Southern Utah's Variety of English

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The southern Utah accent is often stigmatized and very little research has been done on the topic. This article identifies features of Utah accents in residents of Garfield County, Utah. Residents were given a passage designed to elicit Utah features. The results showed that the fail-fell *and* feel-fill *mergers were both prevalent in southern Utah;* t*-intrusion was present, but only in the word* else*; the* card-cord *merger appeared in one participant; and various pronunciations of the word* mountain *were demonstrated in all participants. This study aims to bring a better understanding of southern Utah's unique variety of English.*

Many people assume that Utahns always switch the */or/* and the */ar/* just from hearing a Utahn say the word *fork*. They hear *g*-dropping in the word *walkin'* and assume Utahns should learn how to speak. And what is it about the word *mountain* that makes people think Utahns cannot say their *t*'s? There are many well-known stereotypes about the Utahn dialect, but there are also gaps in our knowledge about what has caused these stereotypes and whether or not they are true. Very little linguistic research has been done on the state of Utah and even less on the southern Utah dialect in particular. My article outlines uses of the *card-cord* merger, the *fail-fell* and *feel-fill* mergers, *g*-dropping, *t*-intrusion in words like *else*, and glottalization and oral releases in words like *mountain* in recorded readings.

Tiny rural towns like those in Bryce Valley are often pegged as the home of redneck, isolated, uneducated people. This is partly because of the way the people speak, which tends to be a "nonstandard" variety of English. But descriptive linguists submit that "nonstandard" varieties, however difficult to understand, are still English. No one is "doing it wrong"—even the rednecks. Southern Utah English is vital to understand because understanding of small-town speech can affect the way that small town residents are treated. If southern Utahn speech is seen as wrong or nonstandard, southern Utahns may be perceived as unfriendly or uneducated. When people's speech is understood, their speech is more easily valued and seen as unique.

Finding distinct patterns helps us understand that southern Utah English does indeed have its place among the different varieties of English. Once people understand southern Utah English, they can start to understand the characteristics and identity of the people. This theory could open the door to further research in southern Utah English; my job, however, is simply to give it a start. The purpose of this article is to show what constitutes a southern Utah accent. Specifically, I will focus on identifying certain aspects of the stereotypical Utah accent in the tiny towns of Garfield County, including Bryce Valley, Escalante, and Panguitch.

Background

Utah English can be difficult to distinguish because it is so similar to other Western varieties (Baker et al., 2009). Studies have shown that features such as glottal stops and oral releases in the

word *mountain* and loss of tense/lax distinctions (e.g., merging of *feel* (tense) and *fill* (lax)—both pronounced *fill*) are present all over the Western United States. Oral releases were even studied in the context of non-Western states and were found in Vermont and New Mexico: "in Vermont, Utah, and New Mexico oral releases were viewed as more likely spoken by natives of those three states" (Eddington & Brown, 2021, p. 91). Most studies, however, agree that Utah's particular set of features serve to make it a unique variety among the Western states.

Features specifically identified as part of the Utah accent included the *card-cord* merger (Bowie, 2003), the *fail-fell* and *feel-fill* mergers, *g*-dropping, *t*-intrusion in words like *else* (Baker et al., 2009), and glottalization of the *t* in *mountain* (Eddington & Savage, 2012). Some studies focused on how these features were perceived by listeners. One such study indicated that when identifying whether or not a person had a Utah accent, "listeners attended most closely to the *fail-fell* and *feel-fill* near mergers, [*t*-intrusion] as in *Ol[t]son* and pronounced /l/ as in *palm*. The combined contribution of these four factors accounted for an impressive 98 percent of the variance" (Baker et al., 2009, p. 61). People in the study probably were not consciously identifying and naming these features; they simply knew that they sounded "Utahn." Most people were able to identify a Utah accent just based on listening to these features.

