

# A Comparative Analysis of the Vitality of Welsh and Irish

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## Abstract

The Welsh and Irish languages, the indigenous languages of Wales and Ireland, respectively, have experienced significant declines in their speaker populations since the beginning of English settlement in their homelands. This decline has not occurred to the same extent in both languages; in the early 21st century, Welsh is habitually spoken by a much larger population, both in absolute numbers and proportion of its indigenous territory's total population, than Irish. This is despite both languages having been the subject of intense revitalization efforts since the 20th century and having official status alongside English in their respective countries. This thesis uses historical data on economic conditions, institutional involvement in language maintenance, and patterns of language shift to elucidate the source of this disparity.

## 1 Introduction

Celtic languages have been spoken in the British Isles for thousands of years, predating the arrival of Anglo-Saxon settlers. All Celtic languages have been superseded to varying extents by English, which is now spoken by the vast majority of the islands' non-immigrant inhabitants. Only three Celtic languages of the British Isles survive as spoken languages in the present day—Irish (sometimes referred to as Irish Gaelic), spoken throughout the island of Ireland; Welsh, spoken in Wales; and Scottish Gaelic, spoken in the Scottish Highlands and the Hebrides islands. Of these three languages, Irish and Welsh enjoy the most institutional support, being *de jure* official in Ireland and Wales, respectively. Despite the high official status of these languages, both have experienced severe declines in their speaker populations, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The historical trajectories of Irish and Welsh have much in common. The people of Ireland and Wales, along with their indigenous languages, were subject to centuries of unequal treatment from the English crown, and use of the English language was strongly encouraged and

at times enforced through subjugating and coercive tactics at the expense of the native language and culture. Both languages have also received a tremendous amount of support from grassroots and citizens' organizations, and in more recent years from government bodies. Despite these similarities, however, the parallel history of decline, and subsequent attempts at revitalization, among these two language communities shows many differences as well. In particular, the patterns of language use among Irish- and Welsh-speaking populations differs significantly.

Although a higher proportion of the Republic of Ireland's population is nominally able to speak Irish than the corresponding figure in Wales, Welsh remains in much wider use than Irish outside the context of the education system.

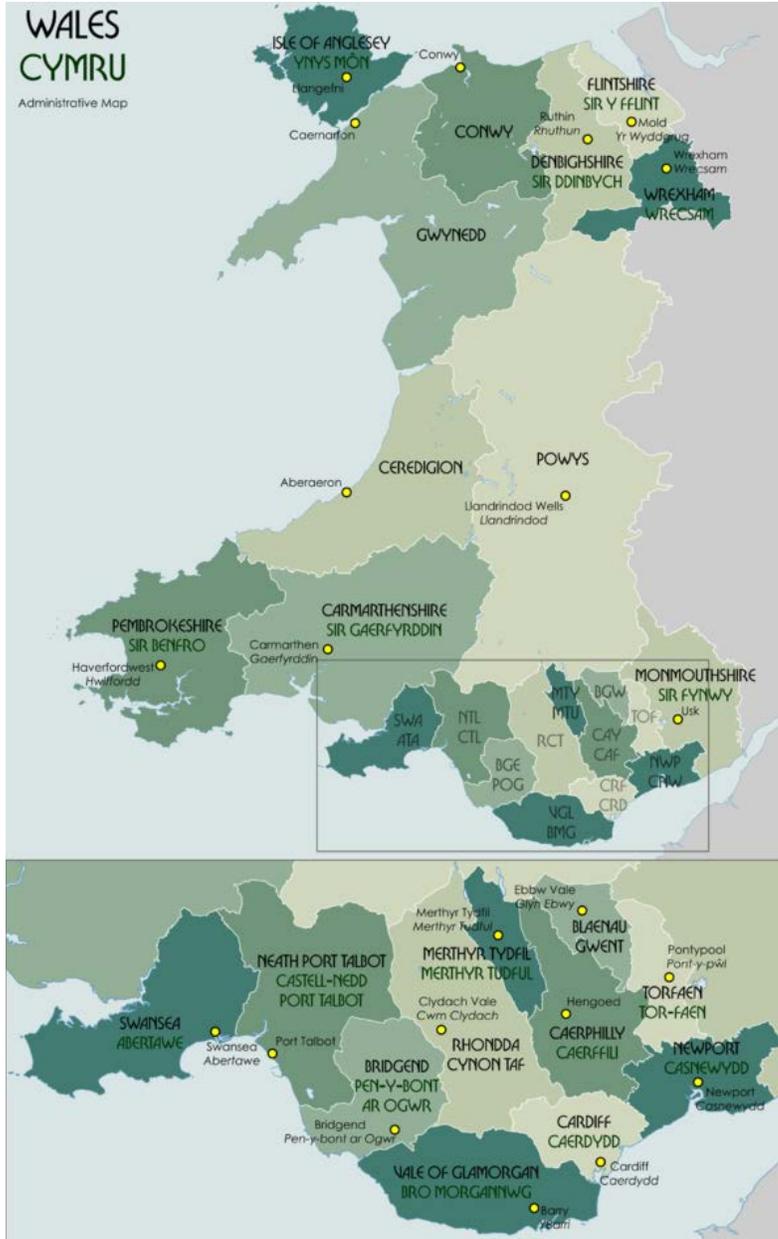


Figure 1: Map of Wales with principal areas. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 2: Map of Ireland with provinces and counties. (Source: Family Tree Magazine)

The aim of this thesis is to explain the modern-day discrepancy in active speaker numbers and vitality outside the education system between Welsh and Irish. Current patterns in language

transmission and use reflect deeply entrenched linguistic attitudes on the part of speakers of these languages. These differences in attitudes and ideologies surrounding language use stem from several historical differences in their countries' histories. The 19th century in particular ended with vastly different economic situations in Wales and Ireland; while Wales' economy flourished due to industrialization, Ireland's was devastated by the Great Famine, which began in 1846 and led to large-scale emigration and a near-total restructuring of the island's economy and society. Other influences on the disparity in *de facto* status of the two languages include cultural and religious differences, varying degrees of cultural influence from, and dependence on, the English government and society, and the much higher level of institutional support for the Welsh language in the form of literature and literacy programs as compared to Irish. Sections 2 and 3 cover the history of the Welsh and Irish languages respectively, with a focus on language shift beginning in the 19th century; section 4 details the differences in the modern-day geographic distribution and usage patterns of the languages; and sections 5 and 6 explain the effects that historical circumstances have had on the disparity in modern sociolinguistic situations between Welsh and Irish.

## **2 The History of the Welsh Language**

### **2.1 Pre-1800**

Welsh evolved from the Brittonic language, which was historically spoken widely throughout Great Britain, sometime between 400 and 700 CE.<sup>1</sup> The formation of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms beginning in the 6th century led to a contraction in the language's territory, but Welsh remained nearly universally spoken in most of what is now Wales, despite the arrival of

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Davies, *The Welsh Language: A History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014).

significant French- and English-speaking populations during the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Welsh remained the dominant language in Wales through the Middle Ages, although English was widely used in the southern and eastern parts of the country and was almost entirely “uprooted”<sup>3</sup> in what is now southern Pembrokeshire. Welsh also enjoyed widespread use in official functions and documents such as courts of law and land deeds into the 15th century, when English began to gain use in many of these scenarios.<sup>4</sup>

Since the 16th century, Welsh has been threatened to varying degrees by the slow encroachment of English into regions and social spheres where Welsh had previously been the primary or exclusive language used. The passage of the Act of Union of 1536 posed the first major threat to the Welsh language’s dominance.<sup>5</sup> The Act, which incorporated Wales into the United Kingdom, included a “Language Clause” that required the use of English in all the courts of Wales and barring public officials from speaking Welsh in their positions. As with many later efforts to marginalize the status of Welsh, this clause was probably not written with the express purpose of eradicating the language, but rather to promote the use of English in official domains.

<sup>6</sup> Even if it was not the goal of the Act’s authors to suppress the language of the Welsh people *per se*, the law’s passage had the effect of creating a stratified society in which the ruling class was able to speak English while most of the rest of the population spoke only Welsh. The influence and dominance of English continued to spread over the ensuing centuries, due in no small part to the linguistic hegemony imposed by a law that declared Wales a *de facto* English-speaking territory.

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<sup>2</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

The dominance of English in Wales first became evident in its widespread use among the Welsh gentry, who were also among the first to abandon the Welsh language entirely.<sup>7</sup> During the two centuries following the passage of the Act of 1536, most of the gentry assimilated both culturally and linguistically into English society, leading them to gradually abandon Welsh. Despite Welsh beginning to lose its status as the language of the upper classes as it had been throughout the Middle Ages, the language remained in vigorous use among the lower and middle classes in the majority of Wales, many of whom were monolingual. The Act of Union did, however, lead to English replacing Welsh as the language of government and of the upper echelons of Welsh society. The Act's passage was a turning point that began a gradual erosion of Welsh and set the stage for its eventual usurpation by English as the vernacular language of the Welsh people.

Although the Act of Union certainly had a negative effect on Welsh's status and level of prestige, the replacement by English that it facilitated was by no means a fatal blow to the language's vitality. The rise of Protestantism in Europe (including Wales) coincided with the passage of the Act, leading to a proliferation of religious literature written in Welsh; the first translation of the Bible into Welsh was published in 1567, and a plethora of other religious texts followed<sup>8</sup>. Despite the blow that Welsh as a legal language suffered as a result of the Act of Union, interest in and use of the language gained ground in more colloquial spheres, as well as in the minds of Welsh and English academics, during the second half of the 16th century. The extensive documentation of, and interest in, Welsh grammar during this time—Janet Davies (2014) cites John Davies' Welsh-Latin grammar and dictionary and William Salesbury's

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Welsh-English dictionary and collection of Welsh proverbs, along with both men's Bible translations, as early examples—may have contributed to the language's continued vitality over the next several centuries compared to other Celtic languages of the British Isles.

