‘New’ speakers in the heartlands: Struggles for speaker legitimacy in Wales

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Abstract

Educational initiatives in many minority language communities in Europe and beyond are producing ‘new’ speakers of the languages in question. The status of such speakers is often contested, however, and many people who have been through immersion education in a minority language can find themselves on the fringes of the language community of which their schooling was meant to make them ‘members’. This article explores the cases of ‘new’ speakers of Welsh in Wales and includes data in particular from the heartlands – West Wales – in which a number of ‘new’ speakers discuss their membership of Welsh-speaking communities, the difficulties they sometimes face and, crucially, how they manage to negotiate their own sense of speakerhood under such conditions. Also examined in this article are discourses on the same topic which appear in online blogs, and which would appear to point to a certain commonality of experience which is not confined to just those areas of Wales where Welsh is, or recently was, a community language, but is further echoed by new speakers in other parts of Wales outside the heartlands who have had similar experiences.

Keywords: Welsh, new speakers, group membership, linguistic legitimacy, community integration.

# Introduction

The Welsh language, as the only language of the majority of the population of Wales until the mid-1800s (Morgan 2001), has seen its number of speakers decrease since then, to the point it is now a minority language within its own historic territory. The 2011 census, the most recent for which results are available, showed there were 562,000 Welsh speakers aged 3+, which equals 19% of the population (ONS 2012). While the rate of decline of the language appears to have slowed over the past few decades, UNESCO still considers the language to be “vulnerable” (Moseley 2010). One response to this language shift has been the rise in popularity of Welsh-medium education which was instigated in order to slow the decline in the number of Welsh speakers, and the results of which Morgan (2001) sees as “remarkable”: “The 1991 census registered an increase of Welsh speakers from 1981 of 49% in the populous Cardiff and South Glamorgan area, owing almost entirely to the increase in Welsh-medium education, and all other areas showed some improvement, for the first time in 100 years” (Morgan 2001, 112). Of course, as Goalabré (2011) has shown, parents can be as motivated by aspirations other than language maintenance in choosing immersion education for their children. Nonetheless, whatever the motivations for the popularity of immersion/bilingual schooling, the fact remains that the numbers of Welsh speakers have been boosted through the education system and, as a result, the obsolescence of the Welsh language has been slowed, if not completely halted; the latest census figures indicate a slight drop of just under two per cent in the number of Welsh speakers (down to 19 per cent in 2011 from 20.8 per cent in 2001) (ONS 2012).

This is not to say that the Welsh-speaking community has always viewed educational initiatives to safeguard the position of the Welsh language in Wales, in numerical terms at least, as successful. Over and above considerations of demographics, concern was expressed early on about the quality of the language spoken by the pupils in these schools. A volume produced in 1973, to mark the first ten years of the first Welsh-language immersion school in south-east Wales, notes a considerable difference between linguistic input and output:

Mae’r plentyn yn clywed Cymraeg da, graenus yr athro. Mae’n ateb yn ei fratiaith ef ei hun a’i [sic] gyfeillion. Ni ellir ei gywiro, air wrth air, frawddeg wrth frawddeg. Fe fyddai hynny’n torri calon y dewraf. Rhaid, er hynny, gwneud rhywbeth.

The child hears good, fluent Welsh from the teacher. He replies in his own slang with his friends. It’s not possible to correct him, word for word, sentence for sentence. That would be enough to discourage even the most hardy. Despite this, something needs to be done (Daniel 1973, 58, our translation).

That the Welsh being spoken by pupils in Welsh-medium schools was substantially different from traditional varieties has been investigated by some researchers, such as Peter Wyn Thomas (1991), who saw that innovations being introduced via the schools in south-east Wales may “represent a stage in the process of remoulding traditional paradigms in order to produce elements of a code which is unique to these new speakers of Welsh” (Thomas 1991, 52).

