

REVIEW: KENSA BROADHURST, *THE CORNISH LANGUAGE IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY* (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2025)

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Dolly Pentreath (d. 1777) is traditionally claimed to have been the last native speaker of Cornish, while the publication of Henry Jenner's *Handbook of the Cornish language* (1904) is celebrated among today's Cornish speakers as the act that began the language revival. The nineteenth century, according to this view, was a fallow period: a time at which Cornish was "dead". These precise limits nonetheless deserve to be questioned, which is what Kensa Broadhurst has set out to do in *The Cornish language in the nineteenth century*, a volume that investigates the extent to which Cornish was used, studied, and discussed at this time. Drawing on primary sources including both archival material and published work, Broadhurst provides a useful and wide-ranging guide to the references to Cornish that we can find in nineteenth-century academic, literary, and media sources, with chapters focusing on Pentreath and Jenner but also on the lexicographic work of Fred W. P. Jago, the efforts to collect examples of Cornish made by Jenner's contemporary W. S. Lach-Szyrma, and references to the language in fiction.

Beyond merely cataloguing the depictions of Cornish found in nineteenth-century texts, Broadhurst aims to draw conclusions about the status of the language based on the material she discusses. It may be tempting to frame this in terms of a binary question: did Cornish really die, in accordance with the traditional view, or did it remain alive between 1777 and 1904? Finding sufficient evidence that Cornish was known and used in the nineteenth century would allow speakers to argue that the language has been spoken continuously from its

beginnings until the present. Yet, as Broadhurst points out, making a clear-cut judgement of this type is difficult.

Firstly, the terminology used in this type of discussion can be unhelpful. Sociolinguistic studies have increasingly moved away from terms such as “death” and “extinction” to describe languages, which “mask dynamic, power-laden processes of language use and shift” (McCarty 2018: 359). The biological metaphor reifies languages, making it seem as if they are agents in themselves rather than the product of speakers’ conscious and subconscious decisions about how to position themselves through communication. O’Rourke and Pujolar (2019: 27) call instead for a “sociolinguistics of the speaker”, centring investigations of minoritised languages on “how people perform social actions through the language varieties in their lives”. In contexts such as that of Cornish, where processes of language shift and revitalisation depend on trends in the enactment of these social actions on the part of groups of speakers, this reframing seems particularly necessary.

Even if we do use the term “language death”, its definition can be difficult to pin down. Broadhurst’s introduction discusses the complexities in determining the status of a language, noting that the tools used to measure endangerment can vary as well as the terminology. Due to its multiscalar approach, the author chooses to assess the position of nineteenth-century Cornish using Lee and Van Way’s quantitative Language Endangerment Index (LEI) (2016), which focuses on numbers of speakers, intergenerational transmission, and use of the language across various public and private domains. Yet, as Grenoble (2016: 297) points out in a response to Lee and Van Way’s framework, attempting to measure speaker numbers quantitatively draws attention to “the question of who is included in speaker counts and how proficiency is determined”. To this we might add the related question of whether those familiar with the language are willing to use it as a means of communication. This is especially relevant to communities in the advanced stages of language shift, such as the Cornish context in the modern period. Indeed, applying the LEI to historical data may seem particularly risky when these data provide no direct access to speaker numbers, only indications of interest in Cornish that need not translate to sustained usage. Should antiquarians such as Fred W. P. Jago with advanced knowledge of the linguistic structures of Cornish be counted as speakers? Broadhurst notes that Jago and other nineteenth-century scholars “felt the preservation and examination of Cornish was a worthwhile task” (p. 113), and even that Jago’s work was “subtly reclaiming the scholarly investigation of Cornish for Cornishmen” (p. 114). But this interest in Cornish literature and lexis does not necessarily translate to the use of Cornish in the community.

Another important source discussed in Broadhurst’s work consists of the examples of Cornish words and phrases gathered by figures such as Jenner and

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W. S. Lach-Szyrma, who together visited a small number of elderly informants in west Cornwall in 1875 (p. 147). Here we return to Grenoble (2016: 297)'s question of "proficiency": again, should these informants, who provided a handful of words and sentences, be considered speakers of Cornish? Is there a threshold they must meet to gain this position, and does that threshold relate to the extent of their linguistic knowledge, or to the extent to which they make use of the Cornish they do know? Such questions cannot be answered objectively. Depending on the reason for the enquiry, different beliefs about what it means to speak Cornish will be relevant: if the aim is to demonstrate at all costs that Cornish was "alive" during the nineteenth century, then we may well take a more lenient view of how speakers are to be defined.

