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WELSH DIALECT CLASSIFICATIONS

Gwenllian AWBERY *

Cardiff

g.m.awbery@googlemail.com

Abstract

Native speakers of Welsh are well aware of geographical variation in features of the language, and are able to tell where people come from by listening to the way they speak. Welsh dialectologists have over the years looked at geographical variation in phonology, lexis and grammatical forms and have tried to establish where changes between different features are located. They have shown relatively little interest, however, in defining distinct regional dialects, and dividing the country into separate speech areas. This paper will look at those attempts which have been made in the frameworks of isoglottic dialectology, by John Rhŷs in 1897 and by Alan Thomas in 1973 and 1980, and ethnolinguistics by Rudolf Trebitsch in 1907-1909.

Keywords: dialect classification, isoglottic dialectology, ethnolinguistics, Welsh

Name: Cymraeg [kəm'ra:ɨg]

Language Code: ISO 639-1: cy ISO 639-2: wel (B), cym (T)

CLASSIFICACIONS DIALECTALS DEL GAL·LÈS

Resum

Els parlants nadius de gal·lès són molt conscients de la variació geogràfica a partir de les característiques de la llengua i són capaços de saber d'on prové la gent escoltant la seva manera de parlar. Al llarg dels anys, els dialectòlegs gal·lesos han analitzat la variació geogràfica en la fonologia, el lèxic i les formes gramaticals i han intentat establir on es localitzen els canvis entre els diferents trets. No obstant això, han mostrat relativament poc interès a definir diferents dialectes regionals i a dividir el

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país en àrees de parla separades. Aquest article analitza els intents que van fer John Rhÿs, el 1897, i Alan Thomas, el 1973 i el 1980, i Rudolf Trebitsch, el 1907-1909, en el de l'etnolingüística.

Paraules clau: classificació dialectal, dialectologia isoglòtica, etnolingüística, gal·lès

DOSBARTHU TAFODIEITHOEDD Y GYMRAEG

Crynodeb

Mae Cymry Cymraeg yn ymwybodol o'r ffordd y mae nodweddion yr iaith yn amrywio o ardal i ardal, ac yn medru dyfalu o ble y mae pobl yn dod wrth wrando arnynt yn siarad. Dros y blynyddoedd mae tafodieithgwyr wedi astudio sut y mae ffonoleg, geirfa a ffurfiau gramadegol y Gymraeg yn newid ar draws y wlad, ac wedi ceisio darganfod ble y daw'r ffiniau rhwng gwahanol nodweddion. Ychydig iawn o ddiddordeb sydd wedi bod, fodd bynnag, yn y dasg o ddiffinio tafodieithoedd penodol, a rhannu Cymru yn rhanbarthau ieithyddol pendant. Yn y bennod hon byddwn yn edrych ar y cynigion sydd wedi eu gwneud, o fewn fframwaith tafodieithog isoglottig gan John Rhÿs yn 1897 a chan Alan Thomas yn 1973 ac 1980, ac o fewn fframwaith ethnoieithyddiaeth gan Rudolf Trebitsch yn 1907-1909.

Allweddair: dosbarthu tafodieithoedd, Cymraeg, tafodieithog isoglottig, ethnoieithyddiaeth

1. Introduction

The Welsh language (*Cymraeg*) is spoken in Wales (*Cymru*), one of the four countries which form the United Kingdom, together with England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.¹ It is an Indo-European language, and a member of the Celtic group of languages. There is substantial evidence, for example from inscriptions and place names, that Celtic languages were at one time widely spoken, in central Europe, Italy and Spain, and as far east as what is now Turkey. They are now found, however, only in the north-west of Europe, in the British Isles and France. They are traditionally divided into two subgroups, commonly referred to as P-Celtic and Q-Celtic. Welsh is a member of the P-Celtic group, along with Cornish and Breton. Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx form the Q-Celtic group. The two groups share many features but are most straightforwardly distinguished by a phonological contrast whereby initial [p] in the P-Celtic set corresponds to initial [k] in the Q-Celtic set. Compare, for instance, Welsh *pedwar* ['pɛdwar] 'four' with Irish *ceathair* ['kʲahɪrʲ] 'four'. Manx and Cornish have

¹ See for instance the map "UK Countries with Names and Capital Cities", Map 3 in *Ordnance Survey Outline Map of the United Kingdom*, <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/documents/uk-outline-admin-maps.pdf>.

effectively died out, though there are currently efforts to revive them. The other languages are still living community languages, though under severe pressure, from English in the case of Welsh, Irish, and Scottish Gaelic, from French in the case of Breton.²