 However, from the data we present below, it is not just linguistic triggers that can index new speakers of Welsh as ‘other’. Taking a critical sociolinguistic approach in this article, we examine how immersion and bilingual schooling in Wales produce the next generation of Welsh speakers and the difficulties such new speakers face in finding acceptance in Welsh-speaking circles. We further examine the strategies these same speakers employ to overcome these obstacles in order to retain some sense of membership of the language community they (aspire to) belong to. We understand the term ‘new speaker’ much in the same way described by O’Rourke, Pujolar and Ramallo: “The ‘new speaker’ label is used here to describe individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programmes, revitalisation projects or as adult language learners” (O’Rourke, Pujolar and Ramallo 2015, 1), though with the caveat that we are particularly interested in those speakers in Wales who live in areas where the language still retains a historic presence as a community language (the ‘heartlands’, or in Welsh, *y Fro Gymraeg*) and where, in theory, new speakers of Welsh could use the language relatively frequently within a community setting. We use the term ‘heartlands’ to refer to areas where the majority of the population can still speak Welsh and where it continues to be a community language used by those who have acquired it via intergenerational transmission: ‘heartlands’ because they are no longer contiguous. For many reasons, inward migration, ageing populations, economic marginalisation, etc., these areas may no longer be considered as strongholds, however. The notion of a Welsh heartland – *Y Fro Gymraeg* – was first devised by Owain Owain in *Tafod y Ddraig* (4 January 1964), the newsletter of *Cymdeithas y Iaith Gymraeg* (The Welsh Language Society), and developed further by the *Adfer* (Restoration) movement as a notional core area which could be protected from Anglicisation.

After considering data from such speakers in these areas, we examine how their experiences tie in with wider public discourses on ‘new speakerness’. We do this by considering how online fora have been used to express opinions on the issues our research participants mentioned in the course of being interviewed.

## Investigating negotiations of language ownership: methodology

In order to inform our discussion we have used qualitative data from interviews with people from English-speaking backgrounds who have had the opportunity to learn Welsh at school, either in naturally majority Welsh schools or in more recently designated Welsh-medium schools, in an area considered part of a notional Welsh-speaking heartland, North Pembrokeshire and South Ceredigion (n=5). Our research participants were divided into two cohorts, based on age: Rowena, Jonathan and George formed the younger cohort and Helen and Yvonne the older one1. The younger cohort participants (now in their early twenties and originally from England or from English families) received both primary and secondary education in schools that were officially designated as Welsh-medium, where most of the teaching and assessment is carried out in Welsh. The participants all claimed a current competence in Welsh and a positive attitude toward using Welsh with interlocutors, though this willingness to use Welsh communicatively was sometimes not reciprocated, as Jonathan pointed out: “You speak Welsh to people who you know can speak Welsh and they answer you in English”. None of them, however, had parents who spoke Welsh and although some of their parents did attend adult classes, the language of home remained English. Interviews were also conducted with two older participants who had begun their education in England but subsequently moved to the same area when young, some forty years before. At this time, Welsh was spoken by 80 per cent in this area, according to the 1961 United Kingdom Census (Aitchison and Carter 1985). For both sets of participants, their circumstances would appear to indicate a language acquisition context with significant advantages over that of immersion education in English-dominant areas and adult learners throughout Wales, in the sense that early socialization also occurs through the target language in a natural setting. However, despite the normalisation of Welsh acquisition through education in the intervening years, the parallels in the experience of these participants suggest that establishing legitimacy as a new speaker of Welsh remains problematic. These interviews, conducted in English with the participants and represented here through ‘broad’ transcriptions (i.e. not edited stylistically), are a means of exploring in depth how some new speakers understand an apparent disjuncture between expectations and reality. They enable the examination of discourses that are less widely discussed in the context of the acquisition of Welsh in Wales. Furthermore, these interviews are, “accounts … that are situated performances in and of themselves’ which nevertheless provide us with ‘a sense of people’s life trajectories and social positioning” (Heller 2011, 44). As such, they help build up a picture of what it means to be a new speaker of Welsh in 21st century Wales, and complement previous studies on the topic by researchers such as Robert (2009), who examined the linguistic output of pupils in Welsh-medium education, or Hodges (2012) who looked at motivational factors in the acquisition of Welsh, both in the south-east of Wales. We build on and extend their work in this part of Wales to examine older new speakers, those who have been through some form of immersion or bilingual educational experience in West Wales, and who have extensive, local Welsh-speaking networks with which they can engage, in a way that is not possible in the south-east of Wales to the same extent.

We also include data from a written interview conducted with one new speaker who rose to prominence in 2009 when she won an award in recognition for her achievements in learning Welsh. This data is included in the section entitled, “The persistence of discourses of the ‘learner’” and is reproduced in the original Welsh version the speaker supplied, with our translation added.

