

Promoting *Kernewek Kemmyn*

Dr Ken George
Cornish Language Board

0 INTRODUCTION

After decades of indifference on the part of officialdom, Cornish received a measure of official recognition in 2002, when the British Government ratified Part II of the European Charter for Minority Languages in respect of the language. This has opened the prospect for some funding, and for a much greater use of Cornish in public life and in education. The existence of several orthographies does not help the cause of Cornish, however. Here a case is presented in favour of *Kernewek Kemmyn* being recognized as the official orthography.

1 BACKGROUND

Nineteen years ago, the Cornish Language Board published *The Pronunciation and Spelling of Revived Cornish* (hereafter *PSRC*), a monograph setting out the rationale and details of a proposed improvement to Nance's Unified Cornish, the spelling system then in use. The proposals were debated extensively in public, and then put to the vote at a meeting of the Board in July 1988. All members present except for Richard Jenkin voted in favour of the improved orthography, which at the suggestion of John King, became known as *Kernewek Kemmyn*.

Teachers were quick to appreciate the advantages of *Kernewek Kemmyn*, particularly the close connection between the written and spoken word, which enabled learners to acquire a reasonable pronunciation with speed and ease. As the deviser of the new system, I was under pressure to produce a new dictionary. This was published in 1993 with the title *Gerlyver Kernewek Kemmyn (GLKK)*.

Kernewek Kemmyn has been an immense success. Over 120 books have been published using it, notably a translation of the New Testament from original sources, under the direction of Keith Syed.

Unfortunately, *Kernewek Kemmyn* has not found favour with a minority of Cornish speakers. A few have preferred to continue with Unified Cornish, despite its deficiencies. Another small group has been attracted by a revision of Unified which was made by Nicholas Williams in the mid-1990s.¹ Yet others have rejected the Middle Cornish base for the revived language used by Nance, and instead have tried to concoct a form of Cornish based on the Late Cornish written in the 17th and 18th centuries.

¹ This revision is known as Unified Cornish Revised (UCR).

2 PRINCIPLES OF ORTHOGRAPHIC SYSTEMS

In 1979, Tim Saunders pointed out that an orthographic system may be based on any of the following principles, or on a combination of them:

- (i) **historical**, in which the spelling of a previous epoch which may refer to a pronunciation no longer in use;
- (ii) **etymological**, where the spelling of each word reflects its origin;
- (iii) **morphemic**, where the spelling is based on grammatical segments of words known as morphemes;
- (iv) **phonemic**, in which each phoneme² is represented by a separate grapheme,³ and each grapheme represents a unique phoneme.

Tim's list was given in *PSRC*. To it may be added:

- (v) **phonetic**, in which each sound is represented by a separate grapheme, and each grapheme represents a separate sound.

The differences between (iv) and (v) will become more apparent in the discussion below.

3 HISTORICAL ORTHOGRAPHIES OF CORNISH

Four (or perhaps five) orthographies were used at various times throughout the history of traditional Cornish (600 to 1800 A.D.)

- (a) **Old Cornish**
This was not a distinctive Cornish orthography, but that of Old English, itself being based on Latin spelling but with additional characters such as þ and ð.
- (b) **Middle Cornish (MidC)**
This was not a distinctive Cornish orthography, but that of Middle English. Difficulties arose in representing sounds such as [œ] which no longer existed in Middle English.
- (c) **Late Cornish (LateC)**
This was not a distinctive Cornish orthography, but that of early Modern English.

² A phoneme is a minimum contrastive sound in the phonological system of a language and usually indicated in writing by slanting lines; phonemes are most easily thought of in terms of minimal pairs such as English *bat* and *bad*, illustrating that /t/ and /d/ are separate phonemes in English.

³ A grapheme is a letter or group of letters representing a sound and usually indicated in writing by angled brackets; e.g. in English, <sh> is a grapheme representing the sound [ʃ].

(d) **Lhuyd’s orthography**

Lhuyd devised this phonetic spelling system to be used not just for Cornish, but for all the Celtic languages. Some of his graphemes do not appear in the Roman alphabet, e.g. <ð> for [ð], <τ> for [θ], and an inverted a for [ɒ]. He also applied diacritics to vowels (mainly dots underneath them and circumflexes above them).

The problem of Cornish orthography in the eighteenth century

Differences of opinion about how to spell Cornish are not new. In the 18th century, some writers continued to use the LateC (i.e. contemporary English) spelling, because they were unaware of Lhuyd’s work (e.g. William Bodener), or did not wish to use it (Oliver Pender). Others (e.g. William Gwavas) used some of Lhuyd’s ideas, notably circumflexes to denote long vowels. This might be regarded as a fifth historical orthography. They were not consistent in applying Lhuyd’s ideas and often omitted diacritics. William Scawen and his nephew John Keigwin, followed by Thomas Tonkin, had copies of some of the texts (*Voc.C.*, the *Ordinalia* and *CW.*), and wrote Cornish using a modified form of MidC orthography.

