

# THE DEATH AND SUBSEQUENT REVIVAL OF THE CORNISH LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

Cornish is the vernacular language of Cornwall, the most South-Western part of Great Britain. It is widely believed the language died out in the eighteenth century with the death of Dolly Pentreath, the so-called last speaker of the language. What caused the language to become extinct, and why do minority languages fall into disuse? After the subsequent Cornish language revival at the beginning of the twentieth century, what lessons can the language community learn from linguists who have researched language extinction and revival?

## I. Introduction

My a vynnsa skrifa a-dro dhe'm hwithrans yn kever mernans yethow yn ollgemyn ha mernans an yeth Gernewek yn arbennek. Yn ow breus vy yma meur a dhyskansow rag an gemeneth kernewegoryon dhe dhyski dhyworth fatel wra hedhi mernans an yethow. Des a dheffo, an moyha didheurek yw, y fo bysi dhe gewsel yethow gans an teylu y'n chi. An gwella tra, ha'n moy posek, rag an termyn a dheu dhe yethow minorityta yw aga threusperthi dhe'n henedh nessa heb falladow, ha nyns yw, herwydh konygyon yethow, da lowr gul marnas dyski yethow yn skol, po yn klassow gorthugherweyth rag tevesigyon.

Yn kynsa le, prag y ferow yethow?

Herwydh an wiasva Ethnologue, yma seyth mil yeth kans ha seytek y'n bys yn pols ma. Hwetek kansran ha peswar ugens a veu kewsys gans peder kansran dhe'n poblans, ha rag unn kwarter dhe'n yethow, yma le ages mil kowser hepken. An niver kesriv dhe gowsoryon rag pub yeth yw hwegh mil. Yethow minorityta a dheu ha bos fesyas gans yethow rann vrassa drefen an yethow rann vrassa dhe heveli moy posek. Yma lies rann yn mernans yeth. Yn kynsa le yma, dell yw usys, discernyans politek po kowethasek war-tu kowsoryon an yeth vinoryta, po dres policis sodhogel,

po dres dispresyans heb dyskans. Gwell yw gans nebes tus kewsel an yeth rann vrassa rag achesonyow politek po erbysek, ha wosa termyn hir an poblans a dhalleth dhe dhos ha bos diwyethek. Rag an nessa henedhow gwella yw kewsel an yeth rann vrassa hepken ha wortiwedh, an yeth vinoryta na veu gewsys marnas gans an dus koth. Yma elven dhidheurek moy. Pan a fleghes neb a gews yeth vinoryta dhe skol le mayth yw res dhedha kewsel ha dyski yeth rann vrassa, an teylu, mar kewsons i yeth vinoryta hepken, a dhalleth kewsel an yeth rann vrassa ynwedh. Ny yllons i gortos unyethek drefen bos poos dhyworth an flogh dhe gewsel yeth aral herwydh konygyon yethow. Awos henna, an fordh bosek rag difres yethow minorityta yw aga threusperthi dhe'n henedh nessa, ha ri kerensa rag yeth vinoryta dhe'n henedh nessa. An gwella tra a vydh an fleghes dhe dhos ha bos diwyethek.

My re studhyas istori an yeth Gernewek kyns mernans Dolly Pentreath. Pur yagh o an yeth Gernewek kyns oos Tudor. An peswardhegves ha pymthegves kansvledhynnyow o oos owrek rag an yeth, pan veu skrifys an gwariow mir an 'Ordinalia,' (*Origo Mundi, Passio Christi ha Resurrexio Domini*), ha'n bardhonek 'Pascon Agan Arluth.' Y feu dew wari bewnans sens skrifys ynwedh – dhe Veriasek ha Ke. Mes

wosa y teuth ha bos Henry VII Myghtern ev a ros orth y skodhyoryon gernewek ha kembrek oberennow yn y lys, ha gwella o ganso kewsel Sowsnek. Wosa Henry VIII dhe worfenna gans an eglos yn Rome, yth esa lies chanj yn bewnans kryjyk, ha pan dheuth ha bos y vab Edward Myghtern, an Lyver Pysadow Kemmyn a veu skrifys.

