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**THOUGHTS ON  
CORNISH TODAY**

**By  
RAY CHUBB**

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# THOUGHTS ON CORNISH TODAY

Conclusions of a study  
on recent publications  
in revived Cornish

By Ray Chubb

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## Foreword

Having read much of the literature of the early revivalists, e.g. 'Trystan hag Ysolt' by A. S. D. Smith and the writing of George Retallack Hooper (Talek), together with the work on Cornish grammar by Ray Edwards and Nicholas Williams it became obvious to me that something had gone wrong in the Cornish language revival over the last 30 years or so.

Comparing Trystan hag Ysolt, for example, with the comments of Edwards and Williams I could find only one major mistake repeated on a regular basis. That was the use of 'nefra/nevra' to mean 'never' when referring to past events.

In 2008 a Standard Written Form (SWF) for Cornish was agreed by disparate language groups for official business and teaching Cornish in schools. Agan Tavas has always maintained that the SWF, especially in its main graph form, SWF(m), is unduly biased towards one section of the language community, a section that regards borrowing freely from Welsh and Breton in revived Cornish as acceptable. It is unfortunate that in order to reach compromise with this section an unnecessary barrier, i.e. the so called 'main graphs' of the SWF, has been placed between school children learning Cornish and Cornish as it was historically written.

That, however, is how things stand at the moment. What this booklet treats on is not excessive borrowing in the agreed spelling but on the way in which excessive borrowing and invention in grammar, devising new words, etc. appears to crept into the revival over the last 30 years. Now seems a good time to review writings in revived Cornish and, one hopes, to learn some lessons from that review for the future.

The main basis for my examination has been output in either Common Cornish, a phonemic spelling adopted by the Cornish Language Board in 1987, or publications using the main graph version of the Standard Written Form. (Many of the users of the SWF in its main graph form learned Cornish through the medium of Common Cornish.) The mistakes noted here do not appear to be as common in revived Cornish either in the Unified or Late Cornish writings of the last 30 years.

It is often claimed that Common Cornish is used by the large majority of Cornish speakers. If this is the case then the problems identified in this review are serious problems and this work may be described as timely.

The examination has been divided into three sections; the first cites examples of wrong use of Cornish grammar, this often involves direct calques on English idiom, the second part examines modern coinages where such coinages appear questionable in the light of the traditional language; lastly some unnecessary coinages are cited, i.e., where the corpus of traditional Cornish provides words that are perfectly adequate.

Quotes from texts examined are in the 'main graph' form of the SWF. The 'traditional' graph form of the SWF is used for comments on the output.

### Abbreviations

- CS A.S.D. Smith, *Cornish Simplified* ( published by An Lef Kernewek and Dyllansow Truran 1981).
- CS2 A.S.D. Smith, *Cornish Simplified Part 2* (published by Dyllansow Truran).
- DK Nicholas Williams, *Desky Kernowek* (published by Evertime 2012)
- GG Nicholas Williams, *Geryow Gwir* (published by Evertime 2013).
- GM Dr Ken George, *Gerlyoer Meur* (published by Kesva an Taves Kernewek).
- GN38 Robert Morton Nance, *Cornish English Dictionary (1938)* (republished by Agan Tavas 1999).
- GW Nicholas Williams, *English Cornish Dictionary* (published by Agan Tavas 2006).
- NK Ray Edwards, *Notennow Kernewek* (published by Kesva an Taves Kernewek 2000)
- TAC Nicholas Williams, *Towards Authentic Cornish* (published by Evertime 2006)
- WRC Nicholas Williams, *Writings on Revived Cornish* (published by Evertime)



## Problem Identified

## Comments

*mar mynno* (subjunctive)

Present subjunctive used incorrectly after 'mar' in a real condition. See CS p. 57.

*yn kever* meaning 'about'.

*yn kever*' is rare in Cornish and it is used only with a possessive adjective. between 'yn' and 'kever' e.g. 'yn agan kever', 'with respect to us'. It's better Cornish to use 'tochya' or 'adro dhe', to render 'about', both are in the SWF dictionary. See GG p. 1.

