Orthographic diversity and the online public face of Cornish and Breton
Merryn Davies-Deacon
Paper presented at the SOILLSE conference on Small Language Planning, 6th June 2016, Glasgow University.

Image source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bretagne_region_relief_location_map.jpg

This paper will cover Cornish and Breton, two very closely related languages: looking specifically at the question of orthographic diversity, which affects both, and its reflection in the websites of the bodies that are seen to be in charge of the two languages.

So some quick information on Breton: it's a Brythonic Celtic language, spoken traditionally to the west of this line, but revitalisation has been taking place all over Brittany. There are about 200000 speakers (Broudic, 2013, p. 10), and the body in charge of the language is the Ofis Publik ar Brezhoneg.

They're in charge of language planning, and as we can see here, this is explicitly stated to involve actions related to orthography:

"L'Office public assurera toutes missions relatives à *la codification*, l'adaptation et l'enrichissement de la langue. Il s'agira d'accompagner *le développement de l'usage écrit* et oral de la langue bretonne dans des domaines de plus en plus larges (enseignement, technologies de la communication, monde économique …) par l'adaptation du lexique *et de la norme écrite : orthographe (y compris veiller à sa bonne utilisation)*, normes, corpus lexical, termes techniques, toponymie, anthroponymie, etc."
(Région Bretagne, 2012, p. 22, my emphasis)

So the Ofis Publik is quite clearly taking charge of Breton orthography, as well as suggesting that there's a correct way to use it.

Moving onto Cornish: it's also a Brythonic Celtic language: there are no traditional speakers per se, but its territory is identified with the administrative area of Cornwall, i.e. to the west of the line; there are a few hundred speakers now (Burley, 2008). Unlike Breton, it's officially (supposedly!) protected by the UK government as it's been recognised under the terms of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, and part of this recognition involved the establishment of the Cornish Language Partnership in 2005, which carries out the official regulation of Cornish.

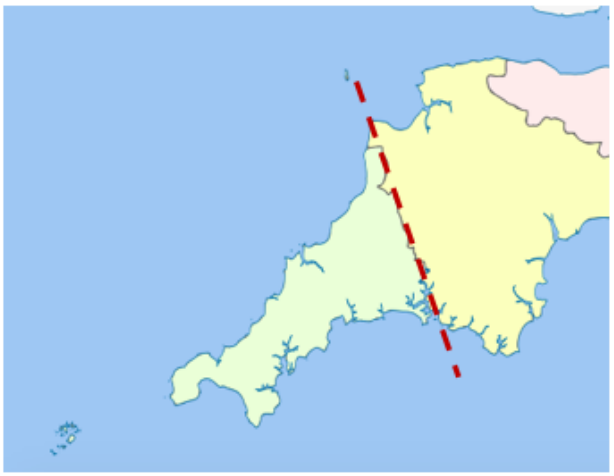


Image source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/England#/media/File:English_ceremonial_counties_1998.svg

The CLP was initially set up in order to carry out the recommendations of the Cornish Language Strategy, published in 2004, and one of those recommendations makes a clear reference to orthography:

"**Targets**

… A single written form of Cornish for use in official documentation and formal education.

Indicative actions
… Initiate inclusive discussion and debate aimed at establishing, in the longer term, the way forward on how Cornish is to be written in official documentation and formal education."
(Lobb and Ansell, 2004, p. 18)

So like the Ofis Publik, the CLP has orthography as an explicit part of its remit.

Orthography creation has been a process affecting both languages over the course of the revival or revitalisation period—and that fits in with the framework of language standardisation, which is a process that tends to occur when a minority language is in a sense trying to compete with the more established dominant language. The general framework for language standardisation, as proposed by Haugen (1966), has 'codification' as one of its four stages, and that often entails the establishment of a standard orthography. However, it can often be a quite emotional topic, particularly if the language is phonetically quite heterogeneous, as Breton is—or for more ideological reasons, and it's been pointed out that it "may involve bitter disputes" (Sallabank, 2011, p. 279), which has certainly been the case for these two languages.

