

Did *tas* ‘father’ and *bras* ‘big’ rhyme in Middle Cornish?¹

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ABSTRACT

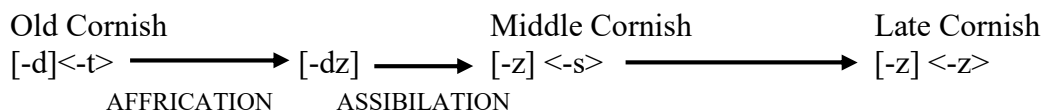
There were few rhymes between *tas* and *bras* in Middle Cornish verse before CW, suggesting that the words had different sounds, [‘ta:z] and [‘bra:s] respectively. The large number in CW suggests that the [-s] in *bras* had by then been voiced to [-z]. A statistical examination of sets of similar words confirms this idea.

1) INTRODUCTION

The common Middle Cornish words *tas* ‘father’ and *bras* ‘big’ rhymed visually, both being spelled with <-as>, but was the sound of this <-as> the same in both words? In Old Cornish, the words were *tat* [‘ta:d] and *bras* [‘bra:s] respectively (Table 1).

Proto-Brythonic	Modern Breton	Modern Welsh	Old Cornish	Middle Cornish	Late Cornish
* <i>tatos</i>	<i>tad</i>	<i>tad</i>	<i>tat</i> [‘ta:d]	<i>tas</i> [‘ta:z]	<i>taz</i>
* <i>brasso-</i>	<i>bras</i> [‘bra:z]	<i>bras</i>	<i>bras</i> [‘bra:s]	<i>bras</i>	<i>braz,</i> <i>brauze</i>

The <-s> in *tas* represents the reflex of Old Cornish /-d/, but the <-s> in *bras* is that of Old Cornish /-s/. The <-t> in Old Cornish is generally reckoned to mean [-d] (except perhaps in absolute final). The change affecting the voiced consonant [-d] would have led to another voiced consonant, viz. [-z]. We can then be confident that Middle Cornish *tas* meant [‘ta:z] (again except perhaps in absolute final, when unvoicing to [‘ta:s] may have occurred). The simplest (and presumably therefore the most likely) development is:



In written place-names assibilation occurred *c.*1275, though in speech the change was perhaps 100 years earlier. This change produced a marked difference between Cornish on the one hand, and Breton and Welsh on the other. Assibilation did not occur when /d/ was followed by a vowel + a nasal or liquid consonant.

The <-s> in *bras* remained as [-s] in Welsh, but at some stage became voiced to [-z] in Breton and Cornish. According to Jackson (1967: §1079), Breton /-s/ was voiced to /-z/ in “the 15th-16th centuries”, as part of a process known as “new lenition”. In Cornish, spellings with <-z> appeared *c.*1600, but [-z] may be older than this; we do not know directly when the sound-change [s] > [z] occurred because <-s> could mean [-s] or [-z].

¹ This paper in English is an expanded version of a slide-show in Cornish (George 2024a).

2) NUMBERS OF RHYMES BETWEEN *TAS* AND *BRAS*

2.1 Simple count of the rhymes between *tas* and *bras*

After the change [-s] > [-z], *braz* would have formed a strict rhyme with *taz*. Before the change, rhymes of *tas* with *bras* were loose. The authors of Middle Cornish verse preferred to use strict rhymes if at all possible (George 2024b). They would have avoided rhyming ['ta:z] with ['bra:s] if they could possibly help it. Counting the number of rhymes between *tas* and *bras* provides a clue as to the sound of these words. If such rhymes are frequent, it is likely that both words were pronounced with [-'a:z]; i.e. that voicing had taken place. If they are few, then it is likely that the pronunciations were still ['ta:z] and ['bra:s]. Table 2 gives the number of relevant rhymes.

Text ² →	PA	PC	RD	OM	BM	BK	CW
Number	3	3	0	9	0	1	28
Number per 1000 lines	1.4	0.9	0.0	3.2	0.0	0.3	11.0

Considering how common the two words are, the number of rhymes between them is remarkably small in every text before CW. This implies that such rhymes were loose rather than strict, that *tas* was pronounced ['ta:z] and *bras* was pronounced ['bra:s]. The number of *tas* – *bras* rhymes in CW is much greater, suggesting that the change ['bra:s] > ['bra:z] had taken place. The voicing therefore probably took place between the dates of composition of BK and CW. Unfortunately we do not know what those dates are. CW was copied by William Jordan in 1611, and BK was copied, perhaps for a second time, c.1565; but these plays were composed decades earlier than their extant manuscripts.

2.2 Setting the numbers within a statistical context

The corpus of traditional Cornish verse was examined to identify all rhyming words in the following groups:

- (a) those containing the reflex of Old Cornish /-ad/;
- (b) those containing the reflex of Old Cornish /-as/;

From these, a selection was made of those words which featured in hard³ rhymes:

- (i) within group (a);
- (ii) within group (b);
- (iii) between group (a) and group (b).

