

# **Pronunciation and Variants**

**A Supplement to  
An English - Cornish Glossary  
in the Standard Written Form**

by

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## Introduction

This document contains the front matter of the original version of MAGA's *English-Cornish Glossary in the Standard Written Form* as published on 18/07/2010. Initial reactions have shown that it was felt to be too technical and indeed potentially off-putting to learners. Subsequent versions of the glossary contain a very different introductory text centering on practical issues.

However, as the original front matter contained important information on pronunciation and variation as the result of extensive discussion among members of MAGA's corpus planning group, it is hereby made available on its own.

Further supplementary documents to accompany future iterations of the glossary will be made available for download at <http://www.magakernow.org.uk>.

## LC variants

Pre-occlusion of Revived Middle Cornish **mm** and **nn** to Revived Late Cornish **bm** and **dn** has been noted except in cases where pre-occlusion unexpectedly does not occur in RLC.

In cases where the SWF allows variant forms with long **y** and long **e**, e.g. **dydh** ~ **dedh** or **pysk** ~ **pesk**, the latter have been marked as recommended RLC forms. It is recognised, however, that speakers of RTC prefer these forms as well, and they are of course free to write them. Much the same applies to variants in **ew** and **ow**, e.g. **kewsel** ~ **kows** or indeed **Kernewek** ~ **Kernowek**, or **s** and **j**, e.g. **losowen** ~ **lojowen**, as well as other features which are common in RLC but can already be found in Middle Cornish texts. Many of those, even though not restricted to Late Cornish, are not included in the prescribed standards of UC and KK, both of which default to very conservative varieties of the language. The SWF does not imply any such bias.

In the SWF specification, the drop of final consonants in verbal endings was always indicated by an apostrophe, e.g. **genow'hwei** 'with you'. This is not mandatory, however, and RLC users are free to use the 'full' equivalents of such forms, e.g. **genowgh hwei**. In this glossary, the latter have normally been given. Conversely, RLC users who may wish to drop word-final consonants in writing such forms, e.g. to emphasise that RLC pronunciation is being represented, are free to write the 'shortened' versions that are dominant in the specification.

## Traditional spelling variants

Traditional spelling variants such as **-y** for **-i**, **wh** for **hw**, **x** for **ks**, **qw** for **kw**, and **ca**, **co**, **cu**, **cl**, **cr** for **ka**, **ko**, **ku**, **kl**, **kr** are used in a separate version of the glossary. Anybody who so wishes is free to use the following traditional variant graphs when writing in the SWF:

<b>hw</b> → <b>wh</b>	[w]
<b>k</b> → <b>c</b> before <b>a, o, u, l, r</b>	[k]
<b>ks</b> → <b>x</b>	[ks]
<b>kw</b> → <b>qw</b>	[kw]
unstressed final <b>-i</b> → <b>-y</b>	[i]

The resulting variant forms, like **cota** for **kota**, **whilas** for **hwilas**, **gwely** for **gweli**, or **qwilkyn** for **kwilkyn**, are considered equally correct and may not be marked as wrong when used in exams. Another version of this glossary using variant spellings as described above is available for download from the MAGA website.

## Use of the apostrophe

In the SWF specification, it was suggested that apostrophes be used in the written representation of RLC to indicate sounds dropped in speech as compared to RMC. This principle has been followed in the glossary, but exceptions have been made for some very common instances to reduce the number of apostrophes cluttering RLC texts. These include **ma** (~ RMC **yma**) 'is' and verbal particles where they are dropped in spoken RLC.

## Use of hyphens

In SWF publications, a variety of conventions in hyphenation can currently be seen in use, mostly based on the previous system used by individual writers. The CLP's Management Group has decided that at the moment, the conventions used for hyphens and apostrophes in publications like this glossary or the SWF specification are considered suggestions, but not mandatory for daily use. As a result of discussions within the Corpus Work Group, it has been decided to use the following set of rules for hyphenation in this glossary:

- Compound prepositions and adverbs like **a-ugh** 'above' are hyphenated to indicate stress on the second component.
- Compound nouns like **kador vreg** 'armchair' are not normally hyphenated.
- Hyphens have not been used with clitic particles like **ma** and **na**.
- Nouns followed by **vyth** ~ **veth** are spelt as two words without a hyphen, e.g. **tra vyth**, **den vyth**.

