



Wales: Culture and identity

Nationalism and Welsh language

Charlotte Aull Davies

I think shared language is a very potentially powerful unifying base in other words it can establish connections and very close connections. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that there is such an intimate relationship between our personal identities and the language that we use but also at the same time language is used to express group solidarity. And at lots and lots of different social levels from families to other groupings right up to the national level. So for those reasons I think language is an especially powerful way of establishing connections. But of course anything that establishes connections and solidarity like that can also be used to exclude and to express differences. So one of the questions is what's happened with the Welsh language? Has it maybe been for connections or has it maybe been in terms of differences? I think certainly it's been both I mean there have been differences based on the language between people, and there's a particular problem both for a political nationalist movement and perhaps for a nation, our collectivity. When you have a minority of a population speaking a different language. So there are and there have been problems with difference or expressions of difference based on language. But I feel and I try to show in this chapter that on balance the Welsh language has been a basis for connections in Wales. Certainly the Welsh language was the main carrier of Welsh distinctiveness. For centuries everything else, all other institutional differences between Wales and England were deliberately destroyed and there were attempts of course to stamp out the Welsh language as well, quite strong attempts over the centuries. But the Welsh language certainly was the main carrier of Welsh identity for centuries. Eventually then it became the main basis for re-establishing some institutional differences so that you have in the very early stages of setting up the Welsh office. One of the arguments that's been made is there is a different language spoken in Wales and therefore we have to cater for that and we need a special Welsh department to do so.

The other sort of basis which has probably developed over the years is a kind of personal and emotional connection. It's always been the case within the political Nationalist movement that the language has served as a kind of unifying characteristic across English and Welsh speakers. In other words you had people within the Welsh Nationalist political movement who were non Welsh speaking themselves but were very strong supporters and very strongly emotionally attached to the Welsh language and it's revival; supporting its increased use within education and so forth and within the bureaucracy.

So within the Welsh political Nationalist movement I think you could say really from the outset it was very strongly Welsh language movement but it attracted English speakers who were strongly attached, emotionally to the Welsh language.

Within Wales as a whole I feel that probably this is something that's developed over the last oh certainly thirty years – if you go back to the 1970's for non-Welsh speakers the language was much more divisive and the attitudes of upper language were much more ambivalent and often hostile for Welsh speakers. Then you of course have this reflected with Welsh speakers who had feelings of hostility and so forth and would themselves deny the language to some degree.

When I was in Wales in 1976/1977 I lived in Cardiff for six months. I was doing my field work. And when I was in Cardiff I had a room with a woman. She was from Swansea. She was completely fluent in Welsh. She'd grown up speaking Welsh but she didn't speak Welsh with me. She never spoke Welsh with me. She did not say on the census that she was Welsh speaking. I was therefore oh easily several weeks before I discovered that she spoke Welsh. She had a number of friends who she said were the same.

Now it was this kind of sort of attitude about the Welsh language, a kind of almost embarrassment, hiding it, and I think that has certainly changed. I don't think that sort of thing would be commented at all now. Why not? Well, the establishment of Welsh media schools has made a huge difference, so that you have lots and lots of people who themselves don't speak Welsh who now have grandchildren that do and are extremely proud of them. So the language becomes something that they themselves see as a part of their own identity because it's something that belongs to their children or their grandchildren. So I think the Welsh schools movement in the valleys and in the non-Welsh speaking parts of Wales has had a big affect. The official recognition for the language has had a huge effect. It's no longer something that's second rate that you use in private. it's become something now it has more prestige. It now is associated with good jobs and so forth. So I think that's made a very big difference. Obviously if you read the letters page in the local papers you can see lots of people who are still quite vehemently opposed to support for the Welsh language but I think it's much less common.

I think the Welsh language certainly does connect people much more than it used to. it's less divisive I think across language groups that is Welsh speakers and non-Welsh speakers and in different parts of Wales. Certainly there are many more speakers of Welsh who have moved to Cardiff in particular. It's become a big centre for good jobs which have Welsh language requirements and you have lots of Welsh speakers in Cardiff. So I think it's much more perhaps accepted and much more resource that in Wales that connects people than it was even – even a quarter of a century ago.

Hugh Mackay

How have case studies shaped Charlotte's research?

Charlotte Aull Davies

You could say the story about my landlady is anecdotal. On the other hand I've done more recent research in Swansea interviewing people about various sorts of things about families and also about their Welsh-ness and Welsh identity and attitude toward the language and have found that although some interviewees did express opposition for the language many many more are very supportive of the language and also seem to sort of own the language. Even if they don't speak it it's something that belongs to them. It's a part of their Welsh-ness. Now I think that this kind of evidence - interview evidence - is to try to explore and reveal the range of expressions and the range of experiences and opinions that people have. It's not intended to give a statistical valid over view of attitudes about the language. On the other hand if you do a comparatively large number of interviews, I mean fifty or sixty, I've heard it said that once people start telling you things you've heard before you can stop interviewing with qualitative interviewing. I don't quite agree with that. I think it's a good idea to to get the range – the full range but also to get an idea of the overall balance of how many people are being supportive of the language and if you do fifty or sixty interviews you're getting at least a sense of the majority of people expressing positive attitudes about the language and one or two or three that are extremely negative.

It's not a statistical conclusion but it's certainly qualitative interviewing of that sort can give you a kind of idea of the overall balance. Also the way in which things are changing. I mean in the interviews that we did in Swansea we were doing a re-study of of a family study that had been done back in the 1960's and Professor Chris Harris who worked with us had been one of the people who did the original study and he was quite surprised and he said that there is a huge difference in the way that people talked not so much about the language but about Welsh identity that sort of they could accept that they were happy, they were proud of it. They didn't really feel they had to push it. It was just part of them. Whereas in the 1960's he felt that the people were really not exactly denying it but they were certainly didn't want to to push it. They didn't want to go on about their Welsh-ness. And it was very different by our interviewing.

And of course there are all sorts of basis for - for Welsh identity – that people talked about besides the language, very positive about the language but they also talked about rugby and so forth. So I think that that kind of research can give you both an awareness of range of

opinions, range of experiences, but it also can give you at least a sense of the balance of – of the way in which balance may be shifting over time.

Hugh Mackay

What other research methods were used in conjunction with Charlotte's interviews?

Charlotte Aull Davies

The particular study in Swansea which was focused in changes in the family life was based around well both a survey which was a quantitative part of the study but around qualitative interviewing and we interviewed about thirty to forty individuals in four different neighbourhoods so that in the process of doing the interviews we were able to build up not just ideas about the range of peoples – individual peoples experiences and so forth but also about the neighbourhood in which they lived so that the interviews fed into case studies – four different case studies of differing and contrasting neighbourhoods in Swansea.

So we were able to use those interviews and then some participating observation in various kinds of activities: school plays, going to leisure centres and sporting events, all this sort of thing in the different locations so that you build up a very rounded picture of what's happening in these different neighbourhoods. Qualitative interviewing is often the principle research method basis for case studies. But obviously then you carry on and you broaden it with other kinds of ethnographic data based on participant observation in different setting and informal conversations as opposed to just interviewing and so forth.