



Welsh Language Preservation: Our Obligation to Transmit Our Cultural Heritage to Our Children

Sian-Azilis Evans*

* Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK. Email: sian.azilis@hotmail.com. URL: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sian-evans-5a40b7198/>

Abstract

Is it justified to take time and resources from current generations to protect minority languages? This paper builds on Jeffers' (2014) argument in favour of cultural preservation, applying it to Welsh language preservation. Cultural preservation is *desirable* because of its inherent value. However, it is unclear whether minority language preservation is our *obligation*. Based on intergenerational egalitarianism, I argue that we have an obligation to ensure parity between generations by giving future generations access to the same benefits derived from Welsh culture as their ancestors. I conclude that we should use compulsory Welsh classes in schools to secure preservation.

Keywords: Cultural Preservation; Intergenerational Justice; Welsh

1. Introduction

It is good for future persons to have access to the Welsh language and the appreciation of Welsh culture it brings, yet this costs approximately £150m per annum to preserve (Gohebydd, 2013). It is therefore unclear whether we have an obligation to facilitate such transfers to possible progeny in light of the costs incurred in the present.

This essay argues that it is obligatory to preserve a minority language when it constitutes a cultural good since cultural preservation is inherently beneficial per Jeffers (2014), and we have a responsibility to future generations to continue transferring such benefits. The Welsh language will form the central case study of this essay. I begin by outlining what characterises a minority language as a cultural good and argue its preservation is beneficial by presenting Jeffers' (2014) argument. I then argue beyond mere desirability and discuss why it would be impermissible not to preserve Welsh. Due to a history of oppression, the Welsh have a moral duty to preserve their culture via their language. Additionally, I argue that the benefits of minority language preservation outweigh the direct and opportunity costs of preservation over time and we ought to ensure parity of benefits between generations. On intergenerational egalitarian grounds it can thus be argued that future generations should

have the same access to the benefits of the Welsh language that their ancestors have enjoyed. Finally, I consider an objection to my thesis; cultural preservation for its own sake is redundant. I resolve this objection and conclude that we have an obligation to preserve a minority language using quasi-coercive measures such as compulsory language classes in schools.

2. The Benefits of Preserving Minority Languages

I take a minority language to constitute a cultural good if it is considered to have artistic, historical, social significance or facilitates the sociological web of customs, values and beliefs (Scheffer, 2007: 119). Additionally, it must belong to a nation's cultural heritage (Harrison, 2009: 9). Minority languages must be part of a nation's ancestry to be considered a cultural good. A language such as Klingon is not considered a cultural good, although it may have artistic and social significance to Star Trek fans; it does not belong to their past ancestry. Welsh and other Celtic languages were the first languages of their nations and have strong social significance for their communities; these would be examples of cultural goods.

The mere fact that something is a cultural norm does not in itself justify its need for preservation. These norms may still be imprudent or unethical. It is thus important to have an ethical threshold for all cultural practices¹ such that they are not harmful to others nor reckless. It is assumed that preserving Welsh, and other minority languages, meets the ethical threshold for moral acceptability (Jeffers, 2014: 206). This seems like a reasonable assumption given that Welsh language transmission poses no direct harm to others. Jeffers' (2014) argument to preserve cultural goods meeting this ethical threshold is reconstructed as follows:

P1. We should presume that the survival of Welsh for an extended period embodies a valuable way of living in the world.

P2. By acting to preserve the Welsh language as your culture, you are ensuring we retain the value Welsh culture embodies.

C. Therefore, you are doing something valuable by engaging in the preservation of the Welsh language. (Bright, 2020; Jeffers, 2014)

On Jeffers' view, the preservation of cultural goods is valuable as they are instruments via which we engage with our cultures and their practices. This is the case for the Welsh language; it is a cultural good *and* a vehicle to accessing other goods (classical Welsh literature, the National Anthem, Welsh folktales, and Celtic stories). I proceed to assess the soundness of the above argument by analysing each premise in turn. P2 can be defended, if speaking Welsh was not a valuable practice, people would not have fought so hard to keep it. The continued existence of the language despite its near eradication during Anglo-Saxon control, suggests that those who have engaged in its preservation, seeking to pass it on to their children, deem it a crucial part of a valuable way of living in the world and an important part of Welsh culture. P2 states that if we act to preserve our own cultural integrity, we simultaneously realise the value our own culture embodies whilst protecting diversity. If minority cultures were not preserved by their own people, then others would not be able to learn from their history and traditions. This allows others to experience a wider variety of cultures, hence contributing to diversity (Taylor, 1994). It follows that cultural preservation is

¹ See Jeffers (2014: 206) for more on the ethical standards to be met.

indeed valuable for yourself and for the benefits it brings others in the form of diversity (Jeffers, 2014: 66-72). Therefore, given the fact that minority language preservation is valuable and meets the threshold for moral acceptability, it is desirable to preserve them.