*Kay Lymmaval*

This is a place name which is named after the Lemon family, it has nothing to do with the fruit. So; 'Cay Lemon'. Overzealous efforts to translate place names are common.

*yn hwir* to mean truly.

The demonstration that this usage is wrong goes back to the time of A.S.D. Smith and has been reiterated by Williams. 'Truly' in historical Cornish is always found as 'yn gwir' and means 'in truth'. As far as the examined texts are concerned, as with other points here, it is as if nothing had ever been written on this topic. See CS2 p. 31 and WRC p. 182.

*an huni ma, an huni aral* etc.

This is Breton usage transferred directly into Cornish and it is inappropriate for the revived language. See GN38 - for limited uses of 'huny'.

## Problem Identified

## Comments

*war'n 25es mis Du*

First of all it should be pointed out that 'war'n' appears to be very rare in historical Cornish and the normal form is 'war an'. That aside, this does not seem to me to be a very good way to render a date. I prefer 'dhe'n 25es mis Du'. See NK p. 85, also, comment about 'war an' can be found on the Spellyans e-mail forum.

*kyns hir* - before long.

The attested form is 'kyns na pell'.

*dyskansow blasa* - taster lessons.

We now know that 'blasa' is incorrect when the meaning is 'to taste'. See GG p. 428. That aside, the phrase is a direct calque on English. I would prefer 'sampel dyskansow'.

*keworansel, ramndirel, kresosel* etc.

The wide use of -el as a suffix appears to be a recent introduction from the users of Common Cornish. Its use for converting a noun into an adjective is rare in historical Cornish. It is better to use the suffixes -ek and -us. See comment below for 'ragdres'.

*yth eson ny ow hwansa* - we want.

Direct calque on English, I prefer; 'yma ethom dhyn', 'yma whans dhyn', 'yma bodh dhyn' but 'yth eson ny ow tesirya' would conform to historical writing.

## Problem Identified

## Comments

*A frequent use of the pluperfect tense of the verb.*

The pluperfect tense is found only in the early Cornish text *Pascon Agan Arluth*, its use in the revived language should therefore be restricted. See TAC 19.25.

*... bagasow torr mes ... (break out groups)*

Direct calque on English, I prefer ; 'bagasow diberthys'.

*gorra mes - to put out.*

Direct calque on English, I prefer; 'dyllo'.

*degys mes - brought out.*

Direct calque on English, I prefer; 'dyllys'

*... dhe gemeres le ... - to take place.*

Direct calque on English, I prefer; 'dhe brocedya/ dhe wharvos' but 'kemerer tyller' is found in Tregear.

*Over use of starting sentences with the verbal particle y/yth plus personal form of the verb.*

Except in the case of the verb 'bos' - 'to be', traditional Cornish tends to avoid introducing a verb with y/yth. It is, perhaps, this problem more than any other which covers nearly the whole spectrum of Cornish users and writers. For further clarification see DK 12a.2 note.

## 2. UNNECESSARY COINAGES

Problem Identified	Comments
<i>ragdres</i> to mean project.	This word is a borrowing from Breton, one has to ask is it really necessary? GW recommends 'keweyth' or 'project' or 'towl' or 'cussel'. The main issue over this word is that it is the only word ever used to translate 'project'. Are users of Common Cornish and SWF unaware that the rest of us just are not using it.
<i>kresosel</i> to mean medieval.	What is wrong with 'a'n osow cres'?
<i>Palas agan istori</i> (Unearthing our history)	A direct calque on English. 'disclosya agan istory' would be better
<i>ynwelians</i> to mean embedding.	It took me a while to recognise what this word was supposed to be. How would it be for students of Cornish? 'fastyans' might be better.
<i>lownyow</i> meaning, I think, practices.	I'm totally perplexed by this word, there must be a better one.
<i>dasvagans</i> to mean feedback.	This word does not appear to be in SWF dictionaries. Use 'dasliv'.
<i>denel</i> to mean human.	See earlier comment re suffix -el. 'denus' is preferable.
<i>Lergh-Lesca</i>	A direct calque on English for Trailblazing. Perhaps 'Owth avonsya' would be better.