The prestige of Welsh continued to decline during the 17th century, although the majority of the country's population were still monolingual Welsh speakers. Although Welsh no longer had the prestige it once had in legal and other official spheres, it was still the only language for a large proportion of the country's population, meaning that any communication with a sizeable part of the populace would by necessity be done in Welsh. Separate from, but perhaps spurred by, demographic considerations, there were two main factors that contributed to the Welsh language's survival during the 18th century. The first of these was the spread of Nonconformist Christian sects into the country, most of which conducted their services in Welsh. This choice was, for the most part, not made due to a strong belief in the preservation of the language, but for a more pragmatic reason: the leaders of these sects saw religious proselytization as an urgent matter that should be conducted in a language that would be understood by the majority of potential converts. Whatever the cause, the use of Welsh was widespread in Nonconformist chapels, and the language became increasingly associated with religious life.

The other factor that strengthened the Welsh language in the 18th century was the establishment by the rector Griffith Jones of over 3,000 traveling schools set up for the purpose of teaching basic literacy to the largely rural, agrarian Welsh-speaking population. Davies estimates that 250,000 pupils attended these schools during the 30 years (1731-61) that they were in operation, or around half of the entire population of Wales. These schools boosted literacy rates to the extent that large-scale publication of literature in Welsh was in demand and

commercially viable. The historically rich Welsh literary tradition persisted, but became predominantly associated with folk literature and poetry rather than what Davies describes as “literature of distinction.”<sup>9</sup> During the 18th century, Welsh-language printing presses flourished, publishing over 2,500 books over the century for the majority of Welsh people who were still unable to speak English. The high literacy rate of the Welsh populace, coupled with the fact that the country was overwhelmingly monolingual, created a demand for Welsh-language literature that allowed these presses to remain active into the 20th century.

The prominence of literacy and literature may have facilitated a high level of monolingualism among the Welsh-speaking population. Whether because of lack of access to education or because they did not see competence in English as necessary or important to their lives, most Welsh people remained without any knowledge of English until well into the 19th century. The number of monolingual Welsh speakers in Wales remained much higher for much longer in Wales as compared to the number of monolingual Irish speakers in Ireland, but the reasoning as to why so many Welsh speakers were able to subsist without any knowledge of English seems a bit circular. Because Welsh speakers were unable to speak English, they were provided with a certain number of resources in their native language, such as religious literature and other folk literature. The existence of these resources made the incentive to learn English even weaker, which led to continued monolingualism in further generations, and thus the cycle continued, at least for a few generations. The existence, and to some extent tolerance, of Welsh monolingualism seems to be indicative of a fundamental distinction between the situation of Welsh and that of the Irish language in Ireland. Authorities seem to have tolerated the use of

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Welsh significantly more than the letter of the law from the time would suggest, and even encouraged its use in certain cases. Davies provides several instances where attitudes toward the language, particularly among the clergy, were ambivalent or even negative and succinctly states that the widespread use of Welsh “stemmed from expediency rather than from a belief in its inherent value.”<sup>10</sup>

## **2.2 Industrialization and Welsh in the 19th Century**

At the outset of the 19th century, Welsh was still the primary language in the majority of the physical area of Wales. English-dominant communities were far outnumbered by Welsh-speaking ones, and were mostly concentrated around the border with England, in addition to the aforementioned Anglicized pocket of southern Pembrokeshire. Pryce’s (2000) analysis of language zones based on the primary language of churches shows that despite the scattered presence of bilingual communities throughout the country, most communities outside of the borderlands and southern coast were mostly or entirely composed of monolingual Welsh speakers. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of Welsh in the early 19th century, and shows that bilingualism was only widespread in a buffer zone between English- and Welsh-speaking regions, as well as a few communities in otherwise predominantly Welsh regions.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

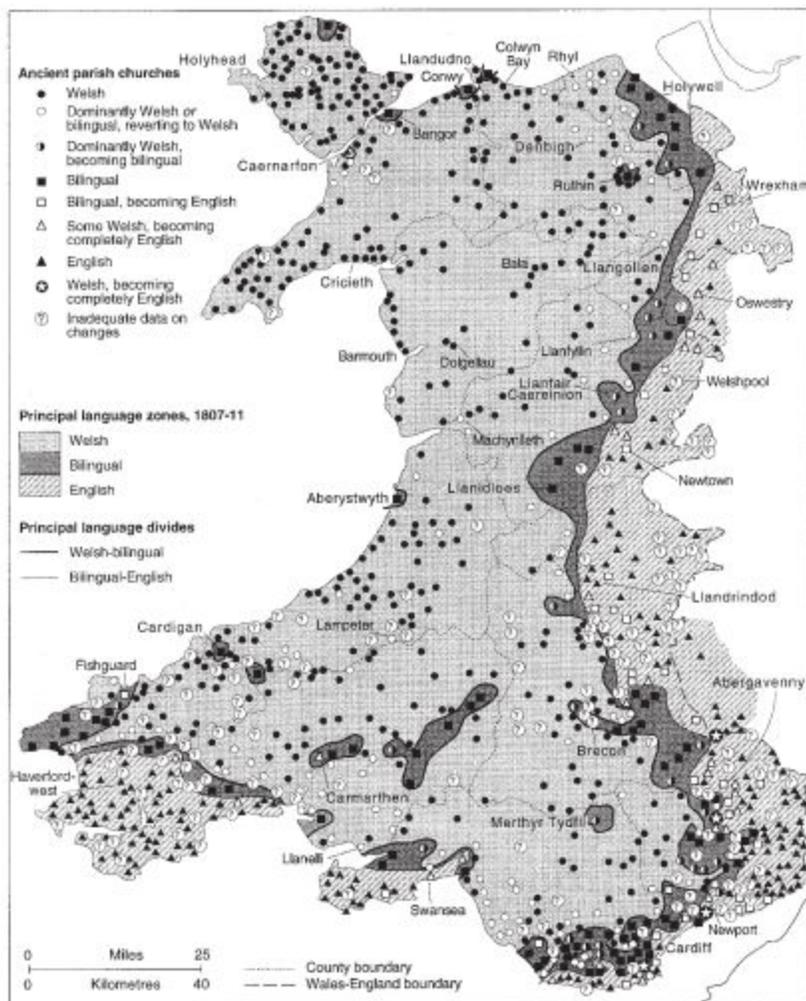


Figure 3: W. T. R. Pryce's map of language zones in early 19th-century Wales

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the character of the Welsh economy and society transformed from almost exclusively agrarian to largely industrial. Industrialization led to widespread demographic shifts as Wales' population practically doubled from 601,767 in 1801 to 1,188,914 in 1851.<sup>11</sup> This population growth was not evenly distributed, however, and internal migration from the rural, agrarian heartland to new industrial hubs was widespread.<sup>12</sup> The commonly held view among 20th-century Welsh nationalists was that industrialization led to the

<sup>11</sup> Geraint H. Jenkins, "Wales, the Welsh and the Welsh Language': Introduction", in *The Welsh Language and Its Social Domains*, ed. Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

downfall of Welsh culture, including the decline of the Welsh language.<sup>13</sup> Brinley Thomas, in his 1987 essay “A Cauldron of Rebirth,” challenges this notion and claims that expanding industry in 19th-century Wales had, at least for a few decades, the opposite effect. The internal migration of massive numbers of rural Welsh workers into newly industrialized areas, combined with the relatively low number of migrants from outside Wales, led to a high concentration of Welsh speakers, contrasting with the widely dispersed villages and rural areas where the language had been spoken up to this point. Wales remained a highly sociolinguistically stratified society, with upper classes speaking English and lower classes speaking Welsh. This stratification may have proven beneficial to the Welsh language’s long-term survival, however, as it remained possible in many industrial villages to conduct all of one’s daily affairs exclusively in Welsh. In regions with more in-migration from England, the Welsh language experienced more attrition among its native speakers. Unsurprisingly, Welsh survived to a much greater extent in the areas where the presence of English was lesser.

Welsh experienced a severe decline in social status beginning in the second half of the 19th century, due in no small part to the pervasive implementation of state-run primary and secondary schools in which knowledge of English was a necessity and the use of Welsh was punished,<sup>14</sup> as well as an influx of English immigrants in the first decades of the 20th century. The language suffered far less, however, than other Celtic languages such as Irish. In 1891, for instance, 59% of the population of Wales spoke Welsh,<sup>15</sup> constituting a clear majority of the country and including a large number of monolingual Welsh speakers. In Ireland, by comparison,

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<sup>13</sup> Brinley Thomas, “A Cauldron of Rebirth: Population and the Welsh Language in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Welsh History Review/Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru* 13, June 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *A Cauldron of Rebirth*.

less than 20% of the population spoke Irish in 1881, and in many regions Irish had completely died out as a native language.<sup>16</sup> The Welsh language's survival through the 18th century can largely be attributed to high literacy rates and a church that supported the language's use. In the 19th century, the language's situation became more tenuous, but it still survived to a remarkable extent as a community language, with monoglot speakers appearing in census results as late as 1971.<sup>17</sup> The survival of the Welsh language through the 19th century can be at least partially attributed to the large numbers of Welsh-speaking industrial workers living in cities and large towns—the prosperity that industrialization afforded, combined with high rates of internal migration of rural Welsh speakers to newly industrialized regions, led to the proliferation of Welsh-language institutions and general positive/utilitarian attitudes toward the language that outweighed the external pressures of English attempts to suppress the language and promote English use. However, industrialization also had negative effects on the vitality of Welsh, especially towards the end of the century, as the presence of monolingual English speakers in industrialized urban centers gave way to widespread bilingualism among the Welsh-speaking population and relegated Welsh to increasingly restricted domains.

