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# The orthography of revived Cornish as an attempt at pluricentricity

## Abstract (English)

After over twenty years of debate over Cornish orthographies, recognition by the UK government according to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2003 led to the creation of what was initially intended as a “single written form” for use in official contexts. However, the inevitable impossibility of finding a compromise that pleased opposing groups of speakers with differing ideologies meant that the eventual *Standard Written Form* (SWF) was pluricentric, comprising two “main forms”. While these were initially stated to be of equal status, this has been hard to maintain since the SWF’s implementation: with more speakers using Middle Cornish forms, the Late Cornish forms are less visible and commonly believed to be subsidiary. Drawing on such perceptions, along with learning materials and other resources, this paper examines the status of the SWF today and offers some reflections on this unsuccessful attempt at pluricentricity in a minoritised language.

## Abstract (Cornish)

Woja ugens bledhen leun a dhysputys ’dro dhe fatel scrifa Kernowek, an tawas a wrug doas ha boas ajonys gen governans an Ruvaneth Unys en 2003 herwedh Chartour Europek rag Ethow Ranndirysel

po Bian, ha letherednans sodhogel nowedh a veu gwres, creies et an dalla “udn furv scrifys”. Bes onpossybyl o hei dhe gawas udn furv a ell boas usyes gen tus ujj o senjy prederyow dihevel ’dro dhe beth ew Kernowek own. En sewyans, an *Furv Scrifys Savonek* (FSS) ew letherednans “liescrejek” (*pluricentric*): ma dhodho dew furv, leverys et an dalla dhe voas kehaval en-kever status. Calish o bettegens dhe ventena an stat ma: ma moy a dus o usya Kernowek Cres, ’della nag ew Kernowek Diwedhes mar es dhe weles, ha ma meur a dus nag ujj anjei o crejy ev dhe gawas an keth bri ’vel an furv aral. Ma an scrif ma o clappya ’dro dhe hebma, ha ma va o mires ort asnodhow a ujj o avonsya hag o tesky Kernowek, rag examnya status an FSS et an dedhyow ma; ma ev o profya ewedh nebes tybyanjow ’dro dhe Gernowek ’vel ensampel a davas bian liescrejek na wrug doas ha boas amyttyes.

## **Introduction**

### ***Pluricentricity and polynomy***

In its strictest application, the term *pluricentricity* is used in reference to languages spoken across national boundaries, with different codified standards applied in different countries (Clyne 1991: 1). However, more recent work has suggested that “in a looser sense, a language is also pluricentric if within the frontiers of a nation state several dominant or standard varieties co-occur” (Kristiansen 2013: 2). This understanding of the term is particularly appropriate in the case of minoritised languages, often spoken in smaller territories than the nation-state. As “a special case of language-internal variation, marked by questions of national identity and power” (ibid.), pluricentricity is particularly worthy of investigation in such cases: the use of a minoritised language is itself

intimately tied to the same questions, often occurring in a situation of conflict with a dominant language (Le Pipec 2010), where power relationships and identities are crucial.

A related term that has also been applied to minoritised languages is *polynomy*, originating in the context of Corsican (Jaffe 2003; Blackwood 2011). Scholars have debated its application to other minoritised languages, e.g. Guernesiais (Sallabank 2010), Kven (Lane 2014), and Irish (Ó Murchadha 2016). Polynomy is conceived of as an alternative to reliance on the typical strategies of language planning, which tend to codify and promote a standard language variety: instead, it takes a “non-hegemonic approach” (Sallabank 2010: 316), seeking not to impose specific codified norms, but instead considering all local varieties as equally valid. While Ó Murchadha (2016) treats pluricentricity and polynomy as comparable concepts, often using the terms somewhat interchangeably, he notes that “the pluricentric model outlined for Irish is not a fully polynomic model” (ibid.: 210), emphasising the continued reliance, in this case, on prescribed regional norms, rather than the acceptance of the local varieties used by speakers.

Revived Cornish can be considered similar to Irish in this respect, particularly in terms of its orthography, on which this paper will focus. Language planning for Cornish in the 2000s created a standard orthography entailing sets of prescribed “variants”: for this reason, and also because Cornish speakers typically place great value in prescriptive sources (Harasta 2013: 222), it seems inappropriate to characterise Cornish as polynomic, particularly in terms of its orthography, where a significant level of prescription persists and is generally respected by speakers. This paper adds to a growing body of recent work focusing on Cornish in the context of language policy and language attitudes (Sayers 2012; Harasta 2013; Renkó-Michelsén 2013; Croome 2015; Sayers & Renkó-Michelsén 2015; Croome 2018). However, these works tend not to make reference to the

pluricentricity of contemporary Cornish. Sayers and Renkó-Michelsén (2015: 23) state that “[the] SWF permits ‘variant’ grammatical forms and spellings”, later noting that this has had linguistic consequences in the form of “a gradual, diffuse, largely unplanned drift” (ibid.: 26) towards resemblance of one particular longer-established orthography. However, they do not investigate the effects of that “drift” or explain what it may mean in practice. This paper therefore focuses on this more closely, concentrating on contemporary examples of Cornish.