4 **THE ORTHOGRAPHIC PRINCIPLES AND *KERNEWEK KEMMYN***

The basis of *Kernewek Kemmyn* was laid down in great detail in *PSRC*, but because there have been changes to the system since 1986, the application of the orthographic principles in section 2 are summarized here.

4.1 **The phonemic principle**

In describing *Kernewek Kemmyn*, the emphasis has been on its phonemic qualities (indeed, the term Phonemic Cornish has occasionally been used of it). This is not surprising, because it is its phonemic properties which make it so easy to learn. Like any language, the number of phonemes in traditional Cornish changed over time, and we cannot be sure of how many there were at a given epoch. This statement is not so weak as it may seem; phoneticians cannot agree on the number of phonemes in English. In cases of doubt, *Kernewek Kemmyn* defaults to more rather than fewer phonemes. The following list applies to the time of the earliest MidC texts (*CE.*); each phoneme is given along with its corresponding grapheme:

Vowels:	/i, ɪ, ε, a, ɔ, o, u, y, œ/	<i, y, e, a, o, oe, ou, u, eu>
w-diphthongs	/iʊ, ɪʊ, εʊ, aʊ, ɔʊ, yʊ ⁴ /	<iw, yw, ew, aw, ow, iw>
i-diphthongs	/εɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ/	<ey, ay, oy>
Semi-vowels	/j, w/	<y, w>
Consonants	/p, t, k; b, d, g/	<p, t, k; b, d, g>
	/tʃ, dʒ, v, z, ð, ʃ, h, ŋ/	<ch, j, v, s, dh, sh, h, ng>
	/m, n, l, r; mm, nn, ll, rr/	<m, n, l, r; mm, nn, ll, rr>
	/s, θ, f, x; ss, θθ, ff, xx/	<s, th, f, gh; ss, tth, ff, ggh>

⁴ This diphthong (more properly [œʊ]) was later represented by the “Baileygraph” <yw>.

The way in which a given phoneme is pronounced is known as its **realization**. This has two aspects: **quantity** (the duration of the sound) and **quality** (the nature of the sound). Both quantity and quality may depend on whether the phoneme is in a stressed or an unstressed syllable. When stressed, the quality is generally⁵ that indicated by the symbol used for the phoneme in the inventory given above; e.g. stressed /i/ in *mis* ‘month’ has the quality [i] and stressed /nn/ in *mynn* ‘wishes’ has the quality [nn]. Quantity is dealt with below.

4.2 Deviations from the phonemic principle

Kernewek Kemmyn is not perfectly phonemic, though it is more phonemic than the orthographies of most languages. The deviations are:

- (i) <y> is used for both /i/ and /j/. This does not cause much difficulty in practice.
- (ii) Final unstressed /b, d, g/ are written <p, t, k>. This is because the contrast between final unstressed /b, d, g/ and /p, t, k/ is neutralized in favour of [p, t, k]; these are phonetic spellings.
- (iii) At present <yw> is used for both /iʊ/ and /yʊ/. This is because /yʊ/ has only recently been recognized, following work by Keith Bailey. The easiest way to deal with this would be to use <uw> for /yʊ/⁶.
- (iv) The sound [z] existed in LateC, and presumably in MidC, too, though it was nearly always written <s>. Whether it was phonemic or allophonic⁷ is not clear; the rhyming contrast in *BK*. between:
 - (a) *thas* ‘father’ and *cas* ‘battle’, in which <s> represents the assibilation of Old Cornish /d/, almost certainly [z]; and
 - (b) *Das* ‘Dacia’ and *plas* ‘place’, in which <s> represents a voiceless sound, either [s] or [ts].

If this difference is to be included in *Kernewek Kemmyn*, then it is much easier to retain <s> for the many examples of (a), and to use a different grapheme (<c> is the most obvious) for the examples of (b).

4.3 The etymological principle

The etymological aspect of *Kernewek Kemmyn* has perhaps not been sufficiently explained. It is important:

- (a) when determining how to spell words with a regular phonological development;
- (b) when coining new words on the basis of Breton and Welsh cognates (see section 7.5).

⁵ /o/ has the quality [o] when long or of mid-length, and [ɤ] when short.

⁶ [This improvement was adopted in the *Gerlyver Meur* \(2009\).](#)

⁷ An allophonic difference between two sounds is one which is perceptible, but the two sounds are still part of the same phoneme.

