

Cornish or Klingon? The standardisation of the Cornish language.

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There are estimated to be upwards of 6,000 languages in the world today, although a disturbingly high proportion of these are under threat of extinction. All these languages have their histories. And then there are those languages that have been invented over the last century and a half. The ‘fastest growing language in the galaxy’ has been claimed to be Klingon, invented for an alien race who were first heard speaking it in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* in 1979.¹ In 1984 Marc Okrand, a linguist, invented its grammar, vocabulary and orthography.² Since then Trekkies have enthusiastically attempted to learn this language, to the extent that in 1999 over 600 people could claim to be speakers, while the Klingon Language Institute had over 1,000 members.³ Klingon, the product of a globalised American TV culture, would seem to be hundreds of light years away from Cornish, a language with a long and respectable history. But is it? In this brief review of the attempted standardisation of revived Cornish my argument is that, in its twentieth century revival, Cornish had many resemblances to invented languages such as Klingon. Being a language fit for aliens, Klingon promoters deliberately revel in its inhuman irregularities.⁴ However, this is unusual for deliberately invented languages.⁵ The website of the Klingon Language Institute is significantly hosted by the Logical Language Group. Its language - Lojban - claims to possess an unambiguous grammar, phonetic spelling and the ‘unambiguous resolution of sounds into words’. Unlike historic languages, with their messy irregularities and other human foibles, languages such as Lojban or the older Esperanto (which dates from 1887) are ‘easy to learn’.⁶ Those familiar with the dialects of revived Cornish will have heard similar claims.

Historically, Cornish became a distinct language somewhere in the latter part of the first millennium when the dialect of the British language spoken in south western Britain began to diverge from that of the Welsh. The history of this language can then be traced to the death of its last speakers around 1800. What is written and spoken now is revived Cornish, a resuscitated version that has no unbroken chain back to the historical language. Indeed, at least one observer has argued that the gap between the historic language and revived Cornish is so wide we should describe revived Cornish as ‘pseudo-

Cornish' or 'Cornic', in contrast to the traditional, authentic and 'genuine' historic language.⁷ Significantly, this comment was made even before the increased pluralism that marked Cornish from the mid-1980s. Revived Cornish itself is usually dated from Henry Jenner's *Handbook of the Cornish Language*, published in 1904. However, this is more a convenient starting point than an accurate date for the genesis of the language's resurrection. For that we would have to go back further, to the lessons written by Wladislaw Lach-Szyrma in the 1890s or to Jenner's own initial foray into language revival in the late 1870s, when he proposed, unsuccessfully, to form a society that would advise on the 'correct' spelling of the language. Now, more than a century later, there are somewhere between 100 and 200 relatively fluent speakers, the exact number being uncertain as no direct survey has ever been undertaken. The most recent guess in 200?, often given the imprimatur of being 'official' due to its appearance in a report on the language sponsored by the Government Office South West, is only that – a guess, one that relied in turn on the estimates provided by the various revivalist groups.⁸ These had very good reason to indulge in inflation of the truth in the context of a perceived struggle over resources.

Whereas we cannot be sure of the precise number of speakers it is crystal clear that there is not one standard Cornish but three main varieties. A century or more of revivalism has produced a situation in which there are competing dialects that are unusually based on temporal rather than spatial differences, surely unique among languages. Users of Unified Cornish and Unified Cornish Revised base their spelling on the Tudor period and the mid-sixteenth century. The Common Cornish school prefers a somewhat earlier period for its ideal pronunciation, around 1500, but in the process discards the historical spelling of Cornish. Finally, Modern Cornish enthusiasts aim to speak and write the Cornish of the later seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries, three generations or so before its eventual demise as a community language in the fishing ports of Penwith. A century and more of language revivalism has thus failed to produce a standard Cornish. But that is not the same as saying there has been no effort at standardisation. For there has.

