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Wales: towards bilingualism

This presentation will look at the current situation of the Welsh language and bilingualism in Wales, covering briefly some of the historical influences and legislation which have affected it over the years. We shall also provide an overview of the work of the Welsh Language Board, and our strategy for the future.

A brief history of the Welsh language is needed in order to set our paper in an historical context. Centuries ago, Welsh was spoken over a much wider area of Great Britain. Our earliest poetry - dating back to the 6th Century - harks back, in fact, not to present-day Wales, but to Southern Scotland and Northern England. However, as a result of first Anglo-Saxon and then Norman conquests, the Welsh language was gradually pushed back.

By the end of the Norman Conquest (1282), Welsh was confined roughly to the present-day geographical boundaries of Wales. In this area, it was the sole language of almost all inhabitants. To grossly oversimplify and omit several centuries' worth of history, it is fair to say that the period 1600-1871 saw a slow decline in the fortunes of Welsh, with evidence of gradual language shift, particularly in the border areas. This was accelerated by the Industrial Revolution and the rapid rise of the iron and coal industries in South East and North East Wales in the 19th Century.

By 1871 it was estimated that just over 70% of the population spoke Welsh. From that point begins a period of rapid decline precipitated by the massive in-migration to Wales. At the turn of the 20th century, when the first reliable language census was taken, only half of Wales's population of almost 2 million people spoke Welsh. And by the time of the 1981 Census, the proportion had fallen to just 19%.

By the time of the 1991 Census, 18.7% of the population of Wales - just over half a million people - said that they spoke the language. However, when viewed from the perspective of the 1981 Census, it was apparent **the steady decline appeared to have been arrested - especially among young people**. We await with great interest the results of the Census conducted in 2001. It is too early to start speculating on the results.

However, raw national figures can often mask the micro level reality of the situation of small languages. The number of communities where Welsh is spoken by the majority of the population has declined substantially. This has happened for many reasons, and is one of the many dichotomies which we have to work with every day.

Despite this downward trend in high density speech communities, we believe that we can expect the upward trend in the **number and percentage of young people** who speak Welsh to continue. This primarily is a result of the development of Welsh-medium education.

We have already mentioned the effect of Welsh medium education on the numbers who speak the language. In 1988 the Education Reform Act was passed which included Welsh as a core subject in the National Curriculum. As a result, Welsh is now taught in every school in Wales. In practical terms, this means that all of the ½ million or so children in schools in Wales will have at least some knowledge of the Welsh language by the time they leave. Of these, nearly 20 percent will have been educated bilingually or through the medium of Welsh.

The legislative framework which supports the teaching, learning and the use of the language has not suddenly appeared overnight. It has developed over time, the result of several separate Acts of Parliament. These developments, which have occurred over the past twenty years, have had a great impact on the language and are therefore worth looking at.

In 1980 and 1981 Broadcasting Acts were passed which established the Welsh language television channel S4C in 1982. S4C now broadcasts 34 hours of Welsh language programmes at peak hours throughout the week and over 100 hours on digital. Its effect has not only been linguistic, but also economic. A key factor in the current revival of the language, one which is of primary importance in terms of language planning, is the 1993 Welsh Language Act.

This Act did three things principally: first and foremost, it established the statutory Welsh Language Board - which came into being on 21 December 1993. It gave the Board certain functions which outline later; and in terms of service provision to the public it placed a duty on the public sector through Welsh language schemes and on the courts to treat Welsh and English on an equal basis. The position of the Welsh language in Wales has been strengthened further by the process of devolution, brought about by the Government of Wales Act 1998. This led in 1999 to Wales being granted its own National Assembly and its own government. The Act is highly significant as far as the language is concerned as well since both English and Welsh are official languages of the Assembly. Welsh has become - with English - a *de facto* official language of public administration in Wales (*although, in fact, the UK has no constitutional official language at all*).

