

The emergence of a Welsh biblical literary standard and the evidence of early modern manuscript sermons

Oliver Currie, University of Ljubljana

The 1588 Welsh Bible, as revised in 1620, is generally regarded as having formed the basis of modern standard literary Welsh (Lewis 1987; Jones 1998; Robert 2011), however, the process of standardization itself has not been systematically researched. Manuscript sermons can provide an interesting insight into the adoption of an emerging biblical literary standard, as we have a large, underresearched body of comparable texts based on the Bible, but where we find significant linguistic variation between individual preachers. Welsh preachers faced a linguistic dilemma: they could follow the linguistic model of the Welsh Bible, which they read to their congregations week in week out, or use a more colloquial and dialectal language closer to that which they themselves and their congregations spoke.

Today, there is a considerable divergence between standard literary Welsh and colloquial Welsh. By comparing the 1588 and 1620 Bibles to contemporary text types in a more informal register, such as Slander case records and popular drama, we can see that many of the points of divergence between standard literary Welsh and colloquial Welsh had emerged at least as early as the Bible translations and are likely to have been cemented by the Bible translations. This paper examines sociolinguistic variation in a self-compiled corpus of over 50 Welsh language autograph manuscript sermons from the late 16th to the early 18th century in 14 manuscripts by 14 different preachers, focusing on a selection of morphological and morphosyntactic variables where there the 1620 Bible diverged from contemporary more popular texts (e.g. the verbal endings 1SG PRES/FUT *-af/-a*, 1SG PAST *-ais/-es*, general 3PL *-nt/-n*, 3SG IMPF *-ai/-e*, the nominal plural ending *-au/-e*, the third person plural pronoun *hwy/nhwy*, and the retention vs. omission of the preverbal particles *a* and *y*) as well as diatopic variables where the Bible used supralocal as opposed to dialectal variants (e.g. the 3SG M simplex personal pronoun – Biblical supralocal *ef* vs. Northern local/dialectal *fo*).

The paper will first, by way of background, suggest a possible explanation of how the language of the Welsh Bible came to diverge from colloquial usage, then examine the extent to which individual preachers used biblical as opposed to more colloquial or dialectal variants, and finally discuss how the data can contribute to our understanding the development of a Welsh literary standard. While we can observe a progressive adoption of linguistic features consistent with the 1620 Welsh Bible – mid and late 17th century preachers use more biblical features than early 17th century preachers – there is significant synchronic and diachronic variation throughout the 17th century. This simultaneous norm convergence, on the one hand, and variation, on the other, reflects a key characteristic of the emergent standardisation of Welsh in the 17th century: it involved organic convergence to the language of an authoritative and widely diffused text, the Bible, but without a planned or centrally coordinated implementation process, comparable to what Joseph (1987, 60) has termed *circumstantial* as opposed to *engineered standardization* or what Deumert (2004, 3) has described as standardization without “deliberate intervention”. The lack of a deliberate implementation process – promotion of a standard or formal education in Welsh – not only meant that there was less pressure to conform to a standard, but also that the standard itself was not rigidly defined. In this respect, the emerging Welsh biblical literary standard in the 17th century appears to be a standard with fuzzy boundaries (Ammon 2003; Brown 2020). Variation in the adoption of a linguistic model is to be expected not only because of the agency of individual writers who can choose to follow it to varying degrees, but also because the linguistic features of a potential model text differ in how easy they are to adopt because of their variable salience or variable proximity to colloquial or dialectal usage.

References

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