
Book Section:
Moore, E. orcid.org/0000-0002-0295-5260 (2024) Insular varieties of English in Britain: 9B The Isles of Scilly. In: Fox, S., (ed.) Language in Britain and Ireland. Cambridge University Press , Cambridge , pp. 238-248. ISBN 9781108477321

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108769617.013

Preprint vsn: Moore, Emma. 2024. Insular Varieties of English in Britain: 9.B The Isles of Scilly. In Susan Fox (ed.), *Language in Britain and Ireland*, 238–248. 3rd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108769617.013.

The Isles of Scilly

Emma Moore

> 'They are described as the jewels on the toe of England and I think that's.. on a good day.. that's what they are. There's a beautiful blue sea. You look down on.. these little.. to call it a land mass is.. hardly fair. But little dots … And - and you're looking down. It is quite, quite beautiful … It is a unique.. way of life, isn't it? … You love it or hate it. There is no in between' (Pamela Thomas, 2014).

Scillonian Pamela Thomas describes the geographic isolation, the size, the aesthetic attractiveness, and the strong emotion provoked by her home, the Isles of Scilly. Whilst the 'urban turn' in sociolinguistics has shifted focus away from the peripheral and the rural (Britain 2009), the demographic, social and cognitive factors that Miss Thomas highlights are well-known for affecting how language varies and changes over time. With an estimated inhabited land mass of 15.5 square km and a relatively stable population of around 2200 (Council of the Isles of Scilly 2019: 21), the Isles of Scilly may be small but – as this vignette will show – their size and the nature of their peripherality is an advantage when it comes to understanding how sociolinguistic processes operate across time and space.

More specifically, this vignette will highlight elements of research on the Isles of Scilly (Moore & Carter 2015; 2017; 2018; Moore & Montgomery 2018; Montgomery & Moore 2018) that cast light on the relationship between ideology and language variation on the one hand, and the social meaning of standard language on the other. It begins by discussing the islands' location and the history of its population, before exploring the long-standing ideologies about the Scillonian dialect. In seeking to examine how these beliefs about the dialect relate to the realities of language use, an overview of dialect features is presented. Focus is then given to two particularly distinctive pairs of linguistic variables in order to examine the social meanings of Scillonian English. This leads to a discussion of the relationship between social meaning and language standardization, calling into question the idea that use of standardized language is incompatible with the embodiment of local identity.

Where and what are the Isles of Scilly?

The Isles of Scilly (or simply Scilly [sɪli]) are a group of islands approximately 28 miles off the south-west coast of Cornwall, England, as shown in Figure 1. There are five inhabited islands, but around 75% of the population live on the main island of St. Mary's; the other islands – Tresco, St. Martin's, Bryher and St. Agnes – are known as the 'off-islands'.

The current population of Scilly was established in the 16th century when Sir Francis Godolphin acquired the islands' lease from the Crown. The lease continued in the Godolphin line until 1834 when it was handed to Augustus Smith, a Hertfordshire landowner. Smith is generally credited with making education compulsory (at a time when it was not compulsory on the mainland) and with improving Scilly's infrastructure. Smith and his descendants held the lease until 1920, when all but one island, Tresco, reverted to the Duchy of Cornwall.

Today, the Duchy own most of the freehold on the islands and the Tresco estate is managed by the Dorrien-Smith family.