## Pronunciation

Over the course of the past hundred years, several different sets of rules for pronouncing Revived Cornish have been proposed. As a result, the spoken language of today is not uniform, but the actual ‘dialectal’ differences between the varieties of spoken twenty-first-century Cornish are not great enough to hinder comprehension. In this glossary, we have refrained from giving detailed phonetic transcriptions for each entry. Instead, we have prepared this guide, which gives a basic introduction to the way Cornish is currently pronounced by its most fluent users.

Broadly speaking, there are three recommended pronunciations for Revived Cornish:

- *Conservative Middle Cornish*, largely reflecting the pronunciation of the language as it was spoken in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This system is mostly associated with Kernewek Kemmyn. Unified Cornish, while reflecting the same approximate target date as Kernewek Kemmyn, also incorporates some later features, e.g. it has only two degrees of vowel length.
- *Late Middle or Tudor Cornish*, reflecting the pronunciation of the mid-sixteenth century. This system is associated with Unified Cornish Revised and Kernowek Standard. It does not recommend gemination of consonants or making a distinction between tense and lax long vowels; e.g. long <y> is pronounced [i:] (almost as *ee* in English *need*) or [e:] (like *é* in French *salé*), but not [ɪ:].
- *Revived Late Cornish*, reflecting the pronunciation of the language as recorded by the Welsh linguist Edward Lhuyd in 1700. This system is associated with Revived Late Cornish and Kernowek Standard.

None of these standards is followed slavishly by present-day users. As there are no recordings of traditional native speakers to imitate, and as English is the first language of almost everyone in the language movement, most people’s spoken Cornish exhibits certain features that deviate from one or more of the prescribed standards:

- Long vowels only appear in words of one syllable (like **da**), in hiatus (as in the first syllable of **keow**), and in stressed final syllables (as in the last syllable of **yma**). Vowels in all other positions tend to be pronounced short by default. Of the three major recommended pronunciations, Conservative Middle Cornish is least compatible with this principle.
- Kernewek Kemmyn recognises a three-fold distinction of vowel length: short, half-long, and long. In normal present-day speech, however, only short and long vowels are distinguished by most speakers, and no difference between short and half-long is made.
- Most speakers do not distinguish between short (single) and long (geminate or double) consonants even though this distinction is reflected in two of the recommended pronunciations (Kernewek Kemmyn and, in the case of long **ll**, Revived Late Cornish). This leads to cases where words like **gwela** ‘I see’ and **gwella** ‘best’ are pronounced identically by learners, as if both had a single L followed by the neutral vowel schwa. Note however that in the traditional language, these two words were probably not pronounced alike. The rules for vowel reduction and short and long consonants in Cornish of different historical periods will be given below.
- There is a noticeable tendency among learners to pronounce long **o** and **e** as if they were the diphthongs **ow** and **ey**, or more precisely [əʊ] and [eɪ] respectively. This is a feature of English, not of traditional Cornish, and as a rule teachers will try to help students avoid it.
- Many speakers tend to link the quality of a vowel (what it sounds like) to its quantity (how long it is sounded), which leads to poor pronunciation. For example, speakers who have been taught that **y** has the sound of *i* in English *bit* tend to pronounce **y** as a short lax vowel in all positions, even though it should be long in words like **bys** ‘world’. Conversely, many learners treat **i** as if it were always long because they have been taught that it is the sound of *ee* in English *bee*. In reality, both **i** and **y** can be long or short (and, in Kernewek Kemmyn, half-long).
- Some learners pronounce **gh** like English *k* or *gg*. This has very little to do with any historical pronunciation of Cornish. If you find it difficult to pronounce [x] (which resembles the *ch* sound of Welsh and German), try pronouncing it **h** as speakers of Late Cornish did, not as *k*.

