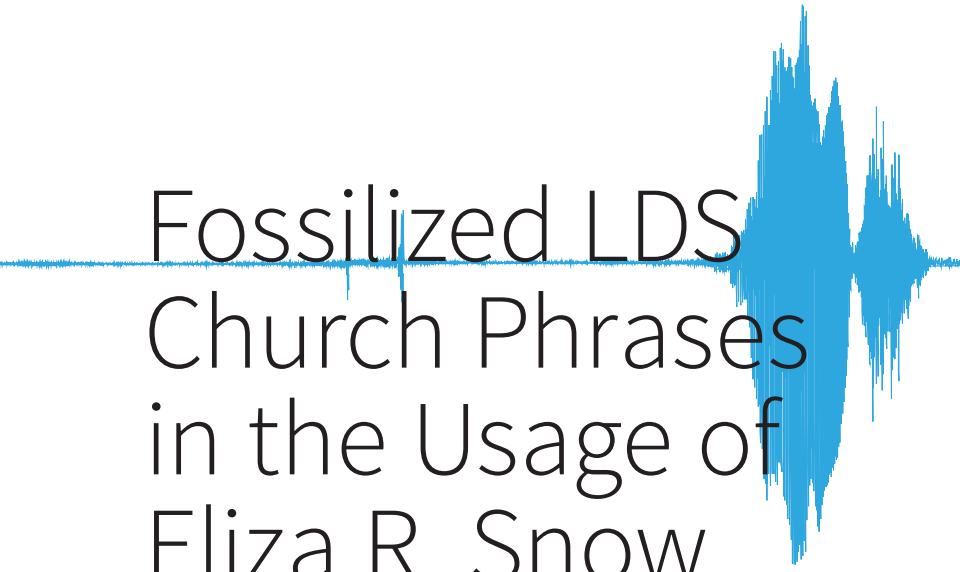

Fossilized LDS Church Phrases in the Usage of Eliza R. Snow

Marie Bourgerie Hunter

Religious forms of speech are often more stylized and traditional than everyday speech, and members of the LDS Church speak in a dialect that differs lexically from that of other Utah residents. The author explores use of the terms brethren, still small voice, *and* tender mercies. *Using three corpora and the works of Eliza R. Snow to track lexical change of these phrases inside and outside of the church over time, the author finds that the usage of these words in the church more closely matches everyday speech from the 19th century than modern Standard American English.*

People unfamiliar with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sometimes encounter unfamiliar idiomatic language in this church environment. While older, stylized speech is not unusual in religious contexts, the LDS church has its own phonological and lexical dialect within the English language (Meechan 1998). Though the church's hub is in Utah, the LDS dialect is not region-specific; Utah residents who are not LDS have language patterns distinct from residents who are members (Baker and Bowie 2009). These language patterns originate in the King James version of the Bible and in nineteenth-century American religious speech.

Some unfamiliar noun phrases found in LDS vernacular are seen in the poetry of Eliza R. Snow. Sister Snow was a prominent nineteenth-century LDS member, leader, and writer. Her widely distributed body of work contains 507 poems, using over 150,000 words in well-educated English. This large body of work from an early church member provides insight into the language of the early church. In this paper, I explore the occurrence of three specific noun phrases that are common in the poetry of Eliza R. Snow to track how her usage of these terms shape and reflect their modern application, both inside and outside of the LDS vocabulary.

The three noun phrases analyzed in this paper are still common in LDS vernacular today: *brethren*, *still small voice,* and *tender mercies*. Most LDS-specific lexical phrases originate in the scripture used by the Church: the King James Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. This paper explores when certain phrases used by Snow entered the general LDS dialect and the lexical changes they underwent, especially as the same phrases became progressively scarcer in Standard American English (SAE).

