Small languages never die, they only fade away: The case of Welsh in Australia

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This paper is based on the proposition that the Welsh language is the core element of Welsh cultural identity. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, it presents a brief outline of those findings of a 1995 historico-sociological study of Welsh language maintenance and inter-generational transmission by a group of post-war Welsh migrants to Australia which bear directly on the school experiences of the second generation. The findings are presented against a brief background of related aspects of the current language situation in Wales.

Amongst the participants in this study, Welsh is confined almost exclusively to the home-domain and to the first generation. Loss of proficiency by the second generation was accelerated in almost every case by the primary and/or secondary school experience. Although attitudes towards maintenance were largely positive amongst both Welsh and non-Welsh speakers, they were seldom activated in terms of usage and support. Given the absence of structural support outside the home, the consequent failure of inter-generational transmission, and the reduction in the number of Welsh-speaking migrant arrivals, the prospects for the survival of the Welsh language in Australia are, at best, poor.

INTRODUCTION

Historical and sociological literature on the language and cultural maintenance patterns of the more culturally distinctive non-English speaking communities in Australia abounds. Although the composite ethnic groups which the term 'British' embraces have by no means been neglected, the main focus has been on the Scots (eg Prentis, 1983; Richards, 1988) and the Irish (O'Farrell, 1986). Of the British migrant population in Australia, only the Welsh have been almost entirely overlooked.[1] The silence is broken only by the occasional dismissive comment. Thus Campion at a 1980 colloquium on 'The Celts in Australia' remarked, not entirely tongue in cheek :

> And the history of Australia may be stated simply: the English made the laws, the Scots made the money, the Irish made the songs. The Welsh? They contributed little to Australian history. Billy Hughes was not a Welshman as Donald Horne's recent book showed.(Campion,1980:1)

One cannot of course entirely disagree. Even with due disregard to the ideology of 'contributionism' which informs many studies of ethnic groups, it must be said that the impact of the Welsh, has been minimal. This is largely a consequence of their very small numerical presence, an invisibility further accentuated by the use, almost throughout the nineteenth century of the ubiquitous 'England and Wales' in official records.[2] To this must be added that amongst the Welsh-born, Welsh speakers are further concealed both by their very small numbers and, until recently, a dearth of information on the language proficiency of migrant arrivals. This lacuna in studies of the migration and settlement of the constituent British ethnic

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[1] An exception would be Lloyd, (1988). This is, however, largely a historical account of Welsh settlement.

[2] Particularly at the British end of the migrant passage.

groups is rather curious since the Welsh are arguably the most culturally and linguistically separate.

This paper attempts a summary of some of the key findings of a 1995 historico-sociological study of Welsh language and cultural maintenance and inter-generational transmission by a group of first and second generation post-war migrants from Wales to Australia in so far as they relate to the school experience. For reasons of space and the theoretical assumption which underlies the study that the Welsh language is the core component of Welsh cultural identity, the focus here is on language rather than on other aspects of Welsh cultural life in Australia. Given recent crucial developments affecting the prospects for the future survival of Welsh in its homeland, the findings are presented against a brief background of its current condition in Wales. Even more than with the larger, and therefore [perhaps] more secure languages,[3] the fate of small languages in migrant societies is inextricably tied to the linguistic *status quo* in the country of origin.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODS OF RESEARCH

The theory of culture in which the study is grounded was first developed by Znaniecki (1969) and subsequently refined by Smolicz (1979) for the study of ethnic cultures. As one of the mainstays of humanistic sociological theory it need not be outlined in any detail here. Two of its fundamental axioms, however, directly apply :

- the assumption that cultural and social phenomena can only be fully understood if they are studied from the viewpoints of the participants. This means the researcher must try to view the social world as it exists for those under investigation through a process of what Znaniecki (1969) calls 'imaginative reconstruction'. To this end subjects of study are encouraged to talk and/or write freely about their thoughts, feelings, aspirations and experiences. In the present context this theoretical stance translates into the use of oral and written memoirs as tools of research into the cultural and linguistic experiences of Welsh migrants in Australia.

