

The (in)authentic bilingual

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Do some people qualify as ‘authentic bilingual speakers’? Possibly, but ‘bilingual’ is an idealised category, in much the same way as ‘authentic’ is. We idealise bilingualism if we think that it implies full competence in two languages, and equivalence between languages, all of which is at odds with accounts of bilingual sociolinguistic practice.

In the context of language policy and planning, for example in Wales, we see strong and explicit claims about authentic bilingualism. The planned future for Welsh is for it to function alongside English as one half of a ‘truly bilingual Wales’ – a much commented-on phrase – and as a centrepiece of national pride. This policy commitment is ambitious and in many ways laudable, making Welsh famous in sociolinguistic circles, as (it is said) a rare instance of successful minority revitalisation. But the policy also has unintended consequences, not least in promoting a view of authentic bilingualism.

I will consider the case of ‘Rhian Madamrygbi Davies’, a comedy rugby reporter on S4C (the Welsh-language TV channel in Wales), performed by actor Eirlys Bellin. Madamrygbi's persona and style are based on the projection of inauthenticity in different dimensions, and on small acts of transgression and deception. I will examine two of her televised mock interviews with rugby celebrities. I will argue that Madamrygbi playfully provides a model of post-nationalist bilingual practice that challenges established orthodoxies, while echoing some contemporary norms, especially among young urban speakers of Welsh.

That is to say that something authentic might actually emerge ‘behind’ or through the performance. Is Madamrygbi perhaps the authentically inauthentic bilingual?