

# Minority Language Survival in Northwest Wales: An Introduction

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## 1. The origins of Welsh in Britain

Around 600 B.C. Celtic speakers arrived in Britain from central Europe and the Brythonic (or Brittonic) language was established in Britain (see e.g. Davies 1993). The Celtic languages are normally divided into two groups: the Goidelic and the Brythonic. The Goidelic group includes Scots and Irish Gaelic and Manx, while the Brythonic group includes Breton and Cornish as well as modern Welsh.

In 43 A.D. the Romans invaded Britain and Latin became established alongside Brythonic in what would have been a bilingual society. Then between 500 and 700 A.D. Anglo-Saxon invaders established kingdoms in eastern Britain in which their language (Anglo-Saxon or Old English) became dominant. Meanwhile Brythonic survived in non-Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the north, west (where Wales now is) and southwest. It evolved into three different languages: Cumbric in the north, Welsh in the west and Cornish in the southwest. All of these were at first referred to by the term *Welsh*, meaning ‘foreigner’ at least from an Anglo-Saxon perspective. The speakers of Welsh and Cumbric, however, adopted the term *Cymraeg* for their language, meaning ‘fellow-countryman’. *Cymraeg* is still the Welsh term for the Welsh language, Cumbric being extinct and Cornish reputedly having had no native speakers since the eighteenth century (cf. Davies 1993: 11).

In 1066, following the Norman Conquest, French became established as the language of the English court, and was adopted by some Welsh rulers in addition to their Welsh. Then in 1284, following the defeat of the Welsh prince Llewelyn by Edward I, Wales was formally annexed to England, and the Statute of Rhuddlan established English law in Wales. The dominance of England over Wales was consolidated in 1536, when the Statute of Wales (also known as the Act of Union) imposed English as the official language of Wales. Since 1284 the ruling classes had increasingly begun to speak English in addition to or instead of Welsh, but the Statute of Wales can be seen as the final stage of the linguistic colonisation of Wales.

The Protestant Reformation, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, provided something of a respite for Welsh as a result of the Protestant emphasis on worship in the vernacular. In 1567 a Welsh translation of the New Testament was published, and the process of translation provided the basis for the modern Welsh literary language (cf. Jones 1988: 128).

The Industrial Revolution took place between 1750 and 1850: during this time the population more than doubled, from under 500,000 to over a million, but the proportion of Welsh speakers decreased from about 80% in 1801 to about 67% in 1851 (Davies 1993:36-7). Government attitudes to Welsh were overwhelmingly negative, as illustrated by what is seen from a Welsh perspective as the “Treachery of the Blue Books” in 1847. This refers to a report of a government commission set up in 1846 to investigate the role of the Welsh language in education, in which its conclusions included the finding that The Welsh language is a vast drawback to Wales, and a manifold barrier to the moral progress and commercial prosperity of the people . This attitude provides the backdrop for the 1870 Education Act, which established English-medium education in Wales. After this children were actively punished for speaking Welsh in school.