Standardisation of languages occur in two overlapping ways. First, there is a *de facto* process of standardisation, as speech communities converge on a standard form. Second, we might identify a more *de jure* standardisation, involving the explicit intervention of official state bodies, professional language planners and so forth. But in the case of Cornish we have had neither. The lack of a decent sized speech community has made the first form of standardisation difficult and the absence of official recognition before 2003 made the second one irrelevant. Instead there has been an attempt at standardisation led by amateur linguists and the voluntary enthusiasts of the language movement. This involved an effort in the twentieth century to devise a standard Cornish based on its late medieval form, one that involved two phases. The first phase was led by Robert Morton Nance who, rejecting Jenner's earlier tendency to favour later forms, in the 1920s 'unified' the spelling around the corpus of historic medieval literature, although this involved only one genre, that of religious drama. 'Unified Cornish' remained the proto-standard until the 1980s, when it came under scrutiny from two directions.

First, a group of revivalists re-discovered the prose writings of later Cornish and decided to build their Cornish on this more modern form, one closer both in time and appearance to the many traces of Cornish that had survived in the physical and cultural landscape around them. Second, another larger group was attracted to the work of Ken George who, echoing an emerging dissatisfaction with the Unified Cornish compromise (medieval spelling conventions but modern pronunciation) decided to seek to recover the 'exact' pronunciation of 1500 and radically adjust the spelling so that one grapheme (letter or group of letters) as far as possible reflected one phoneme (sound).⁹ In doing this, it was claimed that Cornish would become easier. Attracted by the promise of an easier language to learn, the majority of the voluntary movement - but probably involving the active participation of a mere 50 or so people – adopted what later became called 'Common' Cornish (Kernewek Kemmyn). The supporters of this new version were able to seize the institutions of the revival in the mid-1980s, notably the Cornish Language Board. In doing this they cloaked themselves with a degree of legitimacy. But they critically failed to persuade all users of Cornish to adopt their system. Instead of confronting this problem directly the leaders of the Common Cornish project relied on a

‘survival of the fittest’ strategy, ignoring the heretics and prosecuting their own form with extreme vigour, taking every opportunity to portray it as the equivalent of ‘Cornish’. But, unfortunately for those who wished to make Common Cornish into the standard written form, the other forms not only survived but thrived. In doing so they drew in new speakers while producing their own teaching materials, books and other resources. Thus, while the first phase of standardisation eventually succumbed under the weight of its own internal contradictions, the second phase of standardisation also failed, an outcome made easier by the tiny speech community and the limited domains of spoken Cornish, thereby reducing pressures to conform.

Nonetheless, this failed standardisation has interesting lessons if we apply to it the concepts involved in the study of language standardisation. This is what I do in the rest of this article, relying heavily on Robert Millar’s *Language, Nation and Power: An Introduction* and a few other works in order to provide a window onto the Cornish language.¹⁰ By putting Cornish in a more comparative context we can begin to think less introspectively about the issues that surround its standardisation now that we are in the position when a *de jure* process has finally begun. This became a practical option once Cornish received official status through being recognised under the Council of Europe’s Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.

Dialects and synecdoches

In any language standardisation process involving a living language a dominant dialect will emerge, termed by Joseph a synecdoche.¹¹ This dialect will be codified and written consistently and will seek equality with other standardised languages. But what causes one dialect among several to be transformed or to transform itself into a standard language? Joseph points to internal and external motives. Internally, a language elite creates positions of power for itself by transforming its dialect into the standard. While self-aggrandisement may not form the explicit agenda of this elite, standardisation inevitably enhances its profile. Thus ‘a few users of the standard language accede to positions of authority which permit them to direct the future course of standardisation’.¹² Externally, comparison with other standard languages produces a perceived need to

overcome a low esteem. The growth of nationalism in the nineteenth century, based on the idea that one nation equalled one language, was a powerful stimulus in triggering the drive to standardise languages and in doing so to purify them in order to differentiate them from their competitors. Joseph also points to the external motive of imperialism in pushing forward standardisation of colonised languages, and in the Cornish case this takes the form of bureaucratisation, as the involvement of state bodies increases external pressures for standardisation.

