Utah English

Diane Lillie

"Utah English"

Diane Lillie
Brigham Young University

Although Mary Ellen Brown didn't expect communication problems when she came to Salt Lake's Westminster College from Colorado, she was amazed to find how different neighboring Utah could be. She explained: "I remember chatting with a newcomer at a party one night, asking him what his major was. He said 'cells.' I responded that biology was a difficult major to complete, and he said, 'I'm in /s_lz/ (sales), you know, a business degree?'"

Why did Mary Ellen understand the Utah native's "sales" as "cells?" More generally, why did two people of similar background and educational status misunderstand each other? The Dialect Study of Utah answers these questions.

Linguistic Geography in the United States

The purpose of my research is to identify, locate, and analyze dialects of American English in Utah. Carroll Reed defines dialect as a "special variety of usage within the range of a given linguistic system, according to the social or geographical disposition of its speakers" (2). In other words, a dialect is a variety of a language used within a particular speech community.

Traditionally, dialectologists have studied regional dialects by creating linguistic atlases from data collected during regional dialect surveys. These maps show the distribution of dialect features across a region and provide a picture of actual dialect variation. They "contribute to the description and history of a particular language" (Walters 119) and provide a base for further research in linguistics and other fields.

In 1928, the Linguistic Society of America and the Present Day English section of MLA proposed a study of North American dialect geography to match work completed in Europe (Kurath 42). The project, under the direction of Hans Kurath, aimed to collect primary dialect data from the English-speaking United States and Canada and compile it into regional linguistic atlases. It won the approval of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1930, and Kurath began work in New England (Kurath 42). However, resource difficulties brought on by economic depressions and World War II restricted the project's scope. By 1937, Kurath realized that a comprehensive continent-wide survey was beyond his personal capacity and suggested that everything west of the Appalachian mountains should be completed by autonomous research (McDavid 1983, 48).

Since that time, work has been completed in the Middle and South Atlantic States, the North Central States, the Upper Midwest, California, Nevada, Washington, Oklahoma, the Gulf States, Texas, Missouri, Kansas, Hawaii, Colorado, Wyoming, the Maritimes, Ottawa Valley, and British Columbia (Brown 6–7).

Dialect Research in Utah

Utah was originally designated part of the Rocky Mountain States project, but the fieldwork was never

completed. In fact, very little scholarly research on Utah language has been published. In 1977, Carrol Reed summarized the current opinions when he said: "Utah generally shows a preference for Northern terms, although the southern part of the state sometimes participates in Midland usage" (56). Other publications have focused on specific aspects of language in the region. For example, in 1969 Stanley Cook wrote a doctoral dissertation on an emerging urban dialect in the Salt Lake Valley, based on two phonological characteristics. In 1970 Val Helquist studied "one phonological variable in urban and rural Utah" for his master's thesis. A decade later, Karl Krahnke reviewed the northern Utah vowel system and suggested possible areas of study. Other researchers have focused on Mormon language, usually with an emphasis on vocabulary (Baker; Wolsey; Bookstaber; Sorenson; Wallace; Conrad and Weiner). During this decade only Marianna Di Paolo of the University of Utah has focused on Utah English, analyzing specific phonological structures as used in Salt Lake City (1990; 1992; 1993). This sadly short review of literature shows that no one has undertaken a comprehensive study of Utah dialects.

However, the "exceedingly complex . . . geographical distribution of dialect features in Utah" (Reed 56) deserves as much attention as the dialects of other regions. Raven McDavid (1965) points out that the "speech of any American community has long been recognized as being as good as that of any other" (255) and therefore deserves attention. Utah's planned, and relatively recent, settlement makes it an ideal location for historical linguistic research. Much of the state was settled in a carefully planned pattern. Records listing the original settlers, as well as their national origins, are available for many areas of the state. Some of these regions have remained fairly stable in their composition, with descendants of the original settlers still making up the majority of the population. In these areas, geographical isolation and the close-knit oral community have slowed dialect leveling with outside regions. However, the current urbanization trend in Utah means that these speakers are associating with outside language influences. The linguistic data available in these areas needs to be gathered before it disappears. Also, rapidly expanding cities such as Salt Lake City would benefit from the types of sociolinguistic studies performed in other urban areas. However, this work cannot be performed

without some initial information on the regional dialects.

