7 ON PITS, PROGRESSIVES AND PROBABILITIES OF USE: MEMORIES FROM WALES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPUS-LINGUISTIC (AND HISTORICAL) RESEARCH

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Introduction

We was, we was all working in the colliery
(FRED, 87-year-old from Swansea, recorded in 1973)

This quote, taken from an interview in the Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects (FRED), can be read from several perspectives. If we focus on the content, the quote may function as a symbol of the importance of coal mining in the history of Wales. Up to some decades ago, the coal mining industry was among the biggest employers in Wales. And to the present day, the work in pits—especially in the southern Welsh Valleys—is seen as a vital part of Welsh working-class culture and identity (cf. Williams et al. 1996). If we focus on linguistic structure, the utterance contains two non-standard grammatical features: a plural pronoun combined with a singular verb form of past tense *be* ('we was', cf. Kortmann and Lunkenheimer 2013) and the non-standard habitual progressive ('was all work**ing**'). This progressive construction is used in Welsh varieties of English to mark habitual, i.e. regularly occurring, actions or events. It is employed in addition to Standard English habitual markers as *would* and *used to* (*we all used to work in the colliery*). The quote thus provides a first tiny glimpse into how oral histories can contribute to structural investigations of Welsh English. But why Welsh English and why should one explore it using oral histories?

English and Welsh, the two official languages of Wales, have been in close contact for centuries. The indigenous Welsh language developed from Brythonic, a branch of the Insular Celtic languages, between 400 and 700 CE (cf. Davies 2014: 13). The first larger-scale uses of English in Wales trace back to the Anglo-Norman invasion in the late 11th century AD (cf. Aitchison and Carter 1994: 23). Despites the presence of English, Welsh remained the majority language of Wales up to the mid to late 19th century (cf. Davies 1994: 437). The Industrial Revolution as well as measures in governmental and educational policies, however, brought about a shift to English. Nowadays, despite the dominance of English, one fifth of the Welsh population is still able to speak Welsh (cf. Williams 2014: 242). Moreover, various contact features can be found in Welsh English dialects. In addition to characteristic phonetic features such

as the monophthongs [e:] and [o:] in words like *great* [gre:t] and *road* [ro:d], Welsh English grammar also shows traces from the Celtic substrate. An example of such a grammatical feature would be the non-standard habitual progressive, which will be described in more detail below. Clearly, this variety of English has a lot to offer for e.g. dialectologists, sociolinguists and typologists. Somewhat surprisingly, however, only few studies have investigated occurrences of Welsh English features (corpus-linguistically), and even fewer studies have focused on Welsh English grammar. The paucity of studies goes hand in hand with the scarcity of—especially present-day—Welsh English corpora available to researchers. This chapter argues first that oral history interviews from Wales can fill this gap by providing data which can yield quantitative and qualitative insights into morphosyntactic variation in Welsh English. Furthermore, it is then shown how these linguistic insights may contribute to oral history research.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the non-standard habitual progressive in Welsh English is introduced and exemplified through instances from two oral history databases: the Millennium Memory Bank (MMB) and FRED. Second, a corpus-linguistic approach to MMB data is presented, centering on ascertaining what corpus frequencies can tell us about salience in Welsh English grammar. Are salient Welsh English features (as perceived by Welsh people and Londoners) more frequent in the corpus than less salient structures? The non-standard habitual progressive is used as an exemplary feature here. Third, how such a corpus-linguistic approach can yield insights for oral history research is determined. The section compares oral histories from the 1970s (FRED) with corresponding data from the 1990s (MMB) to see whether historico-cultural changes in Wales are reflected in interviewees' memories of habitual actions.

Non-Standard Habitual Progressives in Welsh English

In English, there are several ways of referring to actions or events that took or take place habitually. In the past tense, Standard English possibilities of denoting habituality include *used to* (*I used to take the bus to school every morning*), *would* (*We would go there on Sundays*) and the use of the simple past (*We were paid every fortnight*). In the present tense, the simple present is used (*She visits her grandmother on Wednesdays*). Welsh English features an additional way of referring to such repeated actions, namely by means of the progressive (cf. Paulasto 2006; Penhallurick 2008; Roller 2016). This use of BE + verb ending in -*ing* is illustrated in the following example from the Millennium Memory Bank, where an informant from Mid Wales shares her memories on growing up with several siblings under cramped housing conditions.

(1)   <Interviewer>: …where would you all sleep? Do you, were you in one bedroom or two bedrooms…?