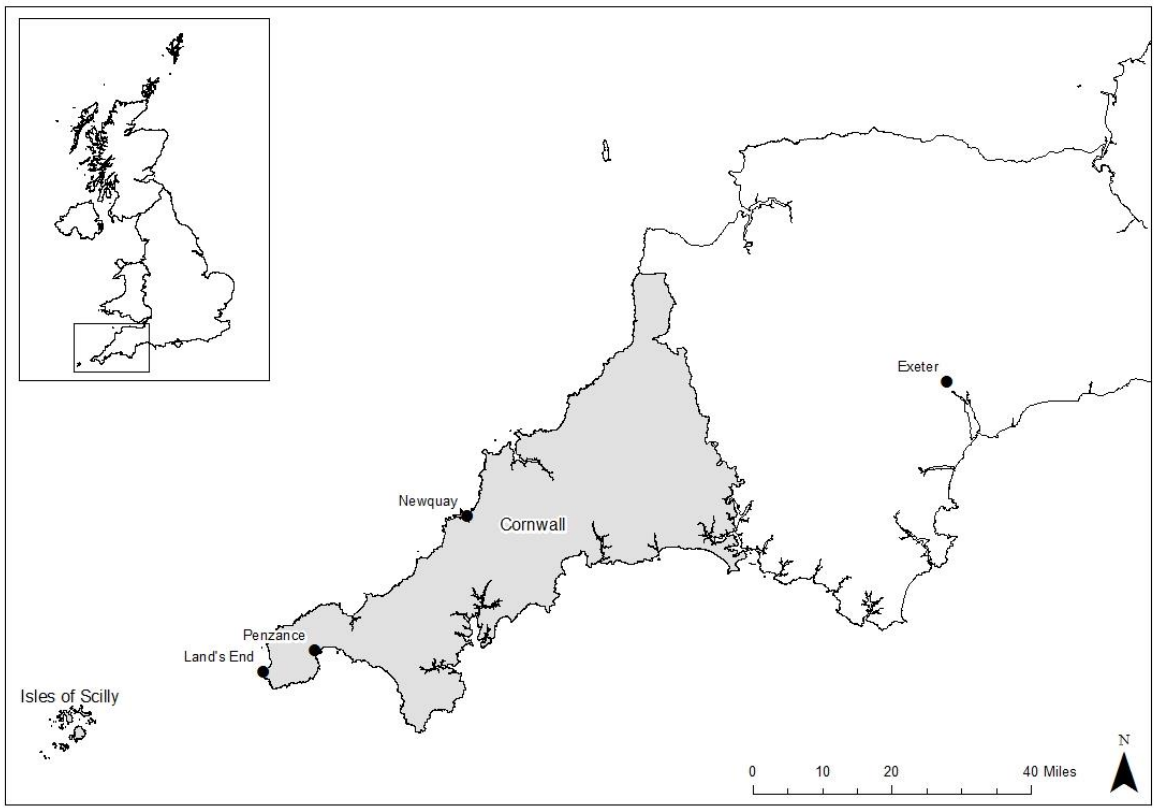

Figure 1: The position of Isles of Scilly relative to Cornwall and the rest of the UK, showing the location of direct transport links to the islands.[1]

Although the islands are relatively geographically isolated, there has been on-going dialect contact over time, making the community "open and exocentric" (Andersen 1988). The nature of island governance provides on-going contact with elite mainland networks. Furthermore, until 1966, when the island secondary school was built, a significant number of islanders were sent away between the ages of 11 and 16 to study at private mainland boarding schools (and most islanders still go away for further education). There has also been military presence on the islands (with a garrison built in the 16th century and seaplane bases in both World Wars). More fleeting contact is facilitated by tourism, which accounts for over 85% of the economy. Around 40% of households are second homes or holiday lets and the population of c. 2200 increases to 6000 in the summer peak (Council of the Isles of Scilly 2005: 14; 2019: 21–22). Tourism really took off on Scilly in the 19th Century, due to improved transport links, and the industry relies on seasonal workers who – like island in-migrants over time – are predominantly from Cornwall (in the 2011 census, 76% of migrants to Scilly were from Cornwall). Nonetheless, Scilly's relationship with Cornwall is contentious as discussed in the next section.

Are the islands Cornish?

Cornwall is the closest English mainland to Scilly. However, Scilly has its own council and is not part of the administrative county of Cornwall. The islanders have always strongly rejected the label 'Cornish'. There is some anecdotal and place-name evidence that the Cornish language was once spoken on Scilly (Heath-Coleman 1995: 60; Fellows-Jensen 2000: 94) but it is unlikely that Cornish persisted on Scilly after Sir Francis Godolphin acquired the island lease. Even so, Scillonians have been in contact with the Cornish English dialect consistently across time, as evidenced from the levels of Cornish in-migration.

