

Welsh and English in Breconshire from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries

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Introduction

Currently, a rather small proportion of the population of Breconshire is able to speak Welsh. As of the 2011 census (Figure 1), this proportion is below the national average (19.0%) across the whole of the north, centre and east of the county, and there are no areas where Welsh speakers form the majority. Rates are higher, however, towards the west, and especially the far southwest of the county, rising to above 40% around Ystradgynlais, and reaching a high of 46.2% in the Cwm-twrch census output area, also the most westerly point of the county.

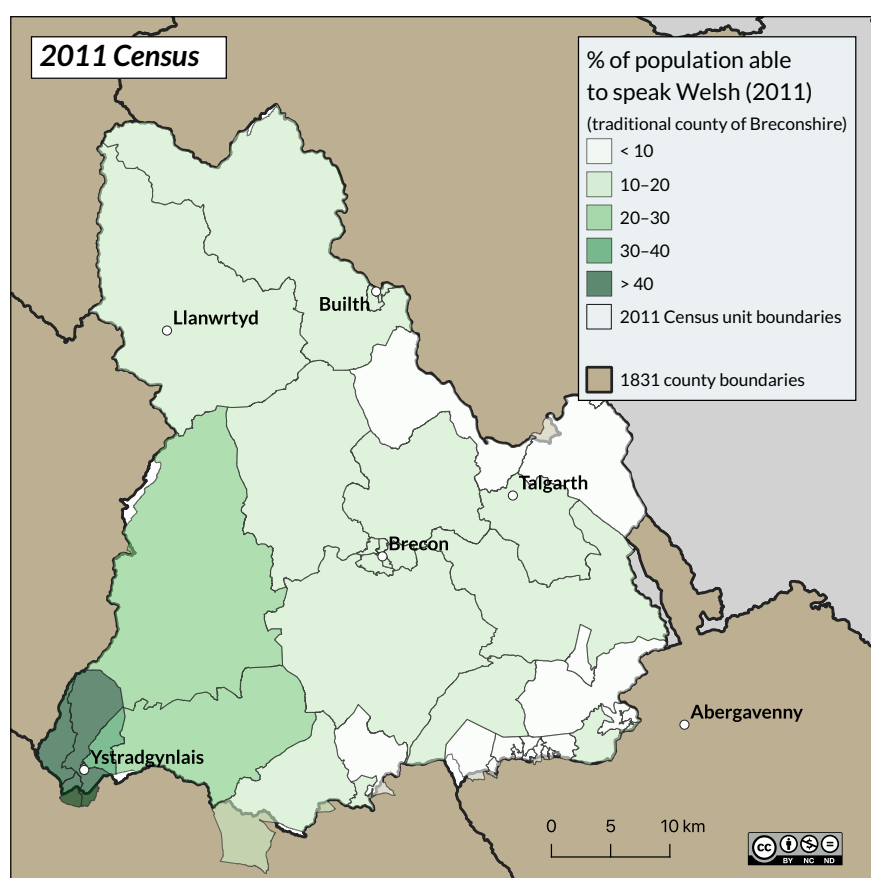


Figure 1. Percentage of population able to speak Welsh in the traditional county of Breconshire (2011 Census).

This, of course, is a relatively recent situation, and, historically, Welsh was once the majority language of the whole of the county. In the last few centuries, English and Welsh have co-existed as community languages across the county, with one or other language predominating in certain communities and certain social groups within those communities, while the other language predominates elsewhere.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the history of the use of the two languages between about 1600 and 1900, specifically to trace the general course of language shift from Welsh to English in the county and to look at the sources of evidence for that narrative; and secondly, to focus on the history of the local variety of Welsh itself. What sort of Welsh was traditionally spoken in Breconshire: how similar has it been to the Welsh of neighbouring counties, and how far back can we trace its salient features?

The use of Welsh and English in Breconshire

No census question was asked about the ability to speak Welsh until 1891, and, before this date, we must rely entirely on interpretation of other sources of evidence for an understanding of the geographic relationship of English and Welsh.

We start by looking at a source that will recur in both parts of this paper, since it provides useful information both about who was speaking Welsh and the form of Welsh that they were using, namely records of slander (defamation) case depositions at the Welsh civil and ecclesiastical courts.¹ Records of such cases tried in Wales from the sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries include witness depositions that are valuable for understanding the historical development of spoken Welsh, and also therefore of where Welsh was being spoken. Although witnesses were in principle required to give evidence in English, defamation cases hinged on the exact words used and, where defamation was claimed to have occurred in a language other than English, it was established in the sixteenth century that the words in that language had to be provided alongside an English translation. Slander cases were relatively common, hence a significant body of evidence is available to us today. For our area of interest, cases are available both from the civil courts, namely the Brecon Court of Sessions, and from the ecclesiastical courts, namely the Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeacons of Brecon, the latter also covering much of Radnorshire, along with parts of Herefordshire, Monmouthshire, and Montgomeryshire.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the 123 cases from these two courts where the alleged defamatory words were in Welsh. Each point represents one case, mapped to the place from where the witness came. The cases are divided into three equal-sized groups: from the first case in 1577 to 1724 (mostly from the 1680s onwards); from 1724 to 1738, a period where cases are very numerous; and for a later period from 1738 to the last case in 1775. The place from where the witness came is sometimes different from the place where the incident of defamation was claimed to have taken place, since arguments giving rise to defamation cases often seem to have occurred when people from outlying districts came across each other in Brecon.