Methodology

I used three corpora to accumulate data and compare word usages through time and across dialects: the Corpus of Historical American English, COHA (Davies 2010-); the Corpus of LDS

General Conference Talks, which I'll refer to as GCC (Davies); and the Corpus of Contemporary American English, COCA (Davies 2008-). I used COHA for several purposes: to determine the frequency of use for each noun phrase over the last two hundred years, to find frequent collocates in order to compare dialects and determine usage, and to look at tokens to get a sense of the word. GCC is a very specialized corpus; it contains all recorded talks given by LDS church officials during General Conference (a worldwide, multi-day meeting that occurs twice a year). I used this corpus in the same way I used COHA, except the GCC represented an aspect of the LDS dialect. I used COCA when necessary to get a better sense of how the word or phrase was used today in Standard American English. In addition, I used lds.org to identify whether specific events or talks had co-occurred with any increase in frequency in GCC (the entire body of LDS scriptural canon is located on this website as well). If I was unsure about a definition, I consulted the Oxford English Dictionary. Finally, I organized and analyzed the data in order to identify meaningful patterns.

Results

Brethren

When searching LDS scripture, there are over 1100 occurrences of *brethren,* most of them from the Bible. Historically, *brethren* was an alternative to *brothers,* though *brothers* was not always gender-specific (OED 2015). Eliza R. Snow uses *brethren* 26 times in her poetry—sometimes with this definition, but with more nuanced meanings as well. Snow often uses the word in a gender-neutral manner to refer to the other members of one's group, usually the church. The following excerpt illustrates this usage: "With interest hear you of the welfare tell / Of our dear brethren, who in Britain dwell" (Snow, 200: 5–6). *Brethren* in this context refers to other Church members who were separated from the

Snow; the phrase *brethren* emphasizes camaraderie rather than gender.

Snow introduces another lexical meaning here that illustrates how the usage of *brethren* became much more specific and significant as time went on: "With thy brethren, the Twelve, thou wilt bear it forth" (148: 15). In this case, *Twelve* refers to the Twelve Apostles of the LDS church. Here Snow is addressing Brigham Young—the Prophet and head of the Twelve Apostles at the time—so her usage does technically fall under the previous definition, another word for *brothers*. However, the most common use of *brethren* refers to the general priesthood authorities with no genitive.

Today, *brethren* is also used to address crowds during church meetings, but only when the audience is exclusively male. GCC says it is no longer is used as a direct substitute for *brothers*. Overall, the modern LDS dialect uses *brethren* less often than dialects in the nineteenth century did, but it is still extremely common; in the 2010s, the frequency was 436.21 tokens per million.

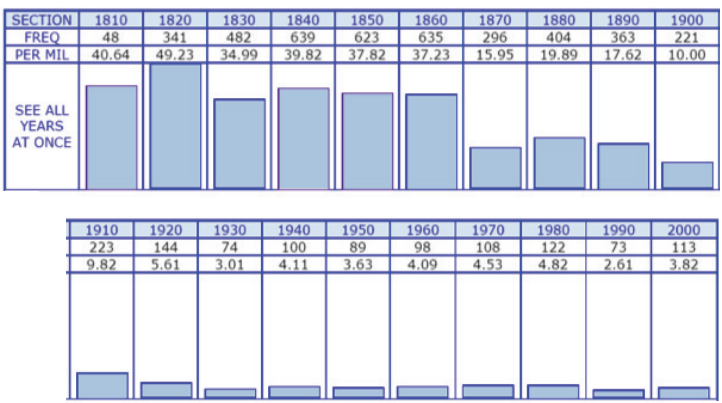

Figure 1. COHA—brethren

Figure 1 shows the progression of *brethren* over the past two hundred years in American English: In the most recent decade, usage has decreased significantly, but still hovers around 2.5 words per million. Still, its colloquial use is decreasing; it

is not as common outside the LDS church as it is inside. Using examples pulled from the corpus, we can see that historically the word was often used as a direct substitute for *brothers,* like in the then-common phrase *brethren and sisters*. However, there are other tokens that use the word to mean part of a group, similar to *fellows,* and to emphasize camaraderie, like Eliza R. Snow did. For example: "At the head of the table . . . sat Sir William Phips himself, treating these hard handed men as his brethren, cracking jokes with them, and talking familiarly about old times" (Hawthorne 1851). The key word *familiarly* treats them as if they were brothers even though they are not literally related; it has a broader meaning that indicates they are all on the same team.

The usage of *brethren* in our SAE is similar to nineteenth-century English in its gender neutrality, as opposed to the modern LDS dialect. Sometimes it is used to sound consciously old-fashioned; for example, "This is not to bash my journalistic brethren. Super Bowl week isn't exactly conducive to originality" (Houston Chronicle 2007). *Brethren* is formal, and it is being used here in a tongue-in-cheek way to describe reporters at a sporting event.

