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Welsh Language Transmission and Use in Families

Executive Summary

1. Research aims and context

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of a research study commissioned by the Welsh Government into patterns of intergenerational language transmission and language use among families with children aged 0 to 4 years old.¹ The research was undertaken by researchers in the School of Welsh and School of Psychology at Cardiff University in collaboration with Arad Research and Statiaith.
- 1.2 The project aimed to examine how parents use Welsh with their children and how the use of Welsh in the home is influenced by various factors. Specifically, the project aimed to answer the following research questions:
 - What are the conditions that facilitate Welsh language transmission within families, and the conditions that make Welsh language transmission less likely?
 - What are the conditions that influence patterns of Welsh language use within families with children in the 0-4 age group?
- 1.3 The Welsh Government has highlighted intergenerational transmission and use of Welsh in the family as a key strategic priority. As the current Welsh language strategy comes to an end in 2017, the research was commissioned as part of the Evaluation Framework which will allow Welsh Government to assess the extent to

¹ The term intergenerational language transmission refers to the use of a particular language or languages by parents with their child(ren) and the subsequent acquisition of that language by the child(ren).

which it has met its strategic aims. It will also inform the formulation of the new strategy for the Welsh language.

- 1.4 In order to address the aims and questions, we completed a thorough literature review of (1) work on intergenerational language transmission internationally and (2) previous research on the intergenerational transmission of Welsh. Following this, we undertook a statistical analysis of data relevant to the transmission of Welsh from the National Census (2011). This analysis centred on the percentages of children aged three-to-four years old residing in households where at least one adult spoke Welsh. Original data were then collected from 60 families through written questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and analysed using a mixed-methods approach (see section 2).

2. Statistical analysis of National Census (2011) data

- 2.1 The analysis of the National Census data showed differences between the percentages of children aged three to four reported as being able to speak Welsh in different types of household. In households where two parents were able to speak Welsh, 82 per cent of children aged three to four also spoke the language. In households where only one of two parents were able to speak Welsh, the percentage of children aged three to four who were able to speak the language was 45 per cent. In lone-parent households where the parent was able to speak Welsh, 53 percent of children aged three to four were reported as being able to speak the language.
- 2.2 The results of a logistic regression on the National Census data indicated that there is a correlation between the transmission of Welsh to children and household type, local authority and, to a lesser extent, socioeconomic (NS-SEC) category.² To summarise, transmission is more likely in families where both parents speak Welsh, in Gwynedd, and to a lesser extent among those with small businesses, intermediate occupations, and managerial and professional occupations.

3. Methodology

- 3.1 A mixed-methods approach was adopted for the design of the main study. The quantitative analysis is based on data from a written questionnaire and closed questions posed in an oral interview with the main caregiver of at least one child aged 0 to 4 years. Another questionnaire was left for the partner of the main

² It should be noted that numbers of children aged three-to-four living in households where at least one parent spoke Welsh varied between local authority.

caregiver (if applicable) to return in the post. The partner's questionnaire contained all the closed questions in the respondent's questionnaire and interview. The qualitative analysis is based on the open-ended questions posed to the main caregiver during the interview.

Quantitative data

3.2 The written questionnaire elicited data on parents' linguistic background and language use, as well as data on their wider social values. This approach was informed by methods in social psychology and, in particular, by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). This theory has been applied to several behaviours but has hitherto not been quantitatively analysed in the context of the intergenerational transmission of Welsh. The TPB measures included in the current research elicited data on respondents' attitudes towards transmission (attitudes), the extent to which respondents felt that speaking Welsh with children was 'normal' in their community (perceived social norms), the extent to which they felt they were able to speak Welsh with their child (control), and the extent to which they viewed themselves as a Welsh speaker (self-identity).

Qualitative data

3.3 The qualitative data were elicited during the semi-structured interview. The open-ended questions focussed on the following themes:

- The respondent's language use and attitudes towards Welsh in childhood.
- The respondent's current language use with extended family, and in their social networks and wider community.
- The family's current linguistic behaviour in the home.
- Discussions with partner, extended family, and/or external agencies regarding language use in the home prior to the birth of the child and during early childhood (if applicable).

