

The Missionary Voice: Perceptions of an emerging register

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Abstract. In this paper, we report on what we are calling “Missionary Voice,” or a particular way of speaking characteristic to missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The first study elicits perceptions of Missionary Voice by Latter-day Saints in the Intermountain West without reference to any particular recording or person. We find a complex, multifaceted indexical field as well as potential linguistic features, uses for Missionary Voice, and speculative origins. In the second study, we play audio clips and ask listeners to identify the missionaries among them. While people did no better than chance at the task, we zero in on certain speakers and compile a tentative list of acoustic correlates of Missionary Voice. As this is the first study on the language of Latter-day Saint missionaries, we open more questions than we answer, but we hope to show that Missionary Voice is very much a part of Latter-day Saint culture.

Keywords. indexicality; registers; enregisterment; religiolect; Latter-day Saints

1. Introduction. This paper focuses on a particular way of speaking among missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,¹ which we call “Missionary Voice.” To our knowledge, this register has not been discussed in the academic literature. In this study, we describe the indexical field that Missionary Voice elicits when perceived by Latter-day Saints. We also provide a preliminary description of acoustic and linguistic cues that are most characteristic of Missionary Voice. In the rest of this section, we provide some background on who missionaries are and the sociolinguistic underpinning for this study.

Missionaries are Latter-day Saint volunteers who dedicate 18 months to two years to tell others about their faith (see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints N.D.). While individuals voluntarily choose to do missionary service, the location of their assignment, which may be anywhere in the world, and the language they are expected to use, which may be completely new to them, are assigned by church headquarters. Missionaries are typically college-aged and adhere to strict rules of dress and behavior. In the eyes of missionaries, persuading others to join their faith has eternal consequences for these potential converts, so there is motivation to do well at their task. Many missionaries prepare emotionally, financially, and spiritually for years leading up to their service, and many consider their missions to be a pivotal, coming-of-age experience. We suspect that these years of anticipation, prominence in Latter-day Saint culture, strict rules, and great personal significance all contribute to the emergence of a linguistic register.

Third Wave sociolinguistic research (Eckert 2012; Hall-Lew, Moore & Podesva 2021) has shown that identity expression happens through language. People oriented towards a place may

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¹ The term *Mormon* to refer to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or its members is now discouraged. We will use the full name of the church when it is not too cumbersome to do so, and will refer to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as Latter-day Saints. However, we will continue to use the term in established expressions like *ex-Mormon* and *Mormon Culture Region*.

use more local variants of that place (Reed 2020; Carmichael 2017). Ethnic identity (Grieser 2022; Jeon, Cheng & Kim 2022), sexual orientation (Podesva 2007), social class (Labov 1966; Eckert 1989), and political affiliations (Schrimpf 2013; Hall-Lew, Coppock & Starr 2010) have all been shown to affect language. Even worldviews, like orientation towards a more “country” lifestyle (Hall-Lew & Stephens 2012; Podesva & Hofwegen 2015), can influence what linguistic variants a person uses. All this happens because language is arbitrary. Countless random variants occur in any one speech community, but eventually one or more will gain traction. Outsiders may notice and associate those variants with the original group. Those variants then become “indexical” of that community, which outsiders can draw upon for aspiration or pejoration and insiders can use to reinforce their position within the group (Eckert 2012; Labov 1972; Silverstein 2003; Agha 2003).

Researchers have previously demonstrated linguistic differences between Latter-day Saint laypeople and others in their region (Di Paolo 1993; Baker & Bowie 2010; Eckstein & Villarreal 2013; Baker-Smemoe & Bowie 2015; Rosen & Skriver 2015), demonstrating that religious affiliation plays a role even in those not involved in missionary service. Given the prominence of Latter-day Saint missionaries in their church culture, and given the great personal significance of missionary service, we anticipate some influence on language. Nygaard (2022), for example, has documented an extensive list of missionary slang. Besides lexical items though, we might also expect other linguistic variants to spread across missionaries. And if outsiders hear those variants enough, they may begin to become indexical of missionaries.

In this study, we seek to address the following research questions. First, is there a Missionary Voice? In other words, is there a particular way of speaking or list of linguistic variants that has become indexical of missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? If so, can Latter-day Saints reliably hear it? Or perhaps, do missionaries consistently use it? Finally, what are the acoustic correlates of Missionary Voice? We address these questions in two studies. The first is where we elicit impressions from people and the second is an experiment where listeners respond to recordings of missionaries.

We acknowledge that Missionary Voice likely exists among Latter-day Saint missionaries elsewhere, in other languages, and among those of other faiths, but for the purposes of this study, we purposely narrowed the scope to English-speaking, American missionaries. We hope future work can explore how other missionaries use language.

