NON-BINARY PRONOUNS IN CORNISH
A discussion paper by Dr Ken George

On June 29th 2021 I chaired a meeting held via Zoom, to discuss gender-neutral words in Cornish.[1] Two attendees argued strongly for a set of pronouns which would apply to non-binary persons. This topic is hotly discussed for many languages. In English, *they, them* and *their* (usually 3rd person plural pronouns) have for centuries been in use for someone of unknown gender, in such exchanges as the following.

      Mabel: There's someone at the door.
      Dick: Tell **them** to go away.

This use of *they, them* and *their* has been extended by some speakers to refer to non-binary persons, as a 3rd person singular neuter pronoun, but still using the verbal endings associated with their more usual use, e.g. *they are happy* (referring to one non-binary person), alongside *he is happy* and *she is happy*. Another approach has been to invent an entirely new set of pronouns; suggestions for the nominative in English include *ey, per, sie, ve* and *zie.* I am more attracted to this idea, because it avoids increasing the functional load on *they.*

When considering possible new pronouns in Cornish, Welsh may provide a helpful model. A proposal for a new non-binary pronoun was drawn up and submitted to the Senedd in May 2020 as a petition. Its introduction has several aspects, including:

(a) The form suggested for the nominative was *ŵ;* this was influenced by the English *they*, because *ŵ* is a shortened form of *nhw* 'they'.

(b) The possessive pronouns in Welsh are *ei* 'his' causing lenition, and *ei* 'her', causing spirantization; it was proposed to keep the same spelling *ei* for non-binary, but causing no mutation.

(c) The pronominal prepositions are also affected; the 3rd singular masculine ending is *-o* (e.g. *arno* 'on him'), and the 3rd singular feminine ending is *–i* (e.g. *arni* 'on her'); to these would be added a non-binary ending *–w* (e.g. *arnw*).

The petition was rejected on the grounds that it was about a matter for which the Senedd is not responsible.

The detail of the Welsh proposals strikes me as somewhat arbitrary. Of course it is difficult to introduce an idea which flies in the face of a language in which almost everything is labelled as masculine or feminine. This has not always been the case with Celtic, however. In its early history, Celtic also had a neuter gender, which it inherited from Proto-Indo-European (PIE). This three-fold system remains in many Indo-European languages, notably German, Russian and Latin. There are a few vestiges of the neuter gender in both Goidelic and Brittonic Celtic, colour-coded red in this paper.

Rather than invent arbitrary forms, it seems sense to see what forms the neuter pronouns in Proto-Celtic (PCl) might have taken if they had survived. The Proto-Celtic forms of the pronouns (all reconstructed) are given in Table 1, which I have drawn up using data from Schrijver (1997).

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[1]   The question of agent-suffixes is tackled in a separate discussion paper.

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Table 1 — Origin of the Cornish 3rd person singular personal pronouns

Type	Gender	English	Cornish[2]	Proto-Celtic	Relation to PIE
Subject	masc.	'he'	*ev*	**em-em*	Acc. sg reduplicated of **e/i*
	fem.	'she'	*hi*	**sī*	Nom. sg. of **s* + **ih₂*
Possessive	masc.	'his'	*y*	**esi̯o*	Gen. sg. of **e/i*
	fem.	'her'	*hy*	**esi̯ās*	
Infixed	masc.	'him'	*'n*		Acc. sg. of **e/i*
	fem.	'her'	*'s*	**san < *sām*	Acc. sg. fem. of **so*
Demonstrative	see below				
Pronominal prepositions	masc.		*-o*	**sosom*	Acc. sg. of **so-so*
	fem.		*-i*	**sī*	Nom. sg. of **s* + **ih₂*

Table 1 may be reversed, adding to the list of Proto-Celtic pronouns the neuter forms, and other forms which do not have reflexes in Cornish. This is done in a series of tables, each corresponding to a different pronoun in PIE. The Welsh and Breton forms have been included for comparison. In blue I have appended what these reflexes might have become have they survived. These hypothetical forms may provide a basis for non-binary pronouns.

Table 2a — Reflexes of the singular of PIE **e/i*

	masculine	feminine		neuter	
Nominative singular					
Proto-Celtic		**sī*		**ed*	
Welsh		*hi*			
Cornish		*hi*	'she'	**ez*	
Breton		*hi* '			
Accusative singular reduplicated					
Proto-Celtic	**em-em > *eμ*			**ed-ed*	
Welsh	*ef*			*ydd*	(verbal
Cornish	*ev*	'he'		*yth*[3]	particle)
Breton	*eñ*			*ez*	
Genitive singular[4]					
Proto-Celtic	**esi̯o*	**esi̯ās*		**esi̯o*	*> *ei̯i̯o*
Welsh	*ei*	*ei*			MidW *eid-*
Cornish	*y*	'his'	*ei*	'her'	**y*	**eydh*
Breton	*e*	*he, hec'h*			

Two potential forms are listed here. For the **subject pronoun**, the reflex of the nominative singular neuter PCl **ed* is a possibility. This would eventually have suffered assibilation (c. 1325), giving ['ɛːz], which I wish to spell as *ez*.