 In 1986, Carol Trosset’s article, “The Social Identity of Welsh Learners”, analysed her experience of learning Welsh in a heartland milieu and the importance of the social status of new speakers in the acceptance of adult learners:

All learners I spoke to agreed that the hardest thing about learning Welsh is getting opportunities to speak it. In general people do not speak to learners in Welsh. Even when they know that someone is learning Welsh and wants to hear it spoken, Welsh speakers will tend to use English in his [sic] presence (Trosset 1986, 169).

Trosset, like Jaffe (1999) in Corsica and MacCaluim (2009) in Scotland, traced the challenges she faced in achieving legitimate speaker status to her position as a ‘stranger’ or ‘newcomer’. Amongst these challenges was a feeling of confusion or anomie that arose from uncertainty about the social role of the learner of Welsh that was reinforced by interaction with traditional speakers, “for whom learners are categorical anomalies with no clear social identity” (Trosset 1986, 184). The difficulty of assigning a particular identity to the learner (other than a ‘learner’) means the goal of linguistic anonymity is thwarted. Although the use of local linguistic forms can confer speaker legitimacy (Woolard 2008, 2) the fact of being an incomer, albeit from a very early age, can undermine this status. The standardised forms of the classroom, however fluently used, do not link the speaker with a locality and thus a local identity. Our interviewees, although experiencing an immersion type exposure to standardised forms, were also exposed to local language practices in their communities. Robert (2009) and Hodges (2012), mentioned above, found that new speakers had fewer opportunities to link into local language practices because of their location outside of the heartlands and in the present article, we aim to complement these studies through reference to post-educational new speaker linguistic practices within Welsh-speaking communities in West Wales. We thus build on Selleck’s (2015) recent investigation of ‘flexible’ and ‘separate’ bilingualism in school settings in the same part of Wales as our study is located in.

The challenge of establishing a Welsh-speaking identity emerged in different ways in the participants’ narratives. For one of the research participants, George, in his 20s, acquiring fluency in Welsh enabled him to integrate: “Before it was like... Ah yeah I really fit in here, I really fit in, in the community so I’ll speak Welsh”. He felt accepted as a Welsh speaker, particularly by older people and in a specific Welsh-using context, “people I know from church”. However, he locates this as in his past; his current identity has changed, perhaps because he is now older and more self-confident in other ways:

Welsh is the way you know it’s a social pressure and when you conform to it and you don’t know any better you feel like ah yeah I fit in, I fit in. Yeah, yeah I’m one of them, I’m one of them and after a while you become yourself and you let go of these things and you’re just yourself.

Jonathan, although confident in using Welsh, returned frequently to his frustration that people used language choice to express social difference:

No one ever engaged with me in Welsh if I heard them speaking Welsh and I went over to speak to them ... you’d speak to them in Welsh and they’d answer you in English. That was really annoying so in the end I used to speak English to them so it was a strange situation to be in.

 His use of the word “strange” echoes the confusion that Trosset referred to as anomie: to Jonathan his interlocutors were not following the communicative rules he was expecting (and had been led to expect from the discourse on Welsh revitalisation). His confusion is expressed as disappointment, even anger. Jonathan referred to the promotion of Welsh language acquisition in order to “be Welsh” that he felt he experienced not only in school but in other social domains as well. For him, Welsh language competence constituted a key element in the integration of newcomers. This was an ideological position shared by most of the Welsh-speaking community and he felt he had worked hard to realise this integration:

Welsh is encouraged throughout the whole, throughout the education system in Wales to you know to encourage you to learn it, to save a dying language. So you have this encouragement first and then once you do learn it, it’s almost like, you know, it’s almost like they wait until the end, really, you know, actually yeah, “The joke’s on you now”. That’s what it feels like.

The desire for legitimacy as a speaker was also frustrated in a more subversive way for Rowena. She returned from college to teach in the bilingual secondary school where she had been a pupil. By virtue of her occupation, at least, she has achieved legitimacy as a speaker of Welsh. Her early experiences in primary school, however, were very different and she craved the anonymity of the local Welsh-speaking identity: “I wanted just to be normal. I didn’t want them to have to switch to talk to me”. Despite her current institutional status as a teacher, however, perceptions of difference and thus challenges to language ownership still emerge in terms of what constitutes legitimate, authentic language itself:

Like the colour ‘purple’…I’ve always said ‘porffor’ and this child was like, “Oh no, it’s ‘piws’. Only people from North Wales call it ‘porffor’”. And, for me, that was strange because that was just how I would say it. So it makes me feel even more of an outsider when I can’t get even my own sort of local dialect correct, if that makes sense.