My research provides baseline regional dialect data on Utah English. The purpose of my project is to provide an overview of Utah in a context of linguistic geography. I have investigated the following research questions:

• What assumptions do Utahns have about their language?
• Are these assumptions correct?

I will also answer the following questions:

• Is there an American English dialect characteristic of Utah? Are there multiple Utah dialects?
• Where are the boundaries of a Utah dialect or dialects?
• What are the characteristic features which differentiate Utah dialect(s) from other American English dialects?

The data presented in this essay will reflect on the first two questions: What assumptions do Utahns have about their language and are these assumptions correct?

Methods

Caroll Reed explains how to conduct linguistic geography research (6–8). First a survey must be designed to test for significant phonetic, lexical, and syntactic characteristics of a region. Next the linguist needs to select informants and administer the survey. The data collected from informants is plotted on a map, which is then marked to show where specific characteristics were found. Where isoglosses match on the map, a dialect boundary is assumed along the line of their convergence. More recently, dialectologists have combined linguistic mapping with computer derived statistical analysis to produce more accurate predictions of actual dialect geography and features (Guy 1993). The Dialect Survey of Utah incorporates two field instruments, an oral survey and an internet questionnaire. I will use statistical analysis software and mapping software in the final analysis.

During the initial stage of my research, I identified phonetic, lexical, and syntactic characteristics of the Utah region by asking both non-Utahns and natives of Utah to identify Utah speech markers. From these responses I designed a survey, modeled on similar instruments developed in Texas and Indiana, to test for dialectal

characteristics in Utah. This method allows collection of data from a wide pool of respondents. My survey gathers biographical information about each informant, including age, education, occupation, religion, linguistic genealogy, and a history of places lived. The questions prompt informants to respond with specific words or phrases, which are then recorded by a field researcher. Last semester 190 undergraduate linguistics students from Brigham Young University, Southern Utah University, and Westminster College conducted approximately 400 surveys. This semester, approximately 250 linguistics students will conduct approximately 750 surveys.

So far, I have analyzed 200 completed surveys. Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of the surveys analyzed so far. All the informants have lived in Utah for the majority of their lives (allowing for missions, military service, and education). With these statistics in mind, I will proceed to give you an overview of the data analyzed so far as it relates to my first two research questions: What assumptions do Utahns have about their language and are those assumptions valid?

Table 1. Informant Demographics

Gender	male	84	Ethnicity	Caucasian	119
	female	114		Asian	2
Age	18+	94	Religion	LDS	172
	31+	54		Other	13
	55+	49		None	15

Counties
SL: 72   Utah: 60   Davis: 13   Weber: 11   Uintah: 6
Carbon, Cache: 4
Iron, Millard, Sanpete, Sevier: 3
Kane, Duch., Morgan, Tooele, Wasatch, Wash.: 2
Wayne, Beaver, Summit, Grand, Juab: 1

Data Collected

Assumptions

The most common assumptions are summarized in Table 2. Many native Utahns feel that Utah has no distinguishing language markers. Another large group commented on the dialect of other regions of Utah (generally north vs. south) or pointed out that there is a rural/urban difference, although they couldn't explain what the difference is. Some respondents claimed that Utahns "don't speak proper English" or are sloppy in their speech. Again, when asked for clarification, most respondents couldn't provide specific examples.

Others were more specific in their comments. For example, many natives of Utah recognize the tendency to use euphemisms rather than swear words (non-Utahns were even more likely to identify this habit). Also, many pointed out that Utahns often confuse the /o/ and /a/ phonemes, especially before /r/. Others noticed that vowels have a tendency to "shift" or "blend." Although these last comments were ambiguous, the words used as examples (/kr_k/ for "creek," /s_l/ for "sale," /_or/ for "sure," etc.) show that they are describing a laxing of tense vowels.

