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AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

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Labov, William

William Labov (1927–) is an American linguist best known for his central role in the foundation of modern sociolinguistics, and more specifically for an approach to the investigation of language in its social context known as *variationist sociolinguistics*. He rose to prominence in the 1960s as part of a broad movement in the social sciences to focus attention on language as a social phenomenon in fields like linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy of language. As such, Labov's work stands in dialogue with prominent anthropologists from that period, including Dell Hymes and John Gumperz, who share a focus on the complex relationship between language and society. What sets Labov apart is his end goal of developing a socially informed linguistic theory and his methods, which focus on the quantification of variables as a means to describing social stratification and linguistic change. He is currently one of America's most distinguished linguists, with a body of work spanning 50 years.

Labov grew up in Rutherford and then Fort Lee, New Jersey. Educated at Harvard (BA in 1948), he worked as an industrial chemist at the Union Ink Company (1949–1960), before returning to academia at Columbia (MA in 1963, PhD in 1964). There, he worked under the direction of Uriel Weinreich, a pioneer in the field of language contact and a scholar of Yiddish. Labov stayed on to teach at Columbia from 1964 to 1970. Since 1971, Labov has been a professor of linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, a city that has served as a laboratory for much of his research.

Diachronic Studies of Linguistic Behavior and Social Patterning

Labov broke from linguistic tradition, which in the 1960s was more and more dominated by Noam Chomsky and generative grammar, by rejecting the *idiolect* (the variety of language unique to an individual) as the primary object of study. Generative linguists considered language a property of the individual and thus relied on individual speaker data, often in the form of intuitions or grammaticality judgments. In direct contrast, Labov argued that language is a community property and that individuals' speech can only be understood relative to that of the *speech communities* they belong to. Speech communities are considered to share linguistic norms and to be the level at which linguistic patterning can be most clearly observed. Labov also called for a combination of the *synchronic* (studies of language at one point in time) and the *diachronic* (studies of change over time). This was in response to the emphasis on synchrony made by both the newer generative and the earlier structuralist traditions (the latter being well known in anthropology due to the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss). Labov's suggestion was to move away from the exclusively synchronic study of abstract idiolects to consider the variation in communities of speakers and how these patterns of variation provide information about community change over time. In this, he updated traditions in dialectology, which had combined synchrony and

diachrony by collecting data in the field to answer largely historical questions. While European in origin, dialectology was compatible with an earlier American tradition of descriptive, anthropologically influenced linguistics, deriving from Edward Sapir and Franz Boas, who were well aware of the extent of linguistic diversity, if not necessarily of intracommunity variation.

Synchronically, Labov set out to demonstrate that linguistic behavior varies systematically according to the social patterning found in speech communities. His first study found that local attitudes toward island life on Martha's Vineyard (Massachusetts) were correlated with the pronunciation of certain vowels. He then demonstrated the social stratification of several features of the New York City dialect. In the famous Department Store Study, Labov visited three stores of differing social status (Klein's, Macy's, and Saks), and he found that the sales clerks had corresponding differences in their production of the *r*s in the phrase *fourth floor*. The main part of Labov's dissertation study was on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where he recorded interviews with a random, socially stratified sample of the population. Published in 1966 (revised edition, 2006) as *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*, this work was more rigorous than dialectologists' previous attempts to observe variation in American English. It demonstrated that several features of pronunciation varied systematically with the social class of the speakers and also with the style of their speech, along a continuum from casual to formal. At the same time, Lower East Siders of all class backgrounds agreed in their negative evaluation of the local dialect. Labov argued that this was evidence that New Yorkers formed a single speech community, sharing norms for linguistic use as well as socially stratified patterns of production.