Both the modern LDS dialect and SAE have vestiges of the nineteenth-century English definition of *brethren*. They both underwent semantic narrowing but arrived at separate, unrelated results. I think *brethren* survived in the church because the number of LDS General Authorities grew exponentially as additional quorums were added (Quorum of the Twelve *Apostle*s, First Quorum of the Seventy, Second Quorum of the Seventy, etc.) and members wanted a short but respectful way to refer to all of these men. Church members already refer to each other as brothers and sisters, but *brethren* is in a higher, more respectful register. Eliza's poetry shows the start of *brethren* being used in this context and it grew from there.

Still Small Voice

The phrase *still small voice* originates in the Bible, in 1 Kings 19:12: "And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in

the fire: and after the fire a still small voice." In this verse, the Lord is speaking directly to the prophet Elijah, so the *still small voice* is the literal voice of God. In LDS canon, there are two other scriptural references to the *still small voice*: 1 Nephi 17:45, and D&C 85:6. The usage in 1 Nephi is identical to 1 Kings, but the scripture in D&C is different: "Yea, thus saith the still small voice, which whispereth through and pierceth all things, and often times it maketh my bones to quake while it maketh manifest." In this case, the voice is not an audible voice but an internal one that speaks to and guides a person through life. The voice is either God or the Holy Spirit, depending on the interpretation of "Spirit of the Lord."

Eliza R. Snow uses the phrase three times in her poetry, and she refers to the still small voice as a guide to mankind, for both comfort and chastisement: "Thus the Spirit of the Lord / In your bosom shall abide; / And produce a rich reward, / While the 'still small voice' shall guide" (168: 5–8). Like in scriptural usage, this could be referring to God or the Holy Spirit, and the voice is not necessarily spoken out loud for everybody to hear. Also, *whisper* is introduced as a collocate in this verse. *Whispering* was the most frequent collocate in GCC. *Whispered* was the second most frequent collocate in COHA. Other lemmas of *whisper* were in other slots on both lists. Today, *small* is becoming synonymous with *whispering* when used to describe a voice.

Throughout the decades, the owner of the *still small voice* seems to change between God and the Holy Spirit, though these could be one and the same depending how the Trinity is viewed. In LDS theology, the Trinity is believed to be three distinct beings. GCC indicates that the leaders of the church used *God*, *Lord*, and *spirit* interchangeably in conjunction with *still small voice* in the 1850s (the first decade the GCC includes). In the 1900s, where the phrase experienced peak usage in the church, the owner of the voice was usually either *God*, *spirit of God*, or non-specific. The tokens from the most recent decade, the 2010s, were either non-specific or *Holy Spirit*.

In SAE, *still small voice* has become less religious, and it often describes a person's conscience.

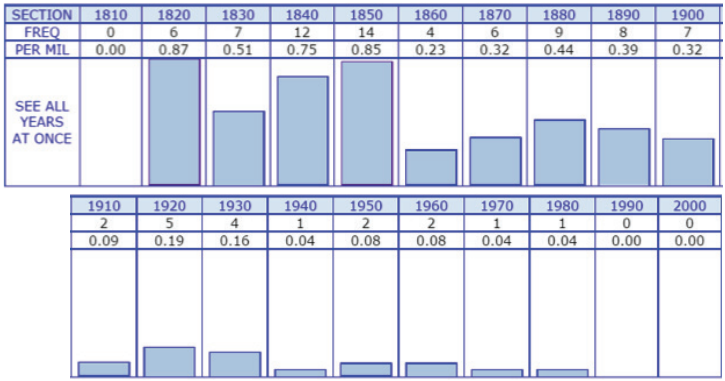

Figure 2. COHA—still small voice.

As can be seen from Figure 2, according to COHA, *still small voice* was most popular between the 1820s and the 1850s, and then its popularity cut off drastically. COHA does not show any tokens for 1990 and 2000. COCA reveals an average of .02 tokens per million between 1990 and 2012. While the phrase was never as common as *brethren*, it was proportionally much more common during the 1800s, when the LDS church was founded.

