

The SWF as compared with *Kernewek Kemmyn*

1 Introduction

The outline specification for a standard written form (SWF) of Cornish is now available. On page iii, a number of people are named as having taken part in the process leading to the SWF. It should not be assumed that all of these gave their advice in the spirit of supporting the introduction of a SWF. In many instances, advice was given, but it was not followed. Many participants always believed that a satisfactory orthography could not be arrived at through compromise or by horse-trading of elements, and their fears are vindicated by the incongruous mixture which is the SWF. Ben Bruch and Albert Bock have attempted in the document to give it some linguistic credibility, but this is like painting over the cracks in a faulty surface.

2 Unified Cornish, *Kemmyn* and the SWF briefly compared

Unified Cornish was a fair starting point for those wishing to write Cornish in the style of the medieval texts, but unsuitable as a vehicle for spoken Cornish, because the correspondence between writing and sounds was not close enough. Table 1 summarizes how its weaknesses in this regard were removed in *Kernewek Kemmyn*.

Table 1

Faults in Unified Cornish	Improvements in Kemmyn		Treatment in SWF	See
Insufficiently clear relationship between sounds and writing	The orthography is largely phonemic	morpho-phonemic	Reversion to a phonetic system which is weaker	3
Insufficiently clear relationship between parts of words	The orthography is largely morphemic			
It is impossible to deduce the length of vowels from the spelling;	It is possible to deduce the length of vowels if the stress is known		Improvement lost in loan-words	4
It is impossible to deduce how to spell the compounds of words ending in <m, n, l, r>	The simplex words are spelled like their compounds: <mm, nn, ll, rr> or <m, n, l, r> morphophonemically		Improvement removed	5
The phoneme /o/ (as in <i>boes</i> 'food') is not recognized as separate from /O/ (as in <i>bos</i> 'to be')	Uses <oe> for /o/		/o/ spelled <oo> when long, otherwise <o>	6
Includes the vocalic alternation seen in some but not all texts	.Excludes vocalic alternation, which is an unnecessary orthographic feature		Vocalic alternation needlessly restored	
The phoneme /ɪ/ is not recognized as separate from /i/	Uses <y> for /ɪ/ (except in words like <i>kegin</i> , where compounds like <i>keginer</i> demand <i>)			
The phoneme /œ/ (as in <i>leur</i> 'floor') is not recognised	Uses <eu> for /œ/		as KK	

The SWF retains a few improvements fully (<eu> for /œ/, universal <k> for /k/, <hw> for /hw/), some partially (length of vowels and recognition of /o/), and discards the others. This haphazard approach to spelling is the result of allowing politics rather than linguistics to be the guiding principle. The SWF is thus better than Unified but not as good as KK. In this light, the change by the Gorsedh to use the SWF instead of Unified may be seen as an improvement. It is to be hoped that they will continue along the path of improvement and adopt KK. Some of these features are considered in more detail below.

3 Phonetic Versus Morphophonemic

A phoneme is “a minimal contrastive unit of sound in the phonological system of a language”, denoted by slanting lines, e.g. in English (and in Cornish), /p/ and /b/ are separate phonemes, as is shown by the minimal pair *pat* v. *bat*, in Cornish, /l/ and /ll/ are separate phonemes, as is shown by the minimal pair *pel* ‘ball’ v. *pell* ‘distant’. A grapheme is “a minimal distinctive unit of writing in a language”, i.e. a letter or group of letters, denoted by angled brackets; e.g. in English and in Cornish, represents the sound [b] and <ch> represents the sound [č], as in *church* and *chi*. A phonemic orthography is one in which each phoneme is represented by a separate grapheme. *Kernewek Kemmyn* is largely phonemic, but includes a few non-phonemic features (notably <nn> in unstressed syllables) which enable the parts of words (morphemes) to be clearly identified; this means that it is a morphophonemic orthography.

The SWF includes “the introduction of phonetic rather than morphophonemic spelling”, (p. 82) This is actually a re-introduction, since Unified tended towards the phonetic. Such a spelling attempts to represent all the ways in which sounds are modified according to whether they occur at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of words. For example, the SWF uses <gh> finally and <h> medially (e.g. *flogh* ‘child’, *flehes* ‘children’), thus destroying the morphemic link between singular and plural.