> <Interviewee>: Yeah, like we was three girls, so we had to sleep in one room and then sort of the boys **were sleeping** in another, that's how you did it like…

In the next example, taken from the FRED corpus, an interviewee talks about his job as a dock worker in South Wales.

(2)   <Interviewee>: So I **was steering** with a man from Clydach, he was a deacon in Moriah Chapel, old (name). He was the man and I was the boy. You'd have to eat your food in the boat while travelling. There was no hours and half hours for breakfast…

It is fairly likely that non-standard habitual progressives emerged in Welsh English due to language contact with Welsh (cf. Paulasto 2006; Penhallurick 2008). In Welsh, the same present tense construction can be used for referring to events which are on-going as well as habitual events. For example, the following sentence translates to both "He goes to the cinema" and "He is going to the cinema", and thus can, but does not necessarily, denote a habitual action (cf. Brake 2004; Thomas 1997).

Mae   *e*   *'n*   *mynd* *i'r*   *sinema*
be.PRS.3SG he   ASP[1] go   to the cinema
He goes/is going to the cinema

The structure and distribution of the feature in Wales have been addressed in previous publications (e.g. Parry 1999; Paulasto 2006), and the non-standard habitual progressive is arguably a "salient" Welsh English feature among scholars. It remains unclear, however, how the feature is perceived by people from Wales (and other parts of Britain). Are speakers aware of using it? And if so, is their level of awareness connected to the feature's frequency in Welsh English? The following section approaches these questions, focusing on how and why oral history interviews from Wales can help shed light on the interplay of usage frequency and perception.

A Corpus-Linguistic Approach to Oral Histories from Wales

Introduction to the project

The research presented here formed part of my Ph.D. project and was carried out between 2012 and 2015. A central objective of the project was to identify factors that determine *salience* in Welsh English grammar. Salience in this study denoted the

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1   ASP in this example refers to the category of aspectual marker (cf. Brake 2004: 21).

degree to which linguistic features were perceived consciously by listeners, i.e. insiders from Wales and outsiders from London, and considered as "typically Welsh". One potential determinant of salience investigated in this context was frequency. It was hypothesised that features with higher frequencies of occurrence in Welsh English would be perceived more consciously (possibly due to higher levels of familiarity and entrenchment) than less frequent constructions. To test this hypothesis, the frequencies of different grammatical features in spoken Welsh English had to be determined. Oral history interviews from the Millennium Memory Bank (MMB) proved to be valuable sources for these analyses.

The Millennium Memory Bank (MMB)

The following introduction to the MMB is based on Gallwey (2013), Perks (2001) and Roller (2015), who provide detailed accounts of the database. The MMB is Europe's largest oral history archive, comprising 6 069 interviews from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, recorded between 1998 and 1999. A collaboration between the British Library and the BBC, the project aimed to "produce a 'snapshot' of Britain at the turn of the millennium" (Perks 2001: 95). Forty local BBC radio stations were involved in carrying out the interviews—with radio producers and researchers working closely—and many recordings later formed part of the radio series *The Century Speaks*.[2] The interviews circle around personal memories of growing up and living in Britain in the 20th century as well as hopes and/or beliefs for the new millennium. Sixteen topics served as guidelines for structuring the interviews: where we live, house and home, who are we, belonging, living together, crime and the law, growing up, getting older, technology, eating and drinking, money, playtime, going places, life and death, beliefs and fears, and what's next? The interviewees, 44 percent females and 56 percent males, were aged between five and 107 and had diverse occupational and educational backgrounds (e.g. college students, farmers, teachers, police officers).

As discussed by Roller (2015), the MMB has a lot to offer for (corpus-)linguistic approaches to British English. The archive involves a vast amount of spoken language in conversations that do not centre around linguistic topics. Sharing life memories and personal experiences may have led many speakers to focus on *what* they were saying rather than on *how* there were expressing themselves, probably resulting in (relatively) natural language use (cf. Anderwald and Wagner 2006: 38). Moreover, the interviewers in the Welsh section of the MMB—the section used for my research —had usually grown up in Wales themselves. According to Anderwald and Wagner (2006: 36–37), being interviewed by such "insiders" may "relax the interview situation considerably". An example of an "insider" would be Anita Morgan, who conducted many MMB

2   *The Century Speaks* comprises 640 half-hour radio documentaries. It was broadcast on local UK radio stations across Britain between September and December 1999 and, in the form of eight programs, on BBC Radio 4 in the autumn of 2000 (cf. Perks 2001: 103).

interviews in Wales. A Welshwoman herself, she spoke English with a clearly audible Welsh accent, which might have encouraged her dialogue partners to use their local dialects, too.