The variation present synchronically in New York City was further important, Labov argued, in that it related to diachronic change. For example, he found that for the upper middle class, the younger the speaker, the more likely the person was to pronounce the *r* after a vowel. Dismissing the alternative possibility of *age grading*—that is, that speakers use less postvocalic (*r*) as they age—Labov called this pattern *change in apparent time*: The synchronic variation between age-groups is a snapshot of a change in progress in the community. In addition, patterns showing individual speakers using more postvocalic (*r*) in more formal styles (where more attention would be paid to speech) and middle class speakers leading in their use of postvocalic (*r*) were both indicative of what Labov calls *change from above* (above the level of conscious awareness). In this case, the change from above involved the adoption of an external prestige standard where coda (*r*) was pronounced. The framework also includes *change from below*, which for Labov is a language- and community-internal process, involving changes that speakers are not consciously aware of. Change from below was exemplified in New York City by the raising of the vowel in *bad* toward *ey* (or even *ee*) and the vowel in *bought* toward *oo*.

Much of Labov's recent work pursues diachronic questions, including the three-volume *Principles of Linguistic Change* (1994, 2001, 2010), which acts as a compendium of variationist sociolinguistic work (including Labov's own studies of Philadelphia English), orienting it within the larger body of work seeking to understand the principles underlying language change.

Another major recent publication (with Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg) is the *Atlas of North American English* (2006), which presents an acoustic analysis of the dialects of the United States and Canada, delineating the boundaries of the major dialect regions and characterizing broad patterns of phonological change. Based on telephone fieldwork, this was the first dialect atlas to cover such a large region and to be based on instrumental measurements.

Labov aligns with the fields of dialectology and anthropology in his methodological contributions. He focuses on gathering naturalistic data, trying to observe the type of speech people use when unobserved. The most valuable speech to elicit for analysis he terms the *vernacular*, which refers to the most casual and systematic of an individual's speech styles. Labov pioneered a methodology known as the *sociolinguistic interview*, a face-to-face recorded session designed to elicit variation across contextual styles (from the vernacular to the very formal) in long stretches of naturalistic speech. The sociolinguistic interview provides the individual data that, when aggregated, is the primary evidence used in sociolinguistic analysis. Today, it is often used in combination with ethnographic observation, allowing researchers to bring both qualitative and

quantitative linguistic observations to bear on their research questions.

A Quantitative Approach to Data Analysis

Labov adopts a quantitative approach to data analysis. His concept of the *linguistic variable* refers broadly to a set of referentially equivalent variants (ways of "saying the same thing"). Defining the linguistic variable allows for variants to be systematically tracked and counted across stretches of speech. Labov's earliest work used tables and graphs to compare the percentages of use of variants such as the presence or absence of *r* in phrases like *fourth floor*, aggregated over stylistic contexts and/or social classes. The regular patterns revealed in such displays constituted the evidence for *orderly heterogeneity* and the social stratification of the speech community, revealing intricate order in place of what had been dismissed as chaotic *free variation* by structuralist and generative linguists.

Later developments by Labov and others enabled a more sophisticated approach to the quantitative analysis of language. Computer programs called *variable rule programs* (VARBRUL) were developed to estimate the social and linguistic contextual effects on many types of linguistic alternations "coded" from naturalistic data. For example, researchers could use a single data set to show that a variable like *t/d* deletion (e.g., saying "wes' coast" instead of "west coast") is favored by particular social groups (e.g., by men more than by women) as well as in particular linguistic environments (e.g., before a consonant, as in *lef' hand*, more than before a vowel, as in *lef' out*). Over the next decades, practitioners would rely on this type of quantitative estimation to compare and contrast VARBRUL parameters between different varieties of a language as well as for studying individual varieties. Although statistical tools other than VARBRUL are now used, sociolinguists build on Labov's early demonstrations that linguistic variation is not random but is governed by orderly quantitative principles.

