

Avoiding Overdetermination

Overuse of the Article in Revived Cornish – Full explanation

An important property of Insular Celtic languages, and one that tends to give learners a headache, is the way they use the definite article *the* (**an** in Cornish) in **noun phrases**.

Most grammar books talk about nouns and adjectives and so on as separate parts of speech. But sometimes we need to describe the way these parts of speech fit together to make larger phrases and parts of sentences. One important unit in Cornish grammar is something we call a "noun phrase". The most basic kind of noun phrase just consists of a single noun: **ki** 'a dog', or **mowesi** 'girls'. But a noun phrase can also include adjectives that describe this 'head noun': **ki bras** 'a big dog', **mowesi vyhan euthek** 'horrible little girls'. We can keep adding adjectives that describe that dog or those girls all day, but we'd still just have one noun phrase, because all the adjectives refer back to the head noun.

Sometimes a noun phrase includes an article: **an ki** 'the dog'. Sometimes it includes a possessive pronoun: **ow hi** 'my dog'. Sometimes we add particles like **ma** and **na** to mean 'this dog' (**an ki ma**) or 'those horrible little girls' (**an mowesi vyhan euthek na**). All three of these things (the article **an**, possessive pronouns like **ow** and **dha**, and demonstrative particles like **an... ma** and **an... na**) are called 'determiners' because they tell us which dog or set of horrible little girls we're talking about.

Sometimes, we need to name the person who owns the dog, so we place another noun (usually a proper name) after the head noun, to say who the owner is: **ki Peder** 'Peter's dog'. If we really want to get fancy, we can describe the owner of the dog in a different way: **ki bras an mowesi vyhan euthek** 'the horrible little girls' big dog'. Phrases like these can end up having a lot of different nouns in them, but we need to remember that we're really just dealing with one single noun phrase. We're only talking about one specific dog.

All the rest of it -- the fact that the dog is big, that it belongs to some girls, who are horrible, etc. -- is just a way of specifying exactly which dog we're talking about. **Ki** 'dog' is the head noun, and everything else is describing the dog. Within a given noun phrase, only one word may be determined by the article **an**, a possessive pronoun, or by virtue of being a proper name which always counts as determined.

In English, as in most other European languages, determination is handled individually on a noun by noun basis, as in:

The Lord of the Rings

As this phrase refers to one specific lord of several specific rings, both words are candidates for determination by the article *the*. Another example of the way English – but not Cornish – works is:

The City of London

Again, both *city* and *London* refer to one specific settlement, but only the common noun *city* takes the article. *London*, being a proper noun (a name, as indicated by the capital L), is considered determined anyway and does not need to be preceded by an article.

In the Celtic languages, this is handled differently. Consider the Breton phrase:

Aotrou ar Gwalennoù
(Lord the Rings)

This conveys the exact meaning of the English *The Lord of the Rings*, even though it only contains one instance of the article. The rule is: in Celtic languages, if the last item in a chain of nouns expressing possession is preceded by the article, or if this last item is a proper noun, none of the nouns preceding it may take the article. The correct Cornish version of the phrase above would therefore be:

Arludh an Bysowyer

The same principle applies to proper names of persons or places as in:

Cita Loundres

***An Cita Loundres** is incorrect, although one frequently stumbles across this kind of utterance in Revived Cornish. Mistakes of this type are found especially frequently in chains of nouns acting as qualifiers for the place-name **Kernow**.

* **An Senedh an Stenoryon Kernow**

and

* **Senedh an Stenoryon Kernow**

are both 'wrong' by the rules of Celtic grammar, and should be:

Senedh Stenoryon Kernow

Kernow, being a proper name, makes the whole chain of nouns qualifying it definite, so none of them need to be preceded by the article. The same principle applies to phrases like **Berdh Gorsedh Kernow** 'The Bards of the Gorsedh of Cornwall' or **ki Wella** 'Wella's dog'. Although most learners quickly come to terms with the rule that there should be only one article in such a chain of qualifying or possessive nouns, there seems to be confusion about the correct way to treat proper names. The answer is simple: they always count as definite, that is, as if they were preceded by the article.