For the reasons given above, the following table takes a middle ground between existing ‘standard’ pronunciations while recognizing certain trends in the spoken language of today. The pronunciations recommended below are meant to sound as familiar as possible to present-day speakers of Cornish while generally avoiding Anglicisms typical of learners. For example, tense and lax qualities in vowels of the same length are only distinguished for the long mid-high vowels **y**, **e** and **oo**, **o**. Short vowels are treated as lax by

default. Please note that this is not a description of 'the' correct way to speak Cornish: the SWF does not prescribe a single standard pronunciation as such. The following table is aimed primarily at beginners who wish to learn Cornish through the SWF. If you learned KK, UC, UCR, KS, or RLC, just stick with what is familiar to you.

We have used the *International Phonetic Alphabet* (IPA) to transcribe the sounds in the following table. While this allows for an unambiguous description, some readers may be unfamiliar with the conventions used. A list of sample words in both written and spoken form will be made available for download on the website <http://www.kernewegva.com> as a supplement to this glossary.

When referring to vowels, the terms 'high', 'low', 'front', 'central', and 'back' refer to the position of the tongue while articulating a given vowel, e.g. Cornish **ou** is a high back vowel; **i** is a high front vowel; **oo** is a mid-high back vowel; and schwa is a central vowel (where the tongue is more or less in its resting position).

## Stress

Stress normally falls on the last syllable but one (the 'penultima'). In loose compounds, primary stress falls on the second component, e.g. **penn BLOODH**. In groups of two words linked by a hyphen in the SWF, primary stress always falls on the word following the hyphen. In close compounds, it falls regularly on the penultimate syllable. Following a convention established since the time of R. M. Nance, irregular or unpredictable stress has been marked in the glossary by inserting a dot (·) after the stressed vowel.

## Intonation

Little is known about the intonation of traditional Cornish. It has been suggested that learners of Cornish may wish to imitate the characteristic phrasal melody used by older speakers of West Penwith dialect.

## Vowels

Spelling	IPA (short, long)	Approximation
<b>a</b>	[a], [a:] [æ], [æ:]	Like <i>a</i> in Spanish or Italian; similar to <i>a</i> in RP <i>father</i> . In RTC and RLC, more fronted, as in RP <i>cap</i> .
<b>e</b>	[ɑ] [ɛ], [ɛ:] ~ [e:] [e:ə]	In RTC and RLC, [ɑ] before <b>r</b> , typically in closed syllables When short, as in English <i>bet</i> . When long, like <i>è</i> in French <i>chèvre</i> (RMC) or like <i>é</i> in French <i>salé</i> (RTC, RLC). In RLC, long <b>e</b> may be pronounced as a broken diphthong [e:ə], almost like <b>e</b> followed by <b>a</b> .
<b>y</b>	[ɪ], [ɪ:] ~ [i:] [e:]	When short, as in English <i>pin</i> . When long, almost like <i>é</i> in French <i>salé</i> ; in RMC, a bit higher than that, i.e. like <i>ee</i> in SE English <i>beer</i> (KK) or in <i>need</i> (UC/R). In RTC and RLC, long <b>y</b> is often replaced by <b>e</b> .
<b>i</b>	[ɪ], [i:]	When long, almost like the <i>ee</i> in English <i>need</i> . When short, as in English <i>pin</i> .
<b>o</b>	[ɔ], [ɔ:] ~ [o:] [ʊ] ~ [ʊ]	When short, as in Spanish <i>torre</i> . When long, like <i>au</i> in English <i>cause</i> . In RTC, often like <i>eau</i> in French <i>beau</i> . In a few words ( <b>skollya</b> , <b>bocka</b> , <b>tomm</b> , <b>tromm</b> , <b>gallos</b> ), almost like <i>u</i> in English <i>but</i> . In RTC, like <i>u</i> in English <i>put</i> .
<b>ou</b>	[u:] ~ [o:] [u:]	Always long; in RMC, almost like <i>eau</i> in French <i>beau</i> , but a little higher. In RLC and RTC, like <i>ou</i> in French <i>tour</i> .
<b>u</b>	[ʊ], [y:] [ɪ], [i:] [iw]	In RMC: Like <i>u</i> in French <i>lune</i> , appropriately lengthened or shortened. In RLC and RTC: In closed syllables, like <b>i</b> . In open syllables and before <b>gh</b> : like <b>iw</b> .
<b>ou</b>	[ʊ], [u:]	In the word <b>arludh</b> and its compounds, almost like <i>u</i> in English <i>but</i> .
<b>eu</b>	[œ], [ø:] [ɛ], [e:]	When short, like <i>u</i> in English <i>pull</i> . When long, as in French <i>tour</i> . When short, like <i>eu</i> in French <i>jeune</i> . When long, the same sound, lengthened. In RLC and RTC, like <b>e</b> .
<b>oa</b>	[v:]	Like <i>a</i> in Penwith English <i>tall</i> . Only used in RLC.