### ***Cornish and the SWF***

Cornish, a Celtic language historically spoken in Cornwall at the south-west tip of Great Britain, features among the world’s small number of revived languages. While the final stages of language death are considered to have occurred towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, speakers now number in the hundreds (Simons & Fennig 2018) as the result of a language revival now of more than a hundred years’ standing. Due to speakers’ different beliefs about the form that revived Cornish should take, which will be outlined in more detail below, orthography became particularly prominent, often provoking heated arguments and *ad hominem* attacks (Szczepankiewicz 2016: 34), with the result that multiple competing orthographies were used concurrently by 1990.

In 2008, following a two-year process, the *Standard Written Form* (SWF) was implemented as a standard orthography for Cornish, primarily intended for official purposes such as “education and public life” (Bock & Bruch 2008: v). From the outset, it was made clear that the SWF was not a single set of orthographic forms, but was pluricentric, entailing a number of “variant” spellings.

After setting out what these variants consist of, and why they were judged necessary, this paper will

discuss whether this pluricentricity has worked in practice. Beginning with an account of the development of Cornish orthographies prior to the creation of the SWF, and the context for its adoption, it will then illustrate how the “variant” forms of the SWF operate, according to the outline published at its implementation (Bock & Bruch 2008).

Concentrating on the divide between “Middle” and “Late” variants in the SWF, it will then go on to assess whether the officially equal status of these two forms is evident in practice. Primarily, this will involve considering examples of top-down language planning initiatives, particularly those created by bodies officially responsible for language planning. For Cornish, this has frequently concentrated on the production of dictionaries and the promotion of written Cornish in the public space, both categories in which orthography is evidently of particular relevance, and so these in particular will be examined. In the category of dictionaries, non-officially produced materials will also be considered in order to broaden the scope of the investigation.

The internet will additionally be a prominent site of enquiry due to its relevance as an emerging context that can “provide minority-language speakers with opportunities to use their language, which may be rare in the real world” (Cunliffe & Harries 2005: 157)—particularly crucially in the case of Cornish, where the community of speakers is physically diffuse. This will enable the examination of online materials produced by official bodies, as well as allowing access to the perceptions of speakers, as the final section will briefly discuss.

## **The creation of the SWF**

### ***Cornish orthographies in the twentieth century***

The development of Cornish orthographies over the twentieth century is covered in detail in various other sources (e.g. Ferdinand 2013: 210–214; Harasta 2013: 28–39; Davies-Deacon 2016: 21–33).

By 2000, three principal orthographies existed. First, Unified Cornish (Nance 1929), and its successor, Unified Cornish Revised (Williams 1995),<sup>1</sup> whose users favoured the medieval texts, believing them to be representative of a time “before English influence had affected [Cornish],” (Nance 1929: 10) and drawing their spelling system from these sources. Second, Kernewek Kemmyn (George 1986), the most widely used orthography, which also favoured the medieval texts, but used a phonemic system based on the reconstructed phonology of Middle Cornish. Third, Modern Cornish (Gendall 1988), which, like Unified Cornish, employed orthographies taken from the traditional texts, but based these on the texts of the Late Cornish period. Each group of speakers thus held a different set of beliefs, all of which opposed each other in at least one way; these would clearly be difficult to reconcile in the creation of a new orthography.

### ***Context for the development of the SWF***

Nonetheless, events leading to the implementation of a new orthography that aimed to satisfy the concerns of all three groups began at the turn of the new millennium, when the UK ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (MacKinnon 2000: 1), seeking to include Cornish under its terms. Cornish was recognised only under Part II of the Charter, which is less

1 *Unified Cornish* will be used in this paper for both these orthographies collectively, as they differ very little.

specific in its requirements than Part III, under which Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic are recognised. This recognition thus did not directly cause the creation of the SWF, but its terms, particularly the need for “the facilitation and/or encouragement of the use of regional or minority languages, in speech and writing, in public and private life” (Council of Europe 1992), set in motion a series of events leading to its adoption. Firstly, to determine how best to meet speakers’ needs according to the Charter, the government commissioned a report on Cornish and its users (*ibid.*), which clearly identified the presence of three disparate groups of speakers, noting however that despite high-profile conflicts among the principal advocates of the three orthographies, most had “a more tolerant view” (MacKinnon 2004: 271), perhaps being willing to compromise in order “to see Cornish in the public domain” (*ibid.*: 278).

