

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### GEIRFA GRAIDD I'R GYMRAEG: CREATING AN A1 AND A2 CORE VOCABULARY FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF WELSH – A CELTIC TEMPLATE?

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#### **Abstract**

This paper looks at vocabulary resources available to adult learners of Welsh and presents a research project undertaken at Swansea University to formulate A1 and A2 level [entry level] core vocabularies for Welsh. In the absence of a suitable corpus, the methodology employed offers a successful model which could be replicated by other Celtic language communities to compile similar 'core vocabularies'. Applications for the *geirfa graidd* [core vocabulary] in the context of Welsh for adults provision are discussed.

According to Nation (2001), "When we plan the vocabulary goals of a long-term course of study, we can look at three kinds of information to help decide how much vocabulary needs to be learned: the number of words in the language, the number of words known by native speakers and the number of words needed to use the language" (p.6). In the context of most – if not all – languages the first two kinds of information present a considerable and often insurmountable challenge. However, knowing how much vocabulary a

learner needs to be able to use at different stages of the learning process has been addressed to varying degrees by all of the major state languages with their numerous corpora. The main concern of this paper is to present how basic A1 and A2<sup>1</sup> vocabularies have been formulated for adult learners of Welsh, the implications of these vocabulary lists and how the methodology could be replicated to inform similar work in the other Celtic languages.

### Vocabulary resources for adult learners of Welsh

There exists a relatively rich stock of dictionaries and vocabulary collections targeted primarily at adult learners of Welsh. Jac L. Williams' *Geiriadur dysgwyr* (1968) is an early example. In 1989, the WJEC [Welsh Joint Education Committee] list of vocabulary according to topics designed primarily for children learning Welsh as a second language at GCSE [the UK General Certificate of Secondary Education] level included approximately 2,900 items initially allocated within headings such as 'the neighbourhood', 'leisure', 'holidays' and so on and then as a composite vocabulary list. The list reflects the functional/notional approach prevalent at the time and was compiled by a working party of experienced teachers. Although not primarily aimed at adults acquiring Welsh as a second language, it nevertheless represents an early attempt to define a useful vocabulary base for a stated level (GCSE)<sup>2</sup>.

When the WJEC published its updated *Dosbarth Nos* (a Welsh for Adults course designed for learners following non-intensive courses) (WJEC, 1994a), a useful additional resource called the *Geiriadur 50 awr* (a fifty hour starter dictionary) (WJEC, 1994b\*) was already available to complement it.

<sup>1</sup> A1 and A2 levels refer to the Common European Framework of Reference [CEFR] for Languages Breakthrough [A1] and Waystage [A2] levels at Basic User – information available at <http://www.alte.org/framework/index.php>

<sup>2</sup> The authors stress (1989:3) that the list is not a 'defined list' for the GCSE examination and that it should be considered merely as a guideline.

Described as an "experimental dictionary" (1994b\*: 1), it was compiled from the vocabulary introduced in units 1-20 of *Dosbarth Nos* and in the Welsh-English section included exemplary notes on word usage, mutated versions of singular feminine nouns, relevant inflected prepositions, persons of *bod* [to be] together with the short forms of the common verbs encountered on the course. This publication was extremely popular with learners and became one of the best-selling publications available from the WJEC at the time. In general, the words included in it are mostly what one would expect to find at such a basic level. However, it is interesting and surprising, given that it is a fifty hour starter dictionary, to note the inclusion of the Welsh equivalents for the following: *freehold*, *ironmonger*, *stronghold* and *worship* which might intuitively be perceived as belonging to higher levels on the CEFR framework.

There is a comparatively good selection of more comprehensive dictionaries specifically compiled for learners of Welsh. The following are amongst the most well known and contemporary of these:

*Teach Yourself Welsh Dictionary* – Edwin C. Lewis (1992). Claiming 16,000 headwords, this was one of the first dictionaries for Welsh learners to incorporate mutated forms, e.g. *ci*, *chi*, *gi* and *nghi* are all listed separately and readers referred back to *ci* 'dog'. There is no pronunciation guide but plural forms are included (Welsh-English) as well as noun gender. The dictionary is "... a modern dictionary specifically designed for use by Welsh learners. The Welsh-English section is based on a basic vocabulary formulated to meet their particular needs. It differs significantly from the traditional type of dictionary, in as much as it also contains mutated forms of nouns, verbs, adjectives and prepositions integrated into the main alphabetical structure" (Lewis 1992: vi).