As can be seen from Figure 2, the court records show that alleged instances of defamation in Welsh involved speakers from across the whole of the county. This broad distribution is maintained across all three periods, and, while consistent with the suggestion that we will come to below that Welsh was no longer widely spoken in Hay in the mid-eighteenth century, suggests no substantial retreat during the bulk of the eighteenth century. Even in the latter part of the century, defamation cases from the southeast of the county and along the northern border along the River Wye, some of the earlier areas to show language shift, remain plentiful. Indeed, the defamation cases suggest robust use of Welsh even in the traditionally Welsh-speaking parts of Herefordshire. In one case at the Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeacons of Brecon in 1757, it is said that the witness, one Lewis Jenkins of Michaelchurch Escley, Herefordshire, a yeoman aged about 19, could not provide an English translation of his evidence, 'being a stranger to the English tongue' and 'able to speak or understand but very few words'.² It seems to have been a feature of the record of this court at the time to note when witnesses were unable to translate their evidence into English, although this is not done at other times or in the many other parts of the country where inability to speak English must also have been the norm. In a case from 1756, it is recorded that neither of the two witnesses were proficient: one William Morgan of Ystradfellte, a tailor aged about 24 'does not understand English and cannot give the meaning of the words in English'; and

¹ Suggett 1983.

² Suggett 1983, Archdeacons of Brecon 1757.

one Edward Jones, also of Ystradfellte, a yeoman aged 24 or more, ‘cannot set forth the meaning or interpretation of these words in English as he is ignorant of the language’.³ This is consistent with other evidence that we will come to, which suggests that, at the time, Welsh was the sole language both of Anglican worship and of religious instruction of the young in Ystradfellte.⁴

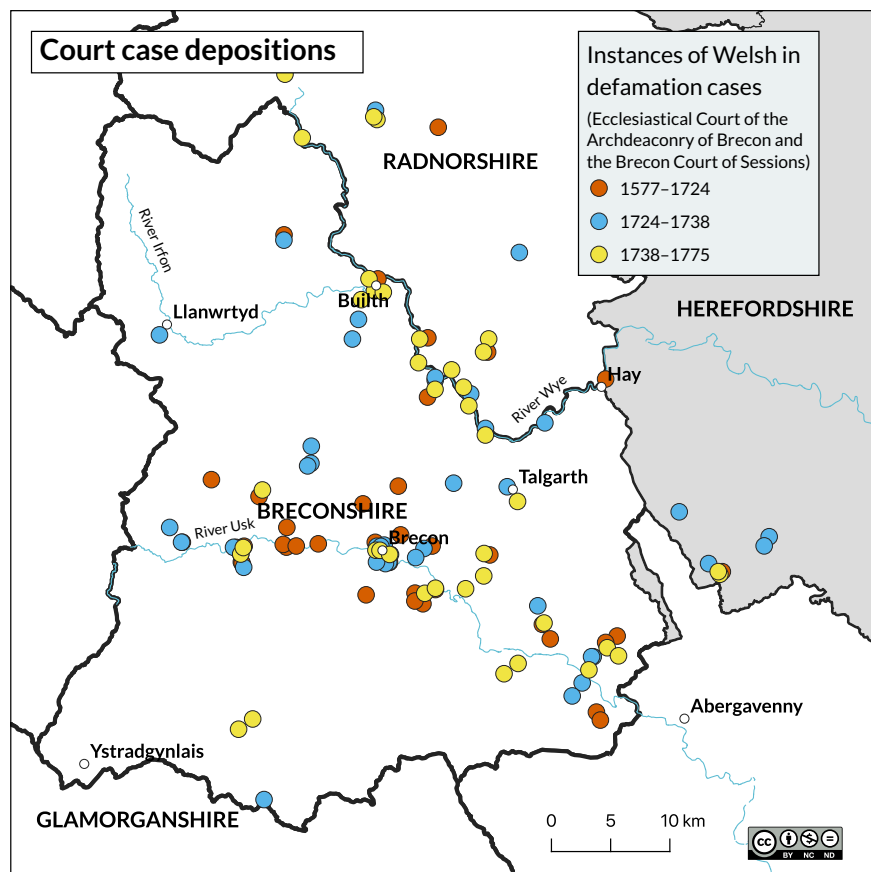


Figure 2. Distribution of court cases involving alleged slander in Welsh 1577–1775.

An important source in modern work on the distribution of the two languages has been the evidence of Anglican visitation charges, an approach pioneered by W. T. R. Pryce.⁵ Anglican bishops monitored local church arrangements by requiring local clergy to answer various questions about their church practices, known as visitation charges. These habitually included questions on the language of public worship, which can be used to establish language use in Anglican church services. To the extent that this language choice reflects community practice, this can be taken as indicative of wider language use among the local community. Visitation charges, for instance, show that, by 1750, Anglican church services were conducted in English across nearly all of Radnorshire, with bilingual practice in a few areas of the southwest. In 1762, the rector of Boughrood, on the border with Breconshire, reported using English and Welsh alternately in church services.⁶ This is consistent with the generally agreed conclusion that, aside from the English-speaking colonies established in south Pembrokeshire, the Gower and the Vale of Glamorgan in the medieval period,

³ Suggett 1983, Archdeaconry of Brecon 1756.