In 2005, the Cornish Language Partnership (CLP) was set up, initially aided by local and central government funding, with the aim of working towards satisfying the Charter. This body was to take charge of language planning, at both linguistic (corpus) and non-linguistic (status and acquisition) levels. From the outset the need to include speakers from the different groups was recognised, and the CLP was careful to draw its members from multiple organisations representing the three opposing stances, aiming for a degree of numerical parity in its composition. It was soon decided that the visibility of Cornish should be prioritised, particularly on street signs. In order not to unduly favour any one of the existing systems, it was eventually agreed that a new orthography should be created for these official uses; developing this became a major focus of the CLP during its initial existence.



### ***The outcome of the SWF process***

The development of orthographies cannot be framed as a purely linguistic process: political concerns and other external matters often overshadow language-internal considerations (Johnson 2005). Indeed, the cases of Unified Cornish and Kernewek Kemmyn demonstrate this: their preference for Middle Cornish, motivated by its perceived greater distance from English, emphasises the security of Cornish as a Celtic language, providing support to claims that the Cornish people has a right to nationhood, which have historically been made in parallel with the language revival (Lowenna 2004). Using the example of the German spelling reforms of 1996, Johnson (2005: 1) characterises orthography development as a “language ideological debate”, emphasising the role of such external factors.

Indeed, the differing beliefs of the three groups of Cornish users that had emerged by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be recognised as some of the most salient “ideologies” that characterised this “language ideological debate” in the case of Cornish. Nakassis (2016: 3) defines an ideology, in linguistics, as a set of “(politically situated or interested) ideas or beliefs about language”. In the case of Cornish, this produces different conceptions of Cornwall and Cornishness: as a Celtic nation looking back to a medieval golden age; as distinct from Englishness; or as a lived reality for ordinary, present-day people. These three positions underlie the three pre-SWF orthographies, motivating each system’s linguistic specificities. Unified Cornish users’ preference for closeness to medieval texts stems from this being “a window to the Celtic-Catholic Cornwall for which [its first promoters] yearned and the vehicle for recreating such a culture in contemporary Cornwall” (Payton 1999: 400). Kernewek Kemmyn’s phonemic system moves away from the spellings used in traditional Cornish, which its users consider undesirable given that they were “based on

contemporary English orthography” (George 1995: 110): indeed, the Kernewek Kemmyn subset of the Cornish revival is characterised by a desire to avoid Englishness as much as possible (Deacon 2006: 21). Meanwhile, Modern Cornish hinged on what Payton (1999: 417) terms the “ideology of modernity”, “providing a sense of historical proximity and continuity for contemporary learners, reassuring them that it was indeed ‘their’ language and a legitimate part of their personal inheritance” (ibid.: 419).

Two ideological axes thus separate the three groups of Cornish users: beliefs about the best temporal basis for the language (either Middle or Late Cornish), and beliefs about the orthographic conventions to be prioritised (based on either reconstructed sounds or on extant spellings). The three orthographies can each be mapped to a different combination of these two sets of opposing ideologies, as Table 1 shows.

**Table 1.** Ideologies of pre-SWF orthographies

|                       |           | Choice of temporal base |                |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------------------------|----------------|
|                       |           | Middle Cornish          | Late Cornish   |
| Choice of conventions | Sounds    | Kernewek Kemmyn         | [none]         |
|                       | Spellings | Unified Cornish         | Modern Cornish |

As these ideologies represent contrary viewpoints, reconciling them in a single new orthography was evidently impossible, as George (2017) notes with reference to the choice between Middle and Late Cornish:

Originally, SWF was to be a *single* written form; all users of Revived Cornish would write the language the same way, even though they might use differing pronunciations. It

is, however, impossible to have a single written form which encompasses Middle and Late (George 2017: 4)

Having already taken care to ensure that all three speaker groups were represented in its activities, the CLP aimed nonetheless to develop an orthography that would satisfy all users of Cornish as much as possible. However, the opposing nature of the groups' most fundamental ideologies meant that this could not result in a single invariable orthographic system. The eventual SWF was instead pluricentric, allowing for variation along two axes that would correspond with the two previously identified sets of ideologies. This allowed speakers from the different groups to use it without compromising on personal ideological principles.

The pluricentricity of the SWF again works along two axes: users can choose between either Middle or Late Cornish-based forms, as well as between forms based on reconstructed sounds or on extant spellings, these being referred to as *Main* and *Traditional* respectively in the SWF. These two parameters result in four possible options, which map onto the previously existing orthographies, illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Forms of the SWF

|                       |           | Choice of temporal base |              |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------------------------|--------------|
|                       |           | Middle Cornish          | Late Cornish |
| Choice of conventions | Sounds    | Middle/Main             | Late/Main    |
|                       | Spellings | Middle/Trad             | Late/Trad    |

In theory, therefore, Cornish users from the different groups can use a form of the SWF that satisfies their own ideological requirements.