- the notion that within the range of distinctive elements which constitute the culture of a group there are definitive or core values (Smolicz, 1981), the maintenance of which is the *sine qua non* of the group's survival as a separate cultural entity. Amongst these quintessential markers of identity, language is usually (but not always) the most manifest – it is certainly the most readily identifiable and is, in the most literal sense, the group's public voice and face to the world. For Welsh-speakers, and increasingly for non-Welsh speakers, it is the Welsh language that has become the rallying point of cultural survival, the last ditch of 'authentic'[4] C*ymreictod* (Welshness).

- Multiple research methods were used. These, for the most part were *qualitative* [oral and written memoirs, participant observation, informal interviews and documentary evidence] but three separate self-administered, Welsh-English bilingual questionnaires were designed in order to obtain concrete[5] fact profiles of the respondents and identifiable data on their evaluation and activation of Welsh cultural values. It must be stressed however that the research methods used were complementary rather than competing means of data gathering.

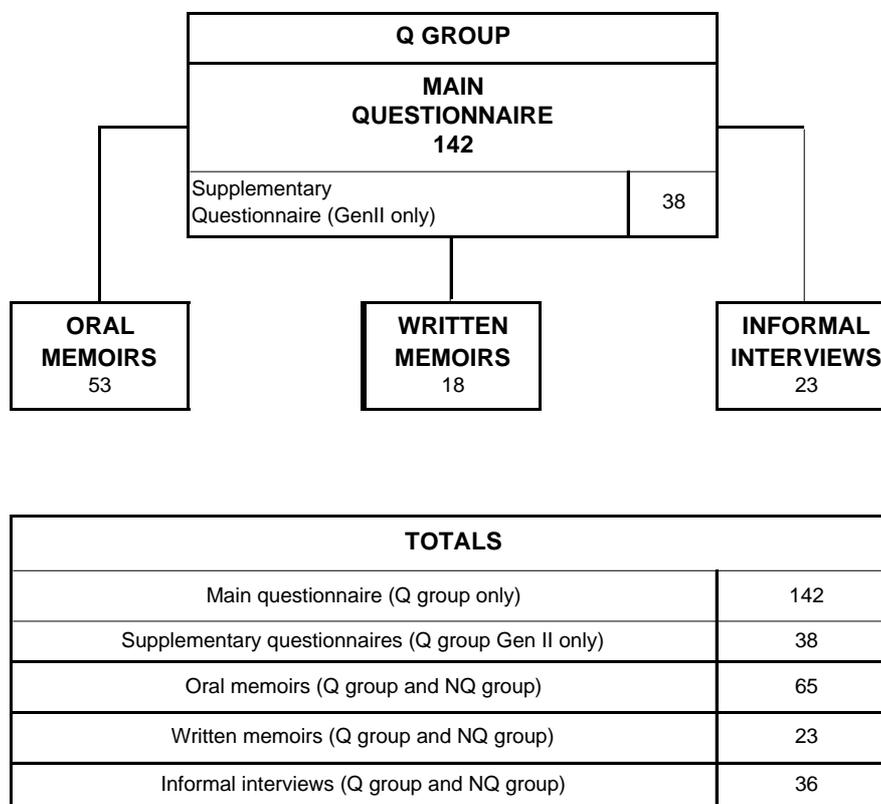[3] Though it by no means follows. Size is no guarantee of linguistic vitality. See P.Nelde et al., (1996)..

[4] Fishman (1966) makes the distinction between 'authentic' or 'primordial' ethnicity and its 'non-authentic' or 'transmuted' expression. In language-centred cultures the latter refers to the residual cultural values that are left behind after the demise of the language.

[5] 'Concrete' facts here refers to personal details on family background, education etc.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Sources of data and participant numbers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Source of Data: Q (Questionnaire) and NQ (Non-Questionnaire) Groups

Q GROUP	
MAIN QUESTIONNAIRE 142	
Supplementary Questionnaire (GenII only)	38

ORAL MEMOIRS 53	WRITTEN MEMOIRS 18	INFORMAL INTERVIEWS 23

TOTALS	
Main questionnaire (Q group only)	142
Supplementary questionnaires (Q group Gen II only)	38
Oral memoirs (Q group and NQ group)	65
Written memoirs (Q group and NQ group)	23
Informal interviews (Q group and NQ group)	36

The 167 participants in the study fell into two groups:

1. The primary or main group of respondents [Q group] comprising 104 first and 38 second generation[6] Welsh migrants to Australia all of whom completed a 28 page questionnaire. Within this group some 45% of the first generation and 19% of the second claimed to be Welsh-speakers. A supplementary questionnaire was also completed by the 38 second generation respondents.