Nonetheless, metalinguistic commentary about Scillonian English over time predominantly rejects the influence of Cornish English, instead favouring the ideology of 'Scillonian purity'. Echoing perceptions across time, Robert Heath (1750: 436), a soldier stationed on St. Mary's in the 18th century, attributed the standardized nature of Scillonian English to islanders' "more frequent Intercourse … with those who speak the Standard English best". Notably, after consulting with the "Lord Proprietor of the Isles" who remarked that there was no "part of the British Isles in which 'the Queen's English' is less murdered", Ellis (1890: 41) concluded that "no attention need be paid to [Scilly]" when compiling his volume on English dialects. Scilly did not feature in the *Survey of English Dialects* either. Of course, the probable dialect mixture, with no or little indigenous input, that followed from Godolphin's repopulation of the islands in the sixteenth century, most likely led to a levelled variety of sorts. As Trudgill (2004: 23) has noted, levelled varieties are often considered 'purer' or 'better' than older varieties of English and this may have contributed to perceptions of Scillonian English.

Nonetheless, there is some acknowledgement that Scillonian English features "a mixture" of Cornish or West Country influences, even if "islanders in general speak much better English than a stranger would expect to find in their detached situation" (Troutbeck 1794: 168). The reality of Scillonian English – such as it can be evaluated from existing corpora – is described in the next section.

Do historical perceptions of Scillonian English match the reality of language use?

Table 1 lists nonstandard pronunciations of Scillonian English present in the Isles of Scilly Museum's Oral History Archive, a corpus containing recordings of islanders born between 1901 and 1993. Table 2 indicates some of the nonstandard grammatical items that can be heard in the archive. The features shown in these tables (which are further discussed in Moore and Montgomery 2018) demonstrate that nonstandard variants do feature in the speech of islanders. But to what extent are these features related to Cornish English? To answer this question, Moore and Carter (2015; 2017; 2018) focused on how two pairs of lexical sets varied in the archive data.

Table 1. Distinctive Scillonian pronunciations found in the Isles of Scilly Museum's Oral History Archive. Vowels are given according to Wells' (1982) lexical sets. Adapted from Table 2 in Moore and Montgomery (2018: 49).

KIT	[ɪ̟]	**FLEECE**	[i:]	**NEAR**	[ɪɚ]
DRESS	[ɛ]	**FACE**	[ɐ̟ɪ]	**SQUARE**	[ɛɚ]
TRAP	[a(:)]	**PALM**	[a(:)]	**START**	[ɑˤ]
LOT	[ɒ̟] > [ɒ̟]	**THOUGHT**	[ɔ:]	**NORTH**	[ɔˤ]
STRUT	[ʌ̟]	**GOAT**	[oʉ] > [oʊ] > [ɛʊ]	**FORCE**	[ɔˤ]
FOOT	[ʊ̈]	**GOOSE**	[ʉ]	**CURE**	[ɔˤ] > [ʉɚ]
BATH	[a:]	**PRICE**	[ɑ̟ɪ] > [oɪ]	**happY**	[i:]
CLOTH	[ɒ̟]	**CHOICE**	[ɔ̟ɪ]	**lettER**	[ɚ]
NURSE	[ɚ]	**MOUTH**	[ɐ̈ʉ] > [əʉ]	**horsES**	[ɪ]

post-vocalic /r/	[ɹ]
intervocalic /t/	[ɾ]
word-final <-ing>	[ən]
word-initial /h/	Sometimes found
yod-dropping after /t/, /d/, /n/	Sometimes found
Initial syllable cluster reduction	Regularly found

Table 2. Nonstandard grammar found in the Isles of Scilly Oral History Archive. Adapted from Table 3 in Moore and Montgomery (2018: 49).

Variant	**Example**
Negative concord	*We **didn't** get **no** fowl*
Levelled past tense forms	*And he **come** up.*
Levelled aren't	***I aren't**.*
Levelled was	*There **was** no electric lights, there were no phones, there **was** no hospitals.*
Levelled weren't	*Talking about airship, **weren't** airship, it was a ... kite balloon section.*

The first pairing of lexical sets, TRAP and BATH, were examined because these variables pattern distinctively in Cornish English when compared to standard English.[2] TRAP and BATH differ by both quality and duration in standard English – they are typically pronounced as /a/ and /ɑ:/ respectively. However, reflecting fossilization of an earlier stage in the development