2. Eliciting impressions of Missionary Voice. In the first of our two studies, we aim to simply determine whether people were aware of Missionary Voice and what their impressions of it are.

2.1. METHODS FOR ELICITING IMPRESSIONS To gather impressions of Missionary Voice, we set up an online survey using Qualtrics. This survey is part of a larger project that analyzes speech production and perceptions in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States (cf. Stanley & Jackson 2023; Stanley 2023). Among other questions that asked about styles of speech within the Latter-day Saint community, we asked the following: “Some people feel that LDS missionaries have a particular way of speaking, especially while in the middle of a lesson. Do you think people sound different when they’re on their missions?” In this survey, though, we used a third-party plug-in, Phonic, which allowed participants to respond orally, with their answers recorded using their computer’s or smart device’s microphone. We have found that people generally give longer answers when asked to provide a spoken response, and it gives participants the flexibility to imitate the register as part of their response.

We targeted participants in Utah, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming for two reasons. First, the English spoken in those four states is generally understudied and part of the larger survey includ-

ed a wordlist task with the intention of documenting patterns of speech production in the region. Second, Utah is the center of the Mormon Culture Region (Meinig 1965; Stanley 2020), so we would expect the highest concentration of Latter-day Saints and the greatest intensity and complexity of Latter-day Saint culture to be located there. The other three states are included mostly due to their proximity to Utah and the Mormon Culture Region. We do not presume that these four states form a cohesive speech community.

We distributed the survey using Reddit by posting a link to subreddits that were specifically focused on cities, counties, regions, or universities within these four states. Only those who claimed to grow up in one of the four states could progress to the portion that collected linguistic data. Furthermore, only those who self-reported current or past affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints saw the question about Missionary Voice. While people who are not of this faith are the ones that missionaries talk to the most, it is those inside the faith that may be more aware of this register and would have the best intuitions. In the end, 366 people took the survey, 147 of which responded to the Missionary Voice question.

2.2. MISSIONARY VOICE IMPRESSIONS. Overall, we found that 98 of 147 responses (66.7%) agreed that Latter-day Saint missionaries do have a particular way of speaking. Only 8 people (5.4%) felt that there was no difference. The rest (41 or 27.8%) stated they were unsure and most of those explained that it was because they do not encounter missionaries enough to say either way. Overall, this appears to be strong evidence that most people affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are aware of some sort of Missionary Voice.

When analyzing the content of their responses we found four categories of comments, which we will describe in turn here. First, some participants gave descriptions of the voice based on its linguistic features. Its pitch is described as higher, monotonous, or having uptalk. Similarly, several general comments discussed the “tone” people use. People described it as quieter and slower than normal speech. There were many comments about “stress” and how some words are emphasized, though it is not clear what the actual linguistic correlates of those descriptions are. Many comments described its “cadence” and mentioned that missionaries often use many long pauses, sometimes deliberately and sometimes awkwardly long. A few participants mentioned that missionaries use “good grammar”, avoiding fillers, and using more gesture. And in a few imitations of Missionary Voice, participants were usually breathier and had audible exhalations. Overall, these comments suggest that Missionary Voice is primarily a suprasegmental phenomenon.

Second, many of the survey participants described the voice in terms of how it is perceived by listeners. Most comments were positive and described missionaries’ voices as generally good (using words like *calm, classy, mellow, nice, peaceful, pleasant, positive, relaxed, soft, soothing, wholesome*) or, as one person put it, “everything is like a ray of sunshine.” Missionary voice was described as compassionate (*agreeable, approachable, empathetic, friendly, gentle, intentional, loving, non-judgmental, respectful, understanding*). There is perhaps a variant of Missionary Voice that is livelier, with words like *confident, energetic, enthusiastic, and excited*. Listeners perceive some authority in the voice (*elevated, power, professional*). Finally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, they also perceive missionaries’ speech as being more religious (*faithful, earnest, humble, passionate, pious, reverent*). Some of the responses were neutral, and simply described the voice as being more formal (*proper, calculated, serious, more scripted*). It wasn’t a “ray of sunshine” for everyone though: others found the voice to be quite negative and described it as fake (*artificial, disingenuous, fake, rehearsed, robotic, stiff, unnatural*), conveying a “holier than thou” attitude (*condescending, pretentious*), and coercive (*forceful, lecturing, manipulative, mild admonishment, persuasion*) and the person who uses Missionary Voice as indoctrinated (*brain-*

washed, conformity, cultish, emasculated, silly, stupid, unhelpful). We note that most negative comments were said by a few ex-Mormons who were likely influenced by negative experiences in the faith.² Meanwhile, almost all the practicing Latter-day Saints described Missionary Voice in overwhelming positive terms. Overall, we find that while not always precisely articulated, most people generally had a good idea of what Missionary Voice was indexical of.