3.4 The qualitative data were analysed thematically. The responses of participants were labelled using codes based on the questions asked. The coded data were then analysed for themes.

The sample

3.5 A total of 60 interviews were completed between March and June 2016 with the main caregivers of at least one child aged 0 to 4 years. The sample was equally stratified by region (north west and south east Wales) to investigate the experiences of respondents in different areas. It should be noted, however, that the study did not seek to compare areas directly due to the differences between the overall proportion

who are able to speak Welsh in the two regions. Most of the main respondents were women ($n=51$) and all reported ability in Welsh. Fifty-three per cent of the respondents' partners returned the questionnaire ($n=32$). Of these, 75 per cent reported ability in Welsh ($n=24$).

4. Quantitative analysis including TPB measures

Language use with children

4.1 Of the main respondents, 42 per cent ($n=25$) reported mainly, almost always, or always speaking Welsh with their child(ren) compared to 35 per cent who reported using mainly, almost always, or always English ($n=21$). The remaining 23 per cent reported roughly equal use of Welsh and English ($n=14$). Sixty-eight per cent of respondents stated that language use with their child was automatic rather than an intentional behaviour.

4.2 There was a strong correlation between both respondents' and partners' language background and their use of Welsh with their child(ren).

Psychological variables

4.3 The psychological variables were presented as seven-point Likert items where 1 equalled the most negative response (e.g. 'extremely bad' or 'strongly disagree') and 7 indicated the most positive response (e.g. 'extremely good' or 'strongly agree'). These items were designed to elicit data on attitudes, perceived social norms, control, and self-identity (see 3.2).

4.4 The attitudes towards Welsh in the sample were largely favourable among both respondents and their partners. The respondents and their partners also tended to perceive speaking Welsh with children as a socially normative behaviour where they live. Similarly, both respondents and their partners tended to agree that they had control over speaking Welsh to their children.

4.5 The respondents and their partners also tended to perceive the Welsh language as part of their identity.

Predictors of intergenerational transmission

4.6 Regression analyses were conducted on the respondents' quantitative data to ascertain the extent to which the demographic and psychological variables were predictors of intergenerational transmission of Welsh. The dependent variable (transmission) was coded according to respondents' self-reported language use with their youngest child (see 4.1). The statistical analysis is restricted due to the relatively small sample size (60 respondents). Our analysis therefore should be seen as indicative of the utility of psychological and social variables in predicting

transmission, and on which further research with a larger sample might build (see Recommendations).

- 4.7 The first analysis (a step-wise regression) was conducted on the psychological variables only. The results of this model indicated that Welsh language habit and Welsh language identity were significant predictors of transmission. This means that those who use Welsh without much thought and those who feel that the Welsh language is an important part of their identity are more likely to transmit Welsh to their children.
- 4.8 A further series of analyses were conducted, which contained all the psychological and social variables. Region was the strongest predictor of transmission. This suggests that those in the north west were more likely to transmit Welsh than those in the south east (although this factor failed to reach statistical significance and may therefore be due to chance). However, region is inherently linked with other demographic factors (e.g. the proportion of children from households where both parents speak Welsh is greater in the north west) which makes comparisons difficult. The qualitative analysis (see section 5) focuses more on the interplay between demographic factors and the transmission of Welsh and the extent to which transmission is an automatic behaviour.

5. Qualitative thematic analysis

- 5.1 Several main themes arose regarding the use of Welsh in the home and the factors which influence transmission.

The transmission of Welsh to children as an unconscious behaviour by respondents

- 5.2 The thematic analysis showed that, for many respondents in the current research, Welsh was the main language they used with their children at all times and they had not given much thought to their linguistic behaviour. These respondents predominantly came from Welsh-speaking families, had Welsh-speaking partners, and reported being confident speaking Welsh.