### **2.3 20th Century to the Present Day**

If the stage for the decline of Welsh as an everyday spoken language was set during the second half of the 19th century, the language began to decline in earnest during the early decades of the 20th century. By the 1890s, the patterns that characterized language shift in 20th-century Wales had begun to emerge clearly, although Welsh was much more widely spoken than in the present

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<sup>16</sup> Garret FitzGerald, "Estimates for Baronies of Minimum Level of Irish-Speaking Amongst Successive Decennial Cohorts: 1771-1781 to 1861-1871," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 84C, 1984.

<sup>17</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*.

day, both in total numbers and in proportion. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 4, which maps the percentage of Welsh speakers by Registration District, a slightly smaller sub-national division than today's principal areas. Although language demographics have changed drastically since the 1891 census—mostly, but not entirely,<sup>18</sup> towards Welsh losing ground in many domains in favor of English—this map shows elements of a pattern of geographic contraction that has characterized the language shift away from Welsh ever since. Specifically, Welsh had ceased to be the language of the majority in many areas closest to the border with England, although many of these areas had already been predominantly English-speaking for decades.<sup>19</sup>

This map illustrates general trends in language use across relatively large administrative areas, but it fails to consider the nuances of local variation in Welsh-speaking levels. This is a problem inherent in choropleth maps, which use extant boundaries, usually between political subdivisions, as the basis for aggregating a large number of individual outcomes for a given variable, such as language use. By virtue of the fact that “the distributions that are portrayed in such maps depend on the way in which boundaries have been arranged,”<sup>20</sup> choropleth maps can never capture all of the nuances of local variation within an extremely complex linguistic situation. Despite the limitations inherent to the use of this format, however, Figure 4 shows evidence of several trends in the slow retreat that Welsh has experienced since the 19th century. Compared to Pryce's map of language zones in 1800, there is a westward and northward retreat of the boundary between undeniably Welsh-speaking areas and bilingual or English-dominant

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<sup>18</sup> W. T. R. Pryce, “Language Zones, Demographic Changes, and the Welsh Culture Area 1800-1911,” in *The Welsh Language and Its Social Domains*, ed. Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Rhys Jones and Huw Lewis, “The Geographies of Language Ability,” in *New Geographies of Language: Language, Culture and Politics in Wales* (Palgrave Studies in Minority Languages and Communities, 2019), 95-146.

areas. The so-called Welsh Heartland (*Y Fro Gymraeg*) is large in area, but it is important to remember that by 1891 the bulk of Wales' population had begun to be concentrated around the southeastern coalfields and just over half (54.4%) of the population of Wales were able to speak Welsh, so the physical size of Welsh-dominant areas is somewhat deceptive as these tended to be the least densely settled parts of Wales. The areas in which the language was most widely spoken also tended to be the areas that suffered the most from depopulation, often resulting from rural residents migrating to areas of high industrial activity—mostly concentrated in the southeast—in hopes of improved economic conditions. The areas with the highest proportion of Welsh speakers are generally located outside these most heavily industrialized areas. Most Welsh speakers during this time continued to speak Welsh in their communities until doing so became difficult because of shifting demographics;<sup>21</sup> it follows, then, that areas showing the greatest evidence of language shift would be those with the highest proportion of migrants from outside Wales.

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas, *A Cauldron of Rebirth*.



emigration away from Welsh-dominant areas.<sup>22</sup> It can also be linked to the increased connectivity and mobility of the Welsh-speaking population brought about by infrastructure improvements, further necessitating English knowledge among populations that had hitherto been largely socially isolated and self-contained.<sup>23</sup> The increasing dominance of English literature and media also coincided with this shift and decreased the viability of the once-thriving Welsh printing and publishing industries beginning in the 1920s, as English-language newspapers, books, film, and radio were now more ubiquitous than ever.<sup>24</sup> Attendance of religious services, which had historically been a bastion of Welsh in many areas, also declined significantly as the century went on, and even in ostensibly Welsh-speaking congregations many attendees used English as their main language.<sup>25</sup> All of these factors contributed to an erosion of resources for Welsh speakers and further restricted the domains in which Welsh could be used, even in areas where it was still the dominant home and community language.

Despite the general pattern of acceleration of language shift and domain shrinkage during the first half of the 20th century, there were some positive developments during this time with regard to Welsh's legal status, as well as its use in the media. The BBC's Welsh Region was created in 1937, leading to an increase in the availability of Welsh-language radio and television broadcasts.<sup>26</sup> The Welsh Courts Act of 1942 did much to reverse the effects of the Acts of Union's language policy, and although its passage did not give Welsh equal footing with English

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<sup>22</sup> W. T. R. Pryce, "Language Zones, Demographic Changes, and the Welsh Culture Area 1800-1911," in *The Welsh Language and Its Social Domains 1801-1911*, ed. Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 1-37.

<sup>23</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

in courts of law, it did allow Welsh speakers to use their native language in these settings at their discretion.<sup>27</sup>

Shifting economic circumstances also played a major role in the precipitous drop in Welsh knowledge. The collapse of the coal-mining industry in the southern parts of the country, along with the economic hardship that many faced as a result of this collapse, led to a massive decline in Welsh-speaking ability in these areas, with the language disappearing almost entirely as a native language in the span of two to three generations in extreme cases.<sup>28</sup>

Although the decline of Welsh as a native language continued throughout the 20th century, the linguistic situation in Wales slowly began to change in favor of Welsh beginning in the 1960s and '70s. In particular, Welsh medium education gained significant ground, to the extent that nearly a quarter of Welsh schoolchildren are now enrolled in schools whose instruction is wholly or partially through the medium of Welsh. Welsh-medium education created a new generation of Welsh speakers, particularly outside of the areas traditionally considered to be the Welsh-speaking heartland. The increase in Welsh-language education has ostensibly had the effect of slowing the decline of the Welsh-speaking population, but the area in which Welsh is spoken by a majority of the population continues to shrink. This means that while the overall number of Welsh speakers has stabilized in recent years, the language has shifted to some extent to being the language “not of the entire community, but of networks within the community.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Welsh has increased in prestige since 1900, and especially since the 1970s,<sup>30</sup> but it has also lost much of its speaker population. The language has more institutional backing today than at any point since at least the 16th century; Welsh-medium education has grown in strength, with 22.2% of primary school pupils attending schools where Welsh is the dominant language of instruction as of 2014.<sup>31</sup> Despite these advances, the language continues to lose ground as the language of domestic and community life. The modest increase in speaker numbers between 1991 and 2001, for instance, reflect growing levels of Welsh knowledge but not necessarily an increase in the language's use outside of education and government, especially given that the number of Welsh-dominant communities, where Welsh is spoken by over 70% of the population, decreased during this decade.<sup>32</sup> For instance, almost all areas with increases in Welsh-speaking population were in areas that already had low proportions of Welsh speakers (see Figure 5).<sup>33</sup>

Conversely, the areas with the largest decreases in Welsh speaking ability between 1991 and 2001 were those with a majority of Welsh speakers. In fact, the six areas with the highest proportion of Welsh speakers (Gwynedd, Anglesey, Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Conwy, and Denbighshire, all in the north or west of the country) were the *only* areas recording a decrease in Welsh ability in the 1990s (see Figure 6). This decline was especially pronounced in Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire, which recorded decreases of 7.1% and 4.5%, respectively. The decline was also particularly precipitous among young people in predominantly Welsh-speaking areas. Gwynedd, by far the most heavily Welsh-speaking area of Wales, experienced a decline in Welsh speakers of 11.9% among 16-24-year-olds, while in Ceredigion the decline was 21.7%

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<sup>30</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*.

<sup>31</sup> Megan Jones, "Welsh-medium education and Welsh as a subject," <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/27029/1/16-048-english-web.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Census 2001

<sup>33</sup> Jones, *Statistical Overview*.

among the same age group. This shows that while the number of Welsh speakers is holding steady or even increasing overall, its use is rapidly decreasing in areas that have traditionally been predominantly Welsh-speaking.

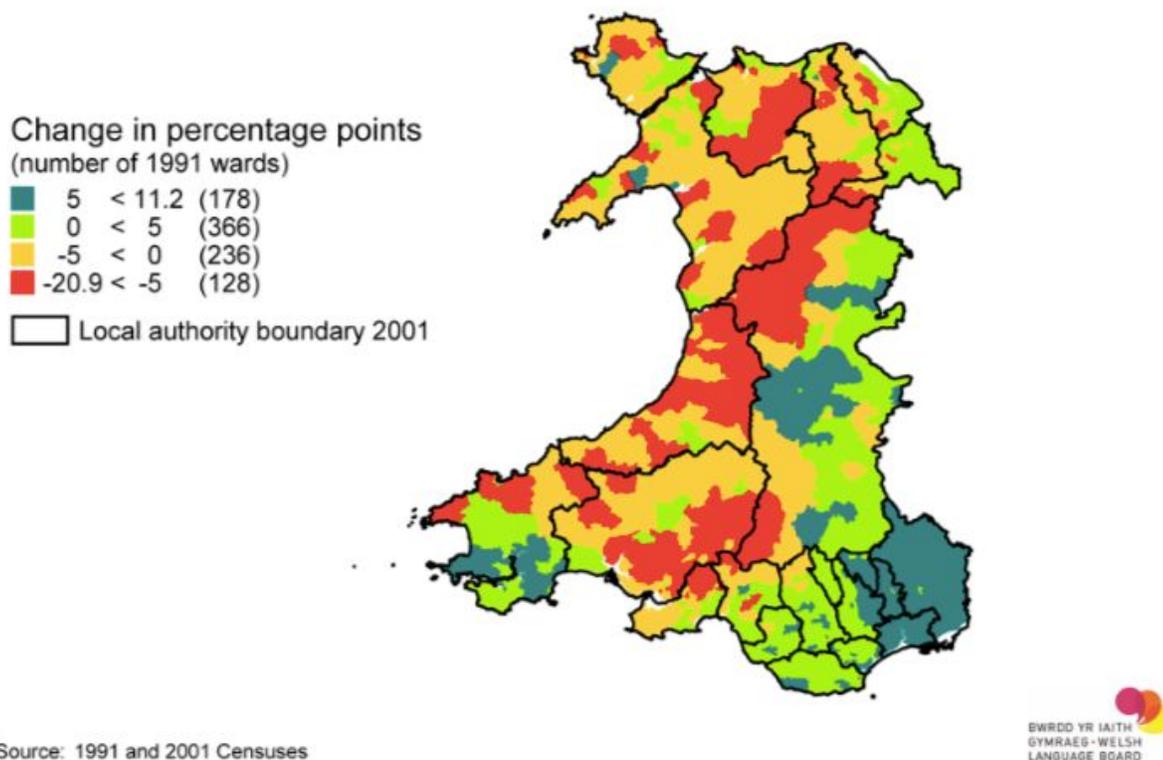


Figure 5: Changes in Welsh speaker population, 1991-2001 (Source: Jones, *A Statistical Overview of the Welsh Language*)

