

BASIC GRAMMATICAL TERMS

for students of Cornish who are a bit vague about grammar in *any* language!

If your aim in learning Cornish is simply to pick up a few everyday phrases, you probably won't need to master grammatical terms at all. But if you wish to get to grips with the structure of the language, and do the exams, some knowledge of grammar will be essential.

You will hear your teacher using terms like *noun*, *imperfect tense*, *adjective*, *definite article*, *preposition*, *verb*, and many more. It will be of immense help if you know what these terms mean. They can save a lot of wordy explanations! They apply to English as well as Cornish, so here are some English examples to help you understand them.

The key terms that you should aim to eventually get a grasp of are in **GREEN**.

Parts of speech

Parts of speech are the different *types* of words we use. The most common ones are...

NOUN	A thing or a person: <i>lobster, Jenny, authority, sand, crisps, laughter, Fred, children</i> .
PRONOUN	A word that takes the place of a noun: <i>it</i> (= the cat); <i>they</i> (= the Smith family); <i>she</i> (= Sally); <i>he</i> (= the butcher).
ADJECTIVE	A word that <i>describes</i> a noun: <i>skinny, wise, out-of-date, funny, short</i> .
VERB	A 'doing' word: <i>write, swim, giggle, be, urinate</i> .
ADVERB	A word that <i>describes</i> a verb, an adjective or another adverb: <i>gladly, fast, urgently, very, really</i> .
DEFINITE ARTICLE	The word <i>the</i> .
INDEFINITE ARTICLE	The word <i>a</i> (or <i>an</i>)
PREPOSITION	A word that links a noun or pronoun to some other part of a sentence: <i>behind, through, on, at, under</i> .
CONJUNCTION	A word that joins words, or groups of words, in a sentence: <i>and, but, so, because</i> .
INTERJECTION	A word that expresses feeling: <i>Wow! Oops! Oh!</i>

Other grammatical terms

SINGULAR	Just one.
PLURAL	Two or more.
PERSON	In grammar, we talk about '1 st person plural' etc. The table below explains this.
TENSE	Used of a verb, to say whether it is referring to the past, the present, the future etc. More on this below.
MOOD	Used of a verb, indicating whether it is a statement, an order, or involves some uncertainty. More on this below.
VOICE	Used of a verb, indicating whether it is <i>active</i> or <i>passive</i> . Details below.
VOWEL	The letters <i>a, e, i, o</i> and <i>u</i> .
CONSONANT	All the other letters of the alphabet.
SUBJECT	Relating to a verb, the person or thing that is doing it.
OBJECT	Relating to a verb, the person or thing at the receiving end of it.

Examples

Here's a sentence: **A careless boy on his bike nearly squashed a hedgehog near the shops, but he slowed and went round it.**

The parts of speech in the sentence are as follows:

A	Indefinite article	Indefinite because it's not a particular boy
careless	Adjective	It describes 'boy'
boy	Noun	A singular noun, referring to just one person
on	Preposition	It tells us his relation to the bike
his	Adjective	Describes 'bike'. We call this one a <i>possessive</i> adjective
bike	Noun	Another singular noun
nearly	Adverb	It modifies, or describes, the verb 'squashed' that follows
squashed	Verb	Here, in the past tense
a	Indefinite article	Not any particular hedgehog, so indefinite
hedgehog	Noun	Another singular noun
near	Preposition	It tells us where the event took place in relation to 'the gate'
the	Definite article	Not any old shops, but particular ones, so it's definite
shops	Noun	A plural noun
but	Conjunction	It joins the two statements in the sentence
he	Pronoun	Referring to 'the boy'
slowed	Verb	In the past tense
and	Conjunction	Joining the two statements that say what he did
went	Verb	The past tense of the verb 'go'
round	Preposition	It describes the relation of his action to the hedgehog
it	Pronoun	Referring to the hedgehog

More details on parts of speech

Some parts of speech are more complex than others. Here are some additional features you will find it useful to know about.

NOUNS

There are two types:

- **COMMON** nouns. These are the usual kind: *love, marmalade, integrity, grass*.
- **PROPER** nouns. These refer to specific people or places, and are normally capitalised: *Jenny, Shakespeare, Coventry, the Bible, France*.

PRONOUNS

Again, there are several categories:

- **PERSONAL** pronouns refer to people: *I, he, she, you, we, they*.
- **POSSESSIVE** pronouns indicate possession: *mine, yours, his, hers, ours, theirs*.
- **INTERROGATIVE** pronouns. E.g. *Which is yours?* referring to two pens.