Wales was formally incorporated into the English state in the mid-sixteenth century, and English then became the language of all official business, government and administration, with Welsh confined to informal social interaction and the home. Welsh was, however, the language of religion, used for public worship in both the established Anglican church and Nonconformist chapels. Literacy in Welsh, particularly the ability to read the Welsh Bible, was widespread from the late Eighteenth Century on. These restrictions on the use of Welsh remained in force until in the mid-twentieth century, when pressure from a number of different groups resulted in a gradual increase in the use of Welsh, for instance in education, the law courts, radio and television, and road signage. Successive Welsh Language Acts, in 1967 and then in 1993, established the principle that Welsh and English in Wales “should be treated on a basis of equality”, and the Welsh Language Board was set up to ensure progress in this direction.³ A referendum held in 1997 resulted in a narrow majority for the devolution of power from the London government in fields such as education and health, and in 1999 the Welsh Assembly (now the *Senedd*) was elected and met for the first time. Since then, the devolved Welsh Government has responsibility for the language. In 2011 the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure came into force, giving the Welsh language official status in Wales, and replacing the Welsh Language Board with the post of Welsh Language Commissioner, responsible for ensuring that the right to use Welsh in a wide range of situations is upheld.⁴

² For the Indo-European origins of Welsh and its relationship to the other Celtic languages, see J. Davies (1999: 1-9). For evidence of the areas where Celtic languages were spoken in early times, see P. Sims-Williams (2006).

³ For an outline of the social history of the Welsh language, see J. Davies (1999).

⁴ For a brief account of devolution in Wales, see *Senedd Cymru Welsh Parliament History of Devolution*, at <https://senedd.wales/how-we-work/history-of-devolution>. For the 2011 Welsh Language Act and the role of the Welsh Language Commissioner, see *Comisiynydd y Gymraeg Welsh Language Commissioner*, at <https://www.welshlanguagecommissioner.wales/about-us/the-welsh-language-measure>

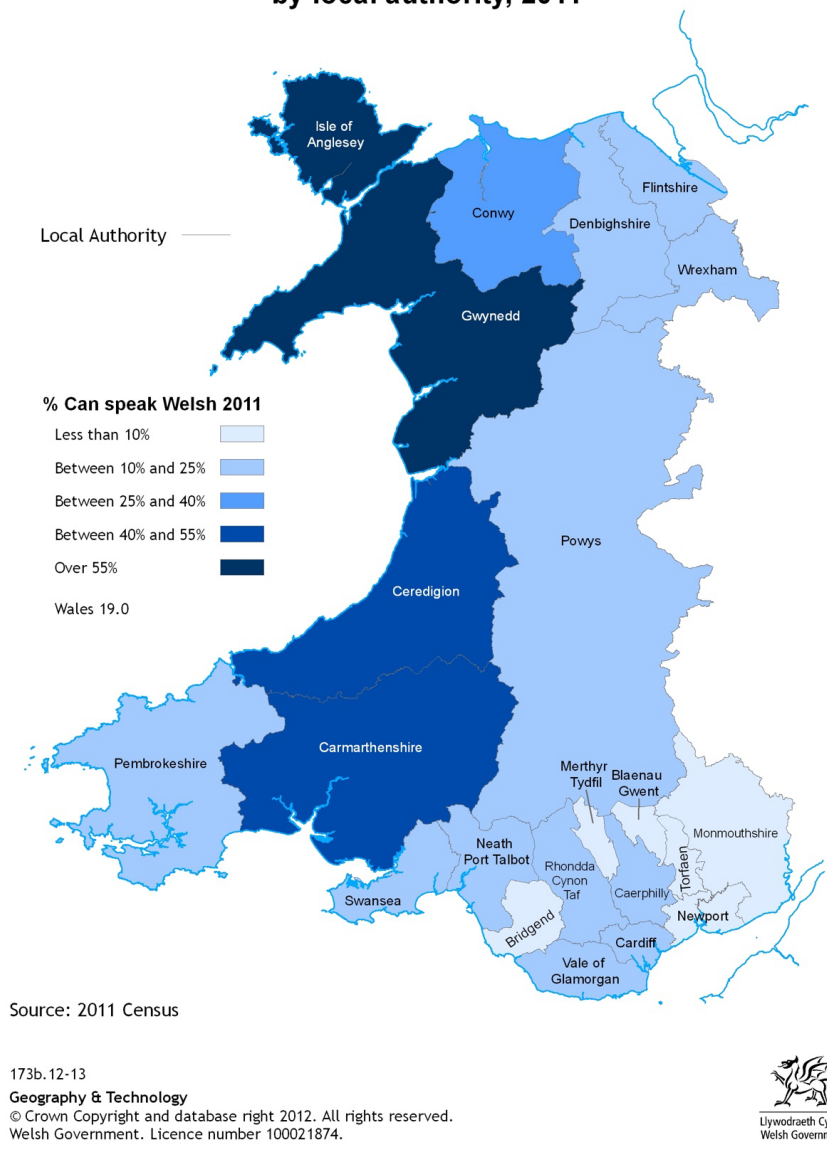
The first attempt to compile official statistics as to how many people in Wales were able to speak Welsh, and what percentage of the population they formed, dates back to 1891. Decennial censuses had been held throughout England and Wales since 1841, but now for the first time a question was included in Wales, asking whether each individual over the age of 2 could speak only English, only Welsh or both languages. Since then, questions of this kind have been included in every census, though the way they have been framed has varied, and it has been possible to chart the situation over time. The picture is broadly one of gradual decline. In 1891 a total of 910,289 people spoke Welsh, which amounted to 54.4% of the population; in the most recent census for which the results are available, that of 2011, the total number of Welsh speakers was 562,000, amounting to 19.0% of the population of Wales. In 1891 just over half the total number of Welsh-speakers had no English at all, but this proportion dropped rapidly, and is today vanishingly small. Those who can speak Welsh are normally bilingual, able to use both English and Welsh, though levels of fluency and confidence will vary.

