Hymns as Language Evolution

Introduction

In their idioms, English speakers often revere music as a method of capturing the intangible: undying love, religious devotion, anguish of spirit—and now, language change? Hymns have been used for centuries to capture these deep emotions, yes, but hymns' long lifespan in a language over periods of evolution makes their lyrics a valuable sample of changes that the English language has undergone. The hymnal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is especially interesting, as it represents one group's codified canon of these lyrics, meaning (1) the lyrics of these hymns have undergone deliberate edits to match these hymns to current English usage and (2) some hymns have remained in every edition and their changes can be followed with ease. This essay will examine the first hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ that remain in its current hymnal, analyzing the differences between the editions to understand how the hymns reflect changes in the English language.

Literature

Though several studies confirm the belief, few would disagree that "a hymn is a cultural product," as Elsabé Kloppers (2020, p. 4) declared when studying the linguistic functions of hymns. Because hymns are a product of culture, they reflect culture directly; therefore, they change alongside a culture. For example, modern churchgoers may witness an especially new style of hymn as pop culture integrates into worship music. Though listeners might assume that the largest changes in worship music happen in the realm of instrumentation, Lester Ruth's 2015 research shows that modern syntax and vocabulary have also seeped into hymns' lyrics. Ruth attributed this change to English's overall shift towards writing as we speak, a clear effect of cultural changes on language evolution in hymns (p. 6).

Though Samuel Monson was quick to point out that the need for rhyme or meter consistently caused many peculiarities in hymns (1979, p. 13), even he acknowledged many linguistic features that may account for a hymn's evolution over time: personal pronouns, verb

endings, *do* support, and even pronunciation (p. 14–22). All of these features are tied to a language's evolution and eventually end up reflected in a hymn's text, both despite of and because of the peculiarities of the register.

The question of what to do with the variance has been largely ignored by the more descriptive linguists. However, theologians have debated the merits of updating older features to more modern audiences. In a June 1987 article, *Reformed Worship* presented the opinions of several religious leaders on a symposium panel. Leaders generally fell into two camps; one recognized outdated vocabulary and non-inclusive language and believed that updating language would better include and teach younger generations. The other camp believed that to only retain modern morals is a revisionist lens that hyper focuses on clarity to the detriment of the art and deeper feelings of the piece (n.p.). This research will examine how editors for the hymn books of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have reconciled these two perspectives on language change in hymns and what their decisions imply are key changes to the English language.

Research

My research methods compare the twenty-six common hymns from *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1835) and *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1985), the earliest and latest hymnals of the Church, respectively. The titles of each of the twenty-six hymns can be found in Appendix A. To create qualitative and quantitative data, I began by transcribing the original hymns and inserting the edits of the current hymns through my word processor's change-tracking software. Afterwards, I tagged each type of change by color in order to analyze the types of changes and their frequency.

Seven different types of changes surfaced in the hymns, which I titled ear-pleasing, grammatical, formatting, stylistic, theological, consistency, and evolutionary. Ear-pleasing changes apparently have the sole purpose of improving the flow of the line when singing. One example is the change from "know then that every soul is free" to "know this that every soul is

free"; no real shift in meaning occurs, but the change from an ending alveolar nasal /n/ to an ending alveolar fricative /s/ allows for a swifter transition to the interdental fricative /ð/. Marvin Gardner, a member of the 1985 hymnbook editorial committee, called this type of edit a "touch of elegance" (personal communication, March 24, 2022).

A grammatical change is a change to make an ungrammatical sentence grammatical in modern American usage, i.e. removing the unnecessary comma between "our shadow by day, /and our pillar by night." Formatting changes are a result of the pairing of the written format with music and largely concern the abbreviation of words like "ev'ry" to fit the number of syllables in a musical line. (The 1835 hymns were not set to specific tunes, so the same line may have needed different syllables depending on the tune.) Stylistic changes are changes that do not adhere to usage guidelines but instead appeal to an editor's preference. An example might be the change from "one chorus—God is love" to "one chorus: God is love": either is grammatically acceptable.

Theological changes shift the lyric's meaning or emphasis to evoke a different religious implication; changing "Our King, our companion" to "Our King, our Deliv'rer" exemplifies the nuance of this category, as the change makes audience's relationship with the Savior less familiar and more formal or worshipful. Consistency changes make a lyric more related to the grammar of its internal text, though its original grammar was not incorrect (this also includes editing to become consistent with other edits). For example, changing "in vain the tomb forbids his rise" to "in vain the tomb forbade him rise" brings the whole verse to a consistent use of past tense. Finally, evolutionary changes reflect actual evolution in the usage of a word, whether that be in its spelling, vocabulary, or capitalization; one example changed capital *C* to lowercase *c* in the noun *chorus*, because in 1835 it was less clear which nouns were considered proper. (Verses inserted or removed are also highlighted but not included in this discussion of language change.)

After all the tagging was completed, the total number of changes (not counting whole verses changed) was 394. The breakdown follows: consistency, 13; evolutionary, 19; formatting, 34; ear-pleasing, 34; theological, 49; stylistic, 91; and grammatical, 154.

