

The Politics of Language Death and Revival: The Case of Cornish

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And to those who ask the inevitable question ‘Why should Cornishmen and women learn Cornish?’, it is Henry Jenner, as Father of the Revival, who still supplies the most simple answer: ‘Because they are Cornish!’

(Berresford Ellis, 2000, p. 32)

1. Introduction

The term “dead language” is evocative of ancient tongues, no longer spoken, consigned to the history books; languages with names that, to us now, seem lost in the sands of time. Akkadian, Elamite, Phoenician, and Sumerian are all examples that appear in the contents pages of Ostler’s excellent *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* (2005). These ancient languages have, sometime in the distant past, become extinct. However, language death is not limited to the distant past, but has occurred throughout history. From the more recent past we can add the more familiar name of Latin to the list of dead languages. More recently still, within the last two hundred and fifty years, as language contact has grown rapidly with population mobility, many more of the languages of the world have died. This is exemplified by the large number of native languages of Australia and the American continent that died as a result of the spread of European settlers to those lands. Languages have died all over the globe as a result of language contact. One such example is the Celtic language of Cornish (the subject matter for this

paper) that reportedly died in the late eighteenth century as a result of prolonged language contact with the far more dominant English language. There seems no respite for the smaller languages of the world, and there is a real danger that many of the world's estimated 6000~7000 languages will die within the next century (see Krauss 1992, 1998).

There are some people that feel that having a smaller number of languages in the world is a good thing; that it can lead to greater harmony and understanding in the world. However, for those that believe in the value of diversity, the death of a language is a sad event, narrowing as it does the stock of the world's languages, and therefore the number of ways in which humans look upon, and express, the world around us. The loss of a language is not merely a loss to linguistics, it also constitutes a loss to culture and to science, and furthermore a loss of human rights (see Bradley 2001, Crystal 2000, Krauss 2001, Miyaoka 2001). In short, it is not just words that disappear when a language dies.

In recognition of this loss, in recent years there has been a greater emphasis not only in the field of linguistics on the plight of endangered languages (see Fishman 1991, 2001; Grenoble & Whaley 1998), but also in the non-academic field (see Abley 2004, Drysdale 2001). Much work has been done on documenting these languages and in creating ways to promote the language so that it is passed on from generation to generation. The documentation (including video and audio tapes) is important as it creates a body of materials from which dictionaries, grammars, and teaching materials can be created. In the worst-case scenario, if the language dies, then there is documentary evidence of the language, from which future generations can attempt to revive it if they see fit to do so.

But what if a language has already died? What if there are no video tapes or audio recordings from which it can be reconstructed? In this

case, the only way to reconstruct a language is through careful study and use of available documents. Can a spoken language be revived under these conditions — put back together from written sources? The simple answer to this question is “yes”, as shown in the case of the Hebrew language. For many years the Hebrew language was used only for literary and religious purposes, yet it was revived as a spoken language in the nineteenth century to great effect. However, Hebrew had passionate political and religious support that enabled its revival as the language of the State of Israel. What if a dead language does not have such religious or state support?

The Cornish language is considered by most to be just such a language — dead and without religious or significant state support. However, thanks to the efforts of local people, a revival is under way. The number of documents from which the language can be reconstructed has, unfortunately, not been as great as the revivalists would have liked, but undoubtedly the Cornish language is undergoing a revival. This revival has been the work of many people over a considerable number of years, and although the end goal is the same for all involved, the means by which the goal is best attained is a matter of much dispute. The body of available literature from which to revive the language is actually at the center of this dispute.

The first aim of this paper is to clarify the terminology used in this particular field of sociolinguistics. The labeling of languages as “dead” or “endangered” is contentious, highly political, and can affect the future well-being of the language. Next, the paper will look at the history of the Celtic language of Cornish focusing on how language contact with English caused its “death” and how the body of literature left from different periods of its history has had a great bearing on revival attempts. Finally, the current revival of Cornish will be examined through a ‘nine-

step language revival model' to show where the Cornish language revival movement has had its problems, and what conditions are necessary for a successful revival to take place.