⁴ Price 1978a: 244.

⁵ Pryce 1978a, b.

⁶ Pryce 1978b: 13.

Radnorshire was the first rural area to undergo community language shift to English in the modern era.

In Pryce's data, there is a sharp contrast in the earliest period between Radnorshire and neighbouring counties. In Breconshire, in 1750, the only area where church services were conducted solely in English was in the far northeast, in and around Hay. The southeast of the county, including Talgarth, had services in both languages, and, while data are lacking for Brecon itself, it likely followed the rest of the county, which was overwhelming Welsh in language choice.

Use of English increases over time, with the direction of movement largely from the northeast, with English apparently diffusing via contact with the English-speaking towns of Radnorshire and, especially, Herefordshire. By 1850, although there were still some Welsh-only churches in the east of the county, bilingual practice had spread to Brecon and places to its west along the River Usk and south towards the border with Glamorgan. There was an English-only church in Brecon, and the English-only area, previously confined to Hay, had spread to include all the settlements on the River Wye up to and including Builth. By 1906, only the west is in the bilingual zone; there are no Welsh-only churches, and only a few settlements within the bilingual zone have churches where Welsh is the predominant language of worship.

By the nineteenth century, the evidence of church visitation charges is less reliable as a surrogate for community linguistic usage, since, by this time, the majority of the population were not members of the Anglican church, and the visitation charges therefore reflect the usage only of one religious group, and, quite possibly, of a socially unrepresentative group at that. Fortunately, there are other ways to fill the gap between this evidence and the evidence of the 1891 census, since the nineteenth century brings ambitious empirical attempts to establish the number of Welsh speakers and their distribution. The notorious *Reports of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (the 'Blue Books') of 1847 estimated English to be 'the fireside language' of 23,500 out of the 55,603 inhabitants of the county (hence, presumably, the remaining 32,103, that is, 57.7%, used Welsh).⁷ Be that as it may, no statement of how this figure was arrived at is given, and it must be treated with some caution given the rabidly anti-Welsh prejudice demonstrated throughout the rest of the work. The first serious attempt to establish the number and distribution of Welsh-speakers was by E. G. Ravenstein, a geographer and cartographer who worked at the topographic department of the War Office from 1855. Having retired from this position in 1872, he took an interest in compiling and publishing maps, was cartographic editor of the *Geographical Magazine* and member of council of the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Statistical Society and the British Association for the Advancement of Science. In 1879, he presented a substantial address to the Statistical Society on the contemporary distribution of the Celtic languages, Irish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic, and Welsh. His work was based on replies to short questionnaires, 1200 of which were circulated across Ireland, Scotland and Wales to 'registrars of births, clergymen, schoolmasters, and others, likely to be intimately acquainted with the linguistic condition of their neighbourhood'. Of these, around half were returned. The survey method itself was highly innovative for its time. It was only two years earlier, in 1877, that the pioneering German dialectologist Georg Wenker had begun surveying variation in German and other languages, first of the Rhineland and later of the whole German Empire, by sending written questionnaires to schoolteachers across the country, initiating the modern study of dialectology.⁸

While Ravenstein was largely operating with a now-outdated notion of a linguistic

⁷ Symons 1848: 313.

⁸ Wenker et al. 1926–56.

line discretely separating English- and Welsh-speaking areas, he does acknowledge that some areas were bilingual and that in some parts there were differences by age or by social class. Ravenstein estimated the total number of Welsh speakers at 996,530,⁹ a number that is consistent with the 1891 census figure of 910,289 some 12 years later, bearing in mind that there were serious irregularities in the conduct of the census, and that it is generally regarded today as having understated the number of Welsh speakers.¹⁰ Specifically in Breconshire, Ravenstein estimated that 66.6% of the population (59,901 people) were able to speak Welsh, including 10.6% of the population monolingual in Welsh. This put Breconshire well into the less Welsh-speaking half of the traditional 13 Welsh counties, exceeding only the border counties of Radnorshire (4.0%), Monmouthshire (28.9%) and Montgomeryshire (43.9%), as well as Pembrokeshire (35.6%) with its long-established English-speaking area. By comparison, the 1891 census put the figure at 37.8%, including 10.4% of the population being monolingual.¹¹ While there is a quite a substantial difference between the two, it should be borne in mind that the 1891 census counted Llanwrtyd district in with Carmarthenshire and Ystradgynlais district with Glamorgan, thereby lowering the overall percentage of Welsh speakers in Breconshire. Taking this into account, J. E. Southall, in his analysis conducted soon after the census results were published, estimated that an accurate figure would have been around 47%.¹² The more reliable later censuses also showed rather higher figures than the headline figure of 1891, namely 45.9% in 1901 and 41.5% in 1911. Extrapolating from these back to the late 1870s puts Ravenstein's estimate in a much better light.

