Recent work in sociolinguistics has highlighted the importance of social meaning as a driver of language variation and change. Innovative methodologies in speech perception have allowed researchers to explore the social meanings of individual linguistic features, and provided insight into their patterning in production (e.g. Fridland & Kendall 2012). In order to illustrate the complementary nature of production and perception, this paper presents a study in two parts: first, a speech perception experiment which identifies the BATH vowel as one of the most salient features of west Cornish English, and second, an acoustic analysis of BATH variation amongst early adolescents in west Cornwall.

In west Cornish varieties of English, the BATH vowel is traditionally /æː/ (Wakelin 1975: 115). Results from a perception study designed to test the salience of features in real time suggest that this is one of the most salient features of the variety, and that its salience is directly tied to its duration, with longer variants being most noticeable. In addition, similar research has explored the social meaning of the ‘long <a>’ in the South-West, and lengthened TRAP has been shown to be perceptually linked to South-Western rural identities, particularly those connected to the concept of the uneducated and unsophisticated ‘farmer’ (Montgomery & Moore 2018). Variants linked to rurality face particular stigma due to prevalent stereotypes of rural areas as, “backward, conservative, boring, dangerous, threatening, ‘uncultured’ and uneducated” (Britain 2017: 174).

In order to examine the interaction between the social meaning of ‘long <a>’ in the South-West and production patterns, I analyse BATH vowels in the speech of forty-two schoolchildren from west Cornwall. Data were collected using two structured elicitation tasks (a series of map tasks and a word list), eliciting 850 BATH tokens. Following an acoustic analysis of the tokens, I examine how the variable is stratified according to the macro-social categories of social class and gender, as well as local orientation, quantified using an identity questionnaire. Results indicate that, in the most monitored style, speakers shift towards the fronted, west Cornish English variant in quality, but away from the longer variants in duration. This suggests that it is the duration of the BATH vowel in Cornwall that attracts stigma, while the fronted quality holds some local prestige.

Overall, this paper demonstrates how different acoustic elements of a variable may carry subtly different meanings, and how speakers may use these creatively to project desired identity traits. In addition, it has been argued that the urban turn in sociolinguistics means that rural varieties, such as those found in Cornwall and the wider South-West of England, have been notably under-researched (Britain 2012). This paper shows how rural adolescents have not simply succumbed to the effects of standardization and, just like their urban counterparts, are innovative in their language use.
References:


