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The "Missionary Voice": Bona Fide Sociolect or Figment of the Mormon Linguistic Imagination?

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Honors Thesis

THE "MISSIONARY VOICE": BONA FIDE SOCIOLECT OR FIGMENT OF THE
MORMON LINGUISTIC IMAGINATION?

by
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ABSTRACT

THE "MISSIONARY VOICE": BONA FIDE SOCIOLECT OR FIGMENT OF THE
MORMON LINGUISTIC IMAGINATION?

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Bachelor of Arts

Can members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints consistently identify the

so-called "missionary voice"? That is, when presented with a series of unidentified

speech samples that are a mix of currently serving young missionaries and their college-

aged peers, how accurate will they be at selecting missionaries from the lineup?

Additionally, what features (prosodic and otherwise) make the missionary voice distinct?

That is, which characteristics of missionary speech most strongly index it as such? In this

paper, I seek to answer both of these questions through a sociolinguistic lens (and, in part,

via the tools of perceptual dialectology). I discuss the results of a 21-question survey I

conducted to determine whether respondents could reliably distinguish the missionaries'

speech samples from the non-missionaries'. Although the survey's results were

statistically inconclusive, I argue that much can be learned about the nature of this

sociolect through a careful qualitative examination of respondents' short-answer

descriptions detailing what they believe constitutes the missionary voice. I then compare

these descriptions to my own impressionistic analysis of the missionaries' speech

samples to determine which of the identified features were most salient to the

respondents' decision-making process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Life itself depends on your filling and being filled with lives that are not your own.

- *Adam Miller*

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I.   Introduction

As a discipline, sociolinguistics is concerned primarily with situating language in the broader social world. Sociolinguists thus seek to account for the patterns of variation that emerge when the rules of our internal grammars—intricate systems for constructing well-formed words, phrases, and sentences which we acquire as very young children, in the case of our native language(s)—collide with the various identities we hold in that social world. Among them are age, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. While these sorts of identities, or variables, are frequently examined in sociolinguistic studies, Hary (2011) notes that "an important variable, often overlooked [by sociolinguists and others], is religious affiliation and identity" (43). Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) is, I believe, one such overlooked religious variable. In what follows, I offer an account of the collision between the English language and an identity, that of "full-time missionary,"[1] held by a particular subset of the Latter-day Saint population.

In early January 2022, my sister Megan—then serving as a missionary for the LDS Church in Finland—sent me a voice memo (transcribed below) about *another* voice memo that she had recently received from a childhood friend who was also on a mission at the time. Megan's words anecdotally illustrate the sense I'd had that something interesting was happening at the nexus of missionary culture and language:

Oh my gosh Josh, OK [my friend] just sent me a voice memo and I can't. It

doesn't sound like her. She changed to a "missionary voice." It is insane. I can't

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[1]Latter-day Saint missionaries are religious volunteers who devote all of their time to proselytizing—sharing the LDS Church's Christian message—and community service. Young men serve for a period of two years, while young women serve for 18 months. Missionaries are generally between the ages of 18 and 26.

even explain it. Oh my gosh, like at first I didn't even recognize it was her. I just

want to submit [her] voice memo to you. I can't even listen to it; it's painful

because she's so cute but it sounds—. (Her voice then trails off.)

Of course, Megan was not the first to have noticed or commented on

missionaries' unique speaking style. I have heard others complain many times about this

particular voice, as well as other unique modes of speech that Latter-day Saints can adopt

when speaking or teaching publicly. These other styles include the "spirit voice," "Relief

Society[2] voice," and even the "CES[3] voice." Impressionistically, the most prominent

among all these voices—at least in terms of how often it is referenced in casual

conversation—is the missionary voice. This makes sense, as the LDS missionary corps

has a much broader demographic reach than either the Relief Society or Church

Educational System do.

The focus of my paper will thus be the missionary voice. By the term, I

specifically mean the unique mode of speech some native English-speaking members of

the LDS Church seem to adopt when in particular ecclesiastical settings. Although the

name of the voice itself suggests only one such setting—that of full-time, volunteer

missionary service—in my observation, *former* missionaries can at times slip back into

this vocal setting while speaking from the pulpit or teaching a lesson during Sunday

school. However, in this study, I concentrated exclusively on the voice as realized by

currently serving young[4] missionaries. One final terminological caveat: although some

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[2]The Relief Society is the LDS Church's global women's organization.

[3]This initialism refers to the LDS Church Educational System, of which Brigham Young University is a part.

[4]Some retired couples also choose to serve administrative or humanitarian missions for the church; they rarely spend significant time proselytizing, however, and I will not be examining their unique modes of speech (if any) here.

sociolinguists would perhaps label this phenomenon a register[5] or dialect (or even—most specifically—a sociolect,[6] as I did in the title of this paper), I will not make a judgment here. For now, the more generic term *voice* will suffice.