Now the archetypal examples of language revival or revitalisation often involve linguists coming in from outside, and so it may be easier to come up with a politically neutral orthography, but in the case of both Cornish and Breton, it was members of the community who started the process back at the beginning of the 20th century. And this hasn't stopped there being a lot of animosity and tension in both cases: there's work on the two languages that refers to it as a war: the "spelling cold war" for Cornish (Harasta, 2013, p. 120), and the "orthography war" for Breton (Wmffre, 2008).

So a very brief background on Cornish orthographies: by the end of the 20th century there were three major types, the oldest being Unified Cornish, and its newer variant Unified Cornish Revised, which were based on the medieval period of the language; there's Modern Cornish, which was quite different as it was based on the language of the 17th and 18th centuries, and Kernewek Kemmyn, which went back to medieval Cornish again, but took a completely different approach for the actual spelling it used. And in 2008 the Cornish Language Partnership oversaw the creation of a new orthography called the Standard Written Form, (SWF), which is a more neutral alternative intended for use in official contexts, as the Cornish Language Strategy specified. But these others continue to be used, online, in publications sometimes, as well as a few other orthographies.

For Breton: there have been four major orthographies over the course of the 20th century, and they all have various names, but I'm going to use the names adopted by Wmffre (2008): KLT was the first orthography that represented three of the four principal Breton dialects. ZH combined all four and was officially adopted in 1941, but then the University of Brest switched to a new orthography, H, which went back to just representing three dialects but was seen as more linguistically rigorous. And then there was a fourth orthography, SS, which came out of an attempt to re-amalgamate the four dialects, but lots of the people involved in its creation weren't happy with it so it didn't get taken up very widely. And again, there have been other minor orthographies used too.

So in practice ZH is still the most commonly used Breton orthography. But we can see it's not universally used: in publications, it's used the most: "73,4% des auteurs écrivent en orthographe unifiée (peurunvan) [ZH] et 14,6% en orthographe dite « universitaire » [H]" (Abalain, 2000, p. 85) —so ZH is a de facto standard in numerical terms, but there's definitely a sizeable amount of Breton published in H, and some in other orthographies too.

So going back to the role of these two bodies, the CLP and the office public: they have a crucial role in the promotion of the two languages. They're links to the state: the CLP is funded by Cornwall Council and was set up as a result of collaboration with the UK government; and the office public is funded by the Breton regional and departmental councils. And this kind of institutional link is vital for Reversing Language Shift, which Fishman (1991, p. 92) says requires

“institutional reinforcement” and some way down the scale, at stage 2, the process requires the use of the language “in lower governmental services” (ibid., p. 105), which Cornwall Council at least is trying to implement on a small scale by asking its staff to greet visitors in Cornish.

And as for the role of the internet, that too is crucial. UNESCO did a lot of research on the use of minority languages on the internet and they concluded by actually encouraging state governments to implement some kind of internet language policy. They said “technological progress provides enormous potential for languages, including those in danger, to be present on the internet and for content to be accessible by all” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 20). So when printed resources in Cornish and Breton are scarce and sometimes difficult to access, online resources on the other hand are easily accessible and cheap to produce. And indeed, the websites of the CLP and the office public are surely a first port of call for anyone who wants to find out about the two languages, and they’re where you can find out how to get official translations, where you can learn the languages, and what other resources available.

So let’s have a look at how these websites actually respond to this orthographic diversity. Here’s the front page of the CLP’s website. This is the Cornish version, and it’s in the SWF only. As that’s the official standard form and the CLP developed it, that’s understandable.

When we switch onto the English version of the site and look for information on the orthographies, we can find it. This is from the ‘History’ page which is the history of Cornish, and a lot of the last part is dedicated to the orthography dispute.

