

What the fuss is all about... some basics of the Cornish reconstruction debate

1. Prosody

Much of the debate between Cornish linguists centers on **prosody** (i.e. those features of pronunciation which are normally not explicitly noted in writing, like stress, intonation, length, breaks and so on – one could sum it up as the rhythm and melody of a language). A central concept in this respect is the so-called **Prosodic Shift** which Nicholas Williams postulated for early Middle Cornish: he claims that before the earliest Middle Cornish texts were written, Cornish exchanged its inherited Celtic rhythm for an English one. Ken George disputes this; in his earlier works he claimed that this change did take place, but only to some extent and not before ca. 1600. He has recently adapted his theory and now claims that it probably did not happen at all, and that the rhythm and melody heard in traditional Cornish English pronunciation of Cornish place-name does not represent how Late Cornish sounded. What this new twist to his theory does not explain well is why, from 1600 on, so many vowels which had been (half-)long originally are marked as short in the texts. Such a massive change in spelling at least raises the suspicion that the original rhythm of the language did in fact change somewhat.

As is immediately apparent from my definition of prosody, this is a tricky subject because prosody can mostly be deduced only indirectly from written texts! It is therefore no wonder that the debate has been raging on for fourteen years, with no side being able to convince the other. I will now go into further detail and explain what exactly the differences in the two reconstructions are, and – more importantly – how they sound.

1.1 The accent: Volume, pitch, and length

Before we continue, we will have to cover the subject of the **accent**. There are three features which an accented syllable can have: volume (**stress**), pitch (**tone accent**), and length (**quantity**). In English, all three features coalesce, and an accent-bearing syllable is louder and higher than its neighbours; it may also be longer – if it contains a long vowel – but this is not required. (It should be said that many present-day English dialects no longer have long vowels at all, and their speakers mistake differences in vowel quality for differences in vowel length.) Other languages may have completely different systems: in Japanese for example, the last syllable in a group bearing high pitch is considered the accented one within a word.

It is not entirely clear how things were in Cornish, and even worse, they may well have changed considerably over time. Its sister language, Welsh, has stress and length on the **penultimate** (=second-last) syllable, but the highest tone on the **ultimate** (=last) one. Breton on the other hand has all three features coalesce on the penultimate syllable, and Cornish English certainly does the same with Cornish names and dialect words. Up till now, spoken Revived Cornish has largely followed the English model, but it is by no means certain that this is also what the traditional language sounded like – Middle Cornish, at least, may well have sounded more like Welsh. Only two out of the three accentual features can be located without a doubt using evidence from textual attestations: the second-last syllable in a word was normally the loudest (i.e. it was stressed) and, at least until the time of the *Ordinalia*, it was also the longest one. We have no idea if it also carried the highest pitch though. Keith Bailey argues that, as in Welsh, the highest pitch in

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Cornish fell on the last syllable. His claim is based on the observation that Edward Lhuyd's transcriptions do not show the neutral vowel schwa in unstressed final syllables – a possible sign that it may have been marked somehow. On the other hand, this may also simply be a result of Lhuyd's own bias as a Welsh speaker. It can be demonstrated that he was unable to identify schwa in final syllables in Breton as well – e.g. he transcribed Bret. **louzaouenn** [lu'zɔwəɲ] 'herb' as <luzauan>.

☞ [Breton louzaouenn, transcribed as <luzauan> by Lhuyd](#)

1. 2 Syllable length

I have already mentioned the most important principle concerning syllable length: in the inherited Cornish system and thus in early Middle Cornish (as represented by KK and UC), stressed syllables were always longer than unstressed ones. Unlike English, this principle also applied if the vowel in the stressed syllable was short – in which case the following consonant was long. The net result of such a system (which is shared by many languages, Celtic and otherwise) is a very characteristic rhythm with speakers dwelling audibly longer on louder “beats”. To get an idea of what the result sounds like, listen to the way that native speakers of Welsh speak English! Or simply click on the link below to have a Cornish sample text read out in an approximation of classical Middle Cornish. You may find some of the vowel sounds different from the usual present-day learners’ pronunciation; ignore them for the time being and concentrate on the length of vowels and consonants.

☞ [Sample text: from ‘Tir ha Taves’, by Tony Snell](#)

Awel wyls a helgh kommel,
hwibana dre Ven-an-Toll,
dehesi dornas grow sygh
a-dhiwar leur an grommlegh,
herdhya tonnow goodh a garth
trethow enyal a-gledhbarth.