This produced eleven words in group (a), including *tas*; and eight in group (b), including *bras*. containing the reflex of Old Cornish /-as/⁴. The two groups may be regarded as two pools of potential rhyming words, listed in Table 3. Since the poet is likely to choose the commoner words more often, the number of occurrences of each word is also listed.

² PA = *Pascon agan Arluth*, PC = *Passio Christi*, RD = *Resurrectio Domini*, OM = *Origo Mundi*, BM = *Bewnans Meryasek*, BK = *Bewnans Ke*, CW = *Creacon of the World*.

³ A hard rhyme is one in which the rhyming sound sequence is stressed.

⁴ Only words actually used in rhymes in the texts are included.

Table 3		Numbers of occurrences (counting in one direction)					
Words from Old Cornish /-ad/				Words from Old Cornish /-as/			
KK	English	Number	Note	KK	English	Number	Note
<i>bras</i>	trap	3		<i>a-has</i>	hateful	3	
<i>gas</i>	leave(s)	13		<i>blas</i>	taste	1	
<i>gwlas</i>	country	59		<i>bras</i>	big	111	
<i>has</i>	seed	6		<i>glas</i>	blue	10	
<i>kas</i>	war	26		<i>glas</i>	maw	3	
<i>las</i>	dram	2		<i>gnas</i>	nature	1	
<i>mas</i>	good	90	including <i>ben'vas</i> , <i>dremas</i> .	<i>gwas</i>	fellow	23	including <i>harlotwas</i> , <i>kawghwas</i> , <i>loselwas</i> , <i>ploswas</i> , and <i>drogwas</i> .
<i>pras</i>	field	4		<i>tys ha tas</i>	noisily	5	counted as Celtic, but may not be
<i>ras</i>	grace	32					
<i>tas</i>	father	124					
TOTAL		359		TOTAL		157	

If the reflex of Old Cornish /s/ was voiced early, as suggested in section 2 above, then the words in Table 3 would not be two separate pools, but one homogeneous pool of $359 + 157 = 516$ potential rhymes. A poet would then choose two rhyming words from this combined pool⁵. The chances of choosing *tas* as the first rhyming word of a pair would be $124/516 = 24\%$. The poet then seeks a second rhyming word⁶; the chance of choosing *bras* is $111/516 = 22\%$. The chance of choosing the rhyming pair *tas* and *bras* is the product of these two probabilities, viz. $0.24 \times 0.22 = 5.2\%$. Similarly, the chance of choosing *bras* as the first rhyming word and *tas* as the second is also 5.2%. Thus in a text of sufficient length, one might expect 10.4% of the rhyming pairs (counting in both directions) in the combined pool to be *tas / bras*.

Table 4	Numbers of <i>tas / bras</i> rhymes							
	PA	PC	RD	OM	BM	BK	CW	Total
Total number of rhyming pairs recorded	36	68	54	92	24	118	124	516
10.4% of these = expected no. with <i>tas / bras</i>	4	7	6	10	2	12	13	54
Actual no. of <i>tas / bras</i> rhyming pairs	6	6	0	18	0	0	56	86

The results, shown in Table 4, are quite remarkable. In three of the texts (RD, BM and BK), *tas* is never rhymed with *bras*. In the other early texts, the number of actual *tas / bras* rhyming pairs is never greater than the expected number. This all suggests that the pool was not homogeneous; that there were two separate pools, the poets usually drew from their main pool, but the exigencies of rhyme meant that they had on occasion to borrow from the auxiliary pool. The implication is that there was a perceptible difference between *tas* and *bras*; that they were pronounced differently.

In CW, on the other hand, *tas* is rhymed with *bras* far more frequently than one would expect. This implies that at the date of its composition, *bras* had been voiced to [ˈbraːz] even though it was still spelled <bras>.⁷

This research is taken further in George (2024b).

⁵ This is similar to the well-known problem of choosing two balls from a bag containing N_1 red balls and N_2 green balls, with replacement.

⁶ It is not obligatory for the second rhyming word to be a different etymon; it can be a mutated form of the first word, or even an identical copy of the first rhyming word; such cases are found in the texts.

⁷ The unusual format of the stanzas in CW, compared with that in the other plays, suggests that it was composed without the guiding influence of Glasney College, i.e. after 1548 (George, forthcoming).

2.3 **Evidence from Late Cornish**

The number of rhyming pairs in Late Cornish is too small to have statistical significance. However, John Keigwin was writing c.1700. In his spellings of words like *tas*, he used <z> 21 times (49%) and <s> 19 times; but when spelling 34 words like *bras*, he used <z> only 7 times (21%) and <s> 27 times. This suggests that even 100 years after the voicing of /-s/ there was still a hint of a difference between /-s/ and /-z/; certainly one would not expect such percentages if /-s/ had been voiced early.

3) **CONCLUSION**

The words *tas* and *bras* did rhyme in Middle Cornish. Before CW, such rhymes were loose, reflecting different pronunciations ['ta:z] and ['bra:s]. In CW and subsequently, such rhymes were strict, reflecting ['ta:z] and ['bra:z]. The sound-change [-s] > [-z] in *bras* took place in the 16th century, after the dates of composition of BM and BK, perhaps c.1550.

4) **REFERENCES**

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