## Diphthongs

Spelling	IPA	Approximation
<b>aw</b>	[aw]	Like <i>ow</i> in English <i>brow</i> .
<b>ew</b>	[ɛw]	Like <i>ow</i> in Anglo-Cornish dialect: <b>e</b> followed by <b>w</b> .
<b>ow</b>	[ow] [u:] [ɔ]	A bit like <i>ow</i> in English <i>blow</i> . In RLC: When stressed and followed by a vowel, like <b>ou</b> . The plural suffix <b>-ow</b> is often pronounced like <b>o</b> .
<b>uw</b>	[yw] ~ [iw]	In RMC, like <b>u</b> followed by <b>w</b> . In RLC and RTC, like <b>iw</b> .
<b>iw</b>	[iw]	In theory like <i>-ee w-</i> in English <i>three windows</i> . In everyday speech <b>iw</b> is pronounced identically to <b>yw</b> by most speakers.
<b>yw</b>	[ɪw] ~ [ɛw]	Like the <i>i</i> in English <i>pin</i> followed by <i>w</i> . In RLC, often like <b>ew</b> .
<b>ay</b>	[aj]	Like <i>i</i> in English <i>pile</i> .
<b>ey</b>	[ej] ~ [əj]	In RMC, as in English <i>why</i> . In RLC and RTC, like <b>ei</b> .
<b>oy</b>	[ɔj]	Like <i>oy</i> in English <i>boy</i> .
<b>ei</b>	[əj]	The neutral vowel schwa followed by the consonant <b>y</b> . Only used in RLC.

## Vowel reduction

There is a general tendency to reduce unstressed **a**, **e**, and **o** to a more indistinct vowel sound ([ə] or schwa = the unstressed first vowel in English *away*). In RMC, this only happens in casual speech, but in RTC and RLC, it is a near-universal principle. In RLC, unstressed **y** is sometimes reduced to schwa as well. Unstressed **I** and **U** are reduced to [ɪ] (like the I in English *bit*) in all forms of Cornish.

Lexicalised schwa is restricted to positions where it is not usually stressed in speech, e.g. in words like **pur** [pər] 'very', **pub** [pəb]/[pəp] 'every', **dhe** [ðə] 'to', the unstressed prefix **om-** [əm-] 'self-', or the unstressed second syllable in **onan**, **onen** [ɔ(·)nən] 'one'.

## Long and short vowels

Although it is recognised that traditional Cornish did at one point feature three vowel lengths (fully long, half-long, and short), speakers of Revived Cornish generally only distinguish between long and short vowels. Vowels that were originally half-long are now almost always pronounced as short. Therefore in the following description only long and short vowels will be distinguished.

Vowels are short:

- In all unstressed syllables
- In stressed syllables when followed by more than one consonant (except for **sk**, **sp**, **st**) or by **ck**, **p** or **t**. Single sounds represented by more than one letter (like **dh** or **gh**) count as one consonant.
- In colloquial Revived Cornish, vowels in non-final syllables are typically short.