Ravenstein gives a rather nuanced geographic picture of the linguistic situation in Breconshire, reporting on details of individual settlements. He notes four major focal points for English in the county. Three involve the main towns of Builth, Hay and Brecon, identifying a familiar pattern of hierarchical diffusion, that is, with English spreading via networks of contacts between people in the largest settlements on the Welsh and English sides of the border. The fourth focal point he identified involves diffusion along the River Usk from Abergavenny into Breconshire via Crickhowell. The only town in the east with a Welsh-speaking majority was Brynmawr (then still in Breconshire).

Ravenstein's comments on individual settlements are summarized in Figure 3. In Brecon itself, he reports that Welsh was used by the old people, but 'is declining rapidly'. Outside the towns, Welsh is reported to be the language of the vast majority, of around 75% of the population in the Irfon valley in the northwest, except for Llanwrtyd, described as 'wholly Welsh'; of around 80% in the districts to the north of the Usk; and more than this to the south of the Usk. He also agrees on a small detail with Pryce's visitation charge evidence that, in the east of the county, Capel-y-ffin was Welsh-speaking despite English dominance in the broader district around it.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the focal points identified by Ravenstein as conduits of English influence evidently involved links with the market towns of the English midlands, in this case, above all, Hereford, rather than links with the industrializing southern valleys. Language shift in Breconshire appears then to be part of a long-term process along the border, a continuation of the shift of Radnorshire to English from the sixteenth century onwards, rather than the result of mass immigration from England and Ireland, as was the case further south. Indeed, the 1891 census evidence discussed below implies that migration played a relatively small role, and that migration from Glamorgan actually strengthened the demographic position of the language in the late-nineteenth century. Thus, Ravenstein reports

⁹ Ravenstein 1879: 621.

¹⁰ Southall 1892: 356, 1895: 7, Jenkins 1999: 2–14.

¹¹ D. Ll. Jones 1999.

¹² Southall 1895: 18.

that Welsh is strongest in the far south, ‘being heard most frequently in the country extending from the river Usk towards Glamorganshire’.¹³

Soon after Ravenstein, another work appeared that is of relevance here. This is Alexander Ellis’s observations on the delimitation of the two languages. Ellis was a mathematician, linguist, phonetician and advocate of spelling reform, who served twice as president of the Philological Society 1872–74 and 1880–82.¹⁴ He presented his work first to the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion on 24 May 1882, and then, subsequently, in abstract to the Philological Society on 2 June 1882, and it was published in the transactions of both societies.¹⁵ Ellis’s work is far less systematic than Ravenstein’s, being based only on reports from a handful of individuals in each county. However, he has more to say about Breconshire than most other areas of Wales, and these reports are an interesting addition to Ravenstein’s. In Breconshire, he consulted with three informants, all vicars, in Builth, Brecon and Crickhowell. They report all three towns as English-only, except for old people in Brecon. Maintaining the idealization of a simple linguistic border, he concludes that:¹⁶

‘the line [in Radnorshire] ... follows the Wye, to within 2 or 3 miles of Builth (Bualt), when it enters Breconshire, and passes in a south-easterly direction just west of Builth and east of Llangynog, and then, probably (but my information is here deficient), runs parallel to the Radnorshire border to Talgarth and the Black Forest, whence it turns southwards and leaves Llanfihangel-cwm-du on the west, and Crickhowel (Crughywel) on the east.’

A final source is John Southall’s book *Wales and her language*, published in 1892. This work includes one chapter on the boundaries of Welsh as part of a much larger work whose aim was to advocate teaching of Welsh as a subject in schools, and Southall was accordingly much more sympathetic to the language than either Ravenstein or Ellis. This chapter is based on personal inquiries, in some cases evidently backed up through personal travel. Southall has rather little to say specifically about Breconshire, and seems to base his comments on a single informant. His description of the linguistic boundaries matches his own map of Wales published in the same volume, which has been added to Figure 3. In his map, Southall puts Hay and its immediate hinterland in the English-only zone, with a bilingual zone with Welsh spoken by under 60% of the population in the centre of the county including the area between Brecon and Talgarth, and a strip along the Wye including Builth. Note, however, his comment that ‘not much [Welsh] is spoken between Brecon and Talgarth’.¹⁷ To the west of this is a zone that reaches across to the western border with a Welsh-speaking majority above 60%, including Crickhowell, Tretower, Defynnog and Llanwrtyd. This is a less nuanced estimate than Ravenstein’s, based on correspondingly less evidence, and the transitional zone clearly includes some areas where well under 60% were conversant in Welsh.

This brings us up to the 1891 census. While its shortcomings have already been noted, the census does provide us with some new dimensions on language shift towards the end of the nineteenth century. David Llewelyn Jones’s analysis of the census returns for Builth district shows, for instance, that, except in some of the very youngest age groups, where there were very few Welsh speakers anyway, men were more likely to be able to speak Welsh than

¹³ Ravenstein 1879: 613.

¹⁴ Carlyle 1901.

¹⁵ Ellis 1882, 1884.

¹⁶ Ellis 1884: 24.

