Of Graves and Epitaphs: Historical Dialectology and Welsh Cemeteries

Gwenllian M. Awbery

This paper originally appeared in
Cardiff Working Papers in Welsh Linguistics, 7 (1992) 1-7

There are a number of questions which haunt any dialectologist with an interest in adding an element of time depth to the study of the modern spoken Welsh language. How old are some of the characteristic features of modern Welsh dialects? Are they comparatively recent developments or do they reach back to much earlier periods? Have some of them spread from an original core to a wider area over the years, or have previously widespread features gradually lost ground so that they now survive only in comparatively small districts? And what of those parts of Wales where the Welsh language yielded to English at an early stage? What sort of dialect was spoken in Radnorshire, in South Pembrokeshire or in the Gower?

Asking these questions is the easy part. Finding answers is considerably less easy. The earliest attempts at sound recording in Welsh take us back to the turn of the century. The earliest systematic descriptions of Welsh dialects date from the late Nineteenth Century, and describe the usage of speakers born as early as the 1830s. Beyond this, however, the evidence becomes anecdotal, and in attempting to build up a reliable picture of the spoken language in earlier periods one must piece together evidence from as many different sources as possible. [1]

In this paper I wish to draw attention to a potential source for this earlier period which has so far been, it seems to me, completely ignored, namely the inscriptions on gravestones in the churchyards and cemeteries of Wales. They survive in truly enormous numbers, and are very often composed wholly or partially in Welsh. They can, furthermore, be clearly linked to a particular place and time, as the inscriptions tell us the names of those commemorated, when they died and their age at death, where they lived, and often what their occupation was. The information gleaned from such inscriptions can therefore be easily compared with other material relevant to that district and that period derived from other sources, so that a fuller picture of the language there can be gradually built up.

How far back can these inscriptions take us? A very large number of inscriptions survive from the middle of the last century, recording the deaths of people born in the early 1800s or towards the end of the Eighteenth Century. Earlier inscriptions, from the first decades of the last century and the latter part of the Eighteenth Century, take us back to people born in the early 1700s. These are fewer in number, but often very interesting form the linguistic point of view. This is as far back as it is normally possible to go, using this particular source. Inscriptions from earlier periods than this which include any Welsh are very scarce, though not totally unknown. [2]

There are, inevitably, problems in the use and interpretation of this material. Gravestones have often been damaged over the years, so that parts of the inscription are missing. The lettering is sometimes unclear and worn, so that it can only be read when the light strikes it from a certain angle. Bushes, creepers and turf hide parts of the wording. The whole enterprise at times feels more like archaeology than linguistics.

I have been collecting material of this kind in several parts of south Wales, but in this paper I shall concentrate on data from one area only. The inscriptions drawn on here are all from south-east Wales, specifically from the suburban outskirts of Cardiff and the rural area to the immediate west of the city. This is a preliminary study only, and I have not as yet explored all churchyards and cemeteries in the area. The material already available does, however, reveal the range of possibilities inherent in this type of source.

The examples which follow reveal the clear presence of dialect features characteristic of east Glamorgan in these inscriptions. Lexical, morphological and phonological features which are found in the modern spoken language can be traced back here to the middle of the last century, and in some cases to the late Eighteenth Century, providing useful confirmatory evidence of the dialect usage of this earlier period.

First, however, a brief outline of the type of data involved. The format of the inscriptions varies, but in all cases the name of the person commemorated is given, along with the date of death and sometimes a range of other personal details - age at death, parish of origin, occupation, family connections and so on. This core section may appear alone. Very often, however, it is either preceded or followed by a Biblical verse or poem, the poem being either written to order in memory of a particular individual, or instead a well known verse, found in many inscriptions over a wide area.

Both parts of the inscription may be in Welsh, but it is quite common to find the personal details given in English, and then a verse or poem in Welsh. The reverse pattern, with the personal details in Welsh, and the accompanying verse or poem in English, does not appear. There are also, of course, many inscriptions which are in English throughout, either giving the core personal details only, or including a Biblical verse or poem in English, but these are not relevant to the present study.

Dialect Features

Dialect features may in principle appear then in any part of the inscription. In practice they are found either in the personal details or the poem. The Biblical verses tend not to contain dialect features, but rather to appear in their correct form, presumably reflecting people's close familiarity with the wording of the Bible.

The personal details do not provide a great deal of scope for dialect variation, being rather limited in content. In this section dialect surfaces mainly as a reflection of the local pronunciation of place names.

The poems are a more productive source. They often appear to be the work of local poets, and reflect dialect usage very clearly, relying for instance for rhyme on pairs of words which do indeed rhyme in the dialect but would not do so in the standard literary language or in the dialect of other areas. Where the poem is rather the work of a well-known poet and was originally written in the standard literary language, we find in the inscriptions variant forms which can only be explained as reflecting local dialect usage. The apparent "mistakes" make good sense if seen as indicating that this poem has become part of the oral tradition and is subject to modification in the light of local needs.