Third, some people offered speculation on why Missionary Voice even exists. Some people felt that it was for pedagogical purposes and that it helped with turn-taking between missionaries, making sure the listener is following, or emphasizing certain points. Others said that that way of speaking is for spiritual reasons, and that its speakers use Missionary Voice out of respect for sacred topics, reverence for divine inspiration, expressing holiness, or to demonstrate spiritual strength. So, at least some listeners sense a purpose for Missionary Voice, over and beyond what it indexes.

Finally, a few participants speculated on the origins of Missionary Voice. Some participants said it comes from imitating global church leaders. Others recognized that missionaries talk differently but said it was no different than any other public-facing, presentation-giving style of speech that would be expected from salespeople, teachers, or customer service workers. Part of it may be stemmed in memorization and rote repetition. Latter-day Saint missionaries today have a relatively limited repertoire of lessons that they teach, which can lead to them recycling phrases and retelling the same anecdotes. Until approximately 2003, lessons were memorized word-for-word, and missionaries were instructed to not deviate from the script. It is likely that a particular style of speech was inadvertently used for repeating memorized content. It may be the case that that style was passed down from trainers to less experienced missionaries in micro-generations; what we describe here may have its origins in that memorized style even though missionaries are taught to speak more spontaneously.

These descriptions about the linguistic properties, its perceptions by listeners, the reason for its usage, and its ultimate origins are at this point purely speculative and varied considerably across participants. However, they illustrate the point that Missionary Voice is very much on the radar for most people affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Its indexical field is wide, complex, and multifaceted. One participant made a particularly enlightening comment: “It’s what spiritual discussions are supposed to sound like.” This brief statement suggests that not only do missionaries sound like that, but that they *should* sound like that, simply because that is what one does in those situations. If, for this participant, spiritual discussions and Missionary Voice go together, we may speculate that it is not a spiritual discussion unless Missionary Voice is used. We touch on this point below in Section 4.1.

The results from this first study show that people know what Missionary Voice is and what it indexes. We now move on to our second study, where we test whether people can actually recognize missionaries by their voice.

3. Do people recognize Missionary Voice? For the second part of our study, we explore Missionary Voice explicitly by running an experiment and having people simply guess whether they hear a missionary or not. For more detail, see Stevenson (2023).

3.1. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN AND PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT. For this experiment, we needed to gather audio clips for listeners to evaluate, but we faced some challenges in accessing speech from missionaries. Our institution, Brigham Young University, is owned by the Church of Jesus

² We do not mean to disregard ex-Mormons’ opinions. In fact, we hope to explore how leaving the faith influences perception and production of language.

Christ of Latter-day Saints and is across the street from the Missionary Training Center. However, the two are separate entities, the latter does not allow visitors, and church policy does not approve of research being done on missionaries. While we do have ample access to individuals at Brigham Young University who have recently completed their missionary service, we felt it would be more authentic to get recordings of people who were actively serving as missionaries at the time of recording. So, we collected audio from videos produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that we found on their public-facing website, on YouTube, and on publicly available missionary instructional videos. Since we did not know the acoustic correlates of Missionary Voice, we simply selected the ones that we felt were the most exemplary. We ended up with clips from five men and five women.

As a control group, we found recordings of people who came from similar demographic backgrounds as the missionaries featured in the audio clips, but who themselves were not missionaries. We sought college-aged, White, Christians from the western United States. We selected audio clips from videos featuring students from Brigham Young University and from another Christian university in the Mountain West. We again selected clips from five men and five women.

An additional obstacle in finding appropriate stimuli was that we wanted the semantic content of the clips to be relatively neutral. They had to be something that either a college student or a missionary could reasonably say so that listeners were forced to use phonetic cues rather than semantic cues to inform their decisions. This means it couldn't be too religious because that is not expected of most college students, and it also couldn't be too secular since missionaries, especially in church-produced videos, do not typically talk about non-religious topics. Nevertheless, appropriate stimuli were found, and a five-second portion of each speaker's audio was selected and incorporated into the survey.

Unfortunately, we have very little background information on the speakers featured in the videos. However, they all spoke what might be described as General American English, or at least what is typical from college-aged White Americans from the Intermountain West.

We incorporated these 20 clips, which were balanced by student/missionary status and by gender presentation, into a simple online survey. Listeners heard each clip and indicated whether they felt like the speaker was a student or a missionary. Each participant heard all 20 clips, which were presented randomly. Listeners were told that some speakers were missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and some were students, but were not told how many of each category there were. At the end of the survey, listeners were given a chance to write their thoughts about what acoustic cues they used to make their decision.