There is a significant difference between the users of KK and its opponents. The former have experience of learning and teaching a morphophonemic orthography, and the latter have not. Those who use KK, and especially those who changed from Unified, are aware how much better a morphophonemic orthography is. Its clarity (“what you see is what you get”) enables the user to see both the structure of words and how they are pronounced. This is extremely helpful in the special circumstances of Cornish, which almost everybody learns as a second language in the absence of native speakers.

4 Length of Vowels

One of the advantages of *Kernewek Kemmyn* is that, in almost all cases, it is possible to deduce the length of vowels from the spelling, provided that the stress pattern is known. In stressed monosyllables, a vowel is short when followed by two consonants (except *sp*, *st*, *sk*). This property is also claimed for the SWF (§3.17) “vowel length in monosyllables may be deduced from the nature of the following consonant or consonants”. But the SWF fails to write doubled consonants in the case of loan-words, so that it is impossible to distinguish (except from the context) the minimal pairs in Table 2:

Table 2:

SHORT			LONG		
Kemmyn	SWF	English	Kemmyn	SWF	English
stopp	stop	stop	ls top	stop	stoop
pott	pot	pot	pot	pot	kick
Skott	Skot	Scot	skot	skot	subscription
pokk	pok	kiss	pok	pok	poke

In this respect the SWF is ambiguous and *Kernewek Kemmyn* is not.

It is of interest to note that in Norway, whence came the arbiter for the process leading to the SWF, bus lanes are labelled BUSS.

5 Sonorants m, l, n, r; mm, nn, ll, rr

It is well known that traditional Cornish had two forms of *n*, long /nn/ and short /n/. These two forms constituted different phonemes, since minimal pairs may be found which distinguish them, e.g. /tan/ 'fire' and /tann/ 'take'. The differences between /n/ and /nn/ persisted throughout the history of traditional Cornish, and so needs to be shown clearly in the revived language. In Middle Cornish orthography, followed by Nance's Unified Cornish, they were distinguished only after stressed vowels in the middle of words, e.g. *lowena* 'joy' v. *lowenna* 'happier'. At the end of a word, they were both written <n>; e.g. both 'fire' and 'take' were written *tan*. In Late Cornish, the difference became obvious, since /nn/ when stressed became [dn] and was written <dn>, both in the middle and at the end of words. Any feature that persisted into Late Cornish must have been present in Middle Cornish, whether shown in writing or not.

Kernewek Kemmyn distinguishes between stressed /n/ and /nn/ by using <n> and <nn> respectively, both in the middle and at the end of words; e.g. *lowena* v. *lowenna* and *tan* v. *tann*.

Table 3: Nouns in <en> with attested compounds

Singular			Plural		O the r comp o unds	
in dictionary		English	in dictionary	in texts	in dictionary	in texts
alusen	f	'alms'	alusenow	<i>alesonov</i>		
anken	m	'misery'			ankenek	<i>ankenek</i>
bargen	m	'bargen'			bargenya	<i>bargidnia</i>
bilen	m	'villain'	bilens	<i>felans</i>	bileni	<i>belyny</i>
blydhen	f	'year'	blydhynyow	<i>blethynnyow</i>		
edhen	f	'bird'	ydhyn	<i>ethyn</i>		
fenten	f	'spring'	fentynyow	<i>-ventinue</i>		
gossen	f	'rust'			gossem	<i>gosheny</i>
gwenen	pl	'bees'				<i>guenenen</i>
horsen	m	'whoreson'	horsens	<i>horsens</i>		
lodhen	m	'bullock'	lodhnow	<i>lothnow</i>		
mysterden	m	'craftsman'	mysterdens	<i>vysterdens</i>		
reden	pl	'ferns'			redenctin	<i>redanan</i>
sosten	m	'sustenance'			sostena	<i>sostene</i>
tenewen	m	'side'	tenwennow	<i>denwennow</i>		
tremen	m	'transit'			tremene	<i>tremene</i>

The following apply to these nouns:

1. There is no single way in which their plurals are formed.
2. Their gender may be masculine or feminine,
3. In almost every case, their compounds are formed with <n> rather than <nn>.