Lexical Features

Lexical features of dialect are not very common in this material, possibly reflecting the limited range of subject matter, but they do nevertheless appear. Southern "mas" *out* appears very often instead of literary and northern "allan", as in these two cases. [3]

1. Croes-y-parc Chapel, Peterston Super Ely: 1820

   Wrth byst dy byrth
   Rwy'n ciro'n eon
   Am ddod i mewn i wledda
   Nid bodlon wyf i fod ty fas
   ..... 'r ddinas noddfa.

2. Croes-y-parc Chapel, Peterston Super Ely: 1858

   Os gofynnwch, pa'm rhwyf fi'n myn'd
   A gadael tad a mam dau ffrynd
   W--th colyn angau pechod cas
   R'wy'n gorfod myn'd o'r byd i ma's.

The use of "mas" rather than "allan" is clearly basic in both of these poems, since it is central to the rhyming structure. In (1) it rhymes with "ddinas" in the middle of the following line, and in (2) "cas" in the third line rhymes with "mas" in the last line.

Grammatical Features

Grammatical features of dialect are found too in this material, though again they are not very common. One particularly striking example appears in an early inscription dating from the mid Eighteenth Century at Lisvane.

3. Lisvane Parish Church: 1765

   Cewch yma fyr hanes
   Cate gwraig Evan Evans
   Hi adws y phechod ai blinder
   Yn laen .....

Here we find the typically south-eastern 3sg past inflection "-ws" on the verb "gadael" *leave* rather than the alternative realisation "-odd" which is found in the literary language and the spoken language of north and west Wales. This dialectal verb form appears, furthermore, in a strongly dialectal sentence pattern, with the pronoun subject "hi" preceding the verb. In the modern dialects this pattern is found only in south east Wales. In the literary language and the spoken Welsh of other districts a pronoun subject, like a noun subject, follows the inflected verb. The form "hi adws" found in this inscription corresponds therefore to an expected "gadawodd hi" in the literary language or the Welsh of other districts.

Local variations in mutation rules also show up in these inscriptions, as in the following examples.

4. Llantrisant Parish Church: 1845

..... yn blwyf Llanwynno .....

5. Llantrisant Parish Church: 1870

..... yn blwyf Llanilltud Fardre .....

In both of these we find, following the preposition "yn" *in*, not the expected Nasal Mutation, but rather the Soft Mutation, to give "yn blwyf ..." This shift to the Soft Mutation following "yn" is typical of south eastern dialects today.

Phonological Features

Examples of lexical and grammatical features of dialect may not be very common, but evidence of dialect phonology is widespread. It is perhaps unwise to rely too much on the evidence of the spelling conventions employed, though these can be suggestive. Fortunately the rhyming patterns of the commemorative poems provide stronger and more reliable clues as to the pronunciation intended by the writer.

A feature restricted in South Wales to eastern districts is the loss of the vowel "e" in final unstressed syllables, where it is replaced by "a". This happens both when "e" is basic to the word as in "amser" *time*, and when the "e" results from the simplification of a diphthong, as in "dyddiau" > "dyddie" *days*. These all show up in the south east as "a", to give for instance "amsar" and "dyddia".

6. St. Fagan's Parish Church: 1741

Yr un wedd yn dy fedd canfod finna
Mi fynnwn ut wybod
Mau pawb oll o'u pybyllod
Ur rhwyd hwn ma'n rhaid dod.

In the first line "finna" *me* appears rather than the expected "finnau". Here, however, it could be merely an idiosyncratic spelling. More reliable as evidence is the next case, where the rhyme scheme is clearly involved.

7. Whitchurch (old churchyard): 1834

Sylwch! Ieuengtyd wrth fyn'd heibio,
Ar y bedd rhwy'n gorwedd ynddo:
Mor wir a bod fy ngorff i yma
Dyma'r modd y byddwch chwitha.

The form "chwitha" *you* in the last line reflects the local pronunciation of "chwithau", and furthermore appear in a couplet rhyming with "yma" *here*, a form where the "a" in the final syllable is stable and not subject to dialect variation.

This feature of south eastern dialect also seems to explain an otherwise odd mistake which is found in a popular englyn in two inscriptions. This englyn normally begins:

Trallodau beiau bywyd - ni welais

In two cases noted here, however, the englyn runs as follows.

8. Llantrisant Parish Church: 1843 and 1894

Trallod a beiau bywyd - ni welais
Na wylwch o'm plegid
Rhw'n iach o bob afiechyd
Ag yn fy medd gwyn fy myd.

The simplest explanation for this change in the first line appears to be that the form "trallodau" *sorrows* was pronounced locally as "tralloda" as would be expected in the dialect, and that this form was then reinterpreted as "trallod a" *sorrow and*.