We wanted to recruit participants who are most familiar with missionaries, meaning Latter-day Saints themselves. We did so by distributing the survey at Brigham Young University and on some Facebook groups for Latter-day Saint congregations near that campus. 95 people took the survey, and all but two self-identified as Latter-day Saints. We had 35 men, 59 women, and one non-binary person, and the median age was 24. 77 participants had completed missionary service so they were likely familiar with Missionary Voice and may have even used it themselves.

3.2. CAN PEOPLE RECOGNIZE MISSIONARIES BY THEIR VOICE? We begin by describing the results of the survey in terms of how well listeners did at identifying missionaries by their voice alone. Figure 1 shows the distribution of correct guesses for these 95 participants out of 20. It is an approximately normal distribution with a mean of 10.27, a median of 10, and a standard deviation of 1.899. A one-sample *t*-test based on a mean of 10 shows that there is not enough evidence to

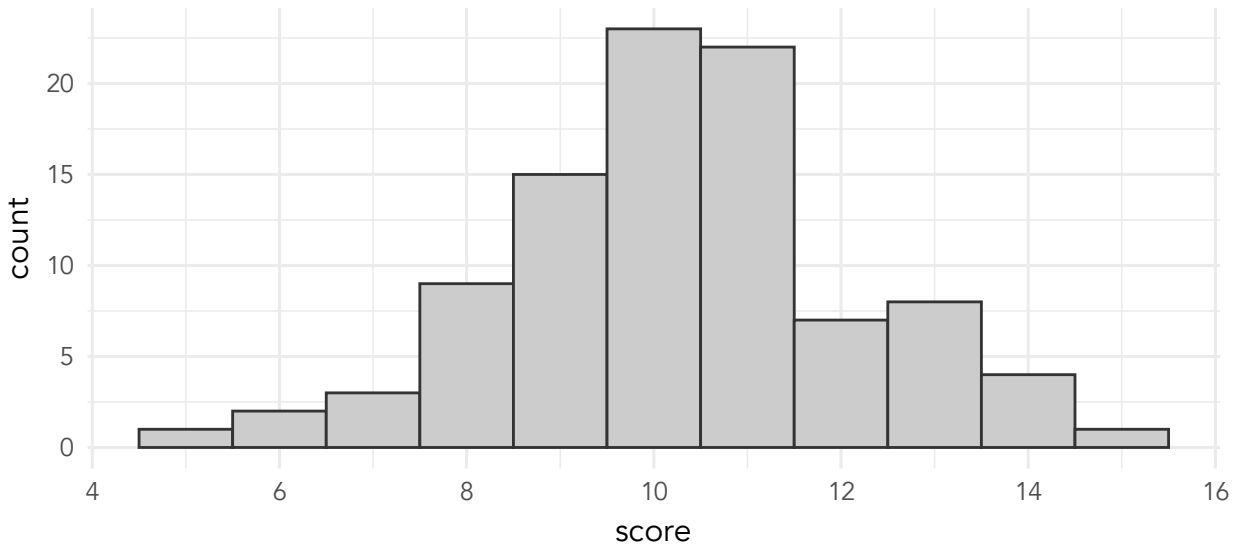


Figure 1: Distribution of scores from the listening task

reject the null hypothesis that it is a normal distribution centered around 10 ($t = 1.405$, $df = 95$, $p = 0.163$). In other words, in the aggregate, these participants did no better than chance.

We get the same results when looking at it from a different perspective. Figure 2 shows distribution of guesses that someone is a missionary or not, based on whether they actually were. The fact that the two blue bars are taller than the red ones means that listeners guessed missionary a little more than not. But the fact that these the two blue bars are approximately the same height, the two red bars are approximately the same height, and the relative height between the two bars within each group is approximately the same, suggests that there was no association between whether someone was a missionary or not and how a listener guessed, which was confirmed by a χ^2 test of independence ($\chi^2 = 1.489$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.222$). In other words, listeners did not systematically get missionaries wrong and the students right or vice-versa.

