

TALK TO THE CORNISH INTERESTS MEETING 17th June, 2000

THE CORNISH LANGUAGE AND NAMES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

Dohajéth da. Hedhyu mý a vyn clappya yn-kever an Yéth Gernewek coth ha keltek.

Pyth dysquedhyans a'n Yéth Gernewek a vynnas bos gwelas war ün vysytya dhe Pow Kernow?

Good afternoon. Today I will talk about the ancient Celtic Cornish language.

What evidence of the Cornish language would be seen on a visit to Cornwall?

OK, you may be fortunate enough to attend a church service in Cornish at Truro Cathedral, or seeking out a relaxing place after a hard day's touring you may stumble upon a small group in a pub talking animatedly in Cornish.

The main contact however will of course be in names:

People names. We've talked about that before here.

And Place Names

How are Cornish place names different to English place names?

Saying "By *tre*, *pol* and *pen* shall ye know most Cornishmen"

Cornwall has noticeably different place names from neighbouring England (about 80% of place names in Cornwall are derived from the Celtic Cornish language, most of the remainder being either from English or Norman French).

These names are similar in many respects to Welsh and Breton names (Cornish, Breton and Welsh languages are closely related).

Examples:

Landevennec (Brittany) and *Landewednack* (Cornwall);

Pendine (Wales), *Pendeen* (Cornwall).

What are Cornish Place Names like?

Typically, Cornish place names start with elements such as *tre* (settlement), *pol* (pool or lake) and *pen* (hill).

Unlike English place names, Cornish ones are structured in 'reverse order' by

comparison with English place names. Therefore *Cunebris' settlement* would be **Tre** (settlement) + **Conebris** = **Tregonebris**.

Also unlike English place names, frequently the first letter of the second part is softened. Note, the change from C to G after **Tre** in the previous example. This is called lenition or a soft mutation . Soft mutations occur mostly after feminine names and things.

The following table shows common Cornish words found in place names, and the type of change that follows. Sometimes in place names the changes are 'irregular' (they do not follow the rules).

Table of Some Common Place Name Elements

A few common place name elements are provided below. These are given as a guide only

Element	Gender	Meaning	Mutation Type	Examples
Bal	M	Mine	None	Baldhu (Baldue 1748)
Bos, Bo, Bod	F	Dwelling	Soft	Bosavern (Bosavarn 1302), Botallack (Botalec 1262)
Carn	M	Hill with a rocky crown	None	Carn Brea (Carnbree 1348)
Castel	M	Castle, fort	None	Castle-an-Dinas (Castel-an-dynas 1504), Castallack (1284)
Chy	M	House, building	None	Chy-an-dour (Chyendower 1504)
Eglos	F	Church, Minster-church	Soft**	Eglos Hayle (Eglosheil 1210)
Lan	F	Churchyard enclosure	Soft	Madron Churchtown (Landythy 1616), Gulval Churchtown (Lanystly 1328)
Marhas	F	Market	Soft	Marazion (Marghasyou 1210; Marcasbyghan 1310)
Nans, Nan	M	Valley	None**	Nancladra (Nanscludri 1302; Nancledry)
Pen	F	Hill, head	Soft	Pendeen (Pendyn 1306), Penhalvean (Penhalvyhan 1319)
Pol	M	Lake, pool	None	Polbathick (Polbartheck 1365)
Pons	M	Bridge	None	Ponsanooth (Pons-an-Oeth 1521)
Porth	M	Cove, Port	None*	Porthmeor (Porthmur 1313), Mawganporth (Porthmawgan 1755)
Ros	F	Moorland, heath, promontary	Soft	Rosemullion (Rosmylian 1318), Roseworthy (Roswori 1289)
Tre	F	Settlement	Soft	Tregonetha (Tregenhetha 1341), Tremaine (Tremen 1230)

* Some words such as Porth (port or cove) and Nans (valley), can harden the first letter of the word that follows: e.g. Porthpean (Porth Bean or Little Port).

** Some words such as Eglos and Forth do not soften the first letter of the word that follows

under some circumstances as expected. E.g. Eglos Boryan (St Buryan's Church).

Descriptive Words

Cornish Word	English Equivalent	Typical Examples
Gwyn (wyn, wen, widden)	White	Porthgwidde
Du (dhu, zu)	Black	Baldhu
Glas (glaze, laze, las)	Green (old usage), Blue	Polglaze
Hyr (heere)	Long, tall	Menheere
Bean, Vean (Byghan)	Small	Porthpean
Wartha, awartha	Upper, Higher	Predannack Wartha
Woles (wollas)	Lower	Predannack Wollas
Noweth, Newth	New	Lesnewth
Coth (coath)	Old	Dolcoath
Bras (brawze)	Large, Big	Creegbrawse
Mur (meor, meere)	Great	Porthmeor

Saints and Place Names

When a place name in Cornwall starts with 'Saint', this is frequently the English form of the name. The Cornish equivalent tends not to use 'Saint'. In addition, place names using just the saint's name without 'Saint' on the front tend to commemorate Cornish saints. Examples include: Breage (Breaca), Paul (Pol-de-Leon), Germoe, Gwithian, Gwinear.

