

Code-switching and Chord Changes: Music, Language, and Identity in Welsh Rock Music

In linguistics, the term 'code-switching' is used to denote the use of two or more languages within the same sentence, conversation, or interaction. A canonical instance of intra-sentential code-switching is exemplified by the sentence “Sometimes I start a sentence in English y termino en español” (‘Sometimes I start a sentence in English and finish in Spanish’) (Poplack 1980), but code-switching can take many different forms, from speakers switching back and forth fluidly between two languages in a conversation, to a child using different languages to address different parents in turn, or a student writing her to-do lists in multiple languages. There are many reasons that speakers code-switch, including topic-conditioned switches based on changes in conversational topic, style-shifts where speakers change language – consciously or unconsciously – for stylistic effect, and single-word switches, where speakers bring in a word from another language either because it is the ‘right word’ for something, or because of cultural salience or past experience with the term in another language (Auer 1984; Gumperz 1982; Poplack 1988; Zentella 1997).

Code-switching is also an important way in which bilingual speakers create and enact their identities; in addition to the linguistic work which goes into identity building in any one language, the act of code-switching itself creates social meaning which is integral to the formation of bilingual identities (Gumperz 1982; Zentella 1981, 1997).

Along with language, another powerful way in which people can create identities is musicking. Because of its rich semiotic potential, multimodality, and place in social life, music is particularly important to identity work (Stokes 1994; Firth 1996), and ethnomusicological research has shown how music creates and enacts personal (Waterman 1982), ethnic (Laušević 2007; Cooley 2005, 2014), and national (Daughtry 2003) identities, among many other types.

Music and language are both independently important sites of identity creation, then, but are particularly powerful when they function in concert as part of semiotic bundles (Turino 1999, 2004; Eckert 2004; Bucholtz 2011) to create social meaning. In this paper, I examine this phenomenon in the context of Welsh rock music, and look specifically at moments in which cotemporal musical and linguistic shifts in performance – shifts between different semiotic bundles of music and language – enact identity. In particular, I look at how three different Welsh rock artists – Super Furry Animals, Gorky's Zygotic Mynci, and MC Mabon – use different types of shifts in music and language to create three different identities.

The first artists, Super Furry Animals, are one of the most prominent groups in the Welsh rock world, and also perhaps “the most successful Welsh export into the Anglo-American dominant culture” (Hill 2007:200). Founded in Cardiff in 1993, Super Furry Animals' early recordings were almost entirely in the Welsh language, and though they have since enjoyed mainstream UK pop-chart success in English, starting with the release of their major label debut in 1996, they have continued to return to Welsh-language songwriting over the years. This language choice is significant, because throughout their career, Super Furry Animals have used code-switching both within and across albums to create a changing identity as a Welsh-speaking band navigating success in an English-speaking mainstream music industry.

While linguists usually talk about code-switching in the context of conversations or interactions, it can also take place within recorded albums. Albums are as much cohesive acts of musicking as performances are – not only in the recording and production, but also in the listening and reproduction (Berger & Del Negro 2004:122) – and thus, as interactions, they can be sites of code-switching as well. Super Furry Animals code-switch in Welsh and English both in and between albums, and we can see the way in which they code-switch change alongside shifts in musical style over three of their early albums – *Fuzzy Logic* (1996), *Radiator* (1997), and *Mwng* (2000) – creating their identity

as Welsh-speaking musicians with English-language success.

Released in 1996, Super Furry Animals' first major label record, *Fuzzy Logic*, is entirely in English, with no code-switching into Welsh. Musically, the album embodies Super Furry Animals' signature blend of psychedelic Britpop, and features short, radio-friendly songs with melodic choruses. Here, this semiotic bundle of music and language indexes Super Furry Animals as aligned with this sector of the mainstream UK music industry, singing in English and producing music suited for the popular charts.

Their next album, *Radiator*, released a year later in 1997, shows a different pattern. Though it's still mostly in English, there is one Welsh song on the album: *Torra Fy Ngwallt Yn Hir*. Musically, *Radiator* is slightly more experimental than its predecessor, with instrumental songs and more techno influences, but significantly, the Welsh-language song calls back to the poppier sound of *Fuzzy Logic*. The semiotic bundle of music and language on *Radiator* helps to shift Super Furry Animals' identity; building on the mainstream success they'd achieved in English on *Fuzzy Logic*, they were able to branch out both musically, with more experimental sounds, and linguistically, with a code-switch into Welsh for a song which musically recalls the sound of their first album.