Applying the concept of synecdoche to Cornish, Unified Cornish was clearly the synecdochic dialect of Cornish from the 1920s to the 1980s. It was believed by virtually all Cornish speakers to form a *de facto* standard. Its orthography and grammar had been codified and it had become the dialect used as symbol of formality and solemnity in Gorseth ceremonies and church services. To all intents and purposes this dialect was established as the equivalent of 'Cornish'. But the engineered standardisation of Unified Cornish was unable to transform itself into an organic standardisation. Although based on the corpus of a historic language, its genesis bore striking similarities with invented languages, in particular in the role of one key person - Robert Morton Nance - in its codification and dissemination. But growing interest in and knowledge of the actual historic language in the context of a failure to produce more than a trickle of speakers resulted in the loss of its synecdochic status in the 1980s.

In contrast Kernewek Kemmyn, or 'Common Cornish', Unified Cornish's late-medieval successor dialect, failed to establish itself as an unambiguous synecdoche. The Common Cornish project was an even more explicitly planned venture but, unlike Unified Cornish in the period before the 1970s, Common Cornish is not believed by all speakers of Cornish to be the best form of the language. It has also had to share the functional sphere – in Gorseth, church services, writing and the media - with the other dialects of Cornish. Twenty years after its introduction, the failure of the Common Cornish project to establish its dialect as the synecdoche was exposed by its inability to convince users of other dialects or many observers outside its immediate speech community that it should

automatically become the standard written form when official status was obtained for Cornish in 2003.

Synecdochic dialects become standards through dissemination, through establishing their written form as that for the language as a whole. As we have seen Unified Cornish had almost attained this situation in the 1970s. However, there needs to be a mass audience ready and willing to receive the standard as the only acceptable form. In the twentieth century that mass audience for Cornish just did not exist. The opportunity to establish Unified Cornish as the standard was thus missed. Now, in the twenty-first century and with the implicit support of the state, there is the possibility of imposing a standard through mass education. This, what Millar calls 'no alternative strategy', gives potential power to one dialect elite to impose its version on others. Advocates of Common Cornish saw the possibility of state subsidy and support for a long-term presence of Cornish in the education system as a lifeline, holding out the glittering prospect that their project might achieve standard status despite its inability to create a mass audience through voluntary efforts. For, as Millar points out, 'if the knowledge of a standardised form of any language remains in the hands of the language planning elite, it is unlikely that it can be treated as anything other than a complex game'.¹³ However, in the Cornish case no dialect is tied to a living community of speakers in any real sense of a community using a Cornish dialect as its everyday means of communication.

Culture, not linguistics

Millar's work, based on comparative studies of a host of standardisation cases, leads him to a conclusion that is fundamentally at odds with the cherished assumptions of the Cornish revival's amateur language planners. There is nothing inherent in a dialect – its vocabulary, grammar or aesthetic attractions – that makes it fit to become a standard. This naive but nonetheless almost universal belief within the Cornish language movement is clearly shown to be a chimera. In contrast 'societal and cultural patterns and pressures are at the heart of whether a given language variety will succeed as a standard or not'.¹⁴ Standards that are associated with a strong or pervasive idea, whether cultural, political or religious, are more likely to succeed. One source from which a dialect may

get its initial prestige is a 'given set of literary or cultural virtues'. In the case of Cornish such literary virtues are traditionally supposed to revolve around the corpus of miracle and saints' plays from the fourteenth to early sixteenth centuries that form the bulk of its literature.¹⁵ These have served as the core of an emerging 'Glasney myth'. Within this twentieth century discourse what is on the European scale quite a modest literature, confined to a single and very limiting genre, becomes a powerhouse of literary perfection. This myth conveniently locates the golden age of Cornish in its late medieval period, a time before the myriad corruptions of Protestantism, modernity and 'English' influence supposedly took effect. The inevitable developments of the language after its 'golden' or 'classical' age then become seen as simplifications or 'decay'.

