

Towards a taxonomy of metalinguistic commentary: The case of Utah English

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, we present meta-linguistic commentary about Utah English, organized into comment types, to paint a picture of how Utahns view their local variety. We then take these comments and sketch out a taxonomy of comments that one might make about language. Our work on this taxonomy is preliminary and requires data from many other dialect regions to be of more universal use. Nevertheless, we lay some groundwork to help quantify one aspect of language regard.

Keywords. Language regard, Utah English, metalinguistic commentary, qualitative data analysis

1. Introduction. *Language regard* refers to “individual beliefs about and affective responses to language details” (Preston 2018a: 3). This umbrella term includes ideas like language attitudes, ideologies, beliefs, perceptions, and awareness that laypeople might have about language (Evans, Benson & Stanford 2018). Linguists study language regard in numerous including matched-guise experiments (Campbell-Kibler 2007; Kircher 2016) and draw-a-map tasks (Preston 1989; Bucholtz et al. 2007). Language regard intersects with other psychological and sociolinguistic concepts like attitudinal cognitoria (Preston 2018b), indexical fields (Zhang 2005; Eckert 2008), and awareness (Labov 1972; Babel 2016). Though the study of language regard is vast and interdisciplinary with numerous methodologies (Preston 1999; Babel 2016; Evans, Benson & Stanford 2018), the focus of this paper is on one small slice of that: metalinguistic commentary about language, specifically in the state of Utah in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States.

Stanley (ND) presents numerous comments about Utah English, specifically those about glottalization verses released /t/ in words like *mountain* and *button*, such as (1–3) below:

- 1) Most people with a strong Utah accent uh leave the *t* off a lot of words. I say *moun*[ʔŋ] instead of *moun*[t^hin], uh so I do think I have that accent. (“Louis”, male, b. 1997)
- 2) I feel like the accent is typically demonstrated in words like *moun*[t^hin]. Uh, I’m saying it there with, with correct diction. Uh, but I feel like often the Utah accent skips over the *t* in *moun*[t^hin] and in other words as well, uh, like *bu*[ʔŋ], *bu*[t^hin], *bu*[ʔŋ]. (“Braxton”, male, b. 1998)
- 3) I do think I have an accent. And I kind of embrace it. I tried not to have it for a long time. But I definitely say *moun*[ʔŋ] and I say *bu*[ʔŋ]. And I have no shame about it. (“Lynn”, female, b. 1969)

What is apparent in these comments is what variant is considered accented. To be clear, glottal stops in this environments is the most common variant in mainstream North American English (Olive, Greenwood & Coleman 1993; Davidson, Orosco & Wang 2021; Repetti-Ludlow 2024; Stanley 2026). In fact, this pattern is used in phonetics and phonology textbooks to illustrate glottal stop and glottalization in English (Jones 1966: 135; Curzan & Adams 2009: 84; Zsiga

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2012: 12; Ladefoged & Johnson 2015: 66; Yavaş 2020: 60). Nevertheless, many Utahns believe that glottalization in words like *mountain* is a unique aspect of Utah English. This misunderstanding has led to statistical hypercorrection and a greater proportion of released /t/ compared to other dialect areas (Stanley 2026; ND).

These and other comments paint an abstract picture of how Utahns view Utah English. Anecdotal, it appears that it is not the same as how people in other dialect regions feel about their local varieties. In theory then, it should be possible to assign a number or a set of numbers to these “vibes”, which would allow for comparison between dialect areas. If linguists can quantify other abstract concepts like grammaticality or surprisal, language regard may be able to be quantified as well.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, we present comments about Utah English to further paint the picture of Utahns’ language regard. By doing so, we then present the beginnings of a taxonomy of metalinguistic commentary about local language. This taxonomy may provide the scaffolding needed to start quantifying language regard. What is presented below is incomplete and will require the input from many other dialect regions to serve as a useful, robust tool. Nevertheless, such a taxonomy can help provide a way to quantify language regard and provide evidence for different general sentiments across dialect regions.