Prag na veu ev skrifys yn Kernewek? Herwydh lies den, hemm yw kaws mernans Kernewek. Herwydh Richard Polwhele, istrier kernewek dhe'n nownsegves kansvledhen, nyns o da gans nebes tus kewsel Kernewek yn pols ma. Gwella o ganso kewsel Sowsnek drefen bos Sowsnek an yeth rag negys. I a vynnas bargynnya ha negysyas y honan, na vynsons i usya trelyansow po na wrussons negys yn Pow Sows, po na ve posek yn lys Edward. Ytho, an dus ma, tus dhyworth an renkasow ughella, a leveris na vynsons an Lyver Pysadow Kemmyn yn Kernewek. Nyns esa, yn pols na, tus ow tadhla rag an Lyver Pysadow Kemmyn, po an Bibel dhe vos skrifys yn Kernewek.

An lyver a veu komendys yn Sowsnek. Kales o rag an yeth. Yn kynsa le, nyns o pes lowen an dus kernewek kemmyn, ha moy ages pypm mil Kernowyon a veu ladhys hag i dhe rebellya yn Karesk. Nyns esa gwrythow dhe'n gwariow mir na fella drefen i dhe vos kowethyas gans an eglos Katholik. Herwydh an eglos nowydh, an eglos Sowsnek, an dus kemmyn a ylli keskomunya gans Duw lemmyn, ha redya an Bibel aga honan, ytho nyns esa edhom ragdha dhe dhyski hwedhlow Bibel dres an gwariow. Y'n vledhen 1560 yth esa govenek dhyworth bagas Puritan neb a wovynnas orth Myghternes Elizabeth. I a vynnas fleghes kernewek po kembrek dhe allos dyski an Deg Arghadow ha Pader agan Arlodh yn aga yeth aga honan. Nyns esa Elizabeth hy honan erbynn an yethow dell hevel, mes nyns esa sewena dhe'n govenek. Magata dell hemma, yth esa

edhom dhe'n glorogyon kewsel Kernewek hwath y'n seytegves kansvledhen. Dres an Kas an Pypm Pobel res o dhe William Jackman, pronter Lannfiek, ri Komun Sans yn Kastel Penndenis yn Kernewek rag an dus ena.

Y'n seytegves kansvledhen y feu skrifys gwari moy gans William Jordan dhyworth Hellys. *Gwreans an bys* yw problemek. Orth an myns, tus a dyb Jordan dhe skrifa dasskrif dhe *Origo Mundi* dhyworth an *Ordinalia*. An hwedhel yw haval, yma kampil dhe limbo, tybyans Katholik, ytho dhyworth an termyn kyns chanjyow kryjyk. Yma lies ger yn Sowsnek dres oll an gwari ynwedh. Yw *Gwreans an bys* dasskrif dhe *Origo Mundi*, po yw ev gwari nowydh? Jordan a skrif lies ger kernewek yn maner sowsnek, gans lytheren 'e' moy orth penn an ger. Ev a skrif nebes ger yn Sowsnek ynwedh, ha yn despit war skians ha devnydh dhe unn ger yn Kernewek (guw), ev a'n skrif yn Sowsnek ynwedh nebes linen diwettha. Ev a skrif *commandment* yn maner kernewek gans medhelheans, mes yma ger Kernewek: *arghadow*. Yn ow breus vy, *Gwreans an bys* a veu skrifys yn termyn pan gewsi an dus unn yeth kemyskys yntra Kernewek ha Sowsnek, pan esens i diwyethek.

Dres an etegves kansvledhen y teuth ha bos Kernewek yeth vinoryta. Yth esa gwer neb a vynnas sawya an yeth, Edward Lhuyd ha William Gwavas rag ensampel. I a guntelas temmyn an yeth war-barth, mes ny gowssons i gans tus kemmyn, an dus neb a, martesen, gewsi Kernewek hwath y'n termyn na. Yn kres an etegves kansvledhen y viajya den, Daines Barrington y hanow, yn Kernow west. Ev a vynna kavos tus neb a wodhya kewsel Kernewek. Ev eth dhe Borth Enys, le may ev a vetyas gans Dolly Pentreath. Hi a gewsis orto yn Kernewek, mes yth esa diw venyn ynwedh neb a ylli hy honvedhes.