Did you hear it? All stressed syllables are pronounced in one of the following ways:

- They contain a long vowel; e.g. awel = A-A-w-e-l; sygh = S-Y-Y-GH.
- They contain a long consonant after the stressed vowel; e.g. kommel = K-O-M-m-o-l.
- They contain a group of consonants after the stressed vowel; e.g. garth = G-A-R-TH.

A very positive offshoot of this is that the length of a vowel can be deduced from the length of the consonant it precedes. Originally, **p**, **t**, **k**, and **m** were always long (and could only be preceded by short vowels); **l**, **n**, and **r** could be either short or long; all other consonants were normally short (thus preceded by a long vowel). There is an apparent exception in comparatives, superlatives and subjunctives: while **sygh**, ‘dry’ was pronounced S-Y-Y-GH, **sygha**, ‘drier’, was S-Y-GH-GH-a with a short vowel followed by doubly long **gh**. This happens because the suffix (= added final syllable) in **comparatives/superlatives** and **subjunctives** actually starts with a ‘h’-sound which is not normally written. The spelling <sygha> stands for actual sygh+ha; here, the stressed vowel is followed by a group of consonants, namely GH-H. In fluent speech, this meant that while the vowel was short, the two consonants merged and came out as long GH-GH. The same holds true for cases like **koth**, ‘old’ > **kothha**, ‘older’ (TH-H which would end up pronounced as long TH-TH), **krev**, ‘strong’ > **kreffa**, ‘stronger’ (V-H → F-F) etc. This lengthened and hardened pronunciation of the consonant can be seen in the texts up to Tregear’s Homilies in the mid-16th century. It may have persisted even longer although Nicholas Williams argues that it came to be replaced by simple devoicing without lengthening.

1.2.1 What is 'half-length' and where does it come into this?

Many learners fell confused by the frequent use of the terms 'half-length' and 'half-long vowels'. What are they, and were are they supposed to be pronounced according to the recommended phonology of KK? (Other systems do not feature half-length.)

In a nutshell, half-length is what happens to a long vowel which stands in a non-final syllable. It becomes shortened a tiny bit as the speaker hurries towards the end of the word. Native speakers of languages where this occurs (such as Breton) do normally not perceive a clear difference between long and half-long vowels but hear both as long. Most linguists believe that in Late Cornish, originally half-long vowels had become short. This is based on a marked change in spelling: in many cases, the LC scribes wrote double consonants after originally half-long vowels, indicating that they heard them as short.

Here is a recording of long, half-long, and short vowels. See if you can discern them without looking at the transcript below!

☞ [Some long, half-long, and short vowels for comparison](#)

lev – levow – poslev

glin – glinyow – dewlin

mil – miles – euthvil

How did the stressed vowels in **levow**, **glinyow**, **miles** sound to you? Long or short? Did you hear the difference in duration between them and those in the monosyllabic words? In spoken Revived Cornish, almost nobody uses half-length in <a>, <e>, <y>, or <o> but pronounces short vowels instead. The speech of some KK users tends to feature half-long <i> because they have (wrongly) been taught that “<i> is always long and <y> is always short”, which is not the case – see under 1.3. Shortening originally half-long vowels in speech is perfectly justified in RLC or Tudor Cornish – so if you are a user of UCR or RLC you will have no problems here - but it clashes with the recommended phonology of KK.

So much for the inherited system in Cornish and its sister languages. Of course, the language came under ever increasing influence of English, especially when a large part of the population became bilingual. According to historical sources, the bulk of this development would have centred on the 16th century with the Reformation as a decisive turning point. English words had been borrowed by Cornish speakers before, but now more and more of them were no longer assimilated to the Cornish system; instead, they were pronounced as in the English of the time. This meant that an increasing number of words like **best**, 'beast' (B-EH-EH-S-T) became part of the language. As a result, you could now have long vowels followed by certain groups of consonants. Even inherited words became influenced by this, and by 1700 Edward Lhuyd marks the vowel as long in words like **pysk** (or **pesk**), 'fish' or **lost**, 'tail'. As a rule, vowels became long before **st**, and often before **sk** and **sp** as well. Vowels were also long before **-ns** in verbal endings.

