

WORKING PAPER 329

THE WELSH LANGUAGE :  
A GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

PHILIP REES

**WORKING PAPER**  
**School of Geography**  
**University of Leeds**



WORKING PAPER 329

THE WELSH LANGUAGE :  
A GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

PHILIP REES

School of Geography  
University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT

March, 1982

---

## Contents

1. Introduction
2. A thumbnail sketch of Welsh history
3. The struggle for the Welsh language
4. Temporal, demographic and spatial patterns of Welsh speaking
  - 4.1 The overall picture of decline
  - 4.2 The age pattern
  - 4.3 The spatial pattern by counties
  - 4.4 The spatial pattern by civil parishes and urban districts
  - 4.5 The processes at work
5. Conclusions

## References

## Abstract

The historical framework, temporal evolution, demographic structure and spatial distribution of Welsh speaking in Wales are reviewed and interpreted. Suggestions are made as to the processes effecting the observed decline.

## 1. Introduction

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland contains three minority sub-nations within its borders - the Welsh, the Scots and the (Northern) Irish. The Welsh were conquered first by the English and Wales was largely assimilated into the English way of life. Scotland was infiltrated, fought against and then merged with (some say bribed into Union) by England, but very many institutions (the law, education, football) retain their unique Scottish identity. The Irish were conquered and colonized, but fought back and won independence for the larger part of their island. Each nation has its Celtic language - Welsh, Gaelic and Erse respectively. Of these, Welsh is spoken by the largest number.

In this paper the history of the Welsh language and people are briefly described. A detailed analysis is made of the twentieth century decline of the language, and some suggestions are made as to the processes producing this decline. The paper is intended to serve as "background briefing" for the visitor to or student of Wales. The reader is referred for more scholarly detail to earlier reviews of the geography of the Welsh language and population - in particular, to Williams (1937), Thomas (1956), Thomas (1957), Jones and Griffiths (1963) and Bowen and Carter (1975).

## 2. A thumbnail sketch of Welsh history

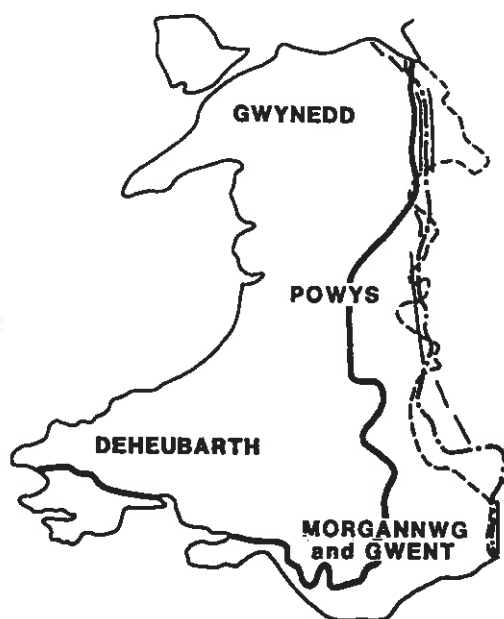
The existence of Wales as a separate territory was very brief on the time scale of world history. The language of the area we know as Wales did not become the Welsh we can recognize today until about A.D. 700, though the Celtic-speaking tribes had occupied the area since about 500 B.C. when the Iron Age B people had begun to enter the region. Between 778 A.D. and 796 this crystallization of the language was given recognition by the construction of Offa's Dyke (a long man-made ridge) which gave concrete expression to the cultural differences between the men of the hills and the men of the lowlands. The present political

boundary (Figure 1) shows a remarkable coincidence with this monumental earthwork. Between the 8th and 13th centuries Wales consisted of some four petty princedoms - Gwynedd, Powys, Deheubarth and Morgannwg and Gwent - which struggled for hegemony among themselves and against the powerful Marcher lords, their English neighbours. The strength and independence of Gwynedd in the 13th century led by Llewellyn provoked the ire of the English King, Edward I, who resolved to subdue this troublesome thorn in his flesh before he went on to deal with the Scots. Llewellyn was defeated, English rule imposed on Wales and enforced through a chain of awesome fortresses (the best examples of which are to be seen at Conway, Caernarvon and Harlech). In 1284 Wales was annexed to England, placed under English law and henceforth referred to as the "Principality". The union of Wales with England was further cemented by the accession of the Tudors to the throne of England. At the battle of Bosworth (1485) Richard III was defeated by Henry Tudor, descended from the Welsh prince Cadwaladr. It was Henry VIII, Henry Tudor's son, who passed the Act of Union in 1536, establishes Welsh representation in the English parliament, abolished the Marcher lordships and divided Wales into shires. Monmouthshire was created a county of England by the Act, but in practice it is included in Wales for most administrative purposes.

### 3. The struggle for the Welsh language

From 1536 to very recent times English was the principal language of administration, of law and of record. In schools Welsh speaking was discouraged, particularly at secondary level. The Education Act of 1870 laid down that English should be the medium of instruction in the schools, then run by the Church of Wales. Lloyd George led the campaign against discrimination against Welsh speakers in the church schools. When the Education Act of 1902 set up the state school system, the Liberal-controlled County Councils made sure that linguistic discrimination ceased. The Church was disestablished in Wales in 1920.

