

Summary report on the Linguistic Group meeting – 11/7/07

Present: Frances Bennett, Ben Bruch, Ken George, Neil Kennedy, Rod Lyon, Hilary Shaw, Nicholas Williams

Facilitator: Mark Gardiner

Apologies: Albert Bock, Dick Gendall, Tim Hambly, Julyan Holmes, Polin Prys

Note takers: Jenefer Lowe, Elizabeth Stewart

1. The meeting began with a brief update on the progress of the process and a look at the Terms of Reference for the Group.

The Commission had met in March and had been supplied with a wide range of books and background material. There had been over 200 submissions from individuals and groups which had been passed on.

The Partnership would be asking the Commission for an interim report which would then be discussed publicly before the final report and decision. They also wished to have a report from the linguistic group on the work thus far and felt that the absence of a Chair was unhelpful. However the group felt that the diversity of opinion among members of the group is so great that it would be impossible to choose a chairman from their number.

The Terms of Reference were re-iterated: the group was there to act as an expert group to answer any queries from the Commission, but also to look at areas of convergence and divergence and offer proposals if it so wished.

The shape of the day was outlined and discussion ensued on the following topics:

Process itself

There was concern from members that they had not been consulted by the Commission thus far. It was noted that the Commission had been deluged with material, but contact would be encouraged. It was felt that there was a growing urgency around the process and a degree of cynicism that needed to be dissipated as the process was so important.

Basis of the discussion

There was some talk around whether the Single Written Form was about orthography alone or concerned grammar and syntax as well. Opinions were expressed that it was purely orthography and it should be able to accommodate a plurality of language; that it was purely orthography but one needed to know which form to base it on; and that syntax should be as comprehensive as possible, particularly as some forms considered late actually appear much earlier. Others felt that any endeavour to encompass all phases of historical Cornish must consider also grammar and syntax, because they changed significantly and forms which are considered as early fell out of use.

It was noted that the arguments tend to fall into two groups: those who feel that the result must be 'right' and those who feel that it should go with the majority. The definition of 'right' was queried and it was felt that in most cases this meant that it should be linguistically 'correct' and stand up to scrutiny. There were lots of claims about numbers on all sides. Opinions varied: some felt that what was 'right' would be

a form that accommodated most people, where everyone loses and gains, others felt that if we could prove a majority that would be helpful guidance, but a majority of whom? It was also pointed out that it was important to keep those who were willing to teach and work for the language on board as the capacity of the language to move forward was what was important. It was also noted that we are starting from such a low base that we cannot afford to lose anyone – that some compromise is better than losing people. It was also noted that it is likely that some people will be lost whether the chosen form is an existing one or a compromise. It was felt that the spread of different forms is largely due to the spread of teachers and that most learners simply go to the nearest class.

It was also noted that no-one is being asked to change their personal use and that will affect future rather than current speakers. It was also said that the one group that might have to change would be teachers and we need them to be prepared to make the effort.

Education

There was discussion over the priorities and whether children or adults should be the primary target. It was noted that for decades the emphasis has been on adults and Cornish has found it impossible to get into schools but now there is an opportunity, though the capacity will need to be developed. It was noted that often parents follow children in learning languages and that this is backed by the evidence from Israel. The need for a context and reason to learn was underlined. It was noted that maybe the fact that the language changes and evolves should be seen as success.

Proposals

It was queried whether the suggestion at the initial meeting that the 'bottom line' for everyone should be assessed had been followed through. The fact that there were now two proposals on the table was put forward as evidence of this. It was noted that the feelings of the LWG on the two proposals would be of interest to the Commission and also that the submissions had been invited before the proposals were published and therefore did not comment on them but on existing forms only.

There was a view expressed that the two proposals could themselves form the basis of 'compromise of compromises'. Each was coming from a different perspective but both sought to accommodate the whole spectrum. Others were not happy with this and felt that existing forms were to be preferred, and changes made should be accepted only if they were an improvement on an existing form. Some were not convinced that a compromise form would ensure unity and felt that it was more important to get the language right than to heal rifts. On the one hand it was held that the aesthetics of the language were unimportant and on the other that this was an important component of the discussion. Some felt that any decision was better than the situation now, while one person in particular disagreed and preferred the current situation to a decision with which he was not in agreement.

Digraphs and Diacritics

There was discussion around the use of digraphs and silent letters in existing forms and in the proposals. It was noted that KD incorporates a lot of the KK system for vowel length, mainly by doubling consonants. Digraphs to show vowel quality are present in KK and to an extent in KD.

It was noted that both proposals contain diacritics but some felt that these could be dropped in use. It was noted that the basic principles behind KS were 1) that it should be based on traditional orthographic forms and 2) that the pronunciation should be unambiguous. The bottom line was traditional spelling. It was noted that there is a lot

of resistance to diacritics. Some felt that diacritics should be used only to assist learners.

