

A chance to share more than just some sounds of languages

There is a lot we don't know about African languages. But retired university lecturer **Dr Paul Tench** has seen more than most. Here, he recalls discovering distinctly Welsh sounds reverberating around the most unlikely of communities



IF you draw a line from the northernmost point of Africa to its southernmost point, and then another from the furthest west to the furthest east, the intersection would come very close to Lake Chad and the north-east corner of Nigeria. There, in the towns and villages, you will find a score of languages with Welsh "ll"s. They belong to what is known as the Chadic family of languages. And that's where I've been on my alphabet workshops.

In 2004, I worked with a group of men who spoke Tera, on the western fringe of that Chadic language area. The speakers of the neighbouring languages couldn't get their tongues around this distinctive "ll" sound, and so the Tera men were astonished that this white man with his white hair could

produce it without any difficulty.

But I was just as astonished to discover Welsh "ll"s in their language; I had absolutely no expectation of hearing a distinctly Welsh sound out there (Incidentally, they also had a North Walian "y" vowel sound).

In 2008, I was invited to another orthography workshop, where groups of people who speak local minority languages wanted to learn how to construct alphabets that suited their languages. And lo and behold, three of these languages also had Welsh "ll"s. And then last year, another workshop. I was assigned to the Glavda language, and they too have "our" sound, and so do the other six languages at that workshop. Then I learnt of a few other

languages with our Welsh "ll"s; a total of about 20 in that north-east corner of Nigeria and spreading over the northern reaches of Cameroon and across the southern plains of Chad.

Not every Chadic language has the "ll", but the total population of speakers who regularly use "ll"s - probably a couple of million - far exceeds the number who articulate "ll" in Wales.

But they don't spell it as "ll". Many of those languages need the double "ll" for the kind of long "ll" you get in Italian, to distinguish *pallo* (ball) from *pa-lo* (shovel). The most common way in that part of Nigeria is to use "tl". That would never do in Welsh because we need that combination for words like "tlws".

So, why "tl"? Now, here's a bit of phonetics for you. First, what's the difference between "t" and "d"? Place the blade of your tongue against the inside of your upper teeth and gum for both "t" and "d". Go on, try it! So where's the difference?

Well, actually, it is with the vocal cords (or vocal folds, as phoneticians call them nowadays) in your throat immediately behind your Adam's apple. With "d" they vibrate, but with "t" they don't. Technically, "d" is then "voiced" and "t" is "voiceless".

Well dear me, did I have to know all that? Well, yes. Because the main difference between Welsh "l" and "ll" is the same: the "l" is voiced, but the "ll" is voiceless - the vocal cords don't vibrate; and they are both articulated at the same place as the "t" and the "d". But there is an additional factor. The "ll" features a noisy passage of air (friction) over the sides of the tongue.

Well, yes, OK, but I still don't quite understand why you're telling me all this. Well now, the "tl" combination tells them in Nigeria that the sound has the voicelessness of the "t", but keeps its "l" quality at the same time: a voiceless "l" - which is exactly what we have in Welsh. In Tera and Glavda there is no "tl" combination of consonants; so you can use it for their voiceless "l". Pretty clever, eh?

But these languages go one step further. One difference between "l" and "ll" (or "tl") is the matter of voicing, but the other is the fricative quality of the "ll" (or "tl"). Now what if you keep that friction going and re-introduce some voicing, you get another kind of "l" - voiced and fricative. And that's precisely what Tera and Glavda manage to do as well, and so - if you work it out logically - it is spelt "dl".

That is the kind of problem

that we try to solve at an alphabet workshop. What is needed is a good knowledge of phonetics - the study of how sounds in a language are made - a good ear and bit of "lateral" thinking. But why bother?

First and foremost, because the local people ask for it, so that they can become literate in their own language. It is worth noting that in our globalised world, there is a complementary interest in localism, or localisation. And that's not necessarily contradictory. Just as everyone will shout for Wales at internationals, not everyone shouts for Cardiff Blues or Swansea City; we can be both national and local, and in the same way, we can enjoy the products of globalisation at the same time as enjoying the values of localism.