## 2. Welsh in the twentieth century

### 2.1 Decline

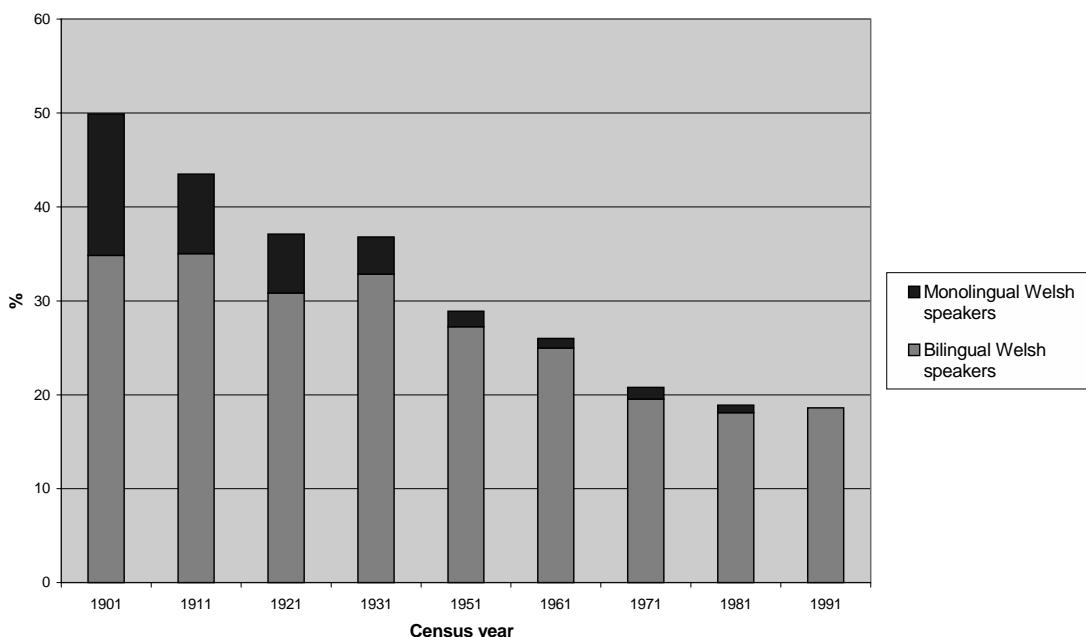
As Baker (1985:1) puts it, “The history of the Welsh speaking population in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a history of decline”. This is illustrated in Table 1, where the number of Welsh speakers and the percentage of the population speaking Welsh are shown from census figures for the years 1901, 1931, 1981 and 1991. As can be seen, both the number and the proportion of Welsh speakers go down

**Table 1: Number and percentage of Welsh speakers in twentieth century**

Census year	Number of Welsh speakers	Percentage of population speaking Welsh
1901	930,000	50%
1931	909,000	37%
1981	500,000	19%
1991	508,098	18.6%

throughout the century. This is further illustrated in Figure 1, where the proportion of both monolingual and bilingual speakers has decreased in every census year of the century. In 1991 no information was actually collected on the numbers of monolingual Welsh speakers, as it was assumed there would be none over three years old. It should be pointed out that the information in Figure 1

**Figure 1: Proportion of monolingual and bilingual Welsh speakers in population**  
(adapted from Jones 1993:550).



masks considerable regional variation, and that according to Aitchison & Carter 1994, the percentage of Welsh speakers in some parts of the northwest, where our research is conducted, reached between 65 and 80%.

## 2.2 Revitalisation

The second part of the twentieth century is not only marked by continuing decline in the number and proportion of Welsh language speakers, but also by increasing efforts at revitalisation of the language. One of these was a BBC lecture by the nationalist Saunders Lewis entitled *Tynged yr Iaith* ‘The Fate of the Language’ (see e.g. <http://www.llgc.org.uk/ymgyrchu/Iaith/TyngedIaith/tynged.htm>) in which he urged supporters to make it impossible to conduct local authority or central government business in Wales without the Welsh language. Shortly after this the Welsh Language Society, *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*, was established. This conducted various campaigns to promote the Welsh language, involving, for example the refusal to fill in forms available only in English, ignoring court summons in English, tearing down monolingual English road signs in the late 1960s, and campaigning for a Welsh language television channel. The Welsh Language Act of 1967 shows that the *Cymdeithas* had some success, since the Act established that more forms and official documents should be available in Welsh, and that anyone wishing to use Welsh in a court of law should have a right to do so. However, English was retained as the official language of record in the courts. In 1982 a separate Welsh television channel was established after a long and bitter campaign, and in 1988 the Education Reform Act came into force. The significance of this for the Welsh language was that it made it compulsory for Welsh to be taught to all pupils in Wales either as a first or as a second language. Since that time the number of public examinations taken through the medium of Welsh has increased considerably (see Baker 1999).

Further government support of the language was shown by Welsh Language Act in 1993, which set up the Welsh Language Board in order to promote the Welsh language. It also made it compulsory for public sector organisations to provide services in Welsh for those who wish to make use of them. While this is a step forward, *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* considers that the provision is too limited, and that it should be extended to the private sector, whose provision for Welsh speakers is only voluntary at the moment.

