

The vowels of Cornish

For users of KK and the SWF (Revived Middle Cornish)

In recent years, pronunciation standards in the Cornish Revival have received more than their fair share of attention. This was not always the case. When the switch from a mostly ceremonial, written language to a medium of spoken communication was made in the 1970s, correct pronunciation was considered less important than attaining fluency. The then standard language, Nance's UC, had never been based on a reconstructed phonological system. Its recommended pronunciation was therefore somewhat ad-hoc and mixed attestation-based observations made by Nance with Anglo-Cornish elements. When UC got largely superseded by KK, many elements of this ad-hoc pronunciation were carried over and combined with parts of KK phonology, most notably the rounded vowel <eu> /œ/. The resulting hybrid pronunciation has been transmitted to new generations of learners. Problems have been aggravated by the gradual loss of Anglo-Cornish pronunciation in Cornwall, drawing the pronunciation of younger learners of Cornish towards that of South Eastern English. It has been observed that specifically the prosody used by many learners is more or less wholly English, and I have tested this with native speakers of German who knew no English. All of them were unable to tell if they were listening to English or learners' Cornish, although they immediately recognised the difference between Welsh and English.

In recent years, this state of affairs is being perceived as more and more problematic. All the more so as the English accent of most learners (and some teachers) and the insufficient explanations given in a number of textbooks have been abused as a weapon in the spelling wars. In the following article, I will try to explain the elements of KK pronunciation that have proven problematic for native speakers of English. All explanations are accompanied by recorded samples which can be accessed by clicking on the sample words while your computer is connected to the Internet.

The aim of this article is not to accurately describe the phonological system of Late or Middle Cornish when spoken as a still living community language. Such a discussion, I believe, has its place in the academic study of the traditional language, but should not bother learners until the academic have sorted it out. I will focus on the recommended pronunciation of KK for users of both this system and the SWF. Similar articles for users of other varieties are in preparation.

Should you come across any inaccuracies, typos or other mistakes in this document, please do not hesitate to contact the author using the contact links provided on <http://www.kernewegva.com>. Likewise, if you would like to see similar explanatory texts of other points of pronunciation, or a guide to other varieties of Cornish, published on the Kernewegva website, please contact me.

Cornish Vowels vs. English Vowels

The vowel system of Cornish is very different from that of present day English. This is not confined to vowel sounds English does not have (like the rounded vowels, spelt <u> and <eu>), but to several aspects of the system, which I will try to outline below.

KK, UC, and the Middle Cornish version of the SWF all try to represent the language as spoken in the 15th century, i.e. before the sound system of Cornish got remodeled to bring it closer to English. I will explain the inherited system of Cornish in this article. All examples from Cornish will be linked to MP3 files so that you can listen to them pronounced as intended as long as your computer is connected to the internet. I have used SWF spellings for the sample words.

Vowel quality

A very common mistake in learners' pronunciation is that they tend to diphthongise long vowels in Cornish as that is what comes naturally to native speakers of English. For example, one sometimes hears **den** 'man' pronounced as if it were spelt ***deyn**.

◀))) [den, *deyn](#)

- ➔ For native speakers of English, lengthening an 'e' implies attaching a 'y' to it. To native speakers of Cornish, lengthening would have meant roughly doubling the duration of the 'e' itself but not attaching a 'y' to it.

The same often happens to SWF <oo> / KK <oe> in words like **boos/boes** which some learners will pronounce as if it were ***bows** because their intuition as native speakers of English tells them to. Others circumvent this problem by pronouncing the word as if it were ***bous**. This latter pronunciation is considered correct for Late Cornish but not part of the recommended pronunciation of KK.

◀))) [boos, *bows, *bous](#)

- ➔ As you can hear, what we have established for 'e' holds true for other vowels as well. In Cornish, as in most European languages but other than in English, long vowels do ***not*** get an audible '-y' or a '-w' attached to them. The duration of the vowels themselves is lengthened, but their quality is not normally changed.