This example shows how ideas about speaker legitimacy have remained resistant to change and have been transmitted intergenerationally. It also highlights the authority conferred on individuals by the ability to challenge ownership - in this case, a school student correcting a teacher publicly - and effectively delegitimising the speaker.

The repeated failure to recognise the new speaker as a legitimate member of local Welsh-speaking communities is the most significant theme when interviewees evaluate their experience acquiring Welsh in this data. The social context of Welsh acquisition was foregrounded by Trosset in 1986: “The native equation of language with social identity makes it clear that learning Welsh is less an intellectual endeavor than it is an interactive process of entering a community and acquiring a new identity” (1986, 189). She foreshadowed the conclusions of later researchers about the importance of acknowledging the interconnection between second language acquisition and a new or modified identity e.g. Norton (2000), Block (2003). The difficulty of achieving a recognised and satisfactory new speaker identity in these narratives suggests that despite the promotion of positive attitudes to the acquisition of Welsh, and the presence of new speakers in most areas of Welsh public life, attitudes in the Welsh-speaking community have remained remarkably static, as a comparison between Helen (one of the older interviewees) and Rowena’s experiences shows over forty years:

Everybody knew everybody so they would even know who you were if they just met you and they would be able to work out whose children you were and they would know that you were from a family who’d moved down so they wouldn’t speak Welsh to you because they would know that you, you weren’t born there … very early on I began to realise that I had a sort of invisible label around my neck which said, “You are not from here” [and] “You are English” (Helen).

We would always get the lower, the English speakers tended to get the lower marks even in maths where language, you know, wasn’t possibly as, em, important but I did feel a sense you know we were like the poorer relative I don’t know but I did have a sense of that at primary school (Rowena).

Thus, despite the economic and social constraints present in rural areas (Milbourne and Hughes 2005, 50), a Welsh-dominant community may feel able to determine who is ‘in’, and who is ‘out’. In the interactions reported by participants, the local communities appear to construct identity as an essentialist binary – either ‘Welsh’ or ‘not-Welsh’ – and link ethnicity with language in a non-negotiable way. At the same time, members of these communities who appear to exclude new speakers, disregard the extent to which their own Welsh language identity has itself been negotiated between Welsh and English competences. A report commissioned by BBC Cymru Wales, S4C and the Welsh Government to explore Welsh speakers’ use of Welsh in a range of everyday settings throughout Wales found that “28% of fluent Welsh speakers lived in households where only or mostly English was spoken” (Beaufort Research 2013, 19). Moreover, the participants’ narratives illustrate how local linguistic diversity becomes concentrated in the classroom, even in Welsh dominant areas, making the construction of a second language identity for incomers more challenging. The linguistic diversity reported in classrooms shows a multilingual context for becoming a new speaker, and problematises the notion of a heartland of uniform monolingual practices.

Although new speakers acquire high levels of productive and receptive language skills in school, the educational context only reproduces (and that in a reductive fashion) the social polarities outside the classroom, in this specific context at least, without legitimising these new users of Welsh as ‘authentic’ speakers with the same rights of access to local Welsh-speaking networks as other Welsh speakers. Bourdieu’s (1997) assertion that a definition of competence should include “an awareness of the right to speak” and “the power to impose reception” has been employed by a number of sociolinguists (e.g. Norton (1997), Teutsch-Dwyer (2001)) to explore new speaker identities. Again a comparison between the older and younger participants’ narratives is revealing; in the early 1970s, it was only when circumstances removed Yvonne from her local milieu, some 16 kilometres away, but with sufficient distance (both physically and psychologically) that she was able to feel empowered as a ‘legitimate’ speaker of Welsh:

When J and his brother bought the garage in S I decided when I went up there I wasn’t going to let people know that I was an English learner I was going to speak Welsh and I spoke Welsh from day one when I was working up there … so I suppose my confidence grew and grew because I was speaking to people who didn’t know I came, unless they could tell from accent, that I wasn’t born in Wales and I suppose the Welsh just blossomed from there really.

Similarly, Jonathan found teaching practice in a Welsh medium school in north Wales reinforced his sense of legitimacy as a speaker, although it was less easily transferred back to his home community: “They say there is a high proportion of Welsh speakers in Pembrokeshire and yet you go out and no-one speaks Welsh to you when they know you can speak Welsh”.