Pressure in the 1920's and 1930's for equal recognition for Welsh in official usage by the Union of Welsh Societies (Undeb y Cymdeithasau Cymraeg) led eventually to the Welsh Courts Act of 1942. This enacted that "the Welsh language may be used in any court in Wales by any party



**Boundaries**

- Offa's Dyke
- - - - -** Political boundary between England and Wales
- Boundary of Welsh speaking c.1930
- . - . - .** Boundary of Welsh place names

**Figure 1. The boundaries of the Welsh culture area**

**Source: Ffytres (1957)**

or witness who considers that he would otherwise be at any disadvantage by reason of his natural language of communication being Welsh" (Welsh Office, 1965, p.14). A judgement in 1962 interpreted the Act rather narrowly as not allowing a bilingual speaker the right to choose the language in which he or she would speak in Court. The Welsh Language Act of 1967 finally granted this right.

The use of Welsh as a medium of instruction is encouraged by the Welsh Education Office, though the responsibility for so doing rests with the Local Education Authority and the Secretary of State for Education. The Cyngor yr Iaith Gymraeg/Council for the Welsh Language (1978) still feels (pp. 54-56) that insufficient financial aid is given for aiding schools to use Welsh as the medium of instruction.

Both the Welsh Office (1965) report on the Legal Status of the Welsh language, and the Cyngor yr Iaith Gymraeg/Council for the Welsh Language (1978)'s Dyfodoli'r Iaith Gymraeg/A future for the Welsh language recognise the importance of television in language learning and use. The recent (1981) decision by the Home Secretary to designate the fourth television Channel (S4C)\* as a Welsh language station, was, however, only brought about by extreme pressure from Plaid Cymru and other organizations. Gwnfor Evans, Plaid Cymru's leader, pledged to fast until death unless the Home Secretary, Mr. Whitelaw, changed the Annan Committee's recommendations for the fourth Channel in Wales in a full blooded Welsh language service. Already, prior to its opening in Autumn, 1982, however, it is under attack from English speaking Welshmen (Leo Abse, MP).

The climate of official opinion has changed, but only slowly. The Welsh language does not have the same rights in Wales as English does in the Common Market. Official publications - even of the Welsh Office - do not have to be published in both Welsh and English, though many are (e.g. the Census Report on the Welsh language). Since official status means jobs (for translators, teachers and preference for Welsh speakers), until this is fully granted, the economic incentive for learning Welsh will be less than that for learning English. The efforts at gaining equality for Welsh in Wales have achieved much in the twentieth century, but it is still to be doubted that they have achieved enough to halt the

\* Saniel Pedwar Cymru (Channel Four Wales)



slide to extinction that seems predicted in the statistics of Welsh speaking to which we now turn.

#### 4. Temporal, demographic and spatial patterns of Welsh speaking

##### 4.1 The overall picture of decline

Table 1 and Figure 2 detail the way in which the proportion that Welsh speakers make up of the population of Wales has fallen since 1911. The proportion of the Welsh population able to speak Welsh was, already in 1911, less than half the total. The fraction had shrunk to a fifth by 1971 and is probably today down to a sixth. The absolute number of Welsh speakers has also fallen though a little less than the proportion. The 1971 absolute numbers are 54% of the 1911, whereas the 1971 proportion is 48% of the 1911 figure.

##### 4.2 The age pattern

The statistics for Welsh speaking by age suggest the overall process at work. The proportion able to speak Welsh declines from the older to the younger ages (Figure 2), and this decline is then transmitted through the age groups as the population evolves. The 30.4 per cent of the population aged 3 to 4 in 1911 able to speak Welsh became the 30.9 per cent able to speak Welsh in the 65 year old age group in 1971. The key process determining the evolution of the number of Welsh speakers is thus the learning of the language by 3-4 and 5-9 year olds from their parents. The proportion so doing falls from 30.4 and 36.2 per cent in 1911 to 11.3 and 14.5 per cent in 1971. The reasons for this decline are many, and other factors such as migration are also important. We will return to a fuller treatment after first considering the spatial pattern of decline.

##### 4.3 The spatial pattern by counties

The spatial pattern of Welsh speaking is first examined at the county scale using the same relative statistic as above, namely, the percentage of persons aged 3 and over able to speak Welsh. The indicator is split into four classes in Figure 3: (1) values greater than or equal to 75 per cent; (2) values less than 75 per cent but greater than or equal to 50 per cent; (3) values less than 50 per cent but greater than or equal to 25 per cent; (4) values below 25 per cent.

Table 1. Proportion of the enumerated population, aged 3 and over, at successive censuses, able to speak Welsh, 1911-1971.

