

Welsh as a responsibility, English as the default: the negative effects of heritage language ideologies among young people

In recent years, the approach to the use of minority languages has shifted significantly, as greater attention is being brought to the positive aspects of multilingualism and to the importance of heritage. However, marked ideologies regarding these languages persist, though often less overtly, as in the case of the Welsh language. Despite it being perceived as something to be proud of by most Welsh people (Welsh Government 2018) and as important to the Welsh identity (Williams 2019: 82-85), it is often dispreferred outside of school or work context even among fluent speakers (Jones 2017).

The reasons behind this phenomenon have been widely analysed in the context of schooling and insufficient opportunities to use the language in a natural environment (cf. Lewis and Smallwood 2010, McAllister et al. 2013: 12-13). However, there has been little discussion about the possible negative impact of assigning a great ideological importance to a language.

The following paper explores that topic and argues that putting too much focus on the cultural weight of the language can hinder the normalisation of its use. The basis for this discussion is the responses provided during two studies on the use of the Welsh language online. They consisted of a series of surveys and semi-structured interviews conducted with Welsh speakers aged 16-26, coming from different linguistic backgrounds.

The participants often talked about Welsh in a positive manner, with most of the interviewees stating that Welsh was more important to them personally than English. At the same time, their approach to English was not as emotionally charged. While the Welsh language was seen as 'theirs', a cultural heritage to be enthusiastic about and a source of pride, English was a language that was not associated with a specific identity, which paradoxically led to its more relaxed usage.

This common sentiment, especially prevalent among the speakers who attended Welsh-medium schools, highlights the double-edged nature of framing languages in a heritage context. Although speakers are often enthusiastic about their heritage language, this feeling can be inadvertently accompanied by a sense of responsibility that halts them from speaking it. As such, these findings suggest that for a language to be used in an everyday context, it must be ensured that the speakers treat it mostly as a means of communication rather than a duty that must be fulfilled.

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