Language use in a Welsh-speaking family

- 5.3 Of the respondents who reported speaking Welsh with their family, most stated that they spoke Welsh almost all the time. Some parents noted that they frequently switched between Welsh and English without much thought and, in fewer cases, respondents noted that language use is linked to context for their children (e.g. playing with dolls in English). It was beyond the scope of the current research to observe language behaviour in the home, however, and we recommend this be undertaken in further research (see Recommendations).

Discussions regarding language transmission and accommodation to English

- 5.4 The use of Welsh in the home was discussed prior to birth in most cases in two-parent families where only one parent spoke Welsh. In these families those that spoke Welsh came from predominantly Welsh-speaking backgrounds rather than through the education system alone.
- 5.5 While some respondents talked about problematic discussions prior to the birth of the child, others noted that their non-Welsh-speaking partners' positive attitudes towards the transmission of Welsh changed following the birth of the child. The respondents noted that their partners were not happy that they did not understand conversations between the Welsh-speaking parent and the child. In such cases, it appeared that the use of Welsh in the home was restricted to one-to-one interactions between the Welsh-speaking parent and the child rather than when in the company of the non-Welsh-speaking partner and extended family.

The transmission of Welsh to children as an unconscious behaviour by respondents

- 5.6 The majority of Welsh-speaking respondents from non-Welsh-speaking homes (most of whom were from south east Wales) had not considered speaking Welsh with their children. Most of these respondents had attended Welsh-medium schools but they noted that they did not use Welsh much outside of the classroom and, in some cases, had held negative attitudes towards the language. Most of these respondents did note, however, that they had discussed Welsh-medium education with their partner (if applicable) as they were certain that they wanted their child(ren) to acquire Welsh. Respondents often reported discussing Welsh-medium education prior to the birth of the child. In many cases respondents answered questions regarding transmission by referring to Welsh-medium education rather than the use of Welsh in the home.

Making space for Welsh in an English-speaking home

- 5.7 Most respondents from non-Welsh-speaking backgrounds in south east Wales noted that they used more Welsh in the home once the child(ren) started Welsh-medium education. For all of these respondents, however, such use of Welsh was largely formulaic (e.g. *bore da* 'good morning') or restricted to certain situations such as helping with homework.
- 5.8 The majority of these respondents mentioned that they did not feel able to use Welsh with their children. Such respondents cited a lack of confidence or 'rusty' language skills and, to a lesser extent, a perception that they did not speak correct Welsh, or lack of opportunity to use Welsh as explanatory factors.

6. Discussion and conclusions

- 6.1 The results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that respondents who came from Welsh-speaking backgrounds and had used Welsh throughout their lives were more likely to report always speaking Welsh with their children. Conversely, those respondents from English-speaking backgrounds, who had acquired Welsh through Welsh-medium education, tended not to use Welsh frequently and spoke mostly English with their children. This shows that there are different groups of Welsh speakers who have different experiences. We recommend that the experiences of these groups should be examined in much more detail and considered in future informational and/or interventional campaigns to promote the use of Welsh in the home (see Recommendations).
- 6.2 The analysis of the psychological variables found that those who felt that Welsh was an important part of their self-identity and used the language habitually were more likely to use Welsh with their children (see 4.7). These factors may be linked to demographic variables, as more habitual users of Welsh are more likely to come from Welsh-speaking backgrounds which, in turn, varies between areas. Further work in this area with a larger sample and adapted TPB measures may yield significant results (see Recommendations).
- 6.3 For most of the parents in the sample, the transmission of Welsh or English with their children was not a planned behaviour. The results of the qualitative analysis indicated that language use in the home was only overtly discussed prior to birth in two-parent households where only one parent spoke Welsh. Those parents who had acquired Welsh via parental transmission themselves tended to discuss language use with their partner and favour speaking Welsh to their children. We found that some non-Welsh-speaking parents may initially be supportive of Welsh-speaking parent speaking Welsh with the children, but find that they feel uncomfortable with a language they do not understand being used in their presence. Consequently, for some respondents, the use of Welsh in the home changed over time.
- 6.4 Respondents who had acquired Welsh through Welsh-medium education had generally not considered speaking Welsh with their children but did want their children to attend Welsh-medium schools. We argue that this is an example intergenerational language *donation* rather than intergenerational language *transmission*.
- 6.5 When their child(ren) started school, many respondents from English-speaking backgrounds had reflected on their language use but reported feeling under-confident in Welsh due to lack of use since school and, to a lesser extent, perceived negative attitudes towards their 'type' of Welsh and perceived lack of opportunities in

