

## Cornish – a fifth dialect of Breton?

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### A B S T R A C T

*From time to time the suggestion has been made that Cornish and Breton are so close that Cornish may be regarded as a fifth dialect of Breton. In the 1980s I refuted this suggestion by showing that, at least phonologically, the distance of Cornish from any of the four conventional dialects of Breton is greater than all of the inter-dialectal distances within Breton. The forthcoming conference gives me an opportunity to revisit this piece of research, and to add to it data for Welsh.*

On re-reading my original paper<sup>1</sup> after a span of twenty years, I am struck by the fact that the estimates of numerical distances between the dialects are highly dependent on the phonological history assumed for their development. After spending some months in Wales this year, I had hoped to add to the data and diagrams some results for the principal dialects of Welsh (north and south); but have not so far found a sufficiently detailed exposition of the phonological development of Welsh. Accordingly I present the original paper, plus a few notes, or more correctly my translation of it, since it was written in French.

### CORNISH - A FIFTH DIALECT OF BRETON?

In this paper, I wish to explore the hypothesis that Cornish is so close to Breton that it may be considered as the fifth dialect of Breton, from a phonological point of view. Of course, historically, it is rather the other way round, if one accepts the idea that Breton was brought by the Celts from the south-west of Great Britain. I do not wish to enter here into the thorny question of the relations between Gaulish and Brittonic. Moreover, by the expression “the fifth dialect”, I do not necessarily imply that there are only four dialects of Breton. I speak only in conventional terms.

- Unfortunately, I cannot study this question as deeply as I would like, for two reasons:
- (a) There is a disagreement about the origin of the dialects in Breton. Professor Falc'hun considers that the substantial difference between Gwenedeg and the others is very old. In this presentation, I follow the opinions of Professor Jackson, who in his book *A Historical Phonology of Breton* argues for a relatively recent divergence [of the dialects].
  - (b) In order to provide a satisfactory answer to the question “What is the distance between Cornish and a given dialect of Breton?” we need a workable numerical dialectology. By comparison with what might be achieved, the scheme presented here is rudimentary. I shall present it, nevertheless, in the hope of stimulating discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> GEORGE, K.J. (1985) “Le cornique - un cinquième dialecte du breton?”  
*La Bretagne Linguistique*, **1**, 117-124

The idea for this investigation came to me after having finished a phonological history of Cornish, and I wish to present the principal results in a Breton context. Although there are a growing number of people who speak Cornish, the language which they speak has been revived, and so there is no uninterrupted oral transmission for the Middle Ages to today. The current pronunciation of Cornish is substantially affected by English, and a comparison with today's Breton would be in a sense inappropriate. In the absence of traditional Cornish speakers, I was obliged to examine written sources. This examination was based on statistical analyses of graphemes in almost the entire corpus of existing literature<sup>2</sup>, using computer programs written for the purpose.

In order to compare the phonological development of Cornish with that of Breton, I extracted from my thesis<sup>3</sup> the principal sound-changes during the entire history of the language, i.e. from 600 to 1800. At the same time, I noted the changes in all the Breton dialects, using the works of Arzel Even (*Istor ar Yezhoù Keltiek*) and of Kenneth Jackson (*A Historical Phonology of Breton*). As far as possible, I arranged all of these changes in chronological order, and assigned to them a numerical value; one point or two points according to their supposed importance. The results are given in Table 1.

A given sound-change may affect a dialect in one of four ways:

- (i) it may apply to this dialect, in which case it is considered as an innovation, and counts one or two points;
- (ii) it may apply partially to this dialect, in which case it counts one point;
- (iii) it may not apply at all, in which case the dialect is conservative, and scores no points;
- (iv) owing to previous developments in this dialect, the sound-change is irrelevant: e.g. the fact that in 16<sup>th</sup> century Cornish the sound [f-] in absolute initial became [v], has nothing to do with the fact that the same change occurred in Tregerieg in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Because of the difficulties in dating the changes, I have grouped them in phases. By summing the total number of points for each dialect in each phase, we can estimate the phonological distance travelled by each in its own evolution. The figures are given in Table 2. It is evident that the numbers are identical for all four Breton dialects in the first two phases; this shows that, according to the sources utilised, no dialectal divergence occurred in Breton until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly the KLT<sup>4</sup> dialects of Breton did not diverge before the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