The participants’ narratives suggested that they felt that new speakers were always positioned as deficient users of the target language categorised on the grounds of known ethnicity or based on accent, register etc. The response to unanticipated language forms, to reaffirm distance and challenge legitimacy, as in Rowena’s example above, disturbs the new speaker identity that she had developed in her “own sort of dialect”. By characterizing herself as an outsider still, Rowena demonstrates the complexity of achieving a satisfactory ‘third place’ identity in this language environment (Block 2007). Norton argues that identity work is related to desire: “the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety” (Norton 1997, 410); Rowena shows how all three of these fields can be frustrated on a daily basis. George’s new speaker identity is more ambivalent; he describes Welsh-language culture as a ‘stream’, something that was always there and could be entered and left at will. Unlike George, Jonathan as an adult does not feel that the goal of Welsh medium education as a socially integrative process has been fully realised. Having aligned himself with its dominant discourses such as the discourse of endangerment, which are reproduced in the education environment, he feels that new speakers who are English-dominant are positioned as ‘responsible’ for the decline of Welsh: “You have to make up for the wrongs that the English have done to Wales” (Jonathan).

Perhaps the underestimation of the complexity of issues of language and identity account for some degree of naivety in the responses of the participants; as Coupland et al. (2005, 5) argue: “Learning Welsh (…) is unlikely to afford young people easy access to, let alone automatic membership of, a distinctively ‘Welsh’ cultural group. It may do this, but Welsh identities are legitimately and freely available to non-Welsh-speakers”, referring to the (Anglo-)Welshness of southeast Wales and the Valleys. However, none of the five research participants interviewed for this article claimed to have contemplated an English-language Welsh identity and, as they were all incomers from England and identifiable as English, would have found difficult this to achieve in any case. Despite the evident frustrations and disappointments voiced by these participants, both young and older, it is important to note that all of them considered that they had eventually achieved some kind of access to Welsh-speaking networks. They considered their Welsh competence as a valuable resource, their learning trajectories ultimately successful, and not as a source of regret.

## Public discourses on ‘new speakerness’ in Wales

New speakers are, of course, crucial to the revitalisation project since intergenerational transmission alone cannot replace losses through mortality and outward migration. Even with intergenerational reproduction and production through education combined, there is a net annual shortfall of c. 3,000 (Jones 2012, 114; Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg 2012). The demographic contribution of Welsh speakers from non-traditional, non-intergenerational transmission backgrounds appears to be crucial to the maintenance of a viable language community. In this section, we examine wider public discourses about the acquisition of Welsh by new speakers and how this can sometimes result in frustration, much in the way our research participants expressed above. In doing so, we follow Heller’s (2011, 45) lead, in that we aim to link our participants’ accounts with “other kinds of accounts, as ways of discovering coherences and contradictions and how people strategize around them”.

Despite the known short-fall in the number of speakers within the Welsh-speaking community, claims made when recruiting potential learners can appear misleading. For example, on the web page of the *Mid-Wales Welsh for Adults Centre* ([www.learnwelshinmidwales](http://www.learnwelshinmidwales)), it is asserted that, “You will find the language alive and kicking in most communities across Wales”. Definitions of vitality vary, nevertheless, and the number of council wards with more than 50 per cent Welsh speakers declined from 192 in 2001 to 157 in 2011. The proportion of Welsh speakers fell in 601 out of 881 wards. Wards where more than 70 per cent of people could speak Welsh dropped from 59 (seven per cent of total) in 2001 to 49 (six per cent of total) in 2011. This was despite the fact that the Welsh (Assembly) Government had set, in 2003, a goal of a five per cent growth in the number of Welsh speakers, and halting the general decline in the use of Welsh in heartland communities by 2011. Despite these tangible differences in figures, which mean that the current use of Welsh as a community language continues to decline, particularly in these core areas, the notion of a heartland continues to figure iconically in discourses centred on Welsh linguistic practices. This is not dissimilar to the way in which the Gaeltacht in Ireland has come to symbolise the authentic milieu for the speaking of Irish. New speakers in the areas where our research participants were interviewed thus experience tensions that are much less evident in the more Anglicised areas of Wales. Being a new speaker of Welsh in North Pembrokeshire and South Ceredigion is to be exposed to additional pressures of being a legitimate speaker of Welsh in ways that new speakers in South-East Wales, for example, experience to a lesser degree, since there is no immediate sense or memory of Welsh as a (recent) community language in the locality. This is despite clear signs that Welsh in West Wales is becoming much more a network language, as opposed to a community language. Morris (2010, 96-7), while delineating so-called “assimilating communities” in the heartlands, where there is pressure for incomers to learn Welsh, also categorises certain major communities in the heartlands as “distinctive language groups” where Welsh-language networks can co-exist alongside English-speaking ones. Further, another question on the same website – “Or maybe, you’ve moved to Wales and want to fully experience the Welsh culture?” – highlights similar issues. As the density of Welsh speakers declines, even in the core Welsh-speaking areas, the value of Welsh as a tool for greater integration for the incomer diminishes. Moreover, in a similar way that mere residency in Welsh-speaking Wales does not guarantee access to local linguistic resources, a linguistic repertoire that includes Welsh competence does not automatically confer legitimacy as a speaker; far from it, in fact, since the labelling of new speakers as ‘learners’ has proved to be indicative of these competing discourses.