So, despite the strong feelings that were elicited in Study 1, Figures 1 and 2 strongly suggest that people could not pick out a missionary just by listening to their voice. In the Discussion section below, we discuss some possibilities why listeners performed so poorly on this task. However, while the guesses appeared random overall, we noticed that some audio clips were

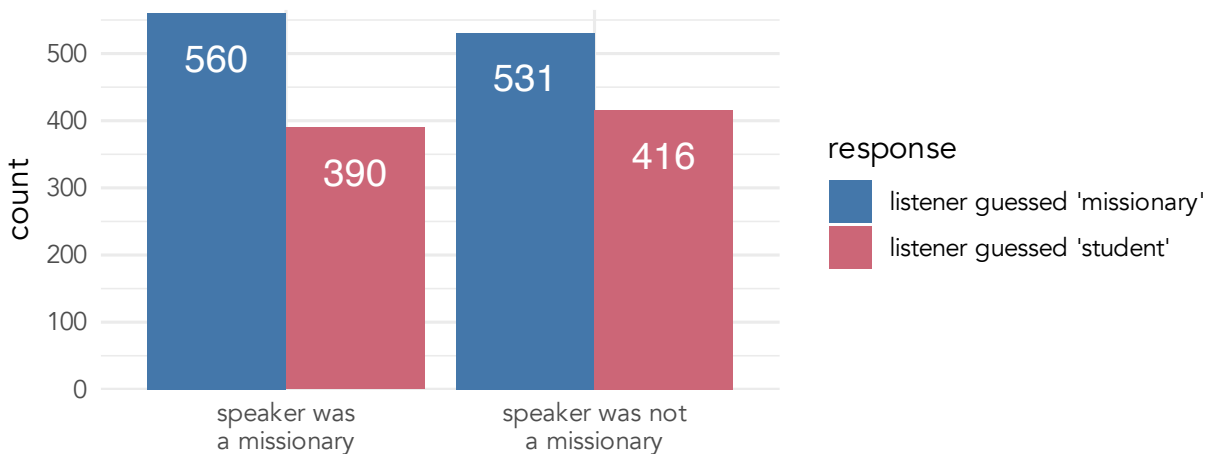


Figure 2. Distribution of guesses by missionary/student status

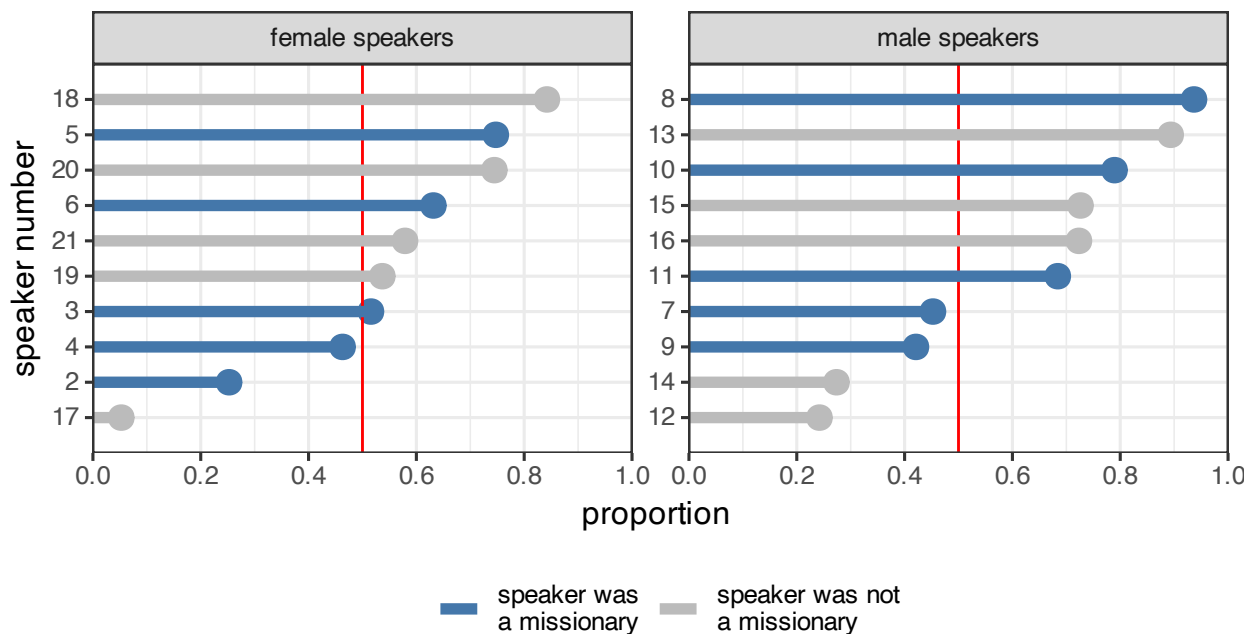


Figure 3. Proportion of guesses that a speaker was a missionary, split by speaker gender and colored by whether they were a missionary. The red line is at 0.5 and represents where the bars would be if guesses were due to chance.

overwhelmingly thought of by listeners as missionaries and others as students. So, in the next section, we explore these clips and see what listeners were cuing in on to make their selections, regardless of whether speaker was a missionary.