Discussion

Because their changes are more rooted in historical usage than musical aesthetics or theology, I consider the evolutionary, stylistic, and grammatical categories to reflect language change most. Evolutionary changes, obviously, reflect a change in the way a word is used, stylistic changes reflect a change in attitudes surrounding punctuation (if not an outright change in what is considered correct), and grammatical changes reflect changing prescriptive rules. In all, these made up 264 of the 394 total edits, or about 65%. A strong majority of changes, then, are the result of language change in some form or another.

Most changes regarded punctuation. In 1985, the comma and semicolon were used at the end of nearly every line, often leaving the comma to splice clauses and the semicolon to introduce a perfectly average phrase. With these hymnbooks as reference, one would naturally conclude that a semicolon and comma held a slightly different purpose at the time.

Perhaps more interesting and complex than changes in punctuation are changes in usage; in hymn 21, the change from “strange work” to “great work” reflects a pejoration in the meaning of *strange*, necessitating the use of a more appropriate adjective. In the same hymn, “converse hold” was changed to “speak again.” A quick perusal of the Oxford English Dictionary reveals that *converse* was formerly a noun, but that sense has become archaic. Gardner also spoke on the subject of archaic language, saying that their original direction from leaders of the Church was to not “change anything that doesn’t have to be changed,” implying that these shifts were so far from their original meaning that understanding necessitated editing. These semantic shifts, as well as changes in spelling, illustrate that though the hymnbook preserves language from a time period, it does not mean that language’s meaning will stay the same.

Four remaining categories illustrate language changes less than the other categories: consistency, ear-pleasing, formatting, and theological changes. In my categorization, consistency changes correct an actual error in the original hymn, while ear-pleasing and formatting changes simply show the changes needed to accommodate a new tune or hymnbook singing. This may illustrate a cultural shift toward the importance of the tune in hymns or toward a common hymn and tune pairing, but those shifts are minimal parts of the culture and therefore peripheral to this discussion. Theological changes will be discussed shortly but reflect a different kind of language change. Summed, these four categories are 130 out of the 394 changes, about 35%.

Still, these changes illustrate changes in language in several ways. For one, Gardner's "touches of elegance" were often focused on matching syllabic stress to hymn tunes; in hymn 1 (formerly "Know Then that Ev'ry Soul is Free") the change from "Bless them with wisdom, love, and light" to "And bless with wisdom, love, and light" illustrates the importance of strong thoughts on strong musical beats. More research would be required, but it's certainly possible that prosody has changed, altering where the stress falls.

Theological changes, too, illustrate the history of a language. The language of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is indeed its own social dialect, and the Church's history (and general English history) has bled through into its hymns. For example, many instances of the word *sons* have been seamlessly transformed into *Saints*; this change is telling of the original patriarchal state of the United States and the Church's increased efforts to provide inclusivity after decades of social justice advocacy. However, Gardner noted the fact that other churches' efforts at inclusivity involved removing male markers associated with God, while lingering lyrics in Latter-day Saint hymns such as "O God, th'Eternal Father" (hymn 57) illustrate the importance of eternal gender to the Church's theology.

Gardner also reflected often on the "retribution language" of the Church from the era of the Mormon Trail and government persecution. At the time, that language depicted a God who dealt justice upon those who harmed members or their loved ones. But today, when the Church

has relatively good relations with society, new lyrics like “God’s commandments to mankind” that replace older lyrics like “the commandments to the Church” reflect the modern Church’s more accepting attitude toward a universal brotherhood.

Conclusion

Though much is to be said about how individual words and usage have changed in the English language, this research highlights the very fact that hymns *are* being edited and the manner in which editors are doing so. Even the way that the lyrics were changed, no matter the reason or category, provides interesting insights to how English has evolved and how hymns preserve older styles of language while accommodating new ones. Gardner recalled that hymnbook editors patched up lyrics by turning to the text of the Book of Mormon and Old Testament, a register rife with older usages. There, Gardner explained, an editor could match the “spirit and flavor of the language. Sometimes it’s too formal. . . . We match the register instead with the tone, the voice, the formality. We’re looking at the original intent of the author.” Hymns, then, have become a kind of museum where the ancient language and its modern counterpart touch for a brief moment of doctrinal clarity.

Indeed, though, the sheer number of changes (394) in these twenty-six hymns alone illustrate the grand scope of language change, even under two hundred years. In lasting, publicly used texts such as these hymns, a sense of authorship fades in the face of community meaning. As Gardner proposed,

> When we look at examples such as these, it becomes clear why some revising . . . of hymn text and tunes is a necessary standard practice through[out] Christian hymnity. . . . Even though an edited word or line may feel disruptive at first, that doesn’t mean the change is unwarranted or inappropriate. We have no reason to be apologetic about careful, informed, revisions that correct doctrinal inaccuracies and help make hymns and songs more appropriate or inclusive for modern worldwide audiences.

Indeed, one can expect exponentially more changes to be made to these hymns and others as their use continues throughout time periods. One researcher might study the rippling effects of these edits on other religious communities, while another might look deeper into which decades these changes came about. Overall, the broader picture is the fascinating and constant change of language itself, and the way that hymns provide an accessible example of people grappling with changing language in cherished objects. Like Latter-day Saints quote from Doctrine and Covenants 121:33, “as well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river” as stop the ever-flowing and ever-changing river of language, which includes these hymns as important stepping stones.