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Concomitant Humanistic Dimensions in Welsh New Media Deployments

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Abstract:

The following article is going to center around the implications of Welsh language revitalization—a very fascinating phenomenon that has received a great deal of insight and speculation over the last decades. As regards the methodology, it is going to make use of a qualitative study by having recourse to some interviews and emails carried out with some Welsh media experts in 2007 in the United Kingdom. A specific emphasis, however, will be placed on Tsunoda's theory and Hughes's assumptions that will attempt to confirm the points to be investigated. Finally, it will reveal the different concomitant humanistic benefits that have emerged as result of Welsh new media deployments.

Keywords: *Language revitalization, Welsh language, new technology, imaginative reconstruction*

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of language endangerment is a phenomenon that has received a great deal of attention and interest over the last years due to its peculiar aspects and multi-faceted characteristics. Many linguists have been deeply interested in this fascinating field and come up with different insights as far as language decline is concerned. According to Grenoble and Whaley (2006), there are a number of innovative programs that deal with endangered languages, which have been emerging around the world over the past five decades. With soaring frequency, the aim of these programs has been to revitalize languages that are on the brink of extinction because of the declining numbers of their native speakers. In addition, it is claimed that the

> nature of these initiatives varies as greatly as the languages that are their targets...Many of these programs are connected to claims of territorial sovereignty, though cultural sovereignty or a desire to maintain a unique ethnic identity is just as often the explicit goal. While in one context a revitalization effort may be centered around formal education, in another it may be focused on creating environments in which the language can be used on a regular basis. Although tremendous variety characterizes the methods of and motives for reinvigorating languages, revitalization, as a general phenomenon, is growing and has become an issue of global proportion. There are now hundreds of endangered languages, and there are few regions of the world where one will not find at least nascent attempts at language revitalization. (Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 1)

Language endangerment and language revitalization are looked upon as highly interesting topics, which have been discussed extensively by many linguists and authors. They have also been approached from different perspectives and with various degrees of emphasis. As Tsunoda explains: "*In almost every part of the world, minority languages are threatened with extinction. At the same time, dedicated efforts are being made to document*

endangered languages, to maintain them, and even to revive once-extinct languages" (2006: V).

Tsunoda (2006: 1) highlights the fact that the vast majority of languages are languages of minority people, which are declining with an alarming rate. Quite recently, a number of strategies and careful measures have been deployed with regard to the fate of disappearing languages. Tsunoda claims that language loss is not a recent phenomenon in human history. It has indeed happened in historic times as well as in prehistoric ones. Colonization may perhaps be taken as the most potential cause of language loss from the perspective of Tsunoda (2006: 3). At this level, I resort to a quotation by Leanne Hinton where she defines the loss of language as

> part of the loss of whole cultures and knowledge systems, including philosophical systems, oral literary and musical traditions, environmental knowledge systems, medical knowledge, and important cultural practices and artistic skills. The world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used. Just as the human species is putting itself in danger through the destruction of species diversity, so might we be in danger from the destruction of the diversity of knowledge systems. (2001: 5)

It is to be noted, however, according to Coupland et al. (2006: 352), that "*Wales is well known as that part of the British "Celtic fringe" hosting the most resilient of the Celtic languages, which has hung on to vitality despite a long and acrimonious history of minoritization and Anglicisation.*" In the following article, I am going to talk about the concomitant benefits that surface as a result of the deployment of Welsh language technology. For this, I am going to make use of some theoretical concepts and apply them to the situation of Welsh and visualize the different outcomes of Welsh media approriations. In fact, the famous Japanese sociolinguist Tasaku Tsunoda (2006: 214) has developed an

interesting theory where he argues that for a language revitalization program is a success or not depends on the definition of language revitalization and the aim of that particular program. Also, a given program may be considered a success if it brings concomitant benefits to the community, e.g. enhancement of the sense of self-esteem and identity, and the community members' involvement in the education process.

2. Overview of the Welsh language

This quotation traces the beginning of the Welsh language from the perspective of the Welsh Language Board:

> Very few examples of Early Welsh exist today, with the earliest dating back to the middle of the ninth century. Elements of Old Welsh are seen in the work of the Cynfeirdd, originally dating back to the sixth century, although all manuscripts are much later than this date. The most famous of these is Canu Aneirin (The Songs of Aneirin), written in Welsh, in an area of Britain now known as south Scotland and the north of England, where Welsh was spoken during this period. (WLB 2007a: n.p.)