Herwydh Dolly Pentreath, hy honan, hi o an diwettha kowser an yeth Gernewek y'n pols na. Dolly Pentreath a verwis mis Kevardhu 1777. An yeth Sowsnek a dheuth ha bos usys a-derdro yn Kernow ha war-tu penn etegves kansvledhen nyns o an yeth Gernewek kewsys na hwath dell hevel. Mes nyns o mernans Kernewek mater sempel. Yth esa lies acheson prag y hwrug tus chanjya dhe gewsel Sowsnek: delanwes an governans ha tus dhyworth renkasow ughella, chanjyow kryjyk hag ynkressyans dhe dus ow viajya a-derdro an pow.

Dres an nownsegves kansvledhen yth esa tevyans kenedlegieth Geltek, gans Kernowyon ynwedh kachys ynni. Henry Jenner, Kernow neb a oberas yn Gwitthi Bretennek, ha'n Revrond Lach-Syzrma a dhallathas tornya Kernow west, rag kuntel py temmyn an yeth Kernewek y kavsens. Jenner a bresentyas an temmyn ma yn areth dhe'n Kowethas Hendhyskoniethel Bretennek yn 1876. Bys dalleth an ugensves kansvledhen, y hwilas Jenner kowlwul eseleth Gernow dhe'n Kuntelles Keltek, byttegyns an lett dhe eseleth o an vreus dhyworth an kenedhlow keltek erel an yeth Kernewek dhe vos marow. An *Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak* a oberas ynwedh rag provia nyns o an yeth marow, hag i a wovynas orth Jenner dhe askorra gramer rag gweres dallethoryon. Y *Handbook of the Cornish Language* (1904) a dhallethas dasserghyans an yeth.

Wosa dasserghyans Kernewek y'n ugensves kansvledhen yma, lemmyn, bagas brassa dhe dus ow tyski Kernewek. Mes nyns yw an yeth salow lowr na hwath. Yn hwir, res yw dhyn komprehendya elvennow politek hag erbysek magata dell adhyskansek ynwedh rag skoodhya Kernewek, hag rag hemma, yma edhom dhe'n skoodhyans pobel, ha dh'aga ri perghenogeth dhe'n yeth. Fatel wra gul

henna? Mar kalsen ni omvyska an gemeneth – mar kallons i skrifa lyvrow, paperyow nowodhow po gwiasvaow rag ensampel y fia perghenogeth aga yeth dhedha hag an yeth a allo kavos talvosgeth rygdhi.

An gwettha kudyn byth moy pan vynnyn ni dasserghi yeth yw kavos dyskatoryon hag asnodhow lowr. Nyns yw gerlyver ha yethador da lowr na fella. Yma edhom dhe adhyskans divers rag dastewynna fatel o an yeth, mes rag hy gwitha ha'y displegya ynwedh. Mes, yma edhom dhyn dhe dhyskansow ha lyvrow arnowydh rag dyski an yeth. Fatel wra dyski yethow a chanjyas dres an ugensves kansvledhen. Lemmyn, gans gweres jynnow-amontya ni a yll dyski war agan klappkodhow, po warlinen, po yn klassow, ha gwella yw gul devnydh a'n asnodhow ma, rag tus yowynk yn arbennek. Magata dell henna, res yw dhyn kavos dyskatoryon neb a yll dyski an yeth yn gisyow arnowydh ynwedh, nyns yw da lowr redya dyskans yn ughel hepken avel yn kres an ugensves kansvledhen. An dus a dhysk yn manerow diffrans orth an eyl y gila: po dre redya, po goslowes, po mires orth imajys, po dres skrifa aga honan. Yn an gwella dyskansow yma pub eghen dhe vaner dhyski rag skoodhya pub eghen dhe studhyer.

Rag dasserghyans yethow yma edhom a skoodhyans dhyworth an gemeneth yeth.

Yn kynsa le, res yw an gemeneth gul towlennans ha delivra ober, a-wosa henna y hyllons demondya skoodhyans dhyworth rannvro po an wlas. Yn gwlasow gans policis rag yethow minorityta yth yw esya kavos arghasans. Reythyow yeth a yll gweres gans dasserghyans ynwedh. Towlennans dhyworth an governans a yll komprehendya: gre – py yeth a vydh kewsys yn py le, skolyow ha media rag ensampel; 'corpus' – geryow nowydh, daffar adhyskans, ha towlennans ynkerth –

fatel wra an dus dyski an yeth ha fatel wra trenya dyskatoryon. Yma Kernow, yn pols ma, y'n wedh ma. An gemeneth Gerneweger a vynnsa Kernewek dhe dhos ha bos yeth neb a rollo talvosogeth ha bri rag an dus yn aga bewnansow pubdedhyek.