But what exactly do I mean linguistically by the term *missionary voice*? While it lacks a rigorous definition for now, from my experience in the LDS Church, I would say that it generally involves at least the three following things: 1) the utilization of intonational patterns typical of questions when making declarative statements,[7] 2) relatively frequent pausing, perhaps for spiritual effect (regardless of why it's done, the pausing frequency helps to differentiate missionary speech from an everyday conversational tone), and 3) pronunciation of words such as *family* and *prophet* with an inflection reminiscent of Utah English. Overall, it seems that the missionary voice is primarily a prosodic[8] phenomenon, although the voice has salient characteristics on the segmental (i.e., involving individual speech sounds), suprasegmental, lexical, and perhaps even grammatical levels.[9]

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[5]The overlap between these terms in the relevant literature is, in any case, significant. As the Wikipedia entry on *register* notes, "Discourse categorization is a complex problem, and even in the general definition of *register* given above (language variation defined by use rather than user), there are cases where other kinds of language variation, such as regional or age dialect, overlap. Due to this complexity, scholarly consensus has not been reached for the definitions of terms such as *register*, *field*, or *tenor*; different scholars' definitions of these terms are often in direct contradiction with each other" (Wikipedia 2023).

[6]Romaine (2000) provides a helpful framework for understanding where sociolects (or as she labels them, "social dialects") fit within the broader concept of "dialect." She notes: "the study of dialects or dialectology has to do with boundaries, which often coincide with geographical features such as rivers and mountains. Boundaries are, however, often of a social nature, e.g. between different social class groups. In this case we may speak of 'social dialects.' Social dialects say who we are, and regional dialects where we come from" (Romaine 2000: 2).

[7]This phenomenon is known as *uptalk*, or, as linguists have more formally labeled it, *high rising terminal* (HRI).

[8]Prosody involves the study of phonological phenomena above the level of individual speech sounds like rhythm, intonation, and stress.

[9]Some Latter-day Saints have noted that missionaries are especially attentive to prescriptive grammatical rules and "sounding correct."

Despite the frequency of my coreligionists' complaints, no one has yet provided a robust linguistic definition of the missionary voice or, more importantly, verified that members can consistently identify those who are speaking this sociolect. In this study, then, I ask two related questions: 1) Can members of the church consistently identify the missionary voice? That is, when presented with several unidentified speech samples—some from currently serving missionaries, others from non-missionaries—how accurate will the given church members be at selecting missionaries from the lineup? 2) What features (phonological—specifically prosodic—and otherwise) make the missionary voice distinct?

Linguists are increasingly interested in documenting the full range of human language variation. Much like there has been a push to recognize and appreciate diversity in other academic realms, so too have linguists felt the call to more fully acknowledge linguistic variety, in all its many forms. While this project doesn't involve documenting a dying indigenous language or preserving an overlooked regional American English dialect—important, more traditional ways of acknowledging linguistic diversity—I nonetheless believe that coming to a better understanding of what sets Latter-day Saint missionary speech apart (no pun intended)[10] is one important way of both acknowledging linguistic diversity and studying the fascinating yet underexplored overlap between religion and language.

II.   Literature Review

There has been, as previously noted, little work done on the characteristics of the missionary voice. One of the few pieces of similar research was done by Villarreal and

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[10]Missionaries are formally blessed by their regional church leader (someone equivalent to the bishop of a Catholic diocese) before beginning their term of service. This blessing is referred to as being "set apart."

Eckstein (2014), who analyzed intonational differences among members of several Christian denominations, including Latter-day Saints, while they were reading aloud from scripture. While Holliday and Villarreal (2020) are in the same ballpark, their study is concerned with strictly ethnolinguistic speaker judgements (specifically those surrounding African American English and Barack Obama's voice). They were seeking to determine which prosodic cues help listeners index a speaker as African American or not. Similarly, Smyth, Jacobs, and Rogers (2003) sought to better understand what constitutes the "gay voice." The goal, in their words, "was to shed light on the specific features to which listeners attend when judging whether a man's voice sounds gay or straight" (Smyth, Jacobs, and Rogers 2003: 329). By the same token, I am seeking "to shed light on the specific features to which listeners attend when judging whether" someone is or isn't an LDS missionary.

It is worth noting here that this kind of linguistic research falls under the sociolinguistics sub-discipline of perceptual dialectology, which is also sometimes considered a branch of folk linguistics—that is, the study of how non-linguists perceive and process variation in language. Although listeners' judgements don't always correspond with scientific, linguistic reality, an underlying assumption of perceptual dialectology is that folk beliefs about language matter; as Cramer (2016) argues, "the inclusion of folk beliefs in linguistic studies can offer important insights into the realities of language variation and change." This was the case in the African American and gay voice studies, and I believe that including "folk beliefs" in this study of the missionary voice will prove similarly fruitful.

The present study also fits within the rubric of third-wave sociolinguistics. As Eckert (2012) notes in her foundational paper outlining three distinct (historical) waves in the practice of sociolinguistics, third-wave sociolinguistic research emphasizes the capacity of language to express "the full range of social concerns in a given community" rather than focusing on "broad correlations between linguistic variables and the macrosociological categories of socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity, and age," as earlier work had (87). One's status as a missionary or non-missionary is clearly not a macrosociological category, and thus can only be studied within a framework that appreciates the impact of these kinds of subtler, finer-grained identities (i.e., that "full range of social concerns").

