

"Scandalous Welsh Words"

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Tracing Dialects Back in Time

I am a dialectologist, working on regional variation in Welsh, and while it is endlessly interesting to explore the ways in which the modern language differs from place to place, I have for many years wished to go one stage further, and add a historical dimension to this work. We have a reasonably clear picture of dialect variation in modern spoken Welsh, and this picture can easily be refined by further field work, or by recourse to the archived collections of tape recordings which have been built up since the 1960s.

There are, however, quite serious difficulties facing anyone who might wish to ask how far back these features of the modern spoken language can be traced in time. If we were to go back a hundred years, two hundred years, three hundred years - would the picture then be much the same as what we see today, suggesting that dialect features and dialect boundaries have been relatively stable over a long period? Or would the past look very different, suggesting that there have been substantial changes in the patterning of Welsh dialects, and that the picture we have now reflects the usage only of comparatively recent times?

The fundamental problem is the lack of direct, first-hand evidence of the spoken language in the past. Once we go back beyond the oldest generation to be recorded on tape, those born in the 1860s and occasionally in the 1850s, there are very few earlier sound recordings available in Welsh. An Austrian scholar, Dr. Rudolf Trebitsch, recorded a few speakers on phonographic rolls in 1907 and 1909, and one of his speakers was born as early as 1840. Examples of this kind are rare, however, and somewhere around this date there is a cut-off so far as direct evidence of the spoken language is concerned. The earliest serious description of a Welsh dialect was published in 1882-4 (Sweet 1882-4: 409-484), presumably drawing on the usage of speakers born in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Beyond this the evidence become anecdotal, and it is more difficult to gather reliable information about the spoken language. Occasional comments from the writings of local antiquaries and travellers, and occasional attempts to write a poem or story in local dialect, usually for comic effect, do no more than scratch the surface.

One might expect to be able to garner information about the spoken language in a particular area from a range of other documents dating from earlier periods, looking at the words and spellings used in letters, estate records, wills and other such sources. There are, however, two problems with such documents in Wales. The use of Welsh was banned from public life from 1536 onwards (Davies 1993: 22 ff). As a result, all legal documents were perforce drawn up in English, and they contain no Welsh at all, except for place names. Where letters and other such informal documents written in Welsh survive, we face the problem of interference from the standard language of the Bible. Anyone who was literate in Welsh would have been heavily influenced by the usage of the Welsh Bible, and it is difficult to establish which features of the text are genuinely local and which are the result of an attempt to achieve the accepted standard. How then are we to build up any kind of picture of a dialect in earlier times, and more generally of how it has developed over the years.

Actions for Slander

It is astonishing, in the circumstances, to discover a source which can be used to shed light on the spoken language throughout Wales in earlier centuries. From the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century actions for slander or defamation were brought before the civil and ecclesiastical courts, and the legal records of these cases have survived, albeit erratically (Suggett 1992; Suggett 1983; Suggett [unpub]). The language of the court was English, and in those parts of Wales which were already English-speaking, the slanderous remarks complained of were in English too. In Welsh-speaking areas, however, where the language of the community was Welsh, these slanders were almost always in Welsh. Normally there would be no Welsh at all in the court record, but here, since the whole point of the case was the exact wording of the slander complained of, this had to be reported fully and accurately. As a result, for each case we have the exact wording of the slander, a translation into English, and relatively full information as to the identity of the people involved and where they lived.

These slanders have the great advantage of reflecting the everyday speech of the community. The clerk of the court would have had no interest in tidying up their language to make it conform to the norms expected in literary composition and religious worship. All he wanted to do was ensure that the court record was accurate and complete. It appears in fact, from the peculiar spellings often used, that many of these clerks were not familiar with the normal standards of written Welsh, if indeed they spoke the language at all, and at times they appear to be writing down words which they either did not understand, or only barely. This does of course sometimes create problems for us in trying to interpret what they have written, but makes it unlikely that they have interfered with any dialectal features that were present in the original slander in favour of a more literary form of words. Crucially here, while the oddities of the spelling used may cause problems when it comes to identifying phonological features of the dialect, it is very easy to see which words are being used, and lexical analysis of this material is relatively straightforward.