## II. English Translation

This piece is about my research regarding language extinction and the death and revival of the Cornish language in particular. There are many lessons for the Cornish speaking community to learn regarding how to reverse language death. The most interesting of these is the importance of speaking languages with the family at home. The preferred, and most important thing, for the future of minority languages is to transfer them to the next generation, and it is not, according to linguists, good enough to only teach languages in school, or in evening classes for adults.

Why do languages die in the first place? According to the website Ethnologue, there are 7117 languages in the world at the moment (Ethnologue 2020). 96% of these are spoken by 4% of the population, and for a quarter of languages, there are less than 1000 speakers with an average number of speakers for each of 6000 (Crystal 2004: 14). Minority languages become crowded out by majority languages because the majority language seems more important. Language death has many stages. At first there is, usually, political or social discrimination towards speakers of the minority language, either through official policies, or through educational neglect (Harrison 2007: 8). Some people prefer to speak the majority language for political or economic reasons, and eventually the population becomes bilingual. For subsequent generations it becomes better to only speak the majority language, and eventually the minority

language is only spoken by the elderly population (Crystal 2004: 79). There is another interesting side to this. When children who speak a minority language go to a school where they have to speak and learn the majority language, the family, if they only speak the minority language, begins to also speak the majority language. Linguists have noticed they are unable to remain monolingual because of the pressure from the child to speak the majority language (Harrison 2007: 8). This is why the most important way to defend minority languages is to transmit them to the next generation and instil love for the minority language to the next generation. The desirable outcome for the minority language is for the children to be bilingual.

I have studied the history of the Cornish language in the period before the death of Dolly Pentreath (the so-called last speaker of the language). Cornish was flourishing prior to the Tudor period. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a golden age for the language, when the mystery plays of the *Ordinalia* (*Origo Mundi*, *Passio Christi* and *Resurrexio Domini*), and the poem *Pascon Agan Arluth* were written. Two miracle plays were also written – on Saints Meriasek and Ke (Payton 2004: 95). However, after Henry VII became King, he gave his Cornish and Welsh supporters positions in his court, and it became more advantageous for them to speak English. After Henry VIII split from the Church in Rome, and the changes introduced by the Reformation, the Book of Common Prayer was introduced during his son Edward's reign. Why was it not written in Cornish? According to many people, this is the main cause of the death of Cornish. Richard Polwhele, the nineteenth century Cornish historian, thought many people did not like to speak Cornish at that time. They preferred to speak English because it was the language of business. They wanted to

negotiate and do business themselves, rather than use a translator, or not do business in England, or not have any power in Edward's court (Polwhele 1808, vol. 5: 4). Therefore, those with power, people from the landed classes, said they did not want the Prayer Book to be produced in Cornish. There were not, at that time, people pushing for the Book of Common Prayer, or the Bible, to be written in Cornish.

The Book of Common Prayer was published in English. This was damaging for the Cornish language. First and foremost, the ordinary Cornish people were not happy, and laid siege to Exeter. Over 5000 Cornishmen were killed as a result (Harris 2016: 20). There were no more performances of the mystery and miracle plays which were linked to Catholicism. According to the new Church, the Church of England, common people could now communicate with God, and read the Bible themselves, so there was no need for them to learn Bible stories through the plays. Yet in 1560 a Puritan group petitioned Elizabeth I. They wanted Cornish and Welsh children to be able to learn the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer in their own languages. Elizabeth herself was not against the languages it seems, but the petition did not succeed (Jenner 1904: 13-14). There was, equally, still a need for Cornish speaking clergy in the seventeenth century. During the English Civil War, William Jackman, rector of Feock, gave Holy Communion in Cornish to the people in Pendennis Castle (Ellis 1974: 77).