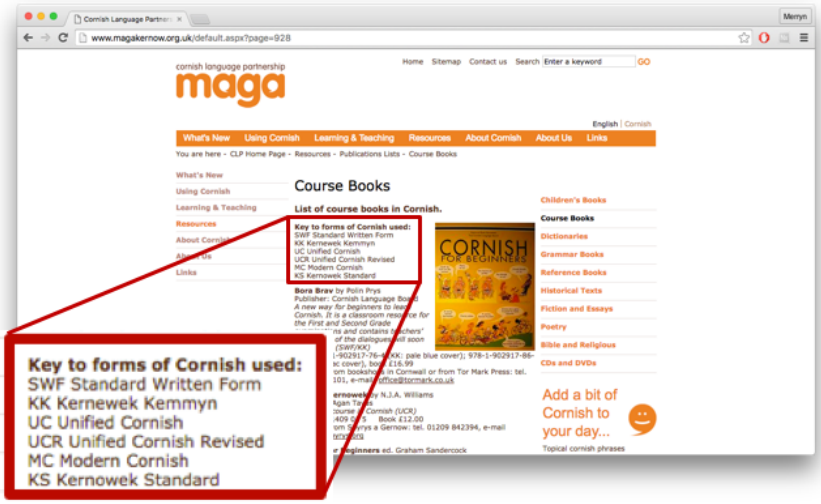
“The 1980s and early 1990s saw a time of review and reconsideration about the theory of reviving a language, plus additional research on the texts. This resulted in the proposal of different approaches … .
… It was decided … that in order to progress the language to its fullest potential, a standard written form should be agreed upon for use in public life and schools … . The process for deciding upon the standard written form drew upon the knowledge of a wide range of Cornish users as well as the experience and advice of a Commission composed of eminent language experts with knowledge of similar situations elsewhere. All Cornish speakers were able to feed in their views, which formed a body of evidence to the Commission. The report from the Commission can be found on this website.

The process resulted in the adoption of a Standard Written Form which draws from all of the systems used by speakers."
(http://www.magakernow.org.uk/default.aspx?page=24)

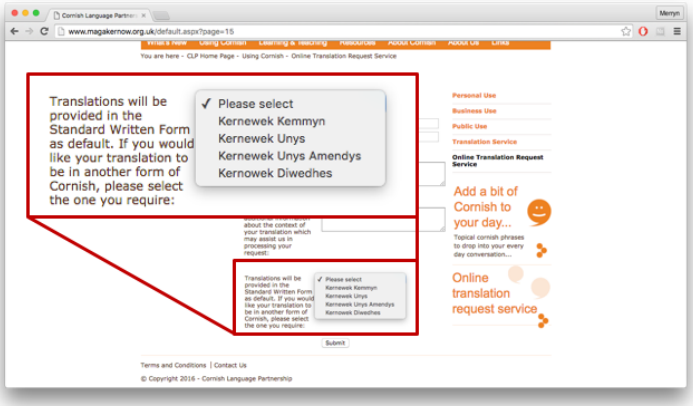
They point out the “proposal of different approaches” in the 1980s and 90s, and they explain why the SWF was developed, “for use in public life and schools”—they show that it’s transparent, saying “the report from the Commission can be found on this website”. So it’s a very clear explanation of the diversity and how they sought to resolve it.

And as well as that, there’s even a separate page, this page called “Variants” (left), where each of the different major orthographies is explained, starting with the swf, and we can see Unified Cornish, Kernewek Kemmyn, and the rest are below.

