

The influence of place on language change: Similarities and differences across insular communities

Emma Moore
University of Sheffield

As geographically isolated entities, island communities are often portrayed as linguistically conservative and homogeneous. It is certainly the case that insular communities have exhibited similarities in the preponderance of certain linguistic forms. For instance, an allophonic split in the MOUTH and PRICE lexical sets – otherwise known as Canadian Raising – has been found in several insular (and isolated) varieties of English. This includes the varieties found on Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963), St. Helena (Schreier 2010a), Tristan de Cunha (Schreier 2010b), the Falkland Islands (Britain & Sudbury 2008), and Mersea Island in Essex, England (Amos 2011).

However, whilst similar raising splits found across insular locations may reflect parallel dialect contact phenomena – combining variants from different inputs and reallocating them according to “natural phonetic tendencies” (Trudgill 1986:159; Britain 1997) – I argue that the precise patterns found (and their trajectories) also depend upon the peculiarities of place which give meaning to the forms in situ. My data comes from an analysis of MOUTH and PRICE on the Isles of Scilly, a group of islands off the south-west coast of England. As Amos (2011) has observed, the allophonic split is much less common for MOUTH than for PRICE. However, on Scilly, we find a raising pattern for MOUTH that is more resilient than the raising pattern for PRICE. I hypothesise that the trajectory of the pattern is a consequence of the different social and regional qualities indexed by these variables and the interaction of these meanings with local ideologies about Scilly and its speakers. That the trajectory of these variables may be affected by their social meaning, and that this meaning is linked to a specific place, demonstrates the need to consider the dynamics of location when studying language variation and change. Furthermore, my data suggests that islands are not necessarily sociolinguistically bland; they can exhibit delicate patterns of change, the analysis of which can add to our more general understanding of sociolinguistic phenomena.

References

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