**Figure 6: Change between 1991 and 2001: % of Welsh speakers by area (all aged 3 and over)**

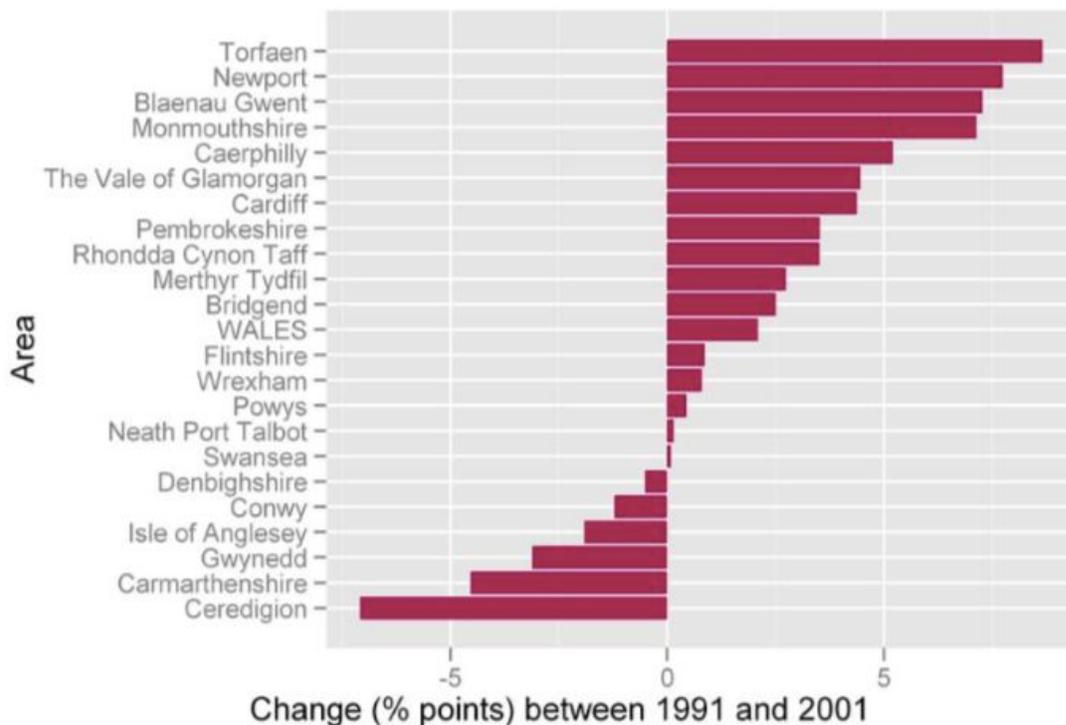


Figure 6: Change in Welsh speakers by percentage points by area, 1991-2001 (Source: Jones, *A Statistical Overview of the Welsh Language*)

The Welsh language and its speakers have been under nearly constant pressure to assimilate into the English-speaking world since the passage of the Acts of Union in 1536. This pressure has only grown more intense since the 19th century, when industrialization and modernization brought a huge number of non-Welsh migrants to the country and increased accessibility and connectivity in even the most remote corners of Welsh-speaking territory. In-migration, along with depopulation of the rural Welsh-speaking heartland, accelerated this decline, as did worsening economic conditions in the 1920s and '30s. Since the second half of the 20th century, the decline of Welsh has halted to a certain extent, although the number of

predominantly Welsh-speaking communities continues to drop. That Welsh survives as a vernacular in any part of Wales is remarkable given these conditions, and its survival in this form can in large part be attributed to the perseverance of its speaker population.

### **3 The History of the Irish Language**

#### **3.1 Pre-1800**

Speakers of a language ancestral to Irish are thought to have arrived to the island of Ireland around 2,500 years ago.<sup>34</sup> Anglo-Norman settlers, upon their arrival to the island in the 12th century, attempted to impose their languages—English and Norman French—on the indigenous population,<sup>35</sup> but their small numbers compared to the native Irish-speaking population meant that most of them were subsumed relatively quickly into the Irish-speaking world. The main exception to this pattern was in the so-called “English Pale,”<sup>36</sup> a small portion of the island’s eastern coast which included Dublin and its immediate surroundings. Outside of this limited area, however, the dominance of Irish as the language of the people of Ireland was practically undisputed until at least the 16th century.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, language use correlated most strongly with religious and ethnic heritage, with a growing number of English settlers creating what Hindley (1990) describes as “a quiltwork pattern of English- and Irish-speaking districts.”<sup>37</sup> Settlers were by and large English-speaking Protestants and natives Irish-speaking Catholics, and this distinction was “effectively fossilized”<sup>38</sup> during the 18th century such that the distribution of Catholics and

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<sup>34</sup> Udaras na Gaeltachta, “Background on the Irish Language.”  
<http://www.udaras.ie/en/an-ghaeilge-an-ghaeltacht/stair-na-gaeilge/>

<sup>35</sup> Reg Hindley, *The death of the Irish language* (London and New York: Routledge), 1990, 4.

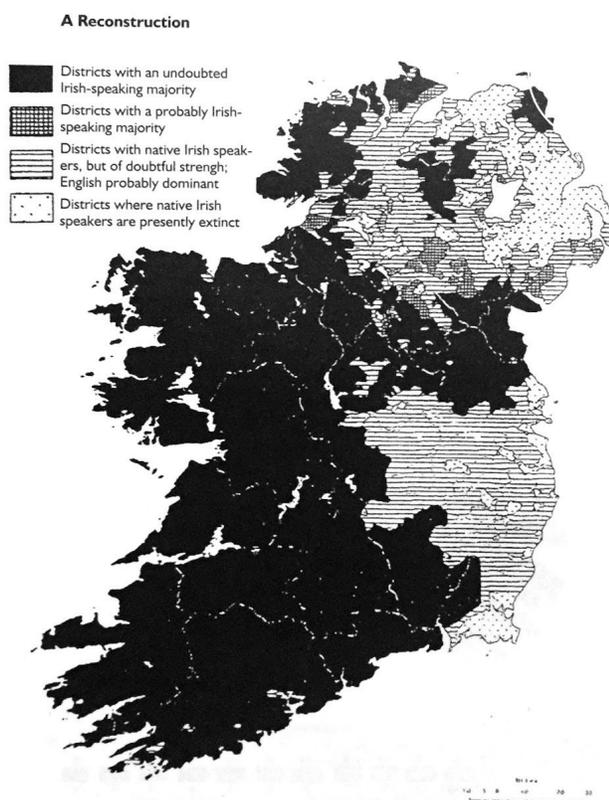
<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Hindley, *Irish Language*, 6

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Protestants from the 1911 census reflects with a great deal of accuracy the religious, and therefore linguistic, demographics of 18th-century Ireland. Based on this correlation, at the end of the 18th century Irish was nearly universally spoken in those areas with a Catholic majority, which comprised most of the western half of the island. Figure 7 shows the probable distribution of Irish speakers in 1800 based on 1851 census figures.

**Figure 6.1**  
*The Irish language in 1800*



Source: projected figures based on Census 1851, produced by the Irish government. The Ministry of Culture in Dublin owns the copyright of figures 6.1 to 6.7.

Figure 7 (Source: Hindley, *Death of the Irish Language*)

Figure 7 shows that Irish was widespread on the island of Ireland and the dominant language of the great majority of its population at the outset of the 19th century.<sup>39</sup> Exceptions to this included most of modern-day Northern Ireland (Ulster) and large parts of Leinster on the east coast, where bilingualism in Irish and English was nearly universal and Irish was no longer in widespread use among younger generations. Both individual and societal bilingualism developed in these regions due to the political and cultural hegemony of the English government and the perceived necessity of English-language abilities for advancement beyond traditional agrarian means of livelihood. The influence and prevalence of English subsequently spread through the rest of the island.

### **3.2 The 19th Century and the Great Famine**

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, bilingualism became commonplace and in many regions, particularly in the eastern half of Ireland, nearly universal.<sup>40</sup> Widespread ability to speak English did not immediately crowd out Irish, but knowledge of English was a necessary precondition for the swift abandonment of Irish that ensued during the first half of the 19th century. Hindley (1990) portrays the rather sudden decline in Irish usage during this time “in terms of the Marxian model of quantitative changes slowly building up to major qualitative change... The steady increase in bilingualism was the quantitative change which led around 1800 to qualitative change represented by the mass abandonment of Irish.”<sup>41</sup> Irish speakers acquired English because of its value to their own lives and the perceived inferiority of their native language, allowing them to abandon Irish once a critical mass of English speakers had been reached. Since Irish was no longer seen as valuable, the task of abandoning it, which had

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<sup>39</sup> Hindley, *Irish Language*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Hindley, *Irish language*, 12.

perhaps been in the minds of Irish speakers for several generations, became feasible. It is difficult to pinpoint an exact reason why widespread Irish-English bilingualism did not persist longer, but it is clear that for one reason or another, the majority of Irish speakers ceased to see the value in speaking their indigenous language around 1800, leading to a rapid decline in its use during the ensuing century.