We will also touch on an important legislative development in the UK which not only affects the Welsh language but also other indigenous UK languages: the ratification by the UK Government of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. In relation to Welsh, the Government has ratified 52 paragraphs or sub-paragraphs, dealing with aspects of the fields of education, the administration of justice, public administration, the media,

and cultural activities. Although the measures relevant to the Welsh language are, in the main, already in place in Wales, the decision to ratify confirms the UK Government's commitment to safeguarding and maintaining indigenous languages as an essential part of our cultural heritage. The Board is playing the main part in the implementation process in Wales, and has recently submitted evidence to the Committee of Experts on their first visit to Wales.

The Board is a public body sponsored by and answerable to the National Assembly for Wales. Its main function as defined by the 1993 Act is 'to promote and facilitate the use of the Welsh language'.

The current Board, appointed by the National Assembly for Wales, is made up of 11 people - including the Chairman - individuals from different backgrounds, all bringing their expertise in different areas to the work of the Board. The Board currently has a staff of 34, and this year will receive nearly £7 million in funding from the National Assembly, of which over 70% will be distributed to other bodies and organisations in the form of grants. Therefore, especially in light of our remit, we are a relatively small organisation with limited resources to support our own activities, especially in comparison with some of our sister language boards.

Here then is a summary of the Board's main duties:

- *offering advice and information on language use*
- *ensuring that public bodies work towards treating Welsh and English equally*
- *reviewing all aspects of Welsh language education*
- *encouraging private companies and voluntary organisations to use more Welsh*
- *giving grants to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh*
- *developing products and services which make using Welsh easier.*
- *marketing the use of Welsh.*

In the light of a recent five year review of our activities by the government, we have recently carried out an internal restructuring. We did this to ensure that all our activities are carried out with complete consideration to the principles of holistic language planning, and so we can make the best use of our scarce resources. We believe that only by adopting an holistic approach can we begin to tackle the challenges facing the language. There are a whole plethora of factors which effect language vitality; they cannot be dealt with in isolation.

Further details are available on our website www.welsh-language-board.org.uk.

The Welsh Language Act's main focus is on the public sector. Each organisation serving the public in Wales, *wherever that organisation is*

situated in the UK can be required to produce a language scheme. These have significantly increased the status of the Welsh language.

Nonetheless, the spirit of the legislation extends further into other sectors. Many voluntary and private organisations have committed themselves to increasing their use of Welsh (either through Welsh language schemes, policies, or partnership agreements with us), even though there is no statutory obligation on them to do so. The principle that we've succeeded in establishing in Wales is relevant for all sectors - that a good quality service is a bilingual service.

Many private companies have shown that they are willing to respond positively to the new linguistic climate in Wales. Since its establishment, the Board has, by providing encouragement and advice, sought to persuade private companies to develop their use of Welsh and to convince them that there are commercial advantages to be gained by operating bilingually.

All the developments we mention are not taking place in isolation. The Board has developed a strategy to give direction to efforts in Wales to sustain the language, a holistic strategy based primarily on two documents, both of which are available in full from our website.

The first, *A Strategy for the Welsh Language*, was published in December 1996 after extensive consultation. It presents a strategy for securing the language's future over the long term, based around meeting the four main challenges which face the Welsh language, namely:

- Increasing the number of people who are able to speak Welsh.
- Providing opportunities to use the language.
- Changing habits of language use, and encouraging people to take advantage of the opportunities provided.
- Strengthening Welsh as a community language.

The second document, *The Welsh Language: A Vision and Mission for 2000-2005* was prepared at the request of the National Assembly for Wales, and presented to them in November 1999. It sets out the steps which need to be taken to create a bilingual Wales, defined as a society in which all its citizens may use Welsh and English with equal facility in all aspects of their lives, and where every language community can live together in harmony, and prosper.

It emphasises that the future of the language is dependent above all on three components: public goodwill; investment by our institutions; and purposeful language planning.

In presenting the document to the National Assembly for Wales, we invited them to adopt the approach contained in it, in order to secure a future for the Welsh language. This invitation has been accepted, and the Assembly now recognises that the creation of a bilingual Wales is an achievable aim.