### 3. QUESTIONABLE COINAGES

Problem Identified	Comments
<i>etholans</i> - election.	What is wrong with 'dewisyans'?
<i>henwisigeth</i> - nomination.	I prefer 'hanwans'.
<i>elethva</i>	We have in the historical texts 'paradhis' to translate paradise. See GG p. 332-33
<i>analadow</i>	We have 'ympossybyl' from Tregear and CW which is 'onpossybyl' in SWF.
<i>gwedren</i> for a piece of glass.	This can only mean a tumbler.
<i>pabel</i>	I prefer 'pavilyon', a native speaker would recognise it.
<i>moyvoy</i>	What's wrong with 'yncessya'?
<i>ober displetyel</i>	'ober displegyans'
<i>chiow</i>	The plural of 'chi' is 'treven'. See GG p. 203.
<i>traow</i>	The plural of 'tra' is 'taclow' not 'traow'. See NK p. 78.
<i>godriga</i> - to visit.	I prefer 'vysytya' which is a word that can be inferred from Tregear 11a. See NK p. 84-85
<i>posedhek</i>	Meaning obscure, use 'posytyv'.

## Problem Identified

## Comments

*diwotti*

The Cornish word for a pub is 'tavern' or 'hostlery'. 'diwotti' is an unnecessary coinage. See GG p. 348.

*amkan* - objective.

A word borrowed from Welsh and or Breton. I see nothing wrong with extending the use of Cornish 'costen'.

*Promovya*

Use 'avonsya'.

*Posek*

'pos' is already an adjective. Use 'pos' or 'a bris'.

*gluek sic*

'glew' is already an adjective.

*Predenek*  
(British)

A doubtful coinage from a place name. Use 'a Vreten Veur'.

*Neuvya*

The Cornish word meaning to swim or fly is 'neyja'. What is wrong with the concept of moving about in a medium? It was good enough for the Cornish. 'neuvya' is an unnecessary borrowing from Welsh.

*neuvella* - to float.

"a y neyj.

*tevisigyon* - adults.

From 'tevy' - to grow. An over strenuous effort to make a new word. Use 'tus a oos'.

*Yethoniethel*

Wow! What a whopper to make 'linguistic'. Use 'yethydhok' or 'a yethow.

## Problem Identified

## Comments

*arbennek* to mean special.

A useful borrowing from Welsh but does it need to be used constantly? 'specyal' from an early historical text could have been substituted on occasions.

*diswaytys* - disappointed.

The Cornish word for disappointed is 'tullys'.

*ragresegydh* - forerunner.

ragresor' is better.

*Kammbronn*

'The Cornish language name of Camborne is 'Cambron'. Attested 10 times in Bewnans Meriasek. The use of 'Kammbron' by councils can now be challenged under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities because it is not a native spelling.

*derowel* - original.

Breton and Welsh borrowings to make 'derow' + -el. GW 'gwredhek' has a much better Cornish feel to it and 'orygynal' is recorded in historical Cornish.

*ferylva* - chemist's shop.

A word tenuously formed from a possible place name derivative. Native Cornish speakers are more likely to have used GW 'apotecary'

*oll dalghus* - all embracing.

GW 'oll compassus' is based on historical text evidence.

Problem Identified	Comments
<i>basa</i> - stunning.	Do we need an extra word of dubious origin for stunning? Use 'marthus'.
<i>arhansel</i> - financial.	Use 'arhansek'.
<i>dewisel</i> - optional.	The ubiquitous -el suffix again. 'A dhewis' is preferable.
<i>unigyn</i> - individual.	The word 'person' is recorded 22 times in the historical texts. There is no need for this invention.
<i>machya</i> - to match.	We might expect to find this word in Tregear but we don't. Suggest; 'dhe vos keslynenek gans' or 'fyttya' found in Gwavas.
<i>yalgh</i> - purse.	The Cornish word for purse is 'pors', See GG p. 350.
<i>henwyn leow Kernewek</i> - Cornish place names.	'le/leow' in the Cornish texts has a very restricted use. It is more accurate to use 'tyleryow' in this context. See Spellyans forum, Daniel Prohaska in reply to Nicholas Williams 14th September 2011.
<i>denyon</i> - men.	Seen on Speak Cornish Week publicity. Even GM does not give this coinage. The plural of 'den' - man in Cornish is 'tus'. 'denyon' is an unnecessary Welsh borrowing.

