

Ethnolinguistic Revival? Identity and processes of iconisation in a post-obsolescent language

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This paper considers the relationship of Cornish to sociocultural identity in Cornwall from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day. When a variety under social and political pressure eventually succumbs to language shift, its role in representations of a distinct sociocultural identity might be expected to die with the medium itself (*cf.* Fishman 1991). Yet Edwards (2009, 2010) has observed that a sense of group cohesion can endure long after a communicative shift to another language has occurred, arguing, furthermore, that the obsolescent variety may itself retain a symbolic role in the maintenance of group boundaries. An obsolescent language may therefore retain ideological associations with the group as an 'iconised' symbol of identity in contexts of language shift (Irvine & Gal 2000; Bucholtz and Hall 2004). This paper asks what might subsequently occur in the situation of a revived, post-obsolescent language such as Cornish (Fishman 1991). The analysis I present is based on an examination of the historical record and a review of recent sociological and sociolinguistic research, with a view to examining past and present processes of iconisation in Cornish society. Attention will be drawn to the manner in which Cornish functioned as an icon of identity in the nineteenth century, through the 'Cornish Revival' of the twentieth century, to the present day Cornish language community.

References

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