

# Perceptual Dialectology of Utah

*Dr. Joseph A. Stanley*

*This perceptual dialectology study presents the results of a draw-a-map task that focused on the state of Utah, completed by sixty-seven Utahns. The most common labels are those that indicate rurality, suggesting that speech along most of the Wasatch Front is perceived as being Utah's default, with varieties outside of the area as being "different." However, the two most stereotyped phonological variables of Utah English are glottal stops in words like mountain and the cord-card merger, the former tending to align with urban areas. This study highlights the understudied relationship between production and sociolinguistic perception of Utah English.*



Methodological choices in draw-a-map tasks vary from study to study and seemingly small changes may affect the completion of the task. For example, Lameli et al. (2008) altered the detail in their Germany-based study by administering one of seven maps to people, including a blank outline of the country, a detailed topographical map, and various combinations of cities, counties, and rivers. They found that people circled fewer areas on the highly detailed maps (particularly the topographical map) compared to the lesser detailed ones (like the blank outline), perhaps because of the potentially jarring incongruities between their crude, subjective boundaries overlaid on an otherwise very precise map. Cukor-Avila (2018) modified the task by providing labels up-front (such as *drawl* and *twang* for Texans and *standard* and *non-standard* for South Koreans) and asking people to identify areas where the prescribed labels apply. Regardless of the technique, each attempt results in a map that offers a glimpse into participants' perception of language. Since Preston's studies, draw-a-map tasks have progressed from larger areas to smaller regions. The earliest tasks focused on entire countries including the United States, the Netherlands, Spain, Hungary, Turkey, South Korea, and Japan (Long & Preston, 2002). Most recently, researchers in the United States have become more curious about perceptions of language within a single state, including California (Bucholtz et al., 2007), Washington (Evans, 2013), and Kentucky (Cramer et al., 2018). However, an analysis of the perceptual dialectology of Utah is lacking. Although people who view maps of the United States may indicate something about Utah (as in Figure 1), little is known about how Utahns view language in their own state or what regional differences may exist in their mental maps. This study seeks to address this gap.

## Methods

To examine how Utahns perceive regional variation within Utah, a draw-a-map task was administered to sixty-seven Utahns in January 2018 in Heber, Payson, and on the Utah Valley University campus in Orem. The participants, who varied in gender, age, and hometown, were presented with a physical map of Utah and portions of surrounding states with labels indicating counties, highways, and major cities. On the back side, they saw a more detailed map of the Wasatch Front, stretching from Santaquin to Willard and peripheral cities like Tooele, Morgan, and Heber. This

detailed map also included larger bodies of water, smaller highways, and more city names. The following prompt was printed at the top of each map:

“Draw a line around places where you think people’s English sounds different. Then, write down what you’d call that way of talking, if you can think of a label for it.”

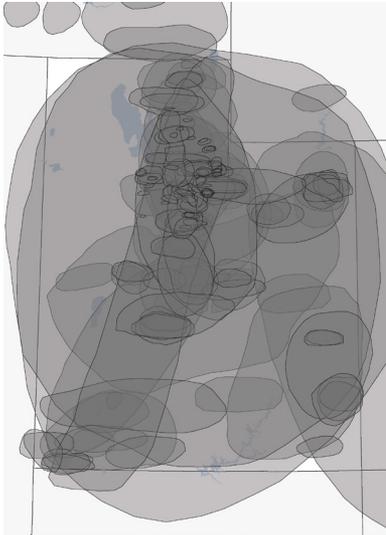
No limits were placed on the amount of detail participants were permitted to include on either map. The resultant level of detail varied, ranging from many circles and labels to, in some cases, a single circle around one city (e.g., Wallsburg).

These maps were then analyzed using the Geographic Information System (GIS) software ArcGIS. Images were primarily

scanned in and lined up to a reference map using a process called *georeferencing*. Regions that the participants drew were then digitally traced and coded into the software. Following typical methods in contemporary perceptual dialectology analysis (Cukor-Avila, 2018), similar labels were grouped together to form categories and all regions from the same category were overlaid to identify “hot spots.” This process is analogous to scanning the maps onto transparent paper and layering them on top of each other. Figure 2 shows all regions on a single map, illustrating the areas that were highlighted the most.

**Figure 2**

*All Circled Areas*



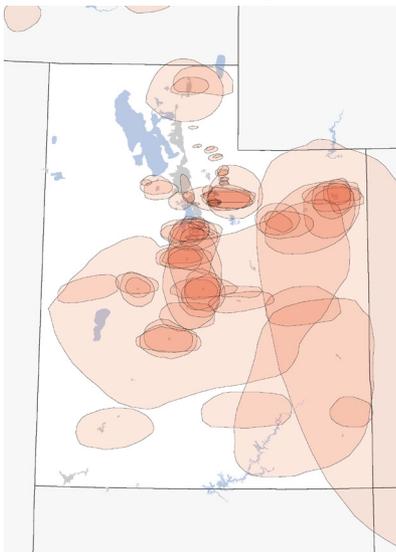
## Results

Across the sixty-seven maps, participants circled 211 areas, resulting in an average of 3.15 areas per person. Given the inverse correlation of detail and number of circles drawn (Lameli et al., 2018) this somewhat low average is not surprising. While the types of responses varied considerably, there were two main categories of labels that stood out: an urban/rural divide and mentions of specific phonological features of Utah English.