Over the years there has usually been a clear age-related pattern, with the percentage of Welsh-speakers among older age groups higher than among younger people, tying in with the gradual decline in the number of Welsh speakers. In recent years the percentage of those able to speak Welsh among school-age children has been higher than would be expected, as the use of Welsh in schools has increased. The crucial question now is whether this uplift will continue as these cohorts leave school and go out into the wider world, or whether the pressures of the outside world will counteract the uplift. The census figures also reveal that the proportion of people able to speak Welsh varies from one part of Wales to another. Already in 1891, we can see that fewer than 20% of people were able to speak Welsh in some areas near the border with England and also in some industrialised areas, while further west and in rural areas over 90% were Welsh-speaking. This pattern has persisted, though even in the western, rural areas the percentage of Welsh-speakers is now much lower.⁵ The

⁵ For a discussion of the census results up to and including the 1991 census, see J. Aitchison & H. Carter (2000). For the results of the 2001 and 2011 censuses, see *2011 Census: Welsh Language Data for Small*

situation of the language as recorded in the 2011 census, the most recent for which the results are available, is shown in Map 1.

Proportion of people (aged 3 and over) able to speak Welsh, by local authority, 2011



Map 1. Proportion of People (aged 3 and over) able to Speak Welsh by Local Authority 2011.
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-03/130130-2011-census-welsh-language-data-small-areas-en.pdf>

Areas, at <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-03/130130-2011-census-welsh-language-data-small-areas-en.pdf>.

In Section 2 we look at the Welsh dialect classifications that have been made, by John Rhŷs in 1897, by Rudolf Trebitsch in 1907/9, and by Alan Thomas in 1973 and 1980.

2. Classifications

2.1 *John Rhŷs (1897)*

2.1.1 Framework: Isoglottic dialectology

The first attempt to divide up Wales into distinct geographical dialect areas appears to be the manuscript map produced by Rhŷs in 1897, shown in Map 2.⁶ He was a native speaker of Welsh from Cardiganshire in Mid Wales, and as the first Professor of Celtic at Oxford University, one of the foremost experts on the language at that time. He distinguishes four dialect areas, and the names he gives to each echo the names of the tribes who lived there in Roman times. The letter which accompanied the map makes it clear that he was relying largely on phonological features to justify these divisions, and that he was still very unsure of the exact location of the various boundaries. He concedes too that each of these areas could be divided up in turn, though he does not suggest what dialect features might be relevant to these new boundaries. Serious fieldwork was needed to establish the facts on the ground. A further complication was that the Welsh language was no longer spoken in some areas near the border with England, such as Radnorshire, and it was not clear what the traditional spoken dialect would have been there.

⁶ Rhŷs's map and the accompanying letter are both in English, and may be found in the National Library of Wales collection, the map as ms. 2473C, the letter as ms. 2492C. The map has since appeared in print in Thorne (1985: 83), and both the map and letter in Thorne (1986: 458-60). The map has also appeared in print in Thomas (1973, frontispiece). This last version is useful as it shows in print the handwritten comments made by Rhŷs on the map, which are quite difficult to read in the original. For a biography of Rhŷs, see Williams (1953).

2.1.2 Classification of dialects and subdialects

Rhŷs names the four dialects as follows:

- Venedotian - the north-west
- Ordovician - mid Wales and the north-east
- Demetian - the south-west
- Silurian - the south-east

Later in this letter he admits that in some ways he would prefer a three way split, again dependent on phonological features: the north-west, mid Wales, and the south. The north-west would remain the same as shown on Map 2. The mid-Wales area would be divided into three, as there is a very striking intrusive phonological feature in the middle of this area. South Wales would be shown as one area, but with the south-east marked as having additional features, distinguishing it from the south-west.