4.4 The historical principle

As has been pointed out by Tim Saunders and by Julyan Holmes, the requirements of Cornish orthography historically are not the same as those today. In the past, people knew how to pronounce the language, and the written form was a useful “visual adjunct to aural memory”. Today, because most people learn Cornish from books, the requirements are different.

5 OBJECTIONS TO *KERNEWEK KEMMYN*

The principal written objections to *Kernewek Kemmyn* were made by Nicholas Williams⁸, and these have been dealt with in *Kernewek Kemmyn - Cornish for the 21st century* (KK21). Otherwise, one hears various comments from time to time.

On occasion, objection has been raised to the use of <k> before <a, o, u, l, r>. The objection seems to be based on aesthetic grounds rather on any linguistic criterion. Some people are so attached to the English graphemes <ca, co, cu, cl, cr> that the substitution of <k> for <c> upsets them. In reply, I would reiterate that:

- (a) the spellings with <k> are found in MidC (and also in Middle Welsh); they are historic;
- (b) the representation of /k/ by two graphemes violates the phonemic principle;
- (c) the mixture of <c> and <k> is an English feature, and Cornish needs an orthography which is distinct from English.

The grapheme <nn>⁹ in final position has also caused comment, because it rarely appears in the texts. It is abundantly clear that in stressed syllables /nn/ was different from /n/, because in LateC /nn/ became [dn] and /n/ did not (except before /j/). The fact that <nn> was not used finally in MidC spelling is probably due to English influence. Mediaeval scribes may have written <tan> for both ['ta:n] ‘fire’ and ['tann] ‘take!’, but there is no need for us to perpetuate this ambiguity: it makes far more sense to write *tan* and *tann* respectively. Nicholas Williams maintains that the scribes used only <-n> because in their dialect the difference between /n/ and /nn/ had been effaced, but he fails to explain why the same scribes consistently distinguished between /n/ and /nn/ in the middle of words. All the evidence is against Williams in this matter of pre-occlusion;¹⁰ he is isolated in a minority of one. The logic of writing <nn> instead of <n> in words like *penn* ‘head’ is clear to everyone else, even though some may not like it.

⁸ Williams, N.J.A. (1995) *Cornish Today*. Kernewek dre Lyther.

⁹ Similar arguments apply to <mm, ll, rr>.

¹⁰ Pre-occlusion is the name given to the sound-changes [nn] > [dn] and [mm] > [bm].

The reason for the use of <nn> in unstressed syllables is not nearly so apparent. People who have associated <nn> with [nn] or [dn] in stressed syllables have occasionally wondered whether the <nn> in final syllables of polysyllables (e.g. *logosenn* ‘mouse’) means that they might be stressed. This is to interpret the spelling in the wrong order. To obtain the correct pronunciation from *Kernewek Kemmyn* spelling, one first has to consider where the stress lies (nearly always on the penultimate syllable), and then apply one of two realizations according to whether the syllable is stressed or unstressed.

The extension of <nn> from stressed to unstressed syllables is a useful feature, also found in Breton spelling, for it links the phonemic, morphemic and etymological aspects of *Kernewek Kemmyn*. As an example, consider the utterance [ɔl wEn]. This can mean either ‘happy’ or ‘louse’. In *Kernewek Kemmyn*, two different spellings are used for these homophones: *lowen* ‘happy’ and *lowenn* ‘louse’, but this distinction is lost in Unified Cornish, which being largely phonetic, uses *lowen* for both. Although the contrast between /-ɛn/ and /-ɛnn/ is neutralized in speech, it reappears when another syllable is added; cf. *lowena* [lɔw'ɛːna] ‘joy’ and *lowennow* [lɔw'ɛnnɔʊ] ‘individual lice’ (cf. *lowenna* .[lɔw'ɛnna] ‘happier’). This shows the morphemic aspect of *Kernewek Kemmyn*.

In MidC, the consonantal cluster /hw/ was written <wh>, which follows English practice. Objection has been raised to the use of <hw> in *Kernewek Kemmyn*, but note that /hw/ was written <hp> in Old Cornish and <hɥ> by Lhuyd. The grapheme <hw> is consistent with these, as well as reflecting the individual phonemes in the cluster, and **making the table of mutations simpler.**

6 ORTHOGRAPHIES OTHER THAN *KERNEWEK KEMMYN*

6.1 Unified Cornish

Unified Cornish should now be regarded as historic; it is an important spelling in the history of the Cornish Revival. I find it extraordinary how slavishly its supporters cling to the writings of Nance, and ignore all discoveries made in the fifty years since he produced his last dictionary. They continue to write *tecca wel* ‘what a fine sight!’ even though Oliver Padel, by comparing this construction with its equivalent in other Celtic languages, showed over twenty years ago that *tek a wel* would be a better way of writing it. Nance did a splendid job of anticipating words which were subsequently discovered in *Bywnans Ke*, but one which he got wrong was *Kembry* ‘Wales’. This should be *Kembra* (as in *Kernewek Kemmyn* and as found in *BK*.) Yet in this word and others, Unified supporters continue to use Nance’s erroneous forms. When a Cornish keyboard was recently suggested, they wanted keys for *ū* (which never existed) and for *ü* (which represents two different phonemes). These and other mistakes were pointed out years ago in *PSRC*, but Unified supporters have taken no notice. They are fossilized in the last century.

