1 The study of language in its social context

The work which is reported in this study is an investigation of language within the social context of the community in which it is spoken. It is a study of a linguistic structure which is unusually complex, but no more so than the social structure of the city in which it functions. Within the linguistic structure, change has occurred on a large scale, and at a rapid pace which is even more characteristic of the changing structure of the city itself. Variability is an integral part of the linguistic system, and no less a part of the behavior of the city.

To assess the relative complexity of the linguistic problem presented by New York City, it may be useful to compare this investigation to an earlier study of a sound change in progress that I carried out on the island of Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963). This earlier work traced the distribution of a particular sound feature as it varied through several occupational, ethnic, and geographic sub-groups of the population, and through three generations of native islanders. The objective pattern of language behavior was seen to be correlated with the overall social pattern of differential reaction to specific economic strains and social pressures; it was then possible to assign a single social meaning to the linguistic feature in question. It was thus demonstrated that social pressures are continually acting upon the structure of a language, as it develops through the mechanism of imitation and hypercorrection.

In turning to the speech community of New York City, we are faced with a much more complex society, and linguistic variation of a corresponding complexity. On the Vineyard, the six thousand native residents are close to single-style speakers: they show relatively little change in their linguistic behavior as the formality of the social context changes. In New York City, the population to be sampled is more than a thousand times as large, with many more divisions of social class and caste. Neither the exterior nor the interior boundaries of the New York City community are fixed, as Martha's Vineyard's are: for within the limits of the island, the sharp distinction between the native residents and the newcomer permits little equivocation. In New York, mobility is a part of the pattern, and the descendents of the

earliest long-term native settlers are not necessarily the most powerful influence in the speech community today. Large numbers of people live within the city yet remain outside the boundaries of the speech community, and the line which divides the native speaker from the foreigner is broken by many doubtful cases. The area of New York City that was chosen for intensive study – the Lower East Side – does not represent a simplification of these problems. On the contrary, it is an area which exemplifies the complexity of New York City as a whole with all its variability and apparent inconsistencies.

The study of linguistic structure

The investigation of New York City is more complex than the Martha's Vineyard study in another sense: instead of limiting the investigation to a single sound feature, I will be dealing eventually with the New York vowel system as a whole. One view that would probably meet with general approval from all linguists today is that the prime object of linguistics is the structure of language, not its elements. In this study, we will be dealing with the structure of the sound system of New York City English – because it is the most amenable to quantitative techniques. Within this system, the question of structure can be approached on a number of levels of organization of increasing complexity.

The individual sound which we hear is in no way a structural unit. Many different sounds may have the same function in distinguishing words; the linguist considers them *non-distinctive variants* of a single structural unit, the *phoneme*. Phonemes in turn are organized into larger systems of vowels or consonants.

It is generally considered that the most consistent and coherent system is that of an *idiolect* – the speech of one person in the same context, over a short period of time. According to this view, as we consider the speech of that individual over longer periods, or the combined dialects of a neighborhood, a town, or a region, the system becomes progressively more inconsistent. We find an increasing number of alternations which are due to stylistic or cultural factors, or changes in time – and these are external to language, not a part of linguistic structure.[1]

[1] A precise statement of this position and the disposition of the problems involved may be found in Harris (1951) page 9: "These investigations are carried out for the speech of one particular person, or one community of dialectically identical persons, at a time . . . In most cases, this presents no problem . . . In other cases, however, we find the single person or the community using various forms which are not dialectally consistent with each other . . . We can then doggedly maintain the first definition and set up a system corresponding to all the linguistic elements in the speech of the person or the community. Or we may select those stretches of speech which can be described by a relatively simple and consistent system, and say that they are cases of one dialect, while the remaining stretches of speech are cases of another dialect." The evidence first presented in Chapter 2, and then in the rest of this study,

The present study adopts an entirely opposite view of the relative consistency of idiolect and dialect in the structure of New York City English. We find that in New York City, most idiolects do not form a simple, coherent system: on the contrary, they are studded with oscillations and contradictions both in the organization of sounds into phonemes, and the organization of phonemes into larger systems. These inconsistencies are inexplicable in terms of any data within the system. To explain them in terms of borrowing from some other, unknown, system is a desperate expedient, which eventually reduces the concept of system to an inconvenient fiction.