Nonstandard Language Varieties: Beyond the Deficit Model

Labov has also had a major impact through his focus on the description and legitimization of nonstandard language varieties, most notably the variety currently known as African American English (AAE). In Harlem in the late 1960s, Labov directed a team of field-workers who conducted ethnographically informed group interviews with African American youth. In his 1972 book *Language in the Inner City*, Labov described the speech of his participants as linguistically structured and sociolinguistically patterned, reiterating his stance on the orderly heterogeneity of all linguistic systems. In the case of AAE, demonstrating its systematicity was crucial at the time, when popular theories like the *deficit hypothesis* posited that linguistic, cultural, or even genetic differences accounted for the poor performance of African American children in schools. The work of the sociologist Basil Bernstein on *restricted and elaborated codes* also contributed to the popular view—one that still holds today—that AAE is a poor or incomplete version of English and reflects a broader cultural deficit for African Americans. Labov has remained an activist throughout his career, working to bring insights from sociolinguistics to a broader audience, both academic and popular. He testified as an expert during the 1979 Ann Arbor trial, which established the precedent that the home language of Black children should be taken into account in public education. More recently, he has worked to develop tools for educators that draw on linguistic knowledge about nonstandard varieties like AAE and Latino English to improve the teaching of reading to minority students. Furthermore, his work has sparked a massive subdiscipline devoted to the study of AAE, large enough to be considered almost a separate branch of sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguistics remains heavily influenced by the variationist paradigm. While some approaches, including many qualitative subdisciplines like discourse analysis and interactional sociolinguistics, critique variationism's reliance on quantifiable data and its use of fixed macro-sociological categories, variationist sociolinguistics remains in dialogue with the broader field. The so-called third wave of variationist studies (developed by Penelope Eckert, herself a student of Labov's) proposes to extend and refine early variationism by retaining its use of empirical and quantifiable data while calling for a renewed focus on the individual, critiquing Labov's assertion that individuals are worthy of study only in the aggregate of speech communities. Eckert's focus on individual practice, style construction, and social meaning also differs from Labov's variationism in drawing on theoretical models from anthropology

and social theory, including indexicality (from Charles Sanders Peirce and more recently revived by Michael Silverstein), enregisterment (Asif Agha), and language ideologies (Paul Kroskrity, Bambi Schieffelin).

Labov's own focus on the social life of language is primarily intended to inform linguistic theory. Nevertheless, his work has had a major impact on, and retains substantial relevance for, those who work at the intersections of language use and social behavior, across many disciplines.

Daniel Ezra Johnson and Kara Becker

See also Chomsky, Noam; Gumperz, John J.; Hymes, Dell; Sociolinguistics

Further Readings

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Lacan, Jacques

Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) was a French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who had a deep influence on philosophy, literary theory, and anthropology. One way to describe the work of Lacan is as an anthropology—a theory of what it means to be human. According to Lacan, Sigmund Freud's greatest contribution was the invention of the unconscious and the emphasis he placed on sexuality, both of which were specific to humans. Unlike animals, governed by instincts, nature, and biology, humans were defined by desire and language, by their ability to symbolize. Human subjectivity was thus always a form of intersubjectivity in which the encounters with the social and the "Other" were key in the construction of the self.

Lacan's thought presents a number of intrinsic difficulties. On a historical level, Lacan insisted again and again on the fact that he was simply reading Freud, that all of his concepts were anchored in Freud's texts. Such a claim is problematic in light of the fundamentally divergent interpretations of Freud throughout the 20th century. If Lacan's writings found little echo in the United States or in Great Britain, they nonetheless radically shaped the field of French psychoanalysis. Whether one argued with or against him, Lacan became a necessary reference within the French context. Lacan's work is also extremely complex on a theoretical level. His notoriously dense prose, his opaque references, his frequent digressions, and his general refusal of any systematic presentation have led many scholars to misconstrue or to simply dismiss his thought. The difficulty of Lacan's style, however, must be understood within his larger philosophical enterprise, as an attempt to *perform* his theory, to put it into practice. How does one write when language is inherently unstable, when meanings shift constantly, when the signifiers and signified are simply connected by an arbitrary relation, and, most important, when the self who writes, the author, is never an autonomous, centered self?

Born in 1901 in a Parisian bourgeois Catholic family, Lacan studied medicine before choosing