The inadequacies of Unified spelling lead to incorrect pronunciations; since drafting this paper, I heard several times at the Gorsedd the pronunciation ['barθ 'mi:r] (or, even worse, the non-rhotic ['ba:θ 'miə]); the Unified spelling *barth mur* does not distinguish between [θ] and [ð] finally, nor between [y] and [œ]. The Kernewek Kemmyn spelling, *bardh meur*, makes both these distinctions, and indicates the Middle Cornish pronunciation [barð 'mœ:r]. In later Cornish, the vowel in *meur* changed to [ɛ:], but it was never [i:].

6.2 Unified Cornish Revised (UCR)

In his revision of Nance's orthography, Nicholas Williams tries to rectify errors; for example, he distinguishes between /y/ and /œ/; but because his interpretation of Cornish phonology is defective, his orthography is too.

6.3 UCR West

Andrew Climo-Thompson has produced a book entitled *Kernuak Es*, which uses a form of UCR modified so as to include more Late (or "westerly") features; e.g. the common adjectival ending *-ek* is re-spelled *-ak*, to reflect the sound-change which took place between about 1450 and 1650.

6.4 Unified Cornish plus diacritics

Diacritics are not used in *Kernewek Kemmyn*. Most learners of Cornish are native English speakers, and as such are not used to diacritics. They find it difficult to cope with graphemes in foreign languages which are distinguished only by diacritics; e.g. French *e, é, è* and *ê*. When foreign words are borrowed into English, they usually lose their diacritics: *café* becomes *cafe*, *rôle* becomes *role*. The typing of letters with diacritics is easier than it used to be, with modern word-processors, but it is still a nuisance. For these reasons, I avoided diacritics in *Kernewek Kemmyn*.

So it was with some scepticism that I heard of a proposal by Andrew Climo-Thompson to introduce yet another Cornish orthography based on MidC (or UCR), but with a battery of diacritics to distinguish the length of vowels and cases where two phonemes were spelled using the same basic graphemes. Since I have no details of this proposal, I shall not discuss it further

6.5 Tim Saunders' orthography

In the 1970s, Tim Saunders devised an elaborate orthography, and he has used it in publications of his excellent poetry. It is largely etymological in nature. Tim is not putting forward his orthography for general use in the current debate; rather he has publicly given his support to *Kernewek Kemmyn*.

6.6 Orthographies based on LateC

The name given to a form of Revived Cornish based on LateC has changed so many times that I hesitate to give one here. At one time *Carnoack Tithiack* was used; later *Traditional Cornish*, which is misleading, since this term is best reserved for the whole of the historic language from 600 to 1800 A.D. The current term appears to be *Modern*; this is confusing, since this word has also been used for both Late Cornish and Revived Cornish; I shall therefore place it in inverted commas. Much of the present spelling of “Modern” Cornish is due to Richard Gendall. I understand that a different orthography based on LateC material is being prepared.

Kernewek Kemmyn, Unified and UCR have a number of features in common:

- (a) all use the grammar of MidC, though with slight differences;
- (b) all use words from all phases of traditional Cornish (a policy called *tota Cornicitas* by Nicholas Williams);
- (c) all (to a greater or lesser extent) create neologisms for new concepts;
- (d) all use an orthography with similarities to MidC.

The proponents of a LateC base do none of these. They use the grammar of LateC (which arguably has a reduced competence),¹¹ they use no source-texts earlier than *CW.*, they prefer English words to neologisms, and their orthography, being based on early modern English, is radically different from that of *Kernewek Kemmyn*. It is therefore difficult to envisage much common ground. The question is addressed in section 9.