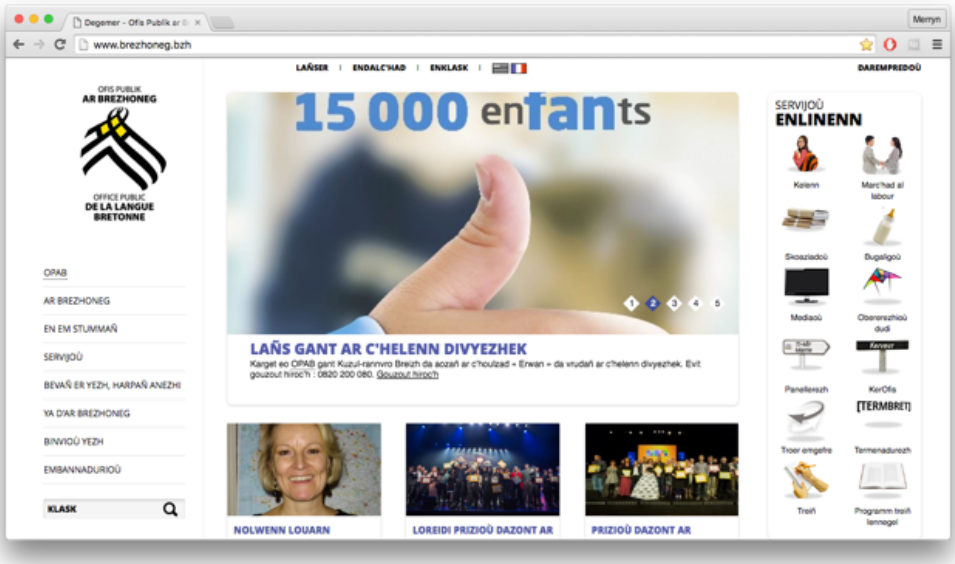
And when we look at their publications pages (below), they state which orthography each publication uses. So it’s again very clear.



And even their translation service (below) allows you to choose which orthography you want them to use. So they’re accommodating the major forms that pre-dated the swf.



Let’s look at the Ofis Publik ar Brezhoneg website now (below). Again starting with their Breton version, and it’s in ZH. Again, it’s not surprising, as this is numerically the most widely used orthography.



And let's switch back into French again and look at the 'history of the language' section, and again it's talking about codification and standardisation.

"Toute la première moitié du 20ème siècle est marquée par un effort de codification visant à réhabiliter la langue bretonne. François Vallée publie son dictionnaire, qui reste encore une référence de nos jours, en 1931. En 1925, Roparz Hemon lance Gwalarn, revue littéraire en langue bretonne … .
Traditionnellement l'on distingue plusieurs dialectes recouvrant plus ou moins les anciennes structures épiscopales (Cornouaille, Trégor, Léon, Vannes). … Les différences dialectales sont peu marquées et concernent surtout l'accent tonique et la prononciation. Le vocabulaire et la grammaire varient peu. …
Le breton moderne a été fixé par des grammairiens et des lexicographes d'abord à partir du XVIIème siècle (Père Maunoir) et du XVIIIème (Grégoire de Rostrenen) puis surtout au XIXème et XXème siècle, notamment par le mouvement Gwalarn (1925) qui fonde véritablement la littérature moderne de langue bretonne."
(http://www.fr.brezhoneg.bzh/4-histoire.htm)

It mentions a few of the leading figures in supporting ZH: Roparz Hemon, Francis Favereau. But it doesn't mention the people who supported H and SS. And more importantly, it doesn't mention the different orthographies themselves. When it's talking about the different dialects, again, it doesn't mention the effect that the differences have on orthography: it downplays the role of variation. And it says modern Breton has been fixed by grammarians and lexicographers, but doesn't say that this involved orthography standardisation, or acknowledge that some degree of variation persists. Essentially, it presents Breton as a lot more unified than it actually is. There are actually no mentions of the non-ZH orthographies anywhere on the website.

Another feature of the Ofis Publik website is this automatic Breton to French translator (http://www.fr.brezhoneg.bzh/42-traducteur-automatique.htm), and I put a few words in different orthographies into it to see if it would recognise them. So we've got the KLT, H and SS forms here where they deviate from the ZH form, and here on the right is the output, which should have been the French translation of the Breton. And I've put it in green when the translator got it right, and in red where it didn't manage it and the output was just the original Breton word. And we can see clearly that all the ZH words are fine, but the spellings that deviate from ZH aren't recognised. So again, the website isn't acknowledging the other orthographies.

