

Rhondda Valley English Compared to Standard Southern British English, Contextualised Through Welsh

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Abstract

Rhondda Valley English is the “Wenglish” spoken in the valleys of Powys and Glamorgan, Wales. It is recognised for its “sing-song” intonation and use of Welsh loanwords. By comparing its phonological inventory and patterns to Standard Southern British English, and contextualising these differences with Welsh phonotactics, this essay aims to shed light on the dialect’s roots.

Keywords: Rhondda Valley English, Welsh, English, phonology, Wenglish, RVE, Standard Southern British English, SSBE, phonetics

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Introduction

Of going to the valleys of Powys and Glamorgan, one may find a dialect most distinctive, one that is known as Rhondda Valleys English (RVE). Known for its “sing-song” intonation¹ and distinctive code-switching, it is sometimes known as the “Valleys accent” or “Wenglish”. RVE contains phonological differences to Standard Southern British English (SSBE) that can be traced back to influence from the Welsh language, which has seen little coverage in English language dialect research, an aspect this essay hopes to illustrate. In doing so, this essay will be showcasing a phoneme inventory from Walters (1999) with intent to synthesise context from Welsh, featured in various sources.

¹ For literature on the intonation of RVE, see Walters 2003b, which covers this in detail.

Phoneme Inventory

Walters (1999), who has contributed most of the literature on this topic, compiled a consonant system for RVE, which goes as follows:

	Plosive	Affricate	Fricative	Nasal	Approximant
Bilabial	p, b			m	
Labiodental			f, v		
Dental			θ, ð		
Alveolar	t, d		s, z, ɹ	n	l
Post-Alveolar					r
Palato-Alveolar		tʃ, dʒ	ʃ, ʒ		
Palatal					j
Velar	k, g			ŋ	w
Uvular			χ		
Glottal			h		

Figure 1 - Consonant inventory of RVE (Walters, 1999).

The consonant inventory is near-identical to SSBE. One standout feature is the “tapped r” [ɹ] instead of the “bunched r” [ɹ̥], normally associated with Irish and American dialects of English; this is most visible in the prevocalic /r/, which is commonly manifested with a trill, similar to Spanish, but in this case originating in Welsh (Walters, 2001). [χ] and [ɹ̥] are Welsh-language consonants and are realised in proper nouns (e.g. placenames such as *Llangurig*, Welsh names such as *Lloyd*, etc; Walters, 2001) or during code-switching (e.g. *Cawellt* instead of wicker basket; Penhallurick, 2008) when speaking English. This is distinct from SSBE and even Cardiff English, where swapping these phonemes for [l] and [k] respectively is more common (Walters, 2001).

Analysing data from Parry (1999), Penhallurick (2008), and Morris (2017) shows that the distribution of the clear and dark /l/ in Welsh English dialects shows a north-south divide: In Anglicised areas of Wales, particularly the south, the clear /l/ [l] dominates in all positions, whereas the dark /l/ [ɫ] dominates the north (Morris, 2017). This truly means all positions: In the north, regardless of whether one is speaking English or Welsh, [ɫ] will only lighten when preceding frontal vowels (Morris, 2017). The reasons for this dichotomy between English dialects in Wales (such as those in Port Talbot, Caerfyrddin, Abercraf, and Abertawe) are complex; depending on position, particularly the coda position, /l/-darkening can be due to interference from other consonants (in other words, linguistic), sociological factors, influence from Welsh, or gender socialisation (Morris, 2017). RVE, being spoken the Rhondda Valley, will always use a

Rhondda Valley English Compared to Standard Southern British English, Contextualised Through Welsh

clear /l/. Because the Rhondda Valley is in mid Wales, an area where the dark [ɫ] is not commonly used, it is simply absent.

With respect to vowels, the inventory goes as follows (Walters, 1999):

- Six short vowels: /ɪ, ɛ, a, ɒ, ʊ, ʌ/
- Eight long vowels: /i:, e:, ɛ:, a:, ɔ:, o:, u:, ɜ:, œ:/
- Six diphthongs: /eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, ɪu, ʌu, ou/

RVE vowels differ radically from SSBE, with more rounded short vowels and an extended set of long vowels. The standout feature, however, would be the heavy preference for monophthongs. There are three unique long monophthongs in /e:, o:, ɪ:/, with /e:/ replacing the SSBE /eə/. Furthermore, the other centring diphthongs seen in SSBE, /ɪə/ and /ʊə/, are also absent (Walters, 1999). These are clearly brought upon by Welsh influence, specifically the Celtic syllable break, a phenomenon where liaison between vowels is virtually non-existent; this is because Celtic languages, particularly Welsh, are syllable-timed, making it difficult for liaison to occur (Emelianova, 2014; Gibbon and Williams, 2007; Walters, 2003b).

Moving away from stress patterns and inventories, RVE is typically marked by strong aspiration on initial consonants, particularly on the voiceless plosives /p, t, k/, where this occurs in all positions. However, this also occurs in the voiced plosives /b, d, g/ if in the initial position, resulting in words like /b^had/ <bad>, which will often be interpreted as <pad> by non-speakers (Emelianova, 2014; Walters, 2003a). This is a feature possibly directly transferred from the Welsh language (Walters, 2003a), where the same pattern can be seen in words such as *dillad* (clothes), *pen* (head), and *talw* (to pay)². Likewise, fricatives receive more forceful pronunciation, seen in /s, f, θ, ð/, also coming from Welsh (Walters, 2003a), with Welsh examples including *saeson* (Saxon), *ffeindio* (to find), *iaith* (language), and *ddim* (soft mutation of *dim*, “not”, *dd* being [ð]; see Gruffudd, 1998). As is commonly seen in other non-standard UK dialects, RVE is too a /h/-dropping language, possibly influenced by West Midlands English (Walters, 2003a). The elision of such could also, however, be an influence from Welsh, with Glamorgan dialects of Welsh lacking the /h/ phoneme entirely (Jones, 1984, p.47).

Conclusion

The phonological differences between SSBE and RVE tell a story of two very different languages shaping one another over the course of a millennia; not just the two, but the people speaking it as well. With developments such as diphthongisation and English loanwords arising over time, especially with the rise of translanguaging pedagogy in Wales, further research into RVE could

² For a Welsh dictionary, view *The Welsh Learner's Dictionary* by Heini Gruffudd, first published by Y Lolfa in 1998.

Rhondda Valley English Compared to Standard Southern British English, Contextualised Through Welsh

not only improve the paltry literature available but also provide insight into the language contact between English and Welsh, something that remains underexplored in literature.

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