of TRAP and BATH, these lexical sets differ only by duration in traditional varieties of Cornish English; TRAP is typically pronounced as /æ/ or /a/ and BATH as /æ:/ or /a:/ (although across the south-west TRAP may occasionally be lengthened in certain contexts). As Moore and Carter (2015) show, in Scillonian English, Scilly-educated islanders (those who were educated entirely in the all-age school on St. Mary's) produce vowels with the same qualities and durations as Cornish English, whereas mainland-educated islanders (those who were sent away between 11-16 to private boarding schools) produce vowels with the same qualities as standard English. Notably, though, whilst mainland-educated islanders differentiate TRAP and BATH by quality, they do not use duration to distinguish these lexical sets as speakers of standard English do – making their pronunciations maximally different from their Scilly-educated peers. This suggests that rather than simply emulating standard English, mainland-educated islanders may use their pronunciation of TRAP and BATH to mark locally-relevant distinctions. This is considered further in the final section but, for now, it is important to note that, for these variables at least, the speech of some Scillonians – those who are island-educated – is not distinct from their Cornish neighbours.

The second pairing of lexical sets, MOUTH and PRICE, were studied by Moore and Carter (2018) because of their very distinctive patterning in Scillonian English. An allophonic raising split for these lexical sets – where raised onsets are found before voiceless consonants, and more open onsets are found in other environments – has been observed in Canadian English and in a number of US varieties. It has also been observed in the English Fens and in a number of insular communities worldwide, including Martha's Vineyard (in the US), St. Helena, Tristan de Cunha and the Falklands (in the South Atlantic) and Mersea Island (in Essex, England).[3] The same allophonic split is found on Scilly. What unites these locations is their relatively recent settlement or repopulation, and/or the nature and extent of the resulting language contact.

In the south-west English mainland, MOUTH is variably centralized, lowered or fronted, with no dominant pattern across the region, and no allophonic raising split. No allophonic raising split is recorded for PRICE on the south-west mainland either – although, compared to standard English, PRICE can have a more raised onset in the south-west.[4] This led Moore and Carter (2018) to conclude that, unlike TRAP and BATH, the allophonic raising split for MOUTH and PRICE on Scilly distinguishes islanders from both Cornish English and standard English, although it is important to note that raised PRICE onsets (irrespective of following phonetic context) occur generally across the south-west mainland. However, just like TRAP and BATH, the precise patterning of MOUTH and PRICE differs across the island population according to education type. It is also in decline. Older speakers (born between 1901 and 1931) are more likely to have the allophonic split than younger speakers (born between 1932 and 1962), and Scilly-educated speakers are more likely to have the allophonic split than mainland-educated speakers. It is also notable that the allophonic raising split seems to be more resilient for MOUTH than it is for PRICE. Only Scilly-educated speakers show the split for PRICE, but the MOUTH split is more widely distributed across both types of islander.

The data from the Isles of Scilly Oral History Archive, studied by Moore and Carter (2015; 2018),suggests that the dialect situation on Scilly is more complex than the historical metalinguistic commentary (with its focus on Scillonian 'purity') would suggest. The mainland-educated islanders clearly do use reasonably standardised pronunciations for TRAP and BATH but the slight adjustments in duration suggest that this may reflect more than a

straightforward orientation to hegemonic (mainland) prestige standards. The Scilly-educated islanders do seem to produce Cornish-like pronunciations for TRAP and BATH but, again, a correlation does not reveal what these variants symbolise on the islands. Finally, archive data uncovers an allophonic raising split for MOUTH and PRICE which is distinctive to the islands and unlike both standard English and Cornish English – although raising of the PRICE vowel occurs across the south-west irrespective of following phonetic context. However, once again, different types of islanders use the distinctive variants with differing frequencies. To better understand these patterns, we explore how Scillonian speech is evaluated in the next section.

How is Scillonian English evaluated?

Montgomery and Moore (2018) sought to uncover how the most vernacular features of the Scillonian dialect (i.e. those typified by the Scilly-educated speakers) were evaluated in a series of perception tests. The tests used two guises, which were created from the speech of the same Scilly-educated male. Both guises included a similar range of the vernacular features found in Scillonian English but, in one guise, the speaker was talking about farming without referring in any way to Scilly (the 'Farmer' guise), and in the other he was talking explicitly about island-related locations and island life (the 'Islander' guise). The two guises were perceived very differently by native British listeners. Compared to the Islander guise, the Farmer guise was more likely to be identified as from the south-west of England, and less likely to be more specifically identified as from Scilly. In-line with this, the Farmer guise was predominantly identified as being from the countryside, whereas the Islander guise was predominantly identified as being from the coast. Finally, the Islander guise was rated as more educated, articulate and ambitious than the Farmer guise.