Age last birthday	Census					
	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961	1971
3 - 4	30.4	26.7	22.1	14.5	13.0	11.3
5 - 9	36.2	29.4	26.6	20.1	16.8	14.5
10 - 14	39.7	32.2	30.4	22.2	19.5	17.0
15 - 24	40.6	34.5	33.5	22.8	20.9	15.9
25 - 44	44.0	36.9	37.4	27.4	23.2	18.3
45 - 64	52.2	44.2	44.2	40.8	32.7	24.8
65 and over	60.2	51.9	49.9	40.7	37.2	30.9
All ages 3 and over	43.5	37.1	36.8	30.6	26.0	20.9
Change	- 6.4	- 1.7	- 6.2	- 4.6	- 5.1	
Absolute numbers (1000's)	1,053	985	954	749	687	571

Source : Computed from Table 6, p.76 in Council for the Welsh Language (1978). Original source : Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (1973) and equivalent volumes from earlier censuses

\* Estimated by applying overall percentage to census populations, thereby including under 3's

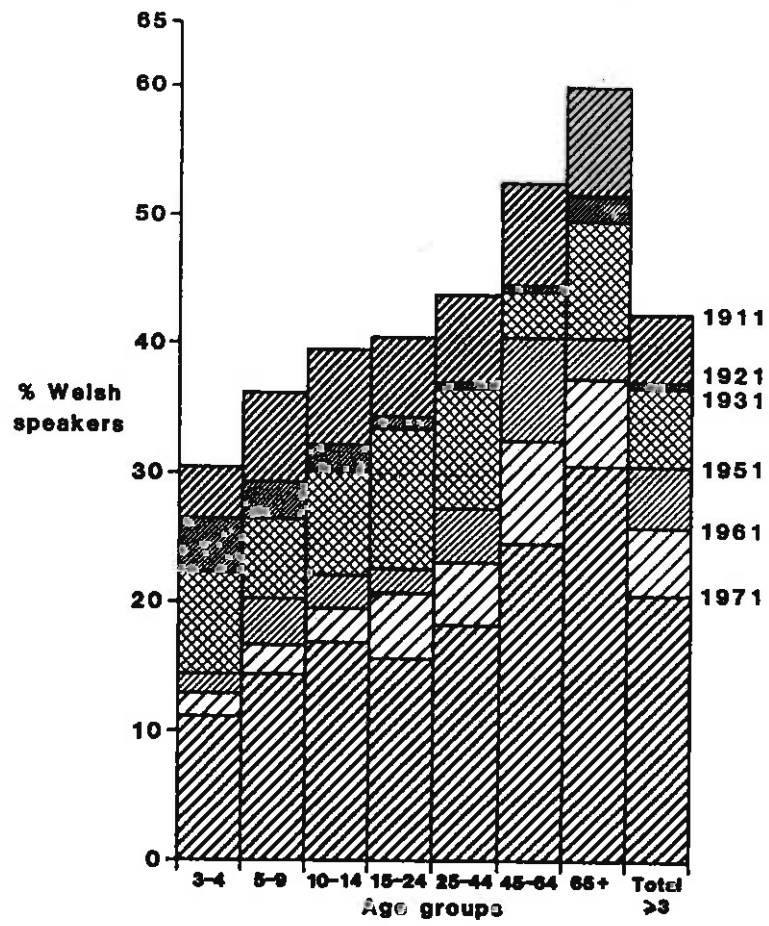


Figure 2. The distribution of Welsh speaking by age at successive censuses, 1911-1971

Source: Table 1

**Figure 3. The relative proportions of Welsh speakers, by pre-1974 county, 1911-1971**

From 1911 to 1931 the pattern was relatively stable in that five counties remained in the top class - Môn/Anglesey, Sir Gaernarfon/Caernarvonshire, Meirionnydd/Merionethshire, Ceredigion/Cardiganshire, and Sir Gaerfyrddin/Carmarthenshire; five counties remained in the third class - Sir Y Flint/Flintshire, Sir Drefaldwyn/Montgomeryshire, Sir Benfro/Pembrokeshire, Sir Frycheiniog/Breconshire and Morgannwg/Glamorgan - and two counties remained in the largely English speaking fourth category. Only Sir Ddinbych/Denbigh changed classes from the third to the fourth. The Welsh speaking heartland is located in two nuclei - North West and South West Wales. The middle and southern borders are largely English speaking. Other counties are transitional.

However, the stability apparent between 1911 and 1971 in the maps however, masks decline as the actual statistics show in Table 2 and in Figure 4. Decline was continuous but did not overlap class boundaries. Between 1931 and 1971 the declining proportions show up as class changes. By 1971 no single county remained in the topmost tier - the Welsh heartland had moved into the 50-75 per cent bracket. The whole of South East Wales had dropped below 25 per cent Welsh speaking, as had Pembrokeshire.

#### 4.4 The spatial pattern by civil parishes and urban districts

The counties form a coarse mesh for describing the distribution of Welsh speakers. That some counties contain areas of dominant Welsh speaking together with areas of dominant English speaking (Sir Benfro/Pembrokeshire and Sir Ddinbych/Denbighshire) is obvious when the percentage of Welsh speakers in the population is plotted by civil parish and urban district. Figure 5, taken from Carter and Thomas (1957) shows the 1951 distribution and Figure 6, taken from Bowen and Carter (1975) the 1971 distribution. Figure 7 shows the distribution in 1971 for North Wales.

Within Welsh speaking Wales there is a variation in intensity that sheds some light on the process of language decline.