6.7 *Kernewek Gorhemmyn* (KK++)

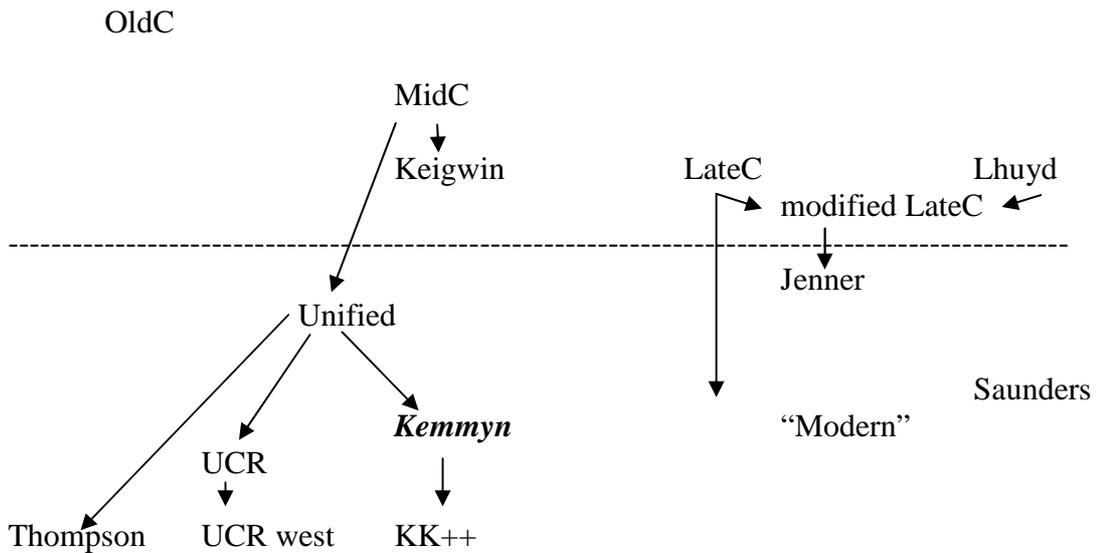
This is the name given by Keith Bailey to his experimental spelling, used in connection with his research into the metrics of MidC verse. It is similar to *Kernewek Kemmyn*, but based on the phonology of the earliest MidC texts. In particular, it uses <e> where other systems use <a>, e.g. *kare* ‘to love’ (rather than *kara*), *bie* ‘would be’ (rather than *bia*).

7 THE ORTHOGRAPHIES IN COMPETITION

7.1 Overview

The relationships between the orthographies of traditional Cornish and of Revived Cornish are shown in this diagram:

¹¹ Competence is the ability of a language to deal with a wide range of topics.



There are thus at least eight different orthographies of Revived Cornish (not three, as is sometimes heard): but the eight are not in equal competition. Only *Kernewek Kemmy'n*, Unified, UCR and “Modern” have a significant following.

7.2 “Standard written form”

There have been calls from supporters of orthographies other than *Kernewek Kemmy'n* for the creation of a “standard written form”. Some seem to imply that such a form, one which might find the approval of all Cornish speakers, could be arrived at by a process of bartering elements of these existing orthographies by consensus. Unfortunately the establishment of a viable official orthography is not a process which is amenable to consensus. In any case, the exercise has already been done, at least twice. Unified Cornish was a “standard written form” and continued as such until its deficiencies became apparent. *Kernewek Kemmy'n* is a “standard written form”; one of its principles (*PSRC p. 94*) is “to reconcile, as far as possible, the desires of different groups to pronounce Cornish in approximately MidC and LateC fashions.” **Most Cornish speakers have already chosen *Kernewek Kemmy'n* as their standard written form.** The current debate arises from those who have not.

7.3 Normalization

The current situation with Revived Cornish resembles, but is not identical to, the common problem facing languages with more than one dialect, that of normalization. This is the process of devising a standard orthography from a variety of dialectal forms. It is worth studying this process for the help that it may bring to Cornish. A few languages sidestep the issue by operating with more than one official spelling system,¹² but this is not recommended for Cornish.

¹² notably Norwegian, which has two official forms: Bokmål (earlier Riksmål) and Nynorsk (previously Landsmål).

Because the loss of sounds and the fusion of phonemes are commoner than the introduction of sounds or the splitting of phonemes, it is easier for the student of a language to go from an earlier to a later form (forwards in time) rather than the reverse. This means that a standardized spelling tends to preserve older features.

The orthography of Welsh was finally normalized by a committee in 1928.¹³ It is based largely on that of the late 16th century. The formal written language is a unified standard, which differs considerably from the dialectalized spoken language. Speakers of a given dialect can interpret the written word in terms of the local spoken norms. For example, the commonest plural suffix *-au* (corresponding to Cornish *-ow*) is pronounced [aɪ] only in the most formal registers (e.g. hymn-singing). In everyday speech, <-au> is pronounced either [-e] or [-a], according to dialect. The standard orthography preserves the older features: it distinguishes [i] from [ɨ], a difference which has been lost in the south, and [a] from [ɛ] in unstressed syllables, a difference which has been lost in the north. In an attempt to bridge the large gap between written and spoken Welsh, a standardized form of more colloquial Welsh, known as *Cymraeg Byw* was introduced in the 1960s, but its success was limited; present thinking in teaching spoken Welsh is to concentrate on the dialects. Meanwhile the formal written language is the official form.

