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**CORNISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE:
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

Cornish is a South-Western British Celtic language, closely related to Breton and Welsh. In the period between 600 and 800 AD the westward movement of Anglo-Saxon peoples separated the Celts of Strathclyde, Cumbria, Wales, and the Cornish peninsula. The dialects of Common British¹ developed into Primitive Welsh, Primitive Cornish and Primitive Breton, the earliest stages of separate languages spoken in Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany, respectively. The further history of Cornish is conventionally divided into Old Cornish (from its beginnings to the end of the twelfth century), Middle Cornish (1200–1600) and Late Cornish (1600–1800). The last phase is also known as Traditional Cornish, in contrast to Modern Cornish, the result of various contemporary attempts at reviving the language.²

¹ This reconstructed form of the ancestral language is also called *Old British*, *Brittonic* or *Brythonic*, sometimes the names are used interchangeably, in other cases, however, they refer to distinct phases in the development of the language. The most important study on the early linguistic history of the British Isles remains the monumental work by Kenneth H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1953, reprinted 1994, Dublin: The Four Courts Press). Cornish language and literature is discussed by Peter Berresford Ellis in *The Cornish Language and its Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); Brian Murdoch provides the most comprehensive account of the literature to date in *Cornish Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993); cf. also a brief summary by Glanville Price, "Cornish Language and Literature," in: J. Glanville Price, ed., *The Celtic Connection* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992), pp. 301–314. The structure of the Cornish language is comprehensively discussed in Ken George, "Cornish", in: Martin J. Ball, ed., *The Celtic Languages* (London–New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 410–468, and Alan R. Thomas, "The Cornish Language," in: D. MacAulay, *The Celtic Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 346–370.

² Cf. a critical account in Glanville Price, *The Languages of Britain* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 134–145. Price refers to the modern revived forms as "pseudo-Cornish" and *Cornic*.

The earliest evidence for Old Cornish consists of nineteen glosses from the end of the ninth century and three glosses from the tenth century. The largest piece of Old Cornish is a Latin-Cornish glossary – the *Vocabularium Cornicum*, a translation of Aelfric's Latin-Old English glossary. This word list, known also as the *Cottonian Vocabulary*, dates from around 1100 AD and contains 961 words. The first entries in the list refer to God and heaven and are worth reproducing here:³

<i>Deus omnipotens</i>	<i>Duy chefuidoc</i>	(almighty God)
<i>Celum</i>	<i>nef</i>	(heaven)
<i>Angelus</i>	<i>ail</i>	(angel)

Further on the glossary provides vocabulary connected with creation, mankind, parts of the body, the ranks of the church, members of the family, crafts and household goods, animals and plants. Crysten Fudge has called the *Cottonian Vocabulary* “a treasure in the history of Cornish.”⁴

Additional evidence on the earliest stages of Cornish is provided by personal names (of freed slaves) noted in the Bodmin Gospels, place-names occurring in Anglo-Saxon charters and in relevant fragments of the *Domesday Book*. In the Old Cornish period the language was still not very distinct from Old Breton, and it is only by the end of the twelfth century that Cornish was established as a clearly separate language (in terms of linguistic features).

The main bulk of Cornish literature is associated with the Middle Cornish period. Cornish literature of that time is represented, almost exclusively, by religious verse and mystery plays. *Pascon agan Arluth* (“The Passion of Our Lord,” also known as “The Poem of Mount Calvary”) is a religious poem of over 2 000 seven-syllabled lines (259 eight-line stanzas) composed circa 1375, in the church college of Glasney at Penryn (founded in 1265). This poem is a versified meditation on the Passion, from the Temptation in the desert to Easter Sunday; below is the closing stanza of the poem:⁵

Del sevy's Cryst a'y veth-ef	As Christ arose from His tomb
Y'n ur-n dhe 'n tressa deth,	then on the third day,
Ynella oll ny a sef,	so shall we all rise
Deth Brus, drok ha da ynweth:	on Judgment Day, evil and good also:

³ Cf. Crysten Fudge, *The Life of Cornish* (Redruth: Dyllansow Truran, 1982), p. 7. The manuscript is in the British Library as part of the collection made in the seventeenth century by the antiquary Sir Robert Cotton, cf. Murdoch, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴ Fudge, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵ *Pascon agan Arluth* ([n.p.]: The Cornish Language Board, 1972), p. 69; modern standard spelling (i.e. Unified Cornish, cf. the discussion below) and English translation by R. Morton Nance and A. S. D. Smith.