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The PCl genitive singular masculine *esi̯o gave the possessive pronoun **y** 'his'; the neuter form was also *esi̯o, so if that had survived, it would also have produced *y*. Schrijver (1997: 57) mentions a secondary development, *esi̯o > *ei̯i̯o, whose reflex is found as the first element of Welsh *eiddo* 'his' (i.e. 'his property'), *eiddi* 'hers' (i.e. her property). Since it requires personal endings, the element *eidd-* connotes possession, yet is independent of gender. It could therefore just as easily have come from the PCl neuter form as the masculine, and would appear suitable as a non-binary possessive pronoun. The Cornish equivalent would be **eydh**. It would cause the same mutation as **y**, viz. lenition.

Table 2b   Reflexes of PIE *so* and *so-so*

	masculine	feminine		neuter	
Accusative singular of *so*					
Proto-Celtic		*sām > *san		*sim > *sin	
Welsh		*'s*	'her'		
Cornish		*'s*	(infixed pronoun)		
Breton					
Accusative singular of *so-so*					
Proto-Celtic	*sosom*	*sosām*		*sosin*	
Old Welsh	-o[5]	(3rd masc. ending		*a*	(verbal
Cornish	**-o**	of pronominal		*a*	particle)
Old Breton	-o[6]	prepositions)		*a*	

This table contains no new suggestions for pronouns, and is included for the sake of completeness. It is interesting that the verbal particle **a** comes from a neuter form.

The demonstrative pronouns

There is quite a large range of demonstrative pronouns in Brittonic.

Table 3a   Demonstrative pronouns in Brittonic

		'this'			'that'		
		masculine	feminine	neuter	masculine	feminine	neuter
Welsh	Middle	*hwnn*	*honn*	*hynn*	*hwnnw*	*honno*	*hynny*
	Modern written	*hwn*	*hon*	*hyn*	*hwnnw*	*honno*	*hynny*
	Modern spoken				*hwnna*	*honna*	
Cornish	full forms	**hemma**	**homma**		**henna**	**honna**	
	shortened forms	**hemm**	**homm**[7]		**henn**	**honn**	
Breton		*hemañ*	*homañ*		*hennezh*	*honnezh*	

In order to disentangle these, colour-coding has been applied.

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[5]   The ending in Middle Welsh was –aw, which came from PCl. *au-dom; paradoxically in Modern Welsh this has been reduced to –o, corresponding orthographically but not etymologically with Cornish **–o**.

[6]   In Modern Breton, this ending has been replaced by –añ.

[7]   Attested only once, as *holm* (BM.1090).

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1) The basic forms highlighted in yellow come from PIE *so-de*, as shown in Table 3b:

Table 3b   Reflexes of PIE *so-de

	masculine	feminine	neuter
Proto-Celtic	*so-de*	*sā-de*	*sim-de*
British	*sondos*	*sondā*	*sindon*
Middle Welsh	hwnn	honn	hynn
Cornish	*hen*	*hon*	*hen*
Breton	*hen*	*hon*	*hen*

Only the Welsh forms survive; today *hwn* and *hon* mean 'this', both as a demonstrative pronoun and a demonstrative adjective.

2) The forms highlighted in green comprise the above basic forms plus an ending –Vð meaning 'that' (for details see Schrijver 1997: 66ff).

Table 3c   Basic forms plus -Vð

	masculine	feminine	neuter
Old Welsh	hunnoid, hunnuid hinnuith, hinnith	hunnuith	hinnoid, hinnith
Modern Welsh	hwnnw	honno	hynny
Cornish	(no attested forms)		
Breton	hennezh	honnezh	

3) The forms highlighted in blue comprise the basic forms plus suffixes meaning 'this' and 'that', derived from the words for 'here' and 'there':

Table 3d   Forms with suffixes from words for 'here' and 'there'

	'this'			'that'				
	'here'	suffix	masc.	fem.	'there'	suffix	masc.	fem.
Welsh	yma	-ma	(not used)		yna	-na	hwnna	honna
Cornish	omma	-ma[8]	henma > hemma	homma	ena	-na	henna	honna
Breton	amañ	-mañ	hemañ	homañ	aze	-se	(not used)	

4) The forms highlighted in pink in Table 3a are shortened forms found only in Cornish, and only before *yw* 'is' and *o* 'was'.

The following may be noted:
- Welsh *hon* means 'this', but Cornish **honn** means 'that'.
- It might be thought that Welsh *hwnna, honna* are spoken forms of *hwnnw, honno,* but this is not so, according to *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*. It follows that Cornish **henna** is not a reduced form of the unrecorded Cornish cognate of Breton *hennezh.*

In Cornish, the basic form corresponding to Middle Welsh *hynn* might be used as a non-binary demonstrative, but according to Schrijver (1997: 28) it would have taken the same form as the masculine, viz. *hen.*   At the meeting about gender-neutral terms, it was suggested that *hynn* might be borrowed directly, as the Cornish non-binary subject-pronoun, but that would evidently be contrary to the supposed development.