Different periods of Cornish

There was discussion over the distance between Middle and Late Cornish. One member felt that those in favour of compromise try to minimise the distance between the two but he felt that no SWF could satisfactorily accommodate both, though it was true to some extent that it could be done using registers. Another felt that it was possible to be inclusive and that there were similar examples that could be considered. Others disputed the view that Cornish changed radically, feeling that there was no massive clash between syntax, only spelling, and examples were quoted of transliteration work undertaken to show how close the forms were.

Compromise

The possibility was put forward of working to a compromise of compromises via an orthographical conference and it was pointed out that if the group saw particular areas of convergence and divergence then that should be communicated to the Commission. It was made clear that the submissions sent to the Commission had been on the basis of the existing forms and not the additional proposals.

The facilitator pointed out that there was nothing in the Terms of reference requiring that the group work consensually and that the groups were at liberty to put forward more than one view.

It was also pointed out that one of the reasons that KD exists was as a response to things about KS with which some were uncomfortable. Although a compromise of compromises could be possible, it was felt that the LWG should not set about creating a structure without the Commission directing. It was noted that the full membership was not in the room and even if it were it was not fully representative of the Cornish Language movement. Good point; keep this in.

It was pointed out that the group was intended to be a focus and to consult more widely but that this did not seem to have happened. It was suggested that most people had viewed the submissions as a chance to endorse their own form rather than think at all about compromise. The general view at the conference last year had been that the problem needed to be sorted, but there was no definitive view on how. There were a lot of speakers who would not wish to think about or discuss how compromise of some sort might happen unless it was clear that it was compromise rather than an existing form that was the recommendation.

It was also commented that most people learnt a particular form through accident rather than design, so probably had not thought very much about it.

It was commented that changes to KK would be accepted by its author if he felt they were improvements, but he saw no such improvements in the additional proposals. It was further commented that everyone had their own ideas about how Cornish should be improved or left alone and complete agreement would not be possible.

It was agreed that the only options are choosing an existing form or some kind of compromise. It was pointed out that that has always been the case and that whatever the decision, communicating that decision and facilitating its acceptance and implementation would be most important.

It was noted that the appearance of the two proposals had altered the process. Without that the choice was between choosing an existing form and recommending

compromise and if the latter, with recommendations as to how to take that forward. the existence of the two proposals had complicated that issue.

It was noted that compromise was being talked about more this time than before, but it would be premature to take it any further. There was a comment that it would help general acceptance if the notion of compromise was more widely disseminated. Some saw it as the only possible end.

A discussion between the authors of the proposals was suggested as some were in the room. The facilitator questioned whether since the concept of improvement was acceptable to KK, the concept of compromise was also as it comes in many forms.

One participant noted that he felt that the outcome and purpose of the process should be to find the best form, not to heal perceived rifts. Another felt that it would be impossible for any group of representatives to come forward with something which everyone could agree was the best way forward. It should be accepted that that is the case and that we should come up with something which may not be the best but would be acceptable.

Chair and forward process

There was a discussion over a Chair for the group [the group decided at the first meeting that it was impossible for them, with widely differing views, to appoint a chair]. Several were suggested and the invitations refused. Agreed to leave it to the office to prepare reports and manage communication.

It was agreed that a summary of the report should be produced by the office and sent to the Commission together with the contact details for the group members and a request that they cc all members on any requests for information made.

It was asked that the Commission be told that at the meeting there was a broad view on a compromise of compromises, but that there were also opposing views.

It was reiterated that once there is a decision the implementation needs to be done with sensitivity. There is already a lot of mythology about the past and much of it came about through lack of sensitivity. A PR company might help.

It was noted that the need for unity should be emphasised, even if everyone gives up something.

It was suggested that one consensus from the meeting could be that once a decision is reached, there must be sensitivity about how it is presented and language promoting it as the best form should be avoided.

Proposals

There was some detailed discussion about the KS proposal. It was noted that there was a fundamental difference in the way that KS and KD approach compromise. KS looks at it and says there are people using substantially Middle Cornish or substantially Late Cornish – let's pick a middle date and base it on that. In changing to new target date it seemed to be asking everyone to give up not only spelling but grammar. There was detailed decision over certain forms. It seemed to some that the designers were resistant to incorporating usages of the period of Cornish KK best exemplifies. The authors present did not see too much difficulty and said they felt there should be some latitude within a standard.

It was commented that written forms have to be arbitrary but more latitude can be used in the spoken form. The first purpose of language was meaning and orthography conveys meaning which is comprehensible to those who pronounce it in different ways. Decisions on a written form are therefore likely to be arbitrary to some extent.

One comment was that children need a single version to start with but ideologically there should be no problem with variant forms and rational people should be happy with historical variants being allowed.

