



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 3

4-6-1979

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Krahnke, Karl J. (1979) "Sociolinguistic Variation and the Vowel System of Northern Utah: A Preliminary Look," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol5/iss1/3>

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SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION AND THE VOWEL SYSTEM OF NORTHERN UTAH:
A PRELIMINARY LOOK

Karl J. Krahnke

Few sociolinguistic or dialect geography studies have been done in the Intermountain West yet. This is unfortunate because this area has some unique and interesting characteristics. Two studies that I am aware of are Stanley Cook's University of Utah dissertation on the emergence of an urban dialect in Utah (Cook 1969), and Vel Helquist's M.A. thesis from the same university (Helquist 1970). These are valuable contributions. The data and analysis contained in them have provided us with much of the meager information we do have of the sociolinguistic processes operant in this area.

Both of the above studies are concerned with an urban/rural dichotomy and they have shown that the dynamics of change are toward an urban model represented by the speech of Salt Lake City and other urban centers. One of the unique features of Utah and the Intermountain West, however, is the social and linguistic character of the rural areas themselves. What we find here are relatively separate and isolated rural communities settled at a fairly recent time, and tied together by common cultural and religious concerns, similar agricultural and economic patterns, and a widely-shared religion which profoundly shapes social and communication patterns.

Sociolinguistics and dialect geography have not really examined situations of this kind anywhere. The major studies of recent years have been concerned with heterogeneous urban areas or with specific ethnic or linguistic communities.

One exception to this is my own dialect geography work in Iran in 1970 to 1972 (Krahnke 1976). The situation in Central Iran is remarkably similar to that of our area, the one difference being that settlement has been continuous and relatively undisturbed for probably several thousand years. Otherwise, the arid land, the agricultural base, the ethnic uniformity, and a common religion are all similarities. The linguistic picture that emerged there was of fine-grained linguistic differentiation maintained over many centuries and constrained by local inwardlookingness. The direction of change was toward an urban, educated standard, of course, but the contrary tendencies were strong.

This is, I believe, a finding we can keep in mind as we consider the sociolinguistic processes of our area. The inwardlookingness of the rural communities of this area has, it seems, been overlooked. The social-geographic pattern that many assume for this area is a core or center, a city or extended urban center, surrounded by a variety of small satellites. Communication, it is assumed, occurs both along the city-satellite axis and also along the satellite-satellite axis. The overall picture is that of a relatively uniform rural area looking outward (or upward) to a differentiated city center.

To some degree, of course, such a conception is probably valid. But the factor that is often overemphasized is that of the degree of positive orientation of one rural area to another. The pattern I discovered in Iran was of a strong village-city axis and a very weak or non-existent village-village axis. Put simply, the villages do not talk to each other very much.

The situation is not that extreme in the Intermountain West, but what is probably true, and what remains to be studied, is that the separated communities of this area have an interest in maintaining a social-cultural identity, separate from that of their neighbors. This interest may interfere in interesting ways with the fine-grained rural-urban continuum that Cook and Helquist have begun to establish. There is a parallel here with Labov's Martha's Vineyard study (Labov 1963), but instead of an on-island/off-island dichotomy, we have an in-town/out-of-town distinction.

There are, then, at least two patterns of social differentiation in the Intermountain West: one, a rural-urban difference, and two, a rural-rural differentiation. The first has been studied to some degree, the second remains to be studied and holds, I believe, rich promise.

A third social variable which must be recognized in this area is that of sex-differentiation. In the western United States, and among members of the LDS church, sexually defined roles have their own peculiarities and these peculiarities must contribute in a significant way to linguistic differences.

A fourth social variable is that of social stratification and social class. This phenomena has not been examined in the existing studies at all. As Cook puts it (1969: p. 137), "In the communities in Utah there is no significant social stratification, and this condition is mainly the result of the Mormon church." This has to be a serious oversimplification of what must be a very complex pattern of stratification, involving economics, occupation, education, church position, family size and marital status among other factors. Just because the church is a powerful unifying force, and it is, and just because the church includes egalitarianism in its values, does not mean that these processes and ideals have been carried to completion. There is certainly stratification in Utah. It is finer than that of, say, the lower east side of New York City--which is why a study of it would be so interesting--but it is definitely there. It must also be kept in mind that there are a significant number of non-Mormons in most of the communities of Utah and they play an important role in the overall stratification picture.