*Gair i Gall – Geiriadur sylfaenol i ddysgwyr / The Acen dictionary for Welsh learners* – Acen (1993). Although the number of headwords is not listed, it appears to be less than that for Lewis (1992). There is again no pronunciation

guide but plurals are given in both sections together with noun gender and word contexts offered. The listing of mutated items in the dictionary is very comprehensive with even h+vowel forms included. Acen is a private company involved in the teaching of Welsh to adults and this dictionary is "... aimed primarily at those learning Welsh. As well as selecting words which we believe will be of most use to learners, a number of additional features, not usually found in Welsh dictionaries, have been included: (i) mutated forms of words.... (ii) ...the stems of the verbs are also given in order that the user can form the conjugated forms... (iii) In the case of irregular verbs, all the most common personal forms are included... (iv) Comparative as well as radical forms of a good number of adjectives are given..." (Acen 1993: v).

*The Welsh Learner's Dictionary (Mini Edition)* – Heini Gruffudd (2000). The original version was published in 1998 but the mini edition merits separate mention as it is the first of its kind in Welsh designed specifically for learners. It boasts 10,000 words and phrases and includes a pronunciation guide from Welsh to English. Plurals and gender are given in both sections together with many examples of word contexts. It does not include mutated versions of items but does remind readers at the beginning of relevant sections (e.g. DD) that mutated words they might encounter beginning with Dd originate from words beginning with D and refers them back to the appropriate page/section head. The dictionary has been compiled for "...the increasing number of people who are learning Welsh or who are interested in the language. It should help learners who are learning on their own, learners in the first few years of evening classes and pupils in schools up to GCSE and beyond" (Gruffudd 2000: 5). Campbell (2000) described this dictionary (in the context of what was available in Welsh) as a "small miracle".

Although *Six Thousand Welsh Words* by Ceri Jones (1995) is not a dictionary per se its intended audience is "...the serious student of Welsh" (Jones 1995: v) as suggested by the fact that the preface is written in English. It is a

unique attempt to provide a vocabulary rather than a dictionary with fifteen sections further subdivided into a hundred and twenty vocabulary lists. In the tradition of other 'vocabulary' series, for example the Harraps/Chambers series, Jones lists from Welsh to English only, noting gender and plural forms (as well as North/South Walian varieties). Jones (1995: vi-vii) notes as his principal sources of information the main first language dictionaries of the time but as with the dictionaries for learners, no rationale is offered for the choice of items included and items rejected. 'Ball and indoor sports' under 'Sport and leisure' (Jones 1995: 73-80) includes for example the Welsh for 'to substitute', many terms from the sport of rugby but no mention of the Premier League, playoffs or the eponymous manager!

Heinz (2003: 479) notes that learners' dictionaries in Welsh are well developed. The purpose of this paper is not to be critical of collections such as these but to illustrate the difficulty in compiling comprehensive dictionaries or vocabulary lists intended for learners based on what those who produce them feel should be included rather than on a more scientific basis such as frequency or corpora.

#### The need for basic core vocabularies

Clearly in the context of the Celtic languages, it would be unreasonable to neglect this kind of work in the vague hope that one day a corpus might become available. However, certain elements of language learning within the Celtic context require attention more urgently than others. The NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research) report (2008: 48) on the intensive provision for Welsh for Adults noted a response from one of the directors of the six Welsh for Adults centres stating: "We have designed our courses on the basis of our professional experience or what we think people say. We have no evidence that we are teaching the constructions and the words which are necessary." The report notes Basic English (a simplified