ADJECTIVES

Apart from normal adjectives there are;

- **COMPARATIVE** adjectives. These have *-er* at the end: *shorter, tidier*.
- **SUPERLATIVE** adjectives. These have *-est* at the end: *shortest, tidiest*.
- **POSSESSIVE** adjective: *my, your, his, her, our, their*.

VERBS

These are far and away the most complex words in any language. For now, the following aspects may be useful:

- **ACTIVE** verbs. E.g. 'John *ate* the fish.' *Ate* is the action that John carried out.
- **PASSIVE** verbs. E.g. 'The fish *was eaten* by John.' The fish was at the receiving end of John's action.

This feature is known as **voice**. A verb may be in the *active voice* or the *passive voice*.

Another common pair:

- **TRANSITIVE** verbs. These are ones that have an object. E.g. 'She *read* the magazine.' The magazine was the object of her reading.
- **INTRANSITIVE** verbs. These don't have an object. E.g. 'She *sighed*.'

And yet another pair:

- **PRESENT PARTICIPLE**. This is usually the verb form ending in *-ing*. 'I am *opening* the box.' The word *opening* is the present participle of the verb 'to open'.
- **PAST PARTICIPLE**. This is usually the verb form ending in *-ed*. 'The box has been *opened*.' The word *opened* is the past participle of the verb 'to open'.

And one more pair, which are very important when it comes to Cornish:

- **STEM**. This is the part of the verb that remains consistent. E.g. *shout*.
- **ENDING**. This is the part tagged onto the end of the stem: *shouts, shouted, shouting*.

More details on other grammatical terms

PERSON

This relates to **verbs** and is a way of indicating who exactly is 'doing' what the verb says:

1ST PERSON SINGULAR	I	
2ND PERSON SINGULAR	you	Referring to one person only
3RD PERSON SINGULAR	he/she/it	
1ST PERSON PLURAL	we	
2ND PERSON PLURAL	you	Referring to more than one person
3RD PERSON PLURAL	they	

TENSE

Verbs have tenses. We say that a verb is 'in the Present tense', or 'in the Imperfect tense.' Here are the most common ones, using the verb *to shout*:

Tense	Expresses...	Form of 'shout'
PRESENT	Something going on now, or that happens regularly.	John <i>shouts</i> when he's upset. / They <i>are shouting</i> .
FUTURE	Something that will happen in the future.	<i>I'll shout</i> when I see it. / You <i>will shout</i> if they score a goal.

CONDITIONAL	An action that one <i>would</i> carry out if the circumstances permitted.	I <i>would shout</i> if I hadn't got a sore throat.
Past tenses. There are several of these...		
IMPERFECT	Something that was going on in the past. Something happening regularly in the past. [It's called <i>imperfect</i> because the action was still going on; it hadn't finished. Or it hadn't been <i>perfected</i> , one might say.]	Ann <i>was shouting</i> her head off. / When I was a kid, we <i>would shout</i> when we saw the steam train. / Harry <i>used to shout</i> when he couldn't manage to tie his laces.
PRETERITE	A completed one-off action in the past.	The policeman <i>shouted</i> , 'Hey! Stop!'
PERFECT	A past action in relation to the present. In English it usually involves <i>have</i> or <i>has</i> .	'I <i>have shouted</i> three times to you kids to come indoors!'
PLUPERFECT	A step further back in time from the Perfect tense, usually involving <i>had</i> .	Mum <i>had shouted</i> three times for the kids to come in.

MOOD

Verbs have several moods:

INFINITIVE	This is the basic 'dictionary form' of the verb. We often put the word <i>to</i> in front of it.	<i>Argue</i> or <i>to argue</i> ; <i>dance</i> or <i>to dance</i> .
INDICATIVE	The most common mood. The verb is making a <i>plain statement</i> .	The arrow <i>hit</i> its target. / Maurice <i>is reading</i> the paper. / Christmas <i>is coming</i> .
INTERROGATIVE	Asking a question?	Who <i>stole</i> the Mona Lisa?
SUBJUNCTIVE	Not common in English, but more so in Cornish. It usually indicates a degree of <i>uncertainty</i> , or something <i>desired</i> or <i>imagined</i> .	If he <i>were</i> a man, he'd look after her better. / Henry suggests you <i>be</i> present at the meeting. / The doctor advises that she <i>rest</i> for a few days.
IMPERATIVE	Giving a <i>command</i> or making a <i>request</i> .	<i>Shut</i> the door, please! / <i>Let's have</i> fish and chips.

SUBJECT AND OBJECT

These terms are often used in connection with **verbs**.

