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William Labov
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The Social Stratification of English in New York City

One of the first accounts of social variation in language, this groundbreaking study founded the discipline of sociolinguistics, providing the model on which thousands of studies have been based. In this second edition, Labov looks back on forty years of sociolinguistic research, bringing the reader up to date on its methods, findings, and achievements. In over forty pages of new material, he explores the unforeseen implications of his earlier work, addresses the political issues involved, and evaluates the success of newer approaches to sociolinguistic investigation. In doing so, he reveals the outstanding accomplishments of sociolinguistics since his original study, which laid the foundations for studying language variation, introduced the crucial concept of the linguistic variable, and showed how variation across age groups is an indicator of language change. Bringing Labov's pioneering study into the twenty-first century, this classic volume will remain the benchmark in the field for years to come.

WILLIAM LABOV is Professor of Linguistics and Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Since *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* was first published in 1966, he has also published *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972), *Language in the Inner City* (1972), *A Quantitative Study of Sound Change in Progress* (with M. Yaeger and R. Steiner, 1972), *Principles of Language Change* (Volume 1, 1994; Volume 2, 2001; Volume 3, forthcoming), and (with S. Ash and C. Boberg), the *Atlas of North American English* (2006). He is co-editor of the journal *Language Variation and Change* (Cambridge University Press).

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Introductory note to the first edition

The Clearinghouse for Social Dialect Studies, a joint instrumentality of the Center for Applied Linguistics and the National Council of Teachers of English, collects and distributes social dialect research information. It operates under the guidance of an Advisory Committee whose members are, at the present writing: Harold B. Allen, University of Minnesota; Alva L. Davis, Illinois Institute of Technology; W. Nelson Francis, Brown University; Alfred S. Hayes, Center for Applied Linguistics; Robert F. Hogan, National Council of Teachers of English; Albert W. Marckwardt, Princeton University; Raven I. McDavid, University of Chicago; David W. Reed, University of California at Berkeley; William A. Stewart, Center for Applied Linguistics. This Committee, known as the Clearinghouse Committee for Social Dialect Studies, also encourages the publication of selected documents. The present publication, essentially the author's 1964 Columbia University dissertation, was unanimously approved by the Clearinghouse Committee, and by the Commission on the English Language of the National Council of Teachers of English, acting on behalf of the Executive Committee of that organization. It is a ground-breaking study, a milestone in the emerging field of sociolinguistics, and we are pleased to make it available to the scholarly community.

Alfred S. Hayes
Director
Education and Research Program
Center for Applied Linguistics

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Preface to the first edition

The work presented in the following pages is a linguistic analysis of one speech community. Like any linguistic analysis, it is concerned with a system of contrastive relations, the code by which speakers communicate with one another. In this particular community, New York City, the system of the individual speaker appears to be less coherent than that of the speech community as a whole. The isolated idiolect of the individual New Yorker shows so much unaccountable variation that it has been described as a case of massive "free variation." But when this individual speech pattern is studied in the larger context of the speech community, it is seen as an element in a highly systematic structure of social and stylistic stratification. It has therefore been necessary to extend the study of linguistic structure to include continuous social and stylistic variation, and unconscious subjective reactions to the variables concerned – areas that have previously been considered inaccessible to formal linguistic analysis.

In the past few years, there has been considerable programmatic discussion of *sociolinguistics* at various meetings and symposia. If this term refers to the use of data from the speech community to solve problems of linguistic theory, then I would agree that it applies to the research described here. But *sociolinguistics* is more frequently used to suggest a new interdisciplinary field – the comprehensive description of the relations of language and society. This seems to me an unfortunate notion, foreshadowing a long series of purely descriptive studies with little bearing on the central theoretical problems of linguistics or of sociology. My own intention was to solve linguistic problems, bearing in mind that these are ultimately problems in the analysis of social behavior: the description of continuous variation, of overlapping and multi-layered phonemic systems; the subjective correlates of linguistic variation; the causes of linguistic differentiation and the mechanism of linguistic change. The final Chapter 14 is devoted to the integration of the individual findings, in an analysis of structural consequences for the vowel system as a whole, and outlines the evolution of the New York City vowel system over the past sixty years.

The data also face in another direction: they bear on many problems of

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sociological theory – the discreteness of socio-economic stratification, the integration of ethnic groups into the social system, the role of exterior reference groups, the relation of normative values to social behavior, the transmission of prestige patterns, and the nature of social control. In order to make this material accessible to sociologists and anthropologists, special phonetic symbols and technical linguistic terms have been kept to a minimum, and defined in the text. A glossary at the beginning of the Appendixes defines symbols and linguistic terms.

Many of the techniques for gathering data, as developed in this study, may apply generally to the study of any complex speech community. Fairly complete descriptions