These discourses are not confined to the Welsh-speaking heartlands, of course, and the examples which follow in our discussion are applicable to new speakers in all parts of Wales (and beyond). We argue, however, that the impact upon new speakers in Welsh Wales is much more powerful, since not only are they subject to the same discourses of authenticity and legitimacy as new speakers in other parts of Wales, they further experience the burden of historicity of recent or current language shift in these heartland areas. The latter represent for the majority of Welsh speakers a now imagined core community of Welsh-speaking and of Welshness in popular essentialist discourses of what it means to be Welsh (-speaking) in Wales today.

## The persistence of discourses of the ‘learner’

The implication that the new speaker of Welsh somehow fails to achieve the transformation that is necessary for a ‘learner’ to clear the final hurdle of language learning and become a speaker is a recurrent theme when the term ‘dysgwr’ (learner) is under consideration. Take, for example, the document: “How to Become Fluent in Welsh: Crossing the Bridge from Learning to USING” from the *Say Something in Welsh* website ([www.saysomethingin.com](http://www.saysomethingin.com)):

Some people spend YEARS learning Welsh – but never cross the bridge to becoming a fluent user of the language. If you’re reading this, you probably already feel that you haven’t learnt Welsh as quickly as you had hoped. Maybe you’re worried that you might be trying to learn in the wrong way, and you’d like to know how to do better, and how to find learning Welsh easier.

The *Say Something in Welsh* website (an online course for people wishing to learn Welsh from scratch, or improve their knowledge of the language) thus recognises that equipping people with the linguistic skills to be able to use Welsh communicatively is only part of the journey a new speaker faces. To be recognised as a bona fide speaker though, the emphasis here (which is reflected in Welsh-speaking circles more widely) is that it is the new speaker who has to ‘cross the bridge’ (*croesi’r bont*), a term frequently used in Welsh-speaking circles to describe a successful learner. Thus, those users of Welsh who are only half-way over this bridge, or at the beginning of their new speaker journey, are not necessarily included in a sense of belonging to the Welsh-speaking community. This is not confined to a Welsh scenario, by any means. One research participant for a study on new speakers of Irish by O’Rourke and Walsh (2015), for example, wanted “recognition for the efforts she and others like her have made to attain a higher level of fluency and accuracy *than other Irish language learners*” (pp. 71-72, our emphasis). This suggests that recognition as a member of a minority language community is dependent on a high level of linguistic skills, a notion shared by both the new speaker and the receiving community, or so it would seem in the case reported by O’Rourke and Walsh.

Inherent in the label ‘dysgwr’, there is undoubtedly a sense of achievement and pride. It is an arduous task to undertake to learn a language and learning a minority language carries the additional merit of being actively involved in language revitalisation, at a time when it is widely recognized that language diversity is under threat (Moseley 2010). We can thus find a celebratory discourse connected with the idea of a Welsh learner, which links this form of acquisition with national pride, meritorious achievement and a sense of serving Welsh-speaking Wales. Christine Jones, a new speaker of Welsh, a poet and academic, has raised the profile of women and learners in Wales. Furthermore, her status as both a woman and a learner when she was Archdruid of the Eisteddfod (a festival dedicated to Welsh-language culture) from 2013 to 2016 was “testun llawenhau i ni fel cenedl” (“a reason for us as a nation to rejoice”) according to another former Archdruid, Jim Parc Nest. Elsewhere, an online article written by Carl Morris (<http://morris.cymru/>), a commentator who regularly blogs in Welsh, a number of follow-up comments by Welsh speakers brought up in the language on the label ‘dysgwr’ reveal a measured and positive defence of the use of the term:

Dw i ddim yn credu fod siaradwyr Cymraeg yn defnyddio ‘dysgwr’ neu ‘[d]dysgwraig’ fel rhyw fath o ymgais i roi pobl mewn ail-ddosbarth, ond yn hytrach ryw fath o ymgais i roi *brownie points* ychwanegol iddyn nhw.