A fifth social variable that should provide us with rich results if studied in our area is what I would like to refer to here as social models. What I mean by this is a person or an idealization of a complex of personal characteristics that serves as a goal of accommodation (Giles & Powesland 1975: 157ff.) or imitation. This variable is really a complex of setting, status, topic, participants, etc., but I think it is a useful notion in explaining style shifting in a rather broad manner. Just as Martha's Vineyarders have different /aw/ values depending on the positiveness of their orientation toward living on the island, so is much style shifting determined by an individual's or a group's orientation toward a social type.

I hypothesize that the models for a typical rural Utah speaker are complex, reflecting social processes orientated toward the community, a profession, the local church organization, the church at higher levels of organization, and, at time, non-LDS, non-Utah models. The identification of these orientations and the conditions under which they come into play promise to teach us much about the mechanisms of language variation and change in this area.

In summary, rural-urban differences, rural-rural differences, sex differentiation, social stratification, and a variety of social models are all factors which seem especially significant in our geographic and cultural area. They must be added to the usual variables of age and education, and to the surprisingly poorly studied matter of geographic variation.

Let us now turn to the linguistic variables. Variables exist, of course, on the lexical, syntactic, and phonological levels and all have their diagnostic value. But to study the fine-grained patterns of differentiation we seem to have in this part of the Intermountain West, the scalar nature of vowel differentiation and the frequency of occurrence of vocalic phenomena offer by far the best means of studying the relationship of social to linguistic differences.

Unfortunately, since so very little dialect geography has been done in this area, determining the nature of the vowel systems and where variation is to be found in them means, in most cases, starting out afresh. What I would like to do in the remainder of this paper is to lay the groundwork for such study by summarizing what we have so far learned about the vowel pronunciations in northern Utah which show the greatest degree of variation.

The basis for this summary is a lot of casual observation, a few interviews, and the work of several others, including Cook (1969), Helquist (1970), and the article by DeSantis in a recent issue of this Society's Bulletin (DeSantis 1978).¹

1. The variable (or variables) that has reached the level of stigmatization among many speakers is the variable behavior of the /o/ and /a/ phonemes before /r/. The stereotype has it that these have switched, resulting in pronunciations something like [form] and [farm]. While the stereotype is well-known, the facts are not at all as clear. What seems to be true in northern Utah is what Cook and Helquist found in other

1. None of this work was done in northern Utah, and my own observations are limited to that area. This does not seem to be a serious problem as the variables that are being examined appear to be quite geographically widespread. The geographic boundaries of the speech community so defined remain to be worked out, but it is clear that they include much of Utah and parts of Idaho, Wyoming, and Nevada, at least.

areas, that is that there is neither a switch nor a merger of these two vowels.

Of the two, the /o/ phoneme exhibits the wider range of realizations, ranging from [o] through [ɔ] to [a]. In the published work, and in my observation, it is the phoneme that is least subject to "correction" or "normalization". The vernacular norm seems to be somewhere around [ɔ] for most speakers, not [o].

The /a/ phoneme, on the other hand, is much less subject to variation in realization. Its range is smaller and it is more subject to normalization. The vernacular norm seems to be a backed [a] ([ɒ]).

There is a suggestion that occurrences of backed and raised /a/ are hypercorrections, resulting from an incomplete merger of /o/ and /a/ and applying "correction" to both. More work is needed before this can be determined. What is clear at this point is that there is a strong tendency for /or/ to be realized with a lowered, unrounded, and centralized vowel with a weaker tendency for the vowel in /ar/ to be backed and somewhat rounded.

The social factors associated with lowered /or/ are age and a rural orientation. Occupation and education must also figure in.