Language shift continued at a fast pace across Ireland throughout the 19th century, especially in the eastern half of the island. By 1851, the first year in which any question about Irish ability was included on the census, the language was almost entirely absent as a native language from Leinster and Ulster. Only in the westernmost portions of the island was it the language of even a simple majority (50%) of the population, and the areas where over 80% of the population spoke it were even more limited in scope.<sup>42</sup> English-Irish bilingualism had rapidly given way to English monolingualism in all but the most isolated parts of Ireland in just 50 years, and this trend was to continue unabated until the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922—although even this event did little to stop the language's decline outside of the education system. Bilingualism did not initially lead to people abandoning Irish, but rather Irish gradually came to be viewed as superfluous given the dominance and perceived necessity of English.

The elephant in the room with regard to the decline of Irish during the 19th century was the Great Famine of 1846, which decimated Ireland's economy and drastically reduced its population due to death and emigration. The Famine had the greatest impact on agricultural laborers and their families in the western and southwestern parts of the country,<sup>43</sup> where the highest proportion of Irish speakers were to be found among those born prior to the Famine.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> FitzGerald, "Estimates."

<sup>43</sup> Hindley, *Irish Language*.

<sup>44</sup> FitzGerald, "Estimates."

Although the Famine doubtless exacerbated the conditions that led to the decline of Irish as a spoken language, it does not appear to have been the primary contributing factor in the Irish people's abandonment of the language. In much of the country, particularly its northern and eastern regions, the language's decline was already well underway by the onset of the Famine in 1845. FitzGerald's (1984) comprehensive study of the language's use by age group through the 19th century shows a significant decline in the level of Irish speaking in nearly every barony (local administrative division) in Leinster, the province comprising most of the eastern half of the island, between those born in the 1770s and those born in the 1830s, all of whom were born and able to speak before the onset of the Famine. Therefore, the decline of Irish in these areas cannot be attributed directly to the Famine. In other areas, especially the provinces of Munster and Connacht that suffered the greatest losses due to the Famine, the beginning of the drop in Irish-speaking numbers does coincide with the beginning of Famine-related emigration and deaths,<sup>45</sup> so it is likely that the Famine had a significant impact on the language in these areas. On the whole, however, it is impossible to attribute the decline to a single factor. What is clear is that at some point, the majority of Irish people internalized the idea that their language was no longer of use to them and ceased to speak it. The Famine was not the event that caused the rapid and pervasive shift away from Irish, although the decimation that this event incurred had a significant impact on the vitality of the Irish language just as it did on nearly every other aspect of Ireland's culture and demographics.

Another factor that reinforced Irish's low social prestige during the 19th century was the advent of relatively widely accessible primary education, which was invariably conducted

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<sup>45</sup> FitzGerald, "Estimates."

entirely in English.<sup>46</sup> Although not accessible to every school-aged child—compulsory, state-run education was not widely implemented in Ireland until the end of the 19th century<sup>47</sup>—its presence certainly cemented the idea, likely already present in the minds of many a rural Irish speaker at the time, that English was necessary for success in life. This association intensified in the wake of the Famine, when economic advancement was not just desired but often necessary for survival. Hindley claims that “the people wanted English as a useful tool for any child with minimal ambition,”<sup>48</sup> a claim that suggests that language shift in 19th-century Ireland was primarily caused by speakers’ own volitions and attitudes towards their own language. This statement ignores to a certain extent the immense pressure that British presence and political dominance exerted on the Irish-speaking population, but it serves to illustrate that the use of English was not so brutally enforced as it might have appeared given the swiftness with which Irish died out in much of the territory. Rather, this rapid change can be traced back to “the imposition of authority exercised entirely through English at all higher levels,”<sup>49</sup> which made knowledge of English all but necessary in a colonial territory where the indigenous population had little to no control over their own lives and livelihoods.

By the end of the 19th century, Irish had all but disappeared from the vast majority of Ireland. The geographical dispersal that characterizes today’s Irish-dominant regions was already present, with the areas around the Connemara in County Galway comprising the largest and most physically cohesive Irish-speaking region, as it does today. Figure 8 shows the distribution of Irish speakers in 1871, 25 years after the Famine. This map reveals the extent to which Irish had

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<sup>46</sup> Tom Walsh, “The National System of Education, 1831–2000,” in *Essays in the History of Irish Education*, ed. Brendan Walsh (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Walsh, “Education.”

<sup>48</sup> Hindley, *Irish language*, 12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*



became the norm for almost all the people of [the Irish Free State].”<sup>51</sup> All schools were now required to teach Irish for at least one hour a day,<sup>52</sup> which boosted the nominal Irish-speaking population significantly. Initially, laws were also in place that required a minimum level of Irish proficiency to “be awarded State certificates, to become a civil servant, to become a teacher, or to enter university,”<sup>53</sup> although this requirement was later discontinued. Irish-medium education grew significantly over the next 30 years, reaching its peak in the 1940s, when Irish was the medium of instruction, either wholly or in part, of 55% of all primary schools in the Republic. Irish-medium schools began to disappear during the 1950s, and by the 1970s their numbers had dwindled to the extent that there were only 16 Irish-medium schools in the entire country.<sup>54</sup> However, these schools failed to create new native Irish-speaking communities or revitalize existing ones that were undergoing language shift; Hindley’s map of Irish-speaking communities in the 1980s shows only a few isolated communities in which Irish was spoken regularly by all generations,<sup>55</sup> and there is no evidence that the level of Irish speaking in these areas has increased since then.<sup>56</sup> Recently, this trend has reversed to a certain extent; the number of Irish-medium schools has grown since the 1980s, and demand for Irish-medium education has outpaced the growth in these institutions. Despite this recent upswing in the number of students enrolled in Irish-medium schools, the majority (69.1%) of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland are English-medium, with Irish taught as a subject and not used as a substantial part of

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<sup>51</sup> Hindley, *Irish language*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Ivan Anthony Kennedy, “Irish Medium Education: Cognitive Skills, Linguistic Skills, and Attitudes Towards Irish” (PhD diss., Bangor University, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Kennedy, “Irish Medium Education,” 28

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy, “Irish Medium Education.”

<sup>55</sup> Hindley, *Irish Language*

<sup>56</sup> Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, *Comprehensive Linguistic Study*.

the curriculum outside this environment.<sup>57</sup> The efficacy of Irish teaching seems to have declined as well, as the Irish proficiency of students in English-medium education dropped precipitously between the 1980s and 2000s.<sup>58</sup>

Another major development following (southern) Irish independence was the delineation of the Gaeltacht, regions where Irish ostensibly remains the dominant vernacular language. In its original definition in 1926, *Gaeltacht* was defined as those areas where Irish was spoken by the majority of the population, or had been until recently. These regions were subdivided into *Fíor-Ghaeltacht* (fully Irish-speaking communities) and *Breac-Ghaeltacht* (partially or historically Irish-speaking communities), with the intention of fully restoring the status of Irish in the partially Irish-speaking communities.<sup>59</sup> The boundaries of Gaeltacht communities were codified in 1926 and updated in 1956, and do not necessarily reflect high levels of Irish use. In the early 1970s, only 30% of communities in the Gaeltacht were predominantly Irish-speaking; 25% were nearly entirely English-speaking, and the remaining 45% were bilingual with evidence of language shift towards English.<sup>60</sup> Since then, the outlook for Irish as a language of entire communities has deteriorated. The 2009 Comprehensive Linguistic Study on the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht, prepared by the Department of Community, Rural, and Gaeltacht Affairs, estimates that “without a major change to language-use patterns, Irish is unlikely to remain the predominant community and family language in those areas with the most widespread and inclusive Irish-speaking networks (i.e. Category A Gaeltacht districts) for more than another fifteen to twenty years.”<sup>61</sup> In light of this observation, it seems that the Gaeltacht designation has

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<sup>57</sup> Kennedy, “Irish Medium Education.”

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, *Comprehensive Linguistic Study*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, *Comprehensive Linguistic Study*, 27.

had little effect on increasing the vitality of historically Irish-speaking communities since Irish independence, as shown in Figure 9.

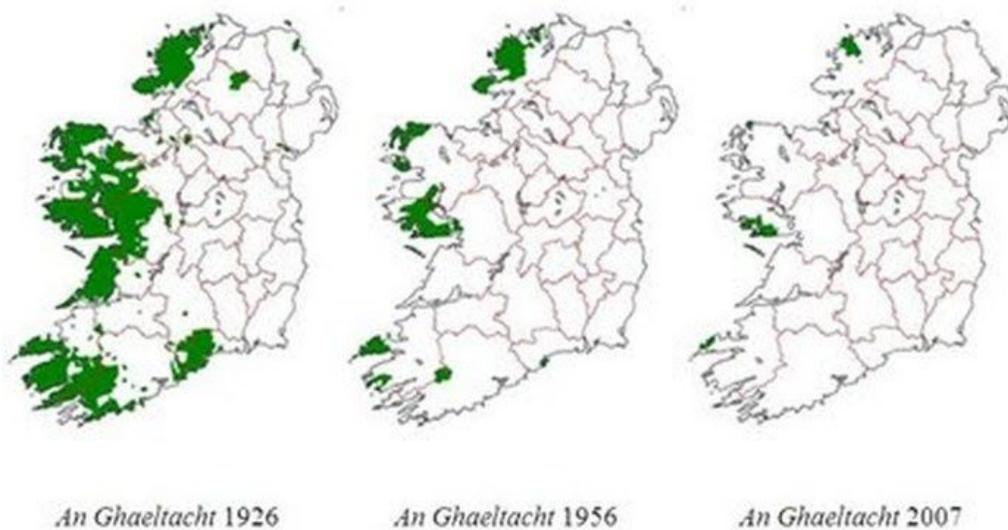


Figure 9: The contraction of Irish-speaking regions since 1926. (Source:

<https://aiteall.weebly.com/irish-language.html>)

It is indisputable that Irish has received more institutional support during the past century than at any other time since the beginning of British rule in Ireland. Despite this, none of the resources that have been made available to Irish speakers seem to have been able to halt the language's decline outside the education system. The promotion of Irish has certainly had the effect of increasing the proportion and number of nominal Irish speakers, meaning that on paper the language is more vital than at any point in the past 200 years. However, it is also clear that Irish-speaking communities are in an extremely precarious position and are in immediate danger of dying out entirely.