SUBJECT	The person or thing that is doing what the verb expresses.	<i>The dog</i> bit Richard. Here, <i>the dog</i> is the subject of the verb <i>bit</i> .
OBJECT	The person or thing at the receiving end of what the verb expresses.	The dog bit <i>Richard</i> . It's poor old Richard who is the object of the verb <i>bit</i> .

APPLYING ALL THIS TO CORNISH

Here's the same information, but with examples in Cornish instead of English. Where appropriate, further remarks have been added.

Parts of speech

These are the different *types* of words we use. The most common ones are...

NOUN	A thing or a person: <i>treth</i> (beach), <i>chi</i> (house), <i>Mighal</i> (Michael), <i>doronieth</i> (geography), <i>pras</i> (meadow), <i>gwiwer</i> (squirrel).
-------------	---

PRONOUN	A word that takes the place of a noun: <i>ev</i> (= an lodrik, ‘the sock’); <i>i</i> (= an fleghes, ‘the children’); <i>hi</i> (= Maria).
ADJECTIVE	A word that <i>describes</i> a noun: <i>hir</i> (tall), <i>didhanus</i> (amusing), <i>koth</i> (old), <i>skwith</i> (tired), <i>lowen</i> (happy).
VERB	A ‘doing’ word: <i>leverel</i> (say), <i>bos</i> (be), <i>nija</i> (fly), <i>minhwerthin</i> (smile), <i>kerdhes</i> (walk).
ADVERB	A word that <i>describes</i> a verb, an adjective or another adverb: <i>a-dhistowgh</i> (immediately), <i>seulabrys</i> (already), <i>war-nans</i> (downwards). In Cornish, a lot of adverbs are formed by putting the word <i>yn</i> ⁵ before an adjective. E.g. <i>yn ta</i> (= <i>yn + da</i> , well); <i>yn skav</i> (fast, as in ‘to drive fast’).
DEFINITE ARTICLE	The word <i>an</i> .
INDEFINITE ARTICLE	Cornish doesn’t have an indefinite article; it’s just assumed. So <i>margh</i> means <i>a horse</i> .
PREPOSITION	A word that links a noun or pronoun to some other part of a sentence. In Cornish, a lot of them start with <i>a</i> : <i>a-rag</i> (in front of), <i>a-dryv</i> (behind), <i>yn-dann</i> (under), <i>war</i> (on), <i>dres</i> (over, through).
CONJUNCTION	A word that joins words, or groups of words, in a sentence: <i>ha[g]</i> (and), <i>mes</i> (but), <i>ytho</i> (so), <i>drefen</i> (because).
INTERJECTION	A word that expresses feeling: <i>Agh!</i> (Oh!); <i>Soweth!</i> (Oh dear!)

Other grammatical terms

SINGULAR	Just one.
PLURAL	Two or more.
PERSON	In grammar, we talk about ‘1 st person plural’ etc. The table below explains this.
TENSE	Used of a verb, to say whether it is referring to the past, the present, the future etc. More on this below.
MOOD	Used of a verb, indicating whether it is a statement, an order, or involves some uncertainty. More on this below.
VOICE	Used of a verb, indicating whether it is <i>active</i> or <i>passive</i> . Details below.
SUBJECT	Relating to a verb, the person or thing that is doing it.
OBJECT	Relating to a verb, the person or thing at the receiving end of it.

Examples

Here’s a sentence: **An ki a lammas dres an yet, hag ena ev a bonyas y’n koos rag chassya gwiwer a welas yn gwydh.**
 [The dog jumped over the gate, and then it ran into the wood to chase a squirrel it saw in the trees.]

The parts of speech in the sentence are as follows:

An	Definite article	Definite because it’s the one dog we’re talking about
ki	Noun	Singular noun
a lammas	Verb	What the dog did. Note that in Cornish lots of verbs have <i>a</i> or <i>y</i> before the main word. These are called <i>verbal particles</i> . More on these below.
dres	Preposition	It tells us the direction of the dog’s jump
an	Definite article	Definite because it’s a particular gate
yet	Noun	Another singular noun
hag	Conjunction	It links the two statements about the dog and what it did
ena	Adverb	It describes how the time of the second action relates to the first.

ev	Pronoun	Standing for <i>ki</i>
a bonyas	Verb	Here, in the past tense
y'n	Preposition	Short for <i>yn</i> , telling us how the dog's running relates to the wood
y'n	Definite article	Short for <i>an</i> , the wood into which the dog ran. Note that the words <i>yn</i> and <i>an</i> , when they come together, shorten to <i>y'n</i> , as they do here.
koos	Noun	A singular noun
rag	Preposition	Telling us the purpose of the dog's running
chassya	Verb	What the dog did
gwiwer	Noun	The creature the dog was after
a welas	Verb	Verb in the past tense
y'n	Preposition	Short for <i>yn</i> , telling us the squirrel's relation to the trees
y'n	Definite article	Short for <i>an</i> , the trees where the squirrel was
gwydh	Noun	A collective noun meaning 'trees'. Cornish has lots of these.

