

English or English?

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It sometimes comes as a surprise to students of the English language that there are a number of people that live in the British Isles who use a daily language which is not English. The number is admittedly fairly small nowadays but there are today areas in Wales and Scotland where the local people still communicate in their own languages, **Welsh** and **Gaelic**.

Many people assume that these are just dialects of English, but this is not the case. Let us compare some words just to show how different they are.

English	Welsh	Gaelic
month	<i>mis</i>	<i>mí</i>
nose	<i>trwyn</i>	<i>srón</i>
night	<i>nos</i>	<i>oíche</i>

Looking at a couple of lines from a Welsh poem, we can see that it bears no resemblance at all to English, nor does a knowledge of English even help us to guess at the meaning:

*Pam y caiff bwystfilod rheibus
Dorri'r egin mân i lawr?*

You will of course have worked out that that means "Why are the ravenous beasts allowed to trample the tender grapes?", although you may not remember that it comes from a poem by William Williams Pantycelyn.

The Welsh language is spoken by some 600,000 people, slightly less than 25 per cent of the Welsh population. It is a Celtic language, and is thought to have entered Britain in the fifth century B.C. The Anglo-Saxon invasions later drove the Welsh into the hills and valleys to the west, where they have lived ever since.

The Welsh call their country *Cymru* and their language *Cymraeg*. The Welsh alphabet doesn't use the letters j, k, q, x or z; the letter w is a vowel; as in "gwr", (man); ch is used as in German "ich"; f is pronounced as /v/, the 'f' sound being written as ff; and dd and ll are two Welsh letter combinations representing sounds not present at all in English, a voiced dental fricative th sound /ð/ and a voiced alveolar lateral fricative /ɬ/ which sounds roughly like the thl in the word athlete.

Gaelic is traditionally written in a system of letters which we can't easily reproduce without specialist help. Here, in our conventional roman alphabet, is an extract in Irish Gaelic from Padraic Pearse's 'The Roads' (also known as *Bóithre*).

Ba mhínic do shíl Nóra go mba bhreá an saol bheith ag imeacht roimpi ina seabhac siúil gan beann aici ar dhuine ar bith – bóithre na hÉireann roimpi agus a haghaidh orthu;

which means roughly "Several times before Nora had thought of what a fine life she would have as a tramp, independent of everybody, her face on the roads of Ireland before her". It is written above in modern letters – in a more traditional [*Cló Gaelach*] script it would look like this:

**Ba mhínic do shíl Nóra go mba
bhreá an saol bheith ag imeacht
roimpi ina seabhac siúil gan
beann aici ar dhuine ar bith –
bóithre na hÉireann roimpi
agus a haghaidh orthu;**

Gaelic is spoken in both Ireland and Scotland, the two distinct varieties being referred to as Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic. Like Welsh, Gaelic is a Celtic language, part of the Indo-European family of languages, and is sometimes referred to as Erse.

Irish Gaelic is the official language of the Republic of Ireland, not, please remember, part of the British Isles, and is spoken by about half a million people, one seventh of the population. The traditional Gaelic alphabet evolved in the fifth century A.D. and lacks the letters j, k, q, v, w, x, y and z. Acute accents over vowels mean they should be pronounced long, and a single dot over a consonant [*síneadh ponc*] indicates it should be aspirated. In modern representations the dot is dropped and an initial h placed after the consonant, so **č** becomes ch.

Gaelic crossed into Scotland in about the 5th Century, and diverged rapidly to the point of becoming a separate dialect. However Gaelic has no official status, and only one and a half per cent of the population of Scotland, some 75,000 people, can speak it. Scottish Gaelic often uses a grave accent where Irish Gaelic uses an acute. Many words are used in everyday English that have come into the language from Gaelic, notably *bard, glen, bog, slogan, whiskey, blarney, shillelagh, shamrock, colleen, brogue* and *galore*. Other words are more closely identified with Scotland, such as *clan, loch* and *ptarmigan*.

Until recently there were still people alive who could speak **Cornish**, another Celtic language very similar to the language spoken in Brittany, and there is still a society dedicated to the study of Cornish language and literature. **Manx** was a language spoken in the Isle of Man, between Wales and Ireland, in the last century. The last native speaker of **Orkney Norn**, a hybrid language of Scots and Norse dating from the Viking visitations in the ninth century A.D., which was spoken in the Orkney islands to the north of Scotland, died as long ago as 1750, but the language has struggled to survive, and even today Orcadian speech draws heavily on Norn intonation and vocabulary, while local place names are testimony to the origins of the language.

The levelling influences of rapid communications and mass media have sounded the death knell for Cornish and Norn, both the Orkney and Shetland variety, but nationalists in Ireland, Wales and Scotland seem sure to keep their languages alive for the time being. In Wales there is the *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*, (Welsh

language Society), in Scotland the *An Comunn Gaidhealach* (Gaelic Language Society), and radio and television channels now broadcast regularly in these languages. But the law has not always permitted this; the Welsh language was outlawed in 1536 by the Act of Union, apparently to little effect as by 1851 ninety per cent of the Welsh people still used it as their language. As late as 1870, children caught speaking Welsh at school were not only beaten but also forced to wear the *Not*, a heavy wooden yoke, around their necks. Gaelic was banned in 1616, but has survived too; language is too vital to be suppressed by legislation.

Welsh and Gaelic have had their effect on the mixture which is modern day English. So too have a myriad of other languages, from all the waves of successive invaders and visitors. English today reflects all these roots, and the percentage of words from Latin and French, (Hundreds of years under the Romans and three hundred more under the Normans), is very high in our language.

A Victorian, William Barnes, was convinced this was a bad thing, and dedicated his life to promoting a language policy that would eliminate "foreign" words and replace them with Germanic or Anglo-Saxon ones. Strangely enough, or perhaps not so strangely, José Luis Borges was a great admirer of Barnes; in his *History of Eternity*, (the chapter on Kenningar), he mentions a *Word-book of the English Tongue* and five of the eleven words quoted by Borges as being in this (presumably imaginary) book, five are mentioned by Barnes. These are *licherest* (cemetery), *redecraft* (logic), *fourwinkled* (quadrangular), *hairbane* (depilatory) and *kinlore* (genealogy). The etymology is clear enough for those who take the pains to look.

Barnes was of course doomed to failure, even though he received prestigious support from time to time. Few people other than linguists now are even aware of his one man stand. But only a Joyce can invent his own language, and of course only a Joyce can speak it. Barnes wanted to change the demotic speech, and one man can not take on a language on a whim. However, I do occasionally receive letters myself taking me to task for the predominance of Latinisms in my writing, so the matter is still, if not a burning issue, at least a smouldering one. I would say in my defence that whereas the most basic words in the language, those dealing with the family and the home, are predominantly Anglo-Saxon in origin, it is not possible to write in a formal, academically respectable style without leaning heavily towards Latin and Romance vocabulary.

In 1966 Paul Jennings published a humorous article in *Punch* magazine; Hamlet's famous soliloquy as it might have been penned if Shakespeare had been a Barnesite:

*To be or not to be: that is the ask-thing:
Is't higher-thinking in the brain to bear
The slings and arrows of outrageous dooming
Or to take weapons against a sea of bothers
And by againstwork end them? To die: to sleep:
No more" and, by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand lifesome dints
That flesh is deathboon to*

Frankly, interesting as it is as a linguistic exercise, I'm glad Shakespeare wrote the way he did.