Without any doubt, one of the most widely known Welsh literary works is the *Mabinogi*—a series of tales transcribed between 1050 and 1170. Over a period of centuries, this series of tales had been transmitted from generation to generation through the medium of the *Cyfarwydd*–the Story Teller. The famous tales, which constitute the four branches of the Mabinogi, are *Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed* (Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed)*, Branwen Ferch Llyr* (Branwen, Daughter of Llyr), *Manawydan Fab Llyr* (Manawyddan, Son of Llyr)*,* and *Math Fab Mathonwy* (Math, Son of Mathonwy). The use of the Welsh language has been deeply affected by the passing of the 1536 and 1542 Acts of Union. Four centuries later, the language would be employed again as an official language

after the passage of the 1942 Welsh Courts Act. According to WLB (2007b: n.p.), the objective of the Acts of Union was to make Wales part of England. As a consequence, English became the official language of business and administration in Wales. It followed from the enactment of the Acts that it was not possible for any monolingual Welsh speaker to hold official office in Wales. Despite the fact that the language was not banned, it lost its status and brought with it centuries of steady linguistic loss.

Nevertheless, one should not forget the fact that the Industrial Revolution at the start of the 19th century brought a change to Welsh history of the language. Indeed, at the beginning of the century,

> 80% of people in Wales spoke Welsh, but during the century, English became the main language of some areas of the country. This period also saw mass immigration into the industrial areas of south Wales, which had a huge impact on the language. By the end of the century, the number of Welsh speakers in Wales had decreased from 80% of the population to 50%. (WLB 2007c: n.p.)

According to WLB (2007d), Welsh was spoken by a huge number of the population at the very beginning of the 20th century. According to the 1911 Census, about half a million people considered themselves Welsh speakers. From that census on, the number of Welsh speakers gradually declined because of migration patterns from rural to urban areas in search of work and increased availability of English-language news and entertainment media. These factors led to the decline of Welsh in many predominately Welsh-speaking communities. The number of people who could speak the language had been estimated up to (508,098) by 1991—a figure which reflects just 18.7 per cent of the population. According to WLB (2008: n.p.), the trend went on beyond 1991 and this is "*reflected in the results of the 2001 Census, published in 2003,*

which recorded that 20.8% of the population of Wales said they could speak Welsh."

3. Methodology

A qualitative study has been carried out via different interviews and emails to provide an in-depth understanding of the multiple dimensions that are reflected through the appropriation of Welsh language technologies and their multifaceted implications. Basically, the different people interviewed come from both academic and media sectors. These are Grahame Davies,[1] Owain Pennar,[2] Sara Stevensons,[3] and Ifor Gruffyd.[4]

4. Findings

In this part, I am going to apply the theoretical assumptions to Welsh language media and see the extent to which they yield important implications and results. On the basis of the theoretical assumptions provided by Hughes and Tsunoda, one can argue that Welsh language media programs have been successful in the sense they have brought about concomitant humanistic benefits to the Welsh community. After a close analysis of the responses received from interviews and emails conducted with Welsh participants, I have attempted to classify them under the following categories: linguistic, political, economic, and symbolic, as they are the most pertinent and straightforward outcomes of the investigated study.

4.1. The linguistic aspect

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[1] Graham Davies is a famous Welsh poet, literary critic, and journalist.
[2] O. Pennar is a Senior Press Officer at Communications Directorate at *S4C*.
[3] Sara Stevensons is a language expert at Acen Center in Cardiff.
[4] Ifor Gruffyd is a university teacher at Cardiff University.

With regard to the linguistic aspect, Owain Pennar[5] says that at the end of this century, S4C (Sianel Pedwar Cymru)[6] was established. It was regarded as the key to the future of the language and its survival. According to Ben Slimane (2008), the S4C new channel

> did provide twenty-two hours of Welsh programming. Besides, the benefits of public service broadcasting covered those whose medium of choice was the Welsh language. S4C also broadcast diverse programs in English from Channel 4—the other broadcasting television in the beginning of the eighties. To speak in cultural terms, the channel achieved and preserved a powerful status. S4C became a principal agency, aiming at the promotion of the Welsh language.

As far as some striking aspects of the digital television are concerned, Owain further argues that the S4C Welsh television allows to coin words and thus develop its community minority language. In other words, the language is constantly evolving. Besides, he argues that "*the television is considered a key access to language. Children television...new words... catchy in-words. In terms of economic aspects, people recruitment is integral, not Welsh language programs. The spinoff is huge for the whole industry.*" As far as online lessons, CD-ROMs, and DVDs are concerned, Sara Stevensons (2006) points out that the major motivation has been to get people interested in the language "*to make it exciting to learners of the Welsh language. The Welsh language is building up again. A lot of companies develop some Welsh stuff/resources by providing resources to stimulate the development of Welsh language resources.*"

4.2. The political aspect

With regard to the motivation behind the development of new media, Davies (2006) points out that any discussion of the situation of Welsh has to be

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[5] This piece of communication was taken from an interview conducted with Owain Pennar.