All languages are prone to experience this hyper-conservatism as elements, usually among the middle classes, attempt to stifle the more dynamic everyday changes adopted by the language's users. Such attempts, whether by formal institutions such as the *Academie Francaise* or by less formal ones such as Radio Four listeners, normally these days face an uphill task in the face of a tide of Anglo-American linguistic change backed by the power of the global media-corporations. But they are also confounded by the stubborn insistence of those actually using the language to say *le weekend* or use *dreifio* instead of *gyrru*. But for Cornish the lack of such a community gives full rein to the schoolteacherly tendencies within the revivalist movement. Not content merely to fix vocabulary, the Common Cornish project went to the extremes of attempting to fix the sounds of the language on an ultimately hypothetical (as it can never be proven) phonemic system which it claims to detect was present in 1500. Deviations from this norm then also became a version of 'decay'.

Corpus, status and acquisition planning

Such attitudes, ideological rather than scientific, and underpinned by taken-for-granted and unexamined cultural assumptions, lie behind the apparently technical process of language planning – in all languages and not just Cornish. Recently we have heard of corpus and status planning in Cornish, but this can usefully be extended to distinguish three activities within language planning – corpus planning, deciding what is the

‘correct’, ‘pure’ and ‘best’ basis for a language; status planning, enhancing the status of that language; and acquisition planning, encouraging a greater knowledge and use of it.¹⁶ These processes do not simply appear one after the other, although there is a logical progression from corpus to status to acquisition planning. Instead they overlap, mutually informative rather than totally separate.¹⁷

In the Cornish context, corpus planning presents the trickiest problem because of the failure of the late medieval standardisation project since the 1980s. Corpus planning itself involves three stages: selection, codification and elaboration. During the selection stage the problem is identified and norms are allocated. The problem for Cornish is simple. There is only a minute speech community, something that makes the argument that current speakers alone should decide on the standard written form a precarious one with disturbing implications for the future ownership of the language. For Cornish has significance in that it has played a deeply symbolic role as an indicator of Cornish difference and a buttress for the Cornish identity since the second quarter of the nineteenth century; it is not significant as a spoken language. This central fact, though one that tends to be ignored by most revivalists, ensures that any standardisation process has to tread carefully. Hitherto, the activities of the revival have proceeded in parallel with and in the main sealed off from the background role of the language as a symbol of Cornish identity. But when Cornish becomes a public language, inscribed in bureaucratic texts and disseminated in the schools, this cloistered position dissolves. Instantaneously, the form of written revived Cornish, up to this point of little interest or relevance to the mass of the population, becomes of great importance.

If there are two or more varieties or dialects of a language, during the selection stage decisions are made as to which is most acceptable in terms of vocabulary, structure and pronunciation. Yet the majority of Cornish revivalists have apparently already taken it for granted that the fifteenth century is the preferable basis for the language. This ‘decision’, stumbled into in the 1920s and reinforced by the anti-modernism of the early revivalists, lies like a log jam across the process of standardisation. In any corpus planning for Cornish the rationale for basing the language on the fifteenth century will need to be

seriously, explicitly and realistically re-examined. Only when we solve the huge issues around selection can we then move on to codification, the attempt to provide a prescriptive orthography, grammar and dictionary, reinforcing notions of 'correctness'. It is here that the coercive aspect of language planning becomes most obvious. Standardisation is 'designed to control the language (and, implicitly, the behaviour) of a given populace'. However, on the other hand, faced with competition from a dominant language, standardisation is also 'necessary for survival'.¹⁸

As was the case for selection, when codifying Cornish, the language revival worked within some deeply held assumptions that require careful examination. For example, the assumption that we need to (or can) identify the sounds of the Cornish of 1500 or thereabouts (or 1550 or 1700 come to that) and then studiously attempt to replicate them in a quest for some holy grail of authenticity appears to some as complete nonsense. In his excellent short paper, 'Thoughts on the Future of Cornish', Ashby Tabb has deconstructed this 'pipe dream' of recovering an old pronunciation, pointing out how real speech communities include a range of mutually intelligible vowel sounds.¹⁹ The efforts of the amateur linguists who have colonised the Cornish language may well turn out in practice to be finely honed technical schemes but in the long run as effective as that misguided King Canute on his lonely beach.