1.1. QUANTIFYING LANGUAGE REGARD. There have been other attempts to quantify language regard in various ways. One common method is to simply measure the polarity of responses or comments using sentiment analysis. Experimental work on the draw-a-map task itself has shown that the amount of detail on base maps can influence the amount of detail that people draw (Lameli, Purschke & Kehrein 2008; Cukor-Avila 2018). Labov’s (1972) distinction between indicators, markers, and stereotypes was an early attempt to assign important points along a continuum of language awareness.

Preston (1996) presents well-developed taxonomy of one aspect of language regard, awareness. For each individual and each component of language, Preston identifies four dimensions of people’s awareness of language.

- AVAILABILITY is an expansion of Silverstein’s (1981) “limits of awareness” and ranges from linguistic features that are unavailable for laypeople to comment on to things that they freely bring up in conversation. For example, Eckert & Labov (2017) propose that people don’t notice phonological mergers but rather surface phonetic realizations. But people certainly can be aware of other things, like lexical variation, phonetic detail, and grammatical constructions like regularity of past-tense verbs.
- ACCURACY refers to whether their comments reflect linguistic reality. Like folklorists, folk linguists are usually less concerned about the veracity of a comment and more about what it says about human behavior. But, it can be enlightening to see how true some comments are.
- DETAIL may range from global to specific. For example, one may be broadly aware of what a French accent sounds like, but without any knowledge of the specifics. Meanwhile, someone may be aware of detail in phonetic features like glottalization or the so-called “g-dropping” in English.
- CONTROL refers to the ability to produce the linguistic feature or variety.

Preston (1996) goes into depth about these four dimensions and highlights that they are independent of each other. In theory then, different people’s awareness of different aspects of language could be quantified along these four continua and plotted or analyzed quantitatively.

It also shows that we can take something fuzzy, like human behavior, and begin to quantify it.

There are other ways of categorizing language regard from a variety of perspectives (see, for example Drager & Kirtley 2016; Campbell-Kibler 2016, among others), so developing a taxonomy like we have here is not new. However, we feel that using such a model to describe a variety and compare it to others may have use in the broader goal of quantifying language regard.

1.2. UTAH ENGLISH. Of the many varieties of the many languages, why use Utah English as a case study on metalinguistic commentary?

First, it's relatively well-described. Several researchers over the past half century have collectively painted a reasonably detailed picture of what Utah English is like (Cook 1969; Di Paolo & Faber 1990; Di Paolo 1992; 1993; Bowie 2003; 2008; 2012; 2019; Baker & Bowie 2010; Baker-Smemoe & Bowie 2015; Eddington & Savage 2012; Eddington & Brown 2021; Johnson 2025; Stanley & Vanderniet 2018; Stanley & Shepherd 2025; Stanley 2026). While the picture is not as detailed as Philadelphia English or African American English, it is more detailed than other varieties of American English. This work provides a baseline to which comments can be compared, facilitating comments along Preston's accuracy dimension.

Second, this work on Utah English has shown that it is sufficiently distinct from other varieties of North American English. It shares features with Western American English, while also having conditioned mergers, like the *cord-card* merger (Bowie 2008) and the *feel-fill* and *fail-fell* mergers (Di Paolo & Faber 1990) and various fortition processes like [t] insertion in /ls/ clusters (Stanley & Vanderniet 2018), velar nasal plus (Di Paolo & Johnson 2018), affrication of /θ/ clusters (Stanley & Shepherd 2025), and hyperarticulation in unstressed /tən/ (Stanley 2026). Of course, none of these features are unique to Utah—the same can be said of nearly every linguistic feature in any variety—but it is their unique combination, and greater prevalence relative to other (especially neighboring) varieties that makes Utah English distinct. Importantly, this distinction elevates Utah English from merely “the English spoken in Utah” to an abstract object that can be referenced and discussed by laypeople.

Finally, Utah English does not appear to be on the general public's radar. It is not often imitated informally or in the media. In other words, it is not a “folk culture artifact” (Preston 1996: 59), meaning it is not “an object which may be featured in performance” (p. 63). This means that comments that someone might have about Utah English is more likely to be from first-hand exposure to it rather than based on second-hand stereotypes. However, recent reality TV shows like *The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City* and *Secret Lives of Mormon Wives* are putting speakers of Utah English into the spotlight, so Utah English may soon develop some societal recognition.

