

Differential patterning of variants in a postinsular speech community

This paper investigates the outcome of competition between traditional and standard linguistic variants in a dialect contact situation. Insular Scots (IS) is spoken in Westray, a small island in Orkney, Scotland. Westray has gone from horse-drawn plows to high-speed internet within living memory, a uniquely recent increase in contact with external social and linguistic forces (3). Our data come from sociolinguistic interviews with 27 native Westray speakers, balanced for sex across three age groups.

We examine the patterning of Scottish Standard English (SSE) variants in competition with IS variants in the OUT and BEAT lexical classes. The OUT class varies between IS [u(:)] and SSE [əʊ]; the BEAT class varies between IS [e(:)] and SSE [i] (1). These variables are both binary, have dialect spellings (<oot> and <baet>), and were identified as dialect pronunciations by many participants. A quantitative analysis, however, reveals that they behave differently.

For OUT, the IS variant is more frequent in conversation than the word list and peaks in the middle age group, though there is some evidence for dialect intensification similar to that seen on the comparable American island communities of Martha's Vineyard (2) and Smith Island (4). The BEAT variable, in contrast, is not sensitive to context or other social factors and is used consistently at low levels across all age groups.

We conclude that the OUT variable has taken on social salience as a marker or even stereotype of island identity, while the BEAT variable lacks such evaluation. We propose that the tenuous position of the BEAT class in the unstable IS front vowel system (5) may have made it susceptible to rapid standardization under external pressure. This suggests that internal linguistic factors may influence which traditional variables survive to take on social meaning in contact situations.

Selected references

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