English designed to aid the teaching of English as a foreign language in 1930: Ogden, 1930) and Français Fondamental (a basic list of French words and grammatical constructions designed to help the teaching of French as a foreign language in the 1950s: Gougenheim et alia, 1964) – and Buntús Gaeilge – but acknowledges that any efforts in Welsh have concentrated on children, for example the NFER [2005] *Ein Geiriau Ni* on-line corpus which includes three million words from children’s literature and of course, the Bangor corpus *Cronfa Electroneg o Gymraeg* [CEG - 2001] with just over a million words from mainly literary sources. It argues for research to inform both the structures taught and the vocabulary presented within the Welsh for Adults provision. A previous attempt at this had been made by Jones et alia [1996: 23, 105 - 134] in their recommendations for a ‘threshold level’ in Welsh within the functional/notional model. Davies [in Ball 1998: 200] saw the development of *Cymraeg Byw* (‘Living Welsh’ an attempt to bring together diverse spoken forms into a standard spoken Welsh to facilitate the learning of the language by both adults and children) as “...a response to *français fondamental* although its scope was much more limited”. However, neither of these attempted to produce a core vocabulary for adult learners of Welsh such as those available through Cambridge for English, for example, or the Goethe Institut for German.

#### Towards core A1 [Mynediad] and A2 [Sylfaen] vocabularies for Welsh

The lack of a suitable corpus in Welsh based on the vocabulary of spoken rather than written Welsh is an obvious barrier to the production of reliable and accurate vocabularies for these first two levels of achievement within the Welsh for Adults accreditation and assessment framework. A compromise methodology was needed which would result in appropriate vocabularies which could then be applied to the field in general. It was decided, under the generous direction and guidance of one of the leaders in vocabulary research,

Professor Paul Meara of the University of Swansea, to adapt the basic methodology of *français fondamental* [Gougenheim, 1964]<sup>3</sup> to a Welsh context. It is hoped that the methodology described here will be of interest to others involved with Celtic language pedagogy and may offer a possible template for similar work in the respective linguistic communities.

Within the field of Welsh for Adults, there are six administrative centres responsible for the organisation of the teaching of the language to adults within their respective geographical confines. It was decided to base the fieldwork on responses from ten experienced tutors of Welsh for Adults in each of the six centres, giving a total of sixty contributors. This would ensure not only a sufficient variety of background and experience within the field but also a mix of dialects (always an important consideration when considering vocabulary in Welsh). Using the work of Gougenheim et alia (1964) on *français fondamental* as a reference point, twenty five categories were compiled as a basis for the research with the final five (21 – 25) agreed through discussion and the active participation of the contributors. The categories are given below:

1. Parts of the body
2. Illnesses
3. Clothes
4. The home: rooms / furniture [apart from the kitchen]
5. The home: activities / machines [apart from the kitchen]
6. The kitchen / cooking
7. Eating and drinking
8. Transport / travel [but not holidays]
9. Jobs
10. The world of work
11. Going out [i.e. theatre, cinema, pub]

<sup>3</sup> *Français fondamental* consists of a core of about 1500 words at ‘first degree’ level and 1700 words at ‘second degree’. It was developed to aid the teaching of French to foreigners by creating a core vocabulary of words needed to have a command of basic ‘fundamental’ French.

12. Sports and hobbies
13. Animals
14. Family
15. The town centre [including shopping]
16. In the country
17. Holidays
18. Communications – phone, email, internet, post etc
19. The weather
20. Describing people
21. School<sup>4</sup>
22. The world of children
23. Learning a language [Metalanguage]
24. Buildings
25. 20 useful verbs

The contributors were told that they would be contacted once a week, given the topic for the week (from the list above) and asked to note the twenty words which, in their opinion and their experience, were the most essential for adult learners of Welsh at A1 level. Contributors were told that they could use nouns, adjectives or verbs but that the most important consideration for each category was to list the twenty words which they considered vital for learners to know to be able to communicate effectively at a basic (A1) level of Welsh. For example, in a list of animals, *ci* [dog] would appear fairly high on the list but *udfil* [hyena] would be unlikely to appear. A point was made of assuring contributors that dialectal forms would be welcome. The main consideration for the research was the essential nature of the words rather than variations in their production, for example *llaeth* or *llefrith* for milk.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘School’ and ‘the world of children’ were particularly important given that many learners’ prime motivation is to learn Welsh as their children attend Welsh medium schools [Morris, 2005]

Initially, contributors responded to the weekly requests via email but managing this amount of information from sixty contributors soon necessitated the use of an appropriate computer program to collate and organise the contributions according to frequency. Professor Meara facilitated this through his lognostics website and enabled the use of his V\_tools program to process the data – (see <http://www.lognostics.co.uk/geiriau/>).