Most other varieties of American English do not share these three properties. A variety like Hawaiian English is sufficiently distinct but is not especially described. Something like Oregon English is not sufficiently different from neighboring varieties. And varieties like Southern American English are on the public's radar. There are of course other varieties that do fit these three criteria (one example might be Baltimore English), but Utah English serves as just a starting point for a larger project on quantifying language regard in varieties of English.

1.3. THE CURRENT STUDY. With this backdrop in mind, we now present findings from a study of metalinguistic commentary about Utah English. In the following sections, we briefly describe the methods for data collection and analysis and then present the categories of comments that occurred most frequently in the data. We conclude with what is learned about Utah English and then future directions for these beginnings of a taxonomy.

2. Methods. Data for this project comes from three main sources. First, we distributed an online survey to 150 Utahns and asked them to discuss their thoughts about Utah English. These were recorded oral responses, which makes them unscripted and unedited. They also allow for hearing their imitations of the features they discuss, which can be difficult to discern in written comments. For more details of this survey, see Stanley (2026; ND). The second source is social media. We combed through sites like Twitter/X, TikTok, and Reddit trying to find any comment about Utah English. We used search terms like “Utah dialect” and hashtags like #UtahEnglish. For the sake of feasibility, we only analyzed top-level posts and not comments on those posts. Finally, we searched elsewhere on the internet for comments about Utah English. We found discussions on numerous blog posts, personal webpages, online articles, and other forum-based sites. We carefully catalogued each comment by noting various pieces of metadata, the text/transcription, and what linguistic features are discussed. We then did a basic content analysis and scrutinized every comment to find common themes. What is presented here are some of the themes that emerged from this analysis.

3. Results. We find that the bulk of the themes fall under two of Preston’s (1996) categories: ACCURACY and AWARENESS. We begin by describing some of the accuracy-related themes.

3.1. ACCURACY. The first type of comment are ones that are actually correct. Figure 1 is a post on X that specifically calls out the approximation of high front prelateral vowels that makes *healing* sound like “hilling” and *feelings* sound like “fillings”. This prelateral approximation is known to be variable in Utah and is best described in Di Paolo & Faber (1990). Figure 2 displays a comment that shows someone’s awareness and description of [t]-insertion in certain consonant clusters. They first mention names to illustrate insertion in /ns/ clusters, which is common in North American English. But they also mention it in /ls/ clusters which is indeed a feature of Utah English (Stanley & Vanderniet 2018; Stanley & Davidson manuscript). These examples illustrate that some of the features that people talk about align with published linguistics research.



Figure 1: A post highlighting the approximation of /il/ and /ɪl/ (The Real Housewives of SLC 2024).

Re: You'll never guess what I heard at Crown Burgers today Posted by: **fallenangela** () Date: March 16, 2011 08:42AM

My never-mo husband and daughter *love* it when I break into that little ditty! ;-)

On a separate note - it's a total Utah/Mormon thing to add an "s" to the end of store names where one doesn't really exist. Crown burgers. Victoria Secrets (note the "s" has been left of the appropriate place) Chuck-A-Ramas. You get the idea. You get a pass on Albertson's but it usually becomes The Albertson's.

Just one of those "You know you're from Utah when..." moments. Like adding a "T" sound in words that don't have "T"s which happens a lot on Scandinavian last names. HanTsen. JenTsen. OITson.

Because tone is difficult to decipher, I'm making an attempt at some light hearted observations and not anything mean spirited so I hope that is coming across.

Figure 2: A post highlighting [t]-insertion (fallenangela 2011).

Another type of comment under the ACCURACY label are ones that are technically accurate because they are describing a feature of Utah English, but they are about a nonstandard feature that is common in many places outside of Utah. Figure 3 shows another comment that mentions [r]-intrusion in *wash*. Similarly, about 10 of the elicited comments mention realization of *creek* with [ɹ]. Example (1) is a partial transcript of a TikTok video in which a woman discusses prevelar raising of /ɛ/.

Re: I guess my disclaimer feel flat, eh?
 Posted by: Mnemonic ()
 Date: March 16, 2011 10:50AM

I wasn't offended or anything. I was just returning the favor and correcting you back.

