

KERNEWEK / CORNISH

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Status of the lesser used language in the country

Cornish is unusual, but not unique, in that it is a revived language. It was traditionally spoken from about 600 A.D., and reached its heyday in the Middle Ages, when between 30,000 and 40,000 people spoke it. Thereafter, the social and geographical domains of Cornish retreated, until by 1800 it had ceased to be used as a means of communication.

In the twentieth century, Cornish was revived, first as a written medium, and more recently, as a modern spoken language. The revival was started by Jenner, and developed by Nance and Smith, who based their reconstruction (known as Unified Cornish) on the Cornish of the Middle Ages. The phonological details, but not the principles, of Unified Cornish were called into question by the present author, who, after studying the subject intensively, recommended that:

- (a) the grammar of Revived Cornish continue to be based on that of Middle Cornish;
- (b) a phonological base be defined approximating the pronunciation of the traditional language c.1500;
- (c) the orthography be modified so as to fit the phonological base, and form a system (now known as *Kernewek Kemmyn*) which aspires to phonemic perfection.

These recommendations were adopted in principle by the Cornish Language Board¹ in 1987. Many teachers, perceiving the advantages of *Kernewek Kemmyn*, began to teach it enthusiastically, and soon reported how much easier it made the language to learn. Most speakers have now changed to the improved system of spelling, and almost all new publications use it. A few speakers, especially those who learned Cornish many years ago, have been reluctant to change and prefer to stick to the Unified spelling. Another small group has rejected Nance's ideas altogether, and tried to reconstruct a Cornish based on the traditional language of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This fragmentation is typical of the Cornish psyche. It has given rise to the suggestion that "there are three forms of Cornish". It should not be imagined, however, that they are of equal merit, or have equal support. *Kernewek Kemmyn* is linguistically the most defensible, the one with the easiest orthography, and the one which the overwhelming majority of fluent speakers use.

Cornish has no official status, and its use in government and business is so occasional as to be newsworthy. The support given to the language movement by official bodies has increased significantly since 1988, but is still small, so that the movement has to be largely self-supporting. Central government continues to treat Cornwall as if it were part of England, instead of a Celtic nation, which causes difficulties with campaigns to increase the domains of usage, e.g. for bilingual road-signs, and for the official recognition of cheques written in Cornish.

Social and cultural dimensions of the lesser used language

During the first sixty years of its life, revived Cornish was heard mainly on ceremonial occasions: at the annual Gorsedd (gathering of bards), at midsummer bonfires, and at church services. This ceremonial aspect remains to this day, and is led mainly by non-fluent speakers, who prefer the Unified system.

In the mid-1970s, improved communications enabled many more Cornish speakers to visit other Celtic countries, particularly Wales, and to see at first hand how it is possible to live one's life using a Celtic language. People began to converse in Cornish, much more fluently than before. A few parents have been inspired to teach their children to speak Cornish from birth, the first native speakers of Cornish for 200 years. The fluent speakers, at the core of the language movement, almost without exception use *Kernewek Kemmyn*.

Although unquestionably a living language, Cornish is not a living community language. There is in Cornwall no village where Cornish is spoken by most of the people for most of the time. The increasing number of people who wish to lead their lives as far as possible in Cornish form a network rather than a community. The nearest that one can get at present to a Cornish-speaking community is the Cornish Language Weekend, held every spring since 1975, and comprising formal lessons, games, songs, walks, a religious service, a concert and Cornish dancing.

Unlike in Brittany and Wales, there is in Cornwall no reservoir of traditional Celtic speakers. One result of this is that new speakers of Cornish reach a plateau of fluency above which it is difficult to rise. The most effective way of counteracting this has been the *Yeth an Werin* 'language of the people' meetings in taverns, about eight of which are held every month.

The language movement may be regarded as part of a wider cultural movement, including the revival of traditional Cornish dancing and wrestling. Although spoken by a very small number, the language is seen in this movement as having immense symbolic significance. It was mentioned, for example, in a recent official glossy report by Cornwall Council which sought to emphasise the unity of Cornwall as an entity, in face of the threat to partition the country into three as part of the re-organisation of local government.

