

Ifor Part 6



Living here in Caernarfon of course means that I can live most of my life through the medium of Welsh – that wouldn't be true for everywhere in Wales – and there are certain aspects of my life, for instance, some interactions with the state, which have to be in English, so there are different layers to everyone's identity... and it has to be thus, as we live multicultural lives to an extent, wherever we are... that is to say, it's easier to shut out other cultural elements depending where you live, whether from the position of Welsh... here in Caernarfon, you can live in a kind of Welsh language universe,... whilst it's possible in most places in the UK to live in an English language universe, and in much of Wales to be honest.

And of course that raises an interesting question regarding the English language. In Wales our relationship with English is a threefold one... at the first level, English is the medium of identity for four out of five of our compatriots, that is to say 'English is a Welsh language', it's a language with its own forms, accent, its own vocabulary, maybe not to the same extent as Scots in Scotland and not with the same status certainly, but it's a Welsh language like Scots in Scotland...

We don't have a name for English in Wales, that is to say, if we're talking about Welsh, usually it's understood that we're referring to Cymraeg, the native language, but 'Welsh-English' or 'Wenglish' or whatever one wants to call it, **is** a language, it's our variant of the English language here in Wales. So that's one aspect of our relationship with the English language, it's a language that we've taken as our own.

English of course is also an international language, a means for us to communicate with people across the world on an equal footing...it's a means of conveying information from all over the world to us here in Wales, and it's also a means for us to tell our own stories and share our experiences with others in other lands...

But, English is also... and this is the third aspect of our relationship...English is also an imperial language, a colonial language, a language that throughout our history has gradually pushed against the Welsh language, often in an oppressive and vicious manner, dislodging the Welsh language - so there's that element to our relationship with English too.

But with English it depends on where you are in the world... I remember speaking a few years ago with someone from the Czech Republic, and for them English was the 'language of freedom', because for them it represented post-communist possibilities, it wasn't just an international language, it was a language of liberty. Mm... I don't think we see it quite like that

here in Wales, but it just underlines the different dimensions that are possible in our relationship with the English language...

And that's one thing that we have to wrestle with, in contemporary Wales, I think that it was M. Wynn Williams who said...mm... M. Wynn Thomas, sorry! said that 'Wales can never come fully to terms with herself until she acknowledges her bilateral nature'. Bilingualism has evolved within the Welsh context, from being a means by which we conversed with the world outside, (be that through the means of English or Latin in earlier times) and a means of bringing ideas into our Welsh language universe... until nowadays, bilingualism has become an aspect of our relationship with each other as Welsh people, that is, I can't converse with a non-Welsh speaker unless I use another language, so in that respect, bilingualism has changed its role within the Welsh experience.

And maybe that's something that we can profitably share with other people within the UK. We have a long experience of living side by side with other languages, to some extent for the last 500 years. Our aristocracy became anglicised from, let's say, 1485 onwards...then the coming of the Industrial Revolution brought demographic shifts... though some newcomers embraced the Welsh language, you only have to look at the surnames of some of the most fervent of Welsh speakers these days, to see that somewhere down the line, their forefathers came from somewhere else, be that England, Ireland, Germany... there are plenty of Welsh speakers with unusual surnames in the Wales of today...