¹⁷ Southall 1892: 341.

women.¹⁸ Gender differences in this direction are commonly associated with change associated with overt prestige of the new variant, and it is of course well-known that the association of English with social prestige was a contributory factor in failure to acquire skills in Welsh. The census also gives a detailed breakdown of linguistic skills by occupation and by place of birth. Those born in Breconshire were slightly more likely than average to speak Welsh (19.9% as against the average for the district of 17.1%), while those who had been born in Radnorshire or England were less likely (6.2% and 1.9% respectively). Those born in England formed 16.5% of the population, so, while their impact was not trivial, their presence was not the primary driver of language shift as it may have been in other areas, particularly in the south-Wales coalfield.¹⁹ There were also much smaller numbers of migrants from more Welsh-speaking areas such as Glamorgan, Montgomery and Carmarthenshire (those migrants being 43.8%, 28.6% and 77.2% Welsh-speaking respectively) who partially offset this effect.²⁰ In terms of occupation, those working in agriculture were more likely than average (35.4%) to be able to speak Welsh, as were public servants and professionals (for instance, lawyers, teachers, and ministers of religion) (43.1%), while those working in manufacturing, transport and domestic service were less likely (16.0%, 12.5% and 15.9% respectively).²¹

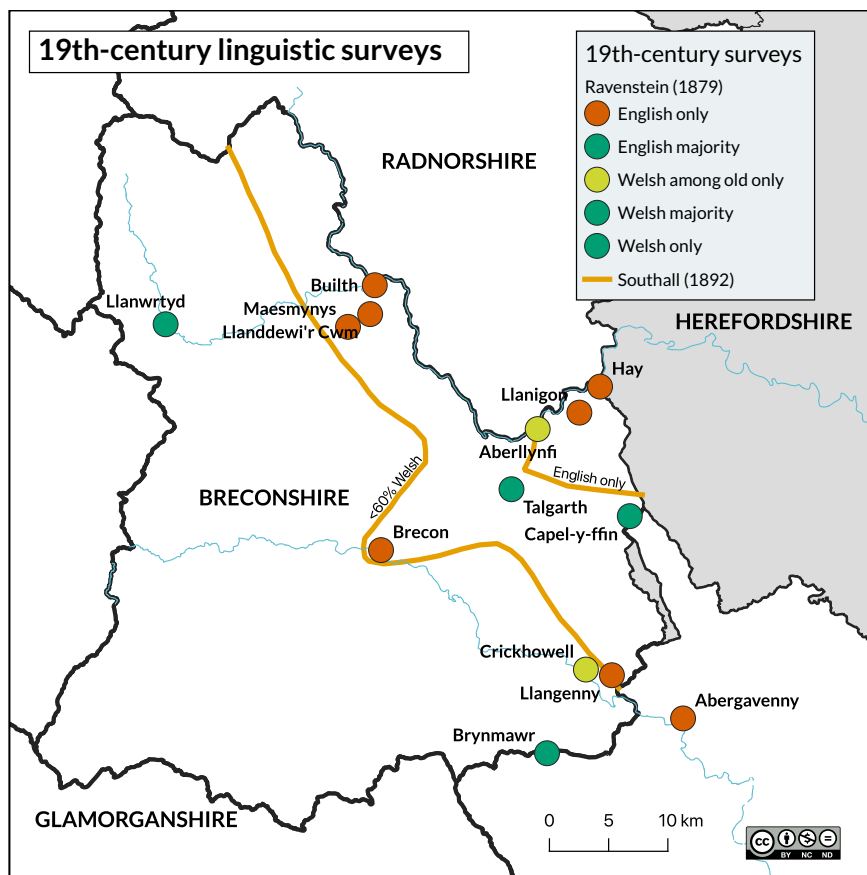


Figure 3. Nineteenth-century sources for the distribution of Welsh in Breconshire.

This brief survey of the sources of evidence for language shift in Breconshire from

¹⁸ D. Ll. Jones 1999: 302–3.

¹⁹ Williams 1971: 14.

²⁰ D. Ll. Jones 1999: 304.

²¹ D. Ll. Jones 1999: 309–314.

the seventeenth to nineteenth century has shown the continuous trend in which competence in English increased and competence in Welsh decreased from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. The geographic line of this development runs from northeast to southwest, and, in light of this, it seems that the main driver of this change was contact from the northeast with English-speaking Radnorshire and Herefordshire. This contact was in turn the result of increasing networks of communication among the market towns in the border region, and a continuation of a process that had already seen language shift in Radnorshire. Conversely, we see little evidence that the industrialization of Glamorgan to the south had a significant impact on the language situation in Breconshire, and the spread of English and loss of Welsh did not diffuse from areas to the south.

The features of Breconshire Welsh

Having looked at the geospatial process of language shift, we can now turn to our second question, namely what sort of Welsh was spoken, that is, its linguistic characteristics. In this regard, traditional Breconshire varieties broadly align with other southern varieties of Welsh, specifically those to the west, except that the Welsh around Llanwrtyd patterns with the north for some features. In a linguistic study published in 2000, Glyn Jones looked at the features of the Welsh of three areas in the county, namely Llanwrtyd, Godre'r Epynt (the foot of Epynt, comprising the western strip from the Usk to the Wye, Pontsenni up to Llandeilo'r-fân) and Defynnog.²² His work is based on speakers born between 1873 and 1917, and so represents the traditional varieties before more extensive language shift in these areas and the linguistic impact of revitalization efforts more recently.

