

The relationship between ratings data and feature recognition in a dialect of English

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This paper presents research relating to the noticeability of regional features in two samples of speech from the Isles of Scilly. The Isles of Scilly are a group of islands off the South West coast of England, which have a population of around 2,200 people. The islands have an interesting settlement history, with compulsory education introduced there before the rest of England. The variety of English spoken there has for centuries attracted comments that relate to its 'refinement' and difference to the English spoken in its near neighbour, Cornwall. The following quotes provide examples of such commentary:

- (1) ...the Language of Scilly refines upon what is spoken in many Parts of Cornwall; probably from the more frequent Intercourse of the Inhabitants, some more than others, with those who speak the Standard English best... (Heath 1750: 436)
- (2) The Islanders are remarkable for speaking good English—far preferable, at least, to what is generally heard amongst the humbler classes of any county, at some distance from the metropolis... (Woodley 1822: 105)
- (3) The English spoken today (1979) by natives of the Isles of Scilly ... is scarcely removed from Standard (southern) English, using a slightly modified 'received pronunciation' (R.P.) as of educated persons. (Thomas 1979: 109)

Research conducted by Moore and Carter (2015; 2017; 2018) has demonstrated that, far from being unmarked and dissimilar to the English spoken in Cornwall, Scillonian English is actually quite similar to that variety, especially amongst residents of the islands who were educated on the islands. The persistence of the notions of 'Standardness' and unmarkedness in contemporary metalinguistic commentary about Scillonian English (e.g. Taylor 2016) sets up an interesting question: are listeners able to notice the regionality that exists in Scillonian speech?

This paper presents new analysis of data collected using a method that permitted 103 respondents to listen to and rate two guises constructed from an interview with an older male Scillonian speaker before identifying in real time features that they considered to be regional. Respondents were then able to review these reactions in order to clarify what they had reacted to. This produced a dataset comprising ratings data and reactions data for each guise. The two guises differed primarily by topic, with one guise dealing with Scillonian island life, and the other focussing on (non location-specific) farming activities.

I focus on the ratings data, and the main ratings components of 'Status' and 'Solidarity', as well as the topic and location cues in each guise, in order to explain the different levels of attention paid to different features in the guises. To do this, I address notions of awareness and 'salience' (Drager & Kirtley 2016), noticeability, priming, and 'surprisal' (Rącz 2013). In doing so, I explore the relationship between ratings data and topic, context, and stereotypes, and how all of these factors interact with the ways in which listeners notice regional features in speech.

References

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