

## The acquisition of stylistic variation in Welsh-medium education

Welsh-medium education presents a different type of immersion than many other educational contexts: students who do not speak Welsh as a home language study alongside children who do. In this paper, we examine pupils' acquisition of stylistic variation, as previous research has shown that students in immersion classrooms often acquire a limited range of registers available to L1 speakers and do not reach full sociolinguistic competence (e.g. French in Canada: Mougeon et al., 2010).

Our research considers students from both Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh-speaking homes studying in two Welsh-medium schools. One school is in Cardiff (South Wales) where 28% of overall population is Welsh-speaking and one is in Gwynedd (North Wales) where 76% is Welsh-speaking. Eighteen participants were recorded in three contexts (informal peer-to-peer conversation, sociolinguistic interview and formal mock job interview) to elicit different speech styles.

In this paper, we present analyses of two morphosyntactic features of Welsh which are known to demonstrate stylistic variation: possessive constructions and past tense verb constructions. The possessive can be signalled in three main ways in Welsh: with a literary form (*fy ffrindiau* – my friends), with a colloquial form (*ffrindiau fi*) and with an intermediary variant which has been called the sandwich form (*fy ffrindiau i*) (Davies 2016: 41). The simple past can be signalled either by an inflectional variant (*gwelais i* - I saw) or by a number of periphrastic forms (e.g. *wnes i weld*, *ddaru fi weld*). Morris Jones (1993:157) suggests that the inflectional form is more appropriate in formal written contexts, but little is known about how the variants pattern in reality, especially in speech rather than in writing.

For both features, we considered home language, location, stylistic context, as well as gender, alongside feature specific internal factors. Data were analysed statistically using generalised linear mixed effects models (Bates et al. 2015; R Core Team 2022). Our findings demonstrate that location is crucial to understand how sociolinguistic competence is acquired: the North and South Wales schools vary considerably in terms of rates and underlying constraints within the Welsh-home language children for both features. Secondly, all the groups studied demonstrate some variation between the more formal and less formal forms and this is, in part, tied to stylistic context. For the possessive constructions, we find that the English-home language children match the patterning of their local peers, demonstrating that their acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. For the past tense forms, instead, while there are similarities EHL and WHL children in the same community, the patterns do not sufficiently match to posit full acquisition of L1 speaker patterns.

We will discuss our results with reference to community dynamics, but also in terms of differences between the two features, both with respect to teaching and to attitudes.

## References

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