Stanley (personal communication) is currently conducting research on the broader Mormon speech community. As a part of his work, he asked Latter-day Saints in several Western U.S. states to respond to the following prompt: "Some people feel that LDS missionaries have a particular way of speaking, especially while in the middle of a lesson. Do you think people sound different when they're on their missions?" In a preliminary analysis of the responses to this question collected by Stanley, I found a strikingly high level of consistency between respondents' perceptions of what constitutes missionary speech. And although I analyzed only 30 or so of the 149 responses (survey respondents provided their answers in the form of a 30-second to three-minute-long voice recording), I also found the correspondence between interviewees' responses and my own provisional, tripartite definition of the missionary voice—set forth in the introduction—to be notable. For instance, several of those interviewed noticed uptalk—missionaries' tendency to end all of their sentences, even declarative ones, with a rising intonation.

Others mentioned the rehearsed or memorized quality of the speech, especially in the middle of lessons (this was another one of the themes: respondents' belief that the voice emerges most strongly during teaching situations, as the prompt to which they were responding to some extent implies). Still others described the earnest, hyper-positive[11] tone that so many elders and sisters[12] seem to adopt, with one man even mentioning that he has told his son, a recently returned missionary, to stop speaking with a "spirit voice." Essentially everyone interviewed agreed that missionaries speak differently, in essence positing the existence of a distinctive missionary voice.

I also hypothesize that there is a nexus between Utah English and the missionary voice. As previously mentioned, I have found some missionaries' pronunciation of certain religious or spiritual words to be reminiscent of Utah English pronunciations. To be sure, a large number of missionaries hail from Utah to begin with, but I think that the explanations for the connection must extend beyond merely this simple demographic fact; many of the missionaries who served in my local Virginia congregation while I was growing up weren't from Utah, and yet their speech still evidenced this feature (at least as I recall). Of course, the flagship Latter-day Saint missionary training center is located in Provo, Utah, and so the six to nine weeks which new missionaries spend in this environment may contribute to a tendency towards acquisition of certain features of Utah English (that being said, it would most likely take a good deal longer for the average person to fully acquire features of any dialect). For these reasons, some of the literature I reviewed in preparation for this study dealt with characteristics of Utah English itself.

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[11]"Hyperpositivity," while a memorable turn of phrase, is of course not a technical linguistic term, and it is unclear to what actual acoustic traits respondents were referring when they described certain missionaries' voices as hyperpositive.

[12]These are alternate terms for male and female missionaries.

One pertinent example of research on Utah English that I found in reviewing the existing literature comes from a paper written by a trio of BYU linguists. They concluded that "listeners with more experience with Utah English are better able to identify Utah speakers than those with less experience" and that "listeners from Utah use less stereotypical characteristics of Utah English for identifying Utahns from non-Utahns" (Baker, Eddington, and Nay 2009: 48).

In another paper published on speakers of Utah English, Lillie (1997) analyzed over two hundred regional dialect surveys that she and her field workers had administered in Utah (i.e., to persons who had lived in Utah for most of their lives). She was seeking to understand what assumptions Utahns had about their language and if these assumptions were correct. She found that although Utahns had plenty of assumptions about their speech, none of them were correct (i.e., the features of Utah English they cited were found in only a minority of respondents).

Although the conclusions Lillie (1997) drew from her work undercut, to some extent, the assumption that Utah English is a cohesive dialect—since its native speakers can't always accurately describe it—Baker, Eddington, and Nay (2009) provide evidence that it in fact is; Utah English is thus a viable potential source for features of the missionary voice.

Di Paolo (1993) examined one feature of Utah speech itself, namely usage of the propredicate *do* (as in sentences such as the following: "I don't know if Martha saw it. She may have done"). Her study utilized primarily naturalistic, qualitative data gathered from spontaneous speech and written texts as well as tape-recorded interview data taken

from the Intermountain Language Survey (ILS). Di Paolo concluded that the pro-*do* does occur with some regularity in speakers of Utah English.

Additionally, in a well-known study performed by another pair of BYU linguists, three possible phonetic correlates of "*t*-dropping" were analyzed in speakers of Utah English compared with speakers of other (non-Utah) Western American dialects in order to better understand which correlate was most clearly behind the widely stigmatized Utahn "*t*-drop." In conclusion, the authors found it was most probable that the orally released "*t*-drop" was the culprit correlate (Eddington and Savage 2012).

Finally, in his MA thesis, Sykes (2010) studied the various sociolinguistic factors that lie behind the glide-weakening phenomenon, as present in Utah English by holding seven different sociolinguistic interviews. He further investigated the extent to which Utah English is consistent with Southern U.S. dialectal patterns. He concluded that "glide weakening is present in Utah English and is conditioned by the voicing of the following consonant, consistent with Southern patterns" (Sykes 2010: iii). Sykes (2010) also identified a gender component to this phenomenon, with men weakening their glides more often than women did.

Of all the features of Utah English that were identified in the studies which I examined, the most salient to the present study is "*t*-dropping" (a feature missionaries have perhaps adopted, thus leading to their pronunciation of certain religious words in a Utah English style). I have not consistently heard missionaries using either the propredicate *do* or weakening their glides; however, I included a mention of these features in this literature review in order to paint a more robust picture of a regional

dialect that may have contributed to the development of missionaries' distinctive speaking style.

