Vowel Length in Welsh Monosyllables

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Status Quo

• The number of learners normally outnumbers that of native speakers, in particular in South East Wales
• Adequate language descriptions requested
• The only standard descriptions of Welsh are GPC, a historical one, and Gramadeg y Gymraeg (P.W. Thomas 1996), both excluding phonology etc
• Learners of Welsh are faced with inadequate guidelines for its pronunciation in related reference works
• Phonetic transcription is largely absent
• Dictionary producers and other linguists of the 20th century justify this by:
  (a) Claiming that Welsh has a phonemic orthography (e.g. Bruce Griffith)
  (b) Reducing dialectal variation to “exceptions” or “easily memorable regular variation”
• As a result, any transcription attempts are inconsistent
• Pronunciation rules given and linguistic properties are contradictory, e.g. GyrA, Gweiadur etc (cf. sonorants, -ff, -th, -s, clusters), Awbrey on -ll
• Or... rules given are difficult to follow (GyrA, G. Jones 1984: 53ff.) due to their incompatible and varied nature
Transcription methods used

- Explanations in front matter of dictionaries (GyrA)
- Imitated pronunciation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>allan 'out, outside'</td>
<td>alh-an</td>
<td>allan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clywed 'to hear'</td>
<td>kluw-ed</td>
<td>kluhooed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chwech 'six'</td>
<td>chwech</td>
<td>chooech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gweithio 'to work'</td>
<td>gweyth-yoh</td>
<td>gwe-eethyo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gweld 'to see'</td>
<td>gweld</td>
<td>gooeld</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gwlyb 'wet'</td>
<td>g(w)leeb</td>
<td>goo'leeb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>llaeth 'milk'</td>
<td>lhyeth</td>
<td>llaceth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>llygad 'eye'</td>
<td>lhuhg-ad</td>
<td>lluhgad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>myfyriwr 'student'</td>
<td>muh-vurr-wir't</td>
<td>muhvuhryroor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pabell 'tent'</td>
<td>pah-belh</td>
<td>pabell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rhyw 'some'</td>
<td>rhiw</td>
<td>rhioo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ymwelydd 'visitor'</td>
<td>um-wel-idd</td>
<td>uhmoelidd</td>
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</tbody>
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⇒ (variety only within Welsh English! - what about the remaining dozens of varieties?)

- Fynes-Clinton (outdated; Northern dialect, 1913)
- IPA - Heinz (reduced lexicon; Southern dialect, 1994)
Some Conventional wisdom

• Long-short vowel distinction in the North
• Long-medium-short in the South
• Long vowels where not expected; minimal pairs
• Short vowels before clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>North Vowels</th>
<th>South Vowels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>llun 'picture’</td>
<td>llyn ‘lake’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>llinell ‘line’</td>
<td>ger ‘near’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gër ‘gear’</td>
<td>man ‘place’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mân ‘small’</td>
<td>math ‘kind’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mor ‘so’</td>
<td>môr ‘sea’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>set ‘set’</td>
<td>sêt ‘seat’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sêt sêt ‘seat’</td>
<td>tan ‘until’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tan ‘until’</td>
<td>talu ‘to pay’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tân ‘fire’</td>
<td>ton ‘wave’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tôn ‘tune’</td>
<td>set ‘set’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sêt sêt ‘seat’</td>
<td>seːt seːt ‘seat’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Minimal Pairs:
- bydd ‘3P Sg will/is’ /biːð/ byr ‘short’ /bɪr/
- bys ‘finger’ /bɪs/ pŵl ‘dull’ /puːl/
- pwll ‘pool’ /pu l/
Research approach

• Creation of database of monosyllables
• Search for minimal pairs of native words (ca 80%; problem here: semantic research still in its infancy)
  - complementary reading of Lewis, Fynes-Clinton, Heinz (+ informants)
• Assessed according to various guidelines and rules provided in secondary sources and by informants
• Result: inconsistent explanations
• Conclusion:
  (a) Welsh phonology is now either developing an overdiversification (cf. Welsh morphology of bod); which may lead to the breakdown of the system
  (b) Or traditional views on the system of pronunciation need to be questioned
• Consequence: focus on native system, excluding synsemantica
• Effects of borrowings on the native system (unstable)
Stops -b, -d, -g ... -p, -t, -c

=> Long vowels before -b, -d, -g
  • Common agreement here
  • Possible exceptions (GyrA) imposed by English loans seem unstable:
    - dad, ffad, pad, sad, led, cid, nod, rod, hwd
    - bib, cob, lob, slob, ffab, cab, dab, lab, nib, tab, wab
    - bag, ffag, gag, sbrag, slag, tag, wag, ffeg, meg, peg, wig, còg, ffog, grog, jog, hog, log, nog, slob, wog, jwg, mwg, plwg??
  => they have to be unstable by necessity, because
    (a) These loans have mostly phonetically long vowels in the source language
    (b) Some of these loans remain rather casual

=> Sources claim short vowels before -p, -t, -c
  • But there are hardly any native examples
  • English loans tend to adapt to native phonology over time:
    - côp ‘cope’ -> cob, crŵp ‘croup’ -> crwb, crâp ‘crape’ -> crab, cŵc -> cwg
    - Alternative spellings show progressive Cymricisation
    - Disturbances by English: sêt ‘seat’ - set ‘set’
Fricatives -f, -dd, -ff, -th, -ch ... s

• -f, -dd considered to have long preceding vowels
• Unambiguously substantiated by our corpus data

• But, long vowels also before -ff, -th, -ch
• Problematic from phonetic and historical points of view
  (a) Longer duration of -ff, -th differentiates them from -f, -dd (Ball 1984: 19f.)
    - This is an issue for a phonological account based on v-c complementation (Bannert 1973: 72-83)
  (b) -ff, -th, -ch develop from geminates into pre-aspirates into fricatives
    (cf. Cormac Anderson)
    - -ff, -th would be expected to take short preceding vowels
      (cf. sonorants -rr, -nn)
Contradictory statements regarding length of vowels before -s
- Short according to Schrijver (1995: 62f.)
- Long according to GyrA, with exceptions:
  - pes, bws, clôs, pàs, sws, g(i)as, ffrès, mas, was, bos, gès, ffws
- The accent grave is an orthographic reflection of the dubious status of vowels before -s (rare 20th century invention)
- or...??