Breton has several different orthographies, and formerly the disputes between their supporters were intense¹⁴. Alone of the six Celtic languages, Breton has no official recognition, and is unlikely to get it, given the opposition of French republicans to the language. There are four dialects to reconcile: Kerneveg, Leoneg and Tregerieg, which are fairly similar, and Gwenedeg, which is substantially different. The KLT spelling of 1911, which united the first three of these, was based principally on the dialect of Leon, not because Leoneg is inherently superior to the others, but because it is more archaic. More recent systems (*peurunvan* or “*zedachek*” of 1941, *skolveurieg* of 1955 and *etrerannyezhel* of 1975) have incorporated Gwenedeg. None of the orthographies has full official acceptance, and it has been a question of “the survival of the fittest”, which, in so far as it is the form taught in schools, seems to be “*zedachek*”.

7.4 Length of vowels

The length of vowels in MidC was dictated by the stress and by the nature of the following consonants, according to the following rules:

- (a) In unstressed syllables, all vowels are short.
- (b) In stressed syllables, vowels are short before consonant groups¹⁵ and double consonants.
- (c) In stressed syllables, vowels are long in monosyllables and of mid-length before single consonants.

¹³ The details are given in the manual *Orgraff yr Iaith Gymraeg*.

¹⁴ and still is intense, if recent entries on web-sites are anything to go by.

¹⁵ There are a few exceptions, e.g. vowels are long in monosyllables ending in [sp, st, sk].

These rules apply also to *Kernewek Kemmyn*, which is based on MidC. Thus *Kernewek Kemmyn* has the remarkable property that the length of vowels is deducible from the spelling, without the need for special marking, provided that the pattern of stress is known. **No other orthography has this property.**

Nance recognized only two lengths of vowel (short and long), but did not distinguish between them in normal writing; e.g. *cam* ‘step’ has a short vowel and *blam* ‘blame’ has a long vowel. Only in Nance’s dictionaries are long vowels distinguished, using macrons. These two words in *Kernewek Kemmyn* are *kamm* and *blam* respectively.

Williams perpetuated Nance’s ideas in UCR, having argued that the three lengths of vowel had been reduced to two c.1300. The three lengths were indeed reduced to two, but c.1600, as I have shown elsewhere.¹⁶ In LateC, the long vowels were indicated by various devices taken from English spelling, such as the use of final mute <e>; Lhuyd preferred to use circumflexes.

7.5 New words

The lexicon of Revived Cornish, although richer than formerly, is still deficient. New words are needed, not only for new concepts but for gaps in the traditional vocabulary. By comparing with Breton and Welsh, one suspects that a large fraction of the lexicon of traditional Cornish never found its way into the texts, and was lost.

Neither the users of Unified nor “Modern” appear to make up new words on any substantial scale. Nicholas Williams, in his English - Cornish dictionary has often preferred to re-spell English words, but he does provide therein about 500 useful new words.

The users of *Kernewek Kemmyn*, on the other hand, have gone in for larger-scale coining of neologisms. Mention must be made of Tony Snell’s contribution; not only has he introduced numerous new words in the magazine *An Gannas*, but he has also created a web-site, *Govel Geryow*, where their accuracy may be publicly debated before the eventual acceptance of many of them in the dictionary. Whereas Nicholas Williams has championed the use of English loan-words, as found in the texts, most writers using *Kernewek Kemmyn* have preferred to use Cornish words, even to the extent of replacing flagrantly English borrowings with neologisms adapted from Breton and Welsh. Many new words are formed at least partly from Breton and Welsh, and **the etymological aspects of *Kernewek Kemmyn* assist considerably in this process.**

¹⁶ George, Ken (1997). “Mid-length vowels in Cornish”. *J. Celt. Linguistics*, 6, 103-124.

7.6 Separation of the issues

The “Modern” orthography is in a different position from the others, because there are two separate issues at stake:

- (i) the choice of the historical base for the revived language;
- (ii) the choice of orthography.

Whereas the supporters of *Kernewek Kemmyn*, Unified, and UCR would apparently like all users to adopt their particular preferred orthography, the supporters of “Modern” appear to have (i) as their priority, since their orthography does not pretend to cover both historical bases. The former are like the Big-Endians and the Little-Endians of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, arguing about the manner of eating any eggs (spelling Cornish), whereas one gets the impression that the supporters of “Modern” would primarily prefer all eaters (speakers) to eat only duck eggs (use only a LateC base) and to swallow them whole (use a LateC style of spelling). We can thus separate the discussion into:

- (a) how well Unified, UCR and *Kernewek Kemmyn* succeed in rationalizing the spelling of MidC;
- (b) how well they represent both historical bases.