More interestingly, Table 1 may be used to estimate the phonological distances between the different dialects at a given epoch. If, for a given sound-change, dialect A conserves and dialect B innovates, a difference of one or two points arises between them. Starting from a date when they were identical, we can add up the differences between them for every subsequent phase, the cumulative total giving their distance apart at the end of each phase. These distances are given in Table 3. In the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Cornish and Breton were separated by 7 points, which is less than half of the distance travelled since 600, and less than the current distance between the members of KLT. At the start of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, this separation had more than doubled, as far as KLT is concerned. Note that the distance between Cornish and these three dialects is greater than that between them and Gwenedeg. When KLT split, the situation evidently became more complicated. The table has to be expanded, and the divergences between all of the dialects increase with time. In the final section of Table 3, Modern Breton is compared with the Cornish of 1800. This table shows that the distance between Gwenedeg and KLT is roughly twice the inter-dialectal distance within KLT, and that the distance between Late Cornish and all the Breton dialects is roughly thrice that of the inter-dialectal distance within KLT. In fact, the distance between Cornish and any given dialect of Breton has always been greater than any inter-dialectal distance within Breton.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1985, another major work in Middle Cornish has been discovered (*Beunans Ke*), and published in provisional form on the Internet.

<sup>3</sup> GEORGE, K.J. (1985) *A phonological history of Cornish*. Thesis successfully presented to the University of Western Brittany (Brest) for the degree of *Doctorat du Troisième Cycle*.

<sup>4</sup> KLT means the three closest dialects of Breton: Kerneveg, Leoneg and Tregerieg.

We may therefore reasonably conclude that, from a phonological point of view, Cornish should be considered not as the fifth dialect of Breton, but as a separate Brittonic language.

Analyses like this raise the question “How far apart do two dialects have to be in order for them to be mutually incomprehensible?” Although the question of comprehension includes lexical and morphological elements as well as phonological, it seems to me, that in the case examined here, the critical distance is about twenty points. This means that, at the start of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, all the Breton speakers understood one another, and that the Cornish speakers understood the Bretons, excepting those living around Gwened. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Cornish and Breton had diverged so much that they were no longer mutually intelligible. Today, the same criterion suggests that the Breton speakers of KLT can understand one another, but cannot understand a Gwenedeg speaker, which seems to be the case. In Figure 4, I have indicated some of the phonological distance geometrically. It should be pointed out that the relative distances of only three dialects may be precisely shown on a piece of flat paper. In order to represent  $N$  dialects, one needs to draw in  $(N-1)$ -dimensional space. Even so, Figure 5 gives an idea of the evolution of the five dialects.

I have never seen diachronic linguistics approached in quite this manner, though Professor Fossat’s team in Toulouse has done work of similar type. At the moment the technique is a blunt instrument. To hone it, I hope to replace the arbitrary points scores by parameters which express the phonetic magnitude of all the sound-changes and their frequencies in each dialect. Like Arzel Even, I find Jackson’s treatment of dental spirants ingenious but too complicated, and would like to re-examine this detail. Lastly, having established that Cornish is rather further away from Breton than one might have thought, it would be interesting to see where Welsh would come in these diagrams.

Note: As far as the critical distance between two dialects A and B is concerned, it must be remembered that the distance AB is not the same as the distance BA. For example, the speakers of dialect A may be able to understand those of dialect B, but the opposite may not be true.