When all contributors had sent their weekly submissions (the software permits verification of who has sent lists and enabled reminder emails to be sent to those who – frequently! – forgot), the program produced a frequency list of all the items under each individual category. By eradicating any singletons, a frequency list based on the number of times contributors had noted words could be produced for every category which gave an initial indication of core items under each heading.

When all the lists had been completed, all twenty five sets were merged into a single large file and an alphabetical list of all entries compiled together with a frequency list. In order to ensure that basic function words and grammatical forms such as pronouns, articles, conjunctions etc. were not missing, it was decided to use the CEG and incorporate the four hundred highest frequency items into what was now being called a ‘*geirfa graidd*’ [core vocabulary]. At this stage, the *geirfa graidd* included just over 1,900 items, clearly too many to include everything in specific A1 and A2 lists which in other languages typically contain between 500 – 800 items. The combined list was checked against the course materials currently used by the South West Wales Welsh for Adults Centre [SWWWAC] in the intensive Mynediad [A1] and Sylfaen [A2] courses and mapped against each other. The Mynediad course has a vocabulary of about 1,200 words with an additional 700 at Sylfaen level. This exercise enabled comparison between actual frequency in the responses of contributors and the level at which items appeared in the curriculum.

1	Pub	22	Beer	43	Rugby
2	Cinema	23	Watch/View	44	Beach
3	Restaurant	24	Show[n]	45	Get ready
4	Theatre	25	Wine	46	Company
5	Eat [out]	26	Get drunk [drunk]	47	Laugh [v]
6	Enjoy	27	Visit	48	Fair [n]
7	Go [for a walk etc]	28	Wear/dress [v]	49	Hall
8	Drink [v]	29	Leisure Centre	50	Swim [v]
9	Meal	30	Food [+ Italian etc]	51	Hangover
10	Friend	31	Relax	52	Swimming Pool
11	Meet	32	Museum	53	Chat [v]
12	Club[night]	33	Menu	54	Stadium
13	Dance[v/n]	34	Drink [n]	55	On my own
14	Concert	35	Ticket	56	Bowling
15	Walk[v]	36	Celebrate	57	Eisteddfod
16	Play[n]	37	Football	58	Trip
17	Socialise	38	Run [v]	59	Pint
18	Fun [have fun]	39	Exciting	60	Birthday
19	Party	40	Church	61	Weekend
20	Shopping	41	Library	62	Twmpath
21	Game	42	Noson Lawen		

Figure 1: Frequency list for category 11 – “Going Out”<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1 refers to the frequency results for the category “Going Out”. Clearly the most frequently occurring item here is *‘tafarn / pub’* and the least frequent is *‘twmpath’*. By mapping these against where they occur in the SWWWAC courses, it could be seen that the first item to appear at A2 level was 17 *‘cymdeithasu / to socialise’* followed by 33 *‘bwydlen / menu’*. This was

<sup>5</sup> *Noson lawen* is an informal night of music and entertainment – literally a ‘happy night/evening’. It can sometimes be in the form of a concert and is the title of a popular entertainment programme on S4C; *Eisteddfod* is a festival usually with a literary element and often also musical and other cultural elements. It varies from the National Eisteddfod to more localised, regional eisteddfodau; *Twmpath* in contemporary usage refers to an evening of traditional folk-dancing not unlike the *ceili*dh.

helpful – although not decisive – in marking the division in this category between A1 and A2 levels. Consideration also had to be given as to where the items appeared in the combined lists – for example, an item like *‘pen-blydd / birthday’* appears at 60 in figure 1 but also occurs in other categories and therefore has a greater overall frequency count than its position in ‘Going Out’ would suggest. Other criteria, discussed below, were also applied. As a result, all items in column one were included in A1 – apart from *‘cymdeithasu / to socialise’*. In column two, everything apart from items 41 and 42 was again in A1. Around half the items in column three [45, 48, 51, 56, 57, 58 and 62] were assigned to A2. This process ensured therefore that items were not only allocated on the basis of their frequency within a category but also – more importantly – with regard to their frequency in the combined list.