The highest percentages of Welsh speakers are found in the remotest rural parishes, away from the tourist attracting coastal shore. Only one group of coastal parishes, along the North shore of the Llyn peninsula fall in the 90 per cent or above category. This pattern of English penetration on the coast is nowhere clearer than on

Table 2. Percentage of persons 3 and over speaking Welsh at successive censuses, by county, 1911-1971

County	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961	1971
Meirionnydd/Merioneth	90.3	82.1	86.1	75.4	75.9	73.5
Ceredigion/Cardiganshire	89.6	82.0	87.1	79.5	74.9	67.6
Môn/Anglesey	88.7	84.9	87.4	79.8	75.5	65.7
Sir Gaernarfon/Caernarvonshire	85.6	75.0	79.2	71.7	68.3	61.9
Sir Gaerfyrddin/Carmarthenshire	84.9	82.4	82.3	77.3	75.1	66.5
Sir Ddinbych/Denbighshire	56.7	48.4	48.5	38.5	34.8	28.1
Sir Drefaldwyn/Montgomeryshire	44.8	42.3	40.7	35.1	32.3	28.1
Sir Y Fflint/Flintshire	42.2	41.1	31.7	21.1	19.1	14.6
Sir Frycheiniog/Breconshire	41.5	37.2	37.3	30.3	28.1	22.9
Morgannwg/Glamorgan	38.1	31.6	30.5	20.3	17.2	11.7
Sir Benfro/Pembrokeshire	32.4	30.3	30.6	26.9	24.4	20.7
Sir Fynwy/Monmouthshire	9.6	6.4	6.0	3.5	3.4	2.1
Sir Faesyfed/Radnorshire	5.4	6.3	4.7	4.5	4.5	3.8
Cymru/Wales	43.5	37.1	36.8	28.9	26.0	20.9

Source : Computed and rearranged from Appendix 6, Table 5 in  
Cyngor Yr Iaith Gymraeg/Council for the Welsh Language  
(1978)

