'To understand' in Cornish

The title of this talk is 'to understand' in Cornish. In his Latin-Celtic vocabulary Lhuyd under Latin *intelligo* 'I understand' gives Cornish *adzhan*. The same form occurs, for example, in John Boson's *Ni el guelas ha* **adzhan** *an Tavaz kernuak dha boz Tavaz koth* 'We can see and acknowledge that Cornish is an ancient language.' *Adzhan* is a variant spelling of *aswon*, *ajwon* 'to recognise' and doesn't really mean 'to understand'.

The Breton for 'to understand is *kompren*, a verb which has clearly been borrowed from French *comprendre* < Latin *comprehendere* 'to grasp, to understand' and also 'to encompass, to include.' As it happens the verb *comprehendya is attested once in Cornish, but it means 'to encompass, to include' rather than 'to understand.' In the Creation of the World God the Father says: *Me ha'we Mabe ha'n Spiris Sans try yth on in vn substance* **comprehendys** *in vdn Dew* 'I and my Son and the Holy Spirit, we are three comprehended in one God.'

One of the possible Cornish words for 'to grasp, to understand' is *convethes*. The word in this form is found uniquely in Late Cornish, for it is attested only in the Creation of the World (1611), where it occurs five times, and once in Pryce's *Archaeologia Cornu-Britannica* of 1790. Here are the attestations in the Creation:

Creation of the World

sera ny won **convethas** *ages dewan in neb for* 'sir, I cannot in any way grasp your anxiety.'
me ny allaf **convethas** *y bosta ge ow hendas na care vyth thym in teffry* 'I cannot appreciate that you are my grandfather nor a relative of mine indeed.'
henna yth ew **convethys** *der an discans eus thymma reis gans an Tas es a-vghan* 'that can be grasped by the learning given to me by the Father above.'
an howle ha'n loor kekeffrys oll warbarth ew **confethys** 'the sun and the moon all together are understood.'
me ne vethaf **confethes** *om bos ynaff fallsurye* 'I will not be discovered to have deception in me.'

And here is the example in Pryce's book:

Archaeologia Cornu-Britannica

Der taklow minniz ew brez teez **gonvethes** *avel an tacklow broaz* 'In small things are men's minds recognised, rather than in great things.'

Since the discovery of *Bewnans Ke* we have some further examples of the verb *convethes*, but with <a> rather than <o> in the first syllable. Here are the examples:

Bewnans Ke

Rag kueth, pan i n **canfethis**, *me re jangyas ow holor* 'For grief, when I heard it, I changed my complexion.'
Ema Arthur devethys ha ny gansa **canfethys** 'Arthur has arrived and we have been noticed by him.'

The form of this verb in all the above quotations is *canfethys*, *convethys*. The second element in these is immediately reminiscent of the verbal adjectives *gothvethys*, *gothvethis* 'known' in Origo Mundi, etc. and *wharfethys* 'happened, occurred' in Passio Christi. This might suggest that *canfethys,* etc. was originally, like *gothvos* and *wharfos,* a compound of the verb *bos* 'to be'. This seems very likely, since *canvos, *canfos would be the exact equivalent of Welsh *canfod* 'to see, to behold, to perceive.' *Canvedhes*, *convedhes* seems to mean 'to understand' in certain contexts. *Yth esoma ow canvedhes Frynkek*, however, might mean 'I recognise French', rather than 'I understand French.'

In his English-Cornish dictionary of 1952 Nance gives another word for 'to understand' namely *attendya*. This has quite obviously been borowed from Middle English *attende*(*n*) and is similar to Welsh *atendio*. There are seven examples of this word in traditional Cornish; here they are.

Nyns esos ov **attendya** *an laha del vya reys* 'You do not consider the law as would be necessary' (Beunans Meriasek).