The *Welsh Dialect Survey (WDS)* also provides useful corroboration. This survey was conducted in the 1990s using extensive oral questionnaires administered to speakers born mainly in the 1920s and 1930s, data being collected from informants at 8 locations in the traditional country, all in the western half, the only areas where the traditional dialects were still spoken, namely Beulah, Tirabad, Llandeilo'r-fân, Trecastle, Heolsenni, Ystradfellte, Coelbren, Ystradgynlais and Penderyn (now in Rhondda Cynon Taf).²³

The distinguishing features that emerge from Jones's study and from the *WDS* are similar to those distinguishing other central southern varieties from their more northerly counterparts. Like all southern varieties, Breconshire Welsh, except in the north of the county, makes no distinction between the high unrounded vowels spelled <i u y>; that is, *llin* 'lineage', *Llyn* (the peninsula in Gwynedd) and *llun* 'picture' are all pronounced identically with an 'i'-sound for the vowel. Speakers further north distinguish the vowel of the first from the other two.

Breconshire speakers 'sound the e', as opposed to 'sounding the a'; that is, they pronounce an 'e'-type vowel in certain unstressed syllables where a reading pronunciation would have a diphthong in the second syllable of words like *cadair* 'chair' or *gadael* 'leave', and their pronunciation agrees with the spelling in the second vowel of words like *bachgen* 'boy' and *hanner* 'half'. Further north, these words are pronounced with an 'a'-type vowel. Thus, the two vowels in *pennau* 'heads' are more or less the same in Breconshire, and the word is pronounced *penne*, as against *penna* in the north, with two very different vowels in the two syllables.

In the south of the county (around Defynnog), 'h' is lost everywhere in speech, as in other southern varieties, but it is retained further north in the county. Words that once ended in 'l' plus a consonantal 'y'-sound now end in an 'a'-sound in the south of Wales, and Breconshire is no exception, having *dala* for 'hold', instead of *dal*, and *bola* for 'belly',

²² G. E. Jones 2000.

²³ A. R. Thomas et al. 2000: 714–21.

instead of *bol*. A whole series of endings have different forms in the north and the south, with the same ending more likely to have a consonantal ‘y’-sound the further north you go. Thus, within Breconshire, a number of relevant cases have the ‘y’-sound (spelled with an <i>) in the north around Llanwrtyd, but not in the south; thus ‘jump’ is *neidio* in the north of the county, but *neido* in the south, and, similarly, we find *breuddwydion* for ‘dreams’ in the north, but *breuddwydon* in the south.

A number of variant forms in verbs are characteristic of Breconshire and of some or all of the rest of the south.²⁴ The basic form of the verb, the verbnoun, ends in *-yd* for many verbs in Breconshire as in neighbouring southern counties; thus we find *ffaelyd* for ‘fail’ where the north and written Welsh have *ffaelu*. This ending is found only with a handful of verbs in northern varieties of Welsh. The future tense generally ends in *-iff*, the historically older form, across most of the county, as in *gweliff* ‘he/she will see’. This form changed to *-ith* in the northern half of Wales several centuries ago,²⁵ and this change has also spread to the northernmost fringe of Breconshire. Similarly, the past tense often retains the older *-ws* ending in central and southern Breconshire, for instance, *enillws* ‘he/she won’. This began to be replaced by a new ending *-odd* in north Wales in the Middle Ages,²⁶ and, again, the north of the county adopted the newer form, which is also the norm in standard written Welsh. In the conditional, more southerly dialects insert an *-s-*, thus *licsen i* ‘I would like’ rather than *licen i*, and Breconshire conforms to this general pattern, with more *-s-* in the south of the county than in the north.

There is some variation in the form of prepositions, which add *-t-* or *-d-* in much of the south, but *-dd-* (i.e. the initial sound in English *the* or *that*) in the north and in the standard language. Thus, *gan* ‘with’ becomes *genti* for ‘with her’ in Breconshire and elsewhere in the south, but ‘with her’ is *ganddi* in standard Welsh and much of the north. Similarly, *yn* ‘in’ becomes *yndo* ‘in it, in him’ rather than *ynddo*. Finally, singular reflexive pronouns use *hunan* in the south but *hun* in the north, thus *fy hunan* ‘myself’, instead of northern *fy hun*.

The general pattern, then, is one that fits in with the overall pattern of dialect variation in Wales: differences tend to be between the north and the south, with Breconshire generally going with the rest of the south, especially Carmarthenshire, except for the area around Llanwrtyd, which is part of the midland transitional zone between north and south, and which, for some features, adopts the northern option.

Historical sources for Breconshire Welsh

One obvious question that arises from this overview of the features of traditional Breconshire Welsh, essentially the spoken Welsh of local speakers born in late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is how far back these features go, and whether they can also be attributed to the former varieties of the east of the county. While medieval and early modern Welsh is very well attested in a substantial and varied body of material, it can be difficult to attribute sources to particular districts. There are some exceptions, however. Suggestions of associations with Breconshire have been made for several medieval manuscripts and their linguistic features thereby associated with the county.²⁷ Thomas Huet, translator of the Book of Revelation in the 1567 Welsh translation of the New Testament, has been argued to have been from Breconshire, on the basis of certain vocabulary items that he uses not found

²⁴ G. E. Jones 2000: 81–100.