In sum, the existing literature, while relatively sparse, supports the approach I am taking to studying the missionary voice; sociolinguists have examined listener perceptions of African Americans' speech and gay men's speech along similar lines (seeking to determine what people believe constitutes a "Black voice" or "gay voice"). The research I reviewed on Utah English demonstrates that this regional dialect has a variety of features that could conceivably be acquired by missionaries and then "passed down" over time, thus contributing distinguishing features to the missionary voice. Additionally, the data Stanley (personal communication) has collected seems to indicate that many if not most Latter-day Saints have concrete, well-developed beliefs about what the missionary voice is. The present investigation seeks to expand and enrich this qualitative database of Latter-day Saints' beliefs about the missionary voice while also testing their capacity to identify these speech patterns (which they've stigmatized) in actual missionaries.

III.   Methodology

i. Speaker selection

To carry out the study, I obtained five-second-long recordings of 10 different missionaries (five male, five female) and 10 different college-aged non-missionaries (five male, five female) speaking in natural conversation. Both the missionaries and non-missionaries were native speakers of English.[13] It is important to note that I selected

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[13]While there are many young Latter-day Saints from abroad assigned to serve English-speaking missions, I have assumed here that the task of initially learning (in some cases) or fully mastering (in others) English does not leave room for their acquisition of the missionary voice, which is a finer-grained, more specialized

samples which clearly exemplified the missionary voice, based on my own impression of what this voice is. In other words, mine is not a random sample, but rather one that was deliberately shaped in order to contrast—as clearly as possible—prototypically missionary voices from non-missionary voices.

Although I sought where possible to control for demographic factors, more than anything else I looked for speech samples without any highly marked regional American English accents, as I assumed these could distract respondents from the only relevant demographic dimension of this study—missionary/non-missionary status.

The missionary recordings came from a mix of sources, including the LDS Church's outward-facing "missionary" webpage, the missionary-related YouTube channel "Called to Share" (the channel is not managed by the LDS Church), and instructional videos that missionaries use while in training.

The non-missionary recordings also came from a variety of online sources, including the LDS Church's official YouTube channel, a YouTube channel featuring interviews with BYU students (the channel is unaffiliated with the university itself), and a single YouTube video highlighting interviews done with students at Colorado Christian University.

In selecting a five-second portion of each recording, my guiding principle was semantic neutrality. That is, I assiduously avoided any language that respondents could have construed as obviously religious (i.e., phrases of the variety that would elicit an "only a missionary would say that" reaction) or secular ("only a college student would

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register. Although I am clearly not a second-language acquisition scholar, this has, in any event, been my sense from interacting with L2 English speakers serving their missions in the United States.

say that"). In other words, I wanted respondents to be attuned not to *what* the speakers were saying, but *how* they were saying it.

The one caveat to this rule of semantic neutrality is that two of the male missionary voice samples came from a series of missionary training videos—relatively well-known among Latter-day Saints—called *The District*. While only five respondents explicitly mentioned this series in the short-response field at the conclusion of the survey (with four of them stating that their identification of this fact caused them to automatically select "missionary"), others may have been influenced by this association as well. And while the two missionaries whom I selected from *The District* videos were not talking about overtly religious topics in their clips, anyone familiar enough with the series would have most likely identified them as such regardless. I decided to take this methodological risk because publicly available voice samples featuring male missionaries were scarce. *The District* was one of the few places I could turn to for quality samples of this kind. Recordings of female missionaries, on the other hand, were easier to come by, and I didn't have to resort to using *The District* as the database in their case.

The female missionaries were from Nashville, Tennessee, South Jordan, Utah, St. Paul, Minnesota, Toronto, Canada, and Santa Clarita, California. One of the male missionaries was from Portland, Oregon, and information on the hometowns of the other four was not available. Of the five female non-missionaries featured in the survey clips, three were Latter-day Saints while two were not (the two non-Latter-day Saints were students at Colorado Christian University). Among the three Latter-day Saints, one was from Provo, Utah and another was a former missionary. Further data about these respondents was unavailable. Of the five male non-missionaries, one was from Utah and

two were former missionaries. All five were Latter-day Saints. Additional demographic information about the male non-missionaries was not available.

ii. Survey

Once I had gathered these recordings, I created an online survey via Qualtrics (see appendix B for a link) that asked respondents to label each of the twenty randomly ordered recordings as belonging to a missionary or non-missionary. Respondents were not told how many of each there would be; they were simply informed that "the samples come from a mix of full-time Latter-day Saint missionaries and college-aged young adults." They were given two multiple-choice options from which to select—either "missionary" or "student." At the conclusion of the survey (question 22), I also asked respondents to write a short paragraph identifying—impressionistically—what they felt distinguished missionaries' speech from non-missionaries' speech; here is the full text of that question: "In two or three sentences, describe what led you to identify some of the speakers as missionaries and others as students." The survey opened in early March 2023, and the bulk of survey responses were collected during March and April 2023.