The linguistic effect of this pluricentricity can be illustrated with an example sentence, such as “He is going to the college”. A user of Middle and Main forms, i.e. a former Kernewek Kemmyn user, could render this as *Yma ev ow mos dhe’n kolji*. A former Unified Cornish user, favouring the conventions of traditional Cornish spelling, could instead use what the SWF specification terms *Traditional graphs* (Bock & Bruch 2008: 4). Five of these are available; two can be used in this sentence, both in the word *kolji* (‘college’). The first is <c> instead of <k> before back vowels and liquids—similarly to English; the second is <y> instead of <i> in final unstressed syllables. This renders the word as *coljy*, making the whole sentence *Yma ev ow mos dhe’n coljy*.

Between the Middle and Late forms of the SWF, there is a larger number of differences: some affect individual words, while others more systematically apply across the lexicon. There are three places in the example sentence where the Middle and Late orthographies would differ. Firstly, the progressive particle *ow* is a Middle form; its Late equivalent is *o*. Secondly, *mos* (‘go’) is one of a small group of words where <o> is a grapheme specific to Middle Cornish; the Late equivalent is <oa>, rendering the word as *moas*. Finally, the unstressed first syllable of *yma* was lost in Late Cornish, and the word is accordingly written as *ma*. The sentence thus becomes *Ma ev o moas dhe’n kolji*. However, as the two earlier tables show, former users of Modern Cornish would no doubt prefer Traditional graphs: it would be more realistic to use Late/Trad forms than Late/Main. By applying these, we thus obtain the Late/Trad version: *Ma ev o moas dhe’n coljy*.

This example shows how a number of small changes can make a noticeable cosmetic difference to Cornish, whilst staying within the specified bounds of the SWF, and remaining comprehensible to all speakers beyond the first stages of learning. Indeed, 20.3% of headwords in the principal SWF dictionary (see below) can be spelt differently depending on whether the user wishes to use main or

traditional graphs, and 17.1% have different forms depending on which temporal base is used. For 3.4% of headwords, both parameters can be invoked, with the result that for these words up to four different forms are permitted: for example, the word for ‘fleas’ can be spelt as *hwann* (Middle/Main), *whann* (Middle/Trad), *hwadn* (Late/Main), or *whadn* (Late/Trad). There are, of course, additional orthographic differences in inflected forms of words.

The SWF specification emphasises that Traditional graphs are subsidiary to their Main counterparts: they “do not have equal status ... and will not appear in elementary language textbooks or in official documents” (Bock & Bruch 2008: 4). Any lack of visibility of these forms can therefore be anticipated. On the subject of Middle/Late alternation, however, the SWF specification states:

The SWF recognises Revived Middle Cornish, Revived Late Cornish, and Tudor Cornish<sup>2</sup> as variants of equal standing ... variations that reflect a difference in pronunciation between RMC and RLC are accommodated by alternating forms using variant graphs (ibid.: 2)

The meaning of the term *variant graphs* is explained in more depth later in the document:

In cases where differences in pronunciation between the varieties of Revived Cornish are too great to be bridged by an umbrella graph [a single grapheme with different pronunciations for Middle and Late speakers], the SWF recognises “dialectal” spelling variants of equal status. (ibid.: 3)

2 This denotes a version of revived Cornish based on the sixteenth-century language: the SWF specification suggests that its users should draw from both Middle and Late forms as they see fit.

This use of the word *variant* thus refers to a spelling that is specific to either Middle or Late Cornish; it is made clear in the assertion that variants are “of equal status” that neither should be prioritised over the other, despite the much smaller number of Late Cornish users (see following section). The remainder of this paper will concentrate on the presence of these “variants” in contemporary Cornish, showing that “Late variants” tend in fact to be marginalised and, contradicting the SWF specification, to be portrayed as subsidiary to “Middle variants”. This partly stems from a numerical imbalance, which the next section will set out.

### **The use of revived Late Cornish**

It has been noted that Kernewek Kemmyn was the most widely used orthography by 2000. Of those who had not adopted it, many continued using Unified Cornish, with only a small number of Modern Cornish users. Put together, the number of Cornish users preferring Middle Cornish-based orthographies would have been far higher than the number of users favouring Late Cornish-based systems.

It is difficult to quantify the extent to which this remains the case, particularly as there appear to have been few comprehensive surveys of Cornish speakers and their orthographic allegiances in recent years, no doubt connected to the appearance of unity brought about by the adoption of the SWF. We must therefore go back to 2008 and the last survey of Cornish users prior to the SWF’s implementation to find that 11% of speakers preferred Late Cornish in written contexts (Burley 2008: 31). This does not necessarily mean that all these speakers subsequently adopted the Late SWF (i.e. SWF with Late variants): individual users may reject the official orthography entirely.