²⁵ Willis 2009: 139.

²⁶ P. W. Thomas 1993: 31.

²⁷ See, especially, Sims-Williams 2013, whose examination of the forms of prepositions in medieval Welsh includes discussion of mss. Peniarth 35, Peniarth 37 and Peniarth 45, all plausibly from Breconshire.

elsewhere in south Wales, and, since he used his local variety in his translation, this might be another valuable source of evidence.²⁸ We will look here at a selection of other sources from the sixteenth century onwards to create a window on earlier forms of language in the county.

First, we can look at a description of how to prosecute a land claim in Brycheiniog (possibly from Tretower) found in a manuscript dating from towards the end of the fifteenth century, ms. Peniarth 67, and edited by Sara Elin Roberts.²⁹ From this, we can see that a number of regional linguistic features that are also found in the modern dialects were already established in this period. Thus, compared to our list above, we find ‘sounding the e’, in the final syllable of *gafel* for *gafael* ‘possession’ (lit. ‘take hold’);³⁰ a ‘y’-sound becoming an ‘a’-sound at the end of *dala* ‘hold’;³¹ a preposition with insertion of *-t-* before an ending in *gantaw* ‘with him’³² (but we find also *gantho* with *-th-* for ‘with him’ in the same text).³³ While these features all suggest a great deal of continuity with the evidence of modern dialect studies discussed above, there are one or two ways in which the grammar of the dialect may have changed. First, there is one instance of reflexive *e hyn* ‘himself’, using northern *hun* where modern dialect studies find southern *hunan*.³⁴ Another is the form of the focus particle, which is *mae* (now spelled *mai*), rather than *taw*.³⁵ In dialect studies today, *mai* is characteristic of Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and west Carmarthenshire as well as much of the north, but it was recorded at only 1 of the 8 Welsh Dialect Survey sites in Breconshire.³⁶ On this basis, it might be suggested that *taw* spread into Breconshire from the west somewhat later than the date of this manuscript, a conclusion that is consistent with the broader idea that *taw* has been spreading in recent centuries.

The defamation case depositions mentioned above also offer invaluable evidence for spoken Breconshire Welsh at earlier period. Since they were intended to be a record of the slanderous words spoken, court clerks seem to have kept close to the actual words spoken by the witness and do not seem to have ‘tidied up’ the record. In many cases, it is also clear that the clerks, more familiar with keeping records in English, were not fully familiar with the spelling conventions of written Welsh. What they produced then often reveals features of spoken language that might have been obliterated by more professional scribes. Evidence of these cases has demonstrated, for instance, that the past-tense ending *-ws* was already confined to the southeast quarter of Wales by the sixteenth century, and that this included Radnorshire before the traditional dialects died out there soon afterwards.³⁷

The earliest case relevant here was heard before the Brecon Sessions in 1577, and we can use this as an example. It pertains to a slander alleged to have been committed at Tretower in which the defendant was claimed to have accused one Thomas ap Ieuan of having stolen a hat from a shop in Abergavenny. The witness deposition is recorded as follows, with an accompanying English translation, also present in the original:³⁸

Thomas ap Ieuan dwyd ti yn llidir, di a ddigest o siope Ph[ilip]e Capp yngevenny tia William

²⁸ Riley 2020.

²⁹ Roberts 2001.

³⁰ Peniarth ms. 67, folio 100, Roberts 2001: 321.

³¹ Peniarth ms. 67, folio 97, Roberts 2001: 321.

³² Peniarth ms. 67, folio 101, Roberts 2001: 321.

³³ Peniarth ms. 67, folio 97, Roberts 2001: 321.

³⁴ Peniarth ms. 67, folio 98, Roberts 2001: 321.

³⁵ Peniarth ms. 67, folio 101, Roberts 2001: 321.

³⁶ A. R. Thomas et al. 2000: 702 (item 726).

³⁷ Awbery, Jones and Suggett 1985.

³⁸ Suggett 1983, Brecon Sessions, 1577.

Thomas Goch hatt yn lledrad ag yn ffeloniaythis ag myfi brifa hyn arnad ti.

Thomas ap Ieu[a]n thow art a theef, thowe hast borne *or taken* out of the shopp of Ph[ilip]e Capp in Abergeven/n/y together w[i]th William Thomas Goch a hatt by stealth and feloniouslie and I will prove this upon thee.

Some English conventions creep into the spelling of the Welsh; for instance, the final letter <e> in the word *siope* ‘shop’ is not to be pronounced, a convention unknown in Welsh but modelled on English spellings such as *shoppe*; similarly the second <t> in *hatt* ‘hat’ is unnecessary in Welsh orthography, but mimics the same spelling that the clerk uses in the English translation. We also see that the court clerk seemingly had no clue when to write <i> and when to write <u> in Welsh, simply writing <i> everywhere, both where it was historically correct, as in *ti* ‘you’ and where it was not, as in *ddigest* ‘took’ (literary Welsh *dugaist*) or *ffeloniaythis* ‘feloniously’ (literary Welsh *ffeloniaethus*). This can be taken to confirm that there was no difference in pronunciation between the two in the dialect of the period, as today.