The current position of Irish is a result of hundreds of years of intense, systematic discrimination against the language and its speakers. From the 16th century until 1922, the language had low prestige and no official status in its indigenous territory, and its decline was

exacerbated by the near-total restructuring of Irish society in the wake of the Great Famine. Efforts to revitalize the language since Irish independence have succeeded in shifting attitudes towards Irish<sup>62</sup> and have increased the proportion of the population with some knowledge of the language (at least in the Republic of Ireland, if not in Northern Ireland), but have done little to halt its disappearance as the native language of Ireland's population. This decline was already nearly complete by the time any part of Ireland achieved political autonomy, and the fragmented nature of Irish-speaking communities has made revitalization all the more difficult. Whatever the cause, Irish speakers began to shift towards using English as their primary language in the early 19th century, a shift that continues to the present day and is likely to progress until Irish is entirely extinct as a community language.

#### **4 Current Social and Demographic Situation of Welsh and Irish**

Despite both Welsh and Irish having official status in their respective countries and receiving similar amounts of institutional support, the reality of the languages' use differs greatly. The most salient difference in the sociolinguistic situation of Welsh and Irish is the proportion of the population that speaks each language fluently and uses it on a regular basis.

Assessing the vitality of any language can be difficult given the multiple concepts the term entails. In a certain sense, both Welsh and Irish can be seen to have lost much of their vitality many years ago, given their continuous loss of fluent, habitual speakers, along with the contraction of the social domains and geographic areas in which each language is spoken. The degree to which language shift to English has occurred varies significantly between the two countries, as well as regionally and locally within both Wales and Ireland; nevertheless, it cannot

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<sup>62</sup> Comprehensive Linguistic Study

be disputed that the majority of both countries' populations are now monolingual English speakers. Even fluent, native speakers of Welsh and Irish who grow up in Welsh- or Irish-speaking communities are overwhelmingly also fluent in English, and the language is ubiquitous throughout both countries. Regardless of the legal status of any language, most of Wales, and nearly all of Ireland, are *de facto* English-speaking. Since both Welsh and Irish have, until relatively recently, been used in fewer and fewer domains and by fewer and fewer people, and since neither one is the default language of its indigenous territory, both languages have decreased in vitality by some measurements.

By contrast, if one measures linguistic vitality by the level of acceptance and support a language receives, either through governmental agencies or grassroots organizations, then both Irish and Welsh have been revitalized to a major extent since the early 20th century. Irish has official status as the primary national language of the Republic of Ireland,<sup>63</sup> and Welsh has had similar status in Wales since the passage of the Welsh Language Act in 1993.<sup>64</sup> Both languages see widespread use in their respective countries' education systems, although not as the medium of instruction in most cases. In summary, the official prestige of both languages has increased dramatically in recent years while their use as vernaculars has continued to decline, although this decline has been much more extreme in the case of Irish.

So how do these two languages differ in their vitality as community-wide vernaculars? This section aims to assess the current sociolinguistic situation of Welsh and Irish using statistics on speaker populations, geographic distribution of speaker communities, and patterns of language use within these communities.

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<sup>63</sup> Houses of the Oireachtas, "Official Languages Act 2003, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2002/24/https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2002/24/>.

<sup>64</sup> "Welsh Language Act 1993," <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1993/38/contents/enacted>.

#### 4.1 Speaker Numbers and Fluency

According to data from the 2011 census, 562,000 people, or 19% of Wales' population, were able to speak Welsh.<sup>65</sup> Of these speakers, 58% self-reported as being fluent speakers of the language.<sup>66</sup> 87% of these fluent speakers report that they use the language every day. Going by these figures, there are around 283,000 fluent, daily speakers of Welsh in Wales, or around 9.2% of the country's total population.

On paper, the proportion of Ireland's population that is able to speak Irish is significantly higher than the Welsh-speaking population in Wales. According to the 2016 census, 1,761,420 people, or 39.8% of the population of the Republic of Ireland, are able to speak Irish.<sup>67</sup> Despite this proportion being much higher than the corresponding proportion of Welsh speakers in Wales, the number of people speaking Irish on a regular basis is much lower. In 2016, only 73,803 people, or 1.6% of the population of the Republic of Ireland, claimed to speak Irish daily outside the education system.<sup>68</sup> This statistic means that even though the number of Irish speakers is significantly higher in both proportion and number than the number of Welsh speakers, knowledge of Irish is much less likely to equate to fluency in and regular use of the language than knowledge of Welsh.

#### 4.2 Language Use Patterns

There is a significant difference in the extent to which Welsh and Irish are spoken in daily life, even among native and fluent speakers. Of fluent Welsh speakers, comprising the

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<sup>65</sup> StatsWales. "Census: Welsh Language." Accessed October 25, 2019.  
<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Welsh-Language/Census-Welsh-Language>

<sup>66</sup> Jones, *Statistical Overview*.

<sup>67</sup> Central Statistics Office. "The Irish Language." Accessed October 25, 2019.

[https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2017/7.\\_The\\_Irish\\_language.pdf](https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2017/7._The_Irish_language.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

majority of the Welsh-speaking population, over half reported that their most recent conversation had been in Welsh among all age groups. This percentage tended to rise with age, but even among 16-29-year-olds, who were the least likely to use Welsh in their daily lives, around half of Welsh-speaking respondents to the 2004-06 Language Use Surveys reported that their most recent conversation had been in Welsh.<sup>69</sup> In heavily Welsh-speaking regions such as Gwynedd and Anglesey, where both the proportion and frequency of Welsh speaking are much higher than the country-wide average, this percentage is likely to be much higher. Even though the frequency of Welsh use seems to be declining among younger speakers, it is still used widely among all age groups, especially in the northwestern part of the country.

The Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish puts Gaeltacht regions in the Republic of Ireland into three categories based on their level of Irish usage. In Category A Gaeltacht areas, where Irish remains a community language used by all generations, the extent to which young people used Irish to talk to each other was much lower than in corresponding Welsh-speaking communities. According to Ó Giollagáin and Mac Donnacha's study of the linguistic patterns of the Gaeltacht, only 24% of Category A residents aged 15-18 primarily used Irish to communicate with their peers.<sup>70</sup> This measurement differs from the one provided by the Welsh Language Use Survey in that it focuses on interactions within peer networks, rather than across all interactions. Still, it is telling that the extent to which young, fluent Irish speakers in the most intensely Irish-speaking parts of Ireland use their language to communicate with each other is lower than the extent to which all fluent Welsh speakers do, including those living in areas where Welsh is not widely spoken outside of schools.

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<sup>69</sup> Jones, *Statistical Overview*.

<sup>70</sup> Williams, "Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht."

### 4.3 Geographic Distribution of Irish and Welsh Speakers

The areas in which Welsh is spoken by over two-thirds of the population are located almost exclusively in Gwynedd and Anglesey, both of which are predominantly rural counties in the northwestern corner of Wales. In Gwynedd, there is a belt of heavily Welsh-speaking areas encompassing most of the Llyn peninsula, along with the areas along the Menai Straits centered around Caernarfon and the southern parts of Snowdonia centered around the towns of Blaenau Ffestiniog and Bala. Of these areas, the highest concentration of Welsh speakers is around Caernarfon, the second-largest settlement in Gwynedd with a population of around 10,000. There, approximately 85% of the population is able to speak Welsh.<sup>71</sup> In fact, of the 12 Electoral Wards in Gwynedd where over 80% of the population is able to speak Welsh, all but two are in Caernarfon or neighboring villages (the other two are located in the built-up areas of Bethesda and Porthmadog, the fourth- and fifth-most populous towns in Gwynedd, respectively)<sup>72</sup>. These areas form a contiguous geographic area in which the rates of Welsh speaking are extremely high. There are many other Electoral Wards in Gwynedd where over 67% of the population is able to speak Welsh, but in general the proportion of the population able to speak the language decreases as one moves away from Caernarfon.