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[8]   Phonemically this is /-mma/.

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An alternative possibility for a non-binary pronoun is one based on the word **huni** 'one' (in the sense 'one individual'). Its etymology is unknown, but the spellings of the Breton cognate (*hini, heni* and occasionally *hani*) suggest a development similar to that of the definite article **sindos* > OldB *in, en* > MidB *an*. The stressed vowel in Cornish is usually <u>, occasionally <v> and <w>, and is assumed to be ['yˑ]. Schrijver (1997: 41) suggests *huny* is related to Proto-Celtic **sim*, and that the <u> is taken from *un* 'one'. In CW, the word appears as *hwnyth* (CW.0640) and *hvnythe* (CW.2248), which appear to be related to the Old Welsh forms in Table 3c. They suggest an earlier form /hyn-ıð/. Curiously, they have <n> instead of <nn>, while *un* 'one' behaved as if it were /ynn/ rather than the etymological /yn/.

As for the use of **huni**, it is found in the texts only as **pub huni** 'everyone' and **lies huni** 'many (people)'. In Breton, it has either gender, depending on the referent; e.g. *an hini kozh* 'the old one (m.)', *an hini gozh* 'the old one (f.), and this usage has been extended to Revived Cornish. It would seem, therefore, a prime candidate for a non-binary pronoun; I suggest the first element **hun** for this. Demonstratives could be **hunna** and **humma**.

There remains the problem of an infixed pronoun. It is not possible to use any of the possible neuter forms so far identified, even when reduced, because they are too similar to other infixed pronouns:

Table 4a   *Problems with choosing an infixed pronoun*

Possible neuter form	Reduced	Objection
ez	*'z*	too similar to 3rd fem. sg. and 3rd pl. *'s*
eydh	*'dh*	too similar to 2nd sg. *'th*
hun	*'n*	identical to 3rd masc. *'n*

There is, however, a way forward. In the foregoing discussion, all of the neuter forms of PIE pronouns have been accounted for, except **so-de-so*. This has an attested reflex in Goidelic (Old Irish *sodin*) but not apparently in Brittonic. It is difficult to construct a putative development of **sodesin* which would not result in a form already in use as an infixed pronoun (Table 4b). Applying [s] > [h] would give **hodehin* at an early stage; then [d] would suffer lenition to [ð] and the final syllable would be lost, giving **hoðe*. Of the two consonants, [ð] would appear the stronger, but if used as an infixed pronoun, would be too similar to the 2nd sg. *'th*. If, on the other hand, one were to select [h-] as the remaining consonant, it could be used as an infixed pronoun *'h* without conflicting with any others already in use. It would also be close to the arbitrary form *'gh* which has been suggested.

Table 4b   3rd singular neuter forms

PIE	Case	Proto-Celtic	British	Usable	Already in use
*e/i	Nominative	**ed*	**ed*	**ez*	
	Accusative reduplicated	**ed-ed*	**ıð*		*yth*
	Genitive	**esi̯o*	**esi̯o*		**y*
			*ei̯i̯o	**eydh*	
*so	Nominative & Accusative	**sim*	**sin*	?**hun-**	?**huny**
*so-so	Accusative	**sosin*			*a*
*so-de		**sondoi*	**sindon*		**henn*
*so-de-so		**sodesin*		**'h*	

Recommendations

The following have been identified as possibilities for non-binary pronouns in Cornish: *ez, eydh, hun*. Of these, *ez* was suggested as a subject pronoun, but: (a) it would risk confusion with the words for 'ease', 'you (sg.) were', 'you (sg.) went'; (b) its pronunciation is not far removed from *ev* 'he', risking confusion. Instead, I propose using this form, unstressed and spelled <es>, as the non-binary suffix in pronominal prepositions, giving such forms as *dhodhes*, *warnodhes*, *ynnes*.

The word *eydh* is suggested for the possessive pronoun.

As for *hun*, I suggest that this could be used for the subject pronoun.

A case, albeit rather artificial, has been argued for *'h* as the infixed pronoun. This would also be appropriate for the verb *a'm beus*, viz. *a'h teves* (the [h] would unvoiced the [d-]).

Table 5   Summary of proposals for non-binary pronouns

	masculine	feminine	neuter
Independent	*ev*	*hi*	*hun*
Possessive	*y*	*hy*	*eydh*
Infixed	*'n*	*'s*	*'h*
Demonstrative	*hemma* *henna*	*homma* *honna*	*hunna* *humma*
Pronominal prepositions	*-o*	*-i*	*-es*
The verb *a'm beus*	*a'n jeves*	*a's teves*	*a'h teves*

Bibliography

SCHRIJVER, P. (1997) *Studies in the history of Celtic pronouns and particles.* National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

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