

Kimura Goro Christoph

Cornish and Esperanto: similar enterprises?

translated from Esperanto by Ken J. George

Abstract

This article compares Esperanto with the Cornish language. Located in the south-western part of Britain, this is a Celtic language which has more than a century-old history of a revivalist movement. In several sociolinguistic features, the similarities are eye-catching. The essential similarity is principally the voluntary construction of a language. But the two languages also have common features as regards the non-territorial base and partly concerning the non-ethnic character of the speakers. Other traits, often presented as particularities of Esperanto, such as the “internal image” or the creative approach to a language, are also identifiable in Cornish. In spite of numerous differences, the connections between the two languages raise the question whether each can learn from the experiences of the other. For example, the research methods used for Cornish may be instructive for research about Esperanto. On the other hand, the operation of the *Fundamento* [essential basis of Esperanto – K.J.G.] and negotiation about norms in Esperanto can be impelling for Cornish. More generally, achievements of comparative linguistics can be useful for language revival, and the comparison with Cornish, or with minority languages in general, opens another context for considering the properties of planned languages. A reciprocal interest and interchange of experiences can be useful for both sides.

1 Esperanto – a minority language?

In his keynote address during the 93rd Universal Congress of Esperanto (2008 in Rotterdam), entitled “Esperanto among the languages”, Humphrey Tonkin remarked that (Tonkin 2008: 176):

“[t]io, kion ni observas en nia movado estas sentebla ankaŭ inter aliaj lingvoj, precipe minoritataj lingvoj sen subteno de grandaj institucioj.”

[That which we observe in our movement may also be felt among other languages, above all minority languages without the support of large institutions – K.J.G.]

In this contribution to his *Festschrift*, let us follow his suggestion, and try to compare our language with a minority language. And the Cornish language, a revived Celtic tongue spoken in the south-western part of Britain, appears particularly interesting for this purpose, not just because the honoured gentleman comes from that region¹ - he was born and grew up in Cornwall until he left the region to study in Cambridge – but also because of its eye-catching similarity with Esperanto in several distinguishing sociolinguistic features. Firstly, let us make a concise overview of the history of Cornish, in order to subsequently compare it with our planned language.

¹ Humphrey Tonkin, who is professor emeritus of English of the University of Hartford in Connecticut, U.S.A., and an important personage in the world of Esperanto, was born in Truro in 1939 – K.J.G.

2 Cornish – a planned language?

In many regions of the world, there are efforts to revive minority languages. Referring to these attempts, Hebrew is often presented as an inspiring case of successful language revival. But in fact Hebrew had quite different pre-conditions compared to the present-day minority languages which one seeks to revive. Firstly, Hebrew was a language which remained in use, at least for religious purposes. On the contrary, (other) minority languages, often underestimated even by their speakers, do not possess such a history of prestigious use. Secondly, the evolution of Modern Hebrew was based on the need for communication between Jews speaking various languages on their arrival in Palestine. On the contrary, present-day speakers of minority languages often still use the state or the majority language as a common tongue. So, they neither have prestige nor are a requirement for communication, both highly necessary factors for the stability of the language.

In order to consider the possibility of reviving a minority language, which has to start from this exceedingly difficult standpoint, the example of Cornish is more appropriate than that of Hebrew. Nominally this language, which under the pressure of English had lost nearly all of its native speakers before the end of the 18th century, has already more than a century of history of a revivalist movement, and thus may be regarded as a pioneer for reviving minority languages.

The start of the Cornish revival is quite similar to that of a planned language. The occasion which symbolically denotes the start of the revival was the publication of the “first book” in 1904, the text-book² written by the “father of the language revival”, Henry Jenner. But the real base for the revived language was formed by Robert Morton Nance, mainly in the 1930s. Nance reconstructed the grammar, compiled a dictionary and established a pronunciation. Founded on this reconstruction, named “Unified Cornish”, the language began to evolve again. Language activists appeared, who created occasions for the ritual use of the language, published new text-books and organized courses. After some decades of mainly formal and written use, with the appearance of an original modern Cornish literature, by about the 1970s, the language attained the status of free spoken use, even as a home language.

More recently, in the 21st century, it has at last succeeded in gaining official recognition. In 2003 the British government included the revived language under Part Two of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, which guarantees a minimal grant for minority languages. Today it is thought that the language has a few hundred more-or-less fluent speakers, and more than a thousand who have learned the language, who can use or try to use the language at different levels. The experience of Cornish shows the difficult nature of a language revival, but also that it is possible to create a regional language without a core of native speakers.