3.3. IDENTIFYING ACOUSTIC CORRELATES In this section, we delve into the recordings themselves, particularly those that had the most consistent listener ratings. Figure 3 shows what proportion of listeners thought each speaker was a missionary. The data is split up into panels by speaker gender. The color of the line and dot is blue if that speaker really was a missionary.

An inspection of this plot reveals several patterns. First, we see that the missionaries themselves are mixed throughout the full vertical range of the plots, which represent the order from most to least missionary-sounding. There was no clustering of missionaries towards the top or bottom, meaning missionaries were not systematically evaluated one way or another, confirming what was shown in Figure 2. In an idealized situation where missionaries are easily pegged by their voices, we would see the blue lines all clustering towards the top and the grey lines at the bottom, but that is not what we see here. In other words, missionaries' voices were well-hidden among the students' voices.

However, Figure 3 also indicates that some speakers (i.e. the ones closest to the top) were typically thought of as being missionaries, regardless of whether they were. Others towards the bottom were typically thought of as being students. In other words, the bars on Figure 3 also span the full range of the x-axis. If missionaries were easily identified by their voice, we would see long blue bars extending far to the right and short grey bars on the left. However, if all guesses were due to chance alone, we would see all bars cluster around the middle near the red vertical line. While some speakers' proportions did end up near the 0.5 mark, others were at the extremes, and we cannot attribute those results to chance alone. Regarding the speakers near the top of the plot, listeners heard Missionary Voice in them regardless of whether they were. And for speakers near the bottom, listeners generally did not hear Missionary Voice. We now explore

these most extreme voices to try to identify what it was that listeners heard. Interested readers may listen to and download all clips that we discuss in this paper [here](#). Brief information about these eight speakers, with transcriptions of their clips, can be found in Table 1.

speaker	gender	status	%	transcription
8	male	missionary	94%	I have an adopted grandma who passed away recently due to cancer.
13	male	student	89%	...uh and that happened, and she was so helpful. Um, at one point, somebody sent me a text...
14	male	student	27%	...cuz, t- in my mind the option was, well, if things really get that bad, w- if you'd-
12	male	student	24%	...play a different position, I'd say no. I'll play the position I want to.
18	female	student	84%	...has been founded on. It's kinda this staple. What we, what we first view as stability and then can move forward I-
5	female	missionary	75%	My first time I ever went on a night dive. You look to your side and you reach your arm out you have no idea what's there cuz it's pitch black.
2	female	missionary	25%	I was slightly disappointed but it wasn't like the end of the world, so I kinda just forgot about it.
17	female	student	5%	And everybody's, like, presentations, so you ha- just have to be careful with... be, a- be aware and be educated in them.

Table 1. Transcriptions and other information about the most extremely rated speakers. The % column refers to the percentage of listeners who thought that speaker was a missionary.

We begin with the most missionary-sounding male voices. The most missionary-sounding voice overall was Speaker 8, who was correctly identified as a missionary by 94% of participants. He had frequent and lengthy pauses (672ms after *grandma*, 95ms after *who*, and 120ms after *passed away*) in this brief clip. We suspect that it was these pauses that listeners reacted to. In fact, in the responses at the end of the survey where people indicated what acoustic cues they used to identify missionaries, many of them mentioned pauses. For Speaker 13, 89% believed he was a missionary, but he was not. He had some uptalk and what sounds like spread lip articulation (Laver 1980: 34–37), or what might be called “smiley voice.” Four listeners’ end-of-survey comments specifically mentioned that missionaries often smile or speaking out of the side of their mouth while talking, which goes along with perceptions of their speech being friendly and excited, so we suspect that that is what they heard as Missionary Voice.

Speaker 14 was not a missionary and only 27% of participants thought he was. The only thing that stands out in this brief clip are some slight disfluencies, which aligns with what was found in Study 1 where people felt that Missionary Voice is slow and deliberate. Also, compared to the previous two clips, Speaker 14 sounds less rehearsed. The least missionary-sounding male was Speaker 12. Again, there was nothing that stood out as especially indexing not-a-missionary but there are a few clues. It might have been the bit of defiance conveyed in the intonation on *no*,

which goes against the descriptions of compassion from Study 1. It could also have been the slight monophthongization in *I* and *I'd*. While many missionaries do come from the South, perhaps the most stereotyped ones come from Utah. It may be the case that in order to truly sound like a missionary, a person should adopt linguistic features characteristic of the American West.