On the basis of this process, it was possible to prepare two provisional lists for A1 [768 items] and A2 [538 items] levels. One particular challenge in the context of Welsh – and clearly not solely a challenge for Welsh – was deciding on the inclusion or otherwise of borrowings from English which could be argued to be passive forms easily understood by speakers of English, for example *jar, jam, problem, fforc, bag*, etc. Even though these forms can be readily understood by speakers of English, this does not necessarily mean, of course, that adult learners of Welsh will know in advance that the Welsh word for *jar* is *jar*. Unless one is taught that *jar* [English] = *jar* [Welsh], one will be unsure as to what the Welsh word for *jar* is. Even when this is known, there could be uncertainty as to whether the noun is masculine or feminine – is a ‘big jar’ a *jar mawr* or a *jar fawr*? What is more than one jar – *jariau, jarau* or *jars*? For these reasons, the majority of these forms have been retained and a decision as to their inclusion or not and at what level, being made on the same basis as for other words in the lists.

One of the principal intended outcomes of this research was to inform and facilitate the examination and assessment of learners at A1 and A2 levels.

It was therefore necessary at this stage in the process to include members of the respective examination boards for these levels in the process of ‘fine-tuning’ the lists to ensure (i) that there would be general agreement and acceptance within the field of Welsh for Adults as to their contents; (ii) that current usage within A1 and A2 assessments could be mapped against the proposed lists; and (iii) to agree criteria when it was decided to move items to a different level. This whole process was further refined in meetings with officers from the examination team at the Welsh Joint Education Committee. There was clearly little point in conducting the research at all if at these final stages, items could be moved and switch levels according to the feelings or whims of members of the examination boards and staff. When a decision was taken to do so, therefore, it was on the basis of agreed criteria for consistency. Some of these criteria are listed below:

- Complex grammatical terms to go to B1 level. Some grammatical terms (e.g. *treigladd meddal* – soft mutation) would be retained but listed with an asterisk to show that students need to be able to recognise but not necessarily produce these terms;
- More common country names/nationalities to stay at A2 level but the rest to go to B1 level (e.g. *Ariannin* – Argentina, despite the Patagonia link);
- Farm animals, clothes, means of transport and school subjects in general to be kept at A2 level together with less common job titles and names of common languages (apart from *Cymraeg* and *Saesneg*);
- Words to be used with small children to stay at A1 level;
- In general, words which would be used to express an opinion in an elementary manner would be included at A2 level as there was little need to do so at A1 level;
- Words of a more ‘cultural’ nature such as *eisteddfod*, *twmpath* and *noson lawen*, although many learners may already have encountered

them independently from the classroom situation, are presented at A2 level.

The final A1 list was completed in August 2010 and contains 616 items (of which eleven are asterisked passive items). The final A2 list, completed a month later, contains 515 items (of which seven have asterisks). The items are listed in their standard form (i.e. standard spoken Welsh, for example *Anaf / Anafu* [to injure/hurt] rather than the more dialectal *'nafu*) and any variations are listed in the next column (*poeni / brifo*) together with possible idioms or useful collocations (*cael anaf*) in column three. The following are not included:

- Conjugated verbs, so *golchi* [to wash] but not *golchais*, *golchaf* etc.
- Inflected prepositions, so *ar* [on] but not *arno*, *arnot* etc.
- Mutated forms, so *merch* [girl] but not *ferch*.
- Names of towns: Abertawe, Llundain, Caeredin etc.
- Comparative forms of adjectives, for example *llai na* [less than].
- Responses and tags.
- A few grammatical words which would only arise within patterns, for example *piaw* or *mai/taw*.