Finally, in 2000, after an intervening all-English album called *Guerrilla*, Super Furry Animals independently released *Mwng*, an album of songs sung entirely in Welsh. This is important in terms of language – it was the first Welsh-language album to reach the top 20 in the UK charts, and was recognized for its importance to the language in a motion in the House of Commons (Llwyd 2000) – and also in terms of music, as *Mwng* represents a much more experimental sound for Super Furry Animals, featuring sparse instrumentation along with darker themes and melodies. Together, the shift in language, from English to Welsh, and the shift in musical style, from psychedelic Britpop to more mellow, experimental themes, work to create a new identity for Super Furry Animals, using their previous success in the mainstream UK music industry to experiment both linguistically and musically, and to bring the Welsh language into focus from the conceptual periphery. That this was a deliberate

choice can be seen in the following quote from lead singer/songwriter Gruff Rhys on the recording of *Mwng*:

“As a band we speak a language that is virtually an invisible language. Welsh doesn't feature in the Webster's list of world languages, because there are fewer than a million people who speak it. Therefore it doesn't exist in the corporate world. When they build new roads through Wales, the government sells the contract to multi-national oil companies so they can open garages. The last thing on their mind is to make concessions to a local language. That's happening on a global scale to all small cultures. So, when we record a Welsh language album, it is a stand against globalisation, even if indirectly.”
(Select eds. 2000)

For Super Furry Animals, standing against globalization, and navigating their identity within the UK music industry, depends not just on language, and not just on musical style, but on the shifting semiotic bundling of both, which creates these multilayered meanings.

The next artists in the data are Gorky's Zygotic Mynci, a band active around a similar time frame as Super Furry Animals, from 1991-2006. Like Super Furry Animals, Gorky's Zygotic Mynci also code-switch in their albums, but here I'll focus on their intra-song code-switching, where they switch between English and Welsh within the same song. Using semiotic bundles of language, musical style, lyrical content, and video signifiers, Gorky's Zygotic Mynci evoke two complimentary identities within their songs: a Welsh-speaking identity which is psychedelic, playful, and modern, and an English-speaking identity which is nostalgic, innocent, wistful, and ultimately ironic.

These two semiotic bundles can be seen in the video for the song *Mae Merched yn Neud Gwallt eu Gilydd*. The video opens with an introduction in the English-language bundle, with a school choir and piano playing an English school rhyme, sung with a nasal voice quality – an index of nerdiness. Notably, during this section, the band members are dressed as English schoolboys, carrying a cricket bat – indexing a distinctly English sport, as opposed to the Welsh sport of rugby – making funny faces, and picking their noses, indicating that this identity is being presented ironically.

At the end of this section, a band member jumps in front of the camera, screams, and the song

moves into its A section in the Welsh-language semiotic bundle. Here, the music is psychedelic rock, with a quick tempo, driving drum beat alternating between the tom and snare, and fuzzy, distorted guitar. The lyrics are all in Welsh, and are abstract and almost surreal, sung in a model (non-nasal) voice quality. In the video, the camera spins around quickly and constantly while focused on the lead singer lying in the grass, setting a disorienting, vertiginous scene.

Then, at the end of this section, the camera steadies and the song switches into a B section in the English-language semiotic bundle: after a spoken-word transition delivered in nasal English by the schoolboys from the introduction, the instrumentation changes to classic Britpop – harpsichord, clean guitar, and pop hi-hat/snare drumming – and the lyrics switch to English, with words evoking schoolday nostalgia of *Village Green*-era Kinks or early Beatles. Notably, the video frame remains as ironic as in the introduction, with the band members making knowing glances at the camera, moving their bodies in exaggerated back-and-forth Beatles-style movements while playing their instruments, and making faces at each other. At the end of this section, the song switches back into the Welsh bundle, as the A section repeats and the band members thrash around laughing with their instruments.