Obereth dremas a dyf,	the work of the good man shall grow,
Y'n ur-na rych ef a vyth;	he shall be rich then;
Drokdhenn y'n jeth-na, goef!	a wicked man on that day, woe to him!
Dhe Cryst y fyth a'n barth cleth.	he shall be on Christ's left hand.

The single best known piece of Cornish literature is *An Ordinalia Kernewek* ("The Cornish Ordinalia"), a religious drama in three parts telling of the Origin of the World (*Origo Mundi*, following the biblical account of events from the Creation to Solomon), Christ's Passion (*Passio Domini*) and the Resurrection of Our Lord (*Resurrectio Domini*). The *Ordinalia* were composed in the late fourteenth century in Glasney. The oldest preserved manuscript dates from the fifteenth century and consists of 8 734 lines.⁶ Below, the first lines of the second play, *Passio Domini*, are reproduced:⁷

Dheugh lavaraf ow dyskyblyon,	Unto you I say, my disciples,
pysough toth da oll kescolon,	pray forthwith, all in accord,
Dew dres pup tra us a-ughon,	to God above all things Who is on high,
dheugh y'n bys-ma y ras danvon,	to send His grace to you in this world,
y'n deweth mayfeugh sylwys.	that in the end you may be saved.

The *Ordinalia* is a long mystery cycle (it has 125 different speaking parts) performed by the local people during three days in the open air in large playing places (known in Cornish as *plen an gwary*). These playing places were circular arena with high earthen sides, terraced for wooden or stone seating. Such amphitheatres still survive in St. Just-in-Penwith and Perranzabuloe.⁸ Though predominantly a religious work, the *Ordinalia* also reveals the authors' familiarity with the knight's code of chivalry, the conventions of the tournament, and even details of the knight's armour.

It is generally agreed that the *Ordinalia* is most significant for its linguistic value, though it is also claimed to be the most important piece of Cornish literature. Earlier studies often dismissed the *Ordinalia* as an imitation of English mystery plays; more recent studies, however, attempt at a comprehensive analysis of the texts in their proper historical setting.⁹ It is interesting to note here that the *Ordinalia* was performed in English at the Perran Round in 1969, under the auspices of Bristol University.¹⁰

⁶ For a full survey cf. Jane Bakere, *The Cornish Ordinalia. A Critical Study* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980).

⁷ *The Cornish Ordinalia*, second play: *Christ's Passion* ([n.p.]: The Cornish Language Board, 1982), pp. 4-5; modern spelling and English translation by R. Morton Nance and A. S. D. Smith.

⁸ Fudge, *op. cit.*, p. 18, provides an illustration of the *plen an gwary* at Perran.

⁹ See the comment in Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 38: there is "nothing spectacular about the *Ordinalia* cycle as literature." Comprehensive reevaluation is provided by Bakere, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Hilary Shaw, "Celtic Drama - Cornish Miracle Plays," *The Celtic Pen* 1 (1993): 17.

Much Cornish medieval literature draws on the Bible as its source, but the lives of the saints also provided material for plays. The only complete saint's play to have survived in the whole of Britain is *Beunans Meriasek* ("The Life of Meriasek," patron saint of Camborne), a profoundly religious verse drama of less than 5 000 lines, the earliest manuscript of which dates from 1504 (discovered in Merioneth in 1869). The play tells the story of Meriasek, a Breton priest, who sailed to Cornwall, consecrated a chapel in Camborne, worked miracles and converted people. According to Crysten Fudge there are several Breton lives of the saint but none mentions his visit to Cornwall; this episode, therefore, must have been added to give the play "topicality for a Cornish, and in particular a Camborne, audience."¹¹ The short play demonstrates the local character of medieval Cornish literature – it was composed by native writers, and performed by the local population for the local population. Some reference to local affairs may be also found in the *Ordinalia*.