Kernewek Kemmyn also distinguishes between *n* and *nn* when unstressed. This is not a phonemic feature but a morphophonemic one. It is not phonemic because there is no difference in pronunciation between *n* and *nn* in this position; e.g. *lowen* 'happy' and *lowenn* 'louse' are pronounced the same. It is very useful, however, to maintain the difference in spelling even in unstressed positions, because in compounds the difference in realization ([n] v. [nn]) will re-appear in stressed syllables, e.g. *lowena* 'joy', with a half-long *e* before a single *n*, versus *lowennow* 'individual lice', with a short *e* before a double *nn*. This valuable morphophonemic property of *Kernewek Kemmyn* is also used in the spelling of Modern Breton, and is a great improvement on that of Middle Breton.

In the SWF this useful property has been abolished; <n> is written instead of *KK* <nn> in unstressed syllables. The effect of this on nouns with *KK* <en> and <enn> is now examined (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 4: Nouns in <enn> with individual plurals attested in traditional Cornish writings

Singularive			Individual plural	
in dictionary		English	in dictionary	in texts
barrenn	f	'twig'	barrennow	<i>barennow</i>
blewenn	f	'hair'	blewennow	<i>vlewennow</i>
boemmenn	f	'blow'	boemmennow	<i>vommennow</i>
dagrenn	f	'tear'	dagrennow	<i>dagrennow</i>
dalghenn	f	'grasp'	dalghennow	<i>dalhennow</i>
dinerenn	f	'penny'	dinerennow	<i>denerennov</i>
gerenn	f	'word'	gerennow	<i>gerennow</i>
gwelvenn	f	'lip'	gwelvennow	<i>guelawennow</i>
hwegenn	f	'darling'	hwegennow	<i>wegennov</i>
ismegenn	f	'salve'	ismegennow	<i>ysmegennow</i>
kolmenn	f	'knot'	kolmennow	<i>colmennov</i>
pedrenn	f	'buttock'	pedrennow	<i>peydrennow</i>
rosa-noblenn	f	'noble'	rosa-noblennow	<i>rase noblennov</i>
skorrenn	f	'branch'	skorrennow	<i>scorennov</i>
sterenn	f	'star'	sterennow	<i>sterradnou</i>
taklenn	f	'item'	taklennow	<i>taclennow</i>

The following apply to these nouns:

1. Their individual plurals are formed in every case by adding <ow> ,
2. Their gender is always feminine.
3. The <nn> is preserved in the plural.

It is clear from Tables 3 and 4 that the formation of plurals and compounds is different in the two cases. In *KK*, seeing nouns in <enn> tells the learner: the gender is feminine (except in compounds like *hor'benn* 'ram'), that the individual plural ends in <ennow>, and that the <e> in <ennow> is stressed and short. On seeing a noun in <en>, the learner knows to beware: the gender is not obvious, and neither is the form of the plural; it will be evident, though, that in compounds where the <n> is followed by a vowel, the <n> is preserved as a single <n> (with very few exceptions).

This vital information is absent in the SWF. All the nouns in Tables 3 and 4 are spelled with <en>, so there is no way of determining from the spelling to which category a noun belongs. They have to be learned individually. This is not a good idea for a spelling system intended for use in education, if there is a better system available.

Note also the following pairs, which cannot be distinguished in the SWF.

//n//			//nn//		
Kemmyn	SWF	English	Kemmyn	SWF	English
asen	asen	ass	asenn	asen	rib
kolen	kolen	puppy	kolenn	kolen	piece of coal
kronen	krogen	shell	krogenn		snare
lowen	lowen	happy	lowenn		louse
moreu	raoren	maiden	morenn	moren	blackberry

They are not phonemically minimal pairs, since each pair is pronounced the same, but they are different morphophonemically.

As regards this feature, the SWF is ambiguous and *Kernewek Kemmyn* is not.

6 Treatment of the Phoneme /o/

The identification of the phoneme /o/, written <oe> in *Kernewek Kemmyn*, was a significant advance in our knowledge of Cornish. In the SWF the opponents of *Kemmyn* have succeeded in dismantling this advance, replacing <oe> with two different graphemes <oo> and <o>. Neither is satisfactory. The grapheme <oo> sits uneasily with the remainder of the orthography, being clearly English. It gives rise to absurd spellings like *poos* instead of *poes*. But its worst aspect is that <oo> is inextricably linked to the sound [u:] in English (the vowel-sound *fool*). No amount of explanation that in Cornish <oo> means [jo:] is going to stop learners pronouncing it as [u:]. Using <o> for the short vowel is also unwise and historically incorrect; the primary development in traditional Cornish was spelled <u>, as in *arluth*.