In *Mae Merched yn Neud Gwallt Eu Gilydd*, then, Gorky's Zygotic Myncci use these two distinct semiotic bundlings of music and language to create a bilingual, bistylistic identity, aligning the Welsh language with psychedelic rock, playfulness, and their modern lives, and the English language with Britpop and ironic innocence and nostalgia. The ironic frame of the English-language identity, shown through both the lyrical content and the video signifiers, lets Gorky's Zygotic Myncci 'play with' this English identity to enhance their Welshness by opposition; by showing what an 'English identity' looks like ironically, they emphasize the authenticity of the identity enacted by the Welsh-language semiotic bundle.

Finally, the third artist in the data is Gruff Meredith, formerly of the Welsh-language hip-hop group Tystion and now a one-man band who goes by the name MC Mabon. Though he is from and still

lives in Wales, MC Mabon travelled to Gaiman, Argentina, in the Welsh-speaking area of Patagonia known as *Y Wladfa*, to record his 2007 album *Jonez Williamz*. Like Super Furry Animals and Gorky's Zygotic Myncci, MC Mabon also uses code-switching and musical shifts to enact his identity – specifically, he uses Welsh-Spanish code-switching alongside shifts in musical signification to create an identity as a global Welsh speaker, at home in and knowledgeable about both Patagonia and Wales. This can be seen in the shifts in music and language on the song *Lawr i Comodoro* from *Jonez Williamz*.

Lawr i Comodoro ('Down to Comodoro') lyrically references the city of Comodoro Rivadavia, the largest city in the province of Chubut in which Gaiman and other important Welsh-speaking centers of Patagonia are also located. In the chorus, MC Mabon sings “Dwi yn mynd drwy'r storm, meddwl mynd lawr i Comodoro” ('I'm going through the storm, thinking of going down to Comodoro'). Though this initially looks to be entirely in Welsh, the use of 'Comodoro' here actually represents a single-word code-switch into Spanish. While it might normally be ambiguous, a specific feature of Welsh morphosyntax – initial consonant mutation – shows that this is indeed a switch into Spanish phonology.

Initial consonant mutation in Welsh causes the first consonant of many words to change following certain particles, including the *i* 'to' of *Lawr i Comodoro*. This *i* 'to' in Welsh triggers a 'soft mutation', which would normally change an orthographic <c> (IPA: /k/) into <g> (IPA: /g/); “down to California” in Welsh would be *lawr i Galifornia*, for example. Likewise, if MC Mabon were to sing the lyric in Welsh, we would expect to hear “Lawr i Gomodoro” – the fact that he says “Comodoro” instead represents a switch into Spanish phonology, indexing his familiarity with the city, the Spanish language, and Welsh Patagonia.

Importantly, this Welsh-Spanish code-switching is also accompanied by a shift in musical signifiers: while most of the songs on the album feature standard rock instrumentation – guitar, bass, drums – for *Lawr i Comodoro*, MC Mabon adds in both Andean pan pipes and a charango (a small Andean lute) which play throughout the song and serve as musical indexes of the Patagonian recording context. The linguistic code-switching and shift in instrumentation work together as a semiotic bundle

to create MC Mabon's identity as a Welsh-speaker at home in both Wales and Patagonia.

Also of note is the fact that *Jonez Williamz* has trilingual liner notes, which list recording credits and individual thanks in Welsh, English, and Spanish. The addition of English in the liner notes – a part of the cohesive act of musicking of the album – adds further meaning to the identity created by the music and language, casting MC Mabon as a global Welsh citizen-musician, comfortable in Welsh, Spanish, or English, and by extension one with audiences in Welsh-, Spanish-, and English-speaking countries.

In conclusion, for all three Welsh rock artists – Super Furry Animals, Gorky's Zygotic Mynci, and MC Mabon – music and language work together as part of semiotic bundles to create identity. For each artist, the shifts between these semiotic bundles – as cotemporal switches between both linguistic and musical elements – work in different ways, to construct three very different identities: a Welsh-language band navigating success and resisting globalization in an English-language musical mainstream, a bilingual, bistylistic band which uses an ironic English identity to emphasize their Welshness, and a global Welsh citizen at home in both Wales, Patagonia, and beyond. Most importantly, none of these identities are reducible to either music or language alone; rather, it is the combination of music and language, working in concert in semiotic bundles, that creates the relevant social meaning and enacts these diverse identities.

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