I have tried very hard to get over speaking Utahn. It's quite difficult being that I've lived here my entire life.

I still have a problem with the letter "R" getting into the wash, or should I say warsh.

Figure 3: A post discussing r-intrusion in wash. (Mnemonic 2011)

1) “Like the commenter said here, we say [eɪg] instead of [eg]. I totally do that. ‘I’m gonna have scrambled [eɪgz].’ Scrambled [eɪgz]! Do you hear it? It’s wild!” (Jalimins House 2024)

While warsh and crick have not recently been studied systematically across the country, we have heard anecdotal comments from all over North America suggesting that they are geographically widespread (see, for example, Gordon & Strelluf 2024 for data from Missouri). Prevelar raising is indeed found in much of North America (Stanley 2022).

The comments in this type illustrate a different side of the ACCURACY theme. Again, these people are not wrong—these are indeed variants that do occur in Utah. But they are certainly not unique to Utah. It is like saying that the *cot-caught* merger, *between you and I*, or *soda* instead of *pop* are part of Utah English. These comments show these people are not aware that the variants also occur in many other places. More broadly, it shows that people assume some non-standard features are local if they don’t otherwise have a region in mind for them. The quantity of this type of comment says something about how Utah English is perceived by its speakers. Specifically, it suggests a bit of linguistic insecurity because they’re quick to point out these nonstandard things in their speech but not in others. This is revisited in Section 4.1 below.

Another type of comment that is possible but was not really found in the dataset are ones that are demonstrably wrong. There were virtually no comments that suggested the presence of a linguistic feature that is mostly attested in other dialect areas, such as the short-*a* split, prevelar /æ/-raising, or nonstandard morphosyntactic features. This means that all comments had some degree of truth to them, even if the accuracy was not high. This may be the result of Utah English not being a folk culture artifact, which means comments are likely based on experience rather than stereotype.

3.2. AWARENESS. In this section, we present three types of comments that relate to AWARENESS. The first is overgeneralizing. People who make overgeneralized comments are aware of some aspect of language variation, but when they describe it, they do so in a broader environment than what linguistic behavior shows. A typical case of this is when people notice allophonic variation but describe it as if it occurs to that phoneme in all environments. Example (2) is a portion of a TikTok video showing someone how to do a Utah accent.

2) “Step one. You’re going to take all the *t*’s in your vocabulary and throw them away. You don’t need them where we’re going.” (kait on booktok ND)

This person is alluding to /t/-glottalization in words like *mountain*. This glottalization is widely but erroneously thought of as deletion, even though the /t/ is usually still realized. Like probably every variety of American English, glottalization is common in Utah in many phonological environments (Eddington & Channer 2010; Eddington & Savage 2012). However, this comment suggests that *all* /t/s are glottalized, including perhaps word-initial, intervocalic, and phonological environments where other allophones are usually found. In fact, earlier in the video, the TikToker even says words like *sixteen*, *Utah*, and *teach* with [tʰ] rather than “thrown away” like they explain later. This is a case of overgeneralization because while they are aware that some /t/s become glottal stops, they fail to recognize that not all do.

The opposite of overgeneralizing is undergeneralizing. This is where people notice phonetic detail of some words, but fail to see the generalization that underlies that variation. Figure 4 shows a case of this in a post on X.



Figure 4: A tweet showing undergeneralization (Caleb 2024).

In this post, the user lists several features of older Utah English. “President Neltzin” refers to [t]-insertion in /ls/ clusters such as in the surname *Nelson*. “The Enzin” and “Fiddler on the Ruff” refer to variants on specific lexical items, *ensign* and *roof*, respectively. “Worshington DC” refers to the [r]-intrusion discussed in the previous section. The rest of the list shows various levels of awareness. The user alludes to the *cord-card* merger twice, once in “The Book a Marman” (‘the Book of Mormon’) and, several items later, “The Ward arganist” (‘the ward organist’). The user is aware of the lower vowel in those words, but it is not clear whether they realize that those words are both affected by the same underlying process, the *cord-card* merger. The fact that they are separated by three additional items suggests that the user fails to notice the connection between them and is simply listing lexical items that they perceive as different. Listing “Mondee, Tuesdee, etc.” on the same line suggests that they see the generalization that affects days of the week. And even listing “Melk” and “Pellow” one after the other suggests that there’s a connection between them. But the gap between “Marmon” and “arganist” suggests that they’re only noticing phonetic detail and not phonological patterning.