3 Traits common to Cornish and to Esperanto

Ofte malmultaj studentoj venas al oficialaj vesperkursoj, sed ekzistas kelkaj kiuj kunvenas en hejmoj por lerni de volontaj instruistoj. La nombroj estas malgrandaj, sed la intereso daŭras. (Sutton 1969:10)

[Often a few students come to official evening classes, but there are some who meet in homes to learn from voluntary teachers. The numbers are small, but the interest persists. – K.J.G.]

² Jenner, H. (1904): *Handbook of the Cornish language*. London: Nutt. – K.J.G.

Such sentences could be a description of classes in Esperanto, but here they refer to Cornish. In fact, an Esperantist visiting Cornwall will easily note that basic (traditional) forms of learning and usage of the two languages are quite similar: courses, clubs, meetings and seminars. Grimley Evans, in an article about the Cornish revival, presented the appearance of original literature and the establishment of an organization for families. He wrote that “one is strongly tempted to compare with Esperanto” (Grimley Evans 1998: 24).

Having established the possible connections of Esperanto with minority languages, and the element of planning in Cornish (see 1 and 2 above), we are also tempted to a comparison. As a starting point for comparison, let us use the famous description of the Esperanto phenomenon as “a voluntary, non-ethnic, non-territorial speech community formed by conscious linguistic choice rather than by birthright membership” (Wood 1979: 433). How much of this characterization applies also to Cornish? And are there more points of comparison?

3.1 **The volunteer spirit**

Let us begin with the volunteer spirit. This attribute of Esperantists applies also to Cornish, Humphrey Tonkin confirmed to me from his experience of visiting “his own corner of the world”. Observing a remarkable progress in the [Cornish] language revival he asked questions of himself and answered as follows:

What revived it? Not practicality. Not economic opportunity. People *chose* it, *constructed* it, because they wanted to make selves different from the selves handed down to them by existing institutions of their society (Tonkin 2003: 154).

Despite the different motives, linguistic construction done by volunteers is a basic feature common to Cornish and Esperanto. In both cases a language movement played and plays an essential role for the existence and the evolution of the language.

3.2 **Non-ethnicity**

The second point, non-ethnicity, appears to be a difference between Esperanto and Cornish. But is the difference absolute? Firstly let us establish that Cornish speakers constitute only a minuscule part of the region’s inhabitants, less than 0.1%. So it is difficult to say that the Cornish language really operates as an ethnic language of the Cornish people. On the other hand, are the Cornish speakers ethnic Cornish? The analysis of the speakers of Cornish shows a somewhat different picture than one would suppose. Nominally, because of the favourable climate and living conditions, more and more people from other regions of Britain moved to Cornwall in the last few decades. And recent studies show that more and more learners of the language are often recruited from those who would not consider themselves as Cornish: among the new learners since 2000 already almost a half (Burley 2008: 13). Even if conversations with activists confirm that ethnic (or national) identity was and is one of the chief motives for learning the language, Cornish is not an ethnic language in the normal sense of being a mother-tongue of an ethnic group. As a community movement “formed by conscious linguistic choice rather than by birthright membership”, as I quoted Wood above, Cornish resembles the non-ethnic Esperanto.

3.3 **Non-territoriality**

On this point there is a clear difference between the two languages, because the very name Cornish already implies a relation with a specific territory. However, as regards the revived Cornish, the territoriality is relative in two senses. Firstly, the language is not learned and used exclusively in Cornwall. For example, in London there is already a long-standing meeting of lovers of the language, and a correspondence course is run from another region of Britain. Learners are to be found all over the world. Here are my experiences to illustrate this: The first Cornish speaker that I met was an American. And subsequently I had the occasion to congratulate two Czech people who passed the highest grade of examination in the Cornish language. Now I have the chance to meet Cornish speakers in Japan, who are working here.

But it is not just this “globalization” of Cornish which renders territoriality a relative concept. It is of greater concern that one cannot define Cornwall as a Cornish-speaking area. Unlike the Irish language, where there are defined Irish-speaking areas (*Gaeltachtaí*), nowhere does there exist a community of Cornish speakers. Speakers are found dotted across the region and outside it, and they travel by cars, buses and trains to lessons, meetings and seminars. One cannot draw a linguistic map which shows the territory where the language is spoken. One can merely indicate the places where there are individual speakers, courses or meetings. Also for Esperanto, it is only thus that the geographical existence may be indicated.