In contrast, looking at Figure 3—the GCC for *still small voice*—LDS leaders continued to use the term more consistently than those outside of the religion, and usually with the same usage as found in Snow's writings and the Doctrine and Covenants. As was discussed earlier, the identified owner of the voice has been subtly shifting from God to the *Holy spirit* or *Holy Ghost* (or *spirit of God*, which in LDS doctrine is the same member of the Godhead as the Holy Spirit); that is where it rests today in the modern LDS dialect. The referent shifting exclusively to the Holy Spirit makes sense in the LDS church; as opposed to many other religions, LDS doctrine not only acknowledges the Trinity to be three separate beings but emphasizes and celebrates the role of each member individually. There was a need to describe the influence and presence of the Holy Spirit in people's lives. The lexical

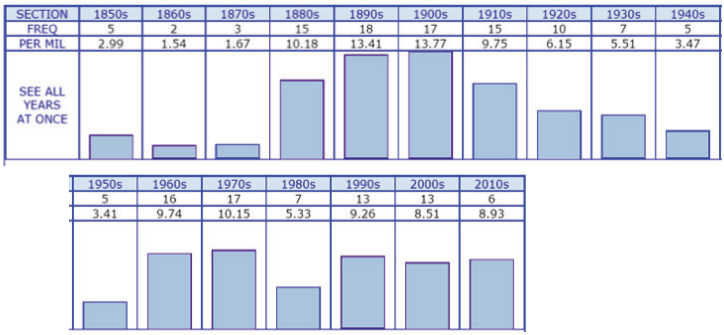

Figure 3. GCC—still small voice.

usage becomes more nuanced in the LDS Church with time, whereas in the limited surviving usage in SAE, it has undergone semantic generalization.

Tender Mercies

Tender mercies is used often in the Bible; there are ten separate instances in the book of Psalms, one in Proverbs, and two New Testament references (in the New Testament, it is used in the singular). There are also two references in the Book of Mormon. The biblical usage is best exemplified by Psalms 40:11: "Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O Lord: let thy lovingkindness and thy truth continually preserve me." *Tender mercies* here

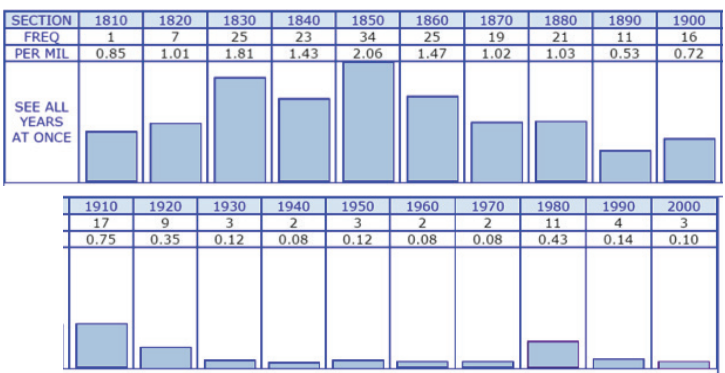

Figure 4. COHA—tender mercies.

essentially refers to blessings from God. Snow also compares tender mercies to the guidance given by a parent, in this case God: "Thro' His parental care— / His love and tender mercies, / You're what and where you are" (276: 2–4). Snow states that the gifts of God make us who we are as people.

Similar to *brethren* and *still small voice,* the graph from COHA above indicates that *tender mercies* was prominent in nineteenth-century English, with a peak in the 1850s.

Like *still small voice,* the phrase *tender mercies* is nearly extinct from today's language (COCA data for 2010–2012 puts the frequency at .12 tokens per million).

SAE non-religious usage of *tender mercy* is usually ironic, probably because it is associated with a religious register. It doesn't really belong in a spoken secular context, so when it is used, it is used self-consciously: "But for us to abandon Afghanistan to the tender mercies of the Taliban and radical Islamic extremists I think would be repeating mistakes we made before" (ABC 2011). This phrase is a typical example of tender mercies being associated ironically with what the speaker views to be a bad person or group, to create a contrast.