Another example of this comes from TikTok. Example (3) is a transcription of a video showing someone listing several items spanning a variety of linguistic features.

- 3) “Okay let’s talk Utah accents. And if you don’t know what the Utah accent is. You’re gonna know. | Okay, number one. So, *I feel*. That’s not it. It’s *I f[ɪ]ll. I f[ɪ]ll*. Okay? Okay. | Second one. *Summer s[e]les* is *summer s[ɛ]les*. *Summer s[ɛ]les*. Yes. | Next one.

Meal. No no no. *m[ɪ]ll*. *I want a m[ɪ]ll*. *m[ɪ]ll*. *chuckles* So bad. | Ready? *Nails*. *n[ɛ]ls*. *Let's go get our [nɛlz] done*. *[nɛlz]*. | *Moun[tʰɪn]s?* *Moun[ʔn]s*. *Moun[ʔn]s*. | *I was thinking*. Translated to, *I was think[ɪŋk]*. *I was think[ɪŋk]*. | Let me know if you guys think of more down below.” (madie.mathews 2024a)

There is already a bit of undergeneralization shown here. They list *feel* and *meal* as different items, separated by a different linguistic phenomenon. These of course are manifestations of the *feel-fill* merger. Interspersed are two additional items, *sales* and *nails*, which demonstrate the related *fail-fell* merger. Perhaps they are providing four examples of front vowel laxing before laterals. But, like the post shown in Figure 4, separate lexical items are listed separately and interspersed with other features they notice. Two days later, the same Tiktoker posts a follow-up video that addresses additional linguistic phenomena (4).

- 4) “Utah accents, part two. You guys brought a lot of good ones to my attention that I’ve honestly never thought about before, so let’s get into it. | The first one, *milk* is *[mɛɪk]*. | The second one, *pillow* is *[pʰɛloʊ]*. *[pʰɛloʊ]*. [...] | *High heels* is *high* *[hɪz]*. [...] | *Jail* is *[dʒɛɪ]*. *[dʒɛɪ]*. Like, what is that? | A lot of you guys said this one, *creek* is *the* *[kɪk]*. *[kɪk]*. *K[ɛ]tchup* is *k[æ]tchup*. That is so- that is so cringy. [...]” (madie.mathews 2024a)

In addition to other linguistic phenomena, this person lists *heels* and *jail*, one more example each of the two mergers highlighted in the previous video. The words are listed as if they are distinct linguistic phenomena that were not already covered in the first video. Since this video is in response to comments on their first video, it suggests that the commentors too are failing to notice the connection between *feel*, *meal*, and *heels* or between *sales*, *nails*, and *jail* and see them simply as six independent words that Utahns pronounce differently, rather than the manifestation of one or two underlying linguistic phenomena. This is another case of undergeneralization since it appears that they are simply noticing phonetic detail and fail to notice the pattern that underlies their examples.

The final type of comment is awareness of allophony. Sometimes the comments that people make are simply highlighting very normal allophonic variation, including reduction, lenition, or consonant cluster simplification. Examples (5–8), which are all excerpted from different TikTok videos, show some of these examples:

- 5) “I did not know that we say *[jə]* (‘your’). Like, *are* *[jə]* *shoes on*, *put* *[jə]* *shoes on*. *[jə]*. We say *[jə]*.” (brooklynbrooksby 2025)
- 6) “People who don’t live in Utah be like, *ca[tʰ]*. People who DO live in Utah be like, *ca[ʔ]*.” (emily 2020)
- 7) “The next one, *[watʰə]* is *[warə]*. I’m guilty of this one. | I’m also guilty of this one too as well. *For* is *[fə]*, like *[fə]* *example*. *chuckles* So embarrassing!” (madie.mathews 2024b)
- 8) “Now one that is specific to Utah I would say is *Smi[θs]*¹. Nobody says it like that. Everybody says *Smi[s]*. S-m-i-s-s. That’s now how you say it!” (Jordan Schmidt 2024)

None of these features has been studied in Utah and to our knowledge there hasn’t been any nationwide dialectological studies of reduction of *your* to *[jə]*, word-final /t/-glottalization, tapping, reduction of *for* to *[fə]*, or consonant cluster reduction. This is probably because they are so widespread that such a study would state the obvious: most American English speakers have these features. (Jordan Schmidt 2024).