What was really interesting about the perception experiment, however, was the distinction in the different linguistic variants noticed in each of the guises. As part of the task, listeners were asked to click a button when they heard something which made them wonder where the speaker was from (or confirmed where they thought he was from). Whereas vernacular variants of TRAP and PRICE were more frequently noticed in the Farmer guise, vernacular tokens of BATH and MOUTH were more frequently noticed in the Islander guise. Several of the TRAP tokens noticed in the Farmer guise were both front and long in duration (as noted above, long TRAP vowels can occur across the south-west region). Similarly, the onsets in the PRICE tokens in both guises were audibly raised – a pattern also replicated in other south-western Englishes (although not with a corresponding allophonic split). On the other hand, the Scillonian pronunciations of BATH and MOUTH are less regionally salient. A fronted BATH vowel is not restricted to the south-west (in fact, it is more often associated with the North of England). MOUTH may have been similarly difficult to place, given that it is pronounced so variably across the south-west and beyond. All in all, these observations suggest that, when listeners more readily identified the speaker of the guise as a south-west farmer, they noticed pronunciations that are stereotypes of south-western English speech. On the other hand, when they more readily identified the speaker of the guise as an islander, they noticed pronunciations that were distinctive, but less easily placed.

What does this tell us about Scillonian English? It suggests that historical metalinguistic commentary about the standard nature of Scillonian English may erase Cornish and south-

western influences in the dialect. The perception experiment shows that it is possible to change what listeners perceive in a dialect by priming them to expect certain variants and not others. When Scillonian English is presented as a rural dialect, listeners more readily perceive those features which link the variety to the south-west. However, when Scillonian English is presented as an insular variety, listeners more readily notice more distinctive, and potentially unusual, variants. Of course, in reality, the dialect incorporates both types of variants, but what is noticed seems to be determined by something more than what is actually heard. The implications of this are explored in the final section.

What can a speech community of 2000 people tell us about language, variation and change?

This discussion of Scillonian English has highlighted how language variation and ideology interact. Historically, metalinguistic commentary has highlighted the more standardised nature of the dialect, to the extent that any Cornish English influence is erased. The presence of more standardised variants is ideologically linked to the influence of elite island governors who "impressed their own corrector locution and more Eastern English of inheritance and education upon the population" (Banfield 1888: 45). This ideological link between Scillonians, education and refinement is maintained across history.

However, the analysis of the Isles of Scilly Oral History Archive undertaken by Moore and Carter (2015; 2018) reveals similarities with Cornish and south-western English. In particular, TRAP and BATH can be pronounced as in Cornish English and the raising of PRICE parallels pronunciations found on the south-western English mainland. On the other hand, the allophonic raising split of MOUTH and PRICE differentiates Scilly from both Cornish English and standard English.

Understanding this linguistic variation requires that it is viewed relative to the ideologies surrounding Scillonian English, rather than simply in relation to an abstract standard/nonstandard continuum of prestige and stigma. The distribution of the linguistic variants by education type, and the way in which these variants are perceived, suggests that 'Cornish' TRAP and BATH and raised PRICE are associated with a rural social type (as embodied by the Scilly-educated islanders). On the other hand, the more standardised pronunciations of TRAP and BATH are associated with a refined social type (as embodied by the mainland-educated islanders). Finally, the very localised pronunciation of MOUTH can be associated with both groups. Importantly, though, whilst the different Scillonian social types suggest different orientations to the islands' linguistic resources, they do not necessarily reflect different degrees of orientation to the islands themselves. It is tempting to see the language of the mainland-educated Scillonian as reflecting an outward, island-external, orientation. However, the mainland-educated Scillonians embody the trope of 'the educated and refined islander' that persists throughout the historical metalinguistic commentary. In using more standardised English, they are not necessarily orientating outwards, they are directly embodying the historical association between Scilly, education and refinement. Rather than aligning with island external values in any simplistic way, in the day-to-day, their use of language principally differentiates them from another island-internal persona – the rural and rugged Scillonian embodied by the Scilly-educated islanders.