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<sup>71</sup> StatsWales

<sup>72</sup> StatsWales

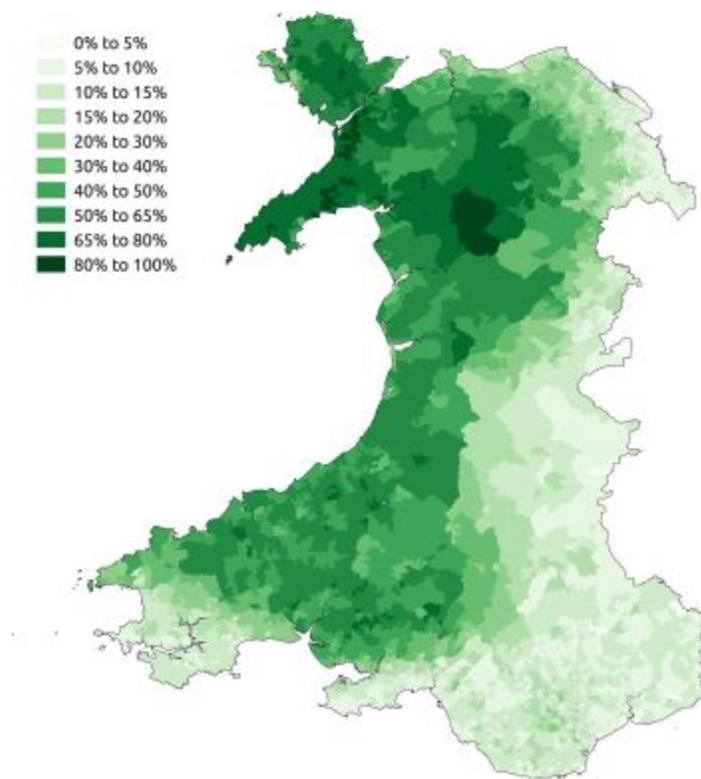


Figure 10: Welsh language ability, 2011 census. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The existence of a town like Caernarfon, a regional center where the significant majority of the local population is able to speak Welsh, provides an anchor of sorts for the Welsh-speaking population of the region. The town provides amenities such as grocery stores, banks, cafes, and restaurants to the surrounding population, meaning that Welsh speakers in the areas around Caernarfon are able to carry out the majority of their daily business in Welsh due to the linguistic makeup of the town's population. The predominance of Welsh speakers in and around Caernarfon greatly facilitates the language's use as a community language, as the town's demographics make it possible for speakers to use the language in a much wider variety of situations than if it were confined to the home or to the most rural areas of the country. Welsh is also the dominant language in several slightly smaller towns in Gwynedd that still serve as local economic and cultural centers. Five out of the six settlements in Gwynedd with a population

greater than 4,000 (Caernarfon, Ffestiniog, Bethesda, Porthmadog, and Pwllheli) have Welsh-speaking percentages greater than 67% (Bangor, the county's largest settlement, is highly anglicized, due in large part to the presence of Bangor University). The high rates of Welsh speaking in the towns of northern Gwynedd seem to have increased the stability of Welsh as a language of wider communication in this region, as they all serve as anchors of the Welsh-speaking world, similar to Caernarfon.

Towns like Caernarfon can be considered anchors for the Welsh-speaking community. The presence of these “anchor towns” in Wales, particularly in Gwynedd, constitutes a major advantage in the viability of Welsh compared to Irish as a language of wider communication. These towns are assets to the cohesion and density of Welsh-speaking social networks, making use of the language viable in a wide range of social situations. This cohesion contrasts with the scattered geographical distribution of heavily Irish-speaking communities, all of which are entirely rural in character and none of which include a settlement anywhere near as large or dense as even Caernarfon.<sup>73</sup>

In their 2009 “Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht,” Ó Giollagáin and Mac Donnacha et al. divide the Gaeltacht into three regions based on levels of Irish language use and the extent to which language shift towards English has occurred. Category A Gaeltacht districts are those electoral divisions where over two-thirds (67%) of the population are daily speakers of Irish and that “evidence the broadest spectrum of Irish language use and exhibit stable levels of Irish language use.”<sup>74</sup> In Category B districts, between 44 and 66% of the

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<sup>73</sup> Conchúr Ó Giollagáin *et al.*, “Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht: Principal Findings and Recommendations,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 30, no. 5 (September 2009): 459–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630903148755>.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

population are daily Irish speakers, and the community shows strong evidence of language shift towards English. Category C districts have the lowest levels of Irish use among the Gaeltacht electoral divisions, with 43% or less of the population being daily speakers of the language and the shift towards English being mostly complete. Category A areas are of the greatest interest in understanding the geographical distribution of daily Irish speakers, as they represent the areas in which Irish is most widely used as a medium of everyday communication.

There are 24 Category A Gaeltacht electoral divisions in the Republic of Ireland, with a total population of 20,944. Of these districts, two do not meet the threshold of 67% daily Irish speakers. The remaining 22 electoral divisions are located in four geographically discrete regions: one comprising 13 electoral divisions on the western coast of County Galway; one comprising four electoral divisions on the northern coast of County Donegal; one comprising four electoral divisions on the Dingle Peninsula in County Kerry; and one comprising a single electoral division on the northern coast of County Mayo. Of these regions, the cluster of Category A divisions in County Galway is the largest, both by area and by population. If any region of Ireland can be said to constitute the core of the Gaeltacht, it is this one.

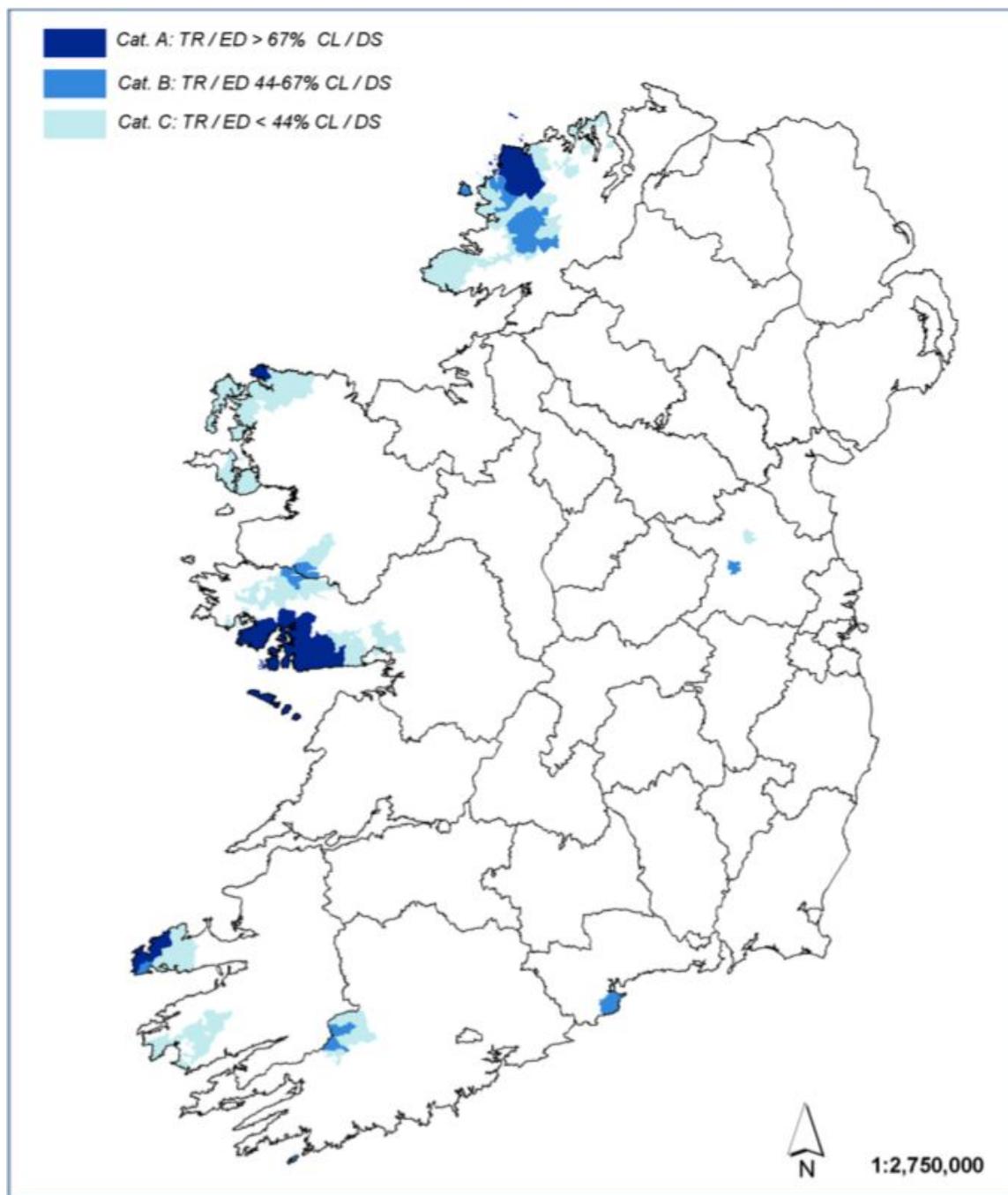


Figure 11: Categories of Gaeltacht regions by habitual Irish-speaking population. (Source: Ó Giollagáin et al., “Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht: Principal Findings and Recommendations”)

Going exclusively by measures of speaker percentages and geographic contiguity, it may seem as if the position of Irish in the Gaeltacht is not so dire. There are at least 13 geographically contiguous electoral divisions in County Galway that are predominantly Irish-speaking. However, none of these areas are located in or near any significant population center. This means that even in areas where Irish is the dominant language, Irish speakers must conduct a significant portion of their daily lives in areas where Irish is not the dominant language and many residents are monolingual English speakers. This means that it is difficult for even fluent, daily Irish speakers to use the language in the public sphere. The absence of anchor points such as those found in Gwynedd has led to Irish being increasingly absent from many domains, even in areas where it remains widely spoken in the home and other informal community settings.

Another advantage that Welsh has over Irish in terms of its viability as a widespread community language is the physical, geographical contiguity of the regions in which it is most widely spoken. As mentioned above, Welsh is the dominant language of a significant portion of Gwynedd and Anglesey. The physical area in which over 70% of the population is able to speak Welsh has shrunk significantly since the beginning of the 20th century<sup>75</sup>, as has the proportion of the population able to speak Welsh even in these areas, but the areas where the language is the most vital are, by and large, still in close physical proximity to each other. The existence of such an area contrasts with the geographical distribution of predominantly Irish-speaking areas in Ireland, which were already significantly geographically dispersed by 1900. The continued existence of contiguous areas where Welsh is spoken by the majority of the population, particularly in Gwynedd and Anglesey, have allowed the language to remain in daily use in a

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<sup>75</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*.

wide range of domains, as it remains possible for Welsh-speaking residents of these areas to carry out everyday activities with a high chance that they will be able to use Welsh in most situations.