Another study focused on how people with the Utah accent were viewed, specifically those who used glottal stops and oral releases in *mountain* words, such as *fountain*, *satin*, *platinum*, etc. Researchers found that "speakers who used glottal stops were viewed as less educated and less friendly; those who used oral releases were perceived as more rustic and less educated" (Eddington & Brown, 2021, p. 78). These features were also associated with people from small towns. Nasal releases, on the other hand, sounded friendly and were less often connected with people from small towns.

Another very strong Utah feature has to do with the *t* in *mountain*. The *t* in *mountain* has long been a highly stigmatized and highly misunderstood feature of Utah English. It has been described as *t*-dropping or *t*-deletion, but this is most likely not the case since one study proved that "actual deletion of /t/ was observed in only eight percent of the cases" (Eddington & Savage, 2012, p. 346). Most people, both in and out of Utah, use a glottal stop for the *t* in *mountain*. What is probably occurring (and

what is actually stigmatized) is the oral release after the glottal stop: [mawʔən]. "Participants who had lived 67 percent or more of their lives in Utah produced oral releases after glottal stops in 16.7 percent of the words, while those who had lived less than two-thirds of their lives in Utah only produced them 0.6 percent of the time" (p. 346). They also found that it was "used most often by young females who had lived the majority of their life in Utah" (p. 336). This oral release in *mountain* was found to particularly correlate with Utahns, which accounts for why *mountain* is so stigmatized.

The *card-cord* merger is another highly stigmatized, often misrepresented feature of Utah English. This feature is what people notice when they hear the word "fark" for "fork." It is not a switch, as many people assume. In other words, someone who says "fark" instead or "fork" would not necessarily say "form" instead of "farm." As it turns out, it is not even a clear merger and is often variable, which means that it is unpredictable whether the merger will occur. One researcher put it well when he said, "it does not seem that it is as simple as previous studies have made it out to be—in all likelihood, there are multiple articulatory processes going on at once" (Bowie, 2008, p. 55). The *card-cord* merger is disappearing in many varieties; however, despite its similarities with other versions of the merger, Utah's *card-cord* merger was likely developed and discarded independent of what was going on in other states. In fact, Utah has the opposite of what St. Louis has in that Utahns merge /or/ words into the [ar] sound while people from St. Louis merge /ar/ words into the [or] sound (Bowie, 2003).

Methods

Each feature outlined above was examined in the following study. A total of twelve participants were selected from the three small towns in southern Utah: ten from Bryce Valley (though not all of them had lived there for all of their lives), one from Panguitch, and one from Escalante. There were eight females and four males. Nine participants ranged from ages eighteen to twenty-three. Three were between the ages of thirty-five and fifty. Participants were asked to record themselves reading a short one- to two-minute passage designed to elicit certain features of Utah English. No further instructions were given. Participants were then asked to send the recordings via text message.

Recordings were then analyzed for features of Utah English. All possible Utah features were included in the passage for a complete

analysis. These features included the *card-cord* merger, the *fail-fell* and *feel-fill* mergers, *g*-dropping, *t*-intrusion in words like *else*, and glottalization and oral releases in words like *mountain*. To ensure that the features were reported properly, each recording was reviewed at least twice.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 present the results of the analysis. Names were replaced with letters to protect the privacy of participating individuals. *A* through *H* are female, and *I* through *L* are male. *G* through *I* are the participants who were over thirty-five. In the results, I found that some participants only used the targeted feature in specific words. These specific words are listed in the tables. A few of the participants didn't have the feature but instead had something close to it. In the tables, this is marked as *close*.