Both the core lists include productive and passive items. In this way, it is comparatively easy to learn borrowings such as *parc*, *ffilm* or *pensil* but as stated earlier, it provides a route for learners to make the connection and to ascertain the gender and plural forms of these items. In the case of a verb which is simply formed from the noun, both are noted as one item with a slash between them:

<i>ffôn / ffonio</i>	<i>gardd / garddio</i>
[phone / to phone]	[garden / to garden, do the gardening]

However:

<i>gwaith</i> = one item	>>>	<i>gweithio</i> = separate item
[work, noun]		[work, verb]

### Applications for the *Geirfa Graidd*

The finalised A1 and A2 lists have now been available since the end of summer 2010. It has already been noted that a key reason for this research initially was to impact and inform examination and assessment in Welsh for Adults. Practical implications include a clear idea of which words can be used at A1 and A2 levels in examination materials. If an item does not appear within the appropriate list then it is reasonable to offer candidates an explanation or an English translation of that item. This decision is now made on the basis of a research-informed lexicon rather than intuitively by members of the examination boards. The lists give a lexical framework within which examination questions and assessment materials can be prepared with an expectation that all learners attempting them will be familiar with it.

Curriculum designers are now aware of the resource and are incorporating it into their work. Maintaining a close connection with local dialects is an important element of curriculum design in Welsh and the *geirfa graidd* does not militate against this. An example would be the item corresponding to 'finish' in English. It is an A1 list item and is given as the standard *gorffen*. This does not however debar the southern form *cwpla* or the western *bennu*. The lexical item is important rather than its realisation. Another consideration is that the *geirfa graidd* notes those items which are core items for their respective levels. It has already been noted that the A1 course used in SWWWAC's provision contains around 1,200 items. It is not intended that curriculum designers are limited to the 616 final A1 list items and this work does not preclude the addition of a wider, expanded lexicon. The important point is that learners would be expected to be familiar with the core items but not necessarily those items which do not form part of the core, this being particularly true in the context of assessment.

The *geirfa graidd* has been the basis of an innovative vocabulary learning resource developed by the Glamorgan Welsh for Adults Centre at the

University of Glamorgan. They have developed themed 'flash card' videos on iTunes that can be used by learners to extend their knowledge of words at A1 level and have completed work for four categories, again taken from the *geirfa graidd* categories, namely the weather, parts of the body, occupations and eating and drinking. This is a welcome additional resource for vocabulary learning which is a field which has sometimes been neglected by Welsh for Adults practitioners.

From the standpoint of practitioners involved in the teaching and promotion of other Celtic languages, the methodology and research behind the *geirfa graidd* can offer a useful template which could be adapted towards their own goals in an environment in which we are compelled to operate without the kind of extensive corpora that inform the work of languages such as English, French or German. The challenge facing teachers and learners of Celtic languages (and indeed other languages which lack adequate corpus resources) is to ensure that the vocabulary included in our courses is appropriate to the level and will equip learners to become competent speakers of the languages at that level. NFER (2005: 49) suggested recording conversations with native speakers about predetermined topics and transcribing these before analysing the patterns and the vocabulary in them. Another suggestion was to base a corpus on dialogues within fifty recent novels and plays. They acknowledge however that this could still result in a more literary / standard core vocabulary than using pure oral sources. By basing the present *geirfa graidd* on *français fondamental* and using a cross-section of experienced tutors from the field of Welsh for Adults as well as being fortunate in the willing cooperation of Professor Paul Meara, the A1 and A2 lists produced for Welsh appear to be a good compromise solution to a problem which would otherwise demand considerable resources to be solved. Indeed, when they are mapped against most of the courses which have been used with success over the years, they reflect the intuitive choice of curriculum designers

operating without such lists. The step forward for Welsh is that there is now a research-informed basis to our A1 and A2 core vocabularies – and a will to progress the work to the higher level provision.

\* The *geirfa graidd* will shortly become available on the Academi Hywel Teifi website: <http://www.swansea.ac.uk/cy/cofrestrfa/ygymraeg/popethyngymraeg/academihywelteifi/>

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