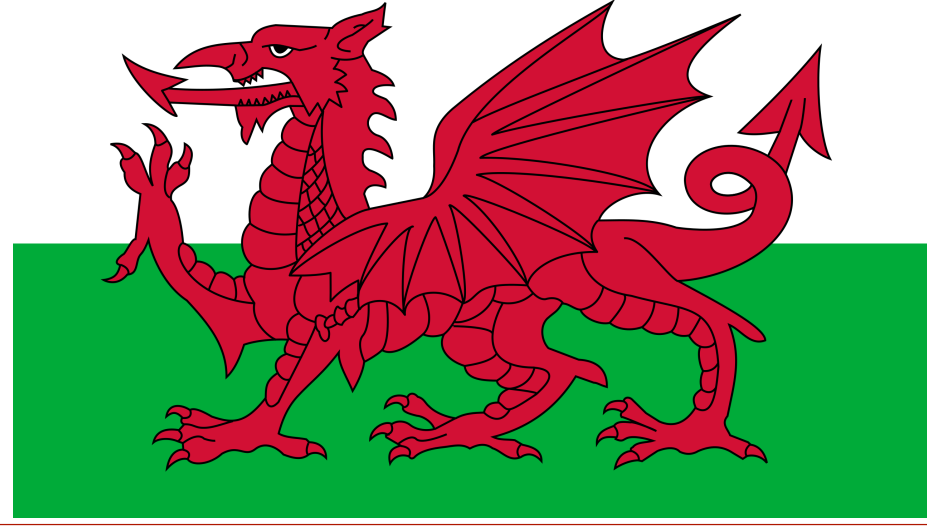


# Class, Nation and Voice: Sounding Welsh at Elite English Universities



## Background

Sociolinguistics is the study of language diversity in social life.

Wales has long been the site of original sociolinguistic research as a result of the country's rich bilingual identity, and numerous studies of Welsh speech exist. However, no studies of speech amongst Welsh students in Higher Education Institutes exists at present; I felt this was a conspicuous absence.

The progression of Welsh students to university, especially selective universities like Oxford, lags behind the national average. Could sociolinguistics explain some of this?

My project seeks to understand how the speech, particularly accent and dialect, of Welsh students at the University of Oxford impacts on their perceptions of social, national and academic identities.

## Aims of Research

- Exploratory research project - more work to be done!
- Focus on tripartite identity: class, nation, intelligence
- How do these interact? How much is each of these factors influenced by how Welsh students speak?
- I wanted to ask:
  - What does it *mean* to 'sound Welsh' in a place like Oxford?
  - Does this have an effect on the experiences Welsh students have here?
  - How do the experiences of Welsh speaking students differ to non-Welsh speaking students?
  - How do Welsh students feel about returning home after terms in Oxford?
- And, crucially, is there anything the university could, or should be doing to improve the experiences of Welsh students here?

## What Next?

- Lecture to be presented in Oxford detailing these findings & to feedback this data to the university as evidence of some Welsh students' experiences - suggestions for change?
- More research! More evidence is needed & similar studies could be conducted: different regional accents, different universities across the UK - a broader picture

## Method

- 15 participants (Welsh students at Oxford)
- 20 minute interviews responding to a semi structured series of questions
- Questions designed to prompt responses focusing on perceptions of class, intelligence and national identity
- Interviews were audio recorded then transcribed
- Close qualitative analysis of responses was made to identify patterns and themes

## Findings

- **Class:** most students did not feel they had directly encountered classed experiences because of their Welsh identity, though were aware of prevailing stereotypes
- One student suggested Welsh speaking people were perceived as 'country bumpkin[s], sort of proper rural town.'
- Wales as a place of rural poverty was a stereotype acknowledged by all participants
- Class was a prevailing theme in many interviews and students acknowledged its prominence in Oxford, often closely tied with social circles and political views
- **National Identity:** the authenticity of a Welsh identity within the Welsh community in Oxford was strongly linked to an ability to speak Welsh by the majority of students interviewed
- Non-Welsh speaking students were described as 'fake Welsh' or 'not quite [Welsh] enough'
- Outside the Welsh community, speaking Welsh was variously seen as pointless, antiquated and actively unhelpful
- Non-Welsh speakers recorded learning Welsh words and phrases in order to amuse non-Welsh peers - a performance of Welshness
- Most students felt their sense of national identity had strengthened since leaving home to come to university: 'I've definitely bigged up the Welsh part a bit more.'
- **Intelligence:** most students did not feel their Welsh identity had impacted their studentship either positively or negatively
- However, a small number believed their Welshness, especially speaking Welsh, had negatively impacted their academic potential, one tutor implying that 'you've put the problems in place for yourself'