[6] S4C, which stands for Sianel Pedwar Cymru, was set up in 1980.

started by bilingual speakers, especially when the education system prioritizes English.[7] In Wales, there is no monolingual market and no simple technology in Welsh. In addition, he says that any decision to provide or use the technologies needs to be motivated by language choice and not by necessity. The motivations he mentions are these:

(a) Political motivation for the preservation of the language as well as a conscious choice to promote the language.

(b) Need for communication because it is people's first language. Moreover, there is a desirability to speak in the language in which the person feels more comfortable and there is a strong drive to have services in Welsh.

From the 1960's, there has been a conscious desire to provide the language for political reasons. The very success of this has been the normalization of the language. It is to be noted that the provision of media is detached from the political motivation. In other words, the tendency has been to rely less on political efforts. With regard to the reception of new media products, he further argues that the provision of Websites is indeed widespread. But their use is less in a population that includes only 21% of Welsh speakers. Most organizations are offering services in English. The aim has been,

> since a lot of media have been carried out in Welsh, to encourage them to make the choice to use the media (the people who are using them are political). The choice is political. The use is however restricted to the minority language who are actively motivated as well as politicized by the use of the language. The challenge remains then to bridge the gap between the committed majority as well as the uncommitted majority—something which stands as a fundamental dilemma of the Welsh language.

4.3. The economic aspect

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[7] This is a personal communication (2006) conducted at *BBC Cymru* (Wales).

Turning to the economic level, Grahame Davies argues that new media is a great opportunity for minority languages, as the publication and distribution costs are so low.[8] The use of traditional media in minority language communities is often hindered by the fact that small numbers of speakers make the use of expensive technology unviable. Cheap technology makes it possible to provide for small audiences. So, on the whole, new media are seen as a great opportunity.

Davies asserts that the priority is considered an internal concern. It is not due to the lack of media provision in Welsh. The point he makes is how best one can attract users to consume the cultural products, which are, for example, in the form of reviews and coverage of communities. This is something, which marks the uniqueness of the Welsh language as well as its media. According to him, there are many people who acquire the language and they do not find a partner to speak the language to.

Consequently, through new media programs, one can attract these interested people to consume and listen to Welsh programs. Davies also highlights the role of technology by saying that the most crucial factor of technology is its cheapness. The technology "*offers greater opportunities for broadcasting: Internet, radio broadcasting… The major factor is the cheapness of digital technology. They reduce the costs drastically. Thus, they open new opportunities. It is a time of challenge.*" The last idea he emphasizes is the chronology in the use of the tools: radio, television, local monthly newspapers, and the Web.

4.4. The symbolic aspect

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[8] This insight has been taken from an Interview conducted with Graham Davies at BBC Wales, Cardiff.

The symbolic aspect of Welsh media appropriations is embodied in the words of Davies when he says that in Welsh media, certainly, there is a combination of legal requirement (the requirement for all public bodies to provide their public material in both languages, including on the web), of state provision (such as the BBC's site for which I was responsible) and private and community enterprise, (such as the maes-e forum site). Taken together, those different elements make up a vibrant, viable and growing new media world in the Welsh language.

Moreover, Ifor Gruffydd (2006: n.p.) says that

"if Welsh has to continue as a strong language, then it has to embrace technology because people need to use it. Technology has to be available in Welsh. Provision of technology in public sector/local government can ensure that much technology can be promoted." [9]

A major point my investigation highlights is symbolism. Indeed, the concept of *liminality*, which means threshold in Latin, is a 21st century characteristic of language use in the words of Brumfit (2006). If applied to the Welsh scenario, this notion would reflect an insight into the so-called inner psychology of the Welsh language community to appropriate technology to revitalize its language. This means that Welsh language media provision serves to represent the high degree of sophistication of the Welsh community and the extent to which it can cope with the contemporary world rather than simply represent a part of an old-fashioned heritage. In this way, it is considered a new mode of representation in the post-industrial society.

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[9] This has been taken from an interview conducted with Ifor Gruffyd at Cardiff University.

5. Conclusion

From what has been explained in the previous paragraphs, it seems that the Welsh language media community has been highly active and dynamic in engaging in language revitalization efforts, specifically because of the significant meanings the language represents for the community and the diverse concomitant outcomes of media appropriations. In addition, a number of perspectives have been highlighted, reflecting the extent to which media can be a pivotal factor in language preservation and storage. The presence of the four diverse dimensions: linguistic, political, economic, and symbolic, as the investigation above has shown, is highly a clear indicator of the vitality and the vividness of the Welsh language as well as the extent to which it has been attempting to find its place in a world of global and social transformations as well as great challenges.

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