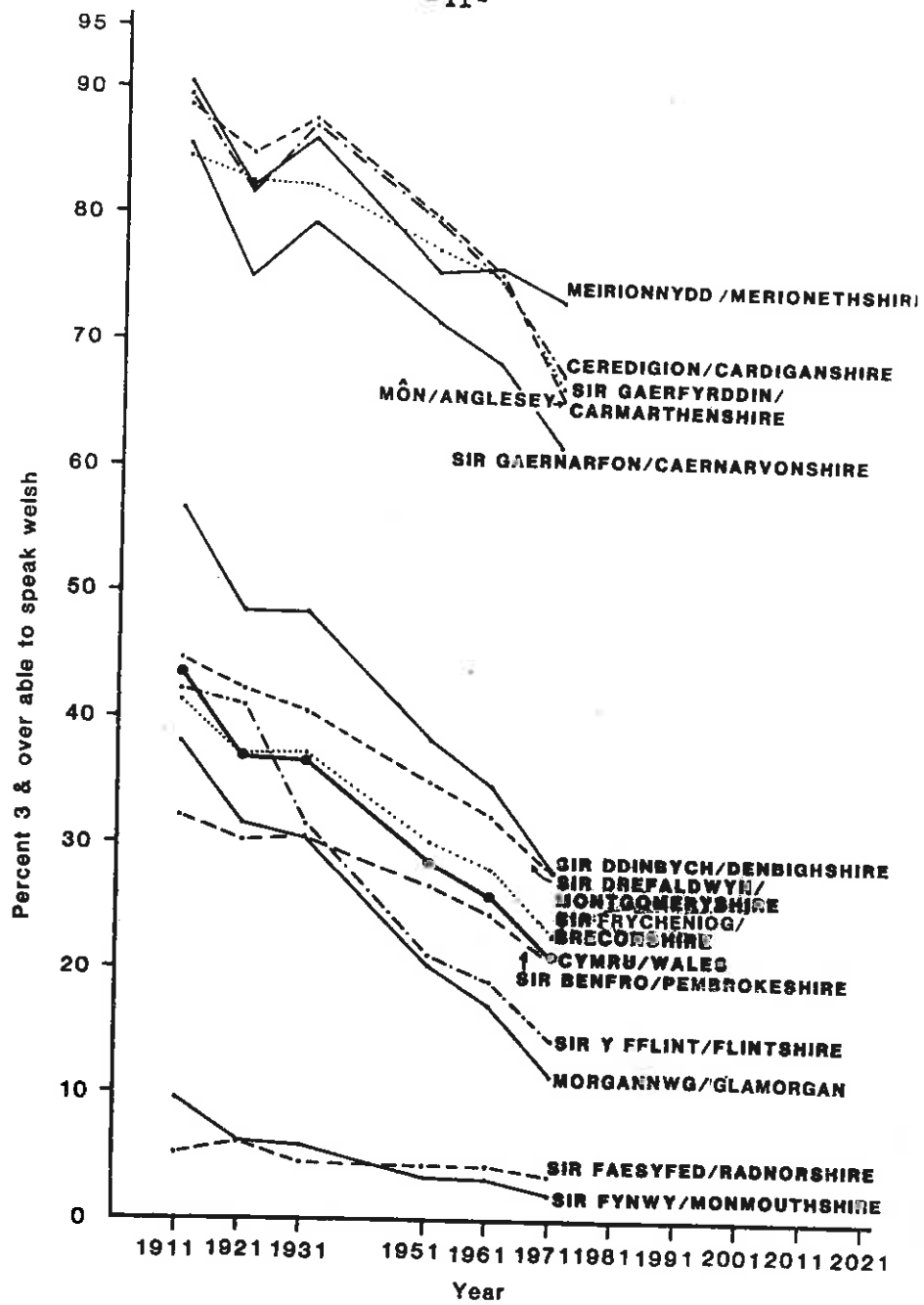


Figure 4. County percentages speaking Welsh against time  
Source: Table 2

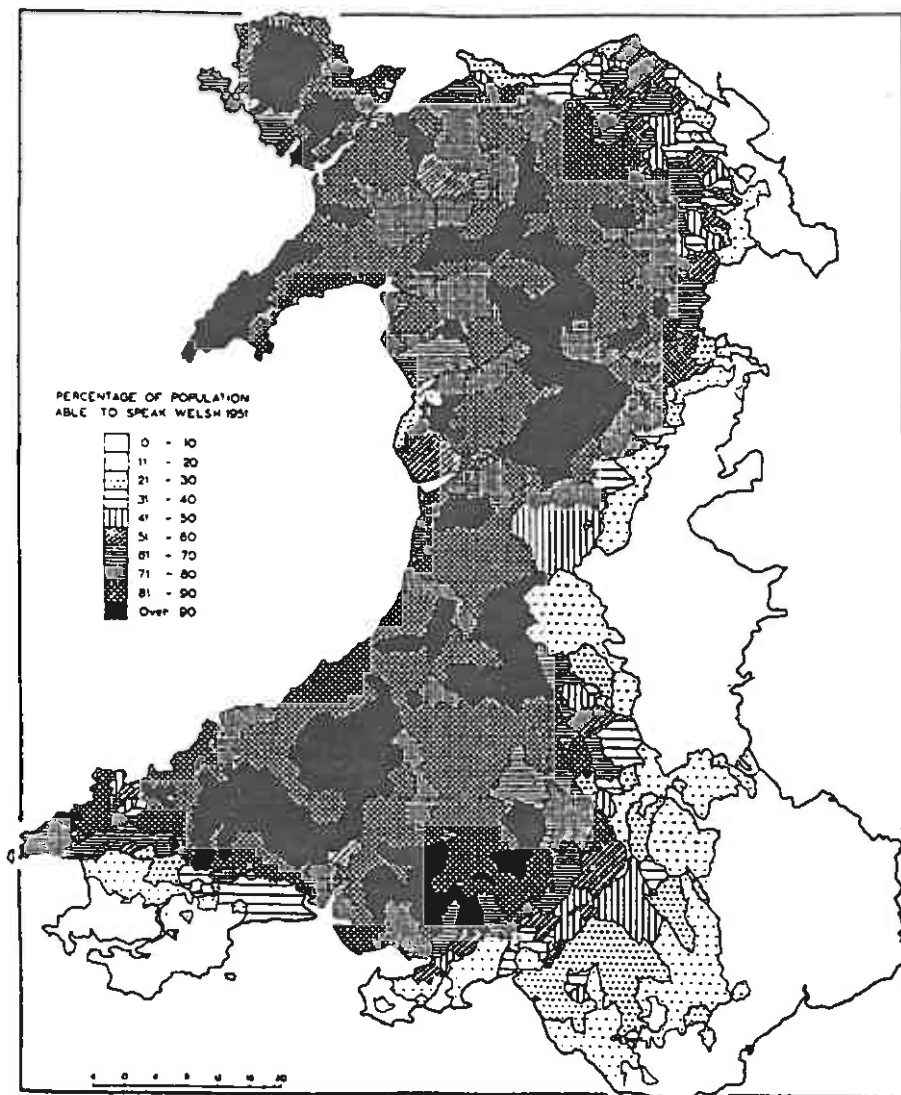
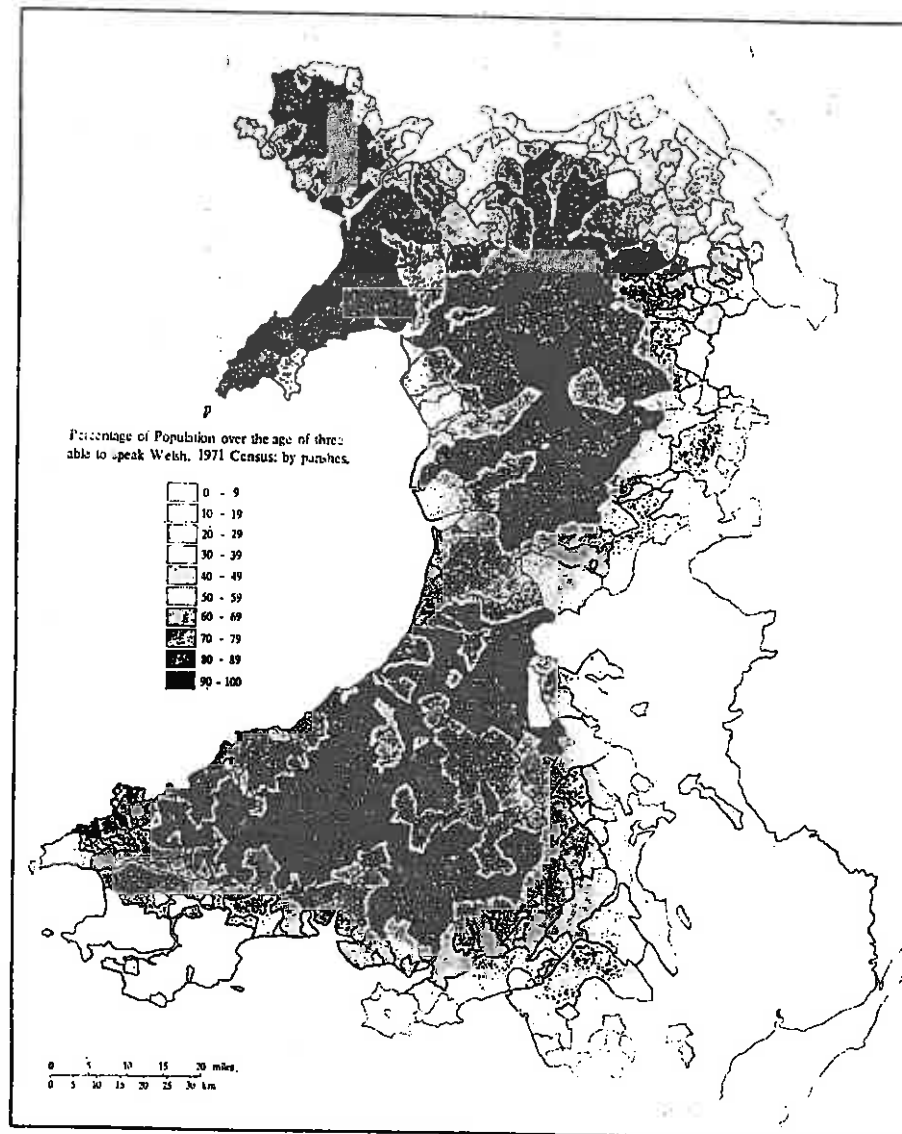


