

The place of women: Beyond the stereotypes of rural and insular speech communities

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Abstract

It is well known that traditional dialectology prioritised the analysis of rural, working class males' speech on the basis that it better reflected older forms of the language. The advent of variationist sociolinguistics led to more inclusive datasets that analysed a more diverse range of speakers. However, the fetishisation of the working class male – especially in rural or insular communities (Britain 2017) – continues. In this paper I argue that this is because of the language features we choose to study and the place-based social meanings we attribute to them.

This talk draws on data from a sociolinguistic study of the Isles of Scilly, a group of islands situated 28 miles off the south-west British mainland. My previous research on the islands (Moore & Carter 2015; 2017; 2018) analysed variations in vowel pronunciation (in the TRAP/BATH and MOUTH/PRICE lexical sets) to suggest that there are two competing personas on the islands: the Educated Scillonian and the Knowledgeable Local. Falling for the traditional trope of rural life, I associated these personas with prototypically male social and linguistic practices.

The choice of variables I studied was determined by previous research on the south-west of England and on other insular communities. However, in this paper, I build on work by Maegaard (2019) to ask: how might we view rural and insular communities differently if we pay more attention to a broader range of linguistic practices, rather than just focusing on the variants associated with traditional dialects? In particular, I argue that what makes language socially meaningful is not just how distinctive a variant is from the standard variety, but how marked a linguistic variant is in certain interactions. Starting with 'markedness' (a concept drawn from pragmatics (Horn 1984: 22; Davis & Potts 2010; Acton 2021) forces the sociolinguist to focus on the interactional significance of variable language use, rather than reproducing the sociolinguistic stereotypes of rural life. Building on these ideas, I'll propose a mode of analysis that places women back into the centre of narratives about language variation on the Isles of Scilly.

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