To make matters worse, some originally English (or French) words had a long vowel before **p**, **t**, **k** or **m**. As you will remember, these consonants were originally long and vowels preceding them were therefore short in all inherited words. But now words like

kota, 'coat', K-OH-OH-t-a, or **dama**, 'dame; mother', D-AH-AH-m-a became part of the Cornish vocabulary. In these two, the **t** and **m** were seen as belonging to the beginning of the following syllable, not the ending of the stressed one, which could not have been the case in earlier stages. The language had to adapt to accommodate – and this is where Williams' and George's theories differ a whole lot.

1. 2. 2 Long consonants and how to pronounce them

Native speakers of English are sometimes unsure how exactly they are supposed to pronounce long consonants. It does not help that they are accustomed to a system in which the length of consonants simply does not matter. It is therefore little wonder that some of them don't even hear the difference, and speakers of Revived Cornish often don't bother to make any distinction in their speech.

Lengthening fricatives like **f**, **th**, or **s** is easy, as is pronouncing long **mm**, **nn**, **ll**, and **rr**: just dwell on these sounds about twice as long as usual. Things get a bit trickier when we come to stops like **p**, **t**, and **k**: after all these are not continuous sounds but basically a blockade of the airstream from your mouth.

Listen to the following words, and try to repeat them. They are **tekka**, 'prettier', **glyppa**, 'wetter', and **lettow**, 'obstacles'. In the recording, they are read out twice: once with long consonants as in the recommended pronunciation of KK, and once with short ones.

☞ [tekka, glyppa, lettow \(1. with long consonants, 2. with short consonants\)](#)

Can you hear what's happening in the first version? The idea is to pronounce the first syllable, e.g. T-E-K up to the first **k**, and then keep the airstream from your mouth sealed for a fraction of a second before pronouncing the second syllable, e.g. k-ah.

You will notice that any lengthening of **p**, **t**, or **k** becomes inaudible if the long consonant is not followed by a vowel: this is the reason why, in the SWF, **pp**, **tt** and **kk** are not written word-finally.

1. 3 Possible changes to the Middle Cornish system

There are basically two possible ways to describe what happened to the length rules in Cornish when more and more unassimilated English loan-words were borrowed. Since we have no native speakers to interview, both are possible – the choice should therefore be made according to how easily and how well they explain the evidence.

a) **Ken George's theory**: all consonants could now be long or short, and vowel length still depended on it; basically an extension of the inherited system.

In order for this to work, there now have to be short and long versions of practically all consonants: **p**, **t**, **k**, and **m** are short in some loanwords; **b**, **d**, **g**, **th**, **gh**, **f**, **v**, and **s** may now be long. In essence, the idea is that people would have memorized how long every consonant was and deduced the length of the preceding vowel from it. This complicates the original system (where only the length of **l**, **n**, and **r** did matter) considerably, giving rise to the question of whether it could really have happened that way – even more so since such a change would have moved Cornish pronunciation further away from English, the language which triggered the shift in the first place.

One important implication of this is that, in Kernewek Kemmyn, vowel length is *never* marked on the vowel itself. Many learners seem to have misunderstood this, and one sometimes hears statements like “In KK, <i> is long and <y> is short.” This is not correct. Both vowels can be long or short, depending on the length and number of consonants following them. The actual difference between <i> and <y> is not in length but in quality, in this case in the position of the tongue while articulating them. <i> is the sound in English “she” (albeit sometimes short, which does not usually occur in English), while <y> is the sound in the South-Eastern pronunciation of “beer”, where the *r* is dropped completely. In most English dialects however, the sound corresponding to <i> is always heard as long, while the sound corresponding to <y> is always heard as short, which is the reason for the confusion amongst learners.

☞ [Listen to the recommended KK pronunciation of mis, dydh, liver, lyver](#)

As you can hear, this differs markedly from what one very often hears from learners who are likely to mistakenly say “meez”, “dyddh”, “leever”, and “lyvver”.

b) **Nicholas Williams’ theory:** people no longer memorized how long consonants were but how long vowels were, as they did in English.