their local area to use the language. This suggests how language use can change over time and be affected by significant life events. Further longitudinal research could shed further light on this, and any further activity regarding transmission by Welsh Government and its stakeholders should also consider supporting the use of Welsh after pupils leave Welsh-medium education (see Recommendations).

6.6 In some cases, respondents from English-speaking backgrounds noted using formulaic Welsh in their homes to support their children's acquisition. It was beyond the scope of the current research to observe linguistic behaviour *in situ* (e.g. the use of formulaic Welsh, translanguaging, and codeswitching), and this should be addressed in future research (see Recommendations).

7. Recommendations

- We recommend research be carried out into language development in the context of Welsh-English bilingualism (and/or multilingualism) in the home. This should target features such as the acquisition of grammar, vocabulary, how sentences are constructed, lexical items, and the acquisition of phonology among children.
- We recommend that further research on intergenerational language transmission should include a more detailed exploration of the influence of household linguistic composition on families' experiences of language transmission. The purpose of this research should be to refine our understanding of the relationship between language transmission practices and the linguistic characteristics of different groups or typologies of families.
- We recommend that further research on intergenerational transmission should collect data from children as well as adults in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of language transmission and family language behaviour.
- We recommend that further research on intergenerational language transmission should include observation methods to supplement other data collection methods such as self-reporting. This would allow the triangulation of data and a fuller investigation of the language use and bilingual discourse strategies used by parents and children in the home.
- We recommend that Welsh Government initiatives in intergenerational transmission of Welsh be grounded in an understanding of research and practice in the field of behavioural science and change. In particular, this understanding should be informed by research which has applied intention-based models, such as a Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to the intergenerational transmission of Welsh. Such research should seek to address the limitations in design that this project revealed by using larger sample sizes and revised TPB measures.
- We recommend that longitudinal research be undertaken to examine whether and

how individuals' use of Welsh changes over their lifespan, and the extent to which this use is affected by societal factors.

- We recommend that the Welsh Government and its partners (including Welsh Government-sponsored community-level initiatives) should systematically collect linguistic and demographic background data on parents and prospective parents in Wales. This information should be used for demographic research and for distributing targeted and relevant information on language promotion activities to specific groups of Welsh speakers.
- We recommend that any interventions relating to the intergenerational transmission of Welsh adopt approaches which are based on a detailed understanding of the different family types that may exist. These interventions should seek to directly address the challenges which these groups report.
- We recommend that Welsh Government consider how interventions relating to the transmission of Welsh can effectively target Welsh speakers prior to the child's birth and/or during the child's early years, and review the most appropriate way of reaching Welsh speakers during this period.
- We recommend that initial teacher education and professional learning provision include opportunities for trainees and staff to develop a social psychological approach to positively encourage the use of the Welsh language amongst people who can, but do not use Welsh.
- We recommend that (1) a mapping exercise be undertaken to better understand current levels of provision of opportunities for adults who since leaving Welsh-medium schools have had limited opportunities to use the Welsh language (2) a scoping exercise be undertaken to ascertain what models of school-community outreach exist in non-language-related fields. The suitability of adapting these models to provide opportunities for Welsh-speaking parents who do not routinely use the language to be reintroduced to active language use should be explored. We also recommend that (3) potential mentoring initiatives between parents of differing Welsh language ability at Welsh-medium schools are explored and (4) further consideration be given to how work on 'linguistic assertiveness' could help less confident speakers of Welsh use their language skills. The findings of this work should feed directly into new initiatives to encourage the use of Welsh among adults who may wish to use the language more regularly.

Research into Conditions Influencing Welsh Language Transmission and Use in Families

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Full Research Report available at:

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/welsh-language-transmission-use-in-families/?lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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