- Venedotian - as before
- Ordovician - as before, but now divided into three by an intrusive dialect feature
- Demetian - south Wales, but with features dividing off the south-east Silurian area



Map 2. Map of Welsh Dialect Boundaries drawn by Rhys (1903). Reproduced by kind permission of the National Library of Wales

A variation on this set of dialect areas appeared a few years later in 1903, in a local newspaper in south-west Wales, *The Pembroke County Guardian*.⁷ This issue of the newspaper contained the first part of a series on the local Welsh dialect by Arthur

⁷ *The Pembroke County Guardian* (1903, Dec. 17, p. 5).

Wade Wade-Evans, and Rhÿs contributed an enthusiastic introduction to this pioneering study. The layout of the page makes it difficult to say with certainty if this item is part of this introduction, or rather written by Wade-Evans. On balance it seems likely that we have here a restatement by Rhÿs of his earlier analysis.

We have once again a four-way split, though there is no accompanying map. The dialect areas are essentially the same as those suggested earlier; the only change is in the terminology used. Instead of referring to these areas by the names of the ancient tribes who lived there, Rhÿs now uses the names of the corresponding medieval territories - *Gwynedd* for the north-west, *Powys* for mid Wales, *Dyfed* for the south-west, and *Gwent* for the south-east. Their location is explained by reference to the then contemporary local government areas (counties) of Wales, the 'etc' presumably allowing for the probability that the dialect boundaries do not correspond at all points with the modern county boundaries. One of the modern counties, Radnor, is omitted from this list, presumably because the Welsh language was lost there early on, as noted above.

- Gwynedd	(Venedotian)	(Anglesey, Caernarvon, Merioneth etc.)
- Powys	(Powysian)	(Denbigh, Montgomery, Flint etc.)
- Dyfed	(Dimetian)	(Pembroke, Cardigan, Caermarthen etc.)
- Gwent	(Gwentian)	(Glamorgan, Monmouth etc.)

This four-way split, and the associated terminology, do not appear to have been adopted widely by dialectologists working on Welsh in the years following, and there does not seem to have been any real attempt to establish the distribution of dialect features throughout Wales in order to test the suggested boundaries, in spite of the encouragement of the Dialect Section of the Guild of Graduates of the University of Wales (Anwyl 1901).

The focus appears rather to have been on describing the spoken dialect of specific areas, and in the course of this work only two writers adopted Rhÿs's terminology. John Griffith, also known as John Pentrevor, in describing the spoken language of south-east Wales, refers to this dialect as *Y Wenhwyseg* (Gwentian). He

concedes, however, that it is not a unified form of speech, as there are many local variations, and indeed some of its characteristic features may be found outside its core area (Griffith 1902: 3-4).⁸ W. Meredith Morris published a glossary “of the Demetian dialect” but made it clear that his focus was on the Gwaun river valley in north Pembrokeshire, rather than any wider area in south-west Wales (Morris 1910).

Other linguists in their accounts of local dialects define the area involved in rather different terms. For some the focus is the speech of a particular town or village, for others a local government area such as a county.⁹ Only one of the later writers, Alf Sommerfelt, uses a medieval territorial term in defining his area of interest in mid Wales, in his *Studies in Cyfeiliog Welsh* (1925a). *Cyfeiliog* is a genuine medieval territorial name, but not one of those found in Rhÿs’s work, and it covers a much more restricted area than the *Powys* Rhÿs uses for mid Wales. In the course of this study Alf Sommerfelt, particularly when discussing dialect variation within mid Wales, is much more inclined to refer to geographically defined districts such as river valleys, and gives the names of those villages where particular forms are heard. He also refers to local government areas, and more general concepts such as north Wales and south Wales. Clearly, he was not particularly attached in this context to the use of the medieval territorial name. Sommerfelt recognised the attempt made by Thomas Darlington (1902) to establish the line of two major phonological dialect boundaries in mid-Wales, and incorporated a map showing these in his own study, but his own work showed that the situation was in fact more complicated and he did not map the results arising from his fieldwork in the area.

⁸ Surprisingly, he says that it is one ‘of the three leading dialects of Wales’, which is inconsistent with the four-way split suggested by Rhÿs himself. He does not comment on this difference.

⁹ The focus is a town or village in A. W. Wade-Evans (1903-4, 1906) - ‘Fishguard Welsh’, and in O. H. Fynes-Clinton (1913) - ‘the Bangor district’, and a county in J. Jones (1907) - ‘*Sir Gaernarfon*’ (Caernarfonshire) and A. Morris-Jones (1926) - ‘Anglesey’.