However, there are some challenges that need to be taken into consideration when approaching the MMB linguistically (cf. Roller 2015). Since the subjects were not selected on the basis of language-related criteria, speakers from a specific region do not necessarily speak that region's local dialect. In approaching the data, it is thus important to take a closer look at individual interviews and/or the metadata provided for all MMB recordings (available at http://cadensa.bl.uk) to learn about a speaker's linguistic background. Also, since the oral narratives focus on past events, past tense constructions (e.g. verbal inflection, temporal adverbs) are likely to outnumber present tense forms. This needs to be kept in mind when determining the usage frequencies of specific features, since they may be skewed towards past tense occurrences simply due to the text genres represented. Limitations with regard to research logistics are that the full-length MMB interviews are currently only accessible in person at the British Library in London and that most of the data have not been transcribed yet due to limited funding (cf. Perks 2001: 100).

To me it was clearly worth taking on these challenges, as the MMB appeared to be a rich source providing valuable insights into dialect morphosyntax. For my own research on Welsh English grammar, I thus transcribed nine hours of MMB interviews from Wales (during a research stay at the British Library).[3]

Data and findings

To approach the usage frequencies of the habitual progressive (and other grammatical features) in Welsh English, the total numbers of occurrence in the corpus texts were determined. As for salience, questionnaires were collected from 150 Welsh people (insiders) and 150 Londoners (outsiders). In the questionnaires, subjects had to assign a range of grammatical features to regions in the British Isles. It was then determined which features had been assigned to Wales most frequently, i.e. which were seen as most characteristic (or *salient*) of Welsh English. To find out about a potential relation between salience and frequency, the values from the questionnaires and the corpus frequencies were then compared. Generally, the data suggest a positive correlation between frequency and salience (both for insiders and outsiders), with more salient features being, on average, more prevalent in the corpus data (cf. Roller 2016). The non-standard habitual progressive covered middle ground with regard to

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3   The MMB was not the only source used for my corpus-based analyses of Welsh English. I also worked with the Welsh section of the *BBC Voices* project, which however will not be discussed in detail in the present chapter. The *BBC Voices* interviews were carried out between 2004 and 2005 all over Wales and the UK and centre around e.g. subjects' attitudes to language and local terms, but also contain general life stories and anecdotes (cf. Elmes 2013).

both salience and frequency. The feature was assigned to Wales by 27 percent of the Welsh subjects, while the most salient Welsh English feature was correctly located by 60 percent, and the least salient one by 9 percent of participants. In the corpus data, habitual progressives occurred 2.64 times per 10 000 words, as compared to 4.58 per 10,000 words for the most frequent construction and 0.15 per 10 000 words for the least frequent feature (plus, one feature from the salience questionnaire could not be found at all in the corpus).

While these data provide some insights into perceptions of average speakers, it seems necessary to take a look beyond the corpus means and salience percentages to learn about interindividual differences in salience perceptions. In my research, it was thus also determined to what extent salience ratings differ between subjects with different social and personal backgrounds. And it was found that, for example, in the group of participants from Wales, older people were considerably more likely to identify the Welsh English features. This may be connected to the fact that—with current processes of dialect levelling going on in Wales (cf. Paulasto 2006)—older speakers are more likely to still *use* the non-standard features in their speech, which becomes apparent in the MMB data. This use may result in them being more familiar with some non-standard forms than the younger generations. Also, (Welsh and London) subjects with more positive attitudes to dialectal diversity were significantly better at recognising the Welsh English features. Overall, this shows that data based on oral history can both provide general quantitative accounts of grammatical patterns in a dialect, but also point to individual speakers' experiences with language. It seems extremely worthwhile to exploit both aspects in approaching representations of language in people's minds.

From Corpus-Linguistic Analyses to Insights for Oral History

Moving away from structural-linguistic aspects of habituality and towards the content of utterances involving habitual markers can have some interesting implications for oral history research. An in-depth look at habitual actions can, for example, offer insights into daily routines and practices at different times of (remembered) history. In the following, a pilot study is presented involving a comparison of contexts of habituality in oral histories from the 1970s (FRED) with interviews from the 1990s (MMB). The aim of the pilot study is to determine to what extent societal changes and developments in Wales are reflected in Welsh people's memories of everyday practices.