Vowels are long:

- In stressed syllables when followed by single **b**, **d**, **g**, **ch**, **dh**, **gh**, **th**, **sh**, **j**, **l**, **m**, **n**, or **r**. (i.e. by all single consonants except for **p** or **t**), by **sk**, **sp**, or **st** or by a vowel.
- A few loanwords from English have long vowels before **p** or **t**, e.g. **stret** [strɛ:t] 'street', **shap** [ʃa:p] 'shape'. These words are generally easy to recognise.
- The vowels **oo** and **oa** are always pronounced long wherever they appear.
- In colloquial Revived Cornish, long vowels are typically found monosyllabic words, in stressed final syllables, or in hiatus. They may also appear, albeit more rarely, in other positions, most notably in loan-words like *spedya* or **bostya** 'boast'.

*It is important to remember that long vowels in Cornish are pronounced 'pure', i.e. as monophthongs.*

## Heavy and light diphthongs

Diphthongs are heavy (i.e. they contain a lengthened first element) in stressed open word-final syllables including monosyllabic words, e.g. **glaw** [glɑːw] 'rain' or **namoy** [naːmɔj] 'no more'. When unstressed or followed by a consonant, they are light (i.e. they contain a short first element), e.g. **gowlek** [ˈgɔwlek] 'forked' or **Kernow** [ˈkɛrnɔw] (RMC) 'Cornwall'.

## Consonants

Spelling	IPA	Approximation
<b>b</b>	[b]	As in English <i>better</i> .
<b>c</b>	[s]	In texts not using traditional graphs, <b>c</b> is always pronounced as in English <i>city</i> .
<b>ch</b>	[tʃ]	As in English <i>cheese</i> .
<b>ck</b>	[k]	As in English <i>clock</i> . <b>ck</b> follows a short vowel in loan-words.
<b>d</b>	[d]	As in English <i>done</i> .
<b>dh</b>	[ð]	Voiced like <i>th</i> in English <i>there</i> . In RTC, voiceless in unstressed final position. This consonant is often dropped after <b>l</b> and <b>r</b> in RLC.
<b>f</b>	[f]	As in English <i>far</i> . <b>f</b> is often pronounced as <i>v</i> in RLC.
<b>g</b>	[g]	As in English <i>go</i> .
<b>gh</b>	[x] [h] [x(:)]	Similar to Scots <i>ch</i> , but not as far back in the throat (i.e. a velar fricative instead of a dorsal one). Very much like Breton <i>c'h</i> . In RLC, <b>gh</b> is always weakened to <i>h</i> as in English <i>ahead</i> . When written between vowels, <b>gh</b> can be pronounced longer than in other positions, although this rule is not normally observed by most speakers today.
<b>h</b>	[h]	As in English <i>hat</i> .
<b>hw</b>	[ʍ]	A voiceless <b>w</b> , like the breathy <i>wh</i> in accents of English that pronounce <i>wear</i> and <i>where</i> differently, such as Scottish and Irish English. Learners who do not have [ʍ] in their dialect may try to approximate it with the lips rounded like blowing out a candle.
<b>j</b>	[dʒ]	As in English <i>jump</i> .
<b>k</b>	[k]	As in English <i>king</i> .
<b>kw</b>	[kw]	Like <i>qu</i> in English <i>question</i> .
<b>l</b>	[l]	As in English <i>live</i> .
<b>ll</b>	[l:] [lh]	Audibly longer than single <b>l</b> in both RMC and RLC. Some speakers prefer to pronounce <b>ll</b> between vowels more like a sequence of <b>l</b> and <b>h</b> . This pronunciation is especially common in RLC.
<b>m</b>	[m]	As in English <i>mother</i> .
<b>n</b>	[n]	As in English <i>novel</i> .
<b>mm, nn</b>	[m:], [n:] [bm], [dn]	In KK, these are in theory pronounced audibly longer than their single equivalents <b>m</b> and <b>n</b> , although many speakers do not make this distinction. In RLC, <b>mm</b> becomes <b>bm</b> and <b>nn</b> becomes <b>dn</b> .
<b>p</b>	[p]	As in English <i>part</i> .
<b>r</b>	[r], [ɹ], [r]	Several different realisations of this sound can be heard in present-day Cornish, with most speakers pronouncing <b>r</b> as in most Anglo-Cornish dialects. Others prefer an apical (tip of the tongue) realisation, as in Spanish <i>pero</i> 'but' as in St. Ives dialect, or a rolled <b>r</b> , as in Spanish <i>perro</i> 'dog'. Whichever pronunciation you choose for yourself, remember that Cornish <b>r</b> and <b>rr</b> are never dropped after vowels, as they sometimes are in English.
<b>rr</b>	[r:], [ɹ] [r̥h]	In theory, to be pronounced long in RMC. In actual speech this almost never happens in 21 <sup>st</sup> -century Cornish, and there is some evidence that the distinction between short <b>r</b> and long <b>rr</b> was already being dropped in the traditional language by 1500. Some speakers prefer to pronounce <b>rr</b> between vowels more like a sequence of <b>r</b> and <b>h</b> .
<b>s</b>	[s] [z] [z] [s]	Often voiceless as in English <i>best</i> , particularly before <b>k</b> , <b>p</b> , <b>t</b> . Between vowels and word-finally after a stressed long vowel, <b>s</b> is voiced as in English <i>tease</i> , e.g. <b>tus</b> [ty:z] ~ [tiz] 'people', <b>skeus</b> [skø:z] ~ [ske:z] 'shadow'. In RLC, word-initial <b>s</b> followed by a vowel is also voiced as in the local pronunciation of <i>Somerset</i> as 'Zomerzet'. <b>s</b> is always voiceless in French loanwords like <b>plas</b> [pla:s] 'place', <b>fas</b> [fa:s] 'face', and <b>gras</b> [gra:s] 'grace'. In Cornish, all of these words are pronounced with a long vowel followed by voiceless <b>s</b> .
<b>sh</b>	[ʃ]	As in English <i>shower</i> .