Figure 5. The distribution of the Welsh speaking population, 1951, by parishes  
Source: Thomas (1956), reproduced in Thomas (1967)





**Figure 6. The distribution of the Welsh speaking population, 1971, by parishes**  
**Source: Bowen and Carter (1975)**

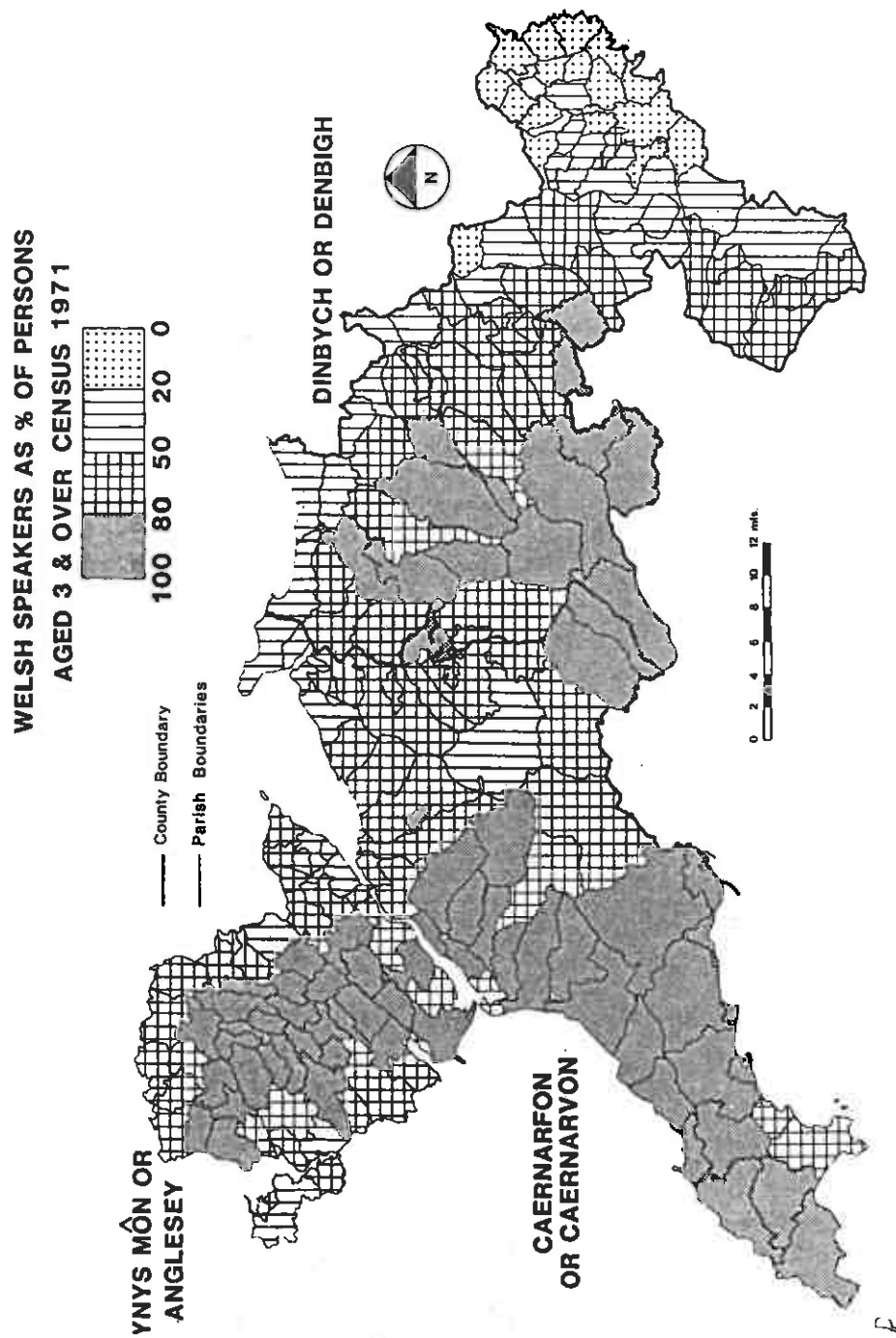


Figure 7. The distribution of Welsh speakers in Anglesey, Caernarvon and Denbigh, 1971