[This vigorous attack on the idiolect anticipated the more thorough treatment of the issues in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968). The result of this program led to what I see as the central dogma of sociolinguistics: that the community is prior to the individual. Or to put it another way, the language of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the community of which they are members. In 1989, I attacked the problem of "the exact description of the community" by a treatment of the complex Philadelphia short-*a* system, and several hundred speech communities have been described in a reasonably precise and replicable way. Still, a very large number of linguists – including some sociolinguists – believe that the community is a fiction, and that language resides in individual brains. As far as I can see, nothing has come of the many efforts to develop a linguistics of individuals (see Fillmore, Kempler & Wang (1979)), except in those fortunate situations where the speech community has been well studied in advance. Language as conceived in this book is an abstract pattern, exterior to the individual. In fact, it can be argued that the individual does not exist as a linguistic entity. That is not to say that we do not study individuals – see the case of Nathan B. (Chapter 7) or the Chapter 12 of Labov (2001) that deals with the leaders of linguistic change. But the individuals we study are conceived of as the product of their social histories and social memberships.

Still, it would not do to be too dogmatic about the central dogma. Santa Ana and Parodi have described a Mexican community of Zamora where a number of older people seem to have limited recognition of community norms (1998), and Zwicky has made strong demonstration of the existence of individual grammars for less frequent syntactic phenomena (2002).]

The treatment of this inconsistency is the overall program of the present investigation. We will begin by turning our full attention to the sources of inconsistency, and treat them as continuous phonological variables rather

Footnote 1 (*cont.*)
shows that the inconsistency found in most New York City idiolects is so great that the first alternative of Harris is impossible, and the second implausible.

The attempt to find linguistic uniformity by retreating to the idiolect is more thoroughly criticized in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968).

than fluctuating constants. These will be codified and measured on a quantitative, linear scale. The data must then be enlarged to include the distribution of these linguistic variables over a wide range of stylistic and social dimensions – that is, distribution within the larger structural unit, the speech community.

That New York City is a single speech community, and not a collection of speakers living side by side, borrowing occasionally from each other's dialects, may be demonstrated by many kinds of evidence. Native New Yorkers differ in their usage in terms of absolute values of the variables, but the shifts between contrasting styles follow the same pattern in almost every case. Subjective evaluations of native New Yorkers show a remarkable uniformity, in sharp contrast to the wide range of responses, from speakers who were raised in other regions.

Traditional dialect studies have shown that isolation leads to linguistic diversity, while the mixing of populations leads to linguistic uniformity. Yet in the present study of a single speech community, we will see a new and different situation: groups living in close contact are participating in rapid linguistic changes which lead to increased diversity, rather than uniformity.

Our understanding of this apparent paradox stems from the recognition that the most coherent linguistic system is that which includes the New York speech community as a whole. It is a long-standing axiom of structural linguistics that a system is essentially a set of differences. De Saussure's conception of the phoneme has been applied to all kinds of linguistic units:[2]

> They are characterized, not by the particular and positive quality of each, but simply by the fact that they are not confused with each other. Phonemes are above all, contrasting, relative, and negative entities.

For a working class New Yorker, the social significance of the speech forms that he or she uses, in so far as they contain the variables in question, is that they are not the forms used by middle class speakers, and not the forms used by upper middle class speakers. The existence of these contrasting units within the system presupposes the acquaintance of speakers with the habits of other speakers. Without necessarily making any conscious choice, they identify themselves in every utterance by distinguishing themselves from other speakers who use contrasting forms.

Some earlier restrictions on linguistic study

The procedure which is outlined above may be termed historical and contextual, and, above all, empirical. Its aim is the understanding of the

[2] Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), page 164 (my translation).

mechanism of linguistic change, and of linguistic evolution in general. The hypotheses that will be constructed here will be designed to lead to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation, and the intention is to make no statement for which there is no empirical evidence within the study itself. No limits are set as to the type of data which are relevant, so long as they are reliable and valid, and clearly correlated with linguistic behavior. The claim is made here that only a socially realistic description can show a consistent and coherent structure for the speech of this community.[3]

In order to carry out this program, it will be necessary to disregard certain restrictions on the scope of investigation that have been imposed upon twentieth-century linguistics. They can be quoted in the forms that have been given them at various times by leading figures in the field. Although it might be difficult to find many who would explicitly endorse all of these restrictions, the combined result will give us a fairly accurate picture of the constraints placed on linguistic writings in the past five decades.