3. The Reasons it Would be Impermissible not to Preserve Minority Languages

This section moves this essay's narrative from the benefits of minority language preservation per section one, to the reasons it would be impermissible not to engage in their preservation. The reasons are twofold: first, we have a moral obligation to redress past oppression by engaging in cultural preservation (Jeffers, 2014), and second, we want future generations to have continual access to these benefits. I illustrate the former with an example by Jeffers (2014): suppose a Welsh woman living in Wales feels no inclination to connect with her cultural heritage. Jeffers argues that this person has a moral duty to engage in cultural preservation *because* her culture has had a history of oppression (2014: 214), since Wales (and other Celtic nations) were invaded by the Anglo-Saxons and oppressed by the ruling class. Individuals have an obligation towards others to counteract their past oppression by celebrating their cultural heritage and preserving their "cultural distinctness" (Jeffers, 2014: 217). Therefore, we have an obligation to preserve minority languages inherent to nations with a history of oppression. This ensures that we can begin to rectify past injustices.

A further reason to preserve the Welsh language is based on the need to ensure the continued access to benefits between generations. The preservation of Welsh entails making an intergenerational transfer; for future generations to benefit from the language (and the cultural diversity it brings, per section one), a sacrifice must be made by current generations in the form of time and resources. Indeed, for Welsh to be transmitted to our children and grandchildren *as a cultural good*, present generations must dedicate time to learning it in school. Benefits to present generations may still accrue from Welsh language preservation. They benefit by experiencing the diversity that cultural preservation entails in addition to direct benefits, such as the development of cognitive skills, and access to Welsh cultural goods.

Setting aside direct economic costs, there is an opportunity cost involved for present generations. However, today's sacrifice will not only accrue the aforementioned benefits to present generations, but also benefit an indefinite number of people. I proceed to argue that a policy preserving Welsh would lead to a net benefit over time; a benefit that future generations have a defensible claim to. The preservation of Welsh and the subsequent increased number of Welsh speakers may plausibly lead to the creation of more Welsh literature and artwork to be enjoyed, thus increasing benefits over time. Furthermore, since the Welsh language is a cultural good and a vehicle via which Welsh speakers can gain cultural appreciation, it seems wrong to deny future generations of this benefit and the cultural diversity derived therefrom, per Jeffers (2014). Given the role ancestry plays to the importance of minority languages as cultural goods, and the importance of tradition *qua* tradition – as more time elapses and the language is transmitted to more generations, the benefits derived will increase indefinitely. This will eventually surpass the *fixed costs* incurred from preservation in each time frame. Note that the *burden* is shared between generations since the process of preserving the language requires continual speakers for its survival, however the *cost* remains constant over time whereas the benefits increase with more subsequent speakers. While it may be more contentious to posit that the benefits of Welsh language preservation outweigh the costs at present, this is certainly the case over time, where all possible progeny will stand to gain perpetually.

² It is plausible to assume that the sacrifice in time and resources will not increase over time and may *decrease* as the number of speakers increases.

Based on intergenerational egalitarianism it would be unjust not to allow future generations access to the same benefits derived from the Welsh language that past and current generations have enjoyed. There is a legitimate claim of future generations vis-à-vis present generations to access their cultural heritage in the form of a minority language. This claim entails a (somewhat small) sacrifice in the choice of how to spend one's time in school. The state can therefore legitimately impose quasi-coercive measures to ensure the transmission of Welsh in the form of compulsory Welsh education and language classes. Therefore, given the claim of future generations to access the same benefits as their ancestors, it is obligatory to preserve the Welsh language.

4. Objection

One could object to my thesis: cultural participation for its own sake is problematic because we no longer truly respect a tradition once we use its existence within a culture to justify its existence (Waldron, 2000: 235). If you are authentically participating in a tradition, you are not doing this for the sake of continuing that tradition and preserving your culture. Rather, you will have personal reasons and motivations since you see it as a valuable way of living (per P1). By the time we are enforcing quasi-coercive measures to preserve Welsh for the sake of cultural preservation, we may have already lost the value of the language. If it were indeed inherently valuable, then Welsh would be passed down by each generation without the need for quasi-coercive measures.

Jeffers (2014) does not deem the motivation behind cultural preservation for the sake of cultural preservation to be problematic, nor does it render a cultural good invaluable. Living in a culturally diverse society entails preserving your own cultural heritage *because of* its cultural distinctness. Thus, on Jeffers' account, this objection is not problematic. Moreover, in the case of minority languages, their value is not lost once we have to fight for their preservation; we are merely recovering from their oppression and interruption in history. The Welsh language was banned in schools during the 19th and 20th centuries, if a child was heard speaking Welsh, they were forced to wear the 'Welsh Knot' around their neck and subjected to corporal punishment. Therefore, for some minority languages, their history of oppression has stifled organic transmission, making preservation more difficult, hence the need to enforce their preservation and aid people to realise their value using quasi-coercive measures.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that it is obligatory to preserve a minority language when it constitutes a cultural good. By drawing on the example of the Welsh language, I defended the argument that we ought to enforce quasi-coercive measures such as compulsory language classes in schools to ensure that future generations can maintain the same cultural benefits to which past and current generations have had access. I began my discussion by outlining what is beneficial about minority language and cultural preservation before arguing that we indeed have an obligation to preserve minority languages to redress past oppression and protect future generations' access to the benefits of minority languages.

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