FRED vs. MMB

The Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects (FRED) was consulted for the study of oral narratives from some decades ago. The corpus consists of 300 hours of oral history interviews from diverse locations. In contrast to the MMB, these interviews were col-

lected by and are stored in many different archives and museums in England, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man (cf. Hernández 2006). The majority of the FRED interviews were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s and involve non-mobile elderly rural speakers. In the MMB, the interviewees have diverse social backgrounds and the age range is large. Consequently, for the present analyses, only MMB interviews with rather non-mobile speakers aged 60 or older from rural locations were selected. The transcription conventions are identical for the two collections since I transcribed the MMB data using the FRED transcription standard.

Data analysis

For the sake of comparability, I analysed subsets of FRED and MMB transcripts totalling around 36 000 words each. It should be noted that the research presented here is just a starting point for more in-depth analyses with larger amounts of data to follow in the future. In both databases, which verbs are used in the habitual progressive form (e.g. *work* in *He was **working***) was determined. The aim was to find out about similarities and differences in daily practices in the life stories collected in the 1970s vs. the 1990s. To be able to work with more data, not only were non-standard habitual progressives analysed, but also the standard past habituals *used to*, *would* and simple past. For the MMB and the FRED data, lists with the "habitual verbs" were compiled and sorted by frequency of occurrence. Diachronic changes, i.e. changes over the course of time, were then approached by identifying those verbs that only occurred either in FRED or in the MMB. These verbs are shown in figures 1 and 2. The larger the font size, the more often the verbs appeared in the respective corpus data.

A range of words only occurring in the FRED data (cf. Figure 1) are used in the context of descriptions of working in the coalmines, such as *bind, carry, fill, hook up, line, wheel, tip, wind, peg, emery* and *weigh*. In the following example involving the verb *to wheel*, a southern Welsh speaker shares his memories of his first job in a coalfield:

(3)   <Interviewer>: What was your first job?

   <Interviewee>: Oh on the surface, wheeling ashes from the boiler and all the rest of it. Hard work. You **were wheeling** the ashes up these old planks and tipping them, you and the barrow in half the time, you got used to it you know. You would be in the truck with the barrow, and unleading small coal after, ten tonners to the boilers.

Work appears frequently in habitual constructions in both datasets; it is the second most frequent "habitual verb" in FRED and the third most frequent in the MMB. Verbs relating to work in pits, however, are much more prevalent in FRED. This may be connected to the fact that the Welsh coal mining industry, "once the biggest single

Fig. 1: Verbs used in habitual contexts in FRED but not in the MMB.

Fig. 2: Verbs used in habitual contexts in the MMB but not in FRED.

employer in Wales" (BBC 2008), experienced a steady decline in the latter decades of the 20th century. While the 1920s saw the largest number of Welshmen working in coal mines (271 000, i.e. ten percent of the Welsh population), many pits closed after WWII, probably due to the growing importance of the oil industry and overseas coal production (cf. BBC 2008). The miners' strikes of 1984/85 could not prevent southern Welsh coalfields from closing, so that only 4 000 miners and seven pits were left at the end of the decade (cf. Davies 1994: 685). "At the end of the 1980s, with more Welshmen working in banks than in pits, one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of the Welsh had closed" (Davies 1994: 685). While the subjects in my MMB sample had witnessed this change, it had not yet taken place to this extent for the FRED speakers. Born around the turn of the 19th to 20th century, they had lived through the heyday of Welsh mining and times when collieries were not only the prime employers in the area, but also constituted integral parts of everyday life in mining communities.

Apart from these dynamic aspects, the analyses of habitual constructions also point to stability in the data, i.e. to habitual practices described by speakers both in

FRED and in the MMB. The following verbs occur four times or more in habitual contexts in both datasets: *be, call, come, do, get, go, have, play, say, take, walk, work.* Not very surprisingly, some (genre-independent) stability is caused by verbs such as *be, do, have* and *say*, which are among the most frequently used verbs in English (cf. Leech et al. 2001).[4] These verbs are thus highly expectable across different text types. In addition to that, however, words such as *work, play, walk* and *call* (as in *we used to call them flower pots*) might hint at some genre-dependent stability and reflect typical and potentially timeless daily routines commonly reported in oral histories.

