

Cornish is a P-Celtic language which experienced language death in the 18th/19th century but has been undergoing revival efforts since 1904. It now being spoken by approximately 3000 users, including several hundred fluent speakers. It has received much historical linguistic attention over the 20th century due to the need to supply it with necessary grammatical and pronunciation rules as well as vocabulary so that it can be learned by others. As one revives a language, it is necessary to decide what should be the source of all this information. In the case of Cornish, there exists written native Cornish material in the form of religious plays written in verse from between the 13th and 16th centuries, and later collections of various forms of prose, as well as descriptions of the language. No audio recordings of pre-revived Cornish exist. The mediaeval plays are by far the largest source of Cornish, but they were written further back in time than the prose of Late Cornish, which, however, is limited in scope.

Because an answer to such a quandary is not obvious and because linguistic analysis and language reconstruction can lead to different results, Cornish has a number of varieties created by individuals and groups over the 20th century. Some are based on Middle Cornish (13th-16th centuries), one on Late Cornish (17th-19th centuries), and another on Tudor Cornish (17th century), which was created as a compromise. All varieties are mutually intelligible — they are varieties of the same language, after all! Nonetheless, they do possess slightly different vowels and rules governing both vowel and consonant length. There are small differences in verb forms, preferences regarding vocabulary, and orthography. It is for the purpose of standardising orthography that the Cornish language community and Cornwall Council developed and adopted the Standard Written Form, which allows Cornish to be used in official contexts such as road signs, public schools, and local government.

The common orthography, of course, did not eliminate the aforementioned differences between the varieties of Cornish. For example, all but one variety of Cornish assume that most vowels at the ends of words should be reduced to shwa. One variety, the dominant variety in terms of numbers, assumes that those vowels at the ends of words should be pronounced as full vowels. However, some observe that a hybridisation of pronunciation occurs in revived Cornish – because the Cornish speakers speak to each, they influence each other's pronunciation and speak differently than the rules of their variety suggest. At the same time, almost all Cornish speakers are also speakers of English, which has its own level of influence on how people speak Cornish.

Very little research has been conducted on the Cornish spoken today in general. No research whatsoever has been done on the pronunciation of Cornish speakers today. That is why this project aims to begin research on the phonology of revived Cornish by analysing how speakers of different varieties of Cornish pronounce vowels at the ends of words.

The project will recruit participants from the pool of fluent speakers of Cornish. This will be done via the snowball sampling method, where one person (a fluent speaker of Cornish) provides the names of other speakers of Cornish, who provide further names. The snowball keeps rolling until no new names appear or until a given number of names is reached. The project aims to record a total of 20 fluent Cornish speakers in three tasks:

Task 1 – reading a short passage containing target words

Task 2 – pronouncing target words inserted in a pre-memorised sentence

Task 3 – a spontaneous conversation

Because phonetic processes, including vowel reduction, occur differently depending on the way and pace people speak, the three tasks will allow to analyse how the vowels of all participants behave in all contexts. The study will help determine how consistent speakers of different varieties are with the rules of their varieties or whether a common Cornish pronunciation is developing.

The results of the project will be published on a project website, during conferences, in academic articles, and the data generated in this study (including the audio!) will be stored in a free, online repository available to every Internet user.