Consonantal Variation in Utah English: What el[t]se is happening[k]?

The purpose of this paper is to assess the frequency of consonantal variables characteristic of Utah English, and to shed light on several linguistic features yet to be analyzed in depth in this region. Because of its unique settlement history and predominantly Mormon population today, Utah is an outlier linguistically and culturally compared to other Western states. But research on Utah English has been focused primarily on vowel mergers (for example Di Paolo & Faber 1990; Baker & Bowie 2010), leaving variation in consonants relatively understudied.

The consonantal feature of contemporary Utah English that is probably most salient, both to the academic community and to Utahans generally, is the oral release of glottal stops in words like *mountain* and *kitten* (Eddington & Savage 2012). However, what has not been extensively studied by sociolinguists include [t]-epenthesis in words like *fal(t)se* and *Wil(t)son* and the realization of *-ing* as [ɪŋk] or [ɪŋg]. Neither of these features are unique to Utah, but to our knowledge an analysis of their frequency in the Beehive State is lacking.

To assess the frequency of these three variables, audio was collected via Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing site for data collection and processing. Following Kim *et al.* (2016), participants were asked to submit recordings of themselves reading approximately 130 prepared sentences and a 250-item word list. We use speech from 14 Utahans, totaling 5.5 hours of audio and over 2000 tokens from 184 unique words. Each observation was impressionistically coded into one of several discrete categories: for words like *mountain* and *kitten*, the variants included [ʔn̩], [ʔɪn], and [tʰɪn]; [t]-epenthesis was coded as either present or absent; and variants of *-ing* included [ɪŋ], [ɪn], [ɪŋk], [ɪŋg], or "other."

The results show a high degree of inter-speaker variation. In words like *mountain* and *kitten*, the syllabic nasal [ʔn̩], which is typical of American English, was the most common form. But surprisingly, aspirated stops [tʰɪn] were the next most common variant, with some speakers as near-categorical users of this form. This makes oral releases of glottal stops [ʔɪn] as described by Eddington & Savage (2012) the least common variant in our sample. Only a few participants had [t]-epenthesis in words like *false* and *Wilson* or stop-released *-ing*, but these variants were relatively frequent in those who did. Furthermore, they were more common in the women in our sample, hinting at a future rise in frequency for these forms since women typically are at the forefront of linguistic change (Labov 1994). Yet at the same time, some of these features, particularly the oral-release of glottal stops, are stigmatized in Utah, which may cause the speakers to avoid their usage in careful speech such as in the recordings we received.

Based on these results, we conclude with two findings: (1) there is variation even within Utah English, particularly among women, and (2) there are still additional features of Utah English that have yet to be studied in depth.

References
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