The first prose writings in Cornish are the *Tregear's Homilies*. These are translations of 12 English sermons by Bishop Bonner (English version published in 1555). The Cornish manuscript dates from the late fifties of the sixteenth century and was written down by a Catholic priest, John Tregear. The vocabulary and grammar of the *Homilies* shows the influence of English, which suggests that Tregear was perhaps not a native speaker of Cornish.¹² The homilies are "of no literary interest,"¹³ though they have undisputed historical and linguistic value. The manuscripts were discovered only in 1949 in Flint (north Wales).

The remaining literature displays existing linguistic features typical of Late Cornish and is represented by the drama *Gwreans an Bys* (known under the English title "The Creacion of the World") written down in 1611 by William Jordan (but most probably composed earlier). *The Creacion* is the first part of a mystery cycle of which the second and third days are lost. The play is based, to some extent, on the first section of the *Origo Mundi* (Noah and the flood, Lucifer's fall, Cain). It is composed of 2 548 lines. Late Cornish also provides as with the only piece of original secular Cornish prose: *Daralla Jooan Choye a Horr* ("The Tale of John Ramshouse"), a short folk-tale adapted by Nicholas Boson and written down by Edward Lhuyd in his *Archaeologia Britannica* (1707). Boson is also the author of a short essay on the Cornish language – *Nebbaz Gerriau dro tha Carnoack* – that sheds some interesting light on the socio-linguistic situation of

¹¹ Fudge, *op. cit.*, p. 22, see also the discussion in Murdoch, *op. cit.*

¹² Price, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

Cornish and its relations with English at the end of the seventeenth century.¹⁴

From the eighteenth century there remain some songs, proverbs, letters and fragmentary translations of religious literature. All this work is important for the linguistic study of Late Cornish but it lacks any literary merit. In spite of the efforts of a group of enthusiasts who corresponded with each other in Cornish and collected specimens of the spoken language, by the end of the eighteenth century the decline of Cornish reached its irreversible point. The last piece of traditional Cornish is most probably a letter written by an old fisherman, William Bodinar, in 1776.¹⁵

What remains from Cornish literature is not impressive: "The total volume of Cornish literature of all periods is less than 150 000 words all told!"¹⁶ However, the slender volume of written literature has to be seen against the small size of the Cornish-speaking population and the gradual decline of the language. At the time of the Norman Conquest (i.e. in the Old Cornish period) the total population of Cornwall, from the river Tamar to Land's End was around 20 000; further increase of population was accompanied by decrease in the number of Cornish speakers, also the area where the language was spoken was continually shrinking. By the year 1700 the language was spoken only by 5 000 people, chiefly in West Penwith and the Lizard Peninsula.¹⁷ According to the tradition, the last speaker of Cornish was the fisherwife from Mousehole, Dolly Pentreath, who died in 1777 in her late eighties. Over the years several other claimants to the title were identified (including William Bodinar, cf. above and note 15); however, it is generally accepted that Cornish did not survive as a community language into the nineteenth century.¹⁸

¹⁴ Richard Gendall, "Early Modern Cornish Literature. A Perspective," *The Celtic Pen* 2 (1993/1994): 19.

¹⁵ William Bodinar was not a native speaker of Cornish, he learnt the language when going to sea with old fishermen. Cf. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

¹⁶ Richard Gendall, *op. cit.*, p. 17. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 308, provides an even more pessimistic opinion. According to him extant Cornish literature amounts in all to less than 100 000 words. Both these authors admit the possibility of the irrecoverable loss of some Cornish manuscripts. To what extent such manuscripts contained literary works of interest is at present an unanswerable question.

¹⁷ Cf. the maps in Gendall, *op. cit.*, p. 18, and Ken George, "How many people spoke Cornish traditionally?", *Cornish Studies* 14 (1986): 70; see also the discussion in Price, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-305.

¹⁸ For the controversy around the identification of "the last native speaker of Cornish" see Price, *op. cit.*, pp. 303-305.