2. A secondary group of 25 respondents [NQ Group] comprising a) non-permanent Welsh residents, b) key informants with specialist knowledge of the Welsh-Australian connection and c) returned Welsh migrants. All had direct experience or knowledge of Welsh cultural life in Australia.

The point should be made that the subjects were not chosen by the use of any mathematical random sampling procedure and the results were interpreted accordingly. No claim was therefore made that the 142 Welsh migrants who were the main subjects of investigation were, in any sense, representative of the totality of Welsh settlers in Australia. Conclusions reached, based as they were on the reconstructed cultural experiences of the participants were

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[6] First generation {Gen1) is defined as adult Welsh migrants who arrived in Australia after the age of 12. Second generation comprises foreign-born children of Gen 1 who arrived in Australia before the age of 12 (Gen 2a) and Australian-born children of Gen 1 (Gen 2b).

exploratory rather than predictive, indicative rather than representative. This said, it must be pointed out that in a non-scientifically defined sense the respondents were 'randomly' recruited rather than selectively chosen. Most were chance contacts within diffuse kinship and friendship networks, including Welsh Societies and Nonconformist chapel[7] congregations throughout Australia.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE WELSH LANGUAGE IN WALES

Needless to say the language situation in Wales is extremely complex and in some respects almost resistant to analysis. Only a brief survey of recent developments which relate directly or indirectly to the findings presented in this paper is possible here.

According to the 1991 census some 523, 319 or 18.7 % of the 2,798,500 population of Wales are Welsh-speaking. Undoubtedly in recent years Welsh has been institutionalised[8] and legitimated[9] within the boundaries of Wales more than any other minority language within the European Union. One significant result was that the 1991 census showed the first reduction in the decline of Welsh-speakers in almost a century. Moreover the most rapid growth was to be found in the 3-15 age cohort. This apparent turnaround in the fortunes of the language is obviously due to a variety of reasons including a militant civil disobedience campaign that *inter alia* saw the setting up in 1982 (Jones, 2000) of a Welsh-language TV channel. [10] There are also by now more than 50 Welsh-language local newspapers. High on the list of explanations for this remarkable development has been the establishment since the 1960s of a range of nursery, primary and secondary Welsh-medium schools throughout Wales but particularly in the non-Welsh speaking areas.[11] The latter point means that the majority of pupils in these Welsh-medium schools come from English-speaking home backgrounds.(Hughes, 2001)) There are also bilingual schools in the predominantly Welsh-speaking areas. The cumulative effect of what has been nothing less than a linguistic *Risorgimento* is that the ability to speak Welsh is now a requirement or at least an important asset for advancement within the public sector in Wales – a far cry from the conclusion of the Royal Commission Report into the State of Education in Wales, 1847:

> The Welsh language is a vast drawback to Wales and a manifold barrier to the moral progress and commercial prosperity of the people……..The evil of the Welsh language is obviously and fearfully great……it distorts the truth, favours fraud and abets perjury.[12]

SOME FINDINGS RELATED TO THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF THE SECOND GENERATION

It should be pointed out that most of the participants arrived in Australia prior to the revival of the Welsh language briefly delineated above. They came for the most part in the 50s and 60s from a Wales in which the status of the language was still very low. It was essentially a private and domestic *patois* with little of the social and/or public standing it currently enjoys. Speaking Welsh in public settings was at that time almost a political act. This is an important link with the fate of the language in Australia in the post war years. It certainly bears crucially

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[7] Welsh Nonconformist churches [Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist] are called 'chapels'

[8] For instance the Welsh Language Act of 1993 repealed all previous legislation pertaining to the language, including the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1542 which proscribed its use The 1993 Act placed Welsh on a basis of 'equality' with English in the courts and in all domains of public administration. To ensure the effectiveness of this legislation a Welsh Language Board with statutory authority was set up This authority includes the right to demand that bodies within the public sector put forward practical schemes to maintain and promote the Welsh language. Needless to say the recent devolution of government in the UK and the establishment of the Welsh Assembly will only strengthen the force of these legislative measures.(Jones,2000; Welsh Language Board, 1995)

[9] Legitimation here is understood to mean formal recognition by the state, with a resulting increase in official use and raising of status. For a fuller discussion of the concept see May (2000).

