

The treatment of the /o/ phoneme

One of the important discoveries which led to the introduction of KK was that there were two long o-vowels in Cornish; that the vowels in Unified *bōs* ‘to be’ and *bōs* ‘food’ were different, in both Middle and Late Cornish. Authenticity therefore demanded that this difference be recognized in Revived Cornish, both in pronunciation and spelling.

<o> was retained for the more open vowel [ɔ:] in *bos* ‘to be’, and a new spelling was sought for the closer vowel [o:] in ‘food’. A common spelling for the closer vowel in Middle Cornish was <oy>, but this is already in use for [ɔ], as in *moy* ‘more’. <oe> was chosen because it was used occasionally in place-names; <oo> was rejected because it comes from the English “signpost spelling”, and suggests the wrong pronunciation.

Because KK is largely morpho-phonemic, <oe> was used not only for the long vowel [o:] but also for its short counterpart, in words like *toemm* ‘warm’. The difficulty here is that the sound of the short vowel is very different; it is [ɤ], which is like the vowel in English *but*, but closer.

<oe> works well for the long vowel, but is not so appropriate for the short; Unified loan-words *bucca* and *rugby* appear as *boekka* and *roegbi*, for example.

The obvious graph for the short vowel is <u>, which is the commonest historical graph, notably in *arluth* ‘lord’ (KK *arloedh*). As noted in PSRC §11.6.5, “there is little risk of confusion with the <u> representing /y/, since the latter is almost always found as a long or half-long vowel.” If <u> is used for short stressed /o/, i.e. [ɤ], then it cannot also be unambiguously used for short stressed /y/, i.e. [y]. Closer examination of the situation reveals that there are only four words containing /y/ as a short vowel; of these, *stumm* ‘bend’, *drumm* ‘ridge’ and *hirdrumm* ‘long ridge’ (attested only in place-names) may be re-written as *stymm*, *drymm* and *hirdrymm*; this is tantamount to unrounding [y] to [ɪ], as happened in the history of the language. The other word, *unn* ‘one’ is much more common, and needs to be treated as an exception; but it is exceptional in any case, because it contains /n/ rather than /nn/, and yet was pre-occluded in Late Cornish.

At present, SWF uses <o> for the short form of /o/, i.e. [ɤ], and also for the short form of /ɔ/; thus the words for ‘deceit’ and ‘hole’ are both spelled *toll*. This is manifestly wrong, because these words were spelled differently throughout the history of traditional Cornish.

It is therefore proposed that, for both KK and SWF:

- long /o/ and mid-long /o/ be written as <oe>;
- short /o/ be written as <u>;
- *stumm* and *(hir)drumm* be re-written as *stymm* and *(hir)drymm*;
- the spelling of *unn* be unchanged.

ken.george@hotmail.co.uk

2016