Then secondly, there are all the personal and social benefits that we enjoy in our literate culture: getting information, keeping records, writing stories and texting. You may ask why they can't do all this in those dominant languages? Because not everyone knows those languages well enough to benefit, but they all certainly know their own local language.

It can also be introduced into education, just like in Wales 50 or 60 years ago. And the benefits for the children and the ethnic groups? Here are six good reasons for using the mother tongue in primary school.

The mother tongue in early education enhances cognitive development, because it is the language of a child's thinking, understanding, knowing and learning; they learn best in the language they know best.

It has a psychological advantage in that it is the language that children are at ease in; there is no extra, special effort in attention as there is when a less familiar language is used in school.

It has social advantages too; it is the language of the informal education within the community, of communication in ordinary daily life, the language of learning social relationships and responsibilities.

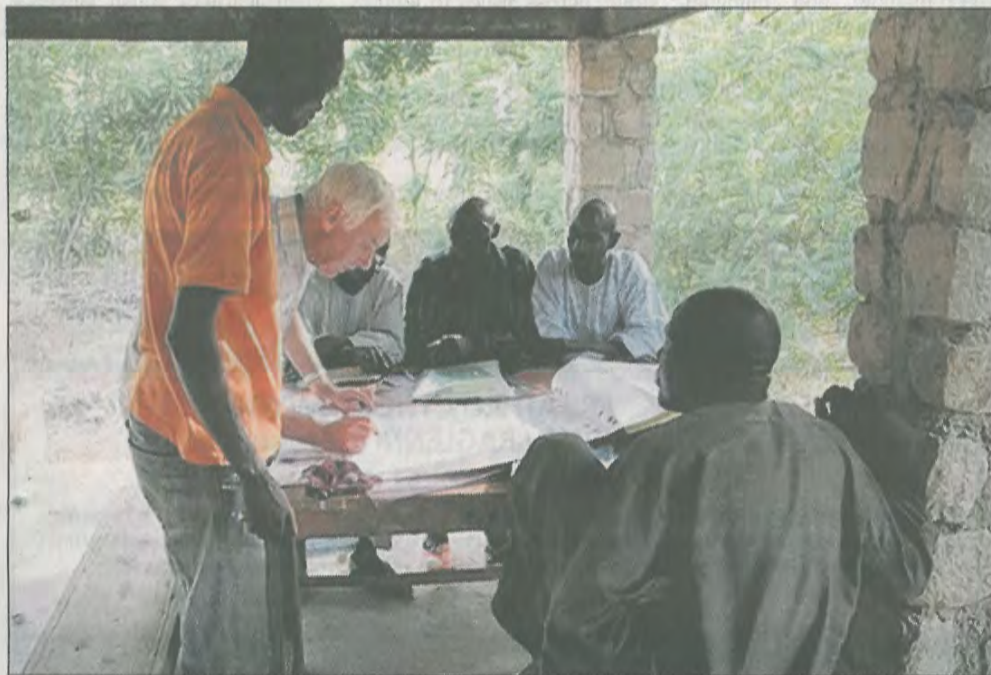
Similarly, in cultural terms, the language of identity - the sense of personal and family belonging to a community; it is the language of stories, poetry, entertainment, with their distinctive styles and forms.

There is also a national dimension to this: there is no reason why primary education should not reflect a nation's multilingual heritage; language policies can promote minority languages, as well as introduce the languages of wider communication, and all this will help to integrate minority communities into the national consciousness - otherwise resentment might set in. Look at the cohesiveness of Switzerland, with its multi-lingual policy, and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, with its centralised policy of insisting on one language only.

There is also a kind of philosophical reason for maintaining minority languages - they represent a way of observing the world with a distinctive perspective.

Can we in Wales help? Yes, we can. We have an expertise in bilingual education that is recognised around the world. Perhaps Welsh schools could link up with schools in Nigeria and share their cultural differences, on the basis that they all use Welsh "ll"s! Well, it's a thought, isn't it. Oh, they'd love it out there.

Dr Paul Tench is an associate researcher and retired lecturer at Cardiff University's Centre for Language and Communication Research. His most recent publication, *Transcribing the Sound of English*, came out last year.



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