It should be noted that the last generations of Late Cornish speakers seem to have made the same type of mistake under the influence of English, as we see in phrases like ***an fêr Karêsk** and ***an ôst an tshei** in Lhuyd's rendering of **Jowan Chei an Hor'**. These examples

show that during the later stages of the language, the traditional system of handling determination may well have been lost. Nonetheless, in Revived Middle Cornish, the Celtic way of doing it is the only correct one, and a number of speakers of Revived Late (or Modern) Cornish are trying to adhere to these rules as well.

A related question is how to treat chains of qualifying nouns in which the first noun in the series is not determined, and would not take the definite article if it stood on its own. In other words: how does one say *a member of the Kowethas* rather than *the member of the Kowethas*? In these cases, the preposition **a** 'of' is normally used. This counts as a break in the chain of qualifying nouns so that the noun following the preposition **a** may take the article if it would normally do so on its own. Thus we can say

esel a'n Kowethas 'a member of the Fellowship'

since the society by itself would be **an Kowethas** in Cornish. But in a phrase like

esel a Gowethas an Yeth 'a member of the Language Fellowship'

it would be incorrect to say ***esel a'n Kowethas an Yeth**, since the phrase meaning *the Language Fellowship* (or, if you prefer, *the Fellowship of the Language*) would stand on its own as **Kowethas an Yeth**. Since the article preceding **Yeth** makes the whole phrase **Kowethas an Yeth** definite, there is never any need to insert a second definite article before **Kowethas**.

Likewise, we can distinguish between the indefinite phrases

esel a'n Senedh 'a member of Parliament'
esel a Senedh Kernow 'a member of the Parliament of Cornwall'

and the definite phrases

esel an Senedh 'the member of Parliament'
esel Senedh Kernow 'the member of the Parliament of Cornwall'

Note that in both cases, the English word Parliament is translated the same way, as **an Senedh**, while the phrase *the Parliament of Cornwall* is translated as **Senedh Kernow**, since the place-name **Kernow** makes the whole phrase definite, without need for a preceding article.

(In English, *Parliament* is a proper noun, as indicated by the initial capital P, and by custom it can stand on its own, and does not need to be preceded by the definite article. We have translated it here as **an Senedh** 'the Parliament', much as we use **an Kowethas** 'the Fellowship' as an abbreviated form of **Kowethas an Yeth**.)

Another way we can specify a noun without using the article or a proper name is by using

a possessive pronoun. **Ow chi** 'my house' refers to a specific house, just like **an chi** 'the house' or **Chi Jowan** 'John's house' does. Thus, we do not need to use the definite article when we translate phrases like *the door of my house*:

Daras ow chi	'the door of my house'
Handla daras ow chi	'the handle of the door of my house'

Note that in Late Cornish, a different construction was often used: **an chei vy** 'the house of me' tended to replace older **ow chi**. This, too, is considered incorrect in Revived Middle Cornish.

In fact, whenever we have a Cornish noun phrase where all of the components are definite, we only need *one* of the following items:

1. a definite article (**an**);
2. a possessive pronoun (**ow, dha, y, hy**, etc.);
3. a proper name (**Jowan, Loveday, Kernow, Breten Veur**, etc.)

This item will appear in the *last* element in the series of nouns. Here are some examples:

Gweder fenester <u>an gegin</u>	'the glass of the window of the kitchen'
Kynsa folen lyver <u>ow thas</u>	'the first page of my father's book'
Onan a vodrebedh <u>Loveday</u>	'one of Loveday's aunts'
Gour hwor modrep <u>Loveday</u>	'the husband of the sister of Loveday's aunt'

Note that in a sentence like the last one above, we could also say *Loveday's aunt's sister's husband*, which has exactly the opposite word order to the Cornish.

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Suggestions for teaching

- As Cornish differs strongly from English in this respect, some explanation of the principles governing determination will be necessary. Immersion alone will probably not work, especially since overuse of the article has become rather widespread in Cornish signage and on the internet. Learners will need some clear advice to help to counter this. They should be exposed to correct usage of determination as often as possible, especially in teaching materials. Unfortunately, older versions of these also tend to include such phrases as ***esel an Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek**.
- If there is a competent speaker of another Celtic language in your class, ask them for their linguistic intuition whenever you are in doubt. Very similar systems of handling determination are at work in all Insular Celtic languages.
- An explanatory handout as well as some exercises (& their solutions) can be found on the following pages.