This version turns the original system on its head: people would have memorized that in some loan-words, vowels could be irregularly long and then, by extension, have started to memorize vowel length (instead of the length of *l*, *n*, and *r*) in Cornish words as well. This is the basis for Williams’ theory of the **Prosodic Shift**: in essence, it says that the way in which the length of sounds in Cornish was organized got remodelled after the pattern of English. This system is simpler than the one presented under point a), but it has a decisive weakness: it postulates that not only did consonants lose their length distinction, but also that vowels in non-final syllables became short by default. Or, to put it another way, long vowels could only appear in a) words of one syllable or b) in stressed final syllables. In all other positions, vowels would become short. The trouble with this is that there would have been no way for speakers to remember where Middle Cornish had had long *ll*, *rr*, or *nn*. However, Late Cornish sources show that the distinction was upheld – most noticeably because in Late Cornish texts, we find <dn> where earlier stages of the language had long N-N, but not where they had short N. The same holds true for <bm>, which we find instead of original M-M, but not M – we never see spellings like **dabma*, for example. The distinction cannot have been lost. It is therefore necessary to assume that not only did people have to memorize which vowels were long, but they also had to memorize which *m*, *n*, *l*, or *r* were. Williams also claims that this happened only in the western part of the Cornish speaking area, while eastern dialects lost consonant length altogether. The result is not really less complicated than model (a), although it is easier for most English speakers to imagine a system built on long and short vowels than it is to imagine one built on long and short consonants.

If one accepts the premise that it is the length of vowels and not consonants that matters most, it is only logical to mark vowel length on the vowel itself; hence the use of accent marks in KS, where <ê> stands for unexpectedly long *e* and <è> unexpectedly short one. The term “unexpectedly” is of importance here: it means that in inherited words, vowel length *can* be deduced from the nature and number of the following consonant(s), so there is in fact unanimity as far as the original system is concerned. Unexpectedly long vowels

are normally found in words of French or English origin, like **stret** (S-T-R-EH-EH-T; spelt **strêt** in KS) Therefore the quarrel is mainly about how exactly the language adapted to growing English influence.

1. 3. 1 The Prosodic Shift

As explained above, Nicholas Williams summarizes the developments in Cornish pronunciation which – according to his theory – resulted from the switch to a more English prosody under the term **Prosodic Shift** (PS). This is a whole bundle of changes in pronunciation because first the length rules would have changed and then, as a consequence, the quality of newly shortened vowels would have done so as well.

☞ [Now listen to a post-PS version of Tony Snell's poem](#)

What differences apart from shortened vowel can you identify between this version and the one above? Which one sounds more like the way present day learners speak Cornish? Which one sounds less like English?

As the Prosodic Shift brings Cornish closer to English prosody, it is only natural that the resulting pronunciation tends to sound similar to that of native speakers of English. In *Cornish Today*, Williams argues that this change in pronunciation happened very early: as the result of English speakers having to learn Cornish after the Norman conquest. This claim is being disputed by almost everybody else. KK stalwarts have even accused Nicholas Williams of constructing his theory of traditional pronunciation expressly in a way that would make today's learners feel comfortable about their Anglicised (mis-)pronunciation. To put it like this is of course mostly polemical, yet it shows that in the KK camp there is a certain degree of discontent with the way revived Cornish is pronounced by most of its speakers. We can observe a clash between two radically different ideological approaches: 1) Should the revived language be made as easy to pronounce as possible to 21st century Anglophones, or 2) should it be made to sound as 'Celtic' as possible? Both sides claim that they are only interested in the historical truth, but as all existing theories are by necessity based largely on conjecture, these basic ideologies are allowed to interfere a lot with "pure" historical linguistics (if such a thing exists).

1. 4 Changes in Late Cornish

Extant Late Cornish texts show that further changes had happened to the length rules by the 17th century. The most obvious point is that long M-M and N-N ceased to exist in pronunciation as they were replaced with **bm** and **dn**. This development in pronunciation is called **pre-occlusion**, and it is by no means restricted to Cornish. In fact, it can be observed in a number of languages all over the North Western Atlantic area of Europe, from Northern Sámi in Norway to Icelandic, and from Cornish and Manx to Faroese. In linguistic terms, pre-occlusion is referred to as an **areal feature** because it is shared by a number of languages spoken in a region. Areal features are quite common - it is normal for neighbouring languages to influence one another. In all cases, pre-occlusion either happened within a Germanic language, or in a language which originally had long **mm** and **nn** and was (or still is) in close linguistic contact with a Germanic one. It has been

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interpreted by Nicholas Williams, Iwan Wmffre, and others as a sign of the loss of the inherited system of consonant length: the difference in duration between **n** and **nn** was replaced by a difference in articulation. This tendency can also be seen with **ll** which often appears as **lh** in later texts. It would therefore seem that the distinction between short **n**, **l** and **nn**, **ll** was never lost but that the pronunciation of long consonants changed over time. Earlier **r** vs. **rr** is a different story: from the time of Bewnans Meryasek onward we see the scribes confusing the two so that it seems probable that later stages of the language only had one 'flavour' of **r**.