3.4 **“Internal image”**

We can yet add a few points not mentioned in the above-mentioned characterization by Wood. One is the importance of “internal image”. The function of an “internal image” for the evolution and use of Esperanto may be established empirically (Kimura 2003). The sociolinguist Joshua A. Fishman notes that minority languages also need something similar:

Every language needs an idea to keep it alive – a goal and a vision above the mundane and the rational – and a struggling language even more than others. (Fishman 1989: 7)

The “internal image” of Cornish is more national than international, more directed at regional difference than at the community of mankind (see the quotes from Tonkin at 3.1). The government tends to regard Cornwall simply as a peripheral part of England, but language activists regard Cornwall as a separate region, sometimes even as a nation, nearly on the same level as Scotland and Wales. So the image of the Cornish language, which aims to liberate the region from its present marginality, is significantly different from that of Esperanto; but the underlying importance of an idealized image for maintaining the language is comparable, because neither can be based on economic or professional necessity.

3.5 Creative approach to a language

Another aspect which is often presented as a particularity of Esperanto is also evident in Cornish. When I began to learn Cornish, I ordered a text-book with an audio-tape, to learn the pronunciation. However, with the tape which was sent, I found a slip of paper which warned that the reader tended to mispronounce the diphthong written <ow>. In the Cornish language, <ow> appears in important words such as *Kernow* ‘Cornwall’. It was then rather strange that the reader often fumbled over the pronunciation of this frequent sound. But even stranger was the fact that this tape was sent without shame to new learners! Afterwards, when I took part in a language seminar in Cornwall, it was made clear to me that Cornish speakers are not so rigorous about pronunciation as the BBC.

Let me give other examples. During a language lesson, when clarifying the rule for forming adverbs, our teacher said that in English, for example, one cannot form from the adjective *black* the adverb **blackly*, but in Cornish no such restrictions exist. The teacher proudly concluded that in this respect Cornish was superior to English. I also encountered a similarly liberal attitude towards word-creation. When we noticed that a Cornish word was missing from the dictionary, the teacher encouraged us to devise an appropriate word ourselves.

These experiences reminded me of Esperanto. Esperanto also prides itself for its liberal linguistic culture, which welcomes the creativity of ordinary users. Perhaps the absence of strict conventions from native-speakers allows this open-minded spirit.

3.6 Tonkin’s contribution

The above considerations showed that the chief common feature of the revived Cornish and the revived Esperanto is the voluntary construction of a language. But the two languages also have common traits in the non-territorial base and partly in the non-ethnic make-up of the speakers. Other properties, often presented as a speciality of Esperanto, such as an “internal image” or creative approach are also found in Cornish.

One could continue the search for connections, but we shall stop here in order to go on to the next step: comparison. Nevertheless, I cannot resist mentioning at least one further point. Nominally, one can estimate the depth of someone’s immersion in the language movement according to whether they know the name “Tonkin”. Just as one cannot be properly immersed in the bath of Esperanto without knowing the name (and perhaps the person) of Humphrey Tonkin, one cannot properly study Cornish without encountering the name of Thomas Tonkin (1678-1742), one of the last traditional writers of Cornish. And this historical Tonkin may genuinely be the forefather of our Tonkin.

4 Mutual learning – by the use of comparisons

Up to now we have looked at some connections between Cornish and Esperanto, both linguistic communities and movements, which depend mainly upon dedicated voluntary non-native speakers. One might even be inclined to say that the Cornish situation is like a kind of regional Esperanto-land, which has to develop the language and the community by itself, (almost) without like-minded members in other parts of the world.

Despite many differences, the connections between the two languages raise the question whether each can learn from the experiences of the other.

4.1 Experiences from Cornish of use to Esperanto

Firstly let us look at an example where Esperanto can learn from Cornish. In the year 2000 was published a sociolinguistic investigation concerning the history and the contemporary situation of Cornish, which was conducted by a person external to the movement (MacKinnon 2000). It showed the vitality of the revived language and very probably contributed to the official recognition of the language a few years later. The research report comprised the following chapters: 1. introduction, 2. historical evolution of the language and literature, 3. use of the language (where and how it is currently used), 4. the language in education, 5. organizations for the advance of the language, 6. financial means (grants etc.), 7. summary. Appendices were added about history, statistics, methodology and bibliography.