More details on parts of speech

Some parts of speech are more complex than others. Here are some additional features you will find it useful to know about.

NOUNS

There are two types:

- **COMMON** nouns. These are the usual kind: *kegin* (kitchen), *paper nowodhow* (newspaper), *davas* (sheep), *furneth* (wisdom).
- **PROPER** nouns. These refer to specific people or places, and are normally capitalised: *Hykka* (Richard), *Mr Angwyn* (Mr White), *Bosvenegh* (Bodmin), *an Bibel* (the Bible), *Pow Sows* (England).

GENDER

Cornish nouns also have **GENDER**, in a way English does not. The two genders are **MASCULINE** and **FEMININE**. In English, people and animals that are male are masculine in gender (*stallion*, *boy*, *buck*, *George*, *cockerel*), while female ones are feminine in gender (*mare*, *woman*, *doe*, *Sally*, *hen*). Everything else is **neuter**, i.e. neither masculine nor feminine—with rare exceptions like ships, which are traditionally called 'she'.

In Cornish, **every noun is either masculine or feminine**. There is no neuter gender. So *kador* (chair) and *bagh* (prison cell) are feminine. It's not that there is anything 'female' about chairs or prison cells; it's the *words* that are feminine, not the items they represent. In the same way, *golowji* (lighthouse) and *trihorn* (triangle) are masculine.

Because there's no obvious logic to which Cornish nouns are masculine, and which feminine, you just have to get stuck in and learn which are which. You will discover that there are certain noun-endings that generally indicate one or the other, but even these patterns have their exceptions. If in a situation where you have to guess, go for masculine, as there are more masculine nouns than feminine.

PRONOUNS

Again, there are several categories:

- **PERSONAL** pronouns refer to people: *my* (I), *ty* (you – singular), *ev* (he), *hi* (she), *ni* (we), *hwi* (you – plural), *i* (they).
- **Other types of pronouns**—e.g. possessive pronouns—work a bit differently in Cornish, and we can't get into that here.

ADJECTIVES

Apart from normal adjectives there are;

- **COMPARATIVE** adjectives. These are usually formed by doubling (and sometimes changing) the consonant at the end of the stem and adding *a*. E.g. *berr* = short'; *berra* = shorter. *Glyb* = wet; *glyppa* = wetter.
- **SUPERLATIVE** adjectives. These use the comparative form, with *an* before it. E.g. *an berra* = best; *an glyppa* = wettest.
- **POSSESSIVE** adjective: *ow* (my), *dha* (your – singular), *y* (his, its), *hy* (she), *agan* (our), *agas* (your – plural), *aga* (their).

VERBS

These are far and away the most complex words in any language. For now, the following aspects may be useful:

- **ACTIVE** verbs. E.g. 'Lowena *a redyas* an lyver' (Lowena read the book). *A redyas* is the action that Lowena carried out.
- **PASSIVE** verbs. E.g. 'An lyver *a veu redys* gans Lowena' (The book was read by Lowena). The book was at the receiving end of Lowena's action.

This feature is known as **voice**. A verb may be in the *active voice* or the *passive voice*.

Another common pair:

- **TRANSITIVE** verbs. These are ones that have an object. E.g. 'Hi *a dhybris* an bara' (She ate the bread). The bread was the object of her eating.
- **INTRANSITIVE** verbs. These don't have an object. E.g. 'Ev *a hanasas*' (He sighed).

And yet another pair:

- **PRESENT PARTICIPLE**. In Cornish, the equivalent of the English present participle is formed using *ow*⁴ followed by the dictionary form of the verb. E.g. *Yma an venyn ow kana* (The woman is singing).
- **PAST PARTICIPLE**. This is usually the stem of the verb with *ys* on the end, though there are exceptions. E.g. *An chi a veu drehevys gans Pol* (The house was built by Paul). The word *drehevys* is the past participle of the verb *drehevel*.

And one more pair, which are very important when it comes to Cornish:

- **STEM**. This is the part of the verb that remains consistent. Using the above example, the stem of the Cornish word for 'to build' is *drehev-*.
- **ENDING**. This is the part tagged onto the end of the stem, and which changes: *drehevel*, *drehevys*, *drehevons*.

