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## Multilingualism in Periodical Studies — A Social History Perspective

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# Multilingualism in Periodical Studies — A Social History Perspective

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Social historians tend to approach the question of defining multilingualism in periodical print mainly from a societal perspective. So what does that mean? In my own work it means trying to explore, in contexts of place and time, the relationships that developed between producers of periodicals and their intended or implied consumers within and across language domains.

Let's begin with a concrete example. The first title I studied in depth, for my doctorate, was a bilingual radical weekly, the *Workman's Advocate/Amdiffynydd y Gweithiwr*, published in one industrial town in Wales between 1873 and 1875. What is meant by bilingual here? Page 1 was mainly in English but with a Welsh title in brackets; pages 2 and 3 were entirely in Welsh; pages 4 and 5 contained a bit of both languages but were mainly in English; and pages 6, 7, and 8 were advertisements, mostly in English. The combination varied over time, but that was the general formula. Reading it over its three-year lifecycle, I was struck by five things that I think remain pertinent to this discussion.

- (i) the articles were not translations of one section to the other. Even the two titles are subtly different, and the two language sections appear to be aimed at separate social constituencies within the same circulation area;
- (ii) the two language sections had a distinctly different 'feel' to them, the Welsh being more literary, more poetic, less explicitly political/campaigning/didactic in tone;
- (iii) the two language sections nonetheless communicated with each other, picked up common talking points, spun them in different ways: there was something organic about their interconnectedness;
- (iv) the inequality of reader access: most who could read the Welsh section almost certainly could also read the English, so were privileged in having access to the entire paper, whilst those who could not read the Welsh only accessed the English half of it — about which they often complained. Sociolinguists tell me this is a case of community, but not societal, bilingualism. What is manifested in this particular case is a one-sided bilingualism, one in which most or all readers of (first) language A can read *the same* (second) language B, whereas few if any readers of (first) language B speak language A. This enables A speakers/writers/readers to reference phrases, or entire texts, written in B in terms that might imply irony, humor, sarcasm. The adoption of a more precise sociolinguistic approach might also tease out alternative readings when we compare registers or tonalities in sections of text printed in different languages on the same page, issue, or run.

I defer to the judgement of others whether, or in what combinations, the same might apply to texts where more than two printed languages are juxtaposed.

- (v) and finally, notwithstanding point (iv), each page displayed a language hierarchy, English being the most prominent, the ‘language of power’, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term, whereas the Welsh is only seen in parentheses on the cover, with blocks of text only on the inner pages.

Subsequent forays into the history of journalism in other multilingual contexts have persuaded me that some, or indeed all, of those five observations can be scaled up from that one very specific example to virtually any spatial dimension: the city, where periodicals are published in different languages but still interact in the same civic space, or the regional, the national, the continental, or the global. In writing a paper recently on a network of connected specialist multilingual news platforms that spanned China, India, Europe, and the US continuously from 1850 to 1951, I was struck by how many of those same issues reappeared. The Chinese title of the *China Express*, 新聞紙 (xīnwénzhǐ), of 1858, for example (unhelpfully printed upside down in the inaugural issue) employed a Western semantic trope to transmit in Chinese characters a European ideal of the ‘newspaper’, one that drew on English Christian missionary Samuel Kidd’s usage in his evangelical news-sheet, the *Universal News* 天下新聞 (Malacca, 1828–29) rather than on one adopted, or adapted, from a term in the contemporary Chinese lexicon. In modern Chinese/Putonghua, the word for ‘newspaper’ is 报纸/報紙 (bàozhǐ), a reminder that colonial-era impositions can be resisted and replaced (the origin of 报纸 is another, not unrelated, story!).

Three quick points in conclusion:

- (i) print languages are expressions of power — economic and cultural as well as political — but while some enjoy dominance in a language hierarchy, others have to negotiate their way to the page from positions of relative subalternity.
- (ii) that said, there exist liminal and sometimes remarkably porous spaces where printed languages meet and interact — sometimes on the same page let alone in the same issue or run. Those spaces deserve our critical attention since it is along those frontiers *between* languages, the shifting edgelands where terms, concepts, identities migrate from one language to the other, that semantic, aesthetic, and ideological hybridities occur.
- (iii) and finally, while all printed languages express some degree of power, particularly in terms of access to technologies, markets, and legal systems, they can also marginalize or silence language communities that fail to command such resources. Language hierarchies, like print itself, may also be gendered and racialized, particularly though not exclusively in colonial contexts, and often we have to read closely in and beyond their printed expressions to discover what Laurel Brake has termed the ‘subjugated knowledges’ contained within them, and in the institutions and economies they structure and critique.

**Aled Gruffydd Jones** has taught history at universities in Wales, China, and Greece. His publications include *Press, Politics and Society: A History of Journalism in Wales* (1993), *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (1996), and (with Bill Jones) *Welsh Reflections: Y Drych and America, 1851–2001* (2001). He is currently completing a book on the cultural strategies of Welsh missionaries in colonial and post-colonial Bengal.