1.4.1 Pre-occlusion of earlier long mm and nn

So when and how exactly did pre-occlusion develop? Everybody seems to agree that this happened as a result of Cornish pronunciation drawing closer to that of English. This may seem strange at first glance, since the English sound repertory does not feature **bm** and **dn**. Things are not so straightforward, however, and the general idea is that these new sounds developed when Cornish speakers, already accustomed to speaking English a lot, started to mix the two prosodic systems. Since English at that point no longer had long mm and nn, people probably first got sloppy about them in Cornish, then tended to overpronounce them as if they were two separate sounds: [mʔm] and [nʔn] (m-stop-m and n-stop-n respectively). From there, it is only a very small step to [bm] and [dn]. The following recording shows this development.

☞ [Listen to how tamm, penn may have turned into tabm, pedn](#)

If you are coming from any of the MC based orthographies, you may be wondering in which positions this occurred exactly. After all, UC and UCR write **pen**, **pennow**, **penygow** (which become **pedn**, **pedno**, **penigo** in RLC) whereas KK writes **penn**, **pennow**, **pennigow**. Neither UC/R nor KK indicate directly where Late Cornish developed **dn**. Yet the distribution of **dn** in Late Cornish shows where the **n** was originally pronounced long, as will be explained below. Incidentally the SWF writes **penn**, **pennow**, **penigow** because it tries to restrict double consonant spellings to where long consonants were originally present in pronunciation. This is the reason for the frequent alternation between **l**, **m**, **n**, **r** and **ll**, **mm**, **nn**, **rr** in the SWF.

There are rules to predict pre-occlusion from KK, but not from UC/R. The last two orthographies do not reflect pronunciation but follow the usage of medieval scribes. Why did the latter not write **penn** if they pronounced the word with long **nn**, one may ask. Interestingly, both Middle Welsh and Middle Breton scribes did the same and wrote **pen**, **pennau** and **pen**, **pennou** respectively. The answer might be that in **pen**, the **n** was lengthened but only perceived once. In **pennow** however, it was ambisyllabic and therefore heard twice: once as part of the first syllable and the second time as part of the last syllable.

Interestingly, the authors of KS state that pre-occlusion is unpredictable and therefore have to introduce a diacritic to mark short vowels preceding unpreoccluded Late Cornish **n**.

But was this phenomenon really unpredictable? In my opinion, the answer is: in over 99% of cases, no. Apart from a tiny number of scantily attested LC words, **mm** became **bm** and **nn** became **dn** exactly where they were pronounced long in conservative Middle Cornish. This includes a number of special cases. Let's state the rules:

- Long **mm** and **nn** could only occur after stressed short vowels, as could their reflexes **bm** and **dn**. Speakers of conservative Middle Cornish said **pennow**, P-E-N-n-o-w, but **penigow**, p-e-n-I-G-o-w.
- In some words like **penn-glin**, LC **pedn-glin**, 'knee', both syllables were stressed. Words of this type are called **loose compounds** (see *Nebes Geryow a-dro dhe Gernewek 04*) and can usually be identified by the hyphen between their

components. The first component bore **secondary** (=weak) and the second **primary** (=strong) **stress**, and both stressed syllables were long.

