

Perceptions of Mormonese

How Association with the
Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints Changes
Perceptions of the Religiolect

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Based on past research of religiolects and in-group behavior, this research investigates if a religiolect exists for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonese) and if members are aware of it themselves, or if it is noticed more by individuals outside of the religious group. Forty-five individuals from Idaho completed an audio recorded survey. The current data is inconclusive due to limitations in the survey population; however, the data trends towards people who have greater affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints identifying Mormonese more readily than those with no affiliation with the Church.

This article investigates Idaho natives' perceptions of Mormonese—an accent distinct to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—and if research participants' perception of that accent positively correlates with their affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In other words, this research seeks to identify if people who are current, inactive, or former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints identify Mormonese at higher rates than participants who have no connection to the Church. I hypothesize that people connected to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will identify characteristics of Mormonese more often than people who are not connected to the Church. In contrast, the null hypothesis is that there is no interaction between an individual's connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and their perception of the presence of Mormonese.

Previous research on language attitudes identifies how in-group and out-group members subjectively stereotype distinctions in another group's speech patterns when no measurable patterns are present (Meyerhoff, 2018). However, these stereotypes lead linguists to find previously undocumented linguistic variants between groups of people. Group identity is multifaceted and sometimes falls along religious boundaries correlated with dialect, as seen in Jewish American English. Christianese is also used throughout the United States by evangelical Protestant Christians, utilizing features like “theological jargon and archaic morphosyntactic constructions” (Stanley, 2020, p. 1). The instances of religiolects—dialects characterizing a specific religion—are common throughout the world. Mormonese has its own distinguishing features from standard Utah English in the same way that Christianese is distinguishable from the regional varieties around it. Mormonese characteristics include proredicate *do*, velar nasal plus (ŋg), and carefully enunciated speech style features that carry over into everyday use (Baker & Bowie, 2009; Stanley, 2020).

Mormonese is documented in the heart of the “Mormon bubble,” which primarily exists in the areas about a one-hour drive from Salt Lake City (Stanley, 2020). The secondary area of the Mormon bubble spreads, most densely, from southern Idaho, down south through Utah, Nevada, and Arizona. Mormonese's distinguishing features predictably fall within the Mormon bubble, but there is room for more research on language outside the bubble's boundaries. Stanley (2020) establishes that members of

the Church in southwestern Washington do not use propredicate *do*, velar nasal plus, or carefully enunciated speech at significantly different rates—even if the members of the Church in Washington had moved from Utah. Stanley’s findings demonstrate that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints do not speak Mormonese inherently. Thus, the Mormon accent may be an artifact of in-group behaviors within Utah and the Mormon region when speakers determine it is beneficial to differentiate between in-group and out-group members.

This article seeks to expand on this previous research by further exploring how people with varying relationships with the Church feel members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints speak. This evaluation of Mormonese questions if participants’ association with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints increases their likelihood to claim there is a Mormon accent. Whether these claims are true or not is not investigated, merely the perception of them. If Mormonese is reported more by people affiliated with the Church than by those who are not, then this preliminary research opens the door to further questions of what motivates those higher reports. Are there in-group biases? Or are members just exposed to more Mormonese than non-members? And what do people classify as distinguishing features of Mormonese?

While this article makes no claims about what may motivate a higher recognition of Mormonese among people who have affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, it proposes that people who have no association with the religion are more likely to report that there is no such thing as a Mormon accent, whereas current or previous members of the Church will be more likely to report a distinct Mormon accent. This article also investigates the effects of gender on perception.

Data and Methodology

The data in this analysis is sampled from a larger dataset on Idaho English collected by Joey Stanley. Idaho English is the variety of English that people from Idaho tend to speak, but there is limited data on what features characterize Idaho English. The data used for this article was collected on a Qualtrics survey distributed via Reddit and targeted to Idaho natives. The survey collected demographic data through free response questions, and it had sixteen questions and four word lists for participants to read.

Questions ranged from demographic information to audio-recorded interview questions, like a quick life sketch. Activities included reading from the word lists. All questions were optional.

The study had fifty-five participants who were all from Idaho. Of these participants, ten were eliminated because they did not answer core questions or provided outlier responses that skewed the analysis, resulting in a sample size of forty-five participants. The core questions asked the following:

- 1) Do you think there is such a thing as “Mormonese” or a Mormon accent?
- 2) What is your gender?
- 3) What is your connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