2. Also relatively well-known, but not usually raised to the level of linguistic consciousness (and therefore stigmatization), the laxing of the high tense vowels before /l/, in words such as feel, sale, fool, and, possibly pole. The phenomenon seems as prevalent in northern Utah as it is in the central part of the area. It is of a smaller phonological range than the /or/-/ar/ variables. The phenomenon seems to be strengthening and the degree of laxing seems to correlate with youth and urbanism, although the facts are far from clear. DeSantis' work has been valuable in understanding this variable (DeSantis 1978).

3. The lax vowels /i/, /e/, /u/, and, to some degree, /æ/ and /o/ variably show a central off-glide, especially when under stress. Examples of this are: pit [pɪ^ət], pet [pɛ^ət], pat [pæ^ət], put [pʊ^ət], and, occasionally words like pour or four [pɔ^ər]. The phenomenon is almost universal among speakers in our area but is subject to phonological and lexical conditioning factors as yet unstudied.

The offglide probably contributes to what is perceived locally as the "Utah drawl".

The social factors involved in the variable offgliding of the lax vowel seem to be sex, with women demonstrating more offgliding than men, and positive orientation toward the cultural area. There seems to be a tendency to minimize the offgliding when the speaker does not wish to "sound like a Utahn".

4. As in much of the rest of the United States, lax /e/ is variably merging with lax /i/ before nasals, especially /n/. Examples: pen [pɛ̃n], sent [sɛ̃nt]. It is nowhere near being a merger at this time. The phenomenon is variable and is an innovation. It is most advanced, therefore, among younger, more educated speakers.

5. Tense /iy/ and /ey/ are variably glides, beginning from a central position somewhat above [ə] and gliding upward and forward to [i] and [e]. Examples are beat [b^əit] and bait [b^əet]. The phenomenon is most apparent under stress. The social factors involved are unknown to me but I strongly suspect this to be an innovation.

6. Tense /uw/ and, possibly, lax /u/, are variably centralized, sometimes with a front to back glide also involved. Examples are: food [f^ɪuwd], or [fud], good [g^ɪud], or [gɪud]. Both the linguistic and social conditions associated with this variation are still unclear, but the phenomenon is very common and widespread and seems to be more frequent among younger speakers of all classes. As with the merging of /i/ and /e/ before /n/, this is a southern phenomenon which may be spreading into this area.

7. /a/ is generally realized further back than in many other dialects, even when not before /r/. This is especially true when /a/ occurs before /p, k, l, n/. The realization often reaches close to [ɔ], a vowel that is supposed to be non-existent in this area. The phenomenon is especially notable when /a/ appears before /n/, giving examples such as: conference [k^ɔnfrəns], or bonfire [b^ɔn fayr]. Other notable lexical forms are: top, talk, all, and on.

The social correlation of this variable is largely with age, older speakers tending to have realizations further back.

8. In common with much of the rest of the northern part of the United States /æ/ is showing signs of raising, even among older speakers. The raising is most advanced among younger speakers, however.

9. The diphthongs /aw/ and /ay/ have some variability in common--the fronting of the nucleus almost to [æ]. Cook (1969) has studied /aw/ and what he found is also true of /ay/, but less categorically and under more complex conditions. Examples such as cow [kæv] and now [næv] should be familiar, high [hæi] may not.

Fronting is correlated with youth and urbanism. /ay/ has two other realizations. One, a monophthongized [a:] as in time [ta:m] or my [ma:], the other a raised, backed, and rounded [o] as in nice [no^ɪs]. All three realizations of /ay/ have been observed to occur in the speech of single speakers, but the linguistic and social constraints are as yet unknown.

10. A final variable on which I have very little information as yet is the tensing of lax /i/ and /e/ before /r/. Examples of this are year [jir] and burial [berɪəl]. This also seems to be correlated with age and lower socioeconomic class, and with ruralism.

In summary, there are a fascinating variety of sociolinguistic phenomena, ripe for study, in this part of the United States. Because of the idiosyncratic social structure of Utah, some of the linguistic variables are more immediately understandable than the social ones. Much of the change in our area seems to be in the direction of an urban, educated standard, as Cook has shown (Cook 1969). But there are strong contradictory tendencies which beg to be studied. What I have attempted here is a charting of the basic components of such study.

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