*Dev avan prest o y days a cothfes y **attendya*** 'God above was his Father, were you able to grasp it' (Beunans Meriasek).
*ov geryov gruegh **attendya*** 'Do pay attention to my words' (Beunans Meriasek).
*gothvethugh y **attendya*** 'Be careful to bear it in mind' (Beunans Meriasek).
*So y thew pleyn the vos **attendys** fatell esa ethom the vabden the gafus specially succure ha gweras the worth du* 'But it can be plainly grasped that mankind particularly needed to receive succour and assistance from God' (Tregear).
*Anotho te re gowsys saw pew ew ny **attendys*** 'You have spoken of him but I did consider who he was' (Bewnans Ke).
*lead ve quycke bes yn thotha may hallan ve **attendya** pan vanar lon yth ewa* 'lead me quickly to him so that I may grasp what manner of creature he is' (Creation of the World).

The only word in the Cornish texts for 'to understand' in all contexts seems to be *understondya*. This is attested only in the Tregear manuscript. John Tregear writes it *vnderstondya* and it is very common, being attested well over 20 times. Tregear frequently also uses the noun *vnderstondyng* 'understanding, comprehension'.

Tregear's homilies are Cornish translations of twelve sermons in English published in the 1550's as an appendix to *A profitable and necessarye doctrine* by Edmund Bonner, bishop of London. Here are some of the instances of *understondya* from Tregear, preceded by the corresponding quotations from Bonner's book:

And to **understand** this thyng the better: *rag may hallogh **vnderstondia** an mater ma the well*
he geueth us to **understand**: *eff a ros thyn ny the **wondyrstondia***
ye shall **understand** the second chapter of Moyses boke: *whi a ra **vnderstondia** an second chapter an lever a Moyses*
there is none that **understandeth**: *nyns es onyn a ra **vndyrstondia***
and so hydde and harde to **understande**: *mar ver in number ha mar teball the **vnderstondya***
we shall the better **understande** the great mercy of God: *ny a ra the well **vnderstondia** an mercy a thu*:
that we should plainelye **understande**: *may teffan pleynly **vnderstondia***
being **understanded** by the works of the creation of the world: ***vnderstondys** dre an oberow an creacion an bys*
yet shall they neuer truely **understande** scrypture: *whath ny rowns y inta **vnderstondia** an scripture lell*
we shall not fayle ryghtly to **understande** scripture: *ny ren fyllall the **vnderstondia** an scriptur*
many thinges harde to be **understanded**: *lyas tra calys the vos **vnderstondiis***
you shall **understande** that charity hath two offices: *why a ra **vnderstondia** fatell vs the charite ii office*
you may easely see and **understand** that in the catholyke churche there are and ought to be degres: *whay a yll gwelas eysy ha **vnderstondia**, fatell vs in catholyk egglos, ha fatell goth thetha bos ena, degreys*
by this voice we **understande** the sonne of Jonas: *dre an voyce ma ny a ra **vnderstondia** mab Jonas.*

Perhaps the most noticeable feature here is that Bonner's book has *understand* while Tregear has *vnderstondya* throughout. Since Tregear translates English *understand* as *understondya*, it is clear that he did not borrow *understondya* directly from Bonner. If he had borrowed *understand* directly into Cornish from his source, one would expect him to have written **vnderstandya*. Such a form is indeed attested in Cornish; it occurs twice in the last sermon in the Tregear manuscript. Here are the two instances in the thirteenth sermon

*fatla ill hemma bos **vnderstandis***
*whath na ruk Judas e **vnderstandya***

The thirteenth homily is not actually a sermon. Moreover it was not written by John Tregear. The dialect is different from Tregear's and the language is later than his. The author, whoever he was, used *vnderstandya* as though it had been borrowed from Modern English. Tregear's dialect on the other hand appears to have obtained *understondya* not from contemporary English, but from Middle English.

There is an online Middle English dictionary curated by the University of Michigan. This dictionary gives us a wealth of examples of the Middle English word *understonden*. If we look at the first four subsections of the article on 'to understand' in Middle English, where we are given the largest number of attestations, the

overwhelmingly commonest Middle English form is *understonde*(*n*). Examples of *understande*(*n*), where they occur, appear to be from Northern or Eastern England. The eastern forms of course are those associated with London and thus became the standard forms in Modern English.