## *Conclusion*

The Standard Written Form is an agreed compromise orthography for Cornish. It was an agreement on which form of Cornish spelling should be used for statutory education and public life. That agreement was heavily biased towards one part of the language movement. A part that is prepared to borrow words liberally from other languages while, at the same time, proscribing native Cornish words.

Some would argue that in order to make Cornish fit for modern life the free use of other Celtic languages and direct translation of English idiom is necessary. I hope that what I have set out here shows that it is not. Cornish is a revived language, and, unlike Manx, we have no recordings of native speakers. The historical Cornish language is the historical Cornish texts, a more than adequate source for reviving the language. We drift too far from those texts at our peril.

What the SWF agreement did not encompass was grammar and vocabulary. However, it is clear that the usages of some people with a Common Cornish background have drifted into output in the Standard Written Form. This is worrying because it means that there is a potential of passing on to school children Cornish that is less than accurate.

Although the future of our language is now firmly in the hands of Cornwall Council, it seems that they have no control over what is being taught to the next generations of students, our children and grandchildren. The majority of current teachers will be from the Common Cornish and SWF groups, who are, almost solely, guilty of the errors which I have highlighted within this booklet.

What is more, many of the mistakes noted in this booklet were committed following work on Cornish in use today by Prof. Nicholas Williams and the late Ray Edwards, an adherent of Common Cornish. It is as if they had never written anything.

Over 200 years ago the Cornish language died out because of the influx and pressure from English, and now with this large number of calques on English being employed in idioms that have perfectly useful Cornish alternatives, we are condemning Cornish to the same ultimate fate once more. We must do something positive about this matter, spelling systems are a minor issue,

when the quality of the Cornish used is, so undeniably wrong, mishandled and absolutely foreign! A first language speaker of the 1700's would have been totally nonplussed at this use of his language and he would have looked at the speaker the same way we do when we hear a foreigner trying to get his tongue around English and its idioms, and probably laughed as we do today. Is that what we want for our beloved language?

Cornwall Council now has direct responsibility for Cornish. - As part of the new structure we have a 'Cornish Language Academy', a very prestigious title. Will this new academy simply follow the practices of the so called 'majority' of Cornish speakers? If so it will not be worthy of its title. The Council itself, perhaps through the offices of the new Cornish Language Lead, will have to keep a watching brief on that academy and ensure that its output is compliant with practices recognised by the best scholars in their fields.

As for the Cornish language output of the Council itself, it is to be hoped that in the future it will be inclusive, and will recognise the practices and study of the whole of the Cornish language community and, make use of all of the source dictionaries used by that community.

It should be remembered that formerly there was a shield between the Council and the Cornish language in the shape of the Cornish Language Partnership. That shield is no longer there. The Cornwall Council electorate should be able to trust that the Cornish language output from the Council is accurate and not misleading away from the historical language. If it is seen that the Council is using invention to such an extent that its output is no longer Cornish in any real sense of the word then Cornish speakers, who elect that Council, have the right, as never before, to complain to their local councillors.

## Appendix 1

What appears to be lacking amongst a number of speakers is good Cornish idiom. The following examples are, for the most part, based on idiom found in the historical texts and, one hopes that this will help to raise the quality of spoken Cornish.

There's no point **arguing** with her.      It's nothing but **dishonesty**.  
*Ny amont resna gensi.*                      *Nyns yw ken es gowegneth.*

Not **before** time!                              My own **flesh and blood**.  
*Prys coth yw!*                                      *Ow goos nessa.*

I couldn't put the **book** down.              Set **free**.  
*Ny yllyn gorra an lyver*                      *Dylllys dhe wary.*  
*dhyworthiv.*

She had her **coat** on.                              They're not **fussy**.  
*Yth esa hy hota yn hy herhen.*              *Nyns yns i denty.*

A **cock and bull** story.                              Let's **go** without delay.  
*Istory askorn penn leugh.*                      *Gwren mos kyns es hedhy.*