Vowel length (quantity)

One observation has been made by a number of listeners: there is a strong tendency among KK speakers to pronounce many vowels as short than actually mandated by the recommended pronunciation. This starts with half-long vowels which are almost always pronounced short in everyday speech, but it also concerns supposedly long vowels in words like **yeth** 'language'. All too often one hears people speak about the last "Yetth an Werrin" using only short vowels in all three words. One of the central selling points of KK has always been that it makes vowel and consonant length clearer than UC did – but it is up to us to actually make use of the visual aid the system provides us with, and pronounce long vowels where the Cornish sound system demands them.

In the case of the example given above, the correct KK pronunciation would be

◀))) [Yeth an Werin](#)

with a long 'e' in the first word and a half-long one in the last.

What happens in the speech of learners – and leads to the shortening of all vowels in this phrase – is subconscious processes that come natural to English speakers. It is difficult to switch them off, and of course even more so since we have no native speakers of Cornish to imitate! The first step we can take is to understand the rules at work in Cornish, especially where they differ from those used in English.

Long, half-long, and short vowels.

The first point to remember is that, other than in English, vowels can be long, half-long, and short. Half-length has proven something of a mystery to many learners, as it is totally alien to native speakers of English. Fortunately it is easily explained: half-long vowels are a special kind of long vowels which get automatically shortened as the speaker hurries towards the end of a word consisting of more than one syllable.

- ➔ Long vowels are found in words of one syllable or in stressed final syllables.
- ➔ Half-long vowels are found in non-final syllables in words of more than one syllable.
- ➔ Both are found before short (single) consonants in stressed syllables.
- ➔ Precise rules for both the SWF and KK are given below

More to the point: a long vowel in a syllable which is not the last or the only one in a word automatically gets shortened by a tiny bit. The offshoot of this is that you only need to remember where long vowels go and let your mouth do the shortening for you. The shortening comes automatically to speakers of languages which have half-length. The only problem for English speakers is that they tend to shorten vowels *too much* so that when they try to pronounce half-long vowels, the results sound exactly as if they were short. This general shortening has become more or less the norm among learners of Cornish, and it was probably also present in later varieties of traditional Cornish, but things were different among native speakers of conservative Middle Cornish in the 15th century, and the recommended pronunciation of KK will have none of it!

Here are some examples of how KK vowels sound when long, half-long, and short. Try to repeat what you hear and make a difference between the degrees of length. The easiest way of doing this is by processing both long and half-long vowels as long.

◀))) [SWF & KK <a>](#)

Long: tan 'fire'

Half-long: tanek 'fiery'

Short: tanlu 'fire brigade'

◄))) SWF & KK <e>

Long: eth ‘eight’

Half-long: etek ‘eighteen’

Short: ethves ‘eighth’

◄))) SWF & KK <y>

Long: ys ‘corn’

Half-long: ysek ‘cornfield’

Short: ysla ‘granary’

◄))) SWF & KK <i>

Long: tir ‘land’

Half-long: tiredh ‘territory’

Short: tirwedh ‘landform’

◄))) SWF & KK <o>

Long: hod ‘hood’

Half-long: hodys ‘hoods’

Short: hodya ‘injure’

◄))) SWF & KK <ou>

Long: gour ‘man’

Half-long: gourel ‘manly’

Short: gourses ‘manhood’

◄))) SWF <oo> / KK <oe>

Long: boos/boes ‘food’

Half-long: bosow/boesow ‘foodstuffs’

Short: bosti/boesti ‘restaurant’

*(Note that **oe** is a special case in KK because it changes to a kind of reduced **ou**-sound when short.)*

The vowels <y> and <i> are especially prone to mispronunciation. Older textbooks often describe them as “i = ee in English need, y = i in English pin”. This is only half the truth, however. It makes things sound as if **i** were always long and **y** always short. In Cornish (at least in the SWF and KK) however, both sounds can be long, half-long, and short.