Instead of identifying /o/ across the board and applying the same grapheme to it, the SWF uses a piecemeal "solution", excluding *kon* 'dinner', *tron* 'nose', *on* 'lamb', *gor* 'knows', *hwar* 'sister', *kor* 'wax', *noth* 'naked' (the latter in spite of *fernoyth* at MC.050, showing <oy> for /o/). That is, it takes the Unified <o> as the default position instead of *KK* <oe>. By doing so, it fails to distinguish between such minimal pairs as *on* 'we are' v. *oen* 'lamb'.

The SWF fails to treat this phoneme correctly.

7 Vocalic Alternation

Some of the Middle Cornish texts show a different vowel in singular and plural forms; e.g. in the Tregear Homilies, *gwyth* 'trees' and *gwethan* 'tree'. This feature, known as vocalic alternation, was an artefact of Middle English spelling which was carried over into the spelling of Middle Cornish, and later copied into Unified Cornish. <e> in Middle English had two values, open ϵ and close \acute{e} , and this practice also applied to Cornish; stressed <e> before single consonants in polysyllables could mean ϵ = [ɛː] or \acute{e} = [ɪː]. The use of <e> in words like Nance's *gwedhen* did not mean [ɛ], but [ɪ]. "The SWF acknowledges vocalic alternation" (§3.18). This is a linguistically unwise choice, since it leads to an incorrect pronunciation. Three of the major tests (PC., RD. and BM.) do not show vocalic alternation. Kernewek Kemmyn follows the example of PC. and RD. in writing <y> for [ɪː].

By including vocalic alternation, the SWF is misleading as regards pronunciation.

8 Spelling of Phonemically Voiced Consonants when Unstressed Finally

In Middle Cornish spelling, voiced and unvoiced consonants in final position were not usually distinguished; the same graphemes were usually used for both. In Late Cornish, the distinction was sometimes indicated in spelling. In final unstressed syllables, Nance tended to write all phonemically voiced consonants as unvoiced: e.g. *Kernewek*, *modryp*, *maryach*. Looking at the cases of /g/, /b/, /v/ and /ð/, one finds the following results:

- Unstressed /g/ after vowels is written <k> in both KK and the SWF; KK can afford the luxury of a phonetic spelling here, in an otherwise morphophonemic system, because there are scarcely any words containing unstressed /k/, with which it might conflict. The use of <k> for unstressed /g/ means that, as in Unified, the <g> has to be substituted for <k> in compounds.
- Unstressed /b/ was spelled <p> by Nance (e.g. *gorthyp* 'answer') and is currently so spelled in KK, but there is a good case for using the phonemic spelling (except for the word *kettep*), because BK. and Late Cornish distinguished /b/ from /p/; i.e. the situation is different from that of /g/.
- Unstressed /v/ was often spelled <f> or <ff> in Middle Cornish because <v> was unavailable; <v> would have been confused with <u> or even <n>. The fact that <f> was used does not mean that the sound was [f].
- It is only in Lhuyd's orthography that any distinction was made between unstressed /ð/ and /θ/ after vowels. All other texts used <th> indiscriminately. The SWF, like KK uses <dh> for /ð/ and <th> for /θ/, with one exception (§5.2), the word for 'new'. This is spelled *nowydh* in defiance of the phonemic spelling *nowydh*, "to reflect that it is found spelled with a <T> in Lhuyd's *Archaeologia Britannica*". These are insufficient grounds to warrant an exception. In all of Lhuyd's writings, there appear to be ten examples of the word, seven with <dh> and three with <th> (or equivalents).

