

“It’s lazy but a part of everyday talk” – the acceptability of Welsh phrasal verbs among professional speakers of Welsh

Phrasal verbs have been largely absent from the linguistic description of Welsh or treated as a marginal phenomenon. Although Welsh possesses a number of native verb-particle constructions (Rottet 2005) and a substantial number of phrasal verbs have emerged as a result of natural processes of metaphorical extension of particle meaning, contact with English, in particular direct calquing, has been found to significantly reinforce the usage and productivity of verb-particle construction. For that reason, some Welsh scholars (e.g. Jones 1979; Thomas 1996) have described phrasal verbs as redundant borrowings from English or substandard elements of the colloquial. Numerous teaching materials aimed at advanced users of Welsh strive to sensitise Welsh native speakers and learners to the phenomenon of calquing, presenting PVs as incorrect, careless translations from English. Prescriptive rules against some of these constructions are also visible in a number of Welsh dictionaries. These norms are in obvious disagreement with the wide-spread usage of phrasal verbs not only in spoken, but also written semi-formal varieties of Welsh, which have been first observed by Rottet (2005) and confirmed by my own study on a corpus of Welsh fiction and press.

Bearing in mind that direct translations of PVs occur at a deeper level of interference than obvious lexical borrowings, it was considered worth investigating whether language-aware users of Welsh perceive PVs as tokens of interference from English and how deeply the monolingual-orientated standardisation processes permeate. The paper will present results of a field study conducted in Wales in the years 2015-2016, which comprised interviews with 55 professional speakers of Welsh accompanied with questionnaires on the acceptability of phrasal verbs. The term “professional speaker”, adopted after McEvan-Fujita (2008) denoted speakers of Welsh who used the language in a professional environment. The study investigated the level of accommodation of phrasal verbs across four registers of the language, focusing on the written semi-formal variety. Answers to the questionnaire have been set against data retrieved from the interviews regarding the speakers’ linguistic awareness, perceived competence, use of borrowings and declared attitudes towards loanwords and calques. In this way the study touched on the broader question of linguistic ideologies manifested by speakers.

The study has demonstrated that the selected PVs were considerably well-accommodated in informal spoken Welsh, while in the written registers the acceptability was much lower

depending on a number of intra- and extralinguistic factors. In general, the phenomenon of calquing phrasal verbs was not perceived as unacceptable or threatening for Welsh and a number of these constructions have been shown to be well-accommodated in the standard language.

References:

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