Table 1 includes the analysis for every feature except *mountain*, which is given in its own table. It is clear from Table 1 that the *fail-fell* and *feel-fill* mergers have a strong presence in southern Utah. *G*-dropping and the *cord-card* merger are not as strong. They did seem to be present in some way but not with a large enough sample to be conclusive. *T*-intrusion also seems to have had a strong presence, but it consistently appeared only in the word *else*, even though the passage also had two other possible *t*-intrusion words: *Nelson* and *also*. These features are discussed in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

Table 1
Utah Linguistic Features in Female Participants

	Card-Cord	***Feel-Fill***	***Fail-Fell***	***G*-dropping**	***T*-intrusion**
A	Different /or/ in *oranges* and *St. George*	x at least once in *sale*	x		Only in *else*
B		x most of the time	x	x	Only in *else*
C			x mostly		Only in *else*
D		x	x		

E		x at least once in *sale*	x mostly	x	Only in *else*
F		Close	x		Only in *else*
G		x at least once in *sale*			Only in *else*
H			x at least once in *feel*		

Note: An x *in a box indicates that the participant has that column's feature. Some participants used the feature only in specific words, which are marked accordingly.*

Table 2
Utah Linguistic Features in Male Participants

	Card-Cord	***Feel-Fill***	***Fail-Fell***	***G*-dropping**	***T*-intrusion**
I	x in *farm* and *alarm*		Close	x	
J	Different /or/ in *oranges* and *St. George*	x	Close		Only in *else*
K		x	Close		Only in *else*
L		Close			

Note: An x *in a box indicates that the participant has that column's feature. Some participants used the feature only in specific words, which are marked accordingly.*

There was only one instance of the *card-cord* merger. It came from a male between the ages of thirty-five and fifty. He pronounced *farm/farmers* and *alarm* like [form] and [ǝlorm]. Other participants had no evidence of the *card-cord* merger, but they did have an /or/ in *St. George* and *oranges* that differed—it was lower so that it was almost an [ɔr] or [ɒr] instead of an [or].

The *feel-fill* merger was the most consistent of the mergers, with ten out of the twelve participants exhibiting at least some evidence of it. This evidence included saying *feel* as [fɪl] or *really* as [rɪli]. Half of the participants had the full merger all the time,

while others varied from most of the time to at least once. One participant almost had it, so that instance is labeled *close*.

The *fail-fell* merger was less clear. It sounded similar to a near merger in most participants' speech. Only one person appeared to have the complete merger. Three participants had a clear merge in the word *sale* so that it sounded like [sɛl] but not in any others.

G-dropping did appear in three out of the twelve participants' recordings in words like *walkin'* or *sellin'*. Those who did drop their *g*'s did not drop them all the time but consistently enough to be a normal part of their speech. Three participants might be enough to make a difference in this study, but the research on this particular feature would still benefit from future data.

There also seems to be a strange correlation between *t*-intrusion and the word *else* so that it sounded like [ɛlts]. Of the twelve participants, eight of them had *t*-intrusion in the word *else*. None of those participants had *t*-intrusion in any other word, such as *also* or *Nelson*.

"Mountain" Words

Pronunciation of *mountain* words is spread between so many possibilities that it needed its own table. Tables 3 and 4 present all of the different pronunciations of *mountain* words, such as *satin*, *fountain*, and *platinum*. Participants' pronunciations in this study fell into four different categories: (1) glottal stop and oral release, (2) glottal stop and nasal release, (3) *t* in *fountain* but nothing else, and (4) everything hyperarticulated. As seen in Eddington and Savage (2012), most people inside of Utah and out will glottalize the *t* in *mountain*. It is not surprising that many of the Utahns in this study did the same. It is unusual to say the *t* instead of glottalizing it (*t* hyperarticulation), but this tends to be a common pattern in Utah because *mountain* is so stigmatized. It is possible that the speaker who articulated the *t* did so because he was aware of the stigmatism.

Mountain pronunciations covered the whole table. Only two participants had a consistent glottal stop with an oral release ([mawʔən]). Five of the participants pronounced it the same way anyone from outside of Utah may have pronounced it, with a consistent glottal stop and a nasal release ([mawʔn]). The next category included four participants who hyperarticulated the *t*, but only in the word *fountain*. One participant pronounced the third *fountain* with a glottal stop. Since not all of these participants' words were pronounced this way, I included additional categories

for *satin* and *platinum*, depending on where the other words fell. Each used nasal releases. The last category included just one person who hyperarticulated the *t* in every word without fail.