After the official recognition of the language, a study was made focusing more on the linguistic skills and domains of usage of the Cornish speakers (Burley 2008). It analyses the replies to a questionnaire about the following eight topics: participation in language activities, learning, speaking, writing, reading, listening comprehension, level of fluency, proficient and regular users.

Although there exist several interesting sociological studies about Esperantists, it seems to me that this kind of sociolinguistic study, one which shows a realistic factually based picture of the language community to the “external world”, is still lacking. The research methods used for Cornish, which has similar sociolinguistic features, can be instructive for researches about Esperanto on a local, regional, national and even a global scale. For example, the questionnaires could be used as a basis to design questionnaires about Esperanto. In addition, the commissioning of the analysis by external professionals is an interesting idea for increasing credibility.

4.2 Experiences from Esperanto of use to Cornish

But the experiences from Esperanto may also be of use to Cornish. As an example, let us look at the central problem of Cornish: the linguistic split. About a recreated language, one might suppose that it has no dialects, and thus no problem of normalization. At first this appeared to be the case. But subsequently the situation changed drastically.

From traditional Cornish, various texts and fragments remain from various epochs. Nance’s reconstruction was based on medieval texts, from a time when the language was still fully alive. And his “Unified Cornish” became the base of the revived language. In 1986, however, there appeared a new study, which asserted that it had succeeded in making a more accurate reconstruction of traditional Middle Cornish. This reformed unified Cornish, which also adopted a new orthography, was called *Kernewek Kemmyn* ‘Common Cornish’. The situation became even more complicated, when people appeared who began to reconstruct the language based on later material from the last years of the traditional language. Their reconstruction is called “Modern Cornish”. And so the movement split into various small groups, who now operate separately and even bitterly criticize one another. The tolerance towards creativity apparently does not apply to those from members of other groups. And attempts at compromise have resulted in numerous variants.

After official recognition, the situation has changed a little. Public pressure led to the development and promulgation of a “standard written form” of the language (see the web-site of the Cornish Language Partnership). But the future of the united attempts is still not certain.

Related to this problem, the history of reform in planned languages and the existence of an “untouchable kernel” in Esperanto can provide great food for thought for Cornish activists. And also the evolution of language norms in Esperanto based on linguistic consciousness (Fiedler 2006) is certainly impelling. In this regard the proposal of Probal Dasgupta to export the experience of Esperanto in negotiation³ about norms seems to me to be quite sensible. This property of Esperanto needs more investigation in order for it to be truly exportable.

5 Beyond mutual hesitations

We have seen above some points where experience in one may be useful for the other. There is, however, some hesitation on both sides about this comparison. On the Cornish side, there may be a hesitation to make a comparison with Esperanto, precisely because of the similarities, which the members of the movement perhaps may not wish to recognize. Recreated Cornish is often regarded as artificial and not really the language which was spoken in traditional Cornwall. The search for a more “authentic” language is in fact one reason for the above-mentioned linguistic split. The supporters of every variety assert that theirs is the most correct reconstruction. And between themselves they began to use the expressions used externally for devaluing the language revival. For example, a proponent of “Modern Cornish” considered that Unified Cornish is unnatural (Gendall 1993: 10), on the other hand, a fundamentalist of Unified declared *Kernewek Kemmyn* to be a completely artificial creation (Pool 1995:6), and an activist for *Kernewek Kemmyn* blamed the “modern” on the grounds that its revival was not possible without unnatural reconstruction and invention (Sandercock 1996:18).

The discussion about artificiality versus naturalness has a long history in comparative linguistics, and we now know how to render this dualism relative. Those principles from comparative linguistics can help to direct the discussion about revived languages – not just about Cornish but also about others – from mutual reproach into a more fruitful direction.

Unfortunately, even if attempts to compare Cornish with artificial languages exist, prejudices are apparent. For example, the head of the Institute of Cornish Studies⁴ made an interesting comparison between Cornish and artificial languages, noting as common traits the role of individuals and the ability to be easily learnt. But finally he emphasized the difference, throwing Klingon and Esperanto into the same pot and denying any “living identity” to planned languages.

Yet Cornish is not Klingon (or Esperanto). It is a language with a long history linked to a living identity (Deacon 2006).

