

How should the word for ‘bonfire’ be spelled?

At a recent meeting of the Signage Panel, it was found that the word for ‘bonfire’ (Beacon on the map) had sometimes been spelled *tansys* by the Panel, and sometimes *tanses*. An investigation was requested.

The word is attested only once, at BM.2106, spelled *tanges*. GM09 states that the word is a compound of *tan* ‘fire’, and gives the Breton cognate *tantad*. The Welsh cognate (not in GM09) is *tandod*, which is *tan* + the abstract noun ending *-dod*. It is therefore evident that Middle Cornish *tanges* is *tan* + the Cornish cognate of Welsh *-dod*. In GM09, this cognate is written *-ses*; in traditional Cornish, the ending appears as a suffix in only four words; it also features (but not as a suffix) in the word for ‘Trinity’:

Table 1 *Words in traditional Cornish containing -ses*

Unified Cornish	KK (GM09)	English meaning	Welsh	Breton	SWF on-line
<i>densys</i>	<i>denses</i>	mankind	<i>dyndod</i>		<i>denses</i>
<i>dewsys, dewjys</i>	<i>duwses</i>	divinity	<i>duwdod</i>		
<i>tansys, tanjys</i>	<i>tanses</i>	bonfire	<i>tandod</i>	(<i>tantad</i>)	<i>tansys, tanjys</i>
<i>huvelsys</i>	<i>uvelses</i>	humility	<i>ufylltod</i>	<i>uvelded</i>	
<i>Trynsys, Trynjys</i>	<i>Trynses</i>	Trinity	<i>trindod</i>	<i>treinded</i>	

Like *tanses*, *uvelses* is attested only once, at VC.431, as *huueldot* (though copied by Lhuyd at LV091 and AB231a). The number of cases of the other three words is sufficiently small to list all of them:

Table 2a *Attestations of denses*

Spelling type	Textual spelling	Primary references	Copies
{-ys}	<i>densys</i>	RD.2487, 2502, 2621; PA.010; BM.4502; TH15r, 56r	LV.051 (miscopied as <i>deusys</i>); PV.089, 171, 187
	<i>densis</i>	BM.0888	
	<i>zensys</i>	PA.060, 258	PV.171
	<i>gengys</i>	BK03.14	
	<i>dengys</i>	BK03.22	
	<i>dynsys</i>	TH12v, 13v	
	<i>dowgys</i>	BK04.87 (an error for <i>dengys</i>)	
{-es}	<i>denses</i>	RD.2514, 2531, 2609	

*Table 2b Attestations of **duwses***

Spelling type	Textual spelling	Primary references	Copies
{-ys}	<i>dewsys</i>	OM.2666	PV.090 (twice, as <i>deusys</i>)
	<i>dewsys</i>	BM.0889	
	<i>zewsys</i>	PA.054, 060	LV.139, PV.171 (as <i>thewsys</i>)
	<i>dusys</i>	TH12v, 15r	
	<i>devgys</i>	BM.0884	
	<i>thowgys</i>	BK03.11, 04.88	
	<i>dugys</i>	TH12v	
	<i>thugys</i>	TH15r	
{-es}	<i>dovses</i>	RD.2454	
	<i>dvses</i>	RD.2515	
	<i>dewses</i>	TH01v	
	<i>dewges</i>	CW.0006	PV.125
	<i>thowges</i>	BK03.081	

*Table 2c Attestations of **trynses***

Spelling type	Textual spelling	Primary references	Copies
{-ys}	<i>drynsys</i>	OM.1734, 2660; TH01v twice	
	<i>drinsis</i>	TH01v	
	<i>drinzis</i>	AB231a	
	<i>drensys</i>	BM.0994, 4414	
	<i>drensis</i>	BM.0500	
	<i>dryngys</i>	BK01.31, 04.27, 04.56; TH12v twice, TH15r	
	<i>dringys</i>	TH05v, 15v, 20r	
	<i>dringis</i>	TH30r	
	<i>drengys</i>	RD.0309a; BK26.58; CW.0125, 2009, 2240	LV.056
	<i>drengis</i>	CW.0708, 1957, 2096	
{-es}	<i>drences</i>	PC.0068	AB231a
	<i>drenges</i>	CW.0513, 1397, 1941	PV.094, 181
	<i>drendzhez</i>	AB231a	
{-as}	<i>drindas</i>	AB241a	
	<i>drindaz</i>	LV.058	AB028a, AB166c, PV.094
	<i>drindzhaz</i>	AB241a	

It is primarily the quality of the vowel in the final unstressed syllable which is of interest here. Counting all of the cases in the primary references above gives:

Table 3 Orthographic profile of final syllables

	VC	PC	RD	OM	PA	BM	BK	TH	SA	CW	Lh
<-ot>	1										
{-ys}			4	3	5	7	9	18		6	1
{-es}		1	5			1	1	1		4	1
{-as}											3

Table 3 shows that the commonest spelling-type for these words in Middle Cornish is {-ys}, which no doubt explains why they are spelled with -ys in Unified Cornish. This {-ys} apparently really means [-is]; if it were [-es], then we would expect more examples of <-as> in Late Cornish than just the three (suspect?) cases in Lhuyd.