Among the female speakers, Speaker 18 was most frequently identified as a missionary (84%), even though she is not. It is difficult to pinpoint why this speaker was identified as a missionary, but one listener specifically mentioned the term *founded on*, which may be a phrase that Latter-day Saint missionaries use more than students (although here it was in fact a student who said it). In this case, listeners might have been using semantic cues or at least lexical information rather than phonetics to make their decision. Also, we think she sounds optimistic in some way, but it's not clear what the acoustic correlates of that might be. 75% of people were correct in guessing that Speaker 5 was a missionary. There is a small amount of creak in her voice and her low vowel in *black* is rather retracted, both of which have been shown to index California-ness and professionalism (Pratt & D'Onofrio 2017; Villarreal & Kohn 2021; Habasque 2021b). There might also be some spread lip articulation in the /ɪ/ in *reach*, which suggests she too was smiling.

Moving now to the women that did not sound like missionaries, Speaker 2 was a missionary but 75% of people did not think she sounded like one. Listeners likely responded to the informal and off-the-cuff nature of what she says, especially in the last phrase, *just forgot about it*, which was higher and louder. In general, there's more pitch and amplitude variation and faster speaking rate than in most of the other clips. Finally, Speaker 17 was the least missionary-sounding voice out of anyone, with just 5% of people thinking she was one. She has a few disfluencies and false starts and speaks faster. She does use *like*, which is stigmatized in formal settings (Habasque 2021a) and likely does not align with most people's impressions of formality. There may also be some semantic cues as well: students likely talk about others' school presentations while missionaries may not.

To summarize this section on what makes voices sound the most missionary-like, based on these audio clips, Missionary Voice has some suprasegmental features like pauses, spread lip articulation, and slower speech. It uses linguistic features characteristic of younger and Western speech like uptalk, retracted /æ/, and creak. In general, they sound more professional and formal. These acoustic correlates match what listeners indicated at the end of the survey and many of them match what was found in Study 1. At the same time, Missionary Voice is partially defined as features it lacks: it does not have false starts or disfluencies, linguistic variants associated with varieties other than Western American English, and other markers of informality. Table 2 summarizes these features.

4. Discussion We now tie these two studies together to discuss what has been found. In Study 1, we found that most people affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe

Missionary Voice	Not Missionary Voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pauses, spread lip articulation, slower speech • segmental variants that index Western American English like uptalk, retracted [æ], creak • professionalism and formality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • false starts and disfluencies • any variety other than Western American English • informality

Table 2. Acoustic correlates of Missionary Voice

that missionaries have a way of speaking and could describe it well. And like any linguistic variant, it has a constellation of features it indexes. This appears to be strong support of the existence of Missionary Voice. However, in Study 2, in which listeners responded to actual missionaries, there was no evidence whatsoever that Latter-day Saints could identify a missionary by their voice alone.

We point out though that there are some shortcomings in this study which might have led to participants' apparent lack of success in Study 2. It is almost certainly the case that not all missionaries use Missionary Voice. In Section 2.1, we described our difficulty in finding appropriate stimuli, but keep in mind that the only pool we had to draw from were recordings, and ones that were in front of a camera. Presumably speakers knew they would be posted in public spaces as well. So, it may be the case that these missionaries who were rated low in Study 2 do in fact use Missionary Voice but only in more genuine settings, such as in a person's home while giving a lesson. It may also be that what Latter-day Saints call "Missionary Voice" is used by other people in other settings, such as when being recorded for a university-produced video. Finally, we suspect that listeners used semantic or lexical clues to inform their decision at least two of our clips, despite our efforts to keep the content neutral.

But, while listeners did not do well at identifying *missionaries*, it appears that they did seem to be able to identify Missionary *Voice*. The linguistic features that correlated most strongly with people thinking the speaker was a missionary are ones that match what they said at the end of the survey. They also match what was described in Study 1, which was based on an entirely separate pool of participants and who were not reacting to audio stimuli. Interestingly, the features we identified in the most Missionary Voice-sounding clips in Study 2 were mostly suprasegmental features like rhythm, intonation, and voice quality, just as what was described in Study 1. We speculate that Missionary Voice is primarily a shift in suprasegmental features because perhaps those are easier to manipulate and can be overlaid on top of a speaker's native variety.

4.1. AN EMERGING REGISTER. We can begin to speculate on the sequence of events that led us to where we are now. We propose a series of six steps, not unlike what has been proposed in other studies on the development of social meaning (Labov 1972: 178–180). We have evidence for some of these steps from this study, but others are necessarily speculative. Nevertheless, we suggest that these sequence of events might help explain the emergence of this register we are calling Missionary Voice.