On the other hand, Esperantists generally prefer to compare their language with English, concerning their function as an international language, rather than with minority languages. Such a comparison, however, shows only one aspect of the Esperanto phenomenon. Comparison with Cornish, or with minority languages generally, opens another context for considering the features of our language and its users.

³ “La esperantistoj scipovas senĉese intertrakti pri lingvaj kaj edukaj normoj. Ni ne evoluu en 999-an etnan lingvon. Male, la etnaroj lernu de ni tiun stilon de intertrakado.” (Dasgupta 2007: 244) [Esperantists know how to negotiate ceaselessly about linguistic and educational norms. Let us not evolve into the 999th ethnic language. On the contrary, let the members of ethnic groups learn from this method of negotiation.” – K.J.G.]

⁴ Kimura wrongly attributed this study to the head of the Institute of Cornish Studies (Philip Payton); it was actually written by Bernard Deacon – K.J.G.

Our concluding suggestion is therefore that the two languages can be an interesting two-way mirror for better understanding of each. A reciprocal interest and interchange of experiences can be useful for both sides.

Bibliography

- Burley, Stuart (2008): *A report on the Cornish Language Survey conducted by the Cornish Language Partnership*. Cornish Language Partnership (place of publication not shown)
Cornish Language Partnership. <http://www.magakernow.org.uk>.
- Dasgupta, Probal (2007): “Spica vizio”. *Esperanto* **100/12**, 243-244.
- Deacon, Bernard (2006): “Cornish or Klingon? The standardization of the Cornish language”. *Cornish Studies* **14**, 13-23.
- Fiedler, Sabine (2006): “Standardization and self-regulation in an international speech community: the case of Esperanto”. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* **177**, 67-90.
- Fishman, Joshua A. (1989): “Status planning for endangered languages”. In Fodor István, Claude Hagège (eds.) *Language reform, history and future*. Hamburg: Buske, pp. 1-11.
- Gendall, Richard (1993): *1000 years of Cornish*. Menheniot: Teere ha Tavas.
- Grimley Evans, Edmund (1998): “Lingvorevivigo. La kornvala”. *Monato* **19/1**, 23-24.
- Kennedy, Neil (1996): “Cornish today. A Modern Cornish perspective”. *Cornish Studies* **4**, 171-181.
- Kimura, Goro Christoph (2003): “The metacommunicative ideology of Esperanto: evidence from Japan and Korea”. *Language problems and language planning* **27/1**, 71-83.
- (forthcoming, 2009): “Esperanto also Minderheitensprache: eine sprachsoziologische Betrachtung”. In Sabine Fiedler (red.) *Esperanto und andere Sprachen im Vergleich*. Berlin: Gesellschaft für Interlinguistik (Interlinguistische Informationen, Beheft 16).
- MacKinnon, Kenneth (2000): An independent academic study on Cornish. EKOS Ltd / SGRUD Research. Revised version: Mackinnon, Kenneth (2005) “Cornish / Kernowek [sic]”. In Diarmuid Ó Néill (ed.) *Rebuilding the Celtic languages. Reversing language shift in the Celtic countries*. Ceredigion: Y Lolfa, pp. 211-274.
- Pool, P.A.S. (1995): *The second death of Cornish*. Redruth: Dyllansow Truran.
- Sandercock, Graham (1996). *A very brief history of the Cornish language*. Kesva an Taves Kernewek.
- Sutton, Geoffrey H. (1969): *Konciza historio pri la kornvala lingvo kaj ĝia literaturo*. Rotterdam: Universala Esperanto-Asocio / London: Brita Esperantista Asocio.
- Tonkin, Humphrey (2003): “Why learn foreign languages?” In Humphrey Tonkin, Timothy Reagan (eds.) *Language in the twenty-first century*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 145-155.
- (2008) “Esperanto inter la lingvoj: UEA en la dua jarcento”. *Esperanto* **101/9**, 175-176.
- Wood, Richard E. (1979): “A voluntary, non-ethnic, non-territorial speech community”. In William F. Mackey, Jacob Ornstein (eds.). *Sociolinguistic studies in language contact: method and cases*. The Hague, Paris, New York: Mouton, pp. 433-450.

Kimura Goro Christoph

Born 1974. Doctorate in linguistics, associate professor of Germanic studies, Sophia University, Tokyo; specializes in sociolinguistics; for Esperanto he has co-organized symposia, published articles and books on comparative linguistics; and recently (2009) has co-edited a text-book in Japanese about comparative linguistics.