Why, then, are they spelled with *-es* in *Kernewek Kemmyn*? The reason is that *Kemmyn* tends to apply the same development of a given sound in a given phonetic environment, to all words which contain that sound. The suffix *-ses* comes from British *-tāt-* < Latin *-tāt-*. Usually British *-āC-* (where C is any consonant) gave Old Cornish *-oC*, *-uC* [-æC] > Middle Cornish *-eC* [-εC] > Late Cornish *-aC* [-aC]. The commonest example is British *-ākos* > Old Cornish *-oc*, *-uc* > Middle Cornish *-ek* > Late Cornish *-ack*. Applying this broad-brush principle gives *-ses* rather than *-sys*. It is not known why *-sys* is found more commonly in Middle Cornish instead of the expected *-ses*; it may be by analogy with the very common past participial ending *-ys*. The following entry appears in GM09:

⁻¹SES *suffix* (masc. abst. noun ending from adj.) e.g.
uvelses 'humility' from **uvel** 'humble'. [l: CLat *-tāt-* (gpc)] There is a conflict here between the etymologically expected *-ses* and the *-sys* found in MidC; words with this suffix were often rhymed with words in <*-ys*>.

The suffix *-ses* is an active one. In traditional Cornish only five words are found containing it; Nance added 13 more, and since his time six more have been recorded, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4 *Words containing -ses*

KK (GM09)	English meaning	First attested	Unified spelling	SWF on-line
<i>ankempennses</i>	untidiness	GM09		
<i>benynses</i>	womanhood	EC52	<i>benensys</i>	
<i>bodharses</i>	deafness	CE38	<i>bodharsys</i>	
<i>bryntinses</i>	excellence	EC00		
<i>denses</i>	mankind	PA	<i>densys</i>	<i>denses</i>
<i>duwses</i>	deity	PA	<i>dewsys, dewjys</i>	
<i>gourses</i>	manhood	GM09		
<i>gwiryonses</i>	sincerity	CE38	<i>gwiryonsys</i>	
<i>henses</i>	antiquity	CE38	<i>hensys</i>	
<i>kempennses</i>	tidiness	EC52	<i>kempensys</i>	
<i>kesunnses</i>	amalgam	AnG1994		
<i>lekses</i>	laity	CE38	<i>leksys</i>	
<i>mabses</i>	boyhood	EC52	<i>mapsys</i>	
<i>myghternses</i>	sovereignty	CE55	<i>myghternsys</i>	
<i>myrghses</i>	girlhood	GM09		
<i>pergherinses</i>	pilgrimage	CE38	<i>perghyrynsys</i>	<i>pergherinses</i>
<i>reythses</i>	equity	GM09		
<i>rydhses</i>	liberty	CE38	<i>rythsys</i>	<i>rydhses</i>
<i>skolheygses</i>	scholarship	EC52	<i>scolhyksys</i>	
<i>tanses</i>	bonfire	BM	<i>tansys, tanjys</i>	<i>tansys, tanjys</i>
<i>trynses</i>	trinity	PC	<i>trynsys, trynjys</i>	
<i>unnses</i>	unity	CE38	<i>unsys</i>	<i>unses</i>
<i>uvelses</i>	humility	VC	<i>huvelsys</i>	
<i>yowynkses</i>	youth	CE38	<i>yowynksys</i>	

The SWF on-line dictionary includes only five of the 24 words in Table 4; that for 'bonfire' is spelled with *-sys* (and *-jys*), while the other four have *-ses*. It appears that the matter has not been studied by the devisers of SWF. It is hardly surprising that the Signage Panel have shown inconsistency in the past.

It is desirable that the ending in all of these words is spelled the same way. For an orthography based on Middle Cornish, there is a strong case for spelling these words with <-sys>, in spite of the etymologically expected <-ses>. It appears sensible to change the spelling of these words in *Kernewek Kemmyn* from *-ses* to *-sys*; before implementing such a change in the new edition of *Gerlyver Meur* (GM19), however, it would be prudent to adopt the same spelling in SWF. In Late Cornish, earlier *-ys* (notably in past participles) was often written *-es*, but this does not appear to be recognized as a Late variant in SWF; e.g. *melys* 'sweet' has only one form in the SWF dictionary. This document is therefore being circulated to many users of *Kemmyn* and SWF alike. Comments are welcome.

Of the five words, all except *uvelsys* show forms with <-g-> (meaning [-dʒ-]) as well as forms in <-s->. The existence of <-g-> indicates that <-s-> means [-z-] rather than [-s-], so that it would actually be better to spell these words with <-zys>. This question of palatal and assibilated forms is, however, much wider than just the set of words considered here.

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