1. First, there is likely a particular way of speaking that is used by missionaries and non-missionaries alike in formal, high-stakes settings, or rehearsed speech. Young Westerners use this in situations like public speaking or when being recorded, just as anyone would style-shift in such contexts.
2. Second, Latter-day Saint missionaries end up using this register frequently. They primarily do so when interacting with anyone besides fellow missionaries since such interactions are formal (they are representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), high-stakes (they are trying to convert others to their faith), and rehearsed (see Section 2.2).
3. Third, because missionaries use it so much, this style begins to be associated with missionaries among those who interact with them regularly. This follows the well-described pattern of enregisterment in sociolinguistic studies (Agha 2005; Johnstone 2016). Missionaries themselves use this style so much that it may spread to other conversation or speech after their missionary service is completed.

4. Fourth, due to its association with missionaries, Missionary Voice becomes indexical of missionary-like attributes like being good, compassionate, and spiritual (or in the case of ex-Mormons, brainwashed and cultish). Study 1 showed that this “everything is like a ray of sunshine” association is very much present in the minds of Latter-day Saints.
5. Fifth, rather than simply being associated with missionaries, it becomes expected of them. Recall from Study 1 that one participant said that this way of speaking is just what is expected of missionaries in spiritual contexts. This expectation makes it so that, for some people, in order to sound like a good, faithful missionary, one must speak that way.
6. Sixth, missionaries then pick up on these expectations from listeners and begin adopting these linguistic features. Missionaries, who are in a stage of life that has extreme personal significance to them and one that they have been preparing years for, want to do the best they can. This association may even become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and we may (already) see more exaggerated versions of Missionary Voice among those wanting to express greater spirituality, in imitation, or in parodic performance.

That evidence exists for some of these steps suggests the emergence of a register. It is something that missionaries switch to in certain contexts and involves a change in linguistic production. It is a register that is passed down by experienced missionaries and trainers to new missionaries who quickly adopt it because “that’s just what you do as a missionary.” It is used during their months in missionary service and then abandoned soon after their service is over. We have begun collecting data on what we call General Authority Voice, which is a register used by male global leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We also have data on what we call Relief Society Voice, which is a Latter-day Saint instantiation of what has been recently dubbed “Fundie Baby Voice” (Bologna 2024). So, Missionary Voice may be just one of many registers within the greater Latter-day Saint religiolect (Hary 2011; Stanley 2020), none of which are well-documented but all are relatively well-known and understood by those in this community.

5. Conclusions. In this study, we have shown evidence that Missionary Voice is well-known among Latter-day Saints in the Intermountain West and that they recognize it when it is used, even if its use is not correlated with being a missionary.

In this first look of Missionary Voice we have opened up more questions than we have answered. Future work should analyze it in natural contexts if possible, ideally in comparison to those same speakers in other situations or before or after their missionary service. It may be possible to elicit Missionary Voice from individuals who have recently completed their missionary service. In addition, analyzing video of speakers would be important as well. This study has focused on Latter-day Saints’ perspectives, but it would be fruitful to explore how people not associated with this faith respond to this register, especially since it presumably is they who missionaries are talking to the most and are targeting by using Missionary Voice. If the responses by ex-Mormons in Study 1 are any clue, we expect at least some differences between Latter-day Saints and others. Finally, an intriguing future direction would be to examine Missionary Voice among Latter-day Saints in other parts of the world and other languages, as well as missionaries of other faiths.

Something that was outside the scope of this study but that may be closely tied in with these phonetic cues is that Missionary Voice extends to paralinguistics as well. We have already discussed the audible effect of smiling, and many survey participants in Study 1 mentioned that a missionary’s gesture, posture, and overall demeanor changes during a lesson, particularly during important parts that they want to emphasize. We suggest that this embodiment (Podesva 2021;

Pratt & D’Onofrio 2017) of the missionary persona and the adoption of Missionary Voice involves more than acoustic changes. Surely a missionary can accomplish their goal of sharing their faith without sounding and acting like a stereotypical missionary, but it could be fruitful to evaluate whether such an embodiment correlates with success in their task.

There are potential implications for the findings in this and subsequent studies. For missionaries, their trainers, and their supervisors, it may be instructive for them to be aware of the register and its perceptions. If it is a register that those invested are interested in pursuing and potentially adopting, we have now presented a preliminary list of linguistic features that can be incorporated into one’s speech as well as an accompanying indexical field that be perceived by their audience. If the negative comments are things missionaries want to avoid, it may be useful for them to be aware of Missionary Voice so that they know not to use or exaggerate it. For people unaffiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it may be useful to understand why missionaries speak the way they do and how they hope their audience is perceiving them, especially if the indexical field does not translate to people of different religious backgrounds.

It is evident that this study of Missionary Voice merely scratches the surface on what is likely a complex phenomenon that varies considerably by a person’s relationship to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We encourage additional research on this understudied topic in linguistics to better document the broader Latter-day Saint religiolect.

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