Pembrokeshire

My own research has been concerned in the main with the dialect of north Pembrokeshire in south-west Wales, and when this new material became available, my immediate reaction was to ask whether it could be used to shed light on the dialect of this area. In this part of Wales it is the records of civil cases which have survived, and they provide a substantial source of information about the spoken language in this earlier period.

In a typical case, Lewis Rees, the plaintiff, claimed that on the 2nd of October 1633, at the village of Llanycefn, he had been slandered by Jane Gruffith, the wife of John Gruffith, in the following terms:

Llydyr wyt ti a mab i lydir.

These "scandalous Welsh words", as they are regularly referred to, are then translated into English for the benefit of the court record:

Thou art a thief & the sonne of a thieff.

The great majority of these cases involve allegations of theft, a serious matter at a time when even a relatively minor crime of this nature might lead to the death penalty. Clearing one's name would have been both necessary and urgent. Other allegations do appear as well, however, as in another

case dating from 1633, where Ieuan Griffith claimed that on the 8th of September, at the village of Dinas, he had been slandered by Ann David, the wife of Robert David, as follows:

Fing elyn falst wyt ti, yn ydonwr wyt ti.

Here again the "scandalous Welsh words" are then translated into English:

Thou art my false enymye and thou art p[er]iured.

Most of the slanders we find are, like those quoted here, relatively short, presumably shouted out in the heat of the moment, though we do occasionally find a long tirade, listing crimes and character deficiencies in great detail.

Given that there are problems with the erratic spelling of the clerks who compiled these records, we cannot look for clues as to the phonological features of the dialect in these slander cases, but must rather try and find out if those words which are found in the spoken language in Pembrokeshire today were already present in the speech of earlier times, or if there has been a clear change in the pattern of local usage. The material is of course, very narrowly focussed on allegations of theft and similar crimes, and many of the words which turn up regularly in the slanders are common to the whole of Wales, and not subject to regional variation. The core word *lleidr* 'thief', for instance, which appears in so many of the slanders, is found throughout Wales, and cannot be used as a tool to explore dialect variation. There are, however, a number of cases where regionally marked forms are found, and it is possible to compare the words used by people in the area today with those used by their ancestors back as early as the seventeenth century: one such set concerns allegations of stealing barley, another set concerns allegations of stealing sheep.

Barley

Many of the words found in Pembrokeshire Welsh are not unique to the immediate area, but rather are found throughout south-west Wales. One of these is the form *barlish*, a loan word from English used in the same way as the English form 'barley'. In north Wales and in the eastern part of south Wales, the corresponding form is *haidd* (Thomas 1973, Fig. 66).¹ The question which arises now, of course, is whether this regional usage is a comparatively recent development, or whether this loan from English was already a feature of the dialect in earlier times.

The evidence of the slanders is here very interesting, as three of the cases recorded refer specifically to the theft of barley. In all three the word used is *barlish*, while the form *haidd* does not appear at all. For instance, in a quarrel which took place in 1636 at Cilgerran, Margaret Garnons was accused by John Griffith of stealing some barley:

Lladrones y barlis wyt ti.

in English:

Thou art a thief ofe barley.

Similarly, in a quarrel which took place at Roch in 1703, John James again accused David Thomas of stealing barley, this time in a rather more long-winded tirade.

Llydyr y marlish y, my profa yt ty ddwyn y marlish y ay carrio e yn lledrad ar di geven.

in English:

Theefe of my barly, Ile prove that thou stolest my barley and caryed it as theft on thy back.

The use of the word *barlish* here is identical then with that of the modern dialect, and it appears that this usage has been stable in the area since the middle of the seventeenth century, that is for over three hundred and fifty years.

