

NON-BINARY PRONOUNS IN CORNISH

Second set of proposals by Dr Ken George

Introduction

On June 29th 2021, I chaired a meeting to discuss gender-neutral words in Cornish. Since then the principle of introducing such words has been discussed on-line, and various proposals have been circulated. Some contributors were uneasy about the idea of introducing new words, especially if they thought that the grammar is thereby changed. Here I first present my own views on the principle.

I feel that Cornish should be a modern language, capable of dealing with twenty-first century life. Inventions which did not exist when Cornish was traditionally spoken (e.g. bicycles, televisions, artificial satellites, the internet) need to be referred to, and I believe that it is better to make up words in Cornish for such concepts than to just use the English words for them. The neologisms should be based on firm linguistic principles, but ultimately the Cornish-speaking community will accept or reject individual suggestions.

The question of non-binary people is a little different. They have been present in the community from time immemorial, certainly when Cornish was traditionally spoken, but as with most languages, there are no separate pronouns in Cornish to distinguish them. Presumably this is because the proportion of non-binary people is low (I have seen 0.4% as a figure), and because (until recently), they were not a subject of common discourse. I acknowledge that their recognition is a matter for concern among many young people, but it is not an issue which affects me directly; I have met only two in my life. My concern is that revived Cornish be founded on robust and defensible linguistic principles. Even though the revival is over 100 years old, this still means frequent reference to the traditional texts.

The absence of any grammatical or lexical references to non-binary persons in traditional Cornish renders difficult any attempt to devise a separate set of pronouns for them. (Because Cornish has no such references does not mean that the language itself, or its users, are necessarily disrespectful to non-binary persons; it just means that the issue has not been tackled). The paucity of references in English does not help either.

My first set of proposals has been widely circulated. Bearing in mind that Celtic once had neuter as well as masculine and feminine forms, the basis of these proposals was to work out what these neuter forms would have developed into, had they survived. The results were as follows:

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

I now put forward an alternative and simpler set of proposals. Noting that *they* is often used in English to refer to a person whose gender is unknown, these are based on the Cornish third person plural verbal ending *-ns*. My inspiration for this comes from Polin's short paper, showing examples from the texts, and in particular *Dallethens neb a vynno!* (RD.0411).

Independent pronoun

The word for 'they' is *i*; *-ns* is added to this, giving *ins*. This is similar to Modern Breton *int*; the Middle Breton for 'they' was *y*, but when the [h-] of Middle Breton *hy* 'she' became mute, the two pronouns were confusable, and *y* was replaced by *int*, from the verbal ending *-nt*.

Example *ins a wel they see* (the underlining here means that the pronoun refers to a person of indeterminate gender)

Possessive pronoun

Addition of *-ns* to *aga* 'their' gives *agans*. No mutation caused.

Example *my a welas agans dillas nowydh* 'I saw their new clothes'

Infixed pronoun

Here *ns* is sufficient by itself, though for conformity, it is preceded by an apostrophe:

Example *ev a'ns gwel* 'he sees them'

Demonstrative pronouns

Here it is suggested adding *-ns* to the masculine forms *hemma* and *henna*, giving *hemmans* and *hennans*.

Example *Lappyer da yw hemmans*. 'They are a good gymnast'.

Pronominal prepositions

In the texts, in addition to the earlier third person plural forms *dhedha*, *ywna*, *gansa*, etc., we have the later forms *dhodhans*, *ywnans*, *gansans*. The second group could be used in the case of a non-binary person. This has the advantage of not needing to coin any new words.

Example *Gansans yth ith dhe Bennsans* 'With them I went to Penzance'.

The verb a'm beus

Similarly to the infixed pronouns, corresponding to masculine *'n* and feminine *'s*, one could have non-binary *'ns*, followed by *tev-* as in the feminine case.

Example *Ins a'ns teves chi nowydh* 'They have a new house'

Summary

	masculine	feminine	neuter
Independent	<i>ev</i>	<i>hi</i>	<i>ins</i>
Possessive	<i>y</i>	<i>hy</i>	<i>agans</i>
Infixed	<i>'n</i>	<i>'s</i>	<i>'ns</i>
Demonstrative	<i>hemma</i> <i>henna</i>	<i>homma</i> <i>honna</i>	<i>hemmans</i> <i>hennans</i>
Pronominal prepositions	<i>-o</i>	<i>-i</i>	<i>-ans</i>
The verb <i>a'm beus</i>	<i>a'n jeves</i>	<i>a's teves</i>	<i>a'ns teves</i>

This set of proposals is much simpler to remember. It is not a change to the grammar, but an extension to lexical items within that grammar.