1) *Synchronic structural systems and diachronic [historical] developments must be studied in isolation* This principle was enunciated most clearly by Saussure (1916) at the beginning of the century:

> The difference in kind between successive and co-existent terms . . . excludes the use of both as the material of a single science. [p. 124] . . . Thus the synchronic 'phenomenon' has nothing in common with the diachronic one. [p. 128]

It has often been pointed out that Saussure's caveat laid the foundation for the structural study of language, but as an absolute principle, it has not been highly regarded. The application of structural arguments to historical changes has never been abandoned, and it has been followed with great vigor in the second half of the twentieth century (Martinet 1952, 1955; Moulton 1960, 1961, 1962).[4] However, the introduction of time depth into synchronic studies of present-day languages is another matter, and here the restriction seems to hold. For our present purposes, it will be necessary to regard a synchronic structure as an instantaneous description of a present state with each unit marked as to its direction and rate of change.

[3] By *socially realistic*, I mean a description which takes into account the distribution of language differences throughout the community, and necessarily preserves the data on the age, sex, education, occupation, and ethnic membership of the speakers studied.

[4] Martinet is cited as the exponent of a different restriction in 3). Martinet's theoretical approach to the explanation of linguistic change is presented concisely in "Function, Structure and Sound Change" (1952). A fuller treatment is given in *Économie des changements phonétiques* (1955).

2) *Sound change cannot be directly observed* The well-known statement of Bloomfield on this point may be quoted:[5]

> The process of linguistic change has never been directly observed; we shall see that such observation, with our present facilities, is inconceivable.

Logically, Bloomfield's statement is unassailable if it is taken to mean that we cannot observe sound change in the same way that we watch crystals grow or cells divide. Like other forms of social change, linguistic change is a change in a pattern of behavior, and it must be observed by inference from the sampling of discrete stages. But Bloomfield's statement is extended to exclude the possibility of such inferential observations as well:

> We must suppose that, no matter how minute and accurate our observation, we should always find deviant forms, because . . . the forms of the language are subject to the incessant working of other factors of change, such as, especially, borrowing and analogic combination . . . [p. 364]

Bloomfield's argument was avowedly designed to support the neogrammarian assumption of the absolute regularity of sound change, despite the observed irregularity of empirical data. In actual observations, we find that change proceeds by fits and starts; that the newer form is heard in some words, and the older form in others; that some groups of speakers lead in the change, while others lag. This irregularly advancing front does not answer Bloomfield's requirements for a perfectly regular, gradual shift in a sound pattern which is never ragged, never retrograde. The net effect of this argument was to remove the empirical study of linguistic change from the program of twentieth-century linguistics. Since borrowing and analogy were considered relatively unsystematic processes, and sound change was unapproachable, there remained nothing to do but construct abstract models of an unobservable process.[6]

[Bloomfield and the neogrammarians appear here in an unfavorable light, since their rigid adherence to their doctrine inhibited them from studying ongoing variation in the present. Later on, my efforts to resolve

[5] *Language* (1933), page 347.

[6] Bloomfield's original prohibition has been repeated by C. F. Hockett, *A Course in Modern Linguistics* (1958), Chapter 52. Hockett's statement of Bloomfield's position is given at the outset: "No one has yet observed sound change: we have only been able to detect it via its consequences. We shall see later that a more nearly direct observation would be theoretically possible, if impractical, but any ostensible report of such an observation so far must be discredited." Hockett's hypothetical suggestion for the study of sound change involves a thousand accurate acoustic records made each month from the members of a tight-knit community for a period of fifty years. Of this point of view, Weinreich (1959) wrote in his review: "It is hard to feel comfortable with a theory which holds that the great changes of the past were of one kind, theoretically mysterious and interesting, whereas everything that is observable today is of another kind, transparent and (by implication) of scant theoretical interest."

the neogrammarian controversy (Labov 1981) led me to believe that they were essentially correct – that in most sound changes, it is the phoneme that changes, not words. This issue is still being disputed, but in *Principles of Linguistic Change* (Labov 1994), the neogrammarians emerge as the heroes of the story.]

