



Vowel patterning of Mormons in Southern Alberta, Canada



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the patterning of /æ/ in the English of Southern Alberta, Canada, with particular attention paid to differences between the general population and Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints). Expanding on work by Meechan (1999) and Sykes (2010), who examine /aw/ and /ai/ diphthongs among the LDS population, we first show that /æ/ is significantly raised before /g/ among speakers in Southern Alberta. We then show that Mormons in the region do not display as strong raising in this linguistic environment. We attribute this to the strong social network of the Mormons in rural Southern Alberta which has a conservative influence on the /æ/ in the English of Mormon church members in the region. We further show that young Mormon women are the most divergent from their other Southern Alberta counterparts, which may be an indication of them being more conservative than other groups, contra many studies showing that women are innovators in sociophonetic change (for example Eckert 1989; Labov, 1990; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998), or it may be an indicator that these young Mormon women are innovators of a different pattern.

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1. Introduction

Utah is well known as the epicenter of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,¹ and sociolinguistic studies in Utah have often included religion as a linguistic variable given the importance of the Mormons in the region. (Baker and Bowie, 2010; Baker-Smemoe & Bowie, 2015, Di Paolo and Faber, 1990; *inter alia*) There has, however, been considerably less study of the linguistic patterning of Mormons outside Utah, with two notable exceptions: a doctoral dissertation by Meechan (1999), and a Master's thesis by Chatterton (2008). Meechan's important finding was that Mormons in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada have lower rates of Canadian Raising than Catholics and Protestants, and was instrumental in the attestation of a distinct ethnolect based on religion in the region. This finding, as well as anecdotal accounts, is the underpinning of the present research. Our assumption in undertaking this research is that if Mormons are distinct in terms of rates of Canadian Raising, we should expect to find other elements of divergence between Mormons and non-Mormons, which would reinforce indicators of identity.² This is therefore the goal of this paper: to investigate another Canadian phonetic feature to see whether Mormons pattern differently in other areas as well, and to seek explanation of any patterns.

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¹ Mormons are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, sometimes known as LDS. In this paper, the terms *Mormon* and *LDS* will be used interchangeably to represent members of the church.

² Note that Baker-Smemoe & Bowie (2015) show that there are actually three groups of comparison to consider: active Mormons, inactive Mormons and non-Mormons, i.e. that the level of participation within a religion is a factor in linguistic variation, not just religious affiliation. All the speakers we interviewed would be considered active members, though we didn't elicit their level of participation. Baker-Smemoe & Bowie's findings make this a relevant future area for study to see whether such a three-way distinction holds in Southern Alberta.

Table 1
2001 census profile data of religion based on census subdivisions.⁴

	Total pop	Roman Catholic	Protestant	LDS	Hutterites ⁵	No religion	LDS in %
Raymond	3105	120	210	2380	0	160	76.7
Cardston county	4270	115	295	2375	1070	235	55.6
Magrath	1935	70	145	1435	0	200	74.2
Cardston	3355	310	110	2600	0	240	77.5
Glenwood	275	0	0	195	0	20	70.9

2. Latter-day Saints in Southern Alberta

We begin this paper with a brief history of the Mormon settlement into Southern Alberta, Canada. The high population and influence of the Mormons within Southern Alberta remain largely unknown among non-church members elsewhere in Canada and abroad, but history and demographics reveal the past and present importance of this group in the area.

2.1. Settlement

In 1887, as tensions between the United States government and Church of the Latter-Day Saints became more and more strained, a large number of LDS members began to migrate north from Utah into Southern Alberta, seeking a friendlier government and religious freedom (Palmer, 1972). They settled just north of the U.S. border in Canada, founding the town of Cardston, named after Charles Ora Card. They built farms and irrigated the land, and more and more church members arrived to settle the region. In 1895, Alberta became the first LDS stake founded outside of the United States.³ By 1911, the LDS in southern Alberta had established 18 communities in the region, and boasted ten thousand church members (Palmer, 1972). The Cardston temple was the first to be built outside the United States; announced in 1913 and dedicated in 1923.

The Mormon population continues to be an important part of the region today. According to the 2001 Canadian Census, 49.7% of Canada's entire Mormon population is situated in Alberta. In the 2001 Canadian Census, 8.5% of Lethbridge and 13% of Taber self-identified as Mormon, far higher than the national rate of .3% and even the provincial rate of 1.7%. This does not tell the whole story, however, as the province is large, and an extremely high segment of the Mormon population resides in a number of small towns in a sparsely-populated area within South-Western Alberta, where church members make up the majority of the population.

Locals know which are 'Mormon towns'. In Southern Alberta, telling someone that one is from Magrath, Raymond or Cardston relays more than simply telling them what town one comes from; it tells people one's religious affiliation, as the assumption in the region would be that someone from these towns is an LDS church member. In fact, non-Mormons from these towns will often speak up to dispel this assumption by saying 'I'm from Cardston but I'm not Mormon.' To confirm this anecdotal evidence and these local perceptions, we analyzed 2001 census data (the last census to list Latter-Day-Saints as a separate religion) and have compiled the results in Table 1.

The census data shown in Table 1 confirms that there is a very high concentration of LDS members in the so-called "Mormon corridor", with approximately three-quarters of inhabitants of the area self-identifying as Mormon. Note that although Cardston County appears to have a lower percentage of LDS members, this can be explained by the fact that there are Hutterite colonies within the county, accounting for 1070 people, or 25% of the area. If we consider that the Hutterites live on colonies and do not interact in a meaningful way with the rest of the population, including Mormons, we see that the Mormon influence will be much stronger than the numbers suggest at first glance. If we remove these Hutterites from the numbers, we get a rate of 74% Mormons in Cardston County, which is exactly in line with the other areas.

These numbers are important because they underscore the high population density of Mormon Church members in the area. Although small towns generally already have fairly 'dense and multiplex' networks, this high LDS population density means that members of these communities will necessarily have even closer, more intense and more multiplex social networks. This is important given the well-known prediction that close-knit networks resist language change:

...a close-knit, territorially based network functions as a conservative force, resisting pressures for change originating from outside the network... Close-knit networks, which vary in the extent to which they approximate to an idealized maximally dense and multiplex network, have the capacity to maintain and even enforce local conventions and norms - including linguistic norms - and can provide a means of opposing dominant institutional values and standardized linguistic norms.

[Milroy and Milroy, 1992, p. 3–4]

³ A *stake* is an administrative unit composed of eight to ten congregations, comparable to a diocese or a deanery. The creation of a stake means that the congregations in the region had grown sufficiently to permit reorganization of the existing district.

⁴ Not all religions are included, so numbers do not add up to total population. Protestant includes United, Anglican and 'other Christian' not listed in the census as options.

⁵ Hutterites (along with Mennonites and Amish) are one of three Anabaptist pacifist groups who immigrated to North America in the late 19th century to escape religious persecution. The Hutterites differ from Mennonites and Amish in that they live communally in colonies. Hutterites speak a variety of Low German as a first language, learning English in their own schools. Their separate living and schooling means they interact minimally with outsiders.

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