

vs po na ges?
That is the question

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Introduction

The Cornish word corresponding to Breton *eus* and Welsh *oes*, meaning ‘is’, has always had just one spelling in all revived orthographies:

- *es* in Jenner’s spelling;
- *us* in Unified and UCR;
- *eus* in KK and SWF.

Since the word is stressed in some instances and unstressed in others, I have wondered on occasion whether it might be better to spell it in two different ways. To investigate this, I turned initially to *Bewnans Ke*.

vs ‘**who is, who are,**
‘which is, which are’
 (relative use)

BK19.10

arluth vs a vghan loer ‘Lord **who is** above the Moon’

BK32.40

drys kenevar vs genis ‘beyond all **who are** born’

BK10.24

saw ve am drog vs om kyk ‘heal me of my evil

BK27.54

which is in my flesh’

in neb dythyow vs ow tos ‘in some days **which are** coming’

pan **NOUN** **vs?**
'what **NOUN is there?**'

BK02.71

pan dv vs gwel ys jovyn 'what god **is there**
better than Jove?'

BK27.37

pan getlow vs genowgh why 'what information **is there**
with you?'

i.e. 'what information have you got?'

CONJUNCTION + *vs*

BK19.84

mars ‘if’

mar sves denyth a vyn cows

‘if **there is** anyone
who wishes to talk’

mars ‘if’ is the only conjunction used with *eus* in BK.

Other texts use in addition *dell* ‘as’, *fatell* ‘how’, *kynth* ‘although’, *mayth* ‘that’, *nans* ‘since’.

NOUN + *vs* ‘there is, there are’

BK15.08 *rag ysmegennow costly* ‘for expensive potions **there**

BK15.09 ***vs** thym heb mar* **are** to me without doubt’

= I certainly have expensive potions

BK28.82 *rag otham **vs** a dvs fuer* ‘for a need **there is** of

BK28.83 *thym drys pub tra* wise men to me above all’

= Above all I need wise men

BK38.09 *ponvotter **vs** wharvethis* ‘a difficulty has happened’

nyn ges (direct statement)
 ‘**there is** not, **there are** not’

BK07.47

nyn ges drog na galaraw ‘**there is** not harm nor grief’

BK33.68

rag ef a verew nynges dowl ‘for he shall die, **there is** not a doubt’

BK24.73

pobath wormol nyn ges dowl ‘all praise thee, **there is** not a doubt’

BK17.59

nyn ges mar tha kenwesow ‘**there are** not such good companions’

na ges (indirect statement)
 ‘**there is** not’

BK03.46

te a gowsys

‘thou saidst (that)

BK03.47

na ges mars onyn

there is only one [God]’

a ses ‘how **there are**’

BK23.73

a ses lyas myghtern gwlas

‘how **there are** many kings
 of countries’

Numbers of spellings in BK

Spelling	{ vs } type mainly positive	{ es } type mainly negative
<i>es</i>	1	18
<i>oes</i>	0	1
<i>us</i>	1	0
<i>ves</i>	2	0
<i>vs</i>	24	0

Etymology of **vs**, **es** ‘is’

- The word is of Celtic origin, but a satisfactory detailed etymology is unavailable.
- The Welsh equivalent *oes* comes from Celtic **esti*, but this is not strictly cognate with Breton *eus* and Cornish *eus*.
- The Breton and Cornish are cognate, but apparently come from a different form of the Celtic verb for ‘to be’.

Development of /œ/ in Cornish

- The principal sound-change is unrounding of /œ/ to /ɛ/.
- This occurred earlier with unstressed /œ/ than with stressed /œ/; the well-known change *-oc*, *-uc* > *-ek* in place-names occurred c.1325.
- The word for ‘great’ was spelled generally *mur* ['mœ:r] in texts up to BM; in BK and later texts it was spelled *mer*, *mear* ['mɛ:r].

Interpretation of data from BK

The remarkable differences between the two spellings indicate two different sounds. The frequent spelling <vs> is thought to mean ['œ:z], and this is supported by the two spellings < ves>.

The frequent spelling <es> is thought to mean [ɛs]; original /œ/ has been unrounded.