3) *Feelings about language are inaccessible* This restriction has not been discussed as freely as the others, except where linguists have used it to combat the excesses of a normative approach to language. However, the following statement by Bloch and Trager in their *Outline of Linguistic Analysis* is pointed enough:[7]

> The native speaker's feeling about sounds or about anything else is inaccessible to investigation by the techniques of linguistic science, and any appeal to it is a plain evasion of the linguist's proper function. The linguist is concerned solely with the facts of speech. The psychological correlates of these facts are undoubtedly important; but the linguist has no means – as a linguist – of analyzing them.

As an antidote to crude psychologizing in the place of phonemic analysis, this statement may have served admirably well. But it seems to be cast in an unnecessarily absolute form reflecting a certain purism that seems to have crept into twentieth-century linguistics. It is possible that too much concern with the image of the linguist – with what the linguist is permitted to do *as a linguist* – may interfere with one's view of language as it is spoken.[8]

4) *The linguist should not use non-linguistic data to explain linguistic change* This point of view may be considered more a statement of policy, or a focus of attention, than a prohibition. It was originally directed against theories which attempted to correlate linguistic change with such factors as climate, inherited differences in physiology, invasions, and revolutions.[9] Martinet (1955) turned linguists' attention away from such remote and occasional factors, and showed that the internal relations of linguistic systems produced constant pressures towards changes that were present in every act of communication. His point of view is supported by evidence in the present study, and many references will be made to Martinet's analysis of structural pressures towards linguistic change. However, in emphasizing the importance of the structural relations of functional units, Martinet has

[7] Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager (1942), page 40.
[8] The evidence to be presented in Chapter 11 indicates that subjective reactions to individual sound features are by no means as inaccessible as Bloch and Trager thought. However the method employed here serves an entirely different purpose than the psychological one which Bloch and Trager rejected.
[9] A review of a number of such theories is given by A. Sommerfelt (1930).

laid unnecessary restrictions on the linguist. In a report to the Ninth International Congress of Linguists in 1962, he declared:[10]

> It is clear, of course, that any language . . . is exposed to changes determined by impacts from outside; no one will doubt that man's changing needs in general will affect his communicative needs which in turn, will condition linguistic structure. The impacts from outside may consist in the pressure exerted on each other by two languages 'in contact.'
>
> The linguist will feel competent to deal with the latter, but he may be excused if, in his capacity as a linguist, he declines the invitation to investigate sociological conditioning.

Martinet himself has shown a broad range of interest in the study of language in its social context, yet the statement given above reflects a policy which is followed by many who would apply Martinet's ideas. Attempts have been made to explain linguistic change by juxtaposing abstract models of linguistic systems which were in fact separated by many centuries and extensive geographic dislocation. The painstaking inquiries of historical linguists into dialectal variations and intermediate stages have been overlooked or disregarded.[11] Such bold abstractions draw support from Martinet's confidence that structural explanations based on the internal economy of the system are sufficient to account for linguistic change in the present, though they may be consequences of social dislocations in earlier times. Evidence in this study, and in the earlier work on Martha's Vineyard, runs counter to Martinet's notion that social forces operated on language only in the remote past. Martinet's reliance on communicative function in the narrowest sense also seems to have played a part in his general argument. The indications of the present studies are that the role of language in self-identification, an aspect of the expressive function of language, is more important in the mechanism of phonological change.

[Martinet was the teacher of my teacher, Uriel Weinreich, and I had the unofficial status of *petit fils* among the Martinetians. Though I argue here against Martinet's insistence on the autonomous character of linguistics, later work has confirmed his contention that the structural consequences of external disruption of the linguistic system may work themselves out for

[10] Martinet's (1962) report on "Structural Variation in Language" embodied this prohibition in even stronger terms as delivered on the floor. Objections were raised by several European linguists on behalf of geographic and other "external" data, but no comment was made on the exclusion of socially determined conditions.