Broadhurst's discussion of the example of John Davey illustrates an opposing perspective on the part of twentieth-century Cornish revivalists. Davey was a self-described Cornish speaker who lived until 1891; as Broadhurst recounts, his claim to authority as a speaker was dismissed by Robert Morton Nance, a highly influential figure in the early revival movement, on the grounds that Davey's "Cornish was learned through lessons" (p. 29) rather than through typical intergenerational transmission (although the lessons were taught by his father!). It seems that in this view, a "nativeness" of some kind is required in order to assume a position as a legitimate speaker. Although Broadhurst does not put it in such terms, this exact issue recurs in twenty-first-century debates around the place of new speakers in minoritised language communities and whether they can claim an authoritative position (see Ó Murchadha et al. 2018: 5-7 and case studies in the same volume). Broadhurst identifies the paradox here in that Nance is thereby "also condemning the Cornish used by his contemporaries in the twentieth-century revival" (p. 29) – i.e. learnt from textbooks and dictionaries written by such people as Nance himself – indeed, Nance's own status as a Cornish speaker similarly lacks the authority of "nativeness". Today's Cornish revival movement continues to grapple with the apparently insurmountable distance between "native" (traditional) speakers and new speakers of the revived language, with figures in some quarters insisting on the primacy of traditional Cornish texts written by historical "native speakers". In turn, the fact that such speakers no longer exist is used as grounds for claiming that all those who use Cornish in the twenty-first century should cleave to the lexis of the traditional texts as much as possible (e.g. Williams 2014: xvii) – notwithstanding the fact that the vocabulary needed for modern life will be at odds with that found in fifteenth-century religious drama.

Broadhurst positions herself in *The Cornish language in the nineteenth century* as a historian (p. 31); indeed, as a historical archival study, the volume is highly valuable for its compilation of sources relating to Cornish from multiple archives, many of which are little known and have hitherto been paid little attention. In terms

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of drawing sociolinguistic conclusions, Broadhurst is understandably more tentative given her academic field. Her examples certainly show that knowledge of Cornish persisted throughout the nineteenth century, but fall short of providing a meaningful assessment of the language's sociolinguistic vitality at this time. As a study of Cornish and its representations in the nineteenth century this is a comprehensive and useful contribution, but as an attempt to answer the question of whether Cornish was "alive" during the period, there is insufficient problematisation of the relevant terminology: not only terms such as "dead" and "extinct", but also those describing speakers such as "native" and "fluent", ideologically informed categories that are increasingly called into question in the context of sociolinguistic enquiry (O'Rourke and Ramallo 2011: 140).

It is nonetheless worth considering the implications of declaring that Cornish was indeed "alive" in the nineteenth century: how would this reconceptualisation affect the revived language and its speakers in the twenty-first? Demonstrating an unbroken chain of intergenerational transmission from the medieval period to the present day may be seen as a way of rebutting the constant positioning of Cornish and its speakers as on the periphery of the Celtic sphere, a minority within a minority. The Cornish language movement has long been dogged by concerns about a lack of authenticity, seen not only in popular discourse but in academic responses to revived Cornish, most notoriously Glanville Price's characterisation of revived Cornish as "Cornic" (Price 1984: 134), coining the term to keep today's varieties apart from "the authentic medieval language". These same concerns have preoccupied the movement from within as Cornish speakers have taken different approaches to lexis, pronunciation, and orthography in attempts to find the most ideologically satisfying variety of the language (leading to perspectives such as that espoused by Williams 2014). Traces of what seems to be the majority view within the Cornish-speaking community can be identified in Broadhurst's occasional reference to the Late Cornish of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as "corrupted" (p. 164): the variety that prevails in official contexts is instead based most strongly on Middle (i.e. pre-seventeenth-century) Cornish (Davies-Deacon 2020: 75), supplemented by lexis based on new coinages from Celtic roots and making use of orthographic conventions that similarly reinforce the linguistic distance between Cornish and English. If Cornish speakers wish to lean on the continuity of the language throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, it would on the other hand seem that today's prevailing focus on Middle Cornish should be called into question. The selection of this period as the basis for the revived language was facilitated by the cessation of intergenerational transmission, which provided an impetus for departing from the remnants of Cornish gathered in the nineteenth century in favour of "the great days of Cornish writing" (Nance 1929: 6). If that chain is to be framed as unbroken, then Late Cornish is surely harder to ignore.

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