Ynys Môn/Anglesey. On the coasts are located the towns, the tourist industry and retirement homes for English speakers. The hill areas of Sir Dinbych/Denbighshire are islands of Welshness in a county with a majority of English only speakers, concentrated on the North coast and in the lowland border areas. One exception to this association of rural, inland areas with Welsh speaking is found in Snowdonia where only 49 per cent of the population of Capel Curig were Welsh speakers in 1971. Here the resource attracting English settlers is the mountain and rock climbing available in the area.

An opposite exception is to be found in the anthracite (Western) part of the South Wales coalfield. Only in the anthracite section of the South Wales coalfield Camarthenshire do high percentages of Welsh speakers occur in fairly densely populated industrial (mining) districts. Views on the influence of the Industrial Revolution on the Welsh language differ somewhat. Thus, Thomas (1957) regards the results of the Industrial Revolution as disastrous to the survival of the language. Thomas (1962) begs to differ, and suggests that, on the contrary, "the Welsh language was saved by the redistribution of a growing population brought about by industrialism". During the latter part of the nineteenth century there was a massive exodus from the rural land of West, Central and North Wales mainly to the South Wales coalfield where the migrants retained their Welsh speech. They would have lost it had they migrated to England or overseas. Thomas has shown that the mining sector of the economy was strong enough to absorb the majority of those leaving farming in Wales in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. Wales avoided being caught in the vicious circle of mass emigration that has characterized Irish demographic history since 1848. Moreover, without the wealth and productivity of the industrial sector, it is inconceivable that resources could have been found to finance those three pillars of Welsh culture - the University (at Cardiff, Swansea, Aberystwyth and Bangor), the Library (at Aberystwyth) and the Museum (at Cardiff). The National Eisteddfod would scarcely be possible without the financial support given by industrial towns in southern and north-eastern Wales.

#### 4.5 The processes at work

From the evidence presented in the preceding paragraphs and from other knowledge, what can we say about the processes affecting the development of Welsh speaking in the twentieth century?

The first factor at work has clearly been that the benefits of learning English for the population of Wales have been overwhelming. English is the language of business, of administration, of education, of the media and of advancement in the British nation as a whole. In the past, this influence has been resisted by use of Welsh in religion, in social intercourse and in the home.

Most Welsh speakers learn English,\* either in school while children or later in work. This, in itself, would not result in a decline in the number of Welsh speakers. What is clearly crucial is whether bilingual parents bring up their children to speak Welsh. If a substantial proportion do not, then swift changes in the number of Welsh speakers can occur. If only 50 per cent of bilingual parents bring up their children to be Welsh speakers, then within one lifetime (3 generations of 25 years say) a population of 100% bilingual Welsh speakers can shrink to one of 12.5% only.

Crude measurement of these transmission rates can be made from the age data presented in Table 1. In Table 3 are computed the ratios of percentage Welsh speakers in the age group 3 to 4 to the average per cent in age groups 15-24 and 25-44 (parental ages). If we regard these as estimates of Welsh language transmission rates, there is some evidence that the rates are higher in 1971 than they were in the four

---

\* The 1971 Census Welsh language report suggests that 1.3 per cent of the Welsh population are monoglot Welsh speakers, making up 6.2 per cent of Welsh speakers. Bowen and Carter (1975), however, suggest that most persons reporting themselves as Welsh-only speakers did so for political reasons, and were not as ignorant of English as their responses as the language question would suggest. In fact, the age tabulations suggest that most monoglot Welsh speakers are young children who have yet to learn English.

Table 3. Estimated rates of transmission of Welsh to children by bilingual parents

	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961	1971
% Welsh speakers 3-4	50.4	46.7	42.1	34.5	33.0	31.4
average of 15-24 and 25-44	42.3	39.7	35.5	25.1	22.1	17.1
Ratio	.72	.75	.62	.53	.52	.60

earlier decades. Godfrey Harrison, writing in an Appendix to *Cyngor yr Iaith Gymraeg/Council for the Welsh Language* (1978) on his study of 'Bilingual Welsh/English mothers in Wales with a special regard to those rearing monolingual (English) children', was encouraged by the difficulty faced by his field workers in finding such mothers. Harrison's report shows that the promotion of Welsh in schools, in popular publications and on television would help parents to bring up bilingual children - that the motivation is clearly there comes through in the survey responses.

The influence of demographic processes of population change - fertility, mortality and migration - is principally through the latter. Normally, out-migrant streams are balanced to a greater or lesser extent, by in-migrant streams. However, if we classify migrants by ability to speak Welsh, out-migration represents a complete loss to the population, as most in-migrants will be monoglot English speakers. Thus, the population turnover process contributes to the replacement of Welsh speakers by English only speakers. Migration of English only speakers into the South Wales coalfield during the latter half of the 19th century led ultimately to the decline in Welsh speaking Morgannwg/Glamorgan, although the South Wales coalfield provided employment within Wales for Welsh speaking migrants and thus reduced the loss from out-migration.