2.2 Rudolf Trebitsch (1907-1909)

2.2.1 Framework: ethnolinguistics

A second attempt to divide Welsh dialects on a geographical basis appears to result from a wish to collect representative samples of the spoken language for archival purposes. Rudolf Trebitsch was an Austrian ethnologist with an interest in the marginal, minority languages and cultures of Europe, aware of the potential of the new technology of sound recording for preserving material for later study by qualified linguists. He was able himself to finance a series of lengthy fieldwork trips to different countries between 1906 and 1913. He had the academic support of the *Museum für Volkskunde* in Vienna, and of the *Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften*, and in reports to them we find detailed accounts of how this work was carried out. As part of this work, he became interested in the Celtic languages, and in 1907 and 1909 visited Wales to record native speakers of Welsh.¹⁰

Aware that he had no experience of the Celtic languages, he turned for advice to others who knew the field well, in order to decide where to make sound recordings which would reflect the full range of dialect variation in the language, ensuring that the material collected would be truly representative.

2.2.2 Classification of dialects and subdialects

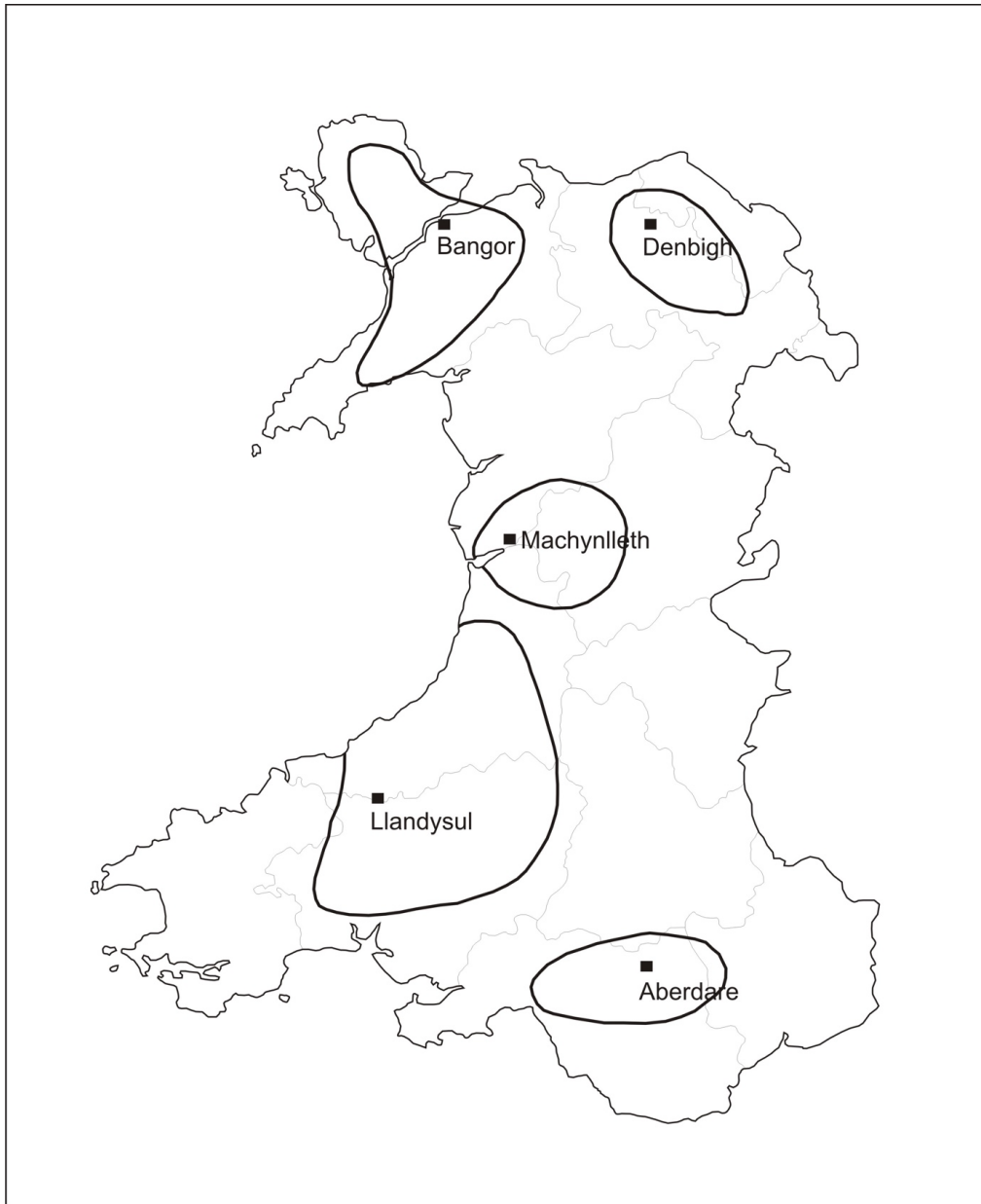
Two of Trebitsch's correspondents, Professor Heinrich Zimmer of the University of Berlin, and Professor Edward Anwyl of the University College at Aberystwyth, were in agreement that alongside the standard written language, there were five main dialects of Welsh (Trebitsch 1909: 4-6, Awbery 2017: 168-169). Rudolf Trebitsch accepted their advice, and chose locations within each area to record speakers, as follows.