Saints names are also often found in Cornish place names with Lan and Tre (Landythy - St Ita, Lanuste - St Just, Trethewey – poss. Dewy or St David).

English Names with saints and their Cornish equivalents:

English	Cornish
Saint Austell	Austol (1150)
Saint Buryan	Eglos Boryan (Eglos Berrie 1086) Buryan's Church
Saint Dennis	Prob. Dunmelioc
Saint Enocher	Eglos Enocher (Heglosenuder 1086) Enocher's Church
Saint Erth	Lanuthno (1269) Uthnoe's Church
Saint Ives	Porth Ya (Porthia 1291) Ya's Port
Saint Just (Penwith)	Lanust (Lanuste 1396) Just's Church

Books on the Subject of Cornish Place Names

A fuller list can be obtained from the following books, which are considered to be reliable sources:

- Padel, O.J., *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place Names*, Alison Hodge, 1988, (ISBN 0-906720-15-X)
- Pool, P.A.S., *The Place-Names of West Penwith*, Penzance, 1985
- Pool, P.A.S., *The Field-Names of West Penwith*, Penzance, 1990
- Weatherhill, C., *Cornish Place Names and Language*, Sigma Books, 1995, (ISBN 1-85058-462-1)

Written and presented by: Chris Dunkerley 17th June, 2001

David Annear's

Lessons in Spoken Cornish

Lesson 1 -- Pronunciation

This is a short and approximate guide to Cornish pronunciation, which thankfully isn't as complicated as Irish Gaelic!

The lessons will be presented in the Kemmyn spelling. Bear in mind that this form is usually easiest for beginners in that, like Welsh, the letter-groups are pronounced exactly the same way in every word ... so once you have learnt the sounds of Cornish, they are easily applied to the written language. Some spellings that occur in English have many different sounds, (such as "rough, cough, bough, through, though"), but this confusion cannot occur in Cornish -- each group of letters has only one sound. Once you are familiar with these simple rules, you will be able to pronounce EVERY Cornish word that you see!

Cornish Alphabet

First, the alphabet. Cornish uses 23 letters from the Roman alphabet. There are no diacritics of any kind. The 'Ch' group is usually considered as one letter in the Kemmyn spelling -- that's because 'C' does not occur alone.

A B Ch D E F G H I J K L M N O P R S T U V W Y

Punctuation marks in written Cornish are as in English.

Pronunciation

Words are usually stressed on the penultimate syllable, the last but one. e.g. "gorthybow" (answers) is pronounced "gor-THIB-oh" Where this rule is broken (very rarely), I shall show the stress.

Letters are pronounced as in English, except for:

A as in "bat" when followed by a doubled consonant, e.g. "dannvon" (to send). More as in "father" but not quite so long when stressed, e.g. the first syllable of "bara" (bread). A neutral vowel as in "the" (not "thee") when unstressed e.g. in the second syllable of "bara" (bread).

AW to rhyme with "how", e.g. "glaw" (rain).

AY to rhyme with "by", e.g. "chayn" (chain) is not pronounced as English "chain" but rather like "chine".

C only used when followed by H. K is used for the normal "hard C" sound.

DH normally as TH in English "this" - not as in "thin".

E when followed by a doubled consonant or in an unstressed syllable, the sound is as in English "bet" e.g. "penn" (head), "tiek" (farmer). When followed by a single consonant or stressed it has the same sound but lengthened as in French "tête", "frêne". This is NOT the same as the vowel sound in English "made" or the French "E acute".

EU as in English "purr" or more accurately as in French "peur", e.g. "beudhi" (to drown).

EW approximately as in English "cow" as said in some parts of Cornwall, or more accurately as Welsh "tew". Try to say the sound of E in "bet" followed immediately by the vowel sound in "boot". Cornish people can usually make this sound more easily than English people.

EY as in English "veil", e.g. "bleydh" (wolf).

G as in English "get" (never as in "giant").

GH sounds as CH in Scottish "loch" or German "achtung". The English speaker can achieve this sound by heavily breathing an H sound, but unlike H in English, the Cornish GH comes in the middle or at the end of words and so can be slightly unnatural for the English speaker, e.g. "yeghes" (health).

I as EE in English "beet", e.g. "gwir" (true).

IW as English EW in "dew", e.g. "niwl" (mist).

O normally as the vowel sound in English "bought", but as in "pot" when followed by a doubled consonant, e.g. "lost" (tail) as in "bought", "bronn" (hill) as in "pot".