I don’t think Welsh speakers use the term ‘learner’ in some sort of attempt to classify people as second class, but rather as an attempt to give them additional brownie points.

Mae’n ennyn gobaith, yn hytrach na dirmyg …

It stirs hope, rather than scorn...

‘Dysgwr’ can be used therefore in a positive sense, but sometimes with what might be described as a slight edge to it, as is noticeable in the following comment:

Y peth neisa mae’n bosibl i glywed fel dysgwr yw, ‘O’n i ddim yn gwybod […] ti wedi dysgu [Cymraeg]!’

The nicest thing a learner can possibly hear is, ‘I didn’t know you had learnt [Welsh]!’

The term ‘dysgwr’ then indexes a certain level of achievement which is cause for celebration or at least noteworthy. Some comments on the blog, though, indicate that the label is something that some new Welsh speakers wish to distance themselves from:

Dw i ddim yn ystyried fy hun fel ‘dysgwr’ bellach, er bod llawer ar ôl i mi ddysgu, mae’n siwr, achos erbyn hyn dw i’n dysgu pethau newydd trwy’r cyfryngau a trwy siarad efo pobl eraill, yn hytrach nag ‘astudio’ yr iaith.

I don’t consider myself a ‘learner’ anymore, even though there’s a lot left for me to learn, of course, because by now I am learning new things through the media and through speaking to other people, rather than just ‘studying’ the language.

This last commentator, while considering that (s)he has moved on from being a ‘learner’, is still defined by the notion, in a ‘post-learner’ sense. (S)he continues to learn new words and phrases thanks to the media and through talking to other Welsh speakers … just as other Welsh speakers improve and extend their Welsh (whether new or traditional speakers). The process of vocabulary acquisition for all speakers of a minority language outside of the classroom, because of the sociolinguistically significant situation of ‘reduced input’ (Gathercole and Thomas 2009) that minority language communities are increasingly experiencing, means that new and traditional speakers are very often on a level playing field.

A further example comes from an interview we conducted with Meggan Prys who, a few years ago, won the title ‘Dysgwr y Flwyddyn’ or ‘Learner of the Year’. This is an annual competition celebrating the commitment and contribution of those who learn Welsh, with one person being chosen as the winner during the National Eisteddfod. Meggan, a teacher originally from Ohio in the USA, exhibits a simultaneous pride at being awarded the title but, at the time, pleasure at not being recognised as a learner. For her, the label of ‘learner’ was not a problem in itself:

Doedd y label ddim yn fy mhoeni rhyw lawer, yn enwedig gan fy mod wedi dysgu'r Gymraeg yn weddol sydyn ...

The label did not worry me as such, especially as I had learned Welsh quite quickly ...

Any possible negative association with the label was much less significant given that, as she said, ‘swn i’n cael fy ystyried fel siaradwr brodorol gan bobl oedd ddim yn fy adnabod’ (I would be considered a native speaker by people who didn't know me).

This idea of “passing for a native speaker” (Piller 2002) and consequently of losing the label of ‘dysgwr’ does appear particularly important for her:

Ar y diwrnod cyntaf [yn y gwaith], ar ôl siarad efo rhywun yn y stafell athrawon yn Gymraeg, fe wnaeth y person ofyn os oedd rhywun o deulu'r gŵr wedi priodi

Americanes. Roedd rhaid i mi esbonio mai fi oedd yr Americanes!

On the first day [at work], after talking to someone in the staff room in Welsh, this person asked if someone from my husband’s family had married an American woman. I had to explain that I was the American woman in question!