It should be pointed out also that -*ond* for -*and* is common in Middle English and is therefore well attested in Middle Cornish loan-words from Middle English. As examples we can quote *londia* 'to land' in Beunans Meriasek, *comondya*, *commondya* 'to command' in Origo Mundi, Beunans Meriasek and Tregear and *ynglonde*, *Englond* 'England' in Tregear.

Understondya then is from Middle English, not from Modern English. That means that *understondya* was already in Cornish and thus in Tregear's Cornish, when he used it to translate *understande*. Although it is not attested earlier than Tregear's homilies (i.e. in 1550s), it was almost certainly in Cornish in the fifteenth or the fourteenth century.

Now let us look at the reaction of modern revivalists to the word *understondya* in Tregear. In his English-Cornish Dictionary of 1952 under 'understand' Nance gives *convedhes*, *attendya* and *understondya*. We have already discussed *attendya* and *convedhes*. Before *understondya*, however, Nance puts a double dagger to indicate that the word is in his view a Late Cornish borrowing. As we have seen, however, this is unlikely to be correct. *Understondya* is a borrowing from Middle English and was almost certainly in Cornish before Tregear's homilies. In his 1955 Cornish-English dictionary on the other hand Nance omits the word *understondya* entirely—presumably because of his linguistic purism. He didn't like the word as being obviously a borrowing from English, so he left it out.

In his *Gerlyver Meur* of 2009 Dr Ken George goes even further. He cites *understondya* with the spelling *onderstondya*. This spelling is because Dr George's preferred orthography cannot distinguish the *u* in *unn* 'one' for example from the *u* in *unpossybyl*. Dr George says of *onderstondya:*

> The archetypal "Kernewek Pronter" word, roundly rejected for everyday use by Cornish speakers at a
> language weekend.

Kernewek Pronter is an invented notion of Dr George's. He means that *understondya* was used by the Cornish clergy when preaching to emphasise their erudition. There is no evidence for Dr George' suggestion. To be fair to Dr George, he does not omit *understondya*, but he appeals to a group of modern revivalist learners as his authority for rejecting it. Dr George does not tell us where and when the Cornish weekend occurred and who and how many the 'Cornish speakers' actually were. It is unlikely whether the majority of them were really fluent speakers; moreover Dr George does not tell us what their qualifications were for objecting so strongly to the attested and traditional word *understondya*.

John Tregear was the vicar of Newlyn East during the reign of Mary Tudor (1553-58). Her father Henry VIII had declared himself supreme governor of the Church of England but it was not until the reign of Henry's son Edward VI (1547-53) that the Church of England got its prayer book in English. Edward's sister Mary reconciled the Church of England with Rome and Tregear as a convinced Catholic was anxious to persuade his parishioners of the merits of submission to the Papacy. He translated the sermons in Bonner's book into Cornish so that the Cornish version might form the basis of his own preaching in Cornish. Why did he preach in Cornish? Because his flock knew no English. They could not therefore object to *understondya* as an English borrowing, since they did not know English. They did not know, indeed they could not know, that *understondya* was a borrowing. Their position was therefore completely unlike that of any English speaker attending a modern Cornish language weekend.

Notice incidentally how inconsistent Dr George is in this matter. In his dictionary of 2009 he condemns *understondya* because it is an obvious English borrowing, but in the same dictionary he expresses no objection to many other obvious English loan-words, for example, *apoyntya* 'to appoint'; *assentya* 'to assent'; *concevya* 'to conceive'; *confessya* 'to confess'; *contradia*' to contradict'; *controlya* 'to control'; *coveytya* 'to covet';

debatya 'to debate'; *delyfrya* 'to deliver'; *devorya* 'to devour'; *dysclosya* 'to disclose'; *dysobeya* 'to disobey'; etc., etc.

There is an important point to be made here. If we are attempting to revive the extinct Celtic language of Cornwall, in my view we should attempt to resurrect it as far as possible as it was, not as we would like it to have been. In which case there is no room for purism. Objections in particular to the loan-word *understondya* are in my view misplaced.