The fact that “Modern” does not appear in (a) does not mean that the views of its supporters are ignored; an attempt to consider them is made in section 9.

8 RATIONALIZING THE SPELLING OF MIDDLE CORNISH

Middle Cornish spelling is over-rated by Nicholas Williams. It is only one of four historical spellings of Cornish, and it is based on English. Nevertheless, if one is to use MidC grammar as a base, then, like Nance, one might as well look at MidC orthography. Its two drawbacks are that it is not fixed, and it is not phonemic; it is therefore unsuitable as a vehicle for learning or for everyday use.

The first step is to fix the orthography; i.e. always to spell a given word in the same way. To do this, one might choose the commonest spellings for each phoneme; but the result will be far from phonemic, because numerous ambiguities will remain - the same grapheme for more than one phoneme, (e.g. <th> for /θ/ and /ð/, <o> for /ɔ/ and /o/); and more than one grapheme for a single phoneme (e.g. <g> and <i> for /dʒ/). A phrase in MidC such as *mos the gregy goth* is highly ambiguous. It can mean:

to go }	{hang}	{pride	
a table }	to {believe}	{a mole	
		{a goose	
		{wildly	
		{a stream	

Most of these ambiguities are resolved in *Kernewek Kemmyn*.

To resolve the ambiguities by using different graphemes means making the spelling more phonemic. This may be achieved by using less common graphemes, e.g. <th> for /θ/ and <ʒ> for /ð/. This is as far as one can go while still retaining the historical graphemes; any further and the orthography ceases to be historical.

Both Unified and UCR have crossed this Rubicon. For /ð/ they both use <dh> (though Unified only medially), a grapheme which was not used in MidC (except by mistake). For /dʒ/ they both use <j>. In my view, there is nothing wrong with this. *Kernewek Kemmyn* does the same. What is wrong is when supporters of Unified and UCR criticize aspects of *Kernewek Kemmyn* as being “non-historical” when these orthographies themselves have non-historical features.

In short, Unified has moved away from purely MidC spellings and thus become more phonemic; UCR has moved further along this road, and *Kernewek Kemmyn* has moved further still. This means that *Kernewek Kemmyn* is less close to the MidC textual spellings than either Unified or UCR; for this it has been criticized, but these criticisms are misguided. If anyone wishes seriously to study the texts, then they must use the original spelling in the manuscripts.

9 RECONCILING MIDDLE AND LATE CORNISH BASES

As indicated above in section 6.3, to achieve a *rapprochement* between a MidC base and a LateC base is a difficult task. The orthographies differ greatly, and the elimination of mid-length vowels *c.*1600 makes the sound-systems different.

9.1 Target date

One sometimes hears an argument that if the target date of *Kernewek Kemmyn* were advanced by say 100 years, from *c.*1500 to *c.*1600, then it would provide a better base for reconciliation between MidC and LateC styles. I fear that it would satisfy neither camp, but first it is worth examining the choice of target date.

In *PSRC*, it was suggested that the phonological base for what became known as *Kernewek Kemmyn* corresponded to the spoken Cornish of *c.*1500. More has been read by some into this statement than was intended. The date came about not as the results of a deliberate choice of epoch, but as the consequence of a sound-change. The sound [ɛ] in unstressed syllables was lowered to [a], both in open syllables¹⁷ and in closed syllables.¹⁸ In Unified Cornish, the change in open syllables was recognized, so that the place-name *Hendra* was thus written instead of the earlier *Hendre*; but the change in closed syllables was not, so that *lader* ‘thief’ was written instead of the later *ladar*. In order to minimize the number of changes from Unified, this policy was continued in *Kernewek Kemmyn*. In my analysis of the changes, it appeared that the central date of the change in open syllables was *c.*1475, and that of the change in closed syllables *c.*1525; though both changes took perhaps 200 years to be completed, and they may have occurred at the same time. 1500 lies between these two central dates.

The same changes took place in Welsh, but only in the northern dialect, so that the situation is now:

¹⁷ Open syllables are those ending in a vowel or diphthong.

¹⁸ Closed syllables are those ending in a consonant or group of consonants.

	CORNISH		WELSH
<i>open</i>	<a> in Unified & Kemmyn, <e> in KK++	<e>	[ɛ] in S, [a] in N
<i>closed</i>	<e>	<e>	[ɛ] in S, [a] in N

It is natural to suppose that the common verbal noun ending *-a* in Cornish corresponds to *-añ* in Breton; to take an example of a newly found verb from *BK.*, Cornish *naska* ‘to yoke’ corresponds to Breton *naskañ* ‘to yoke’. Yet these verbs did not end in <a> in the earliest MidC texts, they ended in <e> (even in *BK.* the textual form is *naske*), and suffered the sound-change [ɛ] > [a]. This remained an unexplained puzzle until Schumacher suggested that British **-ama*, which gave Breton *-añ*, developed in Cornish to **-em-* and then to *-e*.