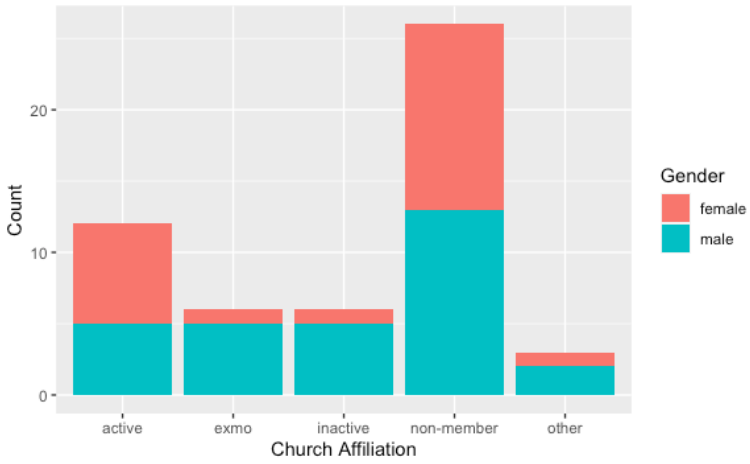
Participants who did not respond to the inquiry of Mormonese (1), or who did not have a definitive response (yes or no) for if Mormonese exists (5), were excluded from the statistical analysis. Three responses were also removed because participants responded to “What is your connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?” with the response choice “Other” (3) instead of “Active member,” “Inactive member,” “Former member,” or “No connection.” These three responses were removed because no text box was provided to specify what the “other” connection was and their responses could not be reliably tied to one of the other connection categories or used to create another adequately descriptive category. The data simplified the responses from “What is your connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?” to a binary factor of “affiliated” (24) or “not affiliated” (21). All participants who indicated that they were current, inactive, or former members of the Church were summarized into the “affiliated” category, while those who indicated they had no connection to the Church were summarized into the “not affiliated” category. In future data collection, a free response box next to the “other” option would be useful to maximize data collection. Finally, one response was removed because only one person in the fifty-five participants identified as genderqueer. While acknowledged and appreciated, the response was an outlier in the dataset and complicated the chi-square test, which works best with binary variables.

This study analyzes the interaction of affiliation with the Church on the perceived existence of Mormonese and the interactions between gender and the perceived existence of Mormonese. Interaction between connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the perceived existence of Mormonese is the primary research question. Gender is also analyzed to check for additional correlations that the initial analysis may overlook otherwise. Because both independent variables are categorical and are compared with a categorical dependent variable, the research analyzes the independent variables against the dependent variable through chi-square and Fisher's exact tests. Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests are designed to compare two categorical variables. The chi-square test will analyze the interaction level between each variable on the perception of Mormonese. After the chi-square test, the Fisher's exact test uses more precise measurements to cross-check the results from the chi-square test. Typically, Fisher's exact test is only used if there are five or fewer observations in a variable, but it can also be used to double-check a chi-square analysis. If results from the Fisher's exact test are significant ($p < 0.05$), a pairwise Fisher's exact test runs the interaction between the variables to verify the p-value. Incongruent results among all three tests would show that the data does not meet the standard of normalcy because we cannot reliably infer any conclusion favoring, or refuting, the null hypothesis and then apply the results to a larger population than the sample size.

Results

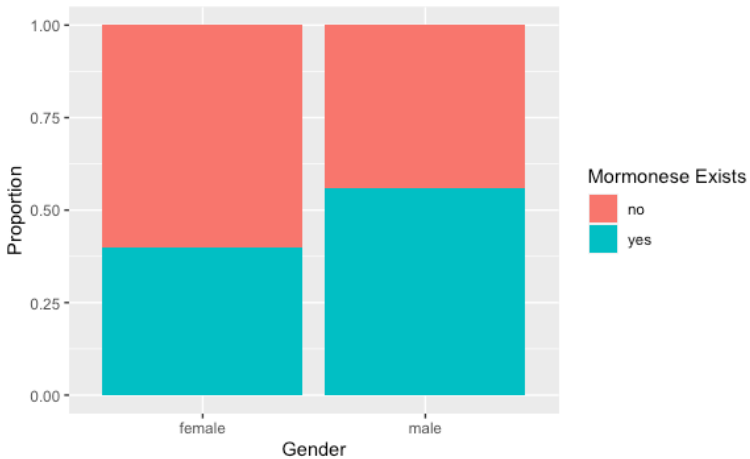
The following graph is provided to give an idea of the general demographic of the participants (54) before null responses and outliers were removed. Among the five categories of affiliation with the Church, more female participants reported being either active members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or nonmembers than male participants did in those same categories (see figure 1 on the next page).

Figure 1



After removing outliers, perception of Mormonese did not significantly differ by gender: $(N = 45) = 0.588, p = 0.443$.

Figure 2

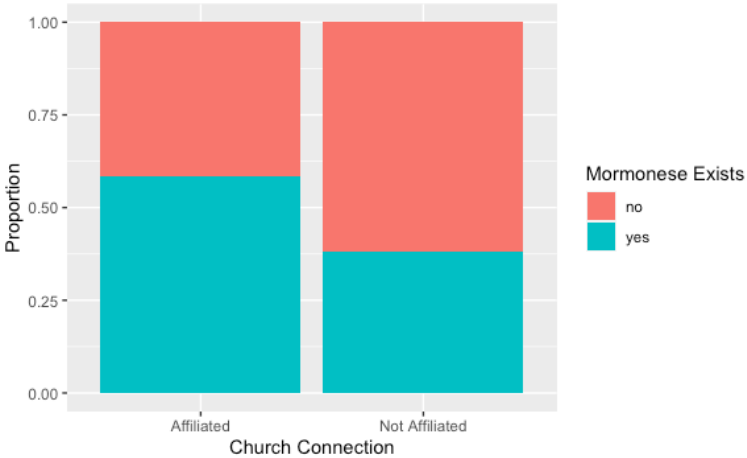


Male and female participants answered at nearly even rates that Mormonese exists or does not exist. However, female participants indicated that Mormonese does not exist at higher rates than male participants (see figure 2).