How do the processes of language transmission and migration relate to the maps described earlier? It seems reasonable to suppose that the degree to which bilingual parents bring up Welsh speaking children will depend on the concentration of Welsh speakers (and therefore the

advantages of Welsh speaking in an area. If we can regard the ratio of the 1971 percentage speaking Welsh to the 1911 percentage speaking Welsh as a spatial measure of the language transmission rates to the new generation, then Table 4, in which these figures are displayed, lends partial support to that hypothesis.

Table 4. Ratios of 1971 to 1911 percentage Welsh speakers, by county

County	1911 Percentage	Ratio of 1971 percentage to 1911 percentage
Meirionnydd/Merioneth	90.3	.81
Ceredigion/Cardiganshire	89.6	.75
Môn/Anglesey	88.7	.74
Sir Gaernarfon/Caernarvonshire	85.6	.72
Sir Gaerfyrddin/Carmarthenshire	84.9	.78
Sir Ddinbych/Denbighshire	56.7	.50
Sir Drefaldwyn/Montgomeryshire	44.8	.63
Sir Y Fflint/Flintshire	42.2	.35
Sir Frycheiniog/Breconshire	41.5	.55
Morgannwg/Glamorgan	38.1	.31
Sir Benfro/Pembrokeshire	32.4	.64
Sir Fynwy/Monmouthshire	9.6	.22
Sir Faesyfed/Radnorshire	5.4	.70

The five counties with the highest proportions of Welsh speakers have ratios above .7 whereas, the other counties have ratios below .7 and generally below .6. Decline in Welsh speaking has been proportionally greater in minority Welsh speaking areas than in majority Welsh speaking areas.

The relationship of the Welsh speaking map at parish level to likely in-migration by English speakers has already been commented upon earlier. Urban, resort, retirement, military base and power station sites areas, were, up to 1971, the likely destinations of monoglot English speaking migrants.

## 5. Conclusions

To sum up then, it might be said that Welsh culture, traditionally defined along linguistic lines, occupies only a part of Wales at high intensity - the more rural South West and North West. The culture of the rural East and industrial South has come to resemble a regional variant of English culture. The latter is encroaching and infiltrating the former, but is being resisted. The creative tension between these two cultures is perhaps best summed up by Aneurin Bevan speaking on "Welsh Day" in 1944 in the Houses of Parliament:

"My colleagues, all of them members of the Miners Federation of Great Britain have no special solution for the Welsh coal industry which is not a solution for the whole mining industry of Great Britain ... why should we deceive the people by this deplorable humbug that there is anything like a Welsh mining problem ... Our problem is to secure enough political leverage to secure attention to our difficulties. Look where we have got today - if you take this technique as a way of drawing attention to Wales. The English are not listening to us, nor have the Welsh been listening to us for most of the day. As a means of directing public attention upon particularly Welsh problems, it is a farce." (Quoted in Foot, 1962).

Spoken like a Welshman!?

On the other hand, European Commissioner Ivor Richard's view that

Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb galon (a nation without a language is a nation without a soul)

may be gaining ground within both Wales and Europe (Euroforum, 1982).

# References

- Bowen, E.G. and Carter, H. (1975) The distribution of the Welsh language in 1971 : an analysis. *Geography*, 80, 1-15.
- Carter, H. (1957) Population. Chapter IX-I, pp. 203-247 in E.G. Bowen (ed.) *Wales : a physical, historical and regional geography*. Methuen, London.
- Cyngor yr Iaith Gymraeg/Council for the Welsh Language (1978) *Dyfodol i'r Iaith Gymraeg/A future for the Welsh Language*. Y Svyddfa Gymraeg/Welsh Office, Caerdydd : Gwasg Ei Mawrhydi/ Cardiff : Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Euroforum (1982) A charter for all cultures. *Europe* 82, Nos. 1/2, January, February, 1982, p. vii.
- Flatres, P. (1957) *Géographie rurale de quatre contrées Celtiques*. Librairie Universitaire, J. Plihon, Rennes.
- Foot, M. (1962) *Anauin Bevan : a Biography*. Vol. One. 1897-1945. MacGibbon and Kee, London.
- Jones, E. and Griffiths, I.L. (1963) A linguistic map of Wales : 1961. *Geographical Journal*, 129, 192-196.
- Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (1973) *Report on the Welsh Language in Wales*. HMSO, Cardiff.
- Thomas, B. (ed.) (1962) *The Welsh economy - studies in expansion*. University of Wales Press, Cardiff.
- Thomas, J.G. (1956) The geographical distribution of the Welsh language. *Geographical Journal*, 122, 71-79.
- Thomas, J.G. (1957) Language. Chapter IX-II, pp. 247-263 E.G. Bowen (ed.) *Wales : a physical, historical and regional geography*. Methuen, London.
- Welsh Office (1965) *Legal status of the Welsh Language. Report of the Committee under the Chairmanship of Sir David Hughes Parry, 1963-65*. Cmd. 2785. HMSO, London.
- Williams, D.T. (1937) A linguistic map of Wales. *Geographical Journal*, 82, 146-157.









Produced by  
School of Geography  
University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT  
From whom copies may be obtained