However, publicly available Late Cornish resources do use this orthography, suggesting that it is preferred by both competent users and learners of this variety.

Revived Late Cornish, as orthographically represented by the Late SWF, has a minor degree of online presence in the form of the website of the Cussel an Tavas Kernôwek (the organisation that promotes Late Cornish; Cussel an Tavas Kernôwek, n.d.), a few blogs, and an audio course, this last resource having the evident advantage of being able to circumvent the question of orthographies. Teaching of Late Cornish in Cornwall also uses the Late SWF (Harasta 2013: 235; Lobb, pers. comm.). While the number of Late Cornish speakers is small, therefore, it does however appear that the Late SWF is actively used by this group.

## **The SWF today**

### ***Official uses of the SWF: visibility in the public space***

The primary aim of the SWF was originally for official use, such as on street signs and the CLP's website. Indeed, the SWF was implemented in these contexts.

We might perhaps expect the Middle and Late variants to be represented equally in such official spaces. The fact that they exist at all indicates a significant change for the Cornish language community: prior to the establishment of the CLP, there was no central, official body regulating Cornish, and language planning was spearheaded by grassroots organisations. The advent of official, professionally-produced materials was no doubt a relief in a movement that has typically demanded immense voluntary effort for very little reward, and for members of a language community that has

typically placed great importance on authoritative sources such as dictionaries (Harasta 2013: 222), the authority of such organisations is paramount.

After funding cuts in 2016, the CLP was split into three institutions: the Cornish Language Office (CLO), a department of Cornwall Council, took charge of status planning; the community interest company Golden Tree deals with acquisition planning, including public campaigns; and the Akademi Kernewek, a voluntary group, focuses on corpus planning.

These bodies however attest no commitment to promoting both varieties of the SWF equally: as a result, Late variants are entirely absent from the public space. Banners advertising the CLO render its name in Cornish as *Sodhva an Yeth Kernewek*; using Late rather than Middle variants, this would be *Sodhva an Eth Kernowek*. Similarly, in a Golden Tree advertising campaign implemented in local buses in early 2017 with the aim of teaching passengers a few Cornish phrases, Late variants are again absent. Examples include the phrases *da yw genev* ('I like it') and *kas yw genev* ('I hate it'), both of which use the Middle variant <yw> rather than Late <ew>.

Turning to the online context, the following text is taken from the Cornish version of the CLO's main webpage:

An yeth Kernewek yw yn studh kreffa ages dell o yn termyn hir, **mes kepar** ha pub yeth **vyghan**, yma **edhom** a dowlenn [sic] dh'y gwitha, skodyha [sic] ha displegya. Konsel Kernow a led towlen an yeth Kernewek hag yw gwrys a beder rann: Status, Devynydh, Ynkerth ha Corpus. Amkan an dowlenn yw dhe ynkressya niver a Gernewegoryon ha **gul** moy a spassow rag **gul** devnydh Kernewek. (Cornwall Council 2016)



[‘The Cornish language is in a stronger state than it was a long time ago, but as with every small language, there is need for a plan to preserve, support and develop it.

Cornwall Council leads the plan for the Cornish language, which is made up of four parts: Status, Use, Uptake and Corpus. The aim of the plan is to increase the number of Cornish speakers and create more spaces to enable the use of Cornish.’]

Bold text in this quotation signals the use of Middle variants; Late variants do not appear on the page.

More examples can be cited. Bilingual signage outside Cornwall Council’s buildings again favours Middle variants in all cases. The websites of other organisations that purportedly represent all users of Cornish, rather than those favouring a particular set of ideologies, also use only the Middle SWF. Among these, the CLO has already been noted; we can add the Akademi Kernewek and Gorsedh Kernow, a body that gives awards to supporters of Cornish, including examination certificates: one, therefore, that many learners will encounter. The exam papers themselves do not offer Late SWF versions, but instead only Middle SWF and Kernewek Kemmyn versions—the latter a remnant of the days before the SWF, when Kemmyn was numerically dominant. The Akademi Kernewek is also particularly important to mention here, given its position as a “language academy” for Cornish, officially delegated control of corpus planning and thus the most relevant to the linguistic aspects of Cornish under discussion here. The Akademi comprises multiple expert panels, drawn from academics and prominent members of the language community. There is no overt commitment to parity among representatives of the different forms of Cornish as there was during the creation of the SWF, but promoters of the different forms are nonetheless present. However, as

noted, the Middle SWF is again the only form visible on its website (Akademi Kernewek n.d.). Like the grassroots organisations that formerly spearheaded Cornish language planning, members of the Akademi are volunteers, and many are based outside Cornwall; this perhaps explains the Akademi's difficulty in providing both versions of the SWF, which would evidently require additional effort.