Fisher's exact test was used to determine if there was a significant association between gender and perception of Mormonese.

There was not a statistically significant association between gender and perception of Mormonese (two-tailed $p = 0.373$). As shown in figure 3, perception of Mormonese also did not differ significantly by connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: ($N = 45$) = 1.12, $p = 0.291$.

Figure 3



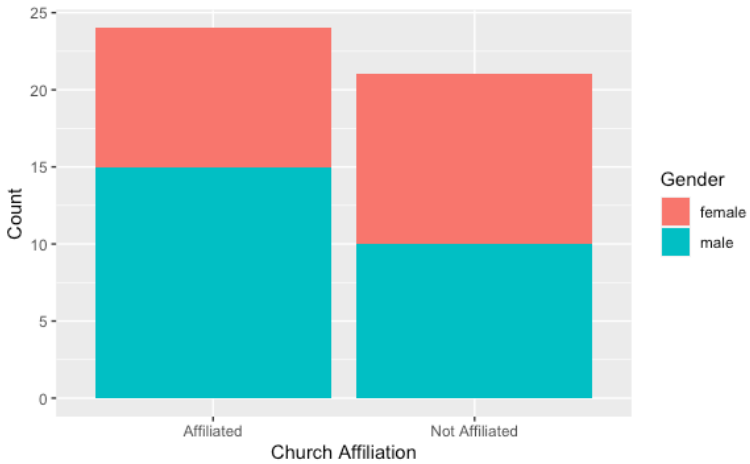
While a higher percentage of participants who are or were previously connected to the Church in some way report that Mormonese exists, results are not statistically significant because the p -value was not lower than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis stands to show that connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not increase an individual’s perception of Mormonese. This result could be due to the small sample size of forty-five observations, or it could be that there is genuinely no correlation between these two variables.

Even though each variable contains more than five observations, Fisher’s exact test was used to determine if there was a significant association between affiliation with the Church and perception of Mormonese after completing the initial chi-square analysis. There was not a statistically significant association between gender and perception of Mormonese (two-tailed $p = 0.236$).

The final analysis checks for the interaction between gender and affiliation with the Church. If there is a significant interaction here, there may be more underlying factors influencing the insignificance of the previous interaction on perceptions of

Mormonese. Figure 4 shows the counts of each gender in the categories of “affiliated” or “not affiliated” with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Participants who are not affiliated with the Church are almost evenly divided between male (10) and female (12). Affiliated participants are a majority male (15) and slightly lower female (8). However, there is no significant effect of gender on affiliation with the Church ($(N=45) = 0.492$, $p = 0.483$) when analyzed in chi-square and Fisher’s exact tests (two-tailed $p = 0.377$). Because there is no connection between gender and affiliation with the Church, we can reasonably infer that there is not a hidden interaction between the two variables when combined with the perception of Mormonese.

Figure 4



Discussion and Conclusions

My research indicates that there is no statistically significant association with gender or connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on perceptions of Mormonese. Nor is there an underlying connection between gender and affiliation with the Church when tested against one another. Due to this lack of an underlying interaction in the independent variables, we can deduce that there is no statistically significant association when the two variables are factored together and tested against the dependent variable. Thus, the null hypothesis stands, and perceptions of Mormonese cannot be accurately predicted based on an individual’s connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, due to the small sample size of this

study, it may be productive to test this theory again with a larger sample. Moreover, all participants were from Idaho and, as such, are not fully representative of the population of how Mormonese may be perceived in the Intermountain West or in the United States. These participants are particularly unrepresentative when research accounts for the Mormon region (Stanley, 2020), which does not extend into northern and western Idaho, where most of the participants were from.

More generalized studies looking at the perceptions of Mormonese in areas surrounding Idaho as well as areas within the Mormon region may have interesting results regarding how in-group members distinguish themselves from out-group members, like the results Baker and Bowie (2009) found among members of the Church in Utah. Further research could also seek to account for how former in-group members' style shift between these in-group language features and out-group language features. Additionally, I would be interested in sentiment analysis on people's perception of Mormonese and other religiolects depending on connection to the religion. Further research could also attempt to define how structurally different Mormonese is from other local dialects and compare those results to how widely perceived those dialectal differences are. This extended research would take the usefulness of the data already collected from being interesting to being useful in learning more about language itself rather than just perceptions of language.

In conclusion, this research begs the question of the salience of Mormonese and what features distinguish it from the other regional dialects in areas where members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reside. Additionally, there is room for discussion about the functions of religiolects as in-group and out-group distinguishers and the intentionality of their use. Further research with larger sample sizes needs to be done on this topic, but with the field of study largely untouched, there is a lot of potential for new developments.

References

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