### Principal sound-changes

Table 1

PHASE	SOUND-CHANGE	Pts.	C	K	L	T	G
Primitive 600-800	Retraction of /β/ and /μ/	2	I	I	I	I	I
	Internal <i>i</i> -affection	2	I	I	I	I	I
	[d] > [ð] in groups	2	P	I	I	I	I
	Loss of [γ] almost everywhere	2	I	I	I	I	I
OLD 800-1050	Svarabhakti in final syllables	2	I	C	C	C	C
	Fusion of /ui/ and /ci/	2	I	P	P	P	P
	/u/ > /ɔ/	2	I	P	P	P	P
	Fronting of /ø/ and /ω/	2	I	I	I	I	I
	/e/ > /ɛ/ and /ø/ > /ɛ/	2	I	I	I	I	I
	/i/ > /ɛ/	2	C	I	I	I	I
	[yw-] > [gw-]	2	I	I	I	I	I
	[θ] > [σ] and [ð] > [ʒ]	2	C	I	I	I	I

EARLY	Accent-shift	2	I	I	I	I	C
MIDDLE	/œ/ > /ɛ/	2	P	P	P	P	I
1050-1425	Loss of nasality > [v]	1	I	C	C	C	C
	Palatalization of /t/ and /d/	2	I	C	C	C	C
	Secondary affection	2	P	I	I	I	P
	/t/ > /ut/	1	C	I	I	I	I
	Pretonic /e/ > /i/ and /a/ > /ə/	2	C	C	C	C	I
	[əi] > [ɛ̃]	2	I	I	I	I	I
	/ui/ > monophthong	2	I	C	C	C	C
	Transference of nasality	1	X	I	I	I	I
	/-ɛ/ > /-ə/	1	I	C	C	C	C
	/k/ > /c/ and /g/ > /j/	2	C	C	C	C	I
	/x, s/ > /s, ʃ/ in groups	2	C	C	C	C	I
	/ɛm/ > /ãm/ and /ɛn/ > /ãn/	2	C	C	C	C	I
	LATER	[ao] > [õ]	2	C	I	C	I
MIDDLE	/xw/ > /f/	2	C	I	C	C	C
1425-1625	[ɛ:] > [ɛə]	1	C	C	I	C	C
	[-ə] > [-a] and [-ɔ] > [-a]	2	I	C	C	C	C
	[σ] > [ʒ] initially	1	X	C	I	I	C
	[σ] > [h], loss of [ʒ] elsewhere	2	X	I	C	C	I
	[w] > [v] between vowels	1	C	C	I	C	C
	Loss of [h-]	1	C	C	C	C	I
	/œ/ > /ɛ/ when stressed	1	I	C	C	C	X
	[-ĩ] > [-i] in stressed monosyll.	1	I	C	C	C	C
	/s-/ > /z-/ in absolute initial	1	C	C	C	I	C
	[n] > [r] in the article	1	C	C	I	I	C
	[-ex] > [-ax]	1	C	C	C	I	C
	[hw] > [xw]	1	C	X	I	I	C
	Loss of unstressed [-f]	1	I	I	I	I	I
	New lenition	2	I	I	I	I	I
	/nr/ > [dn] and /mm/ > [bm]	2	I	C	C	C	C
	Loss of intervocalic [w]	1	C	I	X	C	C
	[n] > [l] in the article	1	C	C	I	I	C
	[ʒ] > [z]	1	X	X	C	I	X
	Elimination of ½ long vowels	2	I	C	C	C	C
	MODERN after 1625	Partial loss of nasalization	1	X	I	I	C
/-o/ > /-u/		1	C	C	C	C	I
/y/ > /i/ when stressed		1	I	C	C	C	C
Partial loss of [-ð] and [-θ]		2	I	X	X	X	X
[n] > [r] in the article		1	C	X	C	X	I
Fusion of /ɪ/ and /ɛ/		2	I	X	X	X	X
Loss of /h-/		1	C	C	I	C	X
/s-/ > /z-/ in absolute initial		1	I	C	C	X	C
/f-/ > /v-/ in absolute initial		1	X	C	C	I	C
[-iɪ] > [-ɛɪ]		1	X	C	C	C	I
Failure to lenite [d-]		1	C	C	C	I	C
[ʒ] > [z]	1	X	X	I	X	X	