¹⁰ Trebitsch (1908, 1909). For digitised versions of the recordings made on these visits, see Schüller (2003). For an account of his visits to Wales and the way he carried out his sound recordings, see Awbery (2017).

- southeast Welsh, spoken in north Glamorganshire - recordings made in Aberdare
- southwest Welsh, spoken in Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire - recordings made in Llandysul
- a transitional dialect between northern and southern speech, spoken in north Cardiganshire, south Merionethshire, and adjoining parts of Montgomeryshire
 - recordings made in Machynlleth
- northwest Welsh, spoken in Angleseyshire (sic) and Carnarvonshire - recordings made in Bangor
- northeast Welsh, spoken in Denbighshire - recordings made in Denbigh

Map 3 shows the areas described, and it can be seen that not all parts of Wales are covered. This was a rough and ready guide to where distinctive dialects would be found, and there is no attempt to identify where the boundaries might run. We are in fact dependent here on Trebitsch's summary of the advice he received, as no relevant letters from Heinrich Zimmer or Edward Anwyl appear to have survived. Nor can we tell what criteria they used as a basis for their division of Wales into five areas.

It is interesting, however, that Anwyl and Zimmer adopted a rather different view to that expressed by Rhys a few years earlier. They defined five dialect areas rather than four, and did so by dividing up Rhys's Ordovician / Powysian into two - separating out the transitional dialect of mid Wales from northeastern Welsh. There is no evidence that this five-way split was adopted by other dialectologists, and it appears to have been used only by Trebitsch for the purpose of organising his fieldwork.



Map 3. The Dialect Areas of Welsh as defined for Trebitsch by Zimmer & Anwyl (1907, 1909)

2.3 Alan R. Thomas (1973, 1980)

2.3.1 Framework: Isoglottic dialectology

Following these two early attempts to define distinct dialect areas in Wales, interest in this approach seems to have waned, and Welsh dialectologists continued to focus rather on describing in detail the spoken dialect of individual districts. A number

of studies, in the form of unpublished M.A. and Ph.D. theses, appeared over the years, though geographical coverage was uneven, and as the material has been collected over a long period, it is difficult to compare data collected in the 1920s and 1930s with that collected in the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ In a few cases a study explicitly compared the speech of different districts, either from widely separated parts of Wales or lying close to each other, but interest was in noting similarities and differences in linguistic features rather than in locating boundaries.¹²

There was, however, a growing feeling that a systematic survey of dialect variation across the whole of Wales was needed, along the lines of the surveys already carried out in other countries. In the 1920s and 1930s there were calls for detailed studies of individual districts to be combined with wider geographical survey techniques, and for the development of a map showing the boundaries of the main dialects of Welsh, and of the subdialects within each of them (Sommerfelt 1925b: 73; Jones 1934: 3). Plans began to firm up, and in 1955 it was announced that, under the aegis of the Welsh Department in the University College at Aberystwyth, a questionnaire had been devised and locations chosen for a dialect survey. A preliminary enquiry would be carried out in the summer of that year, leading to a full survey in 1956 (Watkins 1955: 40-42). This plan seems to have fallen flat, and in 1963 it was announced that a dialect survey was once again being planned, this time by the Linguistics Department in the University College of North Wales at Bangor. The phonological material would be collected in face-to-face interviews by trained phoneticians, but the lexical survey would be administered by post, with questionnaires being sent to contacts in the chosen locations, who would then carry out the work on the ground (Thomas 1963: 125-131).

In the event, only the lexical survey was implemented, by Alan Thomas of the Bangor Linguistics Department. The questionnaire contained 750 items, and a total of 180 locations were chosen, selected with reference to the lie of the land, mountain

¹¹ For bibliographical information on Welsh dialect studies, see T. Jones (1933-34), G. M. Awbery (1982), B. Thomas and P. W. Thomas (1989: 157-169), G. M. Awbery (www.draenog.co.uk).

¹² See for instance E. J. Davies (1955) for a comparison of two dialects within the county of Cardiganshire, and R. O. Jones (1967) for a comparison of three dialects, one from north Wales, one from mid Wales, and one from the southwest.

ranges and river valleys, and also with reference to traditional lines of communication. Only those areas where Welsh has not been spoken as a community language over a long period were omitted.¹³ The results were published in 1973 as a dialect atlas, *The Linguistic Geography of Wales*. Most of the maps show the responses to individual items in the questionnaire, but there is also a discussion of what "speech areas" are revealed by these results. Specifically, where do the isoglosses cluster, and suggest a serious dialect boundary?¹⁴