In 1999 the Welsh Assembly was established to make limited devolution possible, and this body has some responsibility for the Welsh language. It is currently being urged by *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* to do more to guarantee the future of Welsh-speaking communities and village schools (see <http://www.cymdeithas.com/ymgyrchu>).

## 3. Welsh in the twenty-first century

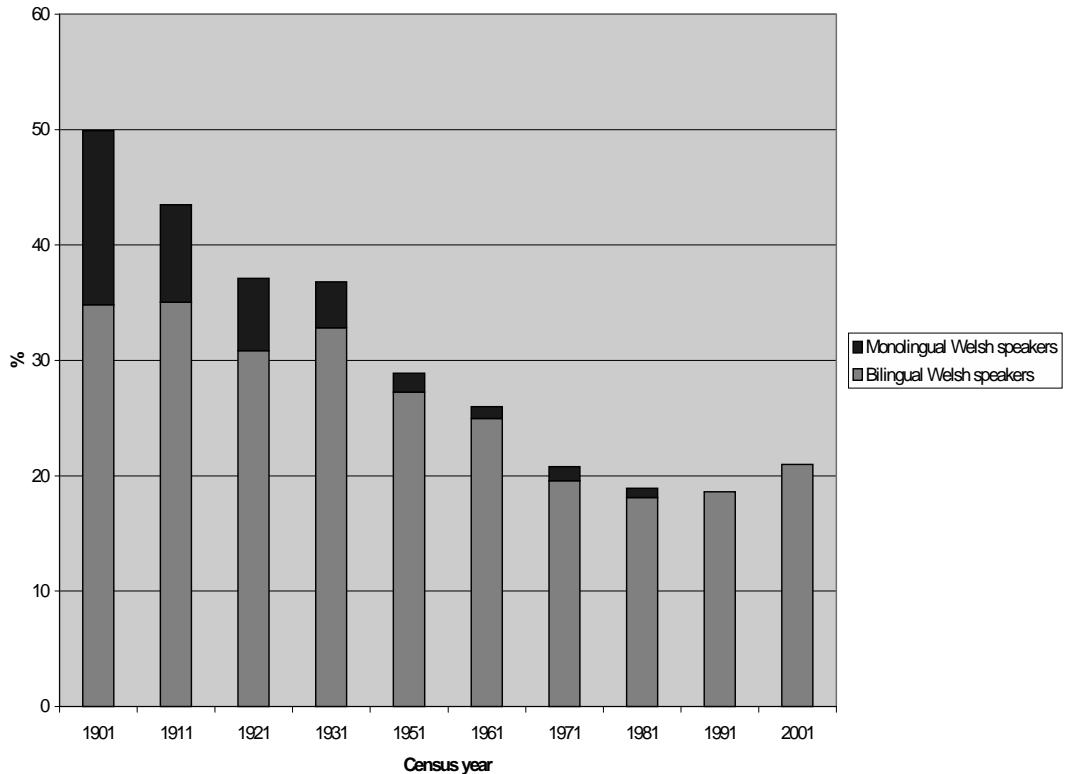
The results from the 2001 Census have recently been published (see <http://www.bwrdd-yr-iaith.org.uk/uploads/publications/159.xls>) and show for the first time an upturn in the number and proportion of the population speaking Welsh. These figures are shown in the last, shaded, row of Table 2, which is an extended version of Table 1. The additional figures are also shown in the final

**Table 2: Number and percentage of Welsh speakers in twentieth century and 2001**

Census year	Number of Welsh speakers	Percentage of population speaking Welsh
1901	930,000	50%
1931	909,000	37%
1981	500,000	19%
1991	508,098	18.6%
<b>2001</b>	<b>575,604</b>	<b>21%</b>

column of the bar chart in Figure 2. As in other years this figure masks considerable regional variation which shows that the increase was concentrated in south-east Wales, with there being some decrease in rural areas (see <http://www.bwrdd-yr-iaith.org.uk/en/news>). The increase in 2001 is thus grounds for cautious optimism, but the battle for the language may not yet be over.

**Figure 2: Proportion of monolingual and bilingual Welsh speakers in population (including 2001) (adapted from Jones 1993:550).**



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