The failed *de facto* late medieval standardisation project of Unified and Common Cornish focussed more of their energies on codification rather than the more fundamental selection. But they also actively engaged in the third aspect of corpus planning, that of elaboration. In this stage language planners pay heed to the relationship between their language and its neighbours, deciding what is needed for a particular language in the wider world. Critically, this stage involves a quest for 'purism', building and maintaining boundaries around a language.²⁰ I have already pointed out how the revived Cornish movement generally and Common Cornish advocates in particular have expended much energy avoiding the Englishness of Cornish. They assert its separateness from that language, sometimes going so far as to avoid historic Cornish spellings partly on the grounds that the latter are over-influenced by English, and assiduously and

unscientifically differentiate between language developments (which are acceptable) and 'English corruptions' (which are not).²¹

Such 'purism' is common to the process of standardisation and has its roots in nineteenth century nationalist ideologies and a xenophobic distrust of external influence. This has been termed an 'external' type of purism, co-existing with an 'internal' purism, where the language planners look to fill the gaps in the language itself.²² Medieval Cornish, with a small vocabulary of around 9,000 headwords,²³ a total the more modern Cornish material is unlikely to increase by more than a thousand or two, is clearly in need of elaboration if it is to become a language fit to compete in the modern world. Yet internal purism also has its ideological dimensions. Millar points out how purism can operate along temporal or social planes. Taking the latter first, social purism can be elitist, proposing a 'proper' pronunciation, or ethnographic, for example involving a nostalgia for countryside virtues and a concern to move away from urban decadence. In the English language elitism is the strongest influence. And this is felt more strongly in terms of pronunciation than vocabulary. Arguments over a 'received' pronunciation and the discourses surrounding this remain strongly elitist despite the de-bunking work of socio-linguists. This can be observed most readily in Radio Four-land, speaking from (and largely to) a Home-Counties mind-set.

Elitist purism can be combined with temporal purism, divided into two kinds by Millar.²⁴ There is 'archaizing purism', looking to the past and resuscitating the linguistic material of a golden age, involving an exaggerated respect for past literary models and an excessive conservatism. And there is 'reformist' purism, 'cleansing the language of foreign elements' and re-building it. These are not necessarily opposed and may combine in any one process of purism, as is obvious from a cursory examination of the Cornish standardisation projects. Is it a coincidence that Cornish dialects of all types have strong elements of elitism in terms of 'correct' pronunciation, while the late medieval project looks back to a 'golden age' of the religious plays and the modern Cornish to a 'golden age' of earthy peasant speakers in west Penwith? Interestingly, these attitudes are ones shared with deeply ingrained views of the English language in England. The irony is that

the purist drive of Cornish revivalists is intimately connected to assumptions uncritically borrowed wholesale from the superordinate language – English. A reverence for the past and archaizing purism stem ultimately from the influence of English. In a contradictory fashion, the rationale for this process is then, somewhat bizarrely, claimed to be the restoration of the distinctiveness of Cornish from English and the purging of foreign (English) elements. But this flows from wishful thinking. The more mundane reality is that not only was the Cornish language in both its medieval and more modern phases inevitably affected by English but that Cornish revivalists have also been deeply affected by English assumptions and attitudes.