After surveying numerous historical sources, Ken George managed to estimate the number of speakers of Cornish throughout the centuries; the results of his survey are reproduced in Table 1.¹⁹

Table 1
Number of speakers of Cornish throughout the centuries

Year	Area where Cornish was spoken (in km ²)	Fraction of total area where Cornish was spoken	Total population of Cornwall	Number of Cornish speakers
1200	3270	0.93	35,000	30,000
1300	2780	0.79	52,000	38,000
1400	2360	0.61	55,000	34,000
1500	1890	0.54	69,000	33,000
1600	1400	0.40	84,000	22,000
1650	910	0.26	93,000	14,000
1700	530	0.15	106,000	5,000
1750	160	0.05	140,000	very few
1800	0	0	192,000	0

The decline of Cornish is attributable to a number of causes and factors with the principal ones being illiteracy in Cornish, lack of Cornish-language education, social, economic and cultural preference for English.²⁰

Interest in Cornish returned in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, when Henry Jenner, a young Cornishman on the staff of the British Museum, had studied the Cornish manuscripts and delivered two lectures on the language. While working in the British Museum Jenner also discovered 41 lines of (Middle) Cornish verse on the back of an old land charter dated 1340 (the so-called *Charter Fragment*, written down most probably around 1400).²¹ In 1904 Jenner published a handbook of Cornish, based on the sources available to him at that time, and proposed that the

¹⁹ George, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–70.

²⁰ For a detailed study see Martyn F. Wakelin *Language and History in Cornwall* (Leicester: Leicester Press University, 1975).

²¹ Some scholars believe the *Charter Fragment* to be a part of a sacred drama like the *Ordinalia*, others, however, consider it the only piece of secular writing extant in Middle Cornish. A detailed analysis, together with the reproduction of the text, is provided by Enrico Campanile, "Un Frammento Scenico Medio-Cornico," *Studi e Saggi Linguistici* III (1963): 60–80. For a recent discussion, together with modernised Cornish text and English translation, see Ray Edwards, "The Charter Fragment – Play or Poem?", *The Celtic Pen* 1 (1995/1996): 17–20.

language might be revived. The rationale behind this endeavour was purely sentimental: "The reason why a Cornishman should learn Cornish, the outward and audible sign of his separate nationality, is sentimental, and not in the least practical, and if everything sentimental were banished from it, the world would not be as pleasant a place as it is."²² Jenner also wrote poems, hymns and songs in Cornish.

Jenner's work was continued by two other enthusiastic revivalists, Robert Morton Nance and A. S. D. Smith. Nance based his reconstruction on Middle Cornish; however, since the quantity and quality of the authentic material was not sufficient to reconstruct the language, he used all available Cornish sources (Old and Late), words from the spoken English of West Penwyth, Welsh and Breton sources, he also devised new words using attested Cornish roots. The resulting form of the language became known as Unified (or Revived) Cornish.²³ The revivalists edited Middle Cornish texts in modernised spelling, produced Cornish translations of *Tristan and Isolt* and the *Mabinogi*, they also published poems and short stories, handbooks and introductory grammars. More recent publications include several other translations (e.g., Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*) and, for the first time in Cornish history, a full-length novel.²⁴ At present the main body responsible for the promotion of Unified Cornish is *Kesva an Tavas Kernewek* (Cornish Language Board, founded in 1967). The Board continues the activities of its predecessors: The Celtic-Cornish Society (1901) and The First Old Cornwall Society (1920). Today the Board is responsible for education, research, publishing and examinations (held at four levels, including a GCSE). The present interest in Cornish is to a large degree sentimental and even ideological. This approach to language revival raises serious methodological questions. According to Glanville Price, one of the most severe critics, revived Cornic is "to no inconsiderable extent a nineteenth- and, more especially, twentieth-century invention, in its orthography, its pronunciation, its vocabulary, and even its grammar."²⁵

The principal objections to Unified Cornish concern the system of spelling and vocabulary. R. Morton Nance worked out a system of

²² Henry Jenner, *Handbook of the Cornish Language* (London: David Nutt, 1904), p. xii.

²³ See the explanations in the "Introduction" in R. Morton Nance, *A New Cornish-English Dictionary* (St. Ives: Old Cornwall Society, 1938, reprinted, with addenda and corrigenda, Redruth: Dyllansow Truran, 1990).