However, after completing actual surveys, one field worker commented, "While Utahns are quick to point out the state's distinct speech characteristics, none of the people I interviewed actually spoke the way they claimed Utahns did." Analysis of the data collected during the survey shows that, overall, this statement is correct. The majority of Utahns do not predict their own speech habits accurately. Their assumptions are based on the most distinct language patterns rather than on common usage.

Table 2. Expectations (1=most common)

General	Phonetic
1. No distinguishing characteristics 2. North/South variation (unsure what it is) 3. Urban/rural variation (unsure what it is) 4. Sloppy speech	1. /o/ becomes /a/ (and reverse) 2. Laxing of tense vowels 3. Heavy or extra /r/ ("warsh)
	Lexical
	1. Made up swear words 2. Mormonese

Barn in a Born (/o/_/a/)

One of the most stereotypical phonetic characteristics in Utah speech is the "variable behavior of the /o/ and /a/ phonemes before /r/. The stereotype is that these have switched, resulting in pronunciations something like /form/ [for "farm"] and /farm/ [for "form"]" (Krahnke 8). This characteristic was first noted in 1935 by T. Earle Pardoe of Brigham Young University. He believed the tendency was centered in Sanpete

County but very common all over Utah. In contrast, Krahnke argued in 1979 that there was no evidence that the sounds had actually switched. Rather, he claimed that the /o/ phoneme had a wide range of realization that sometimes included /a/. Today, Marianna Di Paolo agrees that the switch doesn't actually occur but that the phonological variations of the two phonemes nearly overlap for certain social groups. The tendency occurs in words such as /fark/ (fork), /barn/ (born), and /war/ (war).

The /or/-/ar/ switching tendency is not as common as the assumptions would lead us to believe, as shown in Table 3. The data I have collected indicate that it is dying out among younger speakers, especially in urban areas.

Of the informants who have responded so far, only 3% of those in the 18–30 age category realize /or/ as /ar/ (saying /war/ for "war," for example), compared to 45% of those over 55. Only four informants (all born before 1940) responded with the reverse realization (/born/ for "barn"). Table 4 shows the overall frequency of the /or/ to /ar/ switch according to age.

The Still Mill

In 1988, Michele Petersen researched the perception of the tense/lax distinction in Utah speech. She found that the "difficulty in perception of the tense/lax tonality features" in the environment preceding /l/ exists both for speakers from Utah and from other parts of the country. In other words, she found that the Utahns were actually merging the tense/lax vowels into the lax categories. Krahnke commented that this feature was "not usually raised to the level of linguistic consciousness (and therefore stigmatized)" in 1979 (9). Today, however, the laxing tendency is one of the defining characteristics of Utah speech. Nonnatives frequently point it out when asked to identify " Utahisms." My research so far indicates that the tendency is growing in strength.

Overall, 37% of the informants responded with the laxed front vowel when given the opportunity (see Table 5). Again, comparison of age groups shows a steady change over time (see Table 6). Data collected from these informants indicate general laxing of all tense front vowels preceding /l/. " Steel" becomes /st_l/ and "sale"

Table 3. Barn, Born, War (Total Percentage)

"barn"	/barn/ 95.5%	"born"	/born/ 95.5%	"war"	/wor/ 78.84%
	/born/ 2%		/barn/ 4%		/war/ 15.8%
	other 2.5%		other 0.5%		other 5.29%

Table 4. Barn, Born, War (By Age)

		18+	30+	55+
"barn"	/barn/	99%	95%	90%
	/born/	0%	5%	9%
	other	1%	0%	1%
"born"	/born/	99%	98%	89%
	/barn/	1%	2%	11%
"war"	/wor/	90%	87%	49%
	/war/	2%	11%	45%
	other	8%	2%	6%