¹ *Smith’s* is the name of a grocery store chain in Utah. 7

These types of comments demonstrate various levels of awareness that people have of linguistic phenomena. Of course, we should give laypeople the benefit of the doubt: they obviously lack the terminology and expertise to discuss linguistic concepts accurately and with precision. Nevertheless, these comments demonstrate the kinds of meta-linguistic commentary that one might hear, and a greater proportion of one compared to another may be the beginning of quantifying attitudes towards local language.

4. Discussion. The previous section illustrated five types of comments that Utahns made about Utah English, which fell into two of Preston's (1996) categories, ACCURACY and AWARENESS. In this section, we begin by discussing what these comments say about attitudes towards Utah English and then discuss how they help work towards a taxonomy of metalinguistic commentary.

4.1. UTAH ENGLISH. The collection of comments gathered through elicitations, social media, and other online sources collectively paint a picture of how Utah English is perceived by Utahns. While not demonstrated here due to space, an important part of this collective knowledge is that every aspect of Utah English that has been studied in the linguistic literature (about 15–20 features) was commented on by at least one person. And, as mentioned already, all of the comments had some kernel of truth them; none described features that are not found in Utah. This has implications for starting new work on language production on a variety the researcher is unfamiliar with. A look through metalinguistic commentary on some variety may also paint a relatively complete picture of the features that are a part of that variety. Granted, the commentors also mention many false positives (or rather, features that are not unique to the area), so it will take some work by the researcher to sift out what is unique. But it can offer a useful starting point in early documentation work.

These comments also illustrate that awareness of Utah English is, by and large, limited to superficial linguistic structures. Given that there are several conditioned mergers in the region (e.g. *cord-card*, *feel-fill*, *fail-fell*) and that people tend to notice only phonetic realizations rather than underlying phonological patterns (Eckert & Labov 2017), this should come as no surprise. This shallow awareness leads to undergeneralizations in their metalinguistic commentary. We argue that when they do notice some pattern, the pendulum swings too far the other way and leads to overgeneralizations. If this is the case, then undergeneralization precedes overgeneralization as an individual develops awareness of linguistic variation. One indicator of a settled pendulum is when someone can construct a poem or sentence that highlights the same linguistic feature many times since this illustrates awareness that the linguistic feature affects many words and not just specific ones (Preston 1996: 50–51).

The *water* comment in (7) is poignant example of the broader idea that people are noticing allophony and assume it's regional variation. /t/, which has an especially large number of perceptually distinct allophones in English, is the most common target of these kinds of comments, as seen already in (2) and (3). But does that Tiktoker really think that taps in *water* is uniquely Utahn? Surely, they have been exposed to other varieties through acquaintances and media. What seems to be happening is that people become aware of variation around them, they may jump to the conclusion that that variant is local, accented, and bad. This was already shown in Figure 3, (1), and (4) with *warsh*, *crick*, and prevelar [ɛ]-raising where people notice something that is very widespread but assume it's local. And the laughter and evaluative comments in (3), (4), and (7) illustrate at least some stigma associated with these variants. The difference with *water*, *cat*, *your*, *for*, and *Smith's* is that this is allophonic variation, which is driven by language-internal mechanisms like phonological environments, rather than sociolinguistic variation, which is driven by language-external mechanisms like region and class. The bigger question is why

people think that taps or glottal stops are “accented.” Speculatively, it may be the result of prescriptivist ideologies that the character <t> “makes” one and only sound and anything else is lazy or accented. A greater number of these kinds of comments in Utah might suggest some increased prescriptivism.