GCC pictured below shows an interesting distribution pattern for the phrase *tender mercies* in the LDS dialect from the 1870s to the 1970s—with a similar, albeit slightly later, bell curve—before it becomes completely absent in the language of the

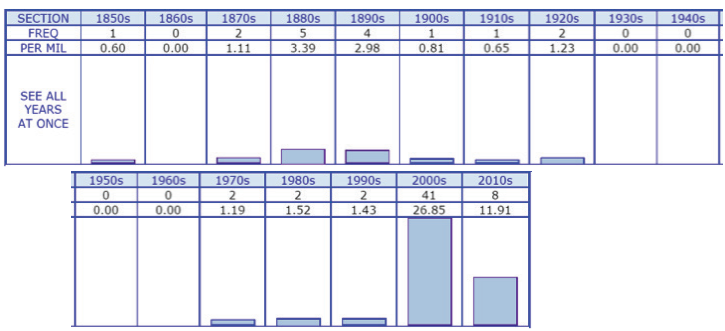

Figure 5. GCC—tender mercies.

church, or at least among church authorities. There is then a huge resurgence, resulting in the current dialect occurrences being 3.5 times as frequent as it was during its previous peak. Out of the 41 tokens in the 2000s bracket, 33 are from a single talk given by Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "The Tender Mercies of the Lord." These were the first tokens of the decade; they appear to be the catalyst that changed the overall frequency of the phrase, as well as cementing the lexical meaning. Bednar explicitly defines *tender mercies* as

> the very personal and individualized blessings, strength, protection, assurances, guidance, loving-kindnesses, consolation, support, and spiritual gifts which we receive from and because of and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here we can see Bednar further narrowing the definition of tender mercies from the traditional Bible definition for church members.

The phrase varies in frequency of use in SAE and the LDS dialect. *Tender mercies* never gained a non-religious definition like *brethren* and *still small voice,* which may be why the nuances in Snow's usage in her poetry fall closely to the reference in 1 Nephi and in Bednar's talk, rather than in the Bible. The concept of personalized blessings from God that help us through life is a significant doctrine in the LDS church, so I believe that when Elder Bednar used the term again in his talk, the term stuck because there was already an empty spot for it in the dialect.

Conclusion

Taking into account the age of the LDS church, evidence supports that the phrases discussed in this paper (*brethren*, *still small voice,* and *tender mercies*) were used more frequently in the nineteenth century, particularly in the mid-1800s, than they are today and thus were in the standard dialect of most of the early church

members. As the phrases and words changed and fell out of use in SAE, they were fossilized in the church dialect.

Brethren is still very common in the LDS dialect, but the meaning has changed from the nineteenth-century usage. The primary usage in LDS vernacular in reference to the male General Authorities of the church, or "the brethren." Since it was used this way in nineteenth-century speech (as can be seen from Eliza R. Snow), the usage just persisted and then narrowed with time.

Still small voice in the Bible refers to the literal voice of God, but Snow did not use it that way; instead, she used it to refer to an internal voice that guides us through life, which in LDS doctrine is the Holy Spirit. The Church emphasizes the Godhead being three distinct beings and the Holy Spirit being the comforter. This point of doctrine kept the noun phrase in the LDS dialect. This diverges from contemporary SAE usage, in which *still small voice* has been generalized to mean one's conscience.

Tender mercies yielded different results. This phrase dropped out of use in the LDS dialect around the same time it left SAE. But it then had a huge resurgence after an apostle gave a talk in a worldwide church meeting about the phrase, and in the following years, other church leaders have begun using it in their lexicon as well. Similar to *still small voice,* the answer to this resurgence lies in LDS doctrine. Bednar defines *tender mercies* as godly blessings that are gifted personally to us and guide us through our mortal lives. This usage was already being discussed among members, but there was no succinct way of saying it until Bednar gave people a way.

One general conclusion from this research is that topics in religion require a specialized lexicon, and the words that stayed within the LDS dialect stayed because there was a need for them. The usage was sometimes altered to fully fill that need. Eliza R. Snow's poetry shows the beginnings of that trend.

The limited sampling and the formality of using General Conference talks are major drawbacks to this paper. A significant addition to this study would be a survey that samples the general speech of the LDS community so that the frequency of phrases

could be accurately gauged in everyday speech, not just in formal settings. Also, this paper only explored three noun phrases, and the phrases were chosen because they were prominent in both Snow's poetry and the LDS dialect; research of more phrases would yield more conclusions. I focused on biblical phrases, but it would be interesting to study phrases not from scripture that were common in nineteenth century English.

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