Table 5. Heel and Sail (Total Percentage)

			/hil/ 65.5%
"sail"	/sel/ 56%	"heel"	/hɪl/ 31.5%
	/s*l/ 42.5%		/h*l/ 1.5%
	other 1.5%		other 1.5%

Table 6. Heel (By Age)

		18+	30+	55+
"heel"	/hil/	61%	69%	72%
	/hɪl/	38%	27%	22%
	/h*l/	1%	0%	4%
	other	0%	4%	2%

Table 7. Pillow, Milk, Hill (Total Percentage)

"pillow"		"milk"		"hill"	
	/pɪlo/ 83.5%		/mɪlk/ 81.37%		/hɪl/ 85%
			/m*lk/ 18.14%		/h*l/ 9%
	/p*lo/ 16.5%		other		/hil/ 3%
					other 3%

becomes /s_l/. This vowel shift results in common Utahisms such as "the still mill is runnin' today," and "there's a sell at ZCMI this weekend."

I have observed this vowel shift in the unmonitored speech of many young, educated Utah natives. For example, a BYU student recently exclaimed "It's going to hell!" as sleet-filled clouds gathered. I overheard another Utah native tell his friend about a company's $6 million annual sells. Similarly, a newspaper classified section recently advertised a telemarketing position that required "No sells" (*Daily Universe*). The employee who took the information for the ad explained that she simply wrote down what she heard over the phone and thus transcribed "sells" rather than "sales."

Young speakers seem to be taking this vowel shift a step further, reducing the front vowels almost entirely to /_/ before /l/. For example, when asked to identify body parts, one child pointed to the lower back part of her foot and said "/h_l/." The informants who responded /h_l/ to Question #7 (see Table 7) show this tendency. The vowel reduction occurs with some frequency in words such as "pillow" (becomes /p_lo/ — Question #4), and "milk" (becomes /m_lk/ — Question #6), as shown in Table 7.

Similar shifting has been observed in vowels preceding /r/. For example, "miracle" becomes /m_r_kl/ and "sure" become /_or/. Table 8, showing the pronunciation of "tour," indicates that the trend has become a dialectal characteristic for nearly half the speakers surveyed.

I'm Going to Warsh My Face

No prior research has been done on the /r/-adding tendency in Utah. Although many people included "warsh" in their list of Utah speech characteristics, I have found little evidence to support it. Only six informants responded with /war_/ when given the opportunity (see Table 9). Again, age seems to be the conditioning factor, with all six born before 1936. Data collected in the future may show that the tendency to include unnecessary *r*'s is actually more widespread. Several informants commented that they "used to say" warsh, but someone (often a teacher) trained them not to do it.

Table 8. Tour (Total Percentage)

"tour"	/tur/ 51%
	/tor/ 48%
	other 1%

Table 9. Wash (Total Percentage)

"wash"	/wa@/ 95%
	/war@/ 3%
	other 2%

Oh My Heck!

A majority of informants pointed out "made-up swear words" as a characteristic of Utah speech. The most common examples include "oh my heck," "good gosh," "fetch," "frig," "frag," and "frick." Several informants postulated that the nonexpletive tendency might derive from Mormon influence. Survey data show that only 15% of the informants responded with creative euphemisms when given the chance (see Table 10). Approximately 20% of LDS respondents used expletives when given the opportunity (see Table 11). In

this case, it appears that although the assumption isn't entirely valid, the explanation behind it might be.