[11] An example of such an a-historical treatment of linguistic history may be found in Herbert Pilch (1955). Pilch used Martinet's ideas "to trace in outline the history of the American English vowel pattern from the time of its geographical separation from British English." The "outline" consisted of three points: Kökeritz' reconstruction of sixteenth-century pronunciation, Pilch's own observations of modern American dialects, and one "connecting link": the vowel pattern described by Noah Webster in 1800.

many centuries, leading progressively from one adjustment to another, so that much of linguistic development is autonomous. Evidence for this view appears most strongly in the *Atlas of North American English* (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006).]

Some earlier studies of language in its social context

Despite the fact that some of the restrictions on the scope of linguistic study are stated in a rigid form, they may best be regarded as temporary expedients adopted by linguists to serve particular ends. In setting them aside, we are returning in one sense to the sound empirical base which formed the methodology of linguistics before a split had developed into dialectology on the one hand and structuralism on the other.

It may be appropriate to quote at some length from a lecture delivered by Meillet in 1905 before a class in general linguistics. Meillet had worked intensively in many areas of Indo-European historical linguistics; his remarks show that he had already formed a clear conception of a socially realistic linguistics which would continue the empirical tradition which he had absorbed. He began with the observation that all historical laws which had been discovered in the nineteenth century were still to be considered as mere possibilities.[12]

> . . . we must discover the variables which permit or induce the realization of the possibilities thus recognized.

Meillet added that this variable cannot be the structure of the physical organs, or a mental function.

> But there is an element in which circumstances induce continual variation, sometimes rapid, sometimes slow, but never completely suspended: it is the structure of society.

He continued with an analysis which is remarkable for its brevity and clarity.

> . . . it is probable, *a priori*, that every modification of social structure is expressed by a change in the conditions from which language develops. Language is an institution with its proper autonomy: we must therefore discover the general conditions for development from a purely linguistic point of view, and this is the object of general linguistics, with its anatomical, physiological, and psychic conditions . . . but from the fact that language is a social institution, it follows that linguistics is a social science, and the only variable to which we can turn to account for linguistic change is social change, of which linguistic variations are only consequences.

[12] Antoine Meillet (1921), pages 16–17.

We must determine which social structure corresponds to a given linguistic structure, and how, in a general manner, changes in social structure are translated into changes in linguistic structure.

It is evident, from the record of the ensuing years, that neither Meillet nor his students took this prospectus with full seriousness. That nothing further was accomplished along these lines may have been due to the fact that the views of Saussure were just beginning to take hold at that time, and linguistics turned in a completely different direction. We can now return to this area of work with more adequate equipment than Meillet could have brought to bear upon such difficult problems. Not only do we have a more explicit theory of phonological structure, but we also possess such useful tools as tape recording, spectrograms and methods of sampling and handling large quantities of data.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the methods used in the present study, it would be best to review some of the more concrete achievements of the intervening years in the empirical study of language in its community context. The references will be discussed under the heading of the particular restriction on linguistic investigation which was necessarily disregarded by those undertaking the work.

1) *Empirical studies of linguistic change in progress* This is a category which is unfortunately almost empty. There are, of course, innumerable studies of linguistic change over long periods of time, utilizing texts and the comments of contemporary observers. But there are very few systematic studies of communities in which the observer analyzed the speech of successive generations to study the development of change. (See Chapter 9 for an elaboration of such methods.) In 1899, Gauchat began the study of the speech of Charmey, a village in French-speaking Switzerland, and found systematic differences in the treatment of six phonological variables by three successive generations. His study, *L'unité phonétique dans le patois d'une commune* (1905), attracted a great deal of comment, particularly from neogrammarian theoreticians who tried to explain away his findings as nothing but a complicated series of borrowings.[13] M. E. Hermann (1929) re-studied Charmey, and his results confirmed Gauchat's inference of phonological change in four of the six items.

[Even though Gauchat's study of Charmey is a purely qualitative description, it stands out among earlier studies of the speech community as the nonpareil investigation of change in progress, and almost every such study since has begun by citing this work. It is full of astonishing insights

[13] P. G. Goidanich (1926) (cited by Sommerfelt 1930).