Constructing your own Words, Part 2: Open and Closed Compounds

Learners are sometimes bewildered by the different ways of constructing compounds in Cornish, especially the fact that the word order within such compounds may vary, depending on whether we are dealing with an *open* or a *closed compound*. Confusion arises especially often when we are dealing with the traditional spellings of Cornish place-names.

In traditional place-names, we regularly find single-word forms like **Chypons** and **Chyrose** where in Revived Cornish, we would expect two words (**Chi Pons, Chi Ros**). The question has arisen whether native speakers of Cornish would have understood such forms as single words. The answer is, 'very probably not.' It is highly doubtful that toponyms like **Chypons** would ever have been understood as single words (= *closed compounds*) by Cornish speakers. In Brythonic languages, open and closed compounds cannot easily be mistaken for one another, either in speech or in written representation. Therefore, written forms like **Chypons** and **Chyrose** do not reflect the underlying structure of the Cornish language well.

Closed compounds have the following characteristics:

- Their word order is *modifier + head*
- They are spelt as a single word.
- They are stressed as if they represent a single word, on the penultimate (second-to-last) syllable.
- In compounds like *pennseythen* (*penn + seythen*), where the penultimate syllable is part of the second element (*SEY*-then), there may also be a secondary stress on the first element (*penn*).
- The initial consonant of the second element usually undergoes lenition (= second state mutation)

What's all this business about *modifier* and *head?* By *head*, we mean the most important word in the compound, the one that tells you *what* the compound is: an animal, a building, a person, and so forth. This *head* is defined more closely by a *modifier*, a word which tells you *what kind of* thing it is: a *marine* animal, a building *for shopping*, a person *who delivers the post*:

e.g.
dowr + ki → dowrgi (otter; lit. 'waterdog,' a dog defined by its affinity to water)
water- + -dog

koffi + chi → koffiji (café; lit. 'coffeehouse,' a house where coffee is served)
coffee- + -house, building

lyther + gwas → lytherwas (postman; lit. 'letterman,' a man who carries letters)
letter- + -man, servant

Sometimes, the head is a verb (which tells you *what* is being done) and the modifier is an adverb (which tells you *how* the action is being done):

e.g.
kamm + gul → kammwul (make a mistake; lit. 'misdo,' to do something wrongly)
wrong- + -do

In some other closed compounds, the head is a noun and the modifier is an adjective:

e.g.
pell + kowser → pellgowser (telephone; lit. 'farspeaker,' a speaker of faraway words)
far- + -speaker

Open, or loose, compounds have the following characteristics:

- Their word order is the opposite of that found in closed compounds: it is *head + modifier*.
- They are often spelt with a hyphen separating the two elements.
- They are sometimes spelt as two separate words.
- Both elements are stressed separately, and there is a stronger stress on the second element (the modifier).
- The initial consonant of the second element is only lenited if the first element is a feminine singular noun (or a masculine plural noun referring to people)

Open compounds usually consist of two nouns; here, however, the head—the noun that tells you *what* the compound is—comes first, while the modifier—the noun that tells you *what kind of* thing it is—comes second:

e.g.
kador + bregh → kador-vregh (armchair; lit. 'chair-arm,' a chair with arms)
chair + arm

gwithyas + kres → gwithyas kres (policeman; lit. 'keeper peace,' a keeper of the peace)
keeper, guardian + peace

It follows that place-names like **Chypons** (SWF equivalent: **Chi-pons** or **Chi Pons**) must be open compounds, or else their meaning would be reversed:

Chi-pons (or **Chi Pons)**   = bridge-house (house [at a] bridge)
house + bridge

*Chibons   = housebridge (i.e. a bridge belonging to a house)
house- + -bridge

Cornish versions of traditional place-name forms like Chypons and Chyrose might therefore best be spelt as two words, with or without hyphenation, in order to reflect the structure of the language and avoid confusion.

The difference in word order between closed and open compounds can be illustrated by the following pair of words:

Closed compound:
mil + medhek → milvedhek (veterinarian; lit. 'animaldoctor,' a doctor for animals)
animal- + -doctor

Open compound:
medhek + dens → medhek-dens (dentist; lit. 'doctor-teeth,' a doctor for teeth)
doctor + teeth

Both of these words (**milvedhek** and **medhek-dens**) refer to doctors. A milvedhek is a doctor who works with animals (**mil**, pl. **miles**), while a medhek-dens is a doctor who works with teeth (**dens**). In both cases the head of the compound—the *what*—is **medhek** 'a doctor.' The word **medhek** is lenited when part of a closed compound after **mil** 'animal,' since all closed compounds involve lenition of the second element. **Medhek** does not lenite **dens** in **medhek-dens**, however, since in open compounds the usual rules for adjectives following nouns apply to the second element: **medhek** is a masculine singular noun, so it does not lenite **dens**. (In the plural, however, we would expect to see **medhogyon-dhens**.)

Why is one of these words a closed compound and the other an open compound? Who knows! Maybe the compilers of early Cornish dictionaries thought that **densvedhek** was too hard to say (especially with a tongue depressor in your mouth)! There are other mismatched pairs like this in Cornish: just think of the pair **kreslu** 'police force' (lit. 'peaceforce') and **gwithyas kres** 'policeman' (lit. 'keeper [of the] peace'). See if you can think of an open compound and a closed compound that use the same two words!

Still having trouble figuring out which of the elements in a compound is the head, and which is the modifier? If the compound is a noun, you can determine this easily by thinking of the plural, since the plural ending always goes on the head. (So do the feminine ending **-es** and the diminutive ending **-ik**.) Here are some examples:

Closed compound:
jynn + chi → jynnji (enginehouse; lit. 'enginehouse,' a house for an engine)
engine- + -house, building

Open compound:
jynn + tenna → jynn-tenna (tractor; lit. 'engine-pulling,' a machine for pulling things)
engine, machine + pulling

The plural of **jynnji** is **jynnjiow** 'enginehouses.' since the head here is **chi** 'house': an enginehouse is a kind of house. The plural of **jynn-tenna**, however, is **jynnow-tenna** 'tractors,' since the head in this open compound is **jynn** 'machine, engine': a tractor is a kind of machine.