## Urban/Rural Divide

Broadly labeling certain areas as having “country” speech was by far the most common response. Any label that contained the words *country*, *Western*, *cowboy*, *southern*, *hick*, *redneck*, *twang*, *hillbilly*, and *mountain men* were classified as COUNTRY.<sup>1</sup> Eighty-three of the 211 areas (39%) fell into this category. As seen in Figure 3,<sup>2</sup> most inhabited parts of Utah outside of the Wasatch Front—and even some areas within the Wasatch Front—were given a COUNTRY label by at least one participant. The highest concentration of COUNTRY labels was located in Spanish Fork, Payson, Nephi, Manti, Heber City, Wallsburg, and Vernal. It seems that rurality is perceived to be the strongest factor of Utahn speech analysis.

**Figure 3**  
*Areas Labeled as Country*



Conversely, only three participants used labels indicating urban speech. Labels that contained the word *city* were classified as URBAN and are shown in Figure 4. Unsurprisingly, these regions center around the most populated cities in Utah: Salt Lake City, Provo, and St. George. Interestingly, Ogden was not circled, even though the Ogden/Layton area is comparable in size to the Provo/Orem area.<sup>3</sup> This striking contrast between the many COUNTRY labels and the few URBAN labels suggests that Utahns view urban areas to be the default and rural areas to be different.

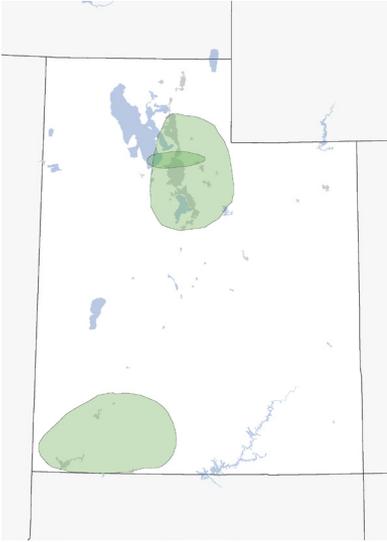
---

1. Grouping these together does miss out on potential differences between such labels. For example, one participant used “southern,” “hillbilly,” and “hick” for three distinct areas.

2. Metropolitan areas, as defined by the US Census, are shown in gray in this map and subsequent maps to give a better sense of the population distribution.

3. That Ogden was not identified as urban may simply reflect the fact that most of the data collection occurred close to the Provo/Orem area.

**Figure 4**  
*Areas Labeled as Urban*

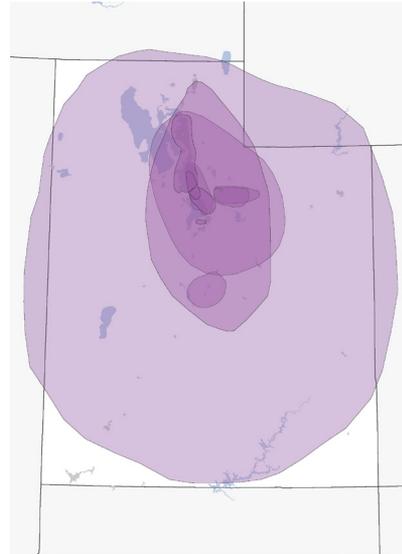


This pattern may stem from sampling bias since participants were recruited from more populated areas; however, some of the participants that came from outside the Wasatch Front often circled their own city and labeled it as COUNTRY. For example, a participant from Huntington circled his own city and nothing else, and wrote “was/were,” “farms,” and “cowboys.” So, it may be the case that even rural Utahns view speech in the Wasatch Front to be the norm and speech in rural areas, including their own, to be different.

### Specific Phonological Features

The other category of labels was those that mentioned specific phonological features. Eleven maps mentioned the word *mountain* or the letter *t*; these labels were collapsed into the label MOUNTAIN just as the label COUNTRY was used as an umbrella for several related labels in Figure 3. Such descriptions presumably refer to the realization of words like *mountain* and *Layton* with a glottal stop, which is common in Utah (Eddington & Savage, 2012; Stanley & Vanderniet, 2018). As seen in Figure 5, MOUNTAIN labels were most concentrated in the Wasatch Front, specifically Provo, Orem, Salt Lake City,