[10] Wales now has 2 Welsh language TV channels including S4C Digital which is also broadcast to other areas of the UK .[with subtitles]

[11] By Welsh-medium is meant schools in which almost all subjects are taught through the medium of Welsh. Their growth has been remarkable. By the early 90s the nos were as follows; nursery [617]; primary [538]; and secondary [58].[May, 2000, 109:10]

[12] 'Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the State of Education in Wales, 1847' cited in Grillo (1989).

on the attitudes towards its maintenance and transmission amongst the subjects of the study under discussion.

Certainly, despite very limited opportunities to speak Welsh outside - and frequently inside[13] - the family home, the evidence of the study was that the adult first-generation speakers retained fluency almost indefinitely after arrival in Australia. The great majority of speakers [94%] and non-speakers [68%] also thought knowledge of the language crucial to the maintenance and transmission of a Welsh cultural identity. Only 8% of all respondents thought it of no importance that a Welsh person be able to speak Welsh. The following comment was typical:

> Why maintain the language? Rather a silly question if you ask me. Who wouldn't want to keep his own language? To me it's as important to hold on to it here in Australia as anywhere else.[14]
> [Oral memoir extract, Q Group; translated from the Welsh.]

Yet this typical positive attitude towards retention was seldom translated into active support. For instance, only 34% of speakers and 14% of non-speakers condoned the speaking of Welsh in public in the presence of or even within the hearing of English monolinguals. This attitude was prevalent even amongst Welsh community leaders. Speaking of his successor, the retired Welsh-speaking minister of one of the Welsh chapels[15] commented:

> We would often be coming out of the church together to mingle with the congregation in the foyer and to my great great annoyance he would insist on speaking Welsh to me. It didn't seem to bother him but it embarrassed me terribly I tell you. [Interview extract, Q Group; translated from the Welsh]

This disapproval of the public use of Welsh is of course related in part to issues of politeness but, more than with most other languages in Australia, has its roots in the historical unequal status of Welsh and English. It is also reflective of attitudes which have witnessed the very rapid decline of the language in Wales during the 19th and 20th century.

It bears also on many of the problems attending on transmission in Australia. Here again the disparity between attitude and actual language behaviour was very evident amongst the participants in the study. Almost all the parents in Q group [93%] thought it 'very important' to maintain and transmit the Welsh language to their children but very few had taken any steps towards its realisation. The consensus was that any effort was futile in the absence of institutional support outside the family home. The two surviving Welsh chapels[16] had few Welsh-language services,[17] proceedings in all the Welsh Societies were held in English, and there were no Welsh-language ethnic schools. Even within homes where both parents were Welsh-speaking the situation was equally bleak. Language loss by the second generation within a few years of arrival was almost universal. In almost every instance it was accelerated by entry to the first primary or secondary school in Australia (see Table 2).

At that stage also, that is when the children could no longer [or in some cases refused to] communicate with their parents in Welsh, the language of the home switched to English. A fundamental consideration here is that all the Welsh-speaking parents were also bilingual. Unlike many speakers of other ethnic languages in Australia they are free to choose between their own language and English when speaking to each other or to their children. *Speaking Welsh within and outside the family home becomes therefore an act of will not of necessity.* The latter point is crucial to maintenance and transmission. There is simply no *need* to speak

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[13] As in the case of mixed linguistic marriages.

[14] First-generation Welsh-speaker

[15] In which services were bilingual.

[16] One in Victoria and one in New South Wales. In the 1860s there were 29 in Victoria alone. (Y Beirniad, 1873)

[17] Once a month on average.

Welsh on any occasion or in any domain in Australia. This means the second generation is seldom exposed even to the sounds of the Welsh language.