It was also noted that it is generally easier to have a system which is older than newer as there are more mergers than splits as time goes on.

It was stressed that KS is a proposal, not a final document. Detailed, but only a proposal and still negotiable. It was commented that since the draft came out, for the first time there had been some significant discussion with KK supporters. There had been no KK input into the first draft because no-one would speak.

Minutes

Some corrections to the notes of the last meeting had been made, either via the website or directly to the office. One member commented that his own notes differed. However the notes had been sent to all for correction at the time. The officers offered to incorporate further corrections at this late stage if they were supplied with them.

It was suggested that any future meetings should be recorded. It was agreed that the officers should prepare full notes and then a summary based on the corrected notes. Members should respond to the drafts and the final version would go to the Partnership and the Commission. Notes would also go to those not present for input.

KD

Comments were invited on KD but none were forthcoming.

One member noted that just because he had put his name to one thing, it didn't mean he wouldn't support other proposals. It was also noted that it should be emphasised that neither proposal is a 5th form but both are sets of revisions and suggestions for further discussion and that should be made clear to the general public.

It was commented that few people realised that compromise might mean only a few amendments. The point to get across was also that no-one has to change their own practice. This was crucial as was the fact that neither proposal was the last word and all was negotiable.

One member felt strongly that there should be an independent website for discussion run by the Partnership as most discussion was on private websites with anonymity and venom. The Partnership had felt this would take up too much staff time in moderating it.

It was queried whether the September deadline could be met. The officers' reply was that it could be in terms of a recommendation but if the recommendation was compromise then it would take longer to finalise.

It was commented that it was impossible to pull together a collective response given the disparate nature of the membership and that that should be acknowledged. It was suggested that members of the group needed to comment as individuals – if nothing

came out as a consensus there could be a danger of the members as individuals being ignored.

The process from here on was questioned. At the first meeting it had been agreed to have an interim meeting in July and then a final meeting, possible with members of the Commission.

Individual statements

[These are attributed and verbatim as they are individual statements]

Frances Bennett – First, I would not like to see an existing form chosen – so many would react bitterly if that were the case. If a compromise was chosen everyone would lose something for the prize of seeing our language live.

Hilary Shaw – My concern is with the learner. The only way to extend the language is for more people to learn it – whether children or adults they will have learnt English. Orthography should therefore not put unnecessary difficulties in the way of the learner who is already familiar with English. Do not think the close tie with pronunciation is possible as things are not always said in the same way twice. We have various forms – it is essential to aim at some unity. In the short term, people continuing to use own form is fine, but the more comprehensive our approach the better. Reconciliation is what we should be aiming for. Everyone will have to give up something.

Neil Kennedy – I believe that choosing an existing form of Cornish would perpetuate the current divisions. There would be winners and losers. Significant numbers of people would not participate in our future work. There are 2 draft proposals for compromise (KD & KS). These could form the basis for further discussion, leading to a 'compromise between the compromises'. The result should be flexible and accommodating of the plural nature of Revived Cornish. An orthography conference might resolve this. This should be focused and involve members of the LWG and others with expert knowledge.

Nicholas Williams – I agree completely. On the table are two compromises starting from different positions which are reconcilable. An SWF would result but it would need to be done by an orthographic conference with not just the LWG but experts in writing systems, Cornish and orthography.

Rod Lyon – My spoken Cornish tends towards later Cornish but it has to be a standard system. It needs to be built on an earlier literary form which can be altered – literary form then colloquial form. History cannot be rewritten and what has happened cannot be ignored. Looking for a compromise on one of current systems – hopefully small – but in the preparation of dictionaries etc. to use the literary form as headword with the colloquial form alongside. All-inclusive and not prescriptive – must encompass all developments in the language.

Ken George- I feel that this meeting has been called at the wrong time – our meetings are not meshing with those of the Commission. We should have met after their report. The two documents (KD and KS) are just proposals. Nobody has used these for more than a few months whereas older forms have been in use for many years and have been taught. I would therefore go for an existing form, viz. KK. Referring to transparency – I feel that it is very important that the process be transparent and would be improved by introduction of a website. The Partnership should do so.

BB – I would agree with something that Rod said in that I would very much like to see whatever form chosen – from existing proposals or something else – being as inclusive as possible. Inclusive of existing practices within the Cornish Language community – not just the traditional period. We should not ignore the fact that the revival has gone on for nearly a century and has practices that should be given a proper place within any future system. I would welcome communication with the Commission and some indication of what direction they would like us to move in so that we can fulfil the function intended.

Jenefer Lowe finished the meeting with thanks to all concerned for their time. She said that everyone was well aware that there had been some deficiencies in the process but that we should remember that it was new territory for everyone. Reports would be circulated shortly and members were invited to send any further points they would like added .