Position of the lesser used language in the education system

During the late 1980s, the British Government introduced a "National Curriculum" to be taught in schools in England (including Cornwall) and Wales. Although some provision was made in Wales for teaching Welsh within the National Curriculum, no such provision was made in Cornwall. The curriculum was so full that there appeared to be no way of including any Cornish dimension, but at a seminar in 1989, John King pointed out numerous ways of introducing Cornish history, geography and even language within its strict guidelines.

Nevertheless, almost all teaching of Cornish in schools takes place outside normal teaching hours, in lunch-time or after-school clubs. Cornish is taught in only a few schools (about seven at present; see Appendix A). The teachers are either Cornish speakers who happen to be members of staff, or Cornish speakers who come to the school to give unpaid lessons. The language is often presented as part of a broader scheme of Local or Historical Studies.

On its formation in 1967, the Cornish Language Board instituted a system of examinations, now in five grades (appendix B). In addition, it organises in conjunction with the Welsh Joint Examinations Council, an official examination for the General Certificate of Secondary Education. A handful of candidates take this examination every year.

The latest plans from the Department for Education will mean that the National Curriculum will occupy only 80% of the time; it is hoped that this allows Cornish to be taught in school time as part of the other 20%, with a view to entering pupils for the GCSE. Ironically, the one school intending to implement this policy is not in Cornwall; it is Devonport High School for Boys, a grammar school in Plymouth where one-third of the pupils are Cornish.

Teacher training and the lesser used language

It is quite evident that if any significant progress is to be made in promulgating Cornish, it will have to be taught as a proper school subject. Several attempts have been made to interest teachers in the language. Unfortunately, many of the head teachers are English, and do not appreciate the importance of Cornish culture. The attitude of Cornwall's Education Committee was formerly one of "favourable toleration", but in 1989, the Committee recognised the importance of Cornish in a policy statement.

More practically, they funded two residential in-service training weekends for teachers (mainly primary) who wish to introduce Cornish into their schools. These were held in 1989 and 1990, and were over-subscribed. Unfortunately, the benefits were limited, owing to the increasing demands made on teachers' time by the National Curriculum. The recession has prevented any further

such teacher-training until this year. The Cornish Language Board receives an annual grant from Cornwall Council, and this year it is intended to use part of this money to hold another teacher-training weekend in the coming autumn.

The Cornish Language Board would like to see Cornish available in school for any children who wish to learn it. The more immediate requirement is for two full-time peripatetic teachers of Cornish. We look with envy at recent developments in the Isle of Man in this respect.

Language programmes and methodologies in the school system

The place of Cornish in the school system is so tenuous and embryonic that no coherent programmes or methodologies have yet developed. In primary schools, the aims are

- (a) to make learning Cornish a highly enjoyable experience;
- (b) to get children interested so that they may return to Cornish when older.
- (c) to give children a taste of a different language at an early age.

In secondary schools, the first two of these also apply; able pupils may add Cornish to their tally of GCSE passes, but most of the work has to be done in their own time.

Materials and resources for the lesser used language

It must be appreciated that the bulk of the teaching of Cornish takes place not in schools, but in evening classes, official or otherwise. Most adult Cornish speakers have learned the language by attending such classes, coupled with private study or correspondence courses. Thus the materials and resources for the teaching of Cornish are aimed more at adults than at children.

Nevertheless, since 1979, an organisation known as *Dalleth* 'beginning' (now part of the Cornish Language Fellowship²) has been concerned with promoting the learning and use of Cornish in families. *Dalleth* has produced several books, cassettes and videotapes suitable for use in schools. The range and quantity of resources available for teaching Cornish have greatly expanded over the last few years (e.g. the Cornish Language Fellowship had 15 books and 1 tape on its sales list in 1990, and it now offers 63 books and 5 tapes). There are several cassettes of songs, some specifically for children, including one newly-produced to the highest professional standards.

There are, however, no universally used text-books, and most teachers provide their own materials in the form of pictures and games. In 1993, a workshop was held at which teachers of Cornish explained and compared their preferred approach, and the provision of a comprehensive graded language course for learners was identified as a desideratum. At present, most teachers

use *Holyewgh an Lergh* (book and tape) by Graham Sandercock for the elementary grades.