Table 2: Welsh Proficiency Levels of Second Generation of 'Q' (Questionnaire) Group at Start and End of First School Entered in Australia (N = 38)

	PROFICIENCY LEVEL (WELSH)																			
LANGUAGE SKILLS	VERY WELL				WELL				LITTLE				NONE				TOTALS			
	Start		End		Start		End		Start		End		Start		End		Start		End	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Understanding	10	26	5	13	3	8	1	3	5	13	4	11	20	53	28	73	38	100	38	100
Speaking	10	26	2	5	2	5	0	0	5	13	7	19	21	56	29	76	38	100	38	100
Reading	6	16	2	5	3	8	0	0	6	16	5	13	23	60	31	82	38	100	38	100
Writing	6	16	2	5	4	10	0	0	4	10	5	13	24	64	31	82	38	100	38	100

Interestingly a frequent complaint of the second generation was the failure of the school in Australia to recognise their English language difficulties:[18]

> When I first arrived I could only speak a few words of English. It took me about two years to settle down. I was what you might call a good student back in Wales but in Australia I was considered something of a slow learner because my English was so poor. The teachers somehow didn't understand that Welsh was not a dialect but a Different language and that it was my first and only language. As I came from Britain it was just assumed that English was my mother tongue. [Extract from Oral Memoir; Q group, second generation]

One Welsh-speaking family, aware after a number of years in Australia of the futility of any attempt to transmit the language to their children took the drastic step of returning to Wales. Table 3 illustrates the language development of one of their two children:

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Undoubtedly the Welsh language was highly valued by the majority of the subjects of the study discussed. Speakers and non-speakers saw it as the most important component of Welsh cultural identity in Wales and Australia. For the great majority it was, however, only peripheral to their lives. It was the natural medium of communication in only a very few households and was seldom if ever the language of inter-generational exchange. It was also infrequently used or heard outside the family home. When the children of Welsh-speaking parents started school in Australia they became English monolinguals within one or two years. This was the experience of all the Welsh-speaking families irrespective of parental attitudes and/or to a lesser extent the age at which the children entered school. Parents, anxious not to impede their children's academic progress, accommodated by switching to English as the sole medium of communication with them and, in some instances, with each other.

In Australia Welsh will probably retain its symbolic value as the prime marker of Welsh cultural identity. As such it will not die, but having ceased to be the language spoken at the family dinner table it will not be transmitted to future generations. Given also the unlikely prospect of Welsh-speaking migrant arrivals again reaching post war numbers, it will most probably fade away.

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[18] Some of whom came from areas of Wales where even in the 60s English was seldom heard at school or in the street.

Table 3: Longitudinal case-study of the language development of a second-generation respondent [Q group]

Age	Speaking Proficiency	Explanation	Biographical Data
4	Monoglot Welsh	Native-speaker of Welsh.No knowledge of English.	Arrives in Australia [1976]
5	Welsh-dominant bilingual	Speaks some English but Welsh is his natural language of use. Hears only Welsh at home, speaks only Welsh to his parents.	Exposed to English via TV and visits by English-speaking cousins and friends [1976-8]
6	Balanced bilingual	Near equal facility in Welsh and English. His speech marked by frequent code-switching	Starts primary school [1978]
8	English-dominant bilingual	Speaks Welsh with difficulty and reluctantly. Feels more comfortable with English. Parents continue to speak Welsh to each other but increasingly in English to him and his younger brother.	Has attended primary school for 2 years.[1980]
10	Monoglot English [speech]; Receptive bilingual [understanding ability only of English]	No longer speaks Welsh to parents or friends. Parents speak Welsh to each other but English only to their two children	[1982]
12	Monoglot English	Has very little understanding of Welsh. His brother is also monolingual English **Family returns to Wales [1984]**	Enters secondary school in Australia
13	English-dominant 'bilingual' [understands Welsh]	Speaks some Welsh but with difficulty to grandparents and family friends.	Enters secondary school in Wales in which Welsh is the medium of instruction in most subjects
16	Balanced bilingual	Speaks Welsh and English and is fully literate in both. Younger brother now also speaks. Welsh is the language of the home	Completes GCE 'O' level [including Welsh and English] Wins school prize in Welsh literature.[1988]

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