- When followed by another consonant within the same word, long consonants were usually shortened in speech, and as a consequence, **bm** and **dn** did not occur, e.g. **kamm+bronn** > **Cambron**, not ***Cabmbron** or ***Cabmbrodn**.
- When short **n** at the end of a stressed syllable was followed by a [j]-sound (spelt <y> in UC/R, KK, KS, and the SWF), it became long, and the vowel preceding it became short; e.g. Engl. **bargain** > MC **bargynya** > **bargynnya** > LC **bargydnya**.
- As I have stated, there is a small amount of words in which pre-occlusion is expected, but not attested. In all of these cases we cannot know if it is our sources that are spelt erratically or if we are really dealing with unexpectedly short consonants following short vowels. The KS draft mentions KS **jyn**, engine, as one such case, yet it is only attested in *Creacion of the Worlde*, a text in which pre-occlusion is not regularly marked in writing. The evidence seems somewhat sparse to decide how it was really pronounced in Late Cornish. On the other hand it may simply have been treated as an English word, not a Cornish one. We must bear in mind that by the 17th century, almost all remaining Cornish speakers were bilingual. A Late Cornish form **jyn** without pre-occlusion is entirely possible, but LC attestations are generally so sparse that we cannot know for sure what happened to each individual word. This leads to a major difference in approaches between RLC and KS on one side and the SWF and KK on the other. RLC and KS are not happy applying known rules for sound-changes to words which are only attested in earlier forms of the language and often prefer to stick to these older attestations, even though the result may in cases be anachronistic (**conservative approach**). The SWF and KK default to treating such badly attested cases as regular developments unless attestations show that they behaved irregularly, although that means working with some forms which were never spelt this way by the scribes (**reconstructionist approach**). Both sides have been known to accuse each other of **conlanging** (i.e. constructing parts of the language at whim) over this issue.

Pre-occlusion meant that Late Cornish no longer distinguished between short and long versions of **m** and **n** because the long variants had turned into something different. But what happened to long **rr** and **ll**? Edward Lhuyd, the only Celtic linguist who heard traditional Cornish spoken, makes no mention of a length distinction in these cases (but on the other hand mentions that he heard word-initial **r** pronounced as “**rh**”, presumably as in the Welsh name Rhys). We have to rely on evidence from other sources and, admittedly, a bit of conjecture here.

Let's cover **r** first. It has been pointed out by Ken George that as soon as 1504, when Beunans Meriasek was written, long and short **r** were no longer reliably distinguished in writing although **l** and **n** still were. This could well mean that by that time, the inherited pronunciation of **r** had been replaced by something new. But by what? Richard Gendall suspects that Late Cornish behaved like early 20th century Penwith dialect in this respect: Between vowels, **r** was realised as a **flap** (=one weak stroke with the tip of the tongue), and there is some circumstantial evidence to back this up: during the transition from Middle to Late Cornish, voiced **s** became **r** between vowels in words like MC **gasa** > LC **gara** or MC **esa** > LC **era**.

☞ [Listen to MC gasa > LC, MC esa > LC era](#)

This sound change - referred to as **rhotacism** - can be observed in various other languages as well, most notably Latin where it gave rise to alternations like *os* (nom.) - *oris* (gen.), 'mouth' (< originally *os*, *osis*, but the voiced *s* sound had turned into *r* between vowels). The new *r* sound produced by this process is indeed a flap. As for other positions within the word, I have already mentioned Lhuyds description of initial "**rh**". We can also find what looks like the written representation of this sound in comparatives, superlatives, and subjunctives, where it seems to appear after the stressed vowel. As you remember, what we are dealing with in these forms is an unwritten 'h' sound at the beginning of the suffix. In Late Cornish, it came to be written: MC **hirra**, 'longer' > LC **hirha**. As regards other positions, we simply do not know the exact pronunciation. It could have been the typical retroflex sound of Cornish English dialect, a flap or something else entirely. What matters as far as the length rules are concerned is that the inherited distribution of *r* and **rr** apparently got abandoned around the time Beunans Meryasek was written (1504) and that the original pronunciation of the long version, probably a long trilled, 'Spanish style' sound, may already have sounded archaic to Cornish speakers by the early 16th century. Fortunately it does not matter much which exact nuance of pronunciation you give your *r* in Cornish - you will be understood in any case, and as you have seen, there may have been different, equally 'correct' realisations in the traditional language. As long as you do not drop it after vowels - South Eastern English style - you should be fine.

The case of **l** on the other hand is quite different. Richard Gendall has collected traditional pronunciation of traditional placenames and has found that original **ll** between vowels was still pronounced long in West Penwith Anglo-Cornish in the early 20th century; e.g. Scilly as S-I-L-l-y. Such a pronunciation cannot well be English in origin, and we must therefore acknowledge the possibility that long **ll** was retained in Late Cornish until the very end. In comparatives, superlatives, and subjunctives, it seems to have alternated in pronunciation with **lh**, c.f. LC spellings like **pelha**, further. This **lh** sound was apparently not pronounced like Welsh **ll** because contemporary authors describe it as different from the Welsh articulation in that it was produced by "a kind of reflecting of the tongue", whatever that means. In any case, it was still markedly distinct from short **l**.