Sheep

A similar picture emerges from those cases which refer to allegations of sheep stealing. The vocabulary involved here is rather more complicated, as to the farmer it is not enough to refer to 'sheep' in general. He needs a terminology that will distinguish male from female, a full ram from a castrated one, and this year's new lambs from all the rest. Two of the relevant terms are found throughout Wales, with no regional variation: *dafad* for a ewe, and *oen* for a lamb. These are found in Pembrokeshire, as elsewhere. The adult male, however, is a different matter, and here regional variation in terminology is important. In Pembrokeshire, as in a wide area covering the south-west and mid Wales, the word for a full ram is *hwrdd*, while in the north and the south-east the corresponding form is *maharen* (Thomas 1973, Fig 147). This latter word is in fact also used in Pembrokeshire, but here it has a very different meaning: here a *maharen* is a ram which has been castrated, a 'weather', in a farming context a very different beast. To quote a farmer from near Trefdraeth (in English, Newport), speaking in 1976:

Gwedwch chi bo chi 'di torri 'wrdd, mae'n, maren yw e wedyn ... Maren yw'r un sy' wedi cal 'i dorri.

Say you have cut a ram, he's, he's a weather then ... The one that's been cut is a weather.

(Museum of Welsh Life, sound archive, tape no. 4928).

Here again the question is whether this regional usage is a comparatively recent development, or whether it has long been a feature of the dialect. Many of the slanders specifically involve allegations of sheep stealing and, as in the case of the examples with barley discussed already, they take us back as far as the seventeenth century. Some of them, of course, refer to the theft of a ewe or a lamb, and are not dialectally significant, as these words are common to the whole of Wales. The interesting cases are those where it is claimed that the theft involved a ram or a weather, as it is here that we can hope to find the regional terminology of farming in order to compare it with the usage of today.

The results are striking. In a quarrel which took place in 1633 at Cilgerran, Gruffith Robert was accused by Evan Richard of stealing a ram:

Llyder wyt ti, ty dy a ddygest hurdd David Morgan

in English:

Thow art a theeffe, and thow has stollen David Morgan his ramme.

This is the only case where a ram is involved, and the use of the word *hwrdd* is clearly identical with that of the modern dialect. Theft of weathers appears to have been rather more common, and a

total of twelve such cases are recorded, the earliest dating from 1610 and the latest from 1662. In one of these, during a quarrel which took place at St. Dogwell's in 1627, Thomas ab Ieuan was accused by Joyce Francis of stealing her husband's weather:

Llydyr wyt ti, ty a ddygaist y myharen gwyn fyn gwr i yn lledrad.

in English:

Thou art a theefe, thou hast stolne my husbands white wether.

The use of the word *maharen* is clearly identical here with that of the modern dialect, and this is the form we find in all the cases which concern the theft of weathers. We can, furthermore, be sure that the word is being used with the same meaning as in the modern dialect, since there is in every case an English translation of the slander, side by side with the original wording. The form *maharen* is definitely being used here for 'weather', as in modern Pembrokeshire Welsh, and there is no trace of the usage found in other parts of Wales where *maharen* is used for a ram. Here again the usage of the dialect appears to have been stable for over three hundred and fifty years.

Conclusion

The initial evidence suggests that some dialect features characteristic of Pembrokeshire Welsh have been stable since the mid seventeenth century. This is a striking result, which immediately opens three new lines of inquiry. First, can these results be replicated with the slander cases in other parts of Wales, to establish if stability of this kind is found elsewhere or holds only in some parts of the country? Second, is it possible to extract phonological information from the slanders, in spite of the unhelpful and erratic spelling found in these records, in order to explore the possibility of phonological stability too? Third, if it has proved possible to track down one previously unexpected source which can shed so much light on the spoken language in the past, what other materials must be hidden away in archives, with equally remarkable potential? This is just the beginning.

Footnotes

1. Note that in the second example, dating from 1703, the initial consonant of the word has changed from *b* to *m* as the result of a straightforward Welsh grammatical process known as Initial Consonant Mutation.

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