What about a target date of fifty years later, representing the Tudor Cornish of Tregear? This would mean the effacement of the contrast <e> v. <a> in closed syllables; thus *mynnes* ‘to wish’ and *mynnas* ‘a wish’ would both be *mynnas*.

Were one starting from scratch with reviving Cornish, instead of having one hundred years of experience, there would be an argument for going the other way, i.e. earlier, as does the KK++ spelling.

9.2 Pronunciation

It would be possible to read a passage written in *Kernewek Kemmyn* using the pronunciation of LateC, but it would need some practice. In effect the reader would be applying the numerous sound-changes which took place between MidC and LateC. The following table, by listing those realizations which differ between the two phases, enables a reader to do this, at least approximately:

<u>Spelling in <i>Kernewek Kemmyn</i></u>	<u>LateC style</u>	cf. <u>MidC style</u>
<i>Quantity</i>		
stressed vowels in polysyllables before single consonants	long	mid-long
<i>Quality when stressed</i>		
<i> in monosyllables	[ɪ]	[i]
<y> in closed syllables	[e]	[ɪ]
<y> in open syllables	[i]	[ɪ]
<e, oe, ou, eu>	[e, u, əʊ, e]	[ɛ ¹⁹ , o, u, œ]
<u> finally and before <gh>	[ʊ]	[y]
<u> otherwise	[i]	[y]
<iw, yw, ew, aw> ²⁰	[eʊ, eʊ, ɛʊ, ɔ]	[iʊ, ɪʊ, ɛʊ, aʊ]
<ow> before a vowel	[u]	[ɔʊ]
<sw, rdh>	[dʒ, rr]	[zw, rð]
<f, s>	[v, z ²¹]	[f, s~z]
<gh>	no sound	[x~h]
<mm, nn, ll, rr>	[bm, dn, ll, rr] ²²	[mm, nn, ll, rr]

¹⁹ actually closer than this, but no symbol is available.

²⁰ [The difficult question of the w-diphthongs has been re-examined since this paper was written.](#)

²¹ The question of palatalization also arises here.

²² It is likely that /ll/ had a distinctive pronunciation in LateC.

Quality when unstressed

<y>	[e]	[ɪ]
<e> in final closed syllables	[a]	[ɛ]
<e, a> pre-tonically ²³	[ə, ə]	[ɛ, a]
<o>	[a]	[ɔ]

Fewer phonemes in LateC means more homophones. The meaning of this nonsense poem, written in a LateC fashion, is by no means apparent:

*Nag ew
mêz an bêz mêr
mêr an bêz mêz
na krêz an hîn
hîn an krêz.*

In *Kernewek Kemmyn*, it is still nonsense, and it does not rhyme, but it is somewhat clearer:

*Nyns yw mes an bys meur mer an bys meus,
na kres an hun hîn an krys.*

‘The field of the great world is not the marrow of the thumb,
nor is the middle of the sleep the border of the shirt’.

9.3 Grammar

The length of the list and the nonsense poem in the previous section emphasize the gulf between MidC and LateC, so far as pronunciation is concerned. Grammar may be a little different. Rod Lyon and others have pointed out that grammatical structures previously identified as exclusively Late are in fact recorded in the MidC texts. It may then be in a less restrictive approach to grammar that the ideas of LateC supporters might best be accommodated. The question of English influence on LateC grammar needs to be revisited, in order to separate those features which were a natural development in Cornish, and those which could be interpreted as corruptions from English. This is beyond the scope of this paper.

²³ i.e. in a syllable preceding the stressed syllable.

10 SUMMARY

- The present debate about spelling has arisen because an official orthography is required to implement the European Charter for Minority Languages in education and official documentation.
- It is being driven by the minority of Cornish speakers who use orthographies other than *Kernewek Kemmyn*, who feel themselves to be increasingly marginalized.
- Their call for a standard written form is answered by the existence of *Kernewek Kemmyn*; the majority of speakers have already chosen this as their standard.
- *Kernewek Kemmyn* is more phonemic, more morphemic, and better etymologically than any other orthography.
- Only *Kernewek Kemmyn* has the property that the length of vowels is deducible from the spelling.
- When devising a standard orthography for a language with more than one dialect, it is better to retain older features in the orthography.
- The gulf between a Middle Cornish and a Late Cornish base for Revived Cornish is difficult to bridge; with practice, it would be possible to read a passage written in *Kernewek Kemmyn* in the style of Late Cornish.