2.3.2 Classification of dialects and subdialects

Alan Thomas argues for a primary split into three areas - the north, mid Wales, and the south - with each of these further split into two, giving a total of six areas, as shown in his Figure 5, here Map 4. He does not give specific names to these areas, beyond basic geographical terms such as "north-west" or "east midlands" for ease of reference. These can be further divided into a set of "minor speech areas", as shown in his Figure 6, here Map 5, again on the basis of the way in which lexical isoglosses cluster. He does not, however, argue in favour of a simple, straightforward division of the country into dialect areas. The picture presented here is rather more complex, and less definite than this. He shows that the boundaries of the dialect areas suggested may be drawn in different places, depending on which lexical items are chosen as characteristic, as the isoglosses they generate do not all cluster in the same place. The boundary is often a transition zone rather than a clearcut line. The boundaries on the whole reflect the physical geography of Wales, mountain ranges which hinder contact and river valleys which aid communication, but they are not stable. There is considerable evidence that boundaries have shifted in the recent past and indeed are still doing so, as patterns of communication change. Some dialect boundaries appear to reflect earlier, medieval administrative units, but since both the medieval administrative units and the modern dialect speech areas are influenced by the

¹³ For a discussion of the methodology used in this survey, see Thomas (1973: 3-10).

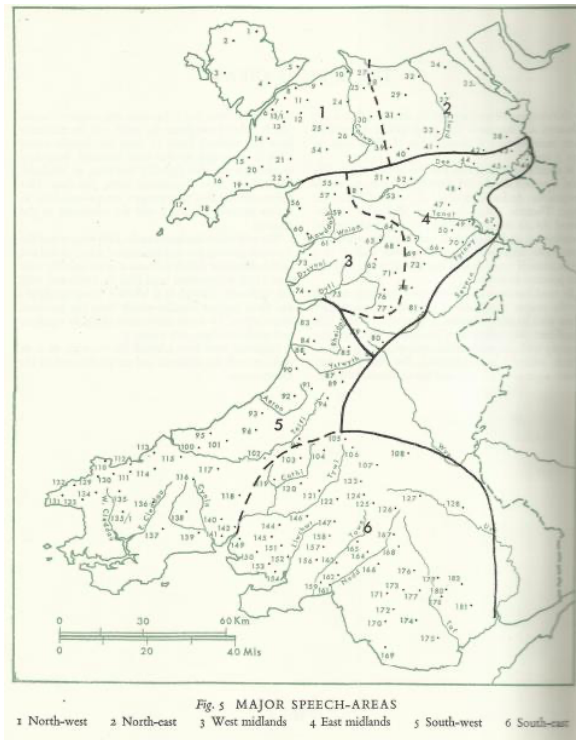
¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the speech areas revealed by the survey, see Thomas (1973: 13-82).

constraints of physical geography, it is not possible to draw conclusions as to the relationship between them.¹⁵

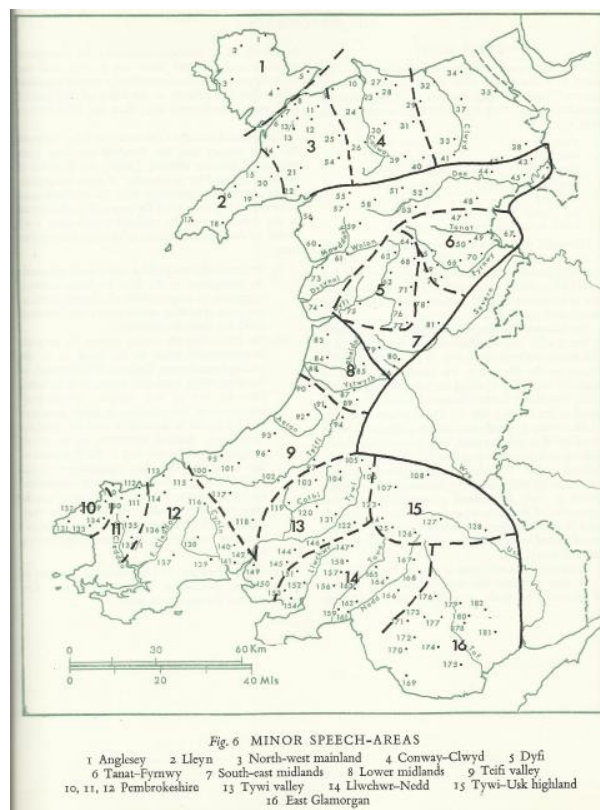
This division of Wales into dialect areas is not based on the full range of linguistic features. Most of the material used is lexical. A few items in the questionnaire were framed to investigate phonological variation, and a small number of items related to grammatical issues such as gender, but again these were very few. Thomas is quite open about this, and clearly saw his work as a first step only. He took the analysis one stage further in his later book, *Areal Analysis of Dialect Data by Computer*, published in 1980, revisiting the lexical data already collected, and setting up dialect boundaries afresh with the use of stringent computer-based techniques. The overall results were similar to those found in *The Linguistic Geography of Wales* in 1973, though greater detail emerged as to the fine structure of transition zones and the strength of individual speech areas.¹⁶

¹⁵ The claim that modern dialect boundaries reflect medieval administrative units has been made again more recently, but a systematic survey of a modern phonological boundary in north Wales suggests that it remains difficult to disentangle the influence of such medieval units from the physical geography which underlies them. Other historical and social factors also seem relevant to the modern position of the dialect boundary. See D. A. Thorne (1976, 1984), B. Thomas (1981, 1984).