9 Attacks on the Phonological Base of *Kernewek Kemmyn*

Nicholas Williams seems to think that his ideas on Cornish phonology are the truth. He often writes “It is true that...” when he means “I believe that...”. In his view, the ideas of anyone who disagrees with him must therefore be false. He has stated (in his book *Towards Authentic Cornish* and elsewhere) that “KK is based on a spurious phonology”. Such is the repetitious nature of these unjustified accusations that others copy them. He seems to think like this: “I am right, so the proponents of Kemmyn must be wrong. They are intelligent enough to see that I am right, so the only reason they persist with Kemmyn must be pride, stubbornness and not wanting to lose face in admitting their errors”. He and others (e.g. some on the Cornwall 24 web-site) may not realise that every criticism of the phonology is taken seriously, and scrutinized. Measures are taken to correct any errors which may be found. These errors are potentially at two levels:

- (i) faults in individual words (lexical faults)
 - i.e. cases where individual words have not been spelled correctly. Here some of Williams’ criticisms are justified, and the spellings will be corrected when the new edition of the dictionary is published.
- (ii) structural faults
 - i.e. faults in the list of phonemes, or in the way in which sounds and orthography are linked. These are more serious. The existence of the phoneme /yw/ (discovered by Keith Bailey) has now been recognized in KK, and approved by the Language Board; it is spelled <uw>. The recognition of /z/ is something for the future. Of those structural faults alleged by Williams, only the case of <tj> and <dj> was found to be partially substantiated. Ken George publicly acknowledged this; the graphemes were removed within months of the criticism being made, yet Williams is still complaining about this twenty years later. His other criticisms are valid only if his ideas about phonology (prosodic shift, pre-occlusion, dialectal variation, significance of vocalic alternation) can be proved. They have all been scrutinized and found to be untenable.

It is imperative that the pronunciation and spelling of Cornish be the best that we can make it. Our standpoint is therefore not that we acknowledge Williams to be right and are scared to admit that we are wrong, but rather that having examined his criticisms, we find them (except for a few minor points) to be without foundation. There is therefore no need to abandon *Kernewek Kemmyn*, nor to change its phonological base.

10 Late Cornish Variants which were not Agreed by the Ad Hoc Group

A surprisingly large proportion (one sixth) of the words listed in the SWF document have two variants “of equal status”, one representing Middle Cornish and the other Late Cornish. In §3.1, a group of words is listed which have <a> in the Middle form and <oa> in the Late. The advisers were apparently never asked about this feature. We are informed that it was neither discussed nor agreed by the Ad Hoc group, but added subsequent to their deliberations, as the result of private discussions between the compilers of the document and supporters of Late Cornish. This “mission-creep” is unacceptable.

The following variants of individual words have been apparently added to the document by its authors without the approval of the Ad Hoc group; they did not form part of the agreement, because they were not discussed by the group.

Kemmyn	English	Form based on Middle Cornish	Forms based on Late Cornish
aswonn	'to know'	aswon	ajon
awos	'because of'	awos	'wos
beudhi	'to drown'	beudhi	budhi
dew	'two' (m.)	dew	dow
dhiworth	'from'	dhyworth	dhort
euthek	'horrible'	euthek	uthik
gans	'with'	gans	gen
gasa	'to leave'	gasa	gara
Genver	'January'	Genver	Jenver
gorhemmyнна	'to welcome'	gorhemmyn	gorebma
hemm	'this'	hemm	helm
Hwevrer	'February'	Hwevrer	Hwevrel
kavoes	'to get'	kavos	kawas
kria	'to cry'	kria	kreia
kyttrin	'bus'	kyttrin	kytteren
melin	'mill'	melin	belin
myghtern	'king'	myghtern	mytern
ow	'my'	ow	o
ow	'-ing'	ow	o
peswar	'four'	peswar	pajer
peub	'all'	peub	pob
skwith	'tired'	skwith	skith
ty	'thou'	ty	chy / che
yeghes	'health'	yehes	'ehes
yeth	'language'	yeth	'eth
ynwedh	'also'	ynwedh	y'wedh
yowywk	'young'	yowynk	younk
vy	'me'	vy	ve

There is no way in which a single written form can satisfactorily represent both Middle and Late Cornish forms, because the two varieties are too widely separated. The SWF is not single, but even so does not satisfactorily represent both. Thus the "agreed SWF" has debased the close fit which KK has for Middle Cornish, and yet it does not fit Late Cornish well. Neither aim is satisfied. The only way to get proper fits is to have different (but linked) orthographies for each. This means keeping KK (with any perceived improvements) for a Middle Cornish base, and designing an extension for a Late Cornish base.