I distributed the survey link using a wide variety of channels, including the BYU Linguistics Department's weekly newsletter, personal text messages to family and friends, and posts on four different Facebook groups for Latter-day Saint congregations to which I currently or used to belong; three of these congregations are located in the northern Virginia area and one is in Provo, Utah. The target sample size was 100 people; the actual sample size, 95, was close to this ideal. 93 of the 95 respondents (97.9 %) were Latter-day Saints, while 77 out of 94 (81.9%) were former missionaries (one individual did not answer this demographic question). Thirty-five of the respondents were male, 59

were female, and one identified as "other" (36.8% / 62.1% / 1.1%). The respondents'

ages had a mean of 29.75, a median of 24, a range of 56—the oldest participant was 71

the youngest was 15—and a standard deviation of 11.91.

Participants were incentivized to take the survey via a gift-card raffle. In early

May 2023, I distributed eight Amazon digital gift cards of varying denominations (from

$10 to $100) to randomly selected respondents who had elected to participate in the raffle

by entering their name and a valid email address on a separate, linked survey.

IV. Results, Discussion, and Analysis

i. Overall survey results

After concluding the data-gathering process, I analyzed respondents' scores on the voice

recording–identification portion of the quiz (questions 2–21), taken out of 20, to

determine whether, as my title asks, the missionary voice is in fact "a bona fide sociolect"

or simply "a figment of the Mormon linguistic imagination." Specifically, my friend and

statistical consultant on the project, Isaac Peterson, ran a one-sample t-test, against a

chance score of 10 out of 20, on the data set of 95 completed survey responses. He used

the R statistical programming language to perform this analysis. The results of the one-

sample t-test are as follows:

Table 1: Results of t-test

|	
n	95
p-value	0.16
mean:	10.27
median	10
confidence interval	(9.89, 10.66)

The histogram (see figure 1 below) and qq plot (see appendix A) show that the distribution of scores is heavier tailed than a typical normal distribution would be, meaning that there were a greater number of especially high or low scores than would have been expected from a true normal distribution of data. To be clear, this *t*-test assessed whether people could accurately identify a missionary by their voice at better-than-chance odds. Because the *p*-value was high (p > .05), it means that they could not. In other words, if I had 95 people randomly selecting answers to my survey, there is a 16% chance of obtaining identical or more extreme results (e.g., the same mean and median or higher).

<div align="center">ii. Analysis of short answer responses</div>

Although I did not find a statistically significant result, given that my *p*-value was larger than 0.05, I noticed other interesting patterns in the data and used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore them. By "interesting patterns," I primarily mean those audio samples associated with questions whose correct-response rates were in the 70% and above range. This 70% threshold was chosen because it seems indicative of a true underlying pattern rather than the result of random guesses. In these cases, I sought to understand what about the given missionary or non-missionary's voice made it seem so obviously "missionary" or "non-missionary" to respondents.

Due to the complexity of prosodic phenomena, the difficulty of capturing and systematically studying intonation, and my lack of experience in the area, I decided to carefully listen to each voice recording and note when the missionaries' speech exhibited the kinds of tell-tale missionary-voice characteristics that survey participants mentioned

Figure 1: Distribution of Respondent Scores
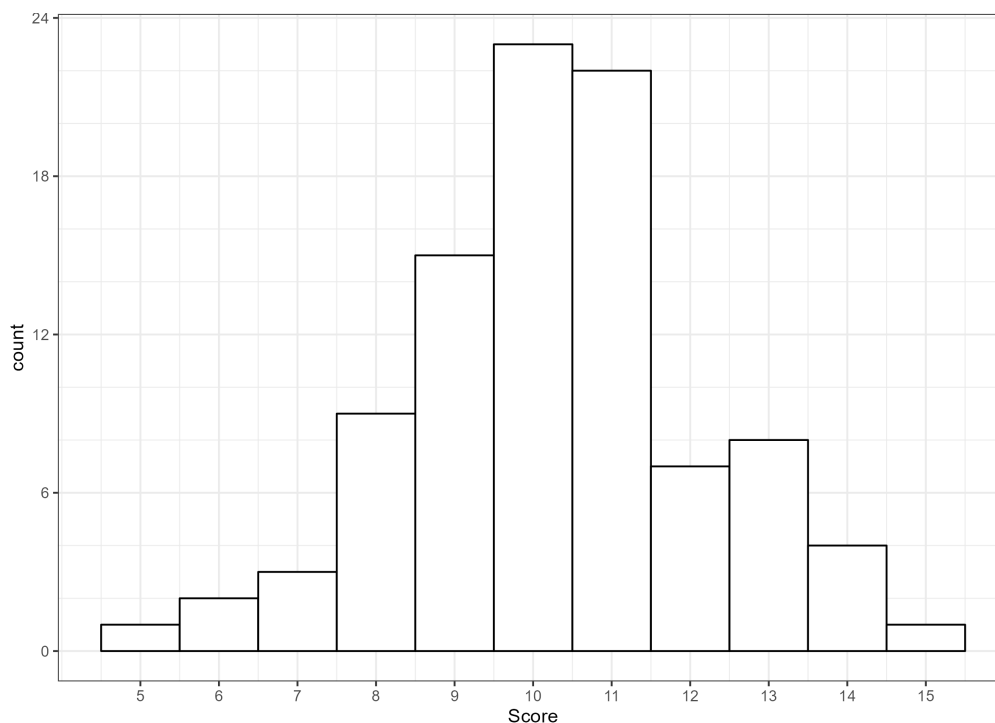
when writing their concluding short responses (instead of examining the samples with the help of acoustic-analysis software like Praat). To aid in this process, I created a two-column table (see appendix C) with the correct-response rates listed for each question; I then paid special attention in my analysis to the aforementioned interesting patterns—those voices which respondents were able to consistently and correctly label (i.e., 70% of the time or more) as being from either a missionary or non-missionary.