Another feature characteristic of south eastern dialects of Welsh is the loss of "h", and this too shows up quite commonly in the inscriptions, as below.

9. Whitchurch (old churchyard): 1807

Iechawdwriaeth yw fy ngysur
Iechawdwriaeth yw fy hedd
A sgrifenwch iechawdwriaeth
Yn eon ar fy ngareg bedd
A phan cadwyf .....
Iechawdwriaeth fydd fy ngan.

In the standard language the nasal mutation following "fy" my would be expected to convert an initial "c" as in "cysur" *comfort*, "carreg" *stone*, and "can" *song* into a "ngh" cluster, to give "fy nghysur", "fy ngharreg" and "fy nghan". In all three cases here, the "h" is missing and the resulting initial "ng" cluster corresponds to the normal form in the modern dialect.

This same feature appears to explain the hypercorrect nasal mutation forms found in one example. Here we have yet another faulty version of the englyn, "Trallodau beiau bywyd ..." already met with.

10. Pendoylan Parish Church: 1868

Trallodau beiau bywyd - ni welais
Na wylwch om plegyd
Wyf iach o bob afiechyd
Ac ynn fy mhedd gwyn fy mhyd.

The last line should read "Ac yn fy medd gwyn fy myd", with the nasal mutation which follows "fy" converting the initial "b" of "bedd" *grave* and "byd" *world* to "m". What seems to have happened here, is that whoever wrote out the englyn realised that local usage often drops "h" where the standard language keeps it, and in the attempt to get it right in such an important context, went too far, putting in an extra "h" where none should be.

A similarly hypercorrect form appears in another example, though here an "h" has been added to a normally vowel-initial word, and there are no mutation rules to complicate the matter further.

11. Croes-y-parc Chapel, Peterston Super Ely: 1863

Ffarwel fo i'r byd a'i orthrymderau
Ffarwel gyfeillion a pherth'nasau
Hadnabod Iesu'r cyfaill ffyddlon
Wna i mi ganu yn yr afon.

The addition of "h" to "adnabod" *know* suggests that here again the writer lacks clear intuitions about which words should have "h" and which words should not, leading to mistakes of this kind in the attempt to achieve correctness.

* * * * * * * * *

It appears then that examples of local dialect usage do show up from time to time in these inscriptions, and that they can be used by the dialectologist with an interest in the past. The examples shown here are only a very restricted sample of the material which has resulted from this pilot survey, and it seems clear that while an element of caution is necessary in interpreting the forms found, this is a source well worth exploring further.

Footnotes

1. For a discussion of other available sources see Awbery (1985) or Awbery (1988).

2. There are occasional examples from earlier periods, such as an inscription at Michaelston Super Ely, commemorating two men, one of whom died in 1630 and the other in 1658. It must date from the mid Seventeenth Century, and although it takes the form of a plaque on the wall inside the parish church rather than a stone in the churchyard, it is clearly relevant to this body of material.

3. A translation of the Welsh inscriptions quoted in this paper is given in the Appendix.

Bibliography

Awbery, G.M. (1985) "Slander and Defamation: a New Source for Historical Dialectology", *Cardiff Working Papers in Welsh Linguistics*, No. 4, pp 1-24

Awbery, G.M. (19880 "Slander and Defamation as a Source for Historical Dialectology", in *Methods in Dialectology,* ed. Alan R. Thomas, Multilingual Matters Ltd., pp 164-174

Appendix

The following translations of the inscriptions quoted in the text have been deliberately kept very close to the wording of the Welsh, in order to facilitate following the original. In the case of poems, the translation has been carried out on a line by line basis.

1. At the posts of thy gates / I am knocking fearlessly / To come in to feast / I am not willing to be outside / ..... the city of refuge.

2. If you ask why I am going / And leaving father and mother two friends / At the sting of death hateful sin / I must go out of the world.

3. You may have here the short story / Of Cate, the wife of Evan Evans / she left her sin and weariness / Completely .....

4. ..... in the parish of Llanwynno .....

5. ..... in the parish of Llanilltud Fardre .....

6. In the same way in thy grave perceive me / I wanted thee to know / that everyone from their tents / Must come to this net.

7. Notice! Youth as you pass by / The grave I lie in / As truly as my body is here / This is how you will be.

8. The sorrow and sin of life - I did not see / Do not weep for me / I am well of all sickness / And in my grave, blessed am I.

9. Salvation is my comfort / Salvation is my peace / And write salvation / Boldly on my gravestone / And when I shall keep ..... / Salvation shall be my song.

10. The sorrows, sins of life - I did not see / (and then as 8 above).

11. Farewell to the world and its oppressions / Farewell friends and relations / Knowing Jesus the faithful friend / Makes me sing in the river.