2. Definitions and their dangers

When is a language considered to be "safe"? When does it become "endangered" or "threatened"? When can it be considered to be "dying"? And what constitutes a "dead" language? These are all questions that, on the surface, appear simple to answer. As Crystal (2000, p. 20) points out, "A common-sense classification [of languages] recognizes three levels: languages are safe, endangered or extinct." Krauss (1992) states that "safe" languages are those that have a large number of speakers or state support; "endangered" languages are those that may cease to be learned by children during the next century; and "moribund" languages refer to languages that are no longer learned as a mother-tongue by children in the present. "Extinct" or "dead" languages are often defined as languages that are no longer spoken. This may not actually be when the last speaker dies, as Crystal explains:

If you are the last speaker of a language, your language — viewed as a tool of communication — is already dead. For a language is really alive only as long as there is someone to speak it to. When you are the only one left, your knowledge of your language is like a repository, or archive, of your people's spoken linguistic past. (p. 2)

As mentioned, these kinds of definitions are contentious and often differ according to the individual and their motives. Linguists, members of the language community in question, and the general public often dis-

agree on the terminology. In the case of Cornish, in most literature, the Cornish language is described as “dead” since the late 18th century. Some sources declare it “dead” but give a nod to the attempts at revival by stating the fact in parentheses. However, members of the Cornish language revival movement often have a very different perspective, as shown by the publication *The Cornish Language is Alive and Kicking!* (n.d.) which states:

The often repeated statement that Cornish language died out, is misleading and in reality inaccurate. It would be more correctly described as ‘lesser used’. There is a wealth of evidence all round of the continued use of Cornish, in for example, the names of both places and people, the many dialect words directly attributable to the Mother tongue and in the manner that the Cornish construct sentences and idiom, in many instances retaining the influence of Cornish grammatical rules. (p. 2)

Just as some U. K. political bodies have a vested interest in declaring the language dead, as the above quotation shows, members of the Cornish language revival movement have the interests of the Cornish language at heart. Some would say that the Cornish language never in fact died, others that the date at which it effectively died being later than commonly construed. Berresford Ellis (1998, p. 20) asserts that there is “ample evidence” showing native Cornish speakers were alive in the early 19th century. His studies conclude that, “... it can safely be said that the last native speakers of Cornish did not die out until the end of the nineteenth century.”

Simplistic definitions of what constitutes a “dead” language are therefore difficult to make. Does a language die when it has just one remain-

ing speaker, or when there are no remaining fluent speakers? Or is it when there are no semi-fluent speakers left, or when there are no remaining people with any knowledge whatsoever of the language? The definitions differ and are dependent on the motives of the person.

3. Cornish language history⁴— a summary

The Cornish language is one of six Celtic languages that are split into two groups — the Goidelic (Irish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic) and the Brythonic (Welsh, Breton, Cornish). As with all languages, the Cornish language has changed over time. Its history can be divided into five periods: pre-Cornish; Old Cornish; Middle Cornish; Modern Cornish; and Revived Cornish.

Pre-Cornish

As Berresford Ellis (1998, p. 4) has written, Celts invaded Britain “in the first millennium BC” and Britain was entirely Brythonic-speaking “at the time of the Roman Conquest, 43AD.” After the Roman occupation came the period of Saxon invasion and advance, a period when the Celtic groups were split into three groups and pushed to the margins of Britain. One of these groups occupied the south-west of Britain, “the kingdom of Kernow, which the English called ‘the land of Cornish foreigners’ — Cornu-wealhas or Cornwall.” (p. 5) Due to the separation of the Celtic groups, it was at this time that the Celtic languages started to diverge, and the origins of Cornish can be traced.

Old Cornish

This divergence continued over the centuries and it was “not until the ninth century that we have the first recorded words of a language

which can safely be recognized as Cornish" (Berresford Ellis, p. 6). Old Cornish was used between the ninth century and mid-thirteenth century by which time MacKinnon (2000) estimates that there were 20,000 Cornish speakers. At this time there was, of course, considerable contact with the English language but the Cornish language of this period would have been healthy, and many of the speakers would have been monoglot Cornish speakers.

Manuscripts in the Cornish language dating to this period are few. As the Cornish Language Partnership website (2008) points out, many Cornish written texts from this period were destroyed by the Saxon king Athelstan in the tenth century. However, some documents do exist and these include the Bodmin Manumissions (a list of the Cornish names of freed slaves), the *Vocabulum Cornicum* (Cornish — Latin vocabulary list), and the Charter Fragment (a document giving marriage advice). As is evident, the old period of Cornish history has few documents to aid the reconstruction of the Cornish language.

