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Were there dialects in traditional Cornish?

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INTRODUCTION

1. Since dialects are a feature of all other Celtic languages, they probably existed in traditional Cornish as well.
2. Nevertheless, the spatial differences in Cornish place-names observed hitherto do not require the invocation of dialects for their explanation.
3. Nicholas Williams takes a different view; that there were two dialects, western and eastern.

TREATMENT OF /-nt/ AND /-lt/ IN CORNISH

4. A significant difference between Cornish and the other Brittonic languages is that /-nt/ and /-lt/ were assibilated to [-ns] and [-ls], c.1100.
5. Examination of place-names (Gover 1948, Wakelin 1975) showed <-nt> east of a line from the Camel estuary to the Fowey estuary, and <-nce> to the west of it.
6. This led to the incorrect interpretation that Cornish was no longer spoken east of this line after c.1100.
7. The real reason for the <nt> forms in the east is that the place-names there were taken into English before the assibilation, and documents were usually written by English-speaking scribes.

TREATMENT OF /d/ IN CORNISH

8. Soon after c.1100, Old Cornish /d/ was often assibilated to [z] (written <s>), but medially before high front vowels, /-d-/ was written <s> or <g> in Middle Cornish.
9. Williams (1990) suggested that the difference between <s> (= [z]) and <g> (= [dʒ]) was dialectal: <s> in the east and <g> in the west.
10. He showed that the use of <s> or <g> is text-dependent, which suggests that the texts with <s> may have been written in the east, and those with <g> in the west.
11. Holmes (2003) showed that there are several dozen examples of <s> and <g> east of the Camel – Fowey line, indicating that Cornish was spoken there at the time of the assibilation, and probably for some time afterwards.

PRE-OCCLUSION

12. Another innovation in Cornish is the set of changes /'nn/ > ['dn] and /'mm/ > [bm] (e.g. *pen* 'head > *pedn*), called pre-occlusion, which occurred in the 16th century.
13. The distribution of place-names containing pre-occlusion (west of a line from Newquay to St Austell) accords with other evidence showing the retreat of Cornish from east to west.
14. Williams (1998) disagreed with this; he suggested that in the east, the opposition /nn/ v. /n/ was neutralized.
15. This would mean that there would be more confusion between /nn/ and /n/ in the east than in the west; an examination of place-names (George, 2009: 531) showed no such distinction.

OLD CORNISH /ui/ > [u:]

16. Before consonants other than /m, n, l, r/, the stressed reflex of Old Cornish /ui/ appears in place-names as <oo-e>, e.g. *cuít* 'wood' > *coose*. These forms are found to the west of a line from Wadebridge to St Austell.
17. Williams (2006) postulated two mechanisms to explain <oo-e>: in his "western dialect", direct monophthongization /ui/ > [u:]; in his "eastern dialect", /ui/ > [o:], transfer to English, raising by Great Vowel Shift.
18. This invocation of dialects is unnecessary, since the eastern limit of the <oo-e> forms corresponds to the boundary of Cornish c.1550, the date when <oo-e> first began to appear in the texts.

ASSIBILATION AND PALATALIZATION

19. Williams' (1990) suggestion that the reflex of Old Cornish /-d-/ had {s}-type spellings in the east and {j}-type spellings in the west has been subjected to much greater scrutiny; all available examples of historical forms in place-names were used, instead of a limited selection of etyma.
20. Four different cases of the reflex of Old Cornish /-d-/ were examined: before high front vowels, and before other vowels, both stressed and unstressed. The distribution of {s}- and {j}-type spellings was mapped for each case.
21. On every map, the dividing line between {s} and {j} (or {s} and {s}~{j}) roughly follows the boundary between Powder and Pydar hundreds, or the watershed between the north and the south coasts.
22. To the south-east of the line, with its core in the Roseland, is an area where the reflex of OldC /d/ and /t/ was written {s} almost exclusively. To the north-west, in a strip along the north coast, is an area where {d} developed to {j}, either exclusively or mixed with {s}.
23. The fact that this isogloss appears on all four maps in approximately the same alignment (not far from the present A30) suggests that it was a real linguistic feature, and one which has not been detected before. In mid-Cornwall, then, it appears that there were two dialects ("Powder" and "Pydar").

CONCLUSIONS

24. Every change in place-name elements is explicable by the phonological changes in and the retreat of Cornish;
25. except for, perhaps, {s} and {j}. These suggest that there were dialects, but instead of western and eastern dialects, they were situated north and south.

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