²⁴ Melville Bennetto, *An Gurun Wosek a Geltya* ("The Bloody Crown of Celtia," [n.p.]: The Cornish Language Board, 1984). This novel deals with Celtic resistance to present-day conditions.

²⁵ Glanville Price, *The Languages of Britain* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 134-145. In later publications (cf. reference in note 1), Price somewhat moderated his criticism, however, he remains highly sceptical about the revival of Cornish.

orthography which was based on Middle Cornish (especially the *Ordinalia* and the *Passion*), all earlier and later forms were re-spelt, additionally "some irregularities or ambiguities of Middle Cornish itself have been removed."²⁶ The resulting system is to a large degree artificial and arbitrary. Furthermore, the pronunciation of Unified Cornish tends to reproduce the sounds of Cornish in its last stages, whereas the written form is based on Middle Cornish.²⁷

Since the whole corpus of written Cornish is very limited, it should not come as a surprise that many words and grammatical forms never occur in the extant texts. As far as vocabulary is concerned, Unified Cornish uses words attested in the available texts, words invented by Nance on the basis of existing roots, and borrowings from Breton or Welsh. In principle, the dictionaries distinguish between these words, in practice, however, not all inventions are marked. Similar observations carry for Cornish grammar.

Unified Cornish, although criticised by academics on grounds of methodology of reconstruction, has remained the standard until recently, and most of the twentieth century literature (both original and in translation) has used it. Research on the history of the Cornish sound system conducted by Ken George resulted in proposing significant changes in the system of orthography. The principal aim of these changes was to accurately represent the historic pronunciation and reflect the phonological development of Cornish. The new system is known as *Kernewek Kemmyn* (Common Cornish, also called Phonemic Cornish), it was adopted by the Cornish Language Board in 1987 and is now officially recommended.²⁸ Also this version of Cornish is heavily criticised, and the Cornish Language Board condemned for advocating "a spurious language that is not Cornish in any real sense."²⁹

The most recent development in reconstructing Cornish is the *Teere ha Tavaz* ('Land and Language') movement founded in 1986 by Richard Gendall. One of the basic aims of this organisation is to move from the devised language to the vernacular form of Modern Cornish (*Cornoack*,

²⁶ Nance, *op. cit.*, "Introduction". It has to be noted here that the orthography of Middle Cornish lacked a commonly accepted standard.

²⁷ Price, *op. cit.*, p. 143, puts it very bluntly: "a language based on its own fifteenth-century written form and the twentieth-century spoken form of another language is indeed a curious animal."

²⁸ Ken George presented the results of his research in a doctoral dissertation to the University of Western Brittany in Brest in 1984, published later as *The Pronunciation and Spelling of Revived Cornish* (Saltash: The Cornish Language Board, 1986). The grammar of Common Cornish is standardized now in: Wella Brown, *A Grammar of Modern Cornish* (Saltash: The Cornish Language Board, 1993, 2nd edition), and the vocabulary in Ken George, *Gerlyver Kernewek Kemmyn* (Callington: The Cornish Language Board, 1993).

²⁹ Cf. Nicholas Williams, "The Case against Kernewek Kemmyn," in: *Cornish Studies: Four* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996).

also referred to as *Kernuak*), assumed to be a natural continuation of Late Cornish. Modern Cornish is based primarily on the last period of the existence of Cornish as a vernacular and therefore differs considerably in pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary and grammar from Unified Cornish.³⁰

The mutual relations among different stages and variants of Cornish can be illustrated on Figure 1 (reconstructed forms in italics):³¹

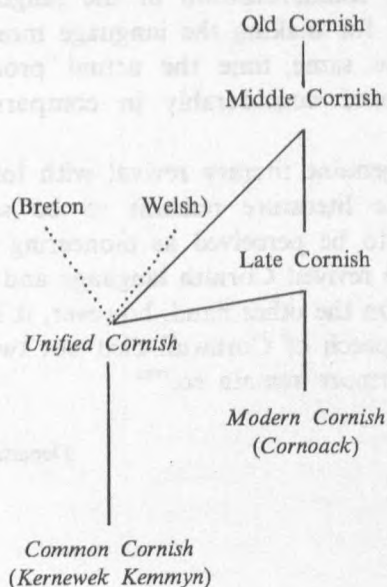


Fig. 1. The mutual relations among different stages and variants of Cornish

Today literature is still written in Unified Cornish, with new contributions in Common Cornish and Modern Cornish. This literature includes poetry, short stories, children's books, translations, and even short radio plays. Cornish-language literary magazines are published: *An Gannas* ('The Messenger', a monthly started in 1977) and *Delyow Derow* ('Oak Leaves',