The only use of the Late SWF in official contexts is among the SWF versions of Cornish place names, visible on town welcome signs and street signs. However, this use is minimal, and, as Padel (2017: 30) points out, muddled, not mapping onto the western area in which Cornish continued to be spoken in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This would perhaps have been a logically defensible way of expressing the alternation between Middle and Late variants, highlighting the way in which the traditional language evolved; it could have been considered for other geographically fixed uses of written Cornish, such as signage at Cornwall Council buildings. As it is, the representation of Late variants in official contexts is minimal.

### ***Resources for users and learners***

We can continue investigating the visibility of Late variants by turning to their presence in resources for those who wish to learn and use Cornish. Based on an examination of the materials available at the Cornish Studies Library in Redruth in late 2016, a modest number of textbooks and dictionaries using Middle variants could be identified: some are recent publications, while others update pre-existing material that originally used other orthographies. This is not the case for the Late SWF, however; only one book seems to have been published using this orthography, the *Oxford Children's Cornish–English Visual Dictionary* (Mills 2013). The author, an academic with research interests in

Cornish lexicography, has made clear his negative views of Kernewek Kemmyn in multiple previous publications, labelling it “not a suitable pedagogical basis for Revived Cornish” (Mills 1999: 194); as the Middle SWF resembles Kemmyn fairly closely, it is unsurprising that he has avoided it here. Indeed, he appears to favour Late Cornish as a basis for the contemporary language, claiming that “the inadequacies of the Middle Cornish texts as a basis for revived Cornish are evident” (ibid.: 196). Using the Late SWF thus allows him to use an orthography that better represents his own stance, while remaining within the bounds of what is officially sanctioned.

As Cornish is still primarily learnt in adulthood, and is not available as a regularly taught school subject, it is hard to see a major role for the *Visual Dictionary* in Cornish teaching; having been published outside Cornwall, it also bears the disadvantage of not necessarily being known to the small booksellers, often affiliated to Cornish language organisations, that have traditionally stocked learning materials and would naturally be a first port of call for learners and teachers seeking resources.

In other publications, Late variants tend to be ignored. This can be illustrated with the example of the most recently published SWF dictionary (Harris et al. 2018), the only comprehensive paper dictionary of the SWF published since the orthography was revised in 2014 (Cornish Language Partnership 2014). This dictionary uses Middle variants throughout, giving the following justification:

To ensure that this dictionary is as easy to use as possible by children, other learners, and those producing material for use in public life, there are no spelling variants. (Harris et al. 2018: 3)

This offers a different interpretation of the word “variant” from how we have understood it so far. While the SWF specification used “variant” to refer to one of a pair of forms of equal status, this cannot be the case here, as the dictionary states that there are “no spelling variants”. Instead, it appears that “variant” is here intended to mean a form subsidiary to a more standard counterpart, following the model of the alternation between Main and Traditional graphs, where Main graphs are more standard. With this interpretation of “variant”, Traditional graphs can be considered a “variant” in relation to the Main form.

By using the Middle SWF consistently, but equating this with a lack of “spelling variants”, the dictionary thus implies that the Middle SWF is not a “variant”, but instead the principal standard form of the orthography. Conversely, the absence of the Late SWF relegates that variety to the status of a subsidiary “variant”, implying that it is less standard than the Middle SWF. In fact, the dictionary makes no mention of the fact that the forms it uses are based on Middle Cornish, thereby equating the Middle SWF with “the SWF” as a whole. The Middle SWF is therefore positioned as a de facto standard orthography, and misrepresenting the intended pluricentricity.

Unlike the *Visual Dictionary*, this dictionary is published in Cornwall, and distributed by Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek, the largest and most active Cornish language association; they promote it as the principal SWF dictionary. It is therefore likely to be a principal source of information for many Cornish learners, who, going by the information presented therein, will be misinformed about the status of variants within the SWF.

On the internet, “official” learning materials, produced by the no longer extant CLP and by Golden Tree, are available on the language-learning website Memrise (GoCornish n.d.) and on the dedicated sites Say Something in Cornish (SaySomethingin 2019), What’s Cornish For (First Group

& Golden Tree n.d.), and Go Cornish (GoCornish 2019). These materials use only Middle variants, and like the dictionary, do not make this practice explicit, noting only that they use “the SWF”. The one online resource produced by an “official” body that does display Late forms is the principal SWF dictionary, [cornishdictionary.org.uk](http://cornishdictionary.org.uk), which merits further investigation.

