A comparative study of post-vocalic /r/ in young people in two Cornish communities: a case of the other Cornwall

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The loss process of post-vocalic /r/ continues today in Britain’s Celtic fringes. Little field research is carried out into this, notwithstanding its importance in the literature. r-pronunciation is an important marker of ethnicity in an increasingly heterogeneous Cornwall. We report sociolinguistic pilot data of current patterns of r-variability amongst indigenous young people which shows /r/ is surprisingly strong in an inland largely post-industrial Mid-Cornwall. By contrast, in coastal West Cornwall we find /r/-loss in a state of near-completion. However, the resulting /a ~ α/ phonological distinction (where /pat/ ~ /pαrt/ has become /pat/ ~ /pαt/) has not penetrated the BATH lexical set (which remains phonetically long [aː] and is not /bαθ/). We account for the differentiation of /r/-use in West and Mid Cornwall by examining an important but overlooked variable in this context: tourism. While maritime communities of West Cornwall are popular tourist destinations and have high levels of second homes ownership, Mid Cornwall is the focus of social and economic regeneration and represents the other Cornwall in terms of peoples’ cultural and linguistic resistance to standardisation. This paper argues for a greater consideration of such qualitative variables in the study of linguistic patterns in peripheral areas of Britain.