Linguistic behavior and religious activity

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ABSTRACT

Studies have found that Mormons and non-Mormons in Utah exhibit significant linguistic differences. We break this down further by investigating whether there are also differences between Mormons who actively participate in the religion and those who do not, and find significant differences with a medium or larger effect size between the groups for multiple variables. We conclude that when investigating the linguistic correlates of religious affiliation in a community, it is vital to elicit not just respondents' religious affiliations, but also their level of participation within that religion.

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1. Introduction

Many sociolinguists assume that religious affiliation has no effect on linguistic behavior in speech communities in the United States (at least for non-plain Anabaptist communities). This assumption makes sense, since religious affiliation isn't a fixed trait, and is subject to individual change at any time: the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that close to half (44%) of all adults in the United States have left the religion—or lack of religion—they were raised in (these and other statistics on religious behavior in this paper are taken from Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008). Since religious affiliation can thus be seen as a matter of personal whim, one might well decide that it can't be reflected in a linguistic system (aside, perhaps, from some lexical items), particularly given the general assumption that childhood linguistic development is largely determinative of adult linguistic behavior (Bailey, 2005; Lenneberg, 1967). Recent work has, however, cast doubt on the assumption that religious affiliation is unimportant (see, among others, Baker and Bowie, 2009; Benor, 2004).

There are likely several reasons that religious affiliation may correlate with linguistic behavior. However, to give one possible explanation, religious affiliation does have an effect on one's social networks, particularly in areas where there is a high degree of religious affiliation (as is the case in the United States, for example). For those who attend worship services regularly (about 40% of the U.S. population), religious congregations provide a "third place" (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982) for social networks to develop aside from home and work; this effect may be strengthened due to the frequency with which entire families are part of the same religious tradition. In fact, for some religions the structure of congregations may encourage very strong religion-based social networks (for examples of this for Mormons, see Chatterton, 2008; Duke, 1998; Mauss, 1994; Meechan, 1999; Rosen and Skriver, 2015). Further, since we know that social networks based on religion can influence linguistic behavior (Baker and Bowie, 2009; Di Paolo, 1993; Fox, 2010; Milroy, 1987; Samant, 2010, among others), and since evidence is building that childhood linguistic development is not entirely determinative of adult linguistic behavior (Bowie, 2010, 2011; Bowie and Yaeger-Dror, 2015; Sankoff and Blondeau, 2007; Wagner, 2012; Wagner and Sankoff, 2011, among

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others), it only seems sensible to track religious affiliation, including changes in religious affiliation, as part of sociolinguistic studies.

Previous research on the correlation between religious affiliation and linguistic behavior has focused mainly in areas where religious activity and membership in a specific ethnic group overlap. These differences can be as large as a choice between different languages (e.g., Johnson-Weiner, 1998; Keiser, 2012) or as small as individual morphemes or sounds (e.g., Benor, 2011).

Other studies suggest that when religion is a defining factor in language maintenance and use, this is often the result of social and physical segregation in the community, whether state- or self-imposed (e.g., Bosakov, 2006; Kingsmore, 1995). Kingsmore, for example, found that language differences between Catholics and Protestants in Belfast could be explained by geography rather than religion. However, a potential confound is that in Belfast, neighborhoods are generally either predominantly Catholic or Protestant.

In these studies, teasing apart confounding variables such as location and ethnicity were difficult (since Belfast Catholics and Protestants tend to live in separate neighborhoods, as do Muslims and Christians in Bulgaria). However, more recent research has demonstrated that a correlation between religion and linguistic behavior occurs not only in areas where ethnicity and religion create confounds. So, for example, Freeouf (1989) found pronunciation differences in native German-speaking settlers in Indiana who differed only in whether they were Catholic or Lutheran. Since then, other researchers have found that religion can play a role in determining a speaker's social networks and, as a result, their language use, at least in areas where religion is a salient social characteristic of the community (e.g., Baker and Bowie, 2009; Chatterton, 2008; Johnson-Weiner, 1998; Meechan, 1999; Germanos and Miller, 2015; Rosen and Skriver, 2015).

In order to look more closely at the interaction between social networks based on religious affiliation and linguistic behavior, in this study we examine the effect of both membership and level of participation in a religious group by investigating language use in Utah County, Utah, a region that is largely (about 79%) made up of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (better known "Mormons", the label we use in this paper). (The geographic location of Utah County in relation to the rest of the contiguous United States is shown in Fig. 1.) Specifically, we look at differences not just between self-identified non-Mormons and self-identified Mormons, but we divide the Mormons further into those who actively participate in that religion (in local terms, which we adopt here, "active Mormons"), and those who do not actively participate in that religion (in local terms, "inactive Mormons").

Utah County is an excellent location for a study of social networks based largely on religious affiliation. There is no neighborhood segregation between Mormons and non-Mormons in Utah County, and there are extremely few K–12 schools that cater to the Mormon population, and the few that do exist are quite small, leading to effectively no educational segregation. (Of course, most of the schools in the region are largely Mormon, but that is simply a reflection of community demographics, not a reflection of religious segregation in the educational sector.) Further, sociological work has noted that active participation in the Mormon religion involves a large investment in time, generally centered around local (if not hyperlocal, particularly in this community) networks of other Mormons (Cornwall, 1998; Mauss, 1994). Further, religion is a highly salient characteristic in Utah County, as can be seen even just by casual observation of local television or newspaper reporting.

In addition, a number of linguistic variables of interest have been reported in previous research conducted in Utah County and bordering areas; these include, for example, tense-lax vowel mergers before /l/ (Di Paolo and Faber, 1990; Faber, 1992; Faber and Di Paolo, 1995), the *card-cord* merger (Bowie, 2003, 2008), /t/-glottalization (Eddington and Savage, 2012) /ɑɪ/-monophthongization (Morkel, 2003), and propredicate *do* (Di Paolo, 1993). (Many, but not all, of these variables are locally
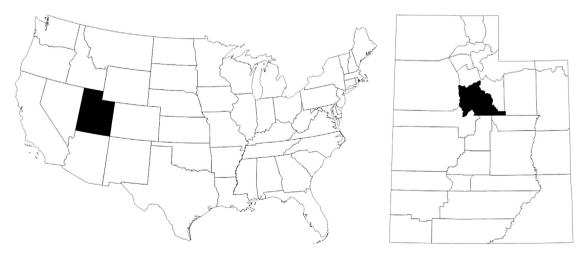

Fig. 1. Location of Utah within the contiguous United States (left), and of Utah County within Utah (right).