

DESKY KERNOWEK SUPPORT GROUP

PRONUNCIATION

On the basis of Standard Cornish spelling (KS)

This memo currently covers the vowel sounds discussed or touched upon in the DKSG meeting on 28 April 2021. The memo will be expanded as more sounds are covered in subsequent meetings.

In these Notes:

'Period 1' means 1200-1350, 'Period 2' means 1350-1500, 'Period 3' means 1500-1650, 'Period 4' means 1650-1800. These dates are only approximate.

BASIC RULE FOR VOWEL SOUNDS

- (1) In Periods 2, 3, 4 vowels are short or long.
For Period 1 we may reconstruct a third category of 'half-long' vowels: Kernewek Kemmyn is the only form of revived Cornish that employs them. For revived Cornish based on historical Cornish as it is attested by the texts themselves, half-long vowels are inapplicable (and these Notes do not cover them).
- (2) Most vowels are short. This is a result of the blending of the Cornish and Middle English sound-systems. We call this blending the 'Prosodic Shift'. It is unique to Cornish, distinguishing it from sister-languages Breton and Welsh.
- (3) Subject to paragraph (4), a vowel is long if:
 - (A) it is the vowel of a one-syllable word and is *not* followed by:
 - (a) CK or P or T or
 - (b) a pre-occluded M (written BM) or a pre-occluded N (written DN) or
 - (c) more than one consonant sound*Note that SK, ST are treated in Cornish as a single consonant sound*
 - (B) it is a diphthong or
 - (C) it is marked with a circumflex accent (^).
- (4) A vowel is short if it is marked with a grave accent (`).

REDUCTION TO 'SCHWA'

Any unstressed short vowel *may* be reduced in pronunciation to or towards schwa. This is a complicated area. Schwa itself is never shown in spelling. See the section on schwa at the end of these notes.

VOWEL SOUNDS

A

Short A is pronounced as in English CAT. Long A is a long version of the same vowel – *not* the vowel heard in the first syllable of English FATHER. In a few words ending in a consonant long **A** develops in Periods 3 and 4 to the same sound as long **AU** – these instances are marked with the circumflex.

AI

This is *not* a diphthong. It is pronounced just like long E. It is merely a spelling convention to preserve the visible shape of certain loan-words.

AR

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ÀR

This is a diphthong. It is **Schwa** (*not* short **A**) + retroflex **R** pronounced as a single sound.

AU

This is *not* a diphthong. It is like the vowel in English HOT when said in a modern relaxed manner. But unlike the English sound (which is always short) the Cornish vowel has short and long versions.

AW

This is a diphthong. It is pronounced like the vowel in English COW.

AY

This is a diphthong. It is pronounced as the vowel sound in English HIGH.

E

Short E is pronounced as in English PET. Long E is pronounced as the vowel sound in English LANE but without the Y-sound at the end.

Ě

This is pronounced just like long **E**. Any word spelled with **Ě** may be spelled and pronounced with **ÿ** instead, and vice versa – this is purely a matter of personal preference.

EI

This is a diphthong identical in sound to EY. In pronunciation based on Period 4 only, it is substituted for **Y** when that comes at the end of a word *and* is stressed: e.g. **chy** ‘house’ may become **chei**. But **EI** is *never* substituted in the pronouns **my** (**vy**, **mavy**) and **ty** (**iy**, **sy**, **teiy**).

ER

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ÊR

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EU

This is *not* a diphthong. Originally it is the sound that is written ö in German. It has short and long versions. It shifts to or towards the sound of **E** in Periods 2, 3, 4. To retain the distinction between e.g. **leun** ‘full’ and **len** ‘faithful’, it is best not to shift the sound all of the way.

EW

This is a diphthong. It is short **E** + **W** pronounced as a single sound. But **EW** in **dew** is pronounced just like **YW**.

ÊW

Originally this was identical with the sound of **EW**. But in Periods 2, 3, 4 it shifts to be identical in sound to **OW**. Note that the circumflex accent is not being used here to mark length. Diphthongs are long by nature. Any word spelled with **ÊW** may be spelled with **ÔW** instead, and vice versa – this is purely a matter of personal preference.

EY

This is a diphthong. It is **Schwa** (*not* short **E**) + **Y** pronounced as a single sound.

I

Short **I** is pronounced as in English PIT. Long **I** is pronounced as the vowel sound in English PEAT.

IR

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O

Short **O** is pronounced as English HOT when said in an old-fashioned 'upper class' accent. Long **E** is pronounced as the vowel sound in English LOAN but without the W-sound at the end.

OO

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OR

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ÒR

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OU

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OW

This is a diphthong. It is short **O** + **W** pronounced as a single sound. For pronunciation based on Periods 3 and 4, **OW** between vowels or at the end of a word may be pronounced just like **Û**. In pronunciation based on Period 4, **OW** may be said as **AW**.

ÔW

This is pronounced just like **ÊW**. Note that the circumflex accent is not being used here to mark length. Diphthongs are long by nature. Any word spelled with **ÊW** may be spelled with **ÔW** instead, and vice versa – this is purely a matter of personal preference.

OY

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U at the end of a word or compound element

When **U** stands at the end of a word it is pronounced just like **YW**. This also applies when **U** stands at the end of the first element of a compound word: e.g. **Lulyn** 'Newlyn'.

U when not at the end

Originally this was the sound that is written u in French and ü in German. It has short and long versions. It shifts to the sound of **I** in Periods 2, 3, 4. But place-names are more conservative and tend to keep the original sound: e.g. **Lanust** 'St Just'. The original sound can also persist where confusion might arise: e.g. to keep **lus** 'blueberries' apart from **lis** 'mud'.

Û

This is the short vowel sound in English WOOD.

Û

This is the long vowel sound in MOON. In loan-words it is pronounced with a preceding Y where English does the same: e.g. **ûsya** 'use'.

UR

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ÛR

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UW

This is pronounced just like **YW**.

ÛY

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Y

When this comes at the beginning of a word it is pronounced as schwa. When it comes at the end of a word it is pronounced like the last letter in English TEDDY. See **EI** above for *Period 4 variant*. When it is in simple-vowel position in the middle of a word it is pronounced just like short **I**.

ÿ

This is pronounced just like long **I**. Any word spelled with **ÿ** may be spelled and pronounced with **Ë** instead, and vice versa – this is purely a matter of personal preference.

YR

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YW

This is a diphthong. It is short **I** + **W** pronounced as a single sound. **YW** (and the spellings pronounced like it: see **U** at the end of a word or compound element, **UW**) may alternatively be pronounced just like **EW**, especially in pronunciations based on Periods 3 and 4.

CIRCUMFLEX AS DISTINGUISHING MARK

The circumflex is used on a few one-syllable words ending in **A** to distinguish them from one-syllable words that are typically unstressed and thus short. For instance, **na** *negative particle*, **nâ** *interjection 'no'*. It is also used as a distinguishing mark on a few one-syllable words containing **E** or **O** – this is purely a spelling convenience, there is no difference in pronunciation. For example, **eth** 'eight' and **êth** 'went'; **goy** 'alas for them' and **gôy** 'digest'.

CIRCUMFLEX MARKING INITIAL Y-DROP

The consonant **Y** may be dropped in pronunciation before **E** or **EW** or **EY** at the beginning of some words. This is marked by placing a circumflex on the vowel: e.g. **yêhes** 'health', **yêwny** 'yearn', **yêyn** 'cold'.

Ian Jackson