C = conservation

I = innovation

P = partial change

X = inappropriate

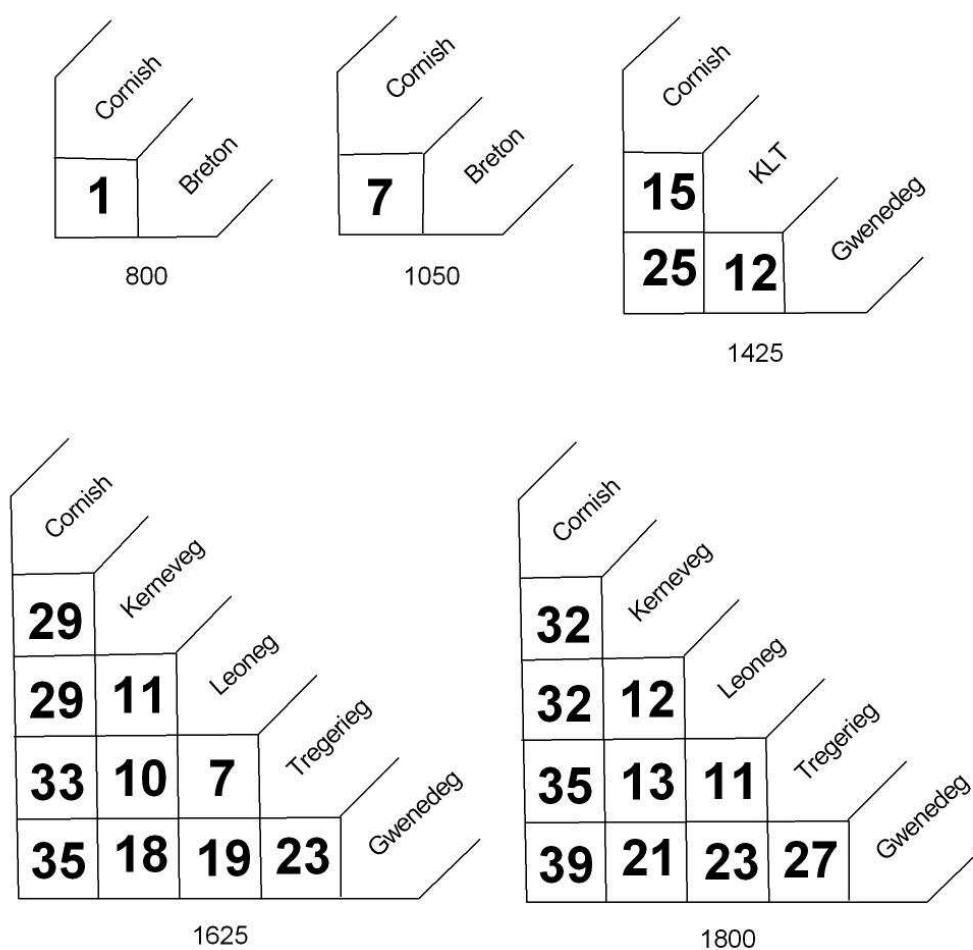
**Phonological distances travelled since 600**

**Table 2**

	<i>DIALECT</i>	<i>YEAR</i>	800	1050	1425	1625	1800
	Cornish		7	19	31	43	49
K	Kerneveg		8	20	29	39	40
L	Leoneg		8	20	29	38	41
T	Tregerieg		8	20	29	41	43
G	Gwenedeg		8	20	35	41	44