c'hweh [H]	c'hweh
c'hwec'h **[ZH]**	six
glaw [SS]	glaw
glav **[ZH]**	pluie
bleo [KLT/H]	bleo
blev **[ZH]**	cheveux
nevesoh [H]	nevesoh
newezzoc'h [SS]	newezzoc'h
nevesoc'h **[ZH]**	plus nouveau

So there's clearly a difference between how the CLP and the office public respond to orthographic diversity: the CLP explicitly acknowledges and explains it, and the office public really just sweeps it under the carpet. And so we have to ask: why? Could it be because of differences between the situations of the two languages? One of the obvious differences is that Breton has about 400 times

as many speakers as Cornish, but that doesn't seem like it would directly be a factor. Related to that is the fact that there are still traditional native speakers of Breton around, although they're all elderly, and their Breton is the most dialectal and has the biggest chance of not being well represented by ZH, while younger speakers will often be using a more standardised type of Breton. And of course, it'll be the younger speakers that the Ofis Publik is trying to reach using the internet. So perhaps they see this multifaceted Breton as something backward, and presenting the orthography as standardised is a way of getting away from this and taking the language forward.

And I think the most important reason is going to be the difference between the British and French states in their attitudes to minority languages. The UK state has never been great with minority languages, but France is the place that's typically cited as restrictive. There's a whole history of the French state being very manifestly opposed to minority languages and in favour of rigidly standardising French, and I would suggest that the office public are reacting to that by trying to present Breton as equally rigidly standardised, so it can be a competitor. Essentially they're using these "traditional nation-building strategies" (Wright, 2007, p. 141), as used for national languages in the past, and creating a microcosm of that in order to try and make Breton succeed in the same way that French has.

And perhaps that very rigid structure, which is very associated with modernity, isn't the right way to go about it. I'd argue that the Cornish model is a better way of dealing with orthographic diversity. It's not modelling itself on standardised British English, but rather acknowledging and explaining the presence of multiple orthographies, thereby creating its own identity rather than building on the structure put in place by the state. And while Cornish has far fewer speakers than Breton does, its number of speakers is growing, while the number of Breton speakers continues to decline. But with recent changes in the management of the CLP and in government funding for Cornish, we'll see whether any of this changes in the future.

References

Abalain, H. (2000). *Histoire de la langue bretonne*. Paris: Gisserot.

Broudic, F. (2013). Langue bretonne : Un siècle de mutations. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 223, 7–21.

Burley, S. (2008). *A report on the Cornish Language Survey conducted by the Cornish Language Partnership*. Available at http://www.magakernow.org/default.aspx?page=404 [Accessed 5 February 2016].

Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Harasta, J. O. (2013). *In search of a single voice: The politics of form, use and belief in the Kernewek language*. PhD thesis, Syracuse University.

Haugen, E. (1966). Dialect, language, nation. *American Anthropologist* New Series 68(4), 922–935.

Lobb, J. and Ansell, G. (2004). *Strategy for the Cornish language*. Available at http://www.linguae-celticae.org/Cornish_Language_Strategy.pdf [Accessed 26 November 2015].

Région Bretagne (2012). *Une politique linguistique pour la Bretagne : Rapport d'actualisation mars 2012*. Available at http://www.bretagne.bzh/upload/docs/application/pdf/2012-04/rapport_dactualisation_de_la_politique_linguisique_2012.pdf [Accessed 26 November 2015].

Sallabank, J. (2011). Language policy for endangered languages. In P. K. Austin and J. Sallabank (Eds.). *The Cambridge handbook of endangered languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 277–290.

UNESCO (2015). *A decade of promoting multilingualism in cyberspace*. Available at http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002327/232743e.pdf [Accessed 16 May 2016].

Wmffre, I. (2008). *Breton orthographies and dialects: The twentieth-century orthography war in Brittany*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Wright, S. (2007). Language policy and language planning. In C. Llamas, L. Mulling and P. Stockwell (Eds.). *The Routledge companion to sociolinguistics*. London: Routledge, pp. 164–171.

Websites accessed 16 May 2016