Middle Cornish

The Cornish language of the Middle Ages reached its peak with 38,000 speakers in 1300, 73% of the population of Cornwall (MacKinnon, 2000). At this time, as MacKinnon has stated, "... the Cornish language functioned as the majority speech for all economic and social purposes in the life and society of Cornwall" (p. 4). English was, therefore, only a secondary language at this time. Between the mid-fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries, the number of Cornish speakers is believed to have remained at around 33,000, although the percentage of Cornish speakers in Cornwall was dropping due to a population rise. Contact with the English language meant that English was increasingly used in the east of Cornwall, however, contacts and trade were strong with the Bretons in

Brittany, and this kept the Cornish language relatively strong. What weakened the language severely was the Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549 in which “11 percent of the population” was killed for protesting the imposition of an English prayer book on the Cornish population. (MacKinnon 2004, p. 269) This date can be seen as a major point in the decline of the Cornish language and the growing influence of English in Cornwall.

From the middle Cornish period, documents that remain include “religious plays, poems and sermons” (Ager 1998). Of these plays, the Cornish Language Partnership (2008) states,

...the largest is a trilogy dating from the mid fourteenth century called the *Ordinalia*, which comprises *Origo Mundi*, (the Origin of the World), *Passio Christi* (the Passion of Christ) and *Resurrexio Domini* (the Resurrection of Our Lord). Notable also is *Bywnans Meriasek*, a play about the life of St Meriadoc of Brittany who became the patron saint of Camborne; and more recently *Bywnans Ke*, the life of St Kea, has been re-discovered and published.

For the Cornish language revivalists, the middle period of Cornish has more documentation on which to draw than the old period.

Modern Cornish

Cornish spoken between the mid-sixteenth and late 19th century is known as Late or Modern Cornish. By the early seventeenth century there were few monoglot Cornish speakers left and by the end of the century “Cornish speakers remained only in the extreme west of the peninsula” (Berresford Ellis, p. 14). The decline gathered pace in the eighteenth century, and in 1722 it was noted that even in the far west,

“only the fishermen and miners used the language at all” (p. 17). The period of Modern Cornish is when the language is said to have died. Many say that its exact date of death was in 1777 when Dolly Pentreath died. Others point to subsequent dates in the nineteenth century.

The Cornish language of this period had been affected by contact with the more dominant English language. Documents of the Cornish language from this period include “folk tales, poems, songs, and translations from the Bible” (Ager, 1998). The Cornish Language Partnership (2008) states that these Bible translations were an attempt to “revive popular interest in the language through religion.” Other documents include the most famous Cornish language folk tale, *Jowan Chy an Hor*, which was written in the late seventeenth century; an account of the spoken Cornish language by Edward Llyud in the early eighteenth century; and a letter dated 1776 from William Bodinar who learned Cornish from fishermen (Cornish Language Partnership, 2008). All of these documents provide evidence about the Cornish language in this period and are valuable sources for reconstruction of the language.

Revived Cornish

The Cornish language revival movement started in the early twentieth century. Henry Jenner published a Handbook of the Cornish Language in 1904. He based his work on “texts available to him at the British Museum” (Cornish Language Partnership, 2008). This was the start of a revival in spoken Cornish, and Jenner’s work was continued by Robert Morton Nance who developed the language by gathering together more of the source materials available. He developed a spelling system based on medieval texts and this came to be known as Unified Cornish. The revival continued until the current time, but not without its troubles. The period of the 1980s and 1990s is described by the Cornish Language

Partnership as,

... a time of review and reconsideration about the theory of reviving a language, plus additional research on the texts. This resulted in the proposal of different approaches which moved the language on from the initial research that Jenner and Morton Nance had carried out in the early twentieth century.

The “differing approaches” and the ensuing problems posed for the revival of the Cornish language are set out in detail in section 5 below.

4. Language Revival

Reviving a language is no simple matter and there is not one model of revival that fits all languages. Fishman (1991) stresses the need for transmission of the language between generations in the home. Bradley (2002) views the community members’ positive attitudes towards their minority language to be essential. Political power and economic influence are extremely important, as is collaboration and cooperation among the community language users. For small-scale minority languages, Hinton (2001) has produced a relevant model of language revival that can be applied to the Cornish case. This model sets out a series of nine steps towards language revival that concentrate on the early stages of language revitalization. Those steps are set out below.