◀))) [Another example of long, half-long, and short vowels](#)

Try to discern them without looking at the transcript below!

lev – levow – poslev /poeslev
 glin – glinyow – dewlin
 mil – miles – euthvil

As you can see in the examples given, long and half-long vowels appear in the same types of syllables while short vowels appear where they are either unstressed or followed by more than just one short consonant. This link between the length of vowels and consonants is what gives Brythonic languages their characteristic ‘rhythm’ which is totally absent from English – and thus from the pronunciation of speakers using an English prosody in Cornish. In Cornish, **stressed syllables are always longer than unstressed ones** because they either contain a long vowel, a long consonant, or a group of consonants following the vowel.

Stressed and unstressed syllables

The basic premise of vowel and consonant length in Cornish is that stressed syllables are not only pronounced louder than unstressed ones, but that they are also longer. Stressed syllables either contain a long vowel or a long consonant or group of consonants. This principle gives Cornish and its sister languages a characteristic rhythm which is very different from that of English, with long stressed syllables alternating with short unstressed ones. Listen to the difference in length between stressed and unstressed syllables in the following sentence:

◀))) [Yn TERMyn eus PASSys, yth ESa TRIGys yn SeLEVen DEN ha BENen in TYLLer KRIys CHI an HORDH.](#)

In case you were wondering, Cornish syllables differ from English ones in that they more often than not do not end between a vowel and the consonant following it, but after the latter, as in trig-ys (not tri-gys as would seem more natural to English speakers).

Vowel length depends on the following consonant(s)

Another difference between the two languages is that speakers of Middle Cornish would not normally have memorised whether a given vowel was long, but rather what the consonant following it was like. The vowels and their length then fell in place automatically. KK reflects this system and therefore does not mark vowel length on the vowel itself. So if you have been told that **oe** and **i** are long and that **y** is short, this was likely based on a misunderstanding of the rules.

In the inherited system of Cornish, **p**, **t**, **k**, and **m** were always long, and vowels preceding them were always short. **n**, **l**, and **r** could be either short or long, and all other consonant sounds were short and thus preceded by a long vowel. Vowels followed by more than one consonant were always short, but the consonant groups **sp**, **sk**, and **st** behaved against this rule: words like **pysk** ‘fish’ had a long vowel.

Over the centuries, a considerable number of words were borrowed from English, and these did not always adhere to the same rules, e.g. **stret** ‘street’ had a long vowel before **t**. KK accommodates these exceptions by always writing **pp**, **tt**, **kk** after short vowels and **p**, **t**, **k** after long vowels.

The main difference between the SWF and KK as far as vowel length marking is concerned is that the SWF treats **p** and **t** as long by default (meaning that consonants preceding them are short). This is

true for inherited Cornish words, but the rule is broken in a few loan-words of English origin which do not adhere to the Cornish system. These are normally easy to recognise: **stret** ‘street’, **shap** ‘shape’, **kota** ‘coat’ and similar words contain long stressed vowels just like their English counterparts. In KK, **t** and **p** are doubled after short vowels to show the difference. The SWF writes **ck** after short vowels in English loanwords such as **klock** ‘clock’.

These rules originally applied to all stressed syllables.

Diphthongs

Diphthongs can be analysed as the combination of a vowel plus a so-called semivowel (i.e. a consonant which is articulated almost like a vowel). Cornish diphthongs can be analysed as either combinations of a vowel + y or a vowel + w. All diphthongs in Cornish are falling, i.e. their emphasis is on the first component. Ever since the time of UC, many speakers of revived Cornish have been pronouncing **yw** (and in KK **iw** as well) more or less like English *you*, with the emphasis on the second component. It should be the other way round: ee + w, not y + ou. Here are some sample words pronounced as recommended in KK:

◀)) [glaw ‘rain’, liw ‘colour’, lyw ‘steers’, lew ‘lion’, glow ‘coal’, guw ‘spear’](#)

➔ All of the words above are meant to be pronounced with a clearly audible full vowel followed by -w.