More details on other grammatical terms

PERSON

This relates to **verbs** and is a way of indicating who exactly is 'doing' what the verb says:

1ST PERSON SINGULAR	my
2ND PERSON SINGULAR	ty
3RD PERSON SINGULAR	ev/hi
1ST PERSON PLURAL	ni
2ND PERSON PLURAL	hwi
3RD PERSON PLURAL	i

FORM

With Cornish verbs, there are usually *two ways of saying the same thing*, with the person of the verb being indicated in different ways:

- The **NOMINAL** form, using the pronouns in the above list. E.g. the verb *tybi* (to think): *my a dyb*, *ty a dyb*, *ev a dyb*, *hi a dyb* etc. It is the pronoun that indicates the person.
- The **INFLECTED** form. Here, the person is indicated by the inflection, that is, the *variable ending* that follows the stem of the verb. E.g. *y tybav* (I think), *y tybydh* (you think), *y tybyn* (we think), *y tybons* (they think).

TENSE

Verbs have tenses. The table gives the most common ones, using the verb *prena* (to buy). Note that, in Cornish, the verbs often use *particles* like *a* and *y*. These are explained later.

Tense	Expresses...	Form of 'shout'
PRESENT	Something that is going on now, or that happens regularly.	'Maria <i>a bren</i> tesennow y'n popti' (Mary buys cakes at the baker's).
FUTURE	Something that will happen in the future.	Cornish verbs don't have a Future tense , except the verb <i>bos</i> (to be). You should use the Present tense, which doubles as a Future, according to the context.
CONDITIONAL	An action that one <i>would</i> carry out if the circumstances permitted. In Cornish we use the Pluperfect for this purpose. The context usually makes it clear whether the meaning is Conditional or a straight Pluperfect. With the Conditional you can only use the <i>a</i> particle (not <i>re</i>).	'Mar kallens, <i>i a brensa</i> margh' (If they could, they would buy a horse).
Past tenses. As in English, there are several of these...		
IMPERFECT	Something that was going on in the past. Something happening regularly in the past. [It's called <i>Imperfect</i> because the action was still going on; it hadn't finished. Or it hadn't been <i>perfected</i> , one might say.]	'Ann <i>a brena</i> hwegennow pub dy'Sadorn' (Ann used to buy sweets every Saturday).
PRETERITE	A completed one-off action in the past.	'My <i>a brenas</i> karr nowydh de' (I bought a new car yesterday).
PERFECT	A past action in relation to the present. In English it usually involves <i>have</i> or <i>has</i> . In Cornish it uses the same form as the Preterite, but with the particle <i>re</i> instead of <i>a</i> .	'Peder <i>re brenas</i> ki' (Peter has bought a dog).
PLUPERFECT	A step further back in time from the Perfect tense, usually involving <i>had</i> in English. In Cornish, it uses the same endings as the Imperfect tense, but with an <i>s</i> between the ending and the stem. It can use either the <i>a</i> particle or the <i>re</i> one.	'My <i>a brensa</i> glawlen' or 'My <i>re brensa</i> glawlen' (I had bought a broolly).

MOOD

Verbs have several moods:

INFINITIVE	The 'dictionary form' of the verb. Often called the <i>verbal noun</i> .	<i>Kerdhes</i> (to walk); <i>hartha</i> (to bark).
-------------------	--	--

INDICATIVE	The most common mood. The verb is making a plain statement.	'An gewer yw splann' (The weather is great).
INTERROGATIVE	Asking a question.	'Piw a ygoras an daras?' (Who opened the door?)
SUBJUNCTIVE	Not common in English, but more so in Cornish. It usually indicates a degree of uncertainty, or something desired or imagined.	'Kettel vo an gwerthji ygor my a bren nebes leth' (As soon as the shop is open I will buy some milk). / 'Lowen re bi!' (May you be happy!)
IMPERATIVE	Giving a command or making a request.	'Dege an daras, mar pleg' (Shut the door, 'please). / 'Dybrens tesen!' (Let them eat cake!).

SUBJECT AND OBJECT

These terms are often used in connection with **verbs**.

SUBJECT	The person or thing that is doing what the verb expresses.	'An ki a vrathas Hykka' (The dog bit Richard). Here, <i>an ki</i> is the subject of the verb <i>a vrathas</i> .
OBJECT	The person or thing at the receiving end of what the verb expresses.	'An ki a vrathas Hykka' (The dog bit Richard). Here, <i>Hykka</i> is the object of the verb <i>a vrathas</i> .

All this can be a bit overwhelming if you have no previous knowledge of grammatical terms. Don't attempt to learn everything at once. Tackle new terms as they come up in your classes, and build up your knowledge bit by bit.

DM Ebreil 2020 (FSS)