This vignette has highlighted the utility of studying the microcosm of a small island community. In particular, it has exposed the ways in which language variation reflects and constructs the local social order. To answer the question of why people use or avoid vernacular features, we need to understand what is at stake in using those forms in situated interaction. Significantly, the Scilly data suggests that non-localisable linguistic variants can be used to embody social personas that do not conflict with orientation to the local. Acknowledging the impact of ideology was essential in decoding this social meaning, not least because – as we have seen – what is noticed seems to be determined by something more than what is actually heard.

References

Andersen, H. 1988. Center and periphery: adoption, diffusion and spread. In J. Fisiak (ed.), *Historical Dialectology*, 39–83. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Banfield, Frank. 1888. The Scillonians. In Sylvanus Urban (ed.), *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. CCLXV, 41–54. London: Chatto & Windus.

Britain, David. 2009. "Big bright lights" versus "Green and pleasant land?": The unhelpful dichotomy of 'urban' versus 'rural' in dialectology. In Enam Al-Wer & Rudolf de Jong (eds.), *Arabic Dialectology: In honour of Clive Holes on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday*, 223–247. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Council of the Isles of Scilly. 2005. The Isles of Scilly Local Plan: A 2020 Vision. Council of the Isles of Scilly, ms.

Council of the Isles of Scilly. 2019. Draft Isles of Scilly Local Plan 2015-2030. Council of the Isles of Scilly, ms.

Ellis, Alexander J. 1890. *English Dialects - Their Sounds and Homes*. London: The English Dialect Society.

Fellows-Jensen, Gillian. 2000. John Aubrey, pioneer onomast? *Nomina* 23. 89–106.

Heath, Robert. 1750. *A Natural and Historical Account of the Islands of Scilly; Describing their Situation, Number, Extent, Soil, Culture, Produce, Rareties, Towns, Fortifications, Trade, Manufacture, Inhabitants. Their Government, Laws, Customs, Grants, Records, and Antiquities.* London: R. Manby & H. S. Cox.

Heath-Coleman, Philip. 1995. Three Cornish place-names [Melledgan, Hanjague, Bosistow]. *Nomina* 18. 53–62.

Montgomery, Chris & Emma Moore. 2018. Evaluating S(c)illy voices: The effects of salience, stereotypes, and co-present language variables on real-time reactions to regional speech. *Language* 94(3). 34.

Moore, Emma & Paul Carter. 2015. Dialect contact and distinctiveness: The social meaning of language variation in an island community. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 19(1). 3–36.

Moore, Emma & Paul Carter. 2017. 'The land steward wouldn't have a woman farmer": The interaction between language, life trajectory and gender in an island community. In Chris Montgomery & Emma Moore (eds.), *Language and a Sense of Place*, 258–280. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moore, Emma & Paul Carter. 2018. Natural phonetic tendencies and social meaning: Exploring the allophonic raising split of PRICE and MOUTH on the Isles of Scilly. *Language Variation and Change* 30(3). 337–360.

Moore, Emma & Chris Montgomery. 2018. The dialect of the Isles of Scilly: Exploring the relationship between language production and language perception in a southern

insular variety. In Laura Wright (ed.), *Southern English Varieties Then and Now*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
Troutbeck, John. 1794. *Survey of the Ancient and Present State of the Scilly Islands: Describing their Situation, Number, Extent, Towns, Churches, Castles, Forts, Harbours, Soil, Produce, Language, Religion, Government, Arts, Traffick, Customs, Manufactures, Grants, Antiquities, House Burnings, Shipwrecks.* Sherborne: Goady and Lerpiniere.
Trudgill, Peter. 2004. *New-Dialect Formation: The Inevitability of Colonial Englishes*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Wakelin, Martyn F. 1975. *Language and History in Cornwall*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
Wakelin, Martyn F. 1986. *The Southwest of England*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Notes

1. This map contains: Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2013 and 2016; National Statistics data © Crown copyright and database right 2013 and 2016; NISRA data © Crown copyright and database right 2013; NRS data © Crown copyright and database right 2013. Location data is © Crown Copyright and Database Right 2016. Ordnance Survey (Digimap Licence).
2. The term ‘standard English’ is used here to refer to a standardised and prestigious form of pronunciation. Terms such as Received Pronunciation and Standard Southern British English are deliberately avoided because they are used variably over time.
3. See Moore and Carter (2018: 337-338) for an overview of this literature.
4. See Wakelin (1975; 1986) for descriptions of Cornish and south-western Englishes.