In the seventeenth century, another mystery play was written by William Jordan of Helston. *Gwreans an Bys* (The Creation of the World) is problematical. On the whole, people think Jordan copied *Origo Mundi* from the *Ordinalia*. The story

is similar, there is mention of limbo, a Catholic concept, which could date the play from the period before the Reformation (Ellis 1974: 74). However, there are many words in English throughout the play as well. Is *Gwreans an Bys* a copy of *Origo Mundi*, or is it a new play? Jordan writes many Cornish words in an English fashion, with an extra 'e' on the end. He writes English words too, and despite knowing and using the Cornish word for spear, he also writes it in English a few lines later. He writes the English word commandment in the Cornish fashion, with a mutation, but there is a Cornish word for this: arghadow. In my opinion, *Gwreans an Bys* reflects the era in which it was written, when people were speaking a mixture of Cornish and English, when they were bilingual.

Over the eighteenth century, Cornish became a minority language. There were men who wanted to save the language, such as Edward Lhuyd and William Gwavas. They collected scraps of the language together, but they did not speak to ordinary people, the people who, perhaps, were still speaking Cornish at this point. In the middle of the eighteenth century, a man called Daines Barrington travelled to west Cornwall. He wanted to find people who knew how to speak Cornish. He went to Mousehole, where he met Dolly Pentreath. She spoke to him in Cornish, but there were two women nearby who could understand her (Ellis 1974: 116). According to Dolly Pentreath herself, she was the last speaker of Cornish at that time. In conclusion, the death of Cornish was no simple matter. There were many reasons why people changed to speaking English: the influence of the government and people of the upper classes, religious changes and the increasing numbers of people travelling around the country.

The nineteenth century saw a growth in Celtic Nationalism and Cornishmen too were caught up in this. Henry Jenner, a Cornishman working at the British Museum, and the Reverend Lach-Szyrma began touring the west of Cornwall, collecting what remains of the Cornish language they could find. Jenner presented these findings in a paper to the British Archaeological Association in 1876 (Harris 2016: 35). By the beginning of the twentieth century Jenner was attempting to achieve Cornwall's membership of the Pan-Celtic Congress, however the obstacle to membership was the view from the other Celtic nations that the Cornish language was dead. The Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak (Cornish Celtic Association) were also working to prove the language was not dead, and asked Jenner to produce a grammar to help learners (Williams 2004: 98). His *Handbook of the Cornish Language* (1904) sparked the language revival.

After the Cornish revival in the twentieth century there is, now, a larger group of people learning Cornish (Kesva an Taves Kernewek 2020: 9). However, the language is not safe enough yet. Political and economic considerations, as well as educational ones, are needed to support Cornish, and for this, public interest, and ownership of the language, is required. How can this be achieved? If the community is involved, by writing books, newspapers or websites for example, they would have pride in their language, and it would have a value for them.

The biggest problem of all with regards to language revival is to have enough teachers and resources (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 182). A dictionary and a grammar are simply not enough anymore. Different lessons are necessary to show how the language was, but also to preserve and develop it. People also need modern

lessons and books to teach the language. The methodology of language teaching changed greatly over the twentieth century. Now, with the help of computers, it is possible to learn via mobile phones, online, or in classes, and it is better to make use of these resources, especially for young people. As well as that, teachers who can teach the language with modern methods are vital, it is not good enough merely to read the lesson out loud as happened in the middle of the twentieth century. People learn in different ways from each other too: either verbally, or aurally, or visually, or through writing things down. In the best lessons there is every type of learning to help every type of learner.

For language revival to succeed, there is a need for support from the language community (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 189). First of all, the community needs to plan and deliver the work, after this they can ask for support from the region or the country. In countries with policies for minority languages it is easier to receive funding. Language legislation can help with revival too. Planning from the government can include: status – what language will be spoken where, in schools or the media for example, corpus – neologisms, educational resources; and acquisition planning – how will people learn the language and how will teachers be trained. Cornwall, at the moment, is at this stage. The Cornish speaking community would like Cornish to become a language which is given value and importance for people in their everyday lives.

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## Biography

Kensa is second year PhD student at the Institute of Cornish Studies, part of Exeter University. Her studies are funded by the Cornwall Heritage Trust. Kensa is researching the status of the Cornish language between 1777-1904, that is, the period in which it is widely believed to have been extinct. A former modern languages teacher, Kensa is a fluent speaker of Cornish, a bard of the Cornish Gorsedh, and both teaches and examines the language.