A look at other defamation cases from later years can show us how far back the other features of Breconshire Welsh mentioned above can be traced. A case from Defynnog in 1743 shows word-final ‘a’ in *bola* ‘belly’,³⁹ and, since this is also found generally in late medieval southern texts, we can fairly confident that this feature is old. Similarly old is *-t-* in preposition endings, exemplified in a case from Llanfrynach in 1706, where we read *genti* ‘with her’.⁴⁰ This has been shown to be one of the more easily identifiable dialect features of medieval Welsh,⁴¹ and its continued appearance in the defamation cases comes as no surprise. An ending without a consonantal ‘y’-sound is found in a case from Llanelly in 1680 in the word *reteyno* ‘retain’ (instead of *reteinio*).⁴² The dialect division here is also known to date to the medieval period and indeed beyond,⁴³ so this evidence fits a familiar picture.

Verb-nouns in *-yd* (normally spelled *-id* in the slander case depositions) are common: we find *perid* ‘cause’,⁴⁴ *dwedid* ‘say’,⁴⁵ and *gwedid* ‘say’.⁴⁶ While *dwedid* is essentially the conservative form for ‘say’ (more formally written *dywedyd*), its retention is worth noting, since defamation cases from north Wales or from further west in Pembrokeshire generally have the more innovative form *dweud*. It is also not found in Breconshire informants of the *WDS*, all of whom gave the form of this verb as *gweid*,⁴⁷ the general southern form which must therefore have diffused into the area from Carmarthenshire during the late-eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. In the past tense, the ending *-ws* occurs in cases from Trallong and Llandefaelog Fach in *enillws* ‘won’ and *findws* ‘found’ respectively.⁴⁸ Overall, *-ws* dominates over *-odd* as the past tense ending in the Breconshire cases, just as it is often retained in the modern traditional dialect.⁴⁹

Other features found in the defamation suits that are regionally distributed today

³⁹ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1743.

⁴⁰ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1706.

⁴¹ P. W. Thomas 1992, 1993.

⁴² Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1680.

⁴³ P. W. Thomas 1992, 1993; Willis 2005.

⁴⁴ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1702.

⁴⁵ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1702/3, 1715, 1716, 1721/22 1735, 1750/51.

⁴⁶ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1715.

⁴⁷ A. R. Thomas et al. 2000: 401 (item 411).

⁴⁸ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1705, 1711.

⁴⁹ Awbery, Jones and Suggett 1985: 13.

include spellings that suggest as ‘sh’-sound rather than an ‘s’-sound in *shutt* ‘sort, suit’ in a case from Llanelly in 1680.⁵⁰ This word is originally a loan from the English word *suit*, which later (in the nineteenth century), via the meaning ‘(what) sort’, comes to be the word for ‘how’ in Welsh.⁵¹ This pronunciation was found at all 8 Breconshire survey points in the *WDS* and is ubiquitous across the traditional dialects of the south today.⁵² One case from Trallong in 1707 has *doi* for ‘two’ (i.e. *dau*), suggesting a pronunciation with a diphthong beginning with ‘o’ rather than with ‘a’, a feature that is again widespread across the south.⁵³ Finally, one instance of the spelling *both* for ‘hot’ (i.e. *poeth*) suggests a long ‘o’-sound rather than an ‘oi’-sound in this and other words with this vowel, which is also a very widespread southern feature.⁵⁴

The historical evidence, therefore, suggests that the features of traditional Breconshire Welsh as attested from interviews with speakers born around 1900 are, with the occasional exception, quite similar to those found in historical texts from the county over the previous four centuries. The dialect remained relatively conservative, as might be expected from its relatively peripheral position relative to other Welsh-speaking areas, to large centres of population and to major transport routes. Where diffusion of innovations did take place, it seems to have been either from the north or the west (Carmarthenshire).

Conclusion

This paper began with a tour of the decline of Welsh in Breconshire as a spoken variety looking at historical sources and evidence from the seventeenth century onwards. The decline of Breconshire Welsh began with language shift in Hay in the mid-eighteenth century, and proceeded relentlessly over the following centuries, in a northeast-to-southwest direction. As such, it seems to have been part of development of borderland networks of communication going back to the early modern period and language shift in Radnorshire. Industrialization and migration, so prominent in the narrative of the somewhat later language shift in Glamorgan, do not seem to have played a major role. As to the form of the language, traditional Breconshire Welsh bears all the hallmarks of a southern Welsh dialect, having most in common with varieties immediately to the west in Carmarthenshire, although the north of the county is part of a transitional dialect zone with the north. Our look at the earlier sources has shown that this has been the situation at least since the seventeenth century, with a number of characteristic features of the dialects going back even earlier than this, and only a few developing within the period we have been examining here.

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⁵⁰ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1680.

⁵¹ R. J. Thomas 1950–2002: s.v. *sut*.

⁵² A. R. Thomas et al. 2000: 427 (item 440).

⁵³ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1707.

⁵⁴ Suggett 1982, Ecclesiastical Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, 1708.

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