¹⁶ For further discussion of the methodology used to set up these computer-based boundaries, see Thomas (1972, 1975).



Map 4. Major Speech Areas (Thomas 1973)



Map 5. Minor Speech Areas (Thomas 1973)

3. Discussion

The Linguistic Geography of Wales is in fact the only attempt so far to establish distinct dialect areas for the language, based on genuine fieldwork and real data. A survey of phonetic / phonological dialect variation in Welsh has since been carried out, and the results published as *The Welsh Dialect Survey* (Thomas et. al. 2000). However, this publication did not take the form of maps where dialect boundaries could be drawn. It consists rather of a series of lists, one for each item in the questionnaire, giving the form recorded in each location. The raw material is therefore available, and it would be possible in principle to convert this material into a set of maps, comparable to those in *The Linguistic Geography of Wales*. This has not so far been done, probably due to the cost of producing such an atlas.

It would be interesting to compare the dialect boundaries which might result from this phonological material with those established for lexical dialect variation. The speech areas defined by Thomas for lexical material are in fact similar to those suggested, largely on phonological grounds, by Rhÿs back in 1901. This early map was based on hunch and general knowledge rather than fieldwork, and a map drawing on the phonological data published in 2000 would be an important step forward.

Other attempts to map phonological variation across Wales have drawn on the descriptions of individual districts referred to in note 11, rather than on a general survey. Each map shows the boundaries of a specific phonological feature, and there is no attempt to establish a more general set of dialect boundaries with wider validity.¹⁷

In recent years dialectologists in Wales have paid greater attention to sociolinguistic factors and tried to incorporate the resulting insights into their work. Geographical variation is still a relevant consideration, but other issues are also felt to be important in accounting for patterns of variation. This work has thrown into doubt the concept of a single dialect in use in a particular area, with clear boundaries separating this from other equally distinct local dialects. This shift in attention on the part of dialectologists in Wales from an interest in geographical boundaries as

¹⁷ See for instance Awbery (1984: 73, 76, 80, 82, 84, 91), B. Thomas & P. W. Thomas (1989: 32, 37, 41).

traditionally defined, to a greater stress on social factors, can be seen as reflecting the current level of concern with the role of language in society more generally. Issues such as understanding what drives language shift in a bilingual society and how it can be reversed, have greater salience at present, as they are seen to determine a wide range of political decisions about the right to use Welsh or English in particular situations, and how resources are to be allocated at a time of financial austerity.

Recent work has shown the kind of complications which must be taken into account. First there is the choice of informants. Over the years many people from other parts of Wales have settled in the industrial valleys of the south-east, so that Welsh-speakers in this area come from a variety of different dialect backgrounds. As a result, in the lexical atlas *The Linguistic Geography of Wales* (Thomas 1973) this area had not surprisingly shown up as having a very mixed set of responses. A new approach was developed, leaving out the families of incomers and working only with longstanding farming families, and as a result clear patterns of lexical variation were revealed, which had previously been hidden by the varied nature of the Welsh-speaking population.¹⁸

Further complications have been found where individual informants differ in their usage of dialect features, creating difficulties in defining what is meant by a dialect boundary. In the case of a village located near the limit of a particular phonological feature, its use varied from one informant to another according to a complex pattern of social factors, including age, sex, socioeconomic status and religious affiliation (Thomas 1988). How can this kind of variation be reconciled with the desire to set up clear isoglosses and dialect boundaries? In another case individual speakers differed from each other in their use of specific phonological features, but more significantly the use of these features even within the speech of a single informant varied according to a range of linguistic factors such as whether these features appeared in a monosyllable or a longer form, their position relative to word stress, and the precise phonetic context (Rees 2015). Here again the problem arises of how such variation can be handled in terms of clearcut dialect boundaries.

¹⁸ For the mixed responses in south-east Wales, see for example A. R. Thomas (1973: 128-131); for the alternative approach, see P. W. Thomas (1982, 1984).

It seems unlikely that Welsh dialectologists will return soon to the task of defining dialect areas, and mapping the boundaries between them. Interest appears focussed on the complexities of how language use reflects the social structure of a community, and how a gradual shift from the usage of one community to that of another is actually realised on the ground. Transition zones rather than clearcut boundaries are the current model of dialect variation.

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