Numbers of spelling-types

	-----Stressed-----				-----Unstressed-----			
	{eus}	{us}	{vs}	{es}	{eus}	{us}	{vs}	{es}
PC	3	1	17	--	1	13	--	--
RD	1	1	13	--	2	7	--	--
OM	1	2	20	2	--	16	--	2
PA	--	--	8	5	--	--	--	6
BM	1	57	6	--	--	15	--	1
BK	2	1	24	1	--	--	--	19
TH	--	1	40	--	2	9	--	19
CW	--	--	--	40	--	--	--	25

Interpretation

Stressed

Unstressed

Ordinalia	{ vs } ['œ:z]	{ us } [œs]
PA	mixed	{ es } [ɛs]
BM	{ us } ['œ:z]	{ us } [œs]
BK	{ vs } ['œ:z]	{ es } [ɛs]
TH	{ vs } ['œ:z]	mixed
CW	{ es } ['ɛ:z]	{ es } [ɛs]

Phonological development

Stressed ['œ:z] → ['œ:z] → ['ɛ:z]

Unstressed [œs] → [ɛs] → [ɛs]

Ord.

BK

CW

BM

PA (rhymes)

eus in question and answer (1)

- This is the only grammatical form with *eus* not in BK.
- When used as a question, it is spelled in the Ordinalia the same way as the stressed form, viz. <vs>; e.g.

PC.3149 *vs* *pynsor thys the tenne* ‘Hast thou pincers to draw

PC.3150 *an kentrow yn mes an pren* the nails out of the wood?’

- The question and answer recorded by Andrew Boorde (1542) shows that the form was still rounded at that date, as indeed it was in TH (c.1558):

*Hostes, **eus** boues de why? **Eus**, sarra, grace a dew.*

‘Hostess, have you any food? Yes, sir, thank God.’

eus in question and answer (2)

- The stress is likely to be different from other examples of *eus*, however, because in a question there will be more stress on the word following *eus* than on *eus* itself. Note the following from Pryce:

Ez kêz ? *ez*, po neg *ez*; ma *fêz* kêz;

Is there cheese? Is there, or is there not? If there be cheese,

Dro kêz; po neg*ez* kêz, dro peth *ez*.

Bring cheese; if there's not cheese; bring what there is.

- All cases of earlier /œ/ are unrounded, but the stress on *eus* is generally insufficient for the vowel to be marked as long.

A parallel: *a'm beus* (1)

Present tense (KK)	Earlier texts	Later texts
S 1 <i>a'm beus</i>	<i>am bues, ambus</i>	<i>nym beas</i> (CW)
S 2 <i>a'th eus</i>	<i>na thues</i> (RD)	-----
S 3m <i>a'n jeves</i>	<i>angeves</i> (BM)	<i>an Jervas</i> (TH)
S 3f <i>a's teves</i>	-----	<i>astevas</i> (TH)
P 1 <i>a'gan beus</i>	-----	-----
P 2 <i>a'gas beus</i>	<i>agas bus</i> (RD)	-----
P 3 <i>a's teves</i>	-----	<i>a stevas</i> (TH)

A parallel : *a'm beus* (2)

	-----Stressed-----				-----Unstressed-----			
	{eus}	{us}	{vs}	{es}	{eus}	{us}	{es}	{as}
PC	4	--	--	--	--	--	5	--
RD	4	4	--	--	--	--	3	--
OM	--	4	--	2	--	--	1	--
PA	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	1
BM	--	18	--	--	--	--	3	--
BK	4	--	--	2	--	--	--	2
TH	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	16
CW	--	--	--	9	--	--	--	1

Spelling in Revived Cornish (1)

- Jenner (*Handbook*, p. 125) used *es* for both stressed and unstressed forms.
- In his 1938 dictionary, Nance gave *üs* and *ēs* for the stressed form; in his Unified versions of the texts, he used only *us* for both. UCR also uses *us* (*Cornish Today*, 1st edn. p.194).
- ***Kernewek Kemmyn*** and SWF use *eus* for both stressed and unstressed forms; so apparently does KS.

Spelling in Revived Cornish (2)

There is a case for spelling the stressed and unstressed forms of *eus* differently. Following the data from *Bewnans Ke*, I would recommend *eu^z* for the stressed form ['œ:z], and *es* for the unstressed form.