The introduction of *Kernewek Kemmyn* has necessitated the production of a new set of standard reference books, notably a new edition of *A Grammar of Modern Cornish*, by Wella Brown, and a new dictionary (*Gerlyver Kernewek Kemmyn*), of which the Cornish-English volume is on sale. A grant from the European Commission has helped finance this enterprise. The Cornish Language Board, in conjunction with the publishing house Usborne, has just produced *The First Thousand Words in Cornish*, a book with counterparts in many lesser used European languages.

The European Dimension and the lesser used language

Cornwall is an ancient region of Europe, significantly older than England, and like many other such small regions, stateless. Difficulties are encountered when trying to get the authorities to recognise it as such. The British Government refuse to recognise the Cornwall's claim for a separate Euro-constituency, made on the grounds of a separate and distinct geographic, historical and cultural identity; hitherto Cornwall has been attached to Plymouth for this purpose. Neither does Cornwall feature as a separate economic region, in the Atlantic Arc or elsewhere, despite the fact that its economy is different from adjacent parts of England. A voluntary body known as COBER (COrnish BUreau for European Relations) has been set up to raise the level of Cornish consciousness in Europe, and indeed European consciousness in Cornwall.

The language has fared rather better. It has been recognised by the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages since the establishment of that body in 1983, and merits the representation of a full member on the U.K. Committee. This has opened the doors for Cornish representation at various European conferences. We await, however, full ratification of the Charter for Lesser Used Languages by the British Government.

Conclusion

Representatives of lesser-used languages are sometimes criticised for being optimistic in a world where hundreds of languages are under threat of extinction.

Although the number of Cornish speakers is still very small³, I make no apology in this respect. After a rapid expansion in the late 1970s, and consolidation during the 1980s, it seems that the language movement is again entering a phase of growth. After recent improvements to the orthography, Cornish speakers have a language fit for the twenty-first century, and can look forward to the future with confidence.

APPENDIX A SCHOOLS WHERE CORNISH IS TAUGHT⁴

Name	Town	Level	Teacher
Heamoor	Penzance	primary	J. Gibson
	Perranporth	primary	T. Tremewan
St John's	Camborne	primary	P. Knight
Varley Lane	Liskeard	primary	A. Sandercock
	Saltash	Junior	M. Fuller
	Saltash	Infants	?
Devonport High School	Plymouth	secondary	G. Sandercock

APPENDIX B EXAMINATIONS IN CORNISH

Grade	Examining body	Level
1	Cornish Language Board	elementary
2	Cornish Language Board	similar to GCSE
GCSE	Welsh Joint Examinations Council	
3	Cornish Language Board	intermediate
4	Cornish Language Board ⁵	advanced
5	Institute of Linguists ⁶	degree

References

- George, K.J., 1986a, *The pronunciation and spelling of Revived Cornish*.
Cornish Language Board, Saltash.
- George, K.J., 1986b, "How many people spoke Cornish traditionally?" *Cornish Studies*, 14, 67-70/
- Jenner, H., 1904, *A handbook of the Cornish Language*. Nutt, London.
- Nance, R.M., 1929, *Cornish for all*. James Lanham, St. Ives.

Footnotes

- 1 The Cornish Language Board (*Kesva an Taves Kernewek*) was set up in 1967 to manage the teaching, development and control of Cornish. It is a democratically elected body, operating through five committees.
- 2 The Cornish Language Fellowship (*Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek*) is an organisation to which the bulk of the Cornish speakers and learners belong. It organises social events, and publishes books (mainly light literature), and a monthly magazine, *An Gannas*.
- 3 Everyone asks how many people speak Cornish, but in the absence of official census figures, the answer is unknown. Probably between 1000 and 2000 people have some knowledge of the language; the number of fluent speakers (those who can talk Cornish all day without undue fatigue) is between 100 and 200.
- 4 This list is not comprehensive
- 5 Successful candidates may be invited to become Bards of the Cornish Gorsedd.
- 6 To be introduced in 1995