Conclusion

This brief foray into some comparative work on language standardisation reveals how the *de facto* standardisation project around late medieval Cornish adopted aspects that are widely familiar from other languages. Furthermore, we can also begin to explain why there has been so much emphasis on issues of pronunciation rather than vocabulary and on the codification rather than the selection stage of corpus planning. More discussion is surely required about the assumptions of the selection stage, including revisiting the basic purposes of the language revival and the role of Cornish in modern Cornish society. More broadly, Millar concludes in his study that corpus planning is very attractive to both professional and amateur linguists, and this has certainly proved to be so in the case of Cornish. However, it is ‘doomed to remain a hobby, unless the corpus planning is associated with outreach ventures connected to the native speakers of the language variety in question and, quite possibly, the members of an ethnic group who do not speak the ethnic group language, but would like to’.²⁵ This means that, in the absence of a pool of native speakers, it is essential that Cornish language planning engages with the wider community and does not remain restricted to the often blinkered visions of the linguists and their enthusiastic followers. In the role of key individuals, the resort to more ‘rational’ spelling systems and the primacy given to ‘ease of learning’, revived Cornish has clear similarities with invented languages. Yet Cornish is not Klingon (or Esperanto). It is a language with a long history linked to a living identity. Its future is inextricably

linked to the vitality of that identity and its standardisation, in order to succeed, will have to recognise and resolve the tensions and contradictions posed by its past.

¹ Klingon Language, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klingon_language (accessed June 15 2006). See also the Klingon Language Institute (www.kli.org/).

² Marc Okrand, *The Klingon Dictionary*, Simon and Schuster, London, 1985.

³ Hwww.swipnet.se/~W-12689/surveyH (accessed 15 June 2006).

⁴ BBC, Hwww.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A4744860H (accessed 15 June 2006)

⁵ Languages such as Esperanto are given various descriptions, including artificial, constructed or international.. Here, I prefer the term 'invented languages' for these.

⁶ Tutmondo Esperantista Tunulara Organizo, www.tejo.org/info/pri (accessed 15 June 2006).

⁷ Glanville Price, *The Languages of Britain*, Edward Arnold, London, 1984, 134.

⁸ Ken Mackinnon, *An Independent Academic Study on Cornish*, Government Office South West, Bristol, 2000.

⁹ The rationale for this was set out in Ken George, *The Pronunciation and Spelling of Revived Cornish*, Cornish Language Board, Torpoint, 1986.

¹⁰ Robert Millar, *Language, Nation and Power: An Introduction*, Palgrave, London, 2005.

¹¹ John Joseph, *Eloquence and Power: The Rise of Language Standards and Standard Languages*, Frances Pinter, London, 1987, 2.

¹² Joseph, *Eloquence and Power*, 43-46.

¹³ Millar, *Language, Nation and Power*, 71.

¹⁴ Millar, *Language, Nation and Power*, 88.

¹⁵ See Murdoch, *Cornish Literature*

¹⁶ Robert Cooper, *Language Planning and Social Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

¹⁷ Einar Haugen, 'The implementation of corpus planning: theory and practice' in J.Cobarrubias and J.A.Fishman (eds) *Progress in Language Planning: International Perspectives*, Mouton de Gruyter, New York, 269-89.

¹⁸ Millar, *Language, Nation and Power*, 102.

¹⁹ Ashby Tabb, 'Thoughts on the future of Cornish', unpublished paper, 2005.

²⁰ Millar, *Language, Nation and Power*, 103.

²¹ Bernard Deacon, 'Deconstructing *Kernewek Kemmyn*: a critical review of *Agan Yeth 4*', unpublished paper, 2005 (available from author). See also Neil Kennedy, 'Verbal hygiene and purism', unpublished paper, n.d.

²² George Thomas, *Linguistic Purism*, Longman, London.

²³ Jon Mills, 'A comparison of the semantic values of middle Cornish *luf* and *dorn* with modern English *hand* and *fist*', *Language Sciences* 18.1 (1996), 71-86.

²⁴ Millar, *Language, Nation and Power*, 104-05.

²⁵ Millar, *Language, Nation and Power*, 112.