### ***cornishdictionary.org.uk***

The online SWF dictionary is the most comprehensive freely available source for the SWF, providing both Middle and Late variants. However, it also contains gaps and inconsistencies that would undoubtedly make it confusing for users unaware of the precise differences between the two forms.<sup>3</sup>

The dictionary uses what it calls *tags* to differentiate between Middle and Late variants, giving the following explanation:

two tags have been chosen to mark words that are perceived as either exclusively Revived Middle Cornish or Revived Late Cornish. Words that are in use across different groups of speakers with both RMC and RLC backgrounds are thought of as “common” and are therefore not marked by any tag. (Cornish Language Partnership n.d.[a])

Going by the dictionary’s explanation, we would therefore expect Middle variants to be marked with a superscript <sup>M</sup>, and Late variants with an <sup>L</sup>. We can take an example item to see how this works in practice, such as the Cornish word for ‘house’ (Cornish Language Partnership n.d.[b]). Two

3 In the time between acceptance and publication of this article, the website has received a major update and is now much clearer regarding the status of Late variants. For the first six years of its existence (until mid–2019), the dictionary functioned as described here.

entries are present in the dictionary, under the headwords *chi* and *chei* respectively. The *chi* entry, itself not tagged either <sup>M</sup> or <sup>L</sup>, gives the plurals *chiow* and *treven*, the former marked with an <sup>M</sup> tag. It provides several phrases using *chi*, including *chi dolli* ('doll's house') and *chi gweder* ('greenhouse'), none marked with any tag. It also gives a pronunciation, marked as being for Middle Cornish users, and lists *chei* as a "variant", with an <sup>L</sup> tag.

The entry for *chei* itself includes the <sup>L</sup> tag attached to the headword. The only plural it gives is *treven*, and the pronunciation it gives is marked as being for Late Cornish users. It includes the same phrases as the other entry, using *chei* instead of *chi*, resulting in *chei dolli*, *chei gweder*, and so on. Each of these examples is marked with the <sup>L</sup> tag. There is no mention of *chi* as a "variant".

Small differences in the two entries' presentation indicate how Middle and Late variants tend to be treated differently within the dictionary. *Chei* is undeniably a Late variant, as the <sup>L</sup> tag indicates. This is reinforced by the fact that the pronunciation provided is specifically for Late Cornish users. Likewise, the pronunciation for *chi* is marked for Middle Cornish users, suggesting that *chi* may be a Middle variant. Indeed, it would be highly unusual for a Late Cornish user to write *chi*; *chei* conforms more closely to the word recommended in pre-SWF Late Cornish materials (e.g. Gendall 2000: 169). While the dictionary's explanation of the <sup>M</sup> and <sup>L</sup> tags would lead us to expect an <sup>M</sup> tag on *chi*, this is not what occurs. The dictionary therefore implies that the Middle variant *chi* is not specific to Middle Cornish, making it seem more standard than its Late Cornish equivalent. Additionally, listing *chei* as a "variant" of *chi*, but not vice versa, again appears to be an instance of the second meaning of "variant", implying that *chei* should be considered subsidiary to *chi*.

This pattern is followed throughout most of the dictionary. The <sup>M</sup> tag is in fact used extremely sparingly, meaning that Middle variants almost universally come across as more standard than their

Late equivalents. In entries where the <sup>M</sup> tag *is* used, this is not paired with an <sup>L</sup> tag on the corresponding entry, still implying that one form of the word is subsidiary to the other: the only difference being that in these examples, the Late variant is presented as standard, and the Middle variant as subsidiary. Again, this misrepresents the equal standing of the two forms laid out in the SWF specification. To the user without an in-depth knowledge of the SWF and different forms of Cornish, therefore, Middle variants will appear more standard in most cases.

### ***Perceptions among speakers***

The lack of visibility of Late variants at the “official” level and their confusing presentation in dictionaries has unsurprisingly trickled down to speakers, among many of whom this perception of Late forms as subsidiary persists. On the most active online community for discussing Cornish (I pledge to become more fluent in Cornish, n.d.), numerous comments attesting this belief can be identified: among them, the identification of the Middle SWF as “standard” in opposition to “late variant spellings”; the “late variant” characterised as one of several “optional variants”; and the belief that “late variants” are not permitted in beginners’ classes, not being part of the “Main Form”. These views are not restricted to those who are new to Cornish, or less acquainted with the historical debates over orthography: one of the comments to which the previous sentence refers comes from a very active and well-known personality in the community, involved to some extent in the creation of the SWF, and no doubt considered an authority by learners in a movement that still relies heavily on the prestige of celebrated leader figures (Kennedy 2005).

Again, these remarks show how the word *variant* has apparently been misunderstood as meaning a form that is subsidiary to the standard. This is no doubt encouraged by the fact that only Late forms tend to be listed as “variants” in the online SWF dictionary, the lack of visibility of the Late SWF in official contexts, and the existence of Traditional graphs, which, unlike Late variants, *are* subsidiary.

These attitudes can also be seen elsewhere on the web. The *Children’s Visual Dictionary* described above is reviewed on Amazon by an anonymous user under the pseudonym *Kerneweger* (‘Cornish speaker’)—a name implying a certain degree of authority—who writes: “The only slight gripe is that’s [sic] it’s not in the main form of the SWF (standard spelling system) but late Cornish SWF ... [this] will limit it’s [sic] future use in the education setting where SWF main form is the agreed system” (Kerneweger 2013).