I first considered the three missionaries whose voices were identified as "missionary" by 70% or more of respondents, and then moved on to examining the three non-missionaries whose voices were correctly identified at that same rate or higher. I

should also note that there was one missionary whose voice was incorrectly identified as belonging to a non-missionary by 74.7% of those who took the survey. And interestingly enough, there were five such 70%-or-more samples on the non-missionary side that were incorrectly identified as being missionaries, meaning that five of the non-missionaries apparently had distinguishing features about their voice that convinced a significant majority of respondents that they were missionaries.

It is perhaps helpful to conceive of these categories as fitting into a two-by-two square (see table 2), with the "correct/incorrect" variable on one side of the square and "missionary/non-missionary" status (as determined by respondents) on another—thus yielding four combinations. Of greatest interest to me, unsurprisingly, are those missionary samples in the 70%-or-more category; I am after all attempting to define the

Table 2: Taxonomy of Selected Results

	samples identified as missionaries	samples identified as non-missionaries
samples correctly identified 70% of the time or more	3	3
samples incorrectly identified 70% of the time or more	5	1

missionary voice and not the non-missionary voice. *Regardless* of whether the individual speaking was actually a missionary, the simple fact that such a large number of respondents felt that there were enough stereotypically "missionary-esque" feature(s) of the given voice to label it as belonging to a missionary is, I believe, a phenomenon worth investigating.

Before proceeding with a qualitative analysis of the subset of speech samples, I had to know what to listen for. I therefore combed through the short-answer responses to question 22, the text of which is included for reference above (there were 88 responses, generally not longer than two or three sentences each) and made a list of several themes or phrases which recurred throughout these responses. I then referred to this list while listening to those speech samples selected via the criteria just outlined. Many participants referred to a rehearsed quality in missionaries' speech, sometimes using terms like *storytelling* or *planned* to describe it; "They have a more rehearsed quality. You can hear just a smidge of fourth wall. Also, the positivity feels a bit forced," wrote one survey respondent. Others noted that missionaries tended to repeat words randomly, generally spoke at a slower rate, and paused more frequently.

Still another respondent singled out sister missionaries, noting their enthusiasm and "smiling voice"[14]: "For women, there was a specific cadence that made it sound like they were intentionally smiling and trying to be peppy." Continuing on this thread of perceived gender differences in the missionary voice,[15] two other study participants observed respectively that "sisters seem to have 'it' worse than elders" and "I feel like sister missionaries also get this accent where they move their mouths differently (again, sorry I can't articulate that better)." More broadly, respondents seemed to identify a cluster of other distinguishing characteristics that relate to the aforementioned rehearsed quality of missionary speech. Words and phrases used to label these characteristics included "affected," "stilted," "insincere," "more structured," "performativity," and

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[14]Laver (1980: 34) calls this a "labiodentalized voice."

[15]Although an examination of the relationship between gender and the missionary voice lies beyond the scope of the present study, it is an area that I believe is ripe for exploration.

"pedagogical tone." One answer reads, "The speech [of missionaries] . . . just sounds less authentic and more structured and performative."

Another interesting feature of the short-response data set is the frequency with which respondents mentioned intonational and other prosodic aspects of missionary speech. There were nine specific mentions of the word *intonation*, as well as many other responses that touched on that same concept without using the term. Much like those polled in Stanley's research cited earlier, seven of those who took my survey noticed intonation typical of questions seeping into missionaries' declarative statements (i.e., uptalk). For example, respondents noticed that missionaries "end each phrase with a high pitch instead of the usual lower pitch," speak "with rising intonations," "slightly adopt the rising tone of questions," "sometimes go up in pitch at the end of their sentences/phrases like they are asking a question," and end "their sentences . . . with an upward intonation." Relatedly, the unique rhythm and cadence of missionaries' speech was also a frequent subject of discussion in the comments; the term *cadence* appears seven times in the data. Although *cadence* is not a term phoneticians would formally employ, non-specialists who use it are most probably referring to prosody.

One other note on the qualitative data set—few if any of the respondents addressed distinct features of the non-missionary voice. This is for obvious reasons; Latter-day Saint missionaries are a well-defined social and cultural group, whereas the class of people who *aren't* encompasses an exceedingly broad and diverse range of social categories. Consequently, participants in the survey often described the missionary voice

in terms of things it was and the non-missionary voice in terms of things it wasn't. As one respondent noted, "I didn't have a metric for the other, non-missionary voice."[16]

iii. Qualitative analysis of the recordings

Questions 5 (74.7% of responses correct), 8 (93.7%), and 10 (78.9%) feature voice samples from a sister missionary and two elders, respectively. After listening to each of the samples several times, I came to the tentative conclusion that the unusual accuracy with which respondents identified these samples as belonging to missionaries stems from their frequent pausing and deliberate, almost didactic cadence—both factors identified as salient by respondents in their answers to question 22. While I cannot completely rule out the influence of semantic content on participants' selections, nothing that any of the missionaries spoke about in the three clips was overtly "missionary-esque" (see my note about semantic neutrality in the methods section). The sister missionary discussed the first time she performed a night dive, elder 1 spoke of his adopted grandmother's recent passing from cancer, and elder 2 spoke about recovering from injuries sustained during a car accident. Although the elders' stories do have more of a feel-good, "you-can-overcome-your-trials" ethos to them, I, again, think that more than anything else it was the missionaries' earnestness and deliberateness (as coded prosodically via things like more frequent pausing, slower speech rate, and variable rhythm) in telling these stories that cued respondents in on their status as such.