In May 2001 the Assembly began a policy review of the Welsh language, one of the purposes of which is to better define the Assembly's aim of 'creating a bilingual Wales', and to propose a strategy of activities to achieve that aim.

We have four extremely important elements in place at the moment to help them on their way. The *Mentrau Iaith*, or language initiatives are community agencies who deal with micro-level language planning, e.g. social events, translations for community organisations, courses to help unsure Welsh speakers brush up on their written language. In short, their purpose, as organic bodies, is to encourage community ownership of the language, and to be a catalyst for linguistic self-sufficiency. There is no one model for such a linguistically eclectic country as Wales, but you can read an independent report about them on our website.

Welsh teaching in the workplace is a fast-growing area, with many businesses providing in-house Welsh language courses for staff members in order to provide a bilingual service for the people of Wales. Many managers have now recognised that a fully bilingual service can lead to customer satisfaction, which in turn should give businesses an edge over competitors. Some public bodies, for instance, offer Welsh language classes as part of their integral staff training programmes which have been developed in accordance with the requirements of The Welsh Language Act of 1993.

The work of Joshua Fishman is familiar to all those interested in the field of language maintenance, as is his understandable emphasis on intergenerational language transmission for self-sustaining language communities. Wales is no exception to the non-reproduction of language, and although the transmission figures have somewhat stabilised over the last few years, we have still felt it necessary to run a scheme whereby we train midwives and health visitors to extol the virtues of bilingualism to new parents. This is one of the Board's most exciting and crucial projects. We cannot do it justice in such a short presentation as this, but in short, 10 people have recently been employed to run the scheme in 8 counties of the west of Wales.

Area development projects are our newest activity. Their aim is to co-ordinate activities by several organisations to increase the opportunities to use the Welsh language in a single area, and especially the provision of educational and social opportunities for young people and adults through the medium of Welsh. They differ from the language initiative agencies mentioned earlier in that the Board is a catalyst for the formation of these multi-agency partnerships.

This is clearly a key period for the Board, the National Assembly, and for the Welsh language. The crucial message from our point of view is that bilingualism should be treated as a cross-cutting issue in the Assembly, and that all subject committees, departments and sponsored bodies should integrate bilingualism across all their policy fields. In essence, we are

asking the Assembly to adopt fully the principles of holistic language planning that we espouse, highlighting the fields of economic development, community planning, health and social welfare, education and lifelong learning, leisure and heritage, information and communications technology, culture and the arts.

The National Assembly has statutory powers to do “*anything*” it deems appropriate to support the language, and is required to treat both languages equally in conducting all its business. Assembly Members are free to use either language in debate and correspondence, and translation and other support services are made available as needed. It also means that in its dealings with the public, and in the public's dealings with the Assembly, both languages can be used.

This represents a massive shift in official attitudes to the Welsh language over the last decade. However, although the messages from the Assembly in relation to the language have generally been very supportive, it is taking time for the Assembly's declarations of principle in relation to the language to have practical effect on the ground. It is time that they did. In effect we are asking them to put their policies into practice, their agreed policy objective, namely the creation of a bilingual Wales.

Post scriptum, January 2003.

The Welsh Assembly Government has published a detailed action plan for the Welsh Language. The document, *laith Pawb*, outlines the strategic lead that the Assembly will give in terms of language policy, and demonstrates how the language will be mainstreamed into all policy areas. From January 2003, all organisations which receive funding from the Assembly will be required to include the Welsh language as a policy consideration, *over and above* any statutory commitment in their language scheme. The Board welcomes this development and looks forward to a new stage in holistic language planning in Wales. The document also outlined a large increase in funding for Welsh language activities (£27,000,000 over the next three years). This will enable the Board to commission dedicated research projects, to increase its dealings with the private sector, and to enhance the monitoring of language schemes. It will also enable the Board to open offices in three other areas of Wales during this time. In conclusion, many of the Board's request to the Welsh Assembly Government have been met; we are entering a new stage of language planning in Wales.

Dr Jeremy Evas, Welsh Language Board, January 2003.