

Cornish language

Background and history

Cornish is a Celtic language which shares its origins with Welsh and Breton. Welsh and Cornish began to diverge and become separate languages after the sixth century when the advancing English reached the Severn estuary and confined the 'west Welsh' to the south western peninsula of the British Isles. Around the same time, Celtic-speaking people from south western Britain migrated to Armorica. They established themselves as a ruling group and introduced the Celtic language to what later became Brittany. The large-scale migration of Breton craftsmen and servants to Cornwall in the later 1400s and early 1500s in search of work suggests that Breton and Cornish were still mutually intelligible in the late middle ages, although by this time some sound changes had occurred in Cornish but not in Breton.

The history of Cornish is often categorized in terms of old, middle and late phases. This prioritises linguistic changes such as those of phonology (the sounds of the language) or syntax (the way the language is constructed). Although such changes occurred at various phases of the language's history the preferred approach here is to classify its history not merely in terms of linguistic change (which tends to underplay the considerable elements of continuity). Instead we will adopt some more general phases in the usage of the language.

In this manner, we can identify five distinct periods. These were, first, a period of *hegemony* from the appearance of Cornish as a distinct language to the 1000s. Second, there was a period of *retreat*, from 1100 to the early part of the 1300s. This was followed by a period of *stabilization*, which lasted until the changes associated with the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The fourth period was one of *decline*, from around 1530 to 1800, by which time the language had ceased to be passed on from one generation to the next. The final period is from the 1870s to the present day and is the period of *revival*.

Hegemony: from the sixth century to 1100

This is the period when the vast majority of people in Cornwall spoke Cornish. This is indicated by the prevalence of Cornish place names right up to the river Tamar (though interestingly not beyond). For example the place name element *tre-* was probably used in name formation from the sixth to tenth centuries and is found all over Cornwall, with the exception of the far north beyond the River Ottery. There, Cornish place names were replaced by English names at some time before 1100. It is possible this was associated with the attacks of Wessex's King Egbert in the 810s when he was said to have 'harried' Cornwall.

Retreat: 1100 - 1330s

Cornish survived as the language of Cornwall into the period after 838 when Cornish kings and landowners began to pay tribute to the neighbouring king of Wessex. This *de facto* situation was formalised in 936 when Athelstan settled the Tamar as the border between Briton and Saxon. But at some stage after the Norman conquest in 1067 Cornish gave way to English as the dominant language of east Cornwall. This process may have occurred over much of this area as early as 1200. By 1300, after which there are sporadic references to Cornish being spoken in various places, there are only a few - and these from the 1330s - that specifically refer to the eastern Hundreds beyond Pydar and Powder. It is possible that Cornish was still spoken along the coast north of the Camel estuary after the Black Death (1349) but the evidence for its use elsewhere in the east is limited. Unfortunately, not much is known about this process or its precise details. However, it seems connected either

to the extension of the political rule of the Anglo-Norman landed elite westwards or to the economic and population growth of these centuries.

Stabilization: 1330s - 1540s

Nevertheless, the westwards extension of English was halted and the linguistic geography of Cornwall stabilized in the fourteenth century along a boundary between the Camel and the Fowey estuaries. English dominated east of that line but to its west it shared the terrain with Cornish. Indeed, it is quite possible that English-speaking towns established in west Cornwall earlier became Cornish-speaking in this period. This stabilization and even re-celticization echoes processes of Gaelic and Welsh revival in these same centuries. In the Cornish case it was reinforced by the use of Cornish by the Church in the form of religious plays designed to teach the word of God to a largely illiterate population. In Cornwall mystery plays were probably written at Glasney College, a monastic house near Penryn, from the later 1300s. Saints' plays were also composed and two survive from a later period around 1500 – *Bownans Meriasek* and *Bownans Kea*. The latter was only rediscovered a few years ago. This period therefore provides the bulk (around two thirds) of the surviving literature of Cornish.

Decline: 1540s - 1800

Unlike Wales, there seems to have been no strong tradition of secular writing and poetry in Cornwall, or at least there remains no evidence of it. This may be because the Cornish gentry had given up the language early in the medieval period in contrast to their Welsh cousins. Or, given their Anglo-Norman roots, perhaps they never possessed it. Whatever the reason, it meant that the fate of the Cornish language was strongly tied up with Church policy and, to a lesser degree, with the cultural freedom guaranteed and perpetuated by the presence of Duchy patronage and Stannary institutions. In the 1530s and 40s its nemesis arrived in the shape of the Protestant Reformation.

The over-dependence of Cornish on the church now sealed its fate. The new Protestantism frowned on religious plays and focused on people reading the word of God directly from the Bible. It was imperative for the future of any minority language therefore that the Bible be published in it and people become literate in that language. But this did not happen for Cornish. It may be that the number of Cornish-speakers, around 30,000 at its peak (compare the almost quarter of a million Welsh speakers in the 1500s), just did not provide the critical mass demand necessary to support a Cornish Bible. In addition gentry support for such a project was minimal or non-existent, especially given the association the language had with subversion and Catholicism, a reputation gained after the abortive and bloody risings of 1548 and 1549. It might be the case that there were insufficient numbers of writers with the requisite literary skills after the closure of the monasteries in the 1530s.

While the evidence of surnames in the first half of the 1500s indicates that Cornish was still spoken widely up to the Padstow-Fowey line, by the mid-seventeenth century both name evidence and the writings of visitors and locals suggest it was confined to districts west of Truro. Around 1700, when the Welsh linguist Edward Lhuyd visited Cornwall and described the language, it was restricted to a belt of coastal parishes from St Keverne on the Lizard around to St Ives on the north coast. The last generation to pass Cornish on to their children in those parishes would have lived in the first couple of generations of the eighteenth century.