A sometimes more vocal discourse over the use of the label in Wales centres on the negative aspects of the use of the term and the slight that is implied (whether actual or perceived). Perhaps the most strongly worded opposition to the term comes from Chris Cope’s blog site (“Pugnacious little trolls: Y problem heb ei ddatrys” (sic), 2012, “Pugnacious little trolls: Y problem heb ei ddatrys” “Y problem (sic) heb ei ddatrys” (sic). http://www.blogiadur.com/hafan/category/pam-bod-cymrun-shit/). An American new speaker of Welsh, and the author of a book on his experiences on becoming a Welsh speaker, he blogs that he has also experienced a sense of frustration in his attempts to express his ‘new speakerness’:

Dwi ddim yn ddysgwr bellach. *Seriously. Stop with that fucking noise* … mae’n sarhaus ar un lefel, fel petai person yn dweud nad ydw i’n cyfrif fel aelod ‘llawn’ [o’r] gymuned Gymraeg, dwi’n teimlo hynny, dwi’n teimlo awgrym y dylwn i fodloni ar gael lle ailaidd, ac mae’n digo fi.

I am no longer a learner. Seriously. Stop with that fucking noise … it’s insulting on one level, as if someone were saying that I don’t count as a ‘full’ member of the Welsh-speaking community, I feel that, I feel a suggestion that I should be content to take second place, and it angers me.

Cope is clearly signalling a sentiment of illegitimacy as a Welsh speaker. He feels second-best, an outsider to the linguistic community he has spent much time attempting to become a member of. And yet, despite these attempts, he is still somehow denied membership of the club. Other blog comments confirm the ‘otherness’ many new Welsh speakers experience, such as in the following comment:

Mae … rhywun sy’n dysgu’r iaith i lefel mor rhugl yn dal i fod yn ‘egsotig’ iawn rhywsut!

Someone who [has learned] the language to such a fluent level still somehow remains ‘exotic’.

This ‘othering’ of the exotic and rare breed of amateur linguist known as the ‘dysgwr’ is not only found within popular discourse. A study of the presence of new speakers in Welsh-medium educational settings, while pointing out that such speakers “were able to express themselves sufficiently in Welsh”, also included the following caveat:

While L2-speaking children attending Welsh-medium schools are thus able to become competent speakers of Welsh by age 9-11 … there were some recurring patterns in their speech that deviated from the ‘norm’ of L1-speaking peers (Thomas, Apolloni and Lewis 2014, 15).

The use of terms such as ‘deviate’ and ‘norm’ emphasizes, for these authors at least, that while they consider all of their research participants to be speakers, some of them are more legitimate than others.

Suggestions have surfaced over the years on ways to circumvent this labelling, by suggesting new labels. ‘Cymry o ddewis’ (Welsh [-speakers] by choice) was in circulation at one point at the start of the 21st Century, but the term is little heard nowadays. More recently, ‘mabwysiadwr’ (adoptee/adoptive speaker) has been proposed and it remains to be seen if this term takes hold, though of course the term implies a certain passivity which is dependent on the goodwill of the adopting community of speakers.

# Conclusions

New speakers of Welsh continue to face challenges in those geographical areas and social contexts where, it might be expected, they would have greater access and opportunities to achieve secondary socialisation in Welsh. Schools in the heartlands of the language, such as those attended by the research participants interviewed for the present article, have provided these – and other – new speakers with the linguistic capacity potential for participation in local community life through the medium of Welsh, and which our participants expressed a willingness and desire to do. However, as Romaine (2006, 466) has noted, “schools themselves become, in effect, new speech communities, and very powerful ones too. Yet, in many cases such schools provide only a small minority of the population with access to linguistic resources which have become scarce in communicative practice in the public at large”. As we have shown, once new speakers of Welsh leave the confines of these ‘new speech communities’, they face challenges over the validity of their linguistic resources, even (or perhaps, especially) in the heartland areas, where the notion of Welsh as a community language still has major currency. We make no claims for the research in this paper as broadly representative of the experience of all new speakers of Welsh, but do feel that the narratives we report here will seem familiar to many people who are learning or have learnt Welsh and who attempt to integrate into Welsh-speaking communities, particularly in the heartlands. We follow the contemporary trend of using the term new speaker to describe the language users we interviewed for the present article, but furthermore note that a change in term – and possibly in thinking – for such users may not necessarily solve the issues over community integration which our research participants outline. As Bowie has noted: “Speaking Welsh does not necessarily enable the learner to ‘become Welsh’ but … it can, in some circumstances at least, invest the individual with ‘honorary Welsh’ status” (1993, 180). Our research ultimately adds to other current investigations on ‘new speakerhood’ which aim to explore how it might be possible for new speakers to be more successfully integrated into their target language communities, in Wales as much as anywhere else.

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Endnote:

1. All names of research participants are pseudonyms. The choice of pseudonym reflects the gender of the participant.