Hinton’s steps are relevant for many of the world’s smaller minority languages because they concentrate on practical measures. The steps act as a guideline for community members and language planners to help enable languages to become vital once again.

In the case of the Cornish language, only step 3 is irrelevant as there

Table 1: Hinton's 9-step scale for revitalizing languages

Step 1	Language assessment and planning: Find out what the linguistic situation is in the community. How many speakers are there? What are their ages? What other resources are available on the language? What are the attitudes of speakers and non-speakers toward language revitalization? What are realistic goals for language revitalization in this community?
Step 2	If the language has no speakers: use available materials to reconstruct the language and develop pedagogy.
Step 3	If the language has only elderly speakers: Document the language of the elderly speakers.
Step 4	Develop a second-language learning program for adults. These professional-age and parent-age adult second-language learners will be important leaders in later steps.
Step 5	Redevelop or enhance cultural practices that support and encourage use of the endangered language at home and in public by first- and second-language speakers.
Step 6	Develop intensive second-language programs for children, preferably with a component in the schools. When possible, use the endangered language as the language of instruction.
Step 7	Use the language at home as the primary language of communication, so that it becomes the first language of young children. Develop classes and support groups for parents to assist them in transition.
Step 8	Expand the use of indigenous language into broader local domains, including community government, media, local commerce, and so on.
Step 9	Where possible, expand the language domains outside of the local community and into the broader population to promote the language as one of wider communication, regional or national government, and so on.

are no elderly speakers in the sense to which Hinton refers. All of the other steps are relevant and with the exception of step 9, each of the steps has been carried out in varying degrees. The details of the revitalization effort in each of these steps will be set out in a further paper, but if steps 1-8 have been addressed to a certain degree, the question of why the Cornish language revitalization movement has not grown at a greater

pace needs to be asked.

The answer to that question lies in step 2 of Hinton's scale. In order to revive a dead language, historical documents must be used. But documents from which period? Section 3 of this paper outlines the texts from each period of Cornish language history available to the language revivalists. The choice of materials⁴ and of the time period on which to focus revival attempts has been the crux of the problem in the Cornish revitalization movement. It has led to a three-way split, with each of the three groups advocating a different form of revived Cornish language.

In effect, three different dialects of Cornish have been competing. These Cornish dialects do not differ due to geographical location (as is the normal case when referring to dialects) but due to temporal differences, with each reconstructed dialect based on the Cornish language of different time periods. For the work that is taking place on the Cornish language in steps 3 to 8 of Hinton's scale to have greater impact, then it is the problems in step 2 of Hinton's scale — the reconstruction of the language — that need to be addressed in order for the Cornish language revival movement to gather pace. The following section looks in more detail at the different forms of revived Cornish, and the attempts at addressing the problems in step 2 of Hinton's scale.

5. Cornish Language Revival Groups: differences and the quest for a standard language

For the Cornish language revival movement to grow in strength it is important that those involved in the revival are united. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. Those involved in the Cornish language movement feel passionately about promoting Cornish, but as has

been stated, during the last thirty years the movement has split into three groups. Each of these groups promotes its own variety of Cornish and there has been no standard language. The three groups use three different forms of Cornish - Unified Cornish (and Unified Cornish Revised), Modern Cornish, and Common Cornish.

Unified Cornish bases the spelling on the Tudor period and the mid-sixteenth century. The spelling is based on a “corpus of medieval literature, although this involved only one genre, that of religious drama” (Deacon, 2006, p. 15). This is the form of the language created by Jenner and continued by Morton Nance. It was the earliest form of revived Cornish. Deacon states that Unified Cornish has “medieval spelling conventions but modern pronunciation”, and this compromise was the source of some dissatisfaction among Cornish language enthusiasts. Unified Cornish Revised is an amended version of this form of Cornish proposed by Professor Nicholas Williams. It is based on the texts of the sixteenth century as its main source (Cornish Language Partnership, 2008). The texts of this time had not been influenced by the English language to a great degree and are therefore considered by some to constitute a “purer” version of Cornish than that of later period texts.