He **comes across** as very sincere.              I've only **got** the one dog.  
*Ev a hevelly bos pur wiryon.*                      *Ny'm beus marnas unn ki.*

He had it **coming** to him.                              What's it **got** to do with you?  
*Gallas y wober ganso.*                              *Pandra yw henna dhiso?*

**Curse** the day I was born!  
*Soweth ow bos formyes!*                              Where ever can he have **got** to?  
*Py toll an Jawl usy ev?*

The **dice** have gone against me.              We are **grateful** to you.  
*Gallas genev hager dowl.*                              *Synsys on ni dhis.*

I'm **grieved**.  
*Yth esov vy yn awher.*

He's a **lot** like you.  
*Yma ev pur havel dhis.*

As **happy** as Larry  
*Maga fery avel hok*

I **love** you.  
*My a'th car y'm colon.*

Let's **go home** now.  
*Deun ni lemmyn wor' tu ha tre.*

I can **make** good pasties.  
*My a wor gul pastiw da.*

It's not so much a **house**, more a mansion.  
*Mansyon yw kyns es chi.*

As **many** as you need.  
*Maga lies del eus fowt dhywgh whi.*

What's your **hurry**?  
*Pandra yw an fysky genes?*

Shade of **meaning**.  
*Arliw a styr.*

**Keep an eye** on the boy.  
*Gorra with a'n maw.*  
*Mir dhe les a'n maw.*

Don't **mess** with me!  
*Ny dal dhis scornya genev vy!*

**Lack-a-day!**  
*Soweth an prys!*

What's your **name**?  
*Py hanow os?*

**Let's go** for a pint now!  
*Deun ni glybyn agan min lemmyn!*

I'm going to stick my **neck** out.  
*My a vynn omberyllya.*

**Let's have** a round of drinks.  
*Evyn pub oll adro.*

May he **never** return!  
*Byner re wrella dewheles!*

**Look out** for him.  
*Mir dh'y les.*

It's been badly **organised**.  
*Yma gwann rewl omma.*

As **long** as I live.  
*Hedre viv bew.*

I'm **out** of everything  
*Deu yw ow stoff.*

The **perfect** thing.  
*An pyth adhevis.*

This is a **sorry** business.  
*Otomma hager viaj.*

Put that in your **pipe** and smoke it!  
*Kemer henna ha toch pib ganso!*

To **speak** directly to.  
*Kewsel orth y anow.*

The rain has **quite** cleared up.  
*Gallas an glaw glan.*

I can't **speak** Welsh nor yet read it.  
*Ny womn kewsel Kembrek na byth moy y redya.*

Oh for a **rest!**  
*A, a pe dhymm powes!*

He found it **stimulating**.  
*Ev a ve movyes ganso.*

**Rough** and tumble.  
*Deray ha terovans.*

At the rising of the **sun**.  
*Orth terry an jydh.*

Forty pounds will **see** me through the week.  
*Dew-ugens peuns a wra ow synsy der an seythen.*

**Take** your shoes off please.  
*Di'sk dha eskisyow my a'th pys.*

**See** that it's done.  
*Gwayt bos gwrys yw.*

I don't **take** sugar.  
*Ny usyav shogra.*

It **serves** you right.  
*Da aqwytys os ta.*

He **takes** him off perfectly.  
*Ev a wor yn perfedh omhevelly dhodho.*

The **shirt** on his back.  
*An heves adro y geyn.*

The question **threw** me.  
*My a veu nebes ancombrys gans an qwestyon.*

He comes across as very **sincere**.  
*Ev a hevelly bos pur wiryon.*

He cleared his **throat**.  
*Ev a garthas y vriansen*

He knows a **trick** or two.  
*Ev a wor lyes wrynych.*

I don't have any **truck** with them.  
*Orta my ny'm beus negys.*

**Turn** on the tap!  
*Ygor an tap!*

**Turn** on the radio!  
*Gwra annowy an radyo!*

**Turn** off the television!  
*Gwra difudhy an pellwolok!*

Is that the **way** of it?  
*Yndella 'vydh hi?*

He **wields** enormous influence.  
*Pur vras yw y rowtyans.*

I am **willing** ...  
*Mal yw genev ...*





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