Table 3
Pronunciation Features for "Mountain" in Females

	Glottal Stop & Schwa (Oral Release)	Glottal Stop & No Vowel (Nasal Release)	*Fountain* Hyper-articulated, but Every Other Word Glottalized	Everything Hyper-articulated
A		x		
B	x			
C		x	x	
D	x			
E		x		
F		x	x	
G		x		
H		x in the last *fountain*	x	

Table 4
Pronunciation Features for "Mountain" in Males

	Glottal Stop & Schwa (Oral Release)	Glottal Stop & No Vowel (Nasal Release)	*Fountain* Hyperar-ticulated, but Every Other Word Glottalized	Everything Hyper-articulated
I		x		
J				x
K		x	x	
L		x		

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. The first limitation is the number and lack of variation of participants. Although twelve is a tolerable amount for an initial study, a better sample would be larger and include a wider variety of ages. Another limitation is that participants recorded their passages independently, so there is no way of knowing how frequently they practiced reading the passage or how many times they recorded the audio before they sent in a final version. A third limitation has to do with the fact that participants knew the researcher. Participants may have been extra nervous about (or proud of) their accent because they were performing for someone that they knew. This may account for some aspects of the data like *t* hyperarticulation and possible exaggeration.

Discussion

Several patterns can be seen in the data. As I mentioned earlier, the *fail-fell* and *feel-fill* mergers were extremely prevalent in this data. It is fair to conclude that, at least in this sample, these mergers are prevalent in southern Utah. I found it interesting that the *fail-fell* mergers were near mergers and so many participants fell under the category *close*. This makes me wonder if either some words more easily merged these vowels or if participants were more aware of the difference between some words—for example, *mail* and *Mel*—so that they sometimes pronounced it one way and sometimes the other. Another interesting result was the specific context for *t*-intrusion. It seemed unusual for it to appear so consistently in *else* but not in any other word. It would be interesting to do a study focused on *t*-intrusion and whether it shows up in certain situations. Is it only certain words? Does it occur with certain vowels or certain lengths of words? How often does it show up, and is it a feature that could be charted as a difference between northern Utah and southern Utah?

One feature that I think merits further research in southern Utah would be the *card-cord* merger. I found only one person with the full *card-cord* merger, but he very clearly had it in the words *alarm* and *farm*. I had only three participants over the age of thirty-five, and only one of them was male. It would be useful to expand research on this demographic to discover if anyone else between the ages of thirty-five and fifty demonstrates the *card-cord* merger. Does it match? It seemed to match with what Bowie found about

this merger; the /or/ words merge into the [ar] sound instead or /ar/ words merge into the [or] sound (2003). I am also interested in studying the younger participants' speech with a different /or/ sound. As far as I could tell, it seemed lower so that it was almost an [ɔr] or [ɒr] in words like *St. George* or *oranges*. What exactly is this different /or/? Is it related to the *card-cord* merger?

I was very interested in the data having to do with *mountain* words. Utahns have a very interesting relationship with *mountains*, meaning words like *mountain* and *fountain*. There is ample evidence of *t* hyperarticulation just in the word *fountain*. The fact that most participants articulated the *t* in this word but not in *satin* or *platinum* is strong evidence for their being aware of the stigmatized *mountain* and, either consciously or unconsciously, changing it. Even more interesting is the fact that these same participants pronounced the other words the same way that the rest of the United States would pronounce them—with a nasal release. So, they must be aware of *mountain* but not of the fact that words like *satin* and *platinum* fall into the same category. There is a lot to unpack when it comes to Utah's glottalization of the word *mountain*.

Conclusion

Future study could focus on these features and how closely each of them is related to how "country" people want to sound. Focus could be placed specifically on how this "country" sound is perceived in small towns. I hope that this information can be a starting point for more people to begin learning about small town varieties of English in southern Utah. It is amazing that we can study varieties of English to help us better understand people. This study could be the beginning to a better understanding of the southern Utah variety of English.

References

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