- Handout -



There can be only one!

(Well, at least in Celtic languages.)

In any **noun phrase**, there can only be either one article, or one proper name, or one possessive pronoun. All nouns preceding either of these within the noun phrase take the definite article “the” in the English translation but must not take “an” in Cornish.

e. g.

literally equals Engl.	Arludh <i>lord</i> The Lord	an <i>the</i> of the	Bysowyer <i>rings</i> Rings	is correct (1 article)
	*An Arludh	an	Bysowyer	is incorrect (more than 1 article).
literally equals English	Gorsedh <i>gorseth</i> The Gorsedh	Kernow <i>Cornwall</i> of Cornwall		is correct (1 proper name: 'Kernow')
	*An Gorsedh	Kernow		is also incorrect (1 article & 1 name).
literally equals English	Penn <i>head</i> The head	ki <i>dog</i> of my	ow broder <i>my brother</i> brother's dog	(only 1 possessive pronoun: 'ow')
	*An penn	an ki	ow broder	is incorrect (2 articles & 1 pronoun);
	*Penn	an ki	ow broder	is still wrong (1 article & 1 pronoun).

What's a “noun phrase”, then?

→ By “noun phrase”, we refer to a noun and those words adjacent to it which define it more closely. This means that a noun phrase can range from very short - e. g. **ki** (“a dog”) - to quite long - e. g. **ki bras broder Jowan** (“Jowan's brother's big dog”). In short, anything which can tell you which individual or specimen you are referring to: “Dog.” - “Which dog?” - “A big white dog.” - “A big fat smelly dog.” - “My uncle Bob's old dog.” - “That dog way way way over there.” etc. All of these are noun phrases.

Exercises

1) Fill in the article “an” where appropriate.

- a) Wella yw Kerneweger. Yma va trigys yn chi y deylu.
- b) esel Kowethas yw Wella.
- c) handla daras agan chambour.
- d) Piw a welas ost chi?

2) Which of the following sentences aren't good Cornish? Correct them if necessary.

- a) Mester Angove yw esel Senedh an Stenegow Kernow.
- b) Yma an varhadoryon ow mos dhe'n fer Karesk.
- c) Y'n seythen yw passyes, my a redyas kynsa folen lyver ow hwor.
- d) Henry Jenner o kynsa Bardh Meur an Orsedh Kernow.
- e) My a brenas karr koth ow ewnter.
- f) Ki ow hwor a bonyas war-lergh kath myrgh an dhyskadores.
- g) Ev a skrifas y hanow war kynsa folen an lyver.
- h) Arlodhes Iwerdhon (Peggy Pollard) a skrifas kynsa rann a'n gwari.
- i) Rann a wari Peggy veu skrifys yn Kernow.
- j) Nebes a'n ilewydhyon ny vynnons gwari an kan.
- k) Ev a veu gwrys an Bardh Meur a'n Orsedh Kernow yn 1961.

Solutions

1) Fill in the article “an” where appropriate.

- a) Wella yw Kerneweger. Yma va trigys yn chi y deylu.
- b) Esel an Kowethas yw Wella.
- c) Handla daras agan chambour.
- d) Piw a welas ost an chi?

2) Which of the following sentences aren't good Cornish? Correct them if necessary.

- a) wrong → Mester Angove yw esel Senedh Stenegow Kernow.
- b) wrong → Yma an varhadoryon ow mos dhe fer Karesk.
- c) correct
- d) wrong → Henry Jenner o kynsa Bardh Meur Gorsedh Kernow.
- e) correct
- f) correct
- g) correct
- h) wrong → Arlodhes Iwerdhon a skrifas kynsa rann an gwari.
- i) correct
- j) correct
- k) wrong → Ev a veu gwrys Bardh Meur Gorsedh Kernow yn 1961.