The prevalence of such comments coming out of Utah² may indicate some degree of linguistic insecurity since they are quick to notice variation in their own speech but fail to notice it in others’. Preston (1996: 47) points out that those with high degrees of linguistic security have no reason to suppose that there is anything unusual about their speech. When they become aware of some feature of their language (often by a linguist pointing it out to them), their response might be “everyone says that.” On the other hand, people with a high amount of linguistic insecurity may suspect that there is a lot that is usual about their speech. Perhaps for that reason, Utahns are quick to point out normal, allophonic variation in their speech. The ideology of “I have an accent” likely leads one to notice things about their language. And when people with linguistic insecurity are made aware of some aspect of their speech, they assume no one else does that and may even shift away from the variant. This is arguably what happened to glottal stops in words like *mountain* in Utah English, which resulted in hypercorrect [t^hin] being used more in Utah than other regions (Stanley 2026; ND).

4.2. TOWARDS A TAXONOMY OF METALINGUISTIC COMMENTARY. We now address the larger purpose of this study, which is to develop a set of comment types that one may encounter in metalinguistic commentary about local language. While we are not yet in a position to propose a full taxonomy, the five types discussed above (accurate statements, assumption that general features are local, overgeneralizations, undergeneralizations, and the assumption that allophony is local) are a starting point. Since they neatly fall under two of Preston’s (1996) categories, it seems then that those categories are useful when developing this taxonomy. However, we are far from being finished, and these comment types may need to be supplemented or refined with others that emerge from the data.

To avoid bias towards the types of comments most common in Utah though, this same analysis needs to be done on many other varieties to see what emerges from them as well. In fact, this work on other dialect regions is currently underway. We have collected data from seven additional varieties of American English: Baltimore, Nebraska, Seattle, Hawaii, New York City, California, and Portland. We chose these because they have a different mix of the three criteria (national saliency, distinction compared to other varieties, and how well-researched they are) described above in Section 1.2. We preliminarily notice different “vibes” from some of these varieties. See also Wade et al. (2026) for recent work in Kansas. This again supports the idea that the way Utahns view their own language is different than how others do; it perhaps means that all varieties will have their unique differences. A proper taxonomy of comments can help pin down those differences.

The next step in developing this taxonomy is to begin quantifying the comments. Again, if linguists can quantify things like grammaticality and surprisal, why not also be able to quantify concepts like language regard? A simple method would be to get the proportion of comments for each type in the taxonomy and compare that to other regions. For example, Evans (2013) shows that 13.5% of Washingtonians indicate in a draw-a-map task that everywhere in Washington sounds the same. To our knowledge, a comparable number hasn’t been reported in other dialect

² Preliminary results from comparable data from California and Washington show similar trends.

regions, but presumably that Washington figure is higher than other dialect regions. A comparison like this can help quantitatively distinguish Washington from other regions.

With a firm taxonomy of comments in hand, the metalinguistic commentary from a dialect region can be boiled down to a set of numbers. The same method can be applied to other dialect regions. Using multivariate statistics or by plotting these numbers in some multi-dimensional space, we may be able to see which varieties cluster together and which stand out. We suspect that Utahns feel differently about Utah English than what might be found by others in other dialect regions. Such a set of numbers and quantitative techniques can provide evidence for that hypothesis.

An objective way of classifying and comparing comments would also bring some objectivity into this analysis. We are aware that many of the claims made here about Utah English very well could be made about other varieties. Perhaps the kinds of comments shown above can be found everywhere. We are striving to not fall victim to the ideologies described above that Utah is different even though others do the same thing. A lack of data from other regions does not serve as evidence for a lack of such commentary. For this reason, we are hesitant to push forward any theory before examining comments on many varieties of English.

5. Conclusion. In this paper, we have examined metalinguistic commentary about Utah English and used those comments to partially sketch a taxonomy of comments about local language. We hope that this taxonomy facilitates quantifying language regard in some new, useful way. This means being able to operationalize concepts like linguistic insecurity, ideology of non-accent, indicators/markers/stereotypes, prescriptivist attitudes, or awareness of allophones. And if we compare the distribution of comments about widespread specific linguistic features, such as /t/-tapping, we can see how awareness of those features is distributed across varieties. We may be able to use that to help track language change or identify areas where those features have richer indexical fields.

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