<b>t</b>	[t]	As in English <i>hat</i> .
<b>th</b>	[θ]	Always voiceless as in English <i>thunder</i> .
	[h]	In RLC, <b>th</b> is pronounced as a weak <b>h</b> when it follows <b>l</b> or <b>r</b> .
<b>tth</b>	[θ:]	Not like <b>t+th</b> but as a long version of <b>th</b> . This length distinction is no longer made by most speakers today.
<b>v</b>	[v]	As in English <i>very</i> .
		In RLC, <b>v</b> is often dropped at the end of a word.
<b>w</b>	[w]	As in English <i>wolf</i> .
<b>y</b>	[j]	When used as a consonant, as in English <i>yes</i> .
<b>z</b>	[z]	As in English <i>zero</i> . Used in loan-words only.

## Long and short consonants

Cornish originally distinguished between long (or geminate) and short consonants. This distinction is not made systematically by a majority of speakers today. If you wish to make it, try pronouncing the following consonants audibly longer than their short equivalents:

<b>ll</b>	Like <i>-le l- s</i> in <i>whole land</i> .
<b>mm</b>	Like <i>-me m-</i> in <i>some monster</i> .
<b>nn</b>	Like <i>-n N-</i> in <i>in Nepal</i> .
<b>rr</b>	May be pronounced long, but was most likely short from ca. 1500.
<b>tth</b>	Like <i>-th th-</i> in <i>bath thermometer</i> .
<b>gh</b> (between vowels)	A lengthened version of [x].

In RMC, this principle can be extended to all double consonants following the stressed vowel in comparatives, superlatives, and subjunctives although in practice only Kernewek Kemmyn recommends this. In RLC, only **ll** is pronounced long or as [lh]. **mm** and **nn** become **bm** and **dn**, and **tth** and medial **gh** are weakened and shortened.