2. The Vowels

2.1. The vowels of KK, UC, and UCR (Revived Middle Cornish)

Of course, the existing systems of Revived Cornish do not only differ in their treatment of length rules. It is also in their repertory of vowels where the influence of different reconstructions is very noticeable. Let's start with the points everybody is agreed on, at least in theory – what individual learners actually pronounce is another thing entirely!

All the systems recognise that – other than Modern English – Middle Cornish had rounded vowels. The epithet 'rounded' refers to the position of the lips while pronouncing them. UC only recognizes one, /y/ (the sound in French **rue** and German **Tür**), which it spells <u> or <ü>. All other systems, including Jenner's, which predates UC by a few decades, agree that there was a second rounded vowel /œ/ (the sound in French **coeur**), which is spelt <ue> in UCR and <eu> in KK, KS, and the SWF.

Early Middle English had these sounds, too, but lost them, and Cornish seems to have followed suit. This is hardly surprising as the language was already under strong influence from English at the time, and the amount of English used in Middle Cornish plays like *Beunans Ke* shows that a sizable proportion of Cornish speakers would already have known some English by the 15th century, or else the audience would have had a difficult time understanding what was going on. As an aside, it is interesting to see that Cornish followed English in dropping rounded vowels from its repertory of sounds, whereas Breton followed French in dropping /θ/ and /ð, i.e. the consonants spelt <th> and <dh> in Cornish. In any case, by 1600 /y/ had fallen in with /i/ and /œ/ had become /e/.

Also, all systems agree that more different vowel sound were distinguished in syllables where the vowel was long (and therefore had to be stressed) than in syllables where it was stressed and short, and even less were distinguished in unstressed syllables. One often hears the term **vowel reduction** which refers to the process of having vowel sounds fall together in less marked positions. Generally, the stronger the stress on a vowel, and the longer it is, the more marked it is said to be.

Once again, it is the extent and timing of vowel reduction and not so much the existence of the process itself which are disputed. I will start out with the most complicated vowel system by far, that of **KK**.

In KK, 9 different long (and half-long) vowels are distinguished:

☞ [Listen to the 9 long vowel sounds of KK](#)

tal, forehead

leth, stone

dydh, day

min, mouth

mogh, pig

boes (SWF **boos**), food

gour, man

leun, full

tus, people

There are 7 short stressed vowels:

☞ [Listen to the 7 short stressed vowels of KK](#)

kamm, crooked
penn, head
gwynn, white
dillas (SWF **dyllas**), clothes
toll, hole
skoellya (SWF **skollya**), waste
gourhys, fathom

And 6 unstressed vowels:

☞ [Listen to the 6 unstressed vowels of KK](#)

ena, there
oferenn (SWF **oferen**), mass
gwruthyl, create
kelli, lose
dhodho, to him
arloedh (SWF **arludh**), lord
traytour, traitor

This vowel system has come under attack from Nicholas Williams and others, who insist that it is not representative of the pronunciation of ca. 1500, the target date of KK. I will now read out the same words in the recommended pronunciation of **KS** – note that many of the KK sounds are not distinguished and that there are only 8 long vowel sounds:

☞ [Listen to the vowel sounds of KS](#)

tâl
leth
dÿdh~dëdh -> <y~ë> is either the same as <i> or as <e>, depending on preference
min
mogh
boos -> <oo> is either the same as <o> or as <ou>, depending on preference
gour
leun
tus

You will have noticed that two distinct KK sounds, <y> and <oe>, are treated as dialectal variants and not as phonemes of their own in KS, and that all long vowels have tense quality: long <o> is always tense as in French **beau**, never lax as in English **law** etc. Conversely, all short vowels have lax quality in KS, which means that there is only 5 of

them if the rounded vowels are not counted.