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[16]This participant's response is indicative of a broader sociolinguistic concept—the notion that standard varieties of a language (e.g., standard American English) are generally defined by what they aren't or don't have, rather than by what they are or do have. Missionaries serve only temporarily, mostly shedding their distinctive voice when they return home. However, standardization has more pernicious impacts upon those whose dialects stem from durable markers of identity like socioeconomic class or ethnicity. Relatedly, Romaine (2000) notes that "the process of standardization . . . is one of the main agents of inequality," thanks to "uneven distribution of access to the standard variety" (87).

To be perfectly candid, even after listening multiple times to the five non-missionary samples that were consistently rated as missionary samples, I had trouble determining a linguistic throughline that could explain why so many who took my survey confused them for missionaries; none of the "themes" readers identified in their short answers seemed to apply. This most likely indicates that there is some acoustic feature that people are listening for that I've yet to identify. A more thorough analysis of speech rate, intonation, voice quality, and so on would be necessary to say for certain.

V.   Conclusion

The present study has sought to determine the difference between the speech of college-aged Americans and that of Latter-day Saint missionaries. While the quantitative results were in a statistical sense inconclusive, the qualitative analysis I performed points strongly in the direction of the missionary voice being a legitimate phenomenon. To put it another way, in this paper's title, I laid out the fundamental linguistic question that I was seeking to answer: Is this voice merely a figment of the Mormon linguistic imagination or a bona fide sociolect? I believe that I have presented meaningful evidence that it is the latter. The fact that over 80 different people were able to articulate coherent, concrete, and relatively similar reasons for why they labeled certain voices as belonging to missionaries and others as belonging to non-missionaries means that many of those same people share at least some overlapping concept of what constitutes the missionary voice. Certainly stereotypes and LDS missionary folklore play a role in the formation of these conceptions, and yet the level of detail in which many respondents described their sense of what makes the missionary voice unique is an indication that such conceptions must also be rooted, at least partly, in reality.

There is, of course, much more research to be done on the missionary voice as a linguistic phenomenon. For one, I still have yet to prove that Latter-day Saints can consistently identify the missionary voice when presented with a mix of young adult speech samples. They may be able to robustly describe it, but in order to prove more conclusively that the missionary voice is a sociolect, one would need to replicate the study I performed (ideally with a larger sample size), but this time obtain a statistically significant result. Alternatively, one could also perform additional phonetic analysis to better understand why so many people had such consistent reactions to the "seventy-percenters" (i.e., the audio samples associated with questions whose correct-response rates were in the 70% and above range—see table 2), especially those non-missionaries whose voices were consistently labeled as belonging to missionaries.

There are at least two things that I believe could be done to improve upon my earlier methods and yield statistically significant results: 1) Increase the length of the samples from five seconds to at least 15 seconds. 2) Obtain clips of missionaries during teaching situations, since many of the respondents mentioned that it is in such situations that the missionary voice seems to emerge most strongly (although this would probably involve embedding with missionaries—likely a non-starter with the LDS Church's Missionary Department; it could also be difficult to find content-neutral segments while missionaries are providing this religious instruction).

My findings are relevant to the field of sociolinguistics as they demonstrate the discrete language-based characteristics that certain subgroups within larger organizations can acquire. They are a reminder that it is important to take our analysis of what makes a

group's language profile distinct beyond traditional boundaries and stereotypical defining characteristics.

For instance, just as the corps of full-time missionaries form a unique subset of the Latter-day Saint population, so foreign diplomats (i.e., those working in a country's diplomatic service) form a subset within a ministry of foreign affairs. Perhaps German diplomats subtly change the way they speak German, prosodically and segmentally, during a tour abroad at an embassy. A more familiar example comes from African American English. Many Americans would, in all likelihood, be quick to identify several stereotypical features of this dialect. However, African Americans are not a monolith, and neither is their language. In reality, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of African American English*es*, split up along all sorts of different lines—e.g., geographic, occupational, and religious. In other words, my point is that in-group/out-group distinctions can be more fine-grained than we sometimes admit, and this matters for the discipline, because wherever there is a social cleavage of any kind, language differentiation is likely taking place.

This research also raises interesting questions surrounding the *why* behind this kind of sociolinguistic differentiation. When, why, and how do missionaries pick up the voice? Is it passed down from veteran missionaries to new recruits in the field, or is Provo's missionary training center the principal site of acquisition? How conscious of a choice is acquiring the missionary voice at all? For Eckert (2012) and other contemporary practitioners of variationist sociolinguistics—who assert that "variation does not simply reflect, but also constructs, social meaning"—the missionaries' choice here is probably quite conscious (87). Speakers, in their view, are not "passive and stable carriers of

dialect, but rather "stylistic agents" (Eckert 2012: 98). Therefore, by extension, missionaries who employ the missionary voice are actively seeking to project or construct a specific ecclesiastical identity; their use of the voice is not an automatic or unconscious byproduct of their status as full-time representatives of the LDS Church.