Despite the desperate attempts of some local intelligentsia to save the language by writing in it and collecting examples from the 1670s onwards, Cornish died on the lips of the poor about a century later. In 1776 William Bodinar, a fisherman from

Mousehole, wrote a letter in which he stated that 'nag es moy vel pager pe pemp en dreau nye ell clappia Cornoack leben, poble coath pager egance blouth' (there are no more than four or five in our town that can talk Cornish now, old people 80 years old i.e. those learning to speak around 1700) could still converse in Cornish. Once this generation passed away so did Cornish. The last speaker was probably not the Dolly Pentreath of legend, who was in any case outlived by Bodinar, but an unknown person in an isolated spot in west Penwith who died around 1800.

Memories of the language lingered on into the nineteenth century. Some remembered how to count in Cornish, or could recite the odd phrase, but it is unlikely they had the ability to coin new sentences in Cornish.

Revival: 1870s to the present day

Yet Cornish did not die in 1800 or thereabouts. Even before its corpse was decently buried there was a move to resuscitate it and collect the fragments – Davies Gilbert for example providing a text of *Pascon agon Arluth* in 1826. In the 1850s early editions of *Netherton's Cornish Almanack* indicate a surprising level of popular interest in the language. By the 1870s some at least were trying to transform this interest into something more concrete. Henry Jenner (1848-1934), a keeper at the British Museum and a scholar of Cornish, attempted to establish a society to modernise its spelling and publish the remnants of its literature in the 1870s.

Although nothing came of this, the revival was eventually kick-started by Jenner's *Handbook of the Cornish Language*, which was published in 1904. This Cornish grammar provided the raw material for people once again to learn Cornish. It was built on by Robert Morton Nance (1873-1959). Nance invested a prodigious amount of time and energy on the language and virtually single-handedly led the revival of the inter-war period based on the 'Unified Cornish' spelling he devised. Unlike Jenner, who had sought to base Revived Cornish on its latest phase, Nance preferred to reconstruct Cornish from the more voluminous medieval texts. This also appealed to his romantic and anti-modernist tastes.

Over the half-century from the 1930s to the 1980s many hundreds, if not thousands, of Cornish people learnt some words and phrases of the old language and grappled with its paradigms and its literature. Some, indeed, became fluent enough to compose literature and poems in Revived Cornish and even to speak to each other in Cornish. By the 1980s, however, it was being argued that Unified Cornish was an insufficiently robust vehicle in which to carry forward the revival. It was pointed out that the spelling, based roughly on the late medieval Cornish scribal tradition, was not a good guide to its pronunciation. Indeed, Nance had been less concerned with the way Cornish was spoken than the way it was written, merely advising learners to speak it with a west Cornish accent. A growing number of critics were quick to point out that the combination of Middle Cornish spelling and Late Cornish pronunciation was illogical and inconsistent.

Criticism reached a head in the 1980s and led to two developments. On the one hand, Ken George claimed that he could reconstruct the phonology of Cornish from its texts and proposed a new spelling system that was apparently based more securely on the sounds of the Cornish of 1500. Another group around Dick Gendall argued that Cornish should be based on the sounds that Lhuyd had described as 'modern Cornish' in 1700 and began a project to reconstruct a revived late Cornish. The majority of the small Cornish-speaking community however opted to stick with revived Middle Cornish and adopt Ken George's 'phonemic', later renamed 'common' Cornish spelling system, although a minority resisted this and kept faith with Nance's Unified Cornish.

The tiny revivalist movement therefore split into three groups – the largest attempting to reconstruct the phonology of 1500, and two minority groups, one basing their Cornish on the later writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the other continuing with Nance's project, although later adopting some of the revisions recommended by Nicholas Williams. Almost as soon as it was adopted 'common Cornish' came under sustained attack from a number of linguists. In the face of this, its supporters closed ranks and adopted a siege mentality, viewing the criticisms not as an opportunity to debate the phonology but as an attack on the language. The resultant 'debates' around Cornish within the revivalist movement too often degenerated into vicious and unseemly name-calling and personal abuse.

Revived Cornish was however given a shot in the arm in 2003 when the language was recognised by the Government under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. This guaranteed a level of public funding, albeit miniscule when compared with some other minority language groups. Nonetheless, the demands of bureaucracy resulted in the production of a Standard Written Form in 2007 (which recognises the pluralism of Cornish by having two variants based on Revived Middle and Revived Late Cornish). This looks likely to engender a new, more positive phase, during which the interminable internecine wrangling of Cornish revivalism since the early 1980s may give way to a post-revivalist Cornish that makes the language once again part of mainstream Cornish life.

Issues/themes/narratives

- Narrative of decline and rebirth
- Why did Cornish cease to be the principal language spoken in east Cornwall before the C14th?
- When, how and why was the linguistic balance stabilised between the C14th and C16th?
- Why did Cornish die – what was the role of 1549? How far do we need to add to William Scawen's reasons for its decline?
- What was the state of popular knowledge of the language in the C19th?
- What were/are the motives driving language revivalists?

Chronologies

c.1100	Old Cornish Vocabulary
between 1000 and 1400	Loss of Cornish in east Cornwall
1300s-1500s	Cornish used in religious plays
1530s-40s	Reformation, English Prayer Book and rising of 1549
1570s	Tregear Homilies
1700	Edward Lhuyd's visit to Cornwall
1777	Death of Dolly Pentreath
1904	Jenners' <i>Handbook of the Cornish Language</i>
1938	Nance's Unified Cornish dictionary
1980s	Split in revivalist movement
2008	Single written form

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