³⁰ The publications by Richard Gendall include *A Student's Dictionary of Modern Cornish* (Menheniot: Teere ha Tavaz, 1990), *A Student's Grammar of Modern Cornish* (Menheniot: Teere ha Tavaz, 1991), and a succinct pamphlet *Traditional Cornish: A Brief Expose* (Menheniot: Teere ha Tavaz, 1988).

³¹ Old, Middle and Late Cornish are the historical stages in the development of the language, Unified Cornish (and its successor, Common Cornish) and Modern Cornish are the revived forms of the language (i.e. 'Cornic' in Price's terminology), whereas Breton and Welsh are the other two British Celtic languages. A comparison of the reconstructed forms is provided by Ken George in "Which Base for Revived Cornish?", in: *Cornish Studies: Three* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), pp. 104-124.

a twice-yearly started in 1988 for writers continuing to use Unified Cornish). Texts in Cornish occasionally appear also in *Cornish Life*, *Cornish Scene*, *New Cornwall*, and local magazines.³² However, publishing in Cornish is not impressive: "the initial sale of a book in Cornish is usually less than 100 and several years are needed to sell 300 copies."³³ The situation is further aggravated by the existence of different spelling systems (and Modern Cornish may be considered as a drastically different variety of the language). Full standardization of the language seems to be an indispensable condition for making the language more accessible to a wider readership. At the same time the actual production of literature in Cornish has increased considerably in comparison to all previous periods.

Whether this is a genuine literary revival with long-lasting effects and consequences for Celtic literature remains to be seen, nevertheless the present activities have to be perceived as pioneering endeavours to create modern literature in the revived Cornish language and as such deserve close attention and interest. On the other hand, however, it has to be remembered that: "The old Celtic speech of Cornwall died out two centuries ago. It is still dead, and will evermore remain so."³⁴

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JĘZYK I LITERATURA KORNICKA: ROZWAŻANIA WSTĘPNE

Język kornicki należy do języków celtyckich i jest spokrewniony z walijskim i bretońskim. Jego historię dzieli się na trzy okresy: starokornicki (od czasów inwazji anglosaksońskich aż po koniec XII w.), średniokornicki (1200–1600) i późnokornicki (1600–1800).

Do najstarszych zabytków języka kornickiego należy 19 głos z końca IX w. oraz pochodzący z początku XII w. słownik łacińsko-kornicki (*Vocabularium Cornicum*) zawierający 961 słów. Najważniejsze dzieła literackie powstały w okresie średniokornickim. Były to misteria (*Ordinalia*, *Żywot św. Meriaska*) i wiersze, głównie o charakterze religijnym (*Męka Pańska*). Z okresu późnokornickiego pozostał, najprawdopodobniej jedynie we fragmencie, jeden dramat

³² For a brief survey see Richard G. Jenkin "Modern Cornish Literature in the 20th century," *The Celtic Pen* 3 (1994): 3–5.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁴ Price, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

(*Stworzenie świata*), krótka powiastka osnuta na motywach ludowych, piosenki, przysłowia i tłumaczenia, zwłaszcza tekstów o charakterze religijnym. Na przełomie XVIII i XIX w. język kornicki przestał istnieć.

W XX w. są podejmowane próby wskrzeszenia języka. Mimo metodologicznych zastrzeżeń wysuwanych przez niektórych językoznawców istnieje obecnie kilka wariantów rekonstruowanego kornickiego (Unified Cornish, Common Cornish, Modern Cornish). W każdym rozwija się literatura, głównie poezja, ale także opowiadania, powieści, tłumaczenia, literatura dla dzieci, a nawet sluchowiska radiowe. Warunkiem dalszego rozwoju literatury jest ujednoczenie i upowszechnienie rekonstruowanego języka.