◀)) [payn ‘pain’, keyn ‘back’, moy ‘more’](#)

➔ These three words all contain a full vowel followed by (consonantal) y.

Other varieties of Cornish feature one more diphthong (but lack the distinction between **iw**, **yw**, and **uw**): **ei**, a sequence of the ‘murmured’ vowel schwa and consonantal y. In Revived Late Cornish, this diphthong takes the place of KK **i** in open syllables.

◀)) [chei \(KK chi\), hei \(KK hi\), trei \(KK hi\)](#)

➔ As speakers of KK, you will probably only encounter the SWF diphthong **ei** when listening to speakers of Revived Late Cornish. It has been mentioned for the sake of completeness.

The core of the length rules

To sum things up, the KK system of vowel and consonant length is based on two principles:

1. There are no long vowels or consonants in unstressed syllables
2. Stressed syllables usually contain one of the two because the underlying rhythm of the language makes them longer than unstressed ones

In fact, only the **rhyme** of stressed syllables is what counts for the length rules. The rhyme is what is left of a syllable if the consonant(s) it starts with are ignored. Thus the rhyme of **ki** is a long **-i**, that of **keun** is **-eun** with a long **eu**, and that of **penn** is **-enn** with a long **nn**.

The couch simile

If you are a Cornish teacher and want to visualise the length rules for the benefit of your students, Benjamin Bruch suggests the following method which he used for his Cornish classes at Harvard:

You either need a couch with three seats or you simulate it using three chairs. This symbolises the rhyme of a stressed syllable. First, the consonants closing a syllable come and take the space they need.

- ➔ There are long (fat) consonant sounds like **nn**, **ll**, **rr**, **mm**, **pp**, **tt**, and **kk**. These are doubled in writing. In our couch simile, they take two seats. Hand out cards showing one “fat” consonant each to one or two students.
- ➔ There are short (slim) consonant sounds like **n**, **l**, **r**, **v**, **b**, **d**, **g**, **f**, **dh**, **th**, or **gh**. These take one seat only. Hand out cards showing one “slim” consonant each to one or two other students.
- ➔ Finally, there is the consonant **s**, a special case. It can have **p**, **t**, or **k** sit on its lap – i.e. vowels are long before **sp**, **st**, and **sk**. Hand a card showing an “extra slim” **s** to one student.
- ➔ All other students can take the roles of vowels.

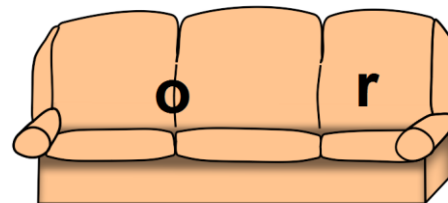
Choose a sample word, ideally one that starts in a vowel. First, the consonant(s) take its or their place(s). For the sake of this example, we are using the sample word **or** ‘border’:

–	–	r
1	2	3

r is a short consonant and takes only one seat (the third one). It leaves two seats empty.

The vowel then occupies all empty seats:

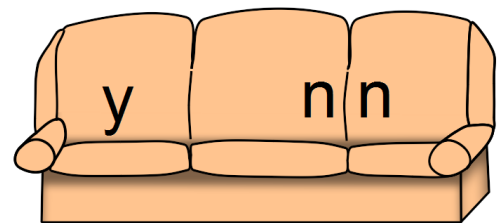
o	r
/ \	
1	2



or ‘frontier’: o - o - r
2 seats for the vowel, 1 seat for the consonant

Repeat this with different syllable structures, using sample words like:

- ◀))) [ynn](#) ‘narrow’ (the “fat” i.e. long **nn** hogs seats two and three)
- ◀))) [als](#) ‘cliff’ (l occupies seat 2, s occupies seat 3)
- ◀))) [Est](#) ‘east’ (s and t share the third seat, possibly with t sitting on the lap of s)



ynn ‘narrow’: y-n-n
1 seat for the vowel, 2 seats for the long consonant

Let your students repeat the sample words, taking care to help them get the length of vowels and consonants right in each of them.