Table 10. Euphemisms (Total Percentage)

Expletives	25.63%
Common Euphemisms	55.78%
Creative Euphemisms	15.08%
Other	3.52%

Table 11. Euphemisms (By Religion)

	LDS	non-LDS
Expletives	20%	63%
Common Euphemisms	55%	33%
Creative Euphemisms	16%	4%
Other	9%	0%

Conclusion

These figures show that, overall, Utahns do not predict their language accurately. Each of the assumptions mentioned exists in only a minority of the speakers surveyed. Utah demographics are changing rapidly. As families move from their traditional homes in small mountain towns to the bigger cities, leveling reduces the state's rich dialect diversity. Outside influences are also affecting Utah dialects. For example, Salt Lake City has received an influx from California in the last few years. In the south, St. George now hosts almost as many newcomers as natives. The 2002 Olympics are already drawing out-of-state companies, and as the event nears more people will move in. These ongoing changes make it more urgent than ever to conduct comprehensive dialect research in Utah.

Works Cited

Baker, Margaret P. (1986). "Some Functions of Mormon In-Group Language in Creating and Maintaining Ethnic Boundaries." Diss. Arizona State University.

Bookstaber, Richard Michael David. (1973). "Mormonisms: A Study of the Language of the Land of Mormondom." *Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the Annual Symposium Deseret Language and Linguistics Society.* Provo, UT. 50–52.

Brown, Becky. "The Indiana Dialect Survey." Unpublished essay. Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.

Conrad, Bruce C., and Mark D. Weiner. (1973). "Word Frequency Count of Mormon English." *Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the Annual Symposium Deseret Language and Linguistics Society.* Provo, UT. 32–35.

Cook, Stanley J. (1969). "Language Change and the Emergence of an Urban Dialect in Utah." Diss. University of Utah.

Daily Universe. Monday, October 14, 1996.

Di Paolo, Marianna. (1990). "Phonation Differences and the Phonetic Content of the Tense-Lax Contrast in Utah English." *Language Variation and Change* 2.2: 155–204.

Di Paolo, Marianna. (1992). "Hypercorrection in Response to the Apparent Merger of (_) and (a) in Utah English." *Language and Communication: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12.3–4: 267–292.

Di Paolo, Marianna. (1993). "Propredicate Do in the English of the Intermountain West." *American Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage* 68.4: 339–356.

Helquist, Val. (1970). "A Study of One Phonological Variable in Urban and Rural Utah (Salt Lake City)." Thesis University of Utah.

Krahnke, Karl J. (1979). "Sociolinguistic Variation and the Vowel System of Northern Utah: A Preliminary Look." *Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the Annual Symposium. 5–6 Apr. 1979. Deseret Language and Linguistics Society.* Provo, UT. 6–13.

Kurath, Hans, Raven I. McDavid, Raymond K. O'Cain, George T. Dorrill, and Sara L. Sanders. (1979). "Preview: The Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States." *Journal of English Linguistics* 13: 37–47.

McDavid, Raven I. (1965). "American Social Dialects." *College English* 26: 254–260.

McDavid, Raven I. (1973). "New Directions in American Dialectology." *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: An International Review of English Studies* 5.1–2.: 9–25.

McDavid, Raven I. (1983). "Retrospect." *Journal of English Linguistics* 16: 47–54.

Pardoe, T. Earle. 1935, June. "Some Studies of Rocky Mountain Dialects." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 21: 348–355.

Petersen, Michele. (1988). "Phonetic Variation and Change: An Analysis of Steel and Still." *Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Symposium. 17–18 Mar. 1988. Deseret Language and Linguistics Society.* Provo, UT. 47–55.

Reed, Carroll E. (1977). *Dialects of American English.* Rev. ed. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P.

Sorenson, John L. (1973). "Language of the Mormons: A Social Perspective." *Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the Annual Symposium Deseret Language and Linguistics Society.* Provo, UT. 1–5.

Wallace, Rachel L. (1973). "Appendix: A Working List of Mormon Language Lexicon." *Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the Annual Symposium. Deseret Language and Linguistics Society.* Provo, UT. 10–19.

Walters, Keith. (1988). "Dialectology." *Linguistics: The Cambridge Survey.* Ed. Frederick Newmeyer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 119–39.

Wolsey, Heber G. (1973). "Mormon Language in a Non-Mormon World." *Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the Annual Symposium Deseret Language and Linguistics Society.* Provo, UT. 36–39.