Certainly a quality distinction: gwas ‘servant’ - blas ‘taste’
- ? gwas = cas ≠? câs ‘nasty’ in NW; cf. NW câs/SW cês <- Eng case


Jones suggests 11 vowels seeing quality as contrastive

Disturbances by introducing minimal pairs:
- clôs/clos - clôs <- Eng ‘close’
  (close=near; close=yard; close=dialect clothes; clause)
- pas ‘cough’ - pàs ‘pass’
Sonorants l, (ll), n, r… m, ng

- Apparent length distinction before -n and -r
- Minimal pairs:
  - gwên ‘smile’ - gwen ‘white’; dan ‘under’ - dîn ‘arse’
- Short vowels in words with Irish cognates ending in a geminate -nn, -rr:
  - pen - ceann ‘head’, ban - benn ‘(geological) summit’
  - ber ‘short’ - berr ‘cut’
- Long vowels in words with Irish cognates ending in a singleton
  - bôn ‘base’ - bun ‘foundation’; tîn - tóin ‘arse’
  - gŵr - fear ‘man’, tir - tîr ‘land’
L - LL

- Most sources describe the vowel before -ll as short except Awbery (1984: 66)
- -ll prefers preceding short vowels
- Words ending in -ll often have Irish cognates ending in a geminate: coll - coll ‘hazel’, dall - OIr dall ‘blind’, llall - OIr alaill ‘(the) other’, gall ‘foreigner’ - Gall ‘foreigner’

- Vowels before -l are generally long
- However, words with historic -lg, e.g. have a short vowel:
- Potential source of internal development of quantity distinction
- However, basically, -l and -ll act complementarily and form quite a stable system
- ng

- Few examples of native vocabulary before -m
  - *llam* ‘leap’ - *cam* ‘step’

- Expected to be short because:
  - The reduced native vocabulary tends to have Irish cognates ending in geminates (cf. -nn, -rr):
    - *cwm* - *comm* ‘valley’, *llwm/lلوم* - OIr *lomn* ‘bare’
  - Historically the singleton -m -> -μ -> -β -> -v <f>
    - This clearly has a long vowel (cf. -f)

- (English) loans with long vowels cause an imbalance to the system:
  - *bēm*, *crêm*

- Few examples of native vocabulary with final -ng
  - Take preceding short vowels
  - There are some loans, also with short vowels, e.g.:
    - *bing* ‘bin/alley’, *bwng* ‘bung’, *rheng* ‘rank’
**Conclusion**

- Apart from historic -ll, -nn, -rr (surfacing normally as -ll, -n, -r), vowels tend to be phonetically long in native monosyllables.
- Short vowels are generally found before codas which are rare in the native system, i.e. -p, -t, -c, -m, -ng
  - Mind that the latter two do not always function as sonorants (cf. Irish).
- Largely complementary system for -l - -ll, despite historical -lg.
- Length distinction before -r, -n reflects old geminate - singleton opposition.
- -s without clear pattern, minimal pairs arguable though.
- English loans may disturb the system in various, but inconsistent, i.e. unstable, ways:
  - Uncommon minimal pairs - sêt ‘seat’ - set ‘set’, clôs/clos - clôs ‘close’
  - Uncommon vowel length - bêm.
  - Eng. long vowels get sometimes borrowed into Welsh as short in contexts where long vowels are expected
    - Eng pass -> W pàs; Eng log /lɔ:g/ -> /lɒg/?? => quality.
  - Varying ways of borrowing - NW – SW: câs - cês, jwg - jyg, ba:g - bag
  - Casual nature (cf. amount of outdated Eng words in GPC)
- Good potential of Welsh system to adjust loan words over time - cŵc ’cook’ -> cwg.
- Alternative phonological analyses possible:
  (a) As to whether the quantity distinction is encoded in the consonant or in the vowel.
  (b) Vowel quality is possibly phonemic; particularly apparent before -s.
Desiderata

• Further clarification necessary by:
  - Including cluster analysis: -s for instance resembles -sg:
    - *llusg* ‘sledge’ - *gwisg* ‘dress’
    - *gwasg* ‘press’ - *mysg* ‘mixture’
    - *lles* ‘weak’ - *llosg/llysg* ‘burn(s)’
  - Effect of surrounding consonants should be examined; i.e.
    - Coda analysis may not be sufficient to explain vowel length in Welsh monosyllables
    - cf. *llall* ‘other’ - *gwall* ‘mistake’
    - or *log* ‘log’ or mutation of *llog* - *llog* ‘interest rate’
  - Or length vs quality: *tâl* ‘pay’ - *tal* ‘tall’; *gwas* ‘servant’ - *blas* ‘taste’
  - Systematic study of English loans, which may add to a potential or initiate a new quality distinction
  - More acoustic studies also needed
Anderson, Cormac, work in progress, *The Phonology of the Goidelic languages - variation, change and typology.*
Informants

Geraint Lewis
Handel Jones
Siôn Rhys Williams

Diolch i'r bobl i gyd sy'n poeni am eu hiaith!