Modern Cornish is generally associated with Richard Gendall. This form of Cornish was based on the Cornish language at a time when it was greatly endangered by the English language. The reasoning behind reviving the language from this period is that “... a language revival should be based upon the last available evidence from when the modern language was last spoken” (Cornish Language Partnership, 2008). The counter-argument to this view is that a language in its highly endangered state will have been greatly influenced by the dominant contact language, namely English, and therefore cannot be seen as a “pure” form of the language making it an unsound base from which to reconstruct the language.

Common Cornish is the third form of revived Cornish and is most commonly associated with the work of Ken George. His aim was to produce a rational spelling system that would greatly aid the study of the language. As George (2000) has written of the phonemic Common Cornish, "The near one-to-one relationship between writing and sound enables learners of Cornish to acquire a fairly accurate pronunciation with ease and speed." The underlying pronunciation of Common Cornish was based around the Cornish of 1500 (Deacon, 2006). In 1987, Common Cornish was adopted by the Cornish Language Board in principle. However, the three differing forms of revived Cornish continued (with no accepted standard form of the Cornish language) well into the new millenium.

Speakers of any language often hold strong feelings of attachment to their version of the language, and this is no different in the three cases of revived Cornish outlined above. Having taken the time and effort to reconstruct a language and learn it, it would be particularly galling to be told that your version of the language was incorrect or inferior. These strongly held beliefs by each of the three respective Cornish-speaking communities had led to an impasse in the search for a standard language that would take the Cornish revival movement forward. Emotions ran high and some of the disputes were acrimonious. However, many were tired of the impasse and recognized that the Cornish community, in spite of their differences, held a common goal — the revival of a strong and vibrant Cornish language. In the spring of 2008 a major breakthrough was made in the creation of a standard with which all sides could agree.

On May 19, 2008, the BBC news announced that a standard written form (SWF) of Cornish had been agreed. The Cornish Language Partnership (CLP) voted to ratify the SWF so that it could be used in education and public life. The four different forms of Cornish had now been

standardized. As Eric Brooke, chairman of the CLP said, “This makes a significant stepping-stone in the development of the Cornish language. In time this step will allow the Cornish language to move forward to become part of the lives of all in Cornwall” (BBC News, 2008).

This ratification of a standard written form for the Cornish language is a solution to the main problem in adequately fulfilling step 2 of Hinton’s scale for revitalizing minority languages. Having a standard written form that can be used in public life and in education will allow revival efforts in steps 4 through 8 of Hinton’s scale to have greater impact. It also increases the chances of the Cornish language revival movement being awarded funding from various U. K. and European governmental bodies. However, differences do still exist between the groups. Each of the differing versions of Cornish will continue to be spoken, just as dialects exist in any language. Misgivings also exist with the newly-created SWF. The group UdnFormScrefys believe that there are “linguistic inconsistencies and indeed errors” in the SWF. They wish to offer the public an adapted version of SWF although, on a positive note, they stress their misgivings about SWF are not an attack on its ad-hoc group authors. They go as far as to say the SWF authors’ “achievement in reconciling many differences is to be applauded” (Kernowek Standard, 2008).

6. Conclusion

Language is an important part of an individual’s identity and the right to speak one’s own language is an important human right. This is a fact that is becoming recognized as more and more of the world’s languages become endangered in an era of globalization. The efforts needed to revitalize an endangered language are great. For the case of languages that are deemed to have already died, such as the Cornish language, the

effort required is perhaps even greater, yet a significant group of Cornish people have felt the need to make such efforts – the reason being that they feel the Cornish language is an important part of their Cornish identity. These Cornish speakers will take offence if the language is described as “dead”, and describing it thus can have negative implications for revival efforts. Cornish speakers may well ask, “How can the language be dead if people are speaking it?”

Revived Cornish has three main versions (as explained in section 5) that can be thought of as dialects. Speakers of each of these versions have the right to speak their own version of the language. However, in recent years the differences between the groups have harmed the progress of the Cornish revival movement, with little common ground being found to create a standard language. However, the recent ratification of a standard written form of Cornish should allow the Cornish revival movement to progress and it is hoped that old animosities do not return to stifle this long-awaited positive step in the revival of the Cornish language. For a strong revival to take place the cooperation of the respective Cornish-speaking communities is paramount.

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