

Making Scilly voices: Dialect contact and socio-stylistic reallocation in a rural island community

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This paper will attempt to unravel the history of dialect contact on a group of islands known as the Isles of Scilly (pronounced [sili:]). These islands are situated twenty-eight miles west off the southern tip of the English mainland. They present an intriguing case study for researchers interested in dialect contact. Records suggest that the islands were effectively repopulated in the sixteenth century, when they were leased by the Cornish peer, Sir Francis Goldolphin. Links to elite social groups (following their leasing from the crown) and on-going (mostly Cornish) migration into the islands, suggests a complex history of dialect contact. This paper will attempt to untangle this history by comparing data from Scillonian speakers born at the turn of the twentieth century with contemporaneous data from the varieties claimed to have influenced the dialect on the islands: Cornish English and RP.

Auditory and acoustic analysis of the vowels found in the TRAP and BATH lexical sets (which are split by vowel quality in RP, but not in traditional varieties of Cornish English) is undertaken in order to explore the relationship between these varieties. Results provide support for dialect contact, but heterogeneity amongst the Scillonian speakers suggests a process of socio-stylistic reallocation (Britain and Trudgill 1999, 247–248), whereby the input variants have been refunctionalised on the islands to mark out local forms of social distinction. In addition to forming an interesting case study on the outcomes of dialect contact, this paper highlights the need for sociolinguists to attend to a range of different types of speech community. As Britain (2009, 238) has observed, “rural areas are not immune from ... mobility and contact, and the linguistic outcomes of contact in rural as well as urban areas are typologically the same”. Indeed, this data goes beyond suggesting that “individual speakers distinguish themselves linguistically no matter what type of community they live in” (Schreier 2006, 27). It also provides some support for Schilling-Estes’ (2002, 77) observation that the need to mark out very local differences means that geographically isolated communities might actually support heterogeneity better than less isolated communities.

References

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