## **5 Reasons for the Disparity in Native Welsh and Irish Communities**

Current patterns in language transmission and use in Ireland and Wales are reflective of deeply entrenched differences in linguistic attitudes between speakers of Irish and Welsh. It is outside the scope of this thesis to fully describe the multitude of events and conditions that caused these attitudes to develop, but there are four main factors that characterize the social, economic, and political conditions that undoubtedly contributed to the difference in attitudes that led to significant differences in language use: differences in economic conditions during the 19th and early 20th century; differing levels of support for Celtic language communities through religious and cultural organizations; the timing of each language's decline as compared to the beginnings of large-scale revitalization and preservation efforts; and differing rates of intergenerational transmission in home environments. This section examines each of these factors.

### **5.1 Economic Conditions**

Disparities in economic conditions played a major role in the divergent evolution of language use patterns in Wales and Ireland, especially during the 19th century. Although both countries were under English rule and their languages under threat by English during this time, the economic situation in Wales diverged sharply from that of Ireland. Simply put, Wales' economy flourished due to industrialization, while Ireland's experienced a near-total collapse due to the Great Famine and its disastrous effects on the Irish population. This difference alone explains to a major extent the survival of Welsh throughout much of Wales while Irish was

rapidly dying out. Evidently, knowledge of English was considered absolutely essential to prosperity and upward mobility in 19th-century Ireland, especially given the high emigration rates in the wake of the Famine. Irish could understandably have been seen as a hindrance to upward mobility and was therefore often not taught to children. In Wales, although English was encouraged and Welsh discouraged, at least on an official level, the Welsh language seems not to have been regarded as a detriment. In the early years of industrialization in Wales, there were even instances of initially monolingual English workers learning Welsh in order to communicate with their colleagues,<sup>76</sup> suggesting that Welsh was as necessary to certain domains as English was to areas of high prestige. This type of linguistic behavior persisted throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, despite the lack of prestige that Welsh had in most domains.

In Ireland, the sociolinguistic situation has historically been similar to that of Wales in that use of the Irish language was heavily stigmatized and associated with low socioeconomic status, but Irish collapsed much more suddenly and comprehensively as a native language than did Welsh. One explanation for the suddenness of the collapse of Irish as compared to Welsh is that the Welsh people were in a much less precarious economic position than the Irish people for much of the 19th century. Although the majority of Welsh speakers were not wealthy by any means, the relative economic stability that industrialization afforded enabled most of them to preserve the vigorous use of their language without fear of losing their livelihoods. By contrast, it is easy to conclude that the Irish population were too concerned with their basic survival to concern themselves with advocating, whether through official or informal means, for their language's survival. A similarly swift linguistic collapse occurred in 20th-century Wales,

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<sup>76</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*.

especially in those areas most affected by the Great Depression and the ensuing collapse of the coal industry; Davies notes that “[i]f abandoning Wales was the only option for the younger generation, there seemed little point in ensuring that they had a command of Welsh.”<sup>77</sup> However, this collapse was nowhere near as universal in Wales as in Ireland, as evidenced by the continued existence of unequivocally Welsh-dominant communities in the present day.

## **5.2 Institutional Support**

The much higher rate at which Irish speakers stopped speaking and transmitting their language compared to Welsh speakers can also be tied to differing levels of institutional support. While neither language received any significant level of support from any government body prior to the 20th century, there are two major ways in which the use of Welsh was encouraged by other organizations and actors. The first of these is literature and literacy: the traveling schools in 18th-century Wales succeeded in teaching nearly half of the country’s population to read in a time when illiteracy was widespread among rural populations. Schooling of any sort did not become available to Ireland’s rural population until well into the 19th century and invariably taught English. High literacy rates in Wales allowed for a Welsh-language printing and publishing industry that persisted into the 20th century, something of which there is no evidence for Irish. The wide availability of Welsh-language literature allowed Welsh speakers to easily access entertainment of a sort without having to resort to English, while Irish speakers had much more limited options available in their native language. Just as the presence of Welsh-language literature decreased the incentive for Welsh speakers to learn English, the paucity of Irish-language literature provided an additional incentive for Irish speakers to do so.

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<sup>77</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*, 92.

Another significant difference was the use of the two languages in religious contexts. Protestant sects in Wales, in particular Nonconformist congregations, made great use of Welsh in religious services into the 20th century. This was a boon to Welsh in the same way that the prevalence of Welsh literature was, and the language of a congregation's liturgy generally (though not always) corresponded to the language spoken by that congregation.<sup>78</sup> By contrast, while the Catholic Church in Ireland did not actively discourage the use of Irish, it made little effort to preserve or promote the language.<sup>79</sup> This apathy in a time when religious practice was crucial to much of the population could not have had any positive impact on the prestige of Irish or the attitudes of Irish speakers towards their native language.

### 5.3 Timing

Another main factor that accounts for the modern-day discrepancy in Welsh and Irish use is the timing of the languages' respective declines. The Irish-speaking population was in severe decline over a century before that of Welsh. Even though Ireland achieved political autonomy earlier than Wales did, its indigenous language was already in a state of terminal decline by this point, with the few remaining Irish-dominant regions geographically scattered and isolated (see Figure 11). Therefore, any attempts to revitalize Irish to pre-English levels would have taken much more effort and organization than was actually invested. By the time language rights and revitalization efforts were taken seriously, Irish was in a dire condition in terms of its speaker numbers and lack of geographic coherence. By contrast, Welsh revitalization and preservation efforts began to gain traction while Welsh was still spoken by a significant minority of the

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<sup>78</sup> Pryce, *Language Zones*.

<sup>79</sup> Niall Ó Ciosáin, "Gaelic and Catholic?" review of *An Irish-speaking Island: State, Religion, Community, and the Linguistic Landscape in Ireland, 1770-1870*, by Nicholas M Wolf, *Dublin Review of Books*, January 7, 2015.

country's population in a single, coherent region.<sup>80</sup> Preservation efforts could be focused on this area, where Welsh-speaking communities were still widespread and the language was still being passed on to younger generations in most of these communities, as evidenced by the fact that the language is still being naturally transmitted between generations in many of them.

#### **5.4 Transmission and Perseverance**

Finally, perhaps the most striking difference between the modern-day demographics of Welsh and Irish is the rate at which the two languages are naturally transmitted in the home. Although only 6.7% of two-parent households with young children have two Welsh-speaking parents as of the 2001 census,<sup>81</sup> 82% of children in such families are able to speak Welsh by the time they enter primary school.<sup>82</sup> This is not the case in any part of Ireland; the number of 3- and 4-year-old Irish speakers in households with two Irish-speaking parents stands at only 24% in the Republic of Ireland and 34% in Northern Ireland. This statistic is consistent with patterns seen in industrialized areas of Wales in the 19th and 20th centuries, where Welsh remained the dominant language of most communities until the percentage of English-speaking in-migrants exceeded a certain number.<sup>83</sup> Despite Ireland's lack of linguistic displacement due to demographic shift during the 19th century, Irish speakers largely made a conscious choice not to pass on their language, even if this choice was made under significant economic duress and intense stigma associated with Irish use.

All of these factors have shaped the way Welsh and Irish speakers perceive their languages. These perceptions and attitudes have led to major differences in the ways language

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<sup>80</sup> Davies, *Welsh Language*.

<sup>81</sup> Jones, *Statistical Overview*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Thomas, *A Cauldron of Rebirth*.

shift has occurred in the two countries. Irish speakers abandoned their language rapidly because of its association with poverty and low social status and English's association with economic and social mobility. Welsh speakers, despite being under similar pressure to assimilate to English society, did not seem to have the same negative associations with their language and only stopped speaking it when it was displaced due to demographic shifts. To generalize, the loss of Welsh speakers occurred due to the difficulty of maintaining Welsh in the face of increasing numbers of non-Welsh in-migrants, while the loss of Irish speakers occurred due to the shame and stigma surrounding the language's use. Irish was abandoned; Welsh was displaced.

## **6 Conclusion**

Irish and Welsh have much in common. Both are Celtic languages indigenous to territories that were subject to subjugation and repression by the United Kingdom, and both have experienced significant declines in their speaker populations, particularly since the 19th century. However, Welsh has managed to maintain a significant native speaker base in a geographically concentrated region, although both the speaker population and geographic area where it is dominant have shrunk significantly. Irish, by contrast, has not been so lucky; the population that speaks it as their first language has nearly disappeared and is now confined to several geographically disparate regions. Both languages have increased in prestige in recent years, particularly in education and government, but Irish is in much greater danger of becoming extinct as the native language of any portion of the population of Ireland. While Welsh-speaking communities continue to decline in strength and numbers, this decline has been much slower and less pronounced than the corresponding decline of Irish-speaking communities, and it is clear

from the case of towns such as Caernarfon that Welsh is still thriving as the language of at least some entire communities.

The disparity between the use of Irish and Welsh in the present day can be attributed to several historical and cultural factors. Wales' economy expanded rapidly during the 19th century, leading to an initial boom in its speaker population before demographic shifts ultimately led to its decline in many parts of the country, while Ireland's economy experienced a near-complete collapse due to the Great Famine that accelerated the decline of a language whose speakers were already beginning to shift towards using English. Welsh's vitality in the 19th century was also bolstered by its widespread use in religious practice and a flourishing publishing industry, while Irish had neither of these advantages. The decline of Welsh has in most cases been long, slow, and recent compared to revitalization efforts, while Irish disappeared from most of Ireland in the span of a century during which very few concerted efforts were made to halt its decline. The relative vitality of Welsh as compared to Irish is strong because of a combination of relatively high levels of economic prosperity, significant support from civilian organizations in the face of suppression by the government, and demographic displacement as opposed to wholesale abandonment.

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