In a similar study with oral history recordings from Birmingham, Sealey (2009) investigated which words occur across all stories, i.e. in 144 narratives by local people with diverse backgrounds. Apart from a great deal of grammatical words, the items shared by all texts suggest "a glimmer of the 'genre' of 'life history' […]: *good, home, know, like, old, school, see, still, things, think, time, way*" (emphasis in original; Sealey 2009: 218). In addition to that, *I used to* was among the 3-word strings occurring in at least 130 texts, indicating that references to habitual actions are characteristic parts of oral histories. Overall this points to some commonality and stability in the stories' themes.

While the narratives in Sealey's (2009) work, as well as those in my study, show some similarities in topics, they are

> "nevertheless unique; each interviewee demonstrates the ever-present potential for linguistic creativity while simultaneously contributing to the collective entity that emerges as 'the discourse of life histories'. […] [E]ach interview is a record of a specific social interaction, and each interviewee interprets this in his or her own way." (Sealey 2009: 2015–17)

These interindividual differences in oral histories are also mirrored in type frequencies in the MMB and FRED data. Of all verbs in habitual constructions (153), 56 percent (87) occur only once in the speech of a single narrator. To name just a few, such verbs hinting at unique life experiences include *amuse, cuddle, dress, manicure, peel, recite* and *harmonise*, the latter being presented in context in example (4) from FRED.

(4)   <Interviewee>: Well I 'll tell you how it started. I was in the army in the First War, and marching along you know how they go, marching along and there was a lot of Lancashire boys with us and there was one of them a pretty decent singer, a pretty decent tenor, and he used to sing that old song "Thora", and I **used to harmonise** it. That was the first time I found out that I had a pretty good voice.

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4   The frequency lists provided by Leech et al. (2001) are based on the British National Corpus (BNC). The BNC includes spoken and written language samples totalling 100 million words. Most of the samples are from the 1980s and early 1990s.

In sum, these glimpses of habitual practices and routines reveal both general and much more nuanced and fine-grained aspects of remembered life in Wales. The quantitative diachronic approach points to broader historical and economical changes in Wales, reflected to some extent in the collective memories of informants who grew up at different times. But as with the linguistic approach presented in the previous section, individual stories necessarily differ from such group averages, and particular verbs may function as gateways to unique and very personal memories. In developing a richer understanding of the past, and in keeping it alive, a combination of both approaches may prove helpful, giving "the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place" (Thompson 2000: 3).

Conclusion

Using the example of Welsh English, this chapter has shown how a corpus-linguistic approach to oral history data can yield linguistic and historical insights. Non-standard habitual progressives (and other habitual markers) in Welsh English were chosen as objects of study. To explore them linguistically, a corpus of oral history interviews from the Welsh section of the Millennium Memory Bank (MMB) was compiled. The corpus frequencies of non-standard habitual progressives helped strengthen the hypothesis that the salience of Welsh English features is related to the features' frequencies in language use. Subsequently, habitual markers were analysed with regard to their meaning, i.e. the actions and events they refer to, in order to determine whether they reflect historical changes in Wales. Contrasting FRED interviews from the 1970s and MMB interviews from the 1990s, it was suggested that the downfall of the Welsh coal mining industry is mirrored in the differing topics referred to by the two groups' descriptions of habitual actions. In addition to this diachronic change, the habitual markers also point to commonalities between the older and the newer oral history interviews. Stories constructed with verbs like *work, play* and *walk* seem to constitute general common parts of oral narratives.

Both the linguistic and the content-related approach show how quantitative corpus-based studies can provide insights into *average* language use and memories, but at the same time that this is not the full (life) story. As exemplified by habitual actions only described once in FRED and the MMB, is important to move beyond these group averages and zoom in on variation to account for *individual* language use/stories. Needless to say, language use includes stories, and stories necessitate the use of language. Linguistics and oral history are per se closely linked, and the present chapter has tried to use this link to show how both disciplines can profit from each other.

Future research could explore past habituality in oral histories in more detail. Besides larger amounts of data, group differences concerning how habitual actions are remembered and shared could be analysed more closely. It would be interest-

ing to learn more about potential differences between, for example, female and male speakers and informants from different age groups. Furthermore, it might be worth investigating how body language is used to portray or underline such memories of recurrent actions. "Memories are recounted in more than words. Transcripts can indicate laughter, sobs, finger pointing, or fist shaking. But some expressions and gestures are too complex and subtle to reduce to words." (Ritchie 2014: 137) In exploring narrations of daily practices and routines, it may thus prove fruitful to go beyond the aural and include the visual as well, for example by using corpora based on videos. Such a multifaceted approach may unearth additional stories in the stories, point to patterns they have in common, but also reveal more about the unique colourings of each individual's life memory.

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