Here, the use of the phrase “SWF main form” suggests that the reviewer has confused the Main/Traditional alternation with the Middle/Late alternation, once again equating Middle and Main. The dictionary itself appears to anticipate this, overtly stating that it uses the Late SWF, but emphasising that this is part of “the agreed Standard Written Form”, and following this with “don’t worry if you spot some differences in this dictionary from something you already have—it is all good Cornish” (Mills 2013: 8). For those who do not already have a copy of the dictionary, however, this review could act as a deterrent, further inhibiting the spread of the Late SWF. Indeed, its lack of visibility only perpetuates that diminished presence, creating a vicious circle: if Late variants are considered non-standard, they will not be used; if they are not used, they will be considered non-standard.



## Conclusions

This paper has explored a case study in the implementation of pluricentric orthographies for very small minoritised language communities, showing how the pluricentricity of the standard Cornish orthography was implemented as an attempt to resolve conflicting ideologies among different groups of users, but was unsuccessful. In this case, ensuring parity between Middle and Late variants was no doubt made even more difficult by the fact that Middle Cornish users significantly outnumber Late Cornish users: this highlights the need for language planners to take into account how the composition of the speaker community will affect the use and portrayal of different prescribed varieties. The contexts examined in this paper highlight the large discrepancy in use between the two Main forms of the SWF: it is clear that Middle variants are prevalent, while Late variants are minimal. As well as the far smaller number of users of revived Late Cornish, contributing factors include the complications caused by the simultaneous existence of subsidiary Traditional forms, the misleading way information is presented in dictionaries, and speakers' lack of understanding of the status of variants, these factors also influencing each other. A number of conclusions can thus be drawn about how this attempt at implementing a pluricentric orthography for Cornish has panned out, including some recommendations for alternative practices that could work towards reinstating the intended pluricentricity.

First, the pluricentricity of the SWF can be considered a failure. While it attempted to resolve the paradox engendered by the presence of multiple conflicting ideologies by instating Middle and Late variants that were intended to be equal in status, this has not been reflected in practice. Speakers appear not to understand the intended function of the variants, indicating that clearer guidance on the matter should be available from official sources such as the CLO or the Akademi

Kernewek. This apparent confusion has probably been exacerbated by the presence of the additional choice between Main and Traditional forms, and the subsidiary status of the latter.

Second, Late forms are barely visible, particularly in official contexts. The bodies in charge of implementing these official uses of Cornish—the CLO, the Akademi Kernewek, and Golden Tree—do not use Late variants; this suggests that their prominent staff members are Middle Cornish users, no doubt a result of the comparatively small size of the Late Cornish user population. As a result, Late variants are difficult to find, effectively only accessible to those who seek them out. Their presence is largely limited to a small set of resources that are not advertised by official bodies and do not link into the larger network of Cornish language materials.

Third, the commitment to parity between Middle and Late Cornish should have been scrutinised more thoroughly when the SWF was implemented. While the Cornish Language Partnership initially ensured that the three ideologically opposed groups of speakers were all represented, this representation was no longer considered important post-SWF, as the new orthography supplanted the three pre-existing systems in official contexts. Adopting the SWF did not however mean that users relinquished the ideological principles that had previously guided their orthographic choices—as the pluricentricity of the SWF itself demonstrates. Just as care was previously taken to ensure representation of these different principles, this should have been retained when these principles were remapped onto different varieties of the SWF, particularly the Middle and Late variants, given their supposed equality.

Fourth, technology should be explored further as a way of dealing with the presence of multiple equal-status forms. The online SWF dictionary in particular could be reworked so as to explain the different variants in a clearer and more intuitive way, perhaps taking into account individual users'

preferences, and more clearly linking together Middle and Late forms of the same word rather than having only one point to the other as a “variant”. The ability of online tools to move beyond the limitations of traditional paper dictionaries could surely provide ways of tackling this matter that would be both comprehensive and elegant.

Fifth, Late Cornish users have a responsibility to make the Late SWF visible. Blogs and other resources using Late variants should be maintained and advertised widely within the general Cornish language community. Materials of this type are of course nearly always side projects, worked on in their creator’s spare time, making it difficult to expend as much effort as might be desired. There nonetheless remains a need to show that there are active users of the Late SWF, for whom adequate provisions ought to be made by the language planning authorities. The case of Cornish shows that pluricentricity will not function as intended if no effort is made to actively promote it beyond its initial top-down implementation: instead, it must be sustained by continuous language maintenance, in the form of both ongoing support from language planning bodies and understanding and engagement from speakers.

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## **List of tables**

**Table 1.** Ideologies of pre-SWF orthographies

**Table 2.** Forms of the SWF