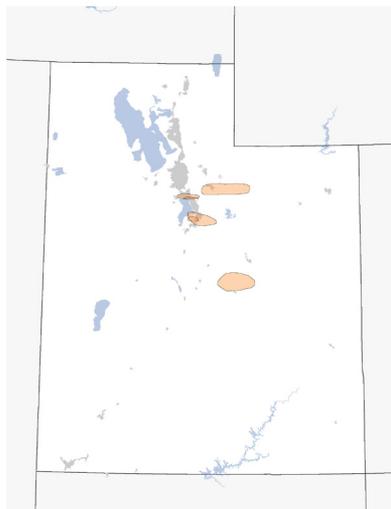
**Figure 5**  
*Areas Mentioning “Mountain” or the Letter “T”*



and Ogden, as well as Heber City and Manti. It is worth noting that these include some of the most populated areas of Utah, like Salt Lake and Utah Counties.<sup>4</sup> So, while very few participants used URBAN labels for those areas, a modest amount did use MOUNTAIN labels. It may be the case that Utahns do not associate glottal stops in words like *mountain* and *Layton* with urban dialects, perhaps because of the widespread misconception that such realizations are unique to Utah (cf. Eddington & Brown, 2021; Roberts, 2006).

Another phonological feature that was specifically mentioned was the *cord-card* merger. This merger affects lower back vowels before rhotics and is

**Figure 6**  
*Areas Mentioning the Cord-Card merger*



stereotyped in the phrase “put the harse in the born.” While once common in Utah (Bowie, 2003; 2008), it is now rare and, if heard at all, is characteristic of older people with rural roots. However, as seen in Figure 6, the stereotype lives on, and some people believe that in cities like American Fork and Spanish Fork this is still common, based on labels such as “Spanish Fark.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike the MOUNTAIN labels though, this set of labels did not neatly pattern with the urban/rural divide.

4. St. George was not included in any of these circles, but again, it may reflect a northern Utah-based sampling bias.

5. It appears that some people erroneously assume that city names are somehow representative of those residents’ speech. For example, I’ve heard comments about people from Tooele or Hurricane and that they *must* have strong accents (or a lack of education) because of how their cities are pronounced. In this case, both cities with *Fork* in their names were circled, so the assumption suggests that those residents have the *cord-card* merger. As a resident of Spanish Fork for over a year and a half, I have heard exactly one person with the *cord-card* merger in their speech.

## Conclusion

In this preliminary view of perceptual dialectology in Utah, there are two main findings. First, the strongest perceived influence on speech is rurality, with urbanity being far less common. This difference suggests that speech along most of the Wasatch Front is perceived as being the default for the state, with anyone outside of Salt Lake, Utah, or Davis Counties as being “different.” The second finding highlights two phonological variables that are the most strongly perceived differences in Utah English: glottal stops in words like *mountain* and the *cord-card* merger. While these are not unique to Utah, nor are they the only features characteristic of Utah English, this sample suggests that they are the ones that have reached the highest level of consciousness, perhaps to the level of stereotype (Labov, 1966). Further work on the perceptual dialectology based on people from other areas of Utah may clarify the extent to which the perceptual urban/rural divide extends to rural areas; meanwhile, perceptual work in tandem with phonetic data may help illuminate how widespread these phonological variables are.

# References

- Bowie, D. (2003). Early development of the card-cord merger in Utah. *American Speech*, 78(1), 31–51. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-78-1-31>
- Bowie, D. (2008). Acoustic characteristics of Utah's card-cord merger. *American Speech*, 83(1), 35–61. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-2008-002>
- Bucholtz, M., Bermudez, N., Fung, V., Edwards, L., & Vargas, R. (2007). Hella Nor Cal or totally So Cal? The perceptual dialectology of California. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 35(4), 325–352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0075424207307780>
- Cramer, J., Tamasi, S., & Bounds, P. (2018). Southernness and our linguistic planets of belief: The view from Kentucky. *American Speech*, 93(3–4), 445–470. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-7271272>
- Cukor-Avila, P. (2018). A variationist approach to studies of language regard. In B. E. Evans, E. J. Benson, & J. Stanford (Eds.), *Language regard* (1st ed., pp. 3–28). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316678381.002>
- Eddington, D. E., & Brown, E. K. (2021). A production and perception study of /t/ glottalization and oral releases following glottals in the US. *American Speech*, 96(1), 1–41. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-8620501>
- Eddington, D., & Savage, M. (2012). Where are the moun[ʔə]ns in Utah? *American Speech*, 87(3), 336–349. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-1958345>
- Evans, B. E. (2013). “Everyone sounds the same”: Otherwise overlooked ideology in perceptual dialectology. *American Speech*, 88(1), 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-2322637>
- Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. [Ph.D. dissertation]. Columbia University.
- Lameli, A., Purschke, C., & Kehrein, R. (2008). Stimulus und Kognition. Zur Aktivierung mentaler Raumbilder. *Linguistik Online*, 35(3). <https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.35.523>

- Long, D., & Preston, D. R. (Eds.). (2002). *Handbook of perceptual dialectology*. John Benjamins.
- Roberts, J. (2006). As old becomes new: Glottalization in Vermont. *American Speech*, 81(3), 227–249. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-2006-016>
- Stanley, J. A., & Vanderniet, K. (2018). *Consonantal variation in Utah English*. Proceedings of the 4th Annual Linguistics Conference at the University of Georgia, 50–65. <https://hdl.handle.net/10724/37876>