Is this voice, then, simply a way for missionaries to mark themselves as a member of the group, or could it be a stress response as well? Serving as a full-time missionary is a uniquely taxing endeavor, demanding a great deal physically, mentally, and emotionally of the young women and men who enlist as volunteers. They are constantly speaking to strangers in their homes, on their doorsteps, and in the streets. The missionary voice may, in part, act as a reflex that seemingly makes their role as church representatives, constantly under public scrutiny, more manageable; as one respondent to Stanley's survey (personal communication) put it:

> People definitely sound different when they're on their missions, because they're having to become this idealized version of a Mormon at all times, and at all things, and in all places [this parallel construction is an allusion to a well-known passage from the Book of Mormon] because they are representatives for the church, and so feel so strongly that they have to be this perfect, shining jewel. And so when they're on their missions, their speech also reflects that.

These questions can be extended to the other examples I mentioned as well (e.g., do those German diplomats adopt a new style of speech because of the insular, highly secure nature of a foreign embassy? Is their occupational environment generally high stress?). Ultimately, as we're so often reminded, linguists are or ought to be primarily descriptivists and not prescriptivists. There is no one right way to talk as a missionary, so

long as the people you are speaking with believe you're sincere and not simply the Christian equivalent of a pest-control salesperson.

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Appendix A

Normal QQ-Plot
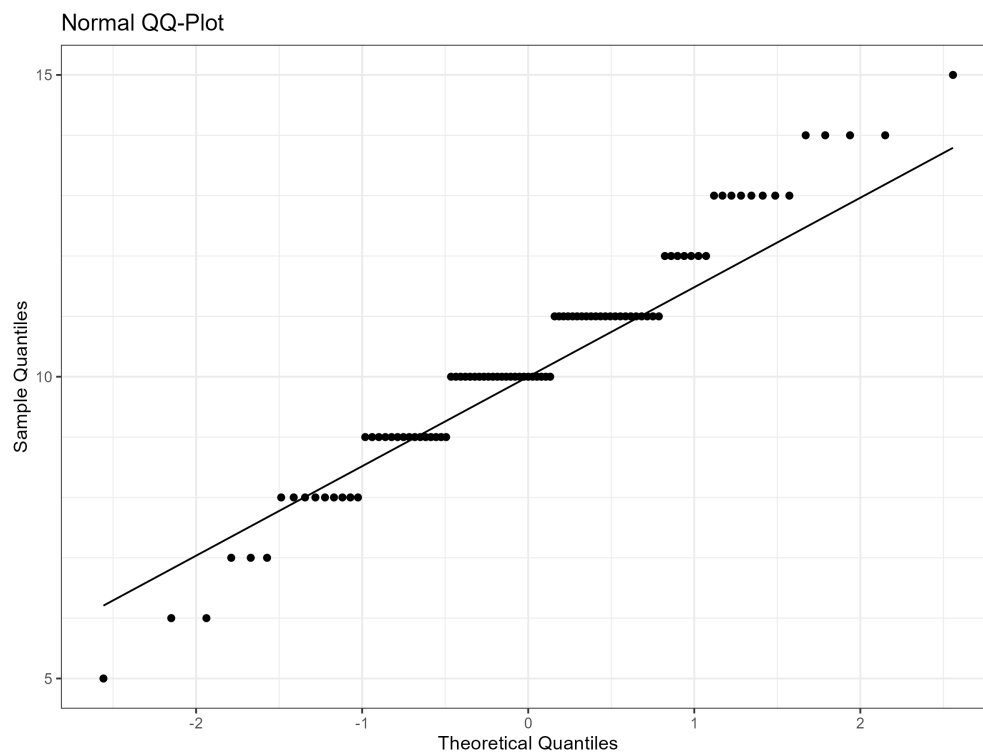
Appendix B

Survey link: https://byu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3aE9bViEzCRwyGO

Appendix C

Question #	Correct-response rate
missionary samples	
2	24/95 **(25.3%)** *74.7% incorrect*
3	49/95 **(51.56%)**
4	44/95 **(46.35%)**
5	71/95 **(74.7%)**
6	60/95 **(63.2%)**
7	43/95 **(45.3%)**

8	89/95 **(93.7%)**
9	40/95 **(42.1%)**
10	75/95 **(78.9%)**
11	65/95 **(68.4%)**
non-missionary samples	
12	72/95 **(75.8%)**
13	10/94 **(10.6%)** *89.4% incorrect*
14	69/95 **(72.6%)**
15	26/95 **(27.4%)** *72.6% incorrect*
16	26/94 **(27.7%)** *72.3% incorrect*
17	90/95 **(94.7%)**
18	15/95 **(15.8%)** *84.2% incorrect*
19	44/95 **(46.3%)**
20	24/94 **(25.5%)** *74.5% incorrect*
21	40/95 **(42.1%)**