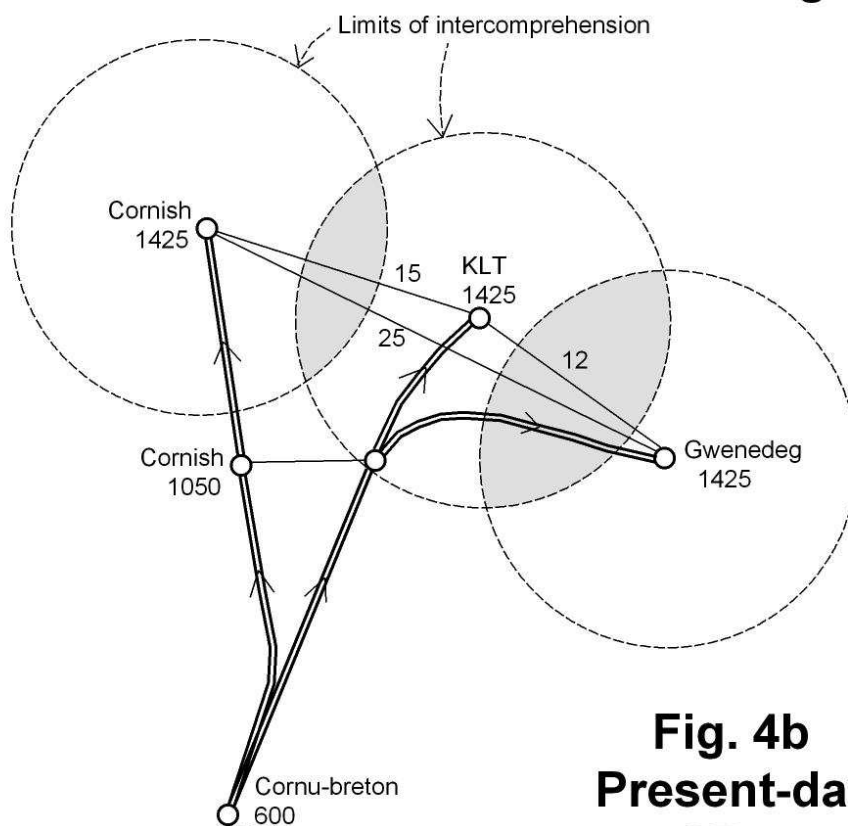
**Table 3**

**Phonological distances between the dialects**

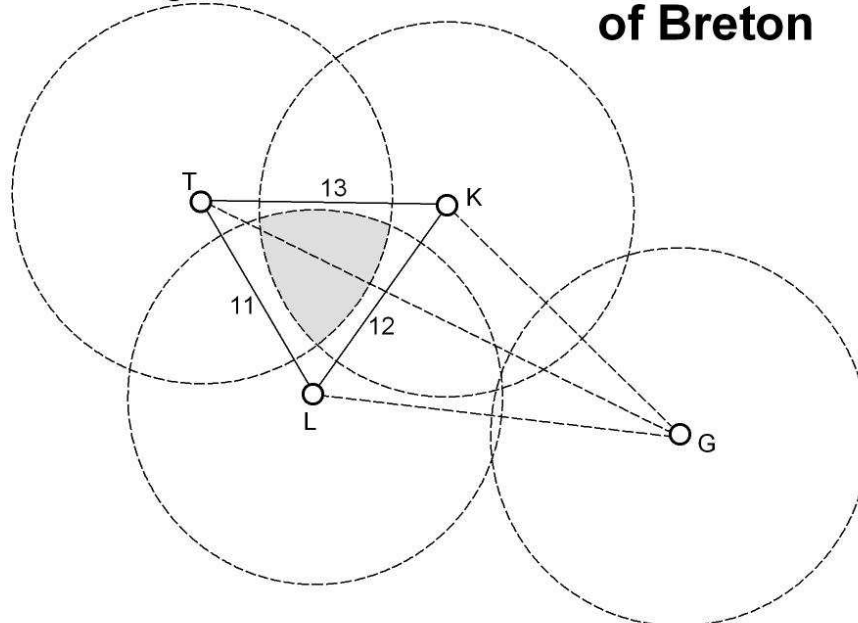


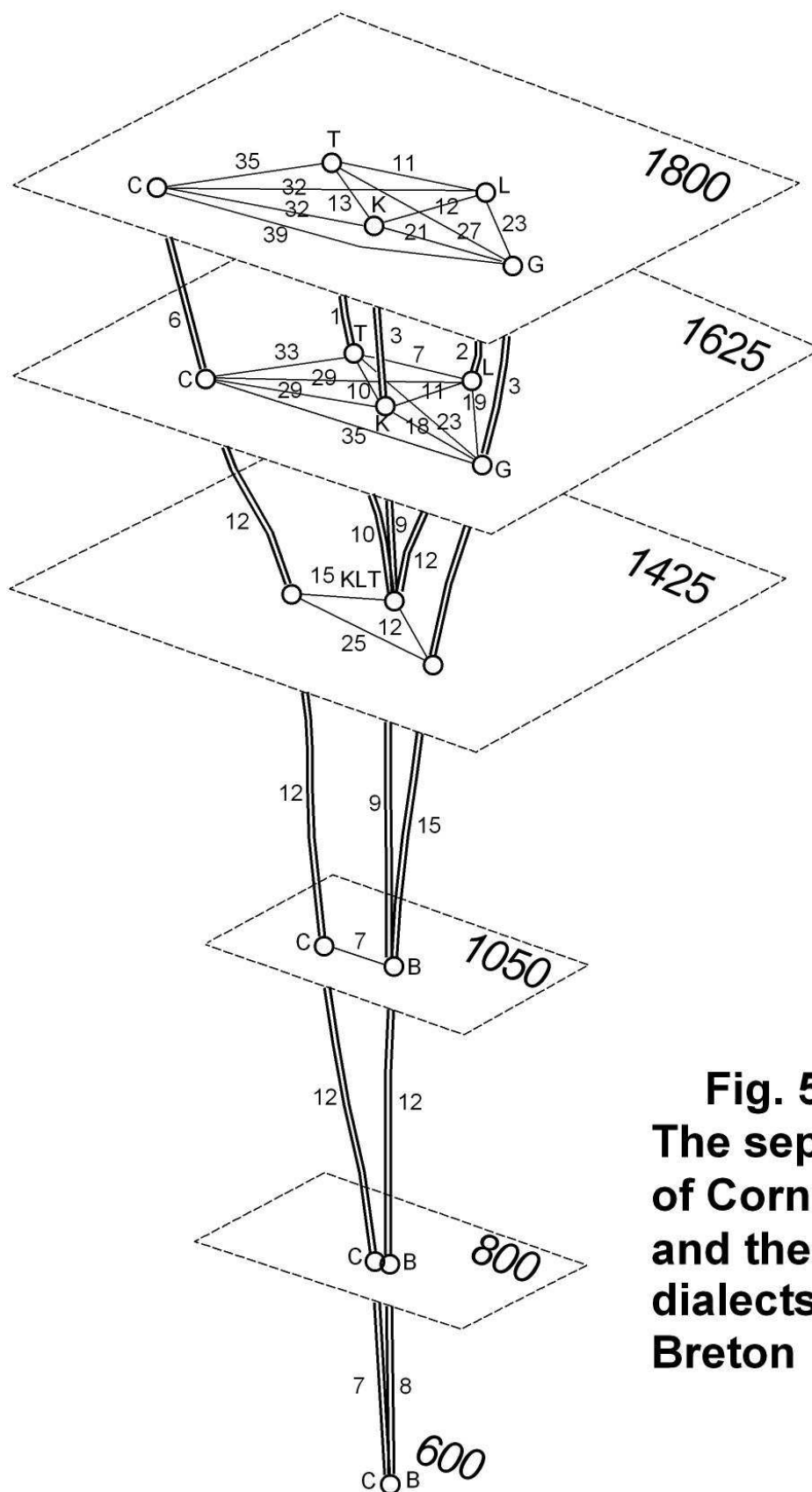
# Cornish and Breton from 600 to 1425

**Fig. 4a**



**Fig. 4b  
Present-day dialects  
of Breton**





**Fig. 5**  
**The separation**  
**of Cornish**  
**and the**  
**dialects of**  
**Breton**