OE very approximately a cross between English "toe" and "saw". More accurately as french "eau", e.g. "boes" (food).

OU as in English "boot", e.g. "gour" (husband).

OW as in "grow" NOT as in "cow", e.g. "down" (deep).

R should ALWAYS be sounded, i.e. rolled in words like "kar" (friend).

U usually pronounced as in French "tu". It is a cross between English "ee" and "oo" and is notoriously difficult for English speakers. Sometimes used by Scottish speakers of English saying "you", e.g. "tus" (men, people).

Y when found at the end of a word or between consonants (i.e. not with another vowel) the sound is as I in "bit" e.g. "bys" (world). When followed by a vowel the sound is as in English, e.g. "redya" (to read).

YW as English EW in "dew", but not as in English "you".

Lessons in Spoken Cornish

Lesson 2 -- Greetings and Phrases



Dydh da!
Hello!
(*lit.* "good day")

Fatla genes?
How are you?
(*lit.* "how goes it with you")

Yn poynt da, meur ras.
Very well, thank you.

Ha genes jy?
And you?
(*lit.* "and with you")

Pyth yw dha hanow?
What is your name?

Peder ov, ha ty?
I'm Peter, and you?

Jori yw ow hanow vy.
My name is George.

Lowena dhis, Jori!
Goodbye, George!
(*lit.* "happiness to you")

Dyw genes, Peder!
Goodbye, Peter!
(*lit.* "God with you")



Summary of words used

da -- good
dha -- your
dhis -- to you
dydh -- day
Dyw -- God
genes -- with you
ha(g) -- and
hanow -- name
Jori -- George
lowena -- joy/happiness
meur ras -- many thanks
(thankyou)
ov -- I am

Grammatical points

- Adjectives usually follow nouns. This is opposite to English, where the adjective precedes the noun. For example, "Good Day" in English is "Dydh Da" in Cornish.
- Note that there is no Cornish word for "a" or "an", as in English "an apple", or "a woman". In Cornish, and most Celtic languages, the noun is used alone; so that "hanow" can mean "name" or "a name".
- "Ha" turns into "hag" if the initial letter of the following word is a vowel

ow -- my
Peder -- Peter
pyth? -- what?
ty -- you (singular)
yn -- in
yw -- is

following word is a vowel.

- Like many languages other than English, there are two forms for the word "you". "Genes" ("with you") and "ty" ("you") are informal terms usually used with friends and children. Slightly more formal terms, and ones used with groups of people, are "genowgh", and "hwi".

Lessons in Spoken Cornish

Lesson 3 -- Are You ...?

Affirmative Answers



Osta ser-prenn?
Are you a carpenter?
Ov! Ser-prenn ov vy.
Yes! I am a carpenter.

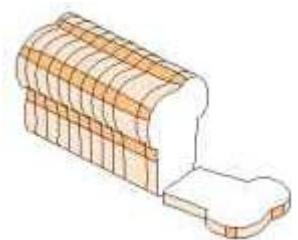


Osta yeyn?
Are you cold?
Ov, pur yeyn ov vy!
Yes, I'm very cold!



Owgh hwi glyb?
Are you wet?
On! Glyb on ni!
Yes! We're wet!

Negative Answers



Yw aval?
Is it an apple?
Nag yw! Bara yw!
No! It's bread!



Osta gwithyas-kres?
Are you a policeman?
Nag ov, tiek ov vy.
No, I'm a farmer.



Owgh hwi dewbries?
Are you a couple? **Nag on,**
teylu on!
No, we're a family!

Summary of words used

aval -- apple
bara -- bread
dewbries -- married
couple
glyb -- wet
gwithyas-kres --
policeman
hwi -- you (plural)
na(g) -- "not" (see
grammatical)
ni -- we
on -- we are
os (-ta) -- you are
(singular)
owgh -- you are
(plural)
pur -- very
ser-prenn -- carpenter
teylu -- family
tiek -- farmer
yeyn -- cold

Grammatical points

- In the sense of answering questions, there are no words for "Yes" and "No" in Cornish. The usual practice is to repeat the verb used in the question (in the relevant tense); so that the answer to "Osta lowen?" ("Are you happy?") would be either "Ov" ("I am") or "Nag ov" ("I am not").
- The verb for "you are" is really "os". The "-ta" is a suffix which emphasises the "you", and is normally used in the "are you ...?" type of question.
- Placing a verb at the beginning of a sentence turns that sentence into a question; e.g. "osta tiek?" ("are you a farmer?"), but "tiek os" ("you are a farmer").
- A verb is negated by preceding it with "na". "Na" is a verbal particle - a word which has no real meaning on its own, and is only used before a verb. Note that "na" becomes "nag" if it precedes an initial vowel; e.g. "na vydh" ("he will not be"), but "nag os" ("you are not").