camm

penn

gwynn

dyllas

-> there is no distinction between short <y> and <i>

toll

skùllya (SWF skollya)

gourhÿs

-> short <ou> is pronounced like <ù>

In unstressed syllables, the difference is most marked. KS mirrors the development of unstressed vowels by ca. 1600, by which time only three of them were still distinguished:

ena

-> unstressed a, e, o become [ə] (schwa)

oferen

dhodho

gwruthyl

-> unstressed y and KK i become [ɪ] (i-coloured schwa)

kelly

arlùth

-> unstressed ù and ou become [ʊ] (u-coloured schwa)

traitour

Surprisingly, there is general agreement that from 1600 on a maximum of three unstressed vowels were distinguished in Late Cornish, but there is still debate about how exactly these were pronounced. Since we cannot ask a native speaker, once again all suggestions including my own are based on conjecture. In Williams' theory, they were three colours of schwa, i.e. three quite indistinct mumbled vowels, while George treats them as full vowels, the same as short a, i, and u. Ben Bruch's research on the prosody of Cornish as attested in CW has confirmed that, by 1611, Cornish must have distinguished three different vowels in unstressed final syllables.

2. 2. What is Vocalic Alternation?

On a basic level, Vocalic Alternation (VA) is a written alternation between <y> and <e> which we find in a number of texts from the mid to late Middle Cornish period. A certain group of words which have either <i>, <y>, <ey>, or <ei> as the stressed vowel in their **monosyllabic** (=single syllable) forms tend to show <e> in forms of more than one syllable., e.g. **dydh**, day, but **dedhyow**, days. An additional complication is that in both earlier (e.g. the oldest parts of the Ordinalia) and later (Beunans Meryasek and all of Late Cornish) texts, VA does not appear. Older texts mostly write <dydh, dydhyow>, and Late Cornish texts have <dedh, dedhyow> (or rather <dyth> and <deth> respectively because the scribes did not distinguish between **dh** and **th**). Which has triggered further debate about what VA actually was, what caused it in the first place etc. etc.

Ken George thinks that both the <y> and the <e> in these words actually represent the same vowel (/ɪ/, which as you remember is the vowel in the south-eastern English pronunciation of "beer"). His explanation is that the Cornish scribes relied on Middle English orthography which did not have a letter for this long vowel, so they took the one representing the closest approximation in the Middle English sound repertory, /e/. Here

lies a serious problem with this explanation: how are we to know that the sound in question was not actually /e/ anyway? Lhuyd's transcriptions show that, by the time of Late Cornish, this vowel was indeed /e/ and no longer /ɪ/. When did it change in Cornish? If we look at the texts, we see that while *Resurrexio Domini* mainly writes <y> for KK /ɪ/, other parts of the *Ordinalia* already mainly write <ey, y, ei> in words of one syllable and <e> in longer words. This would make it seem possible that the lowering of this vowel began as early as ca. 1400, and that VA is the result of a Middle English inspired way of writing long [e:] mixed with a residue of the older habit of writing <y>.

Nicholas Williams on the other hand says that there must have been a difference in pronunciation, too, and has offered two possible explanation. The first explanations links Cornish VA to a similar phenomenon in Welsh, where it is not written but certainly pronounced. Welsh VA goes back to what is called the **accent shift**, a development which took place in all Brythonic languages except for one Breton dialect, ca. 1100. Before this point, words were normally stressed on the last syllable, and vowels in unstressed syllables lost some of their colouring. When the accent moved to the second-last syllable, the newly stressed vowels were given new colouring which did not always correspond to the original pronunciation. Thus, according to this theory, in words of more than one syllable, original /ɪ/ would have become /e/ whereas it never became weakened and then strengthened again in words of only one syllable and therefore remained stable. This explanation has one major flaw: in the *Old Cornish Vocabulary*, the words which should be affected do not show the expected weakening of the vowel in the second-last syllable. Instead, we find spellings like *lither*, 'letter'. The second explanation offered is that in <dyth, deyth, deith> the vowel was long, but that in <dethyow> it had become short, and that its quality had changed when it was shortened. As we have said, Nicholas Williams' theory places the so-called **Prosodic Shift** at a time before the earliest Middle Cornish texts were written. After that time, vowels in second-last syllables would have become short. The question is, if VA is the result of such an old change, why don't we see it in *Resurrexio Domini*? In short, there is still no agreement on what written VA actually represented, as all explanations on offer leave something to be desired. It seems most likely that several phenomena were involved here: the lowering of earlier /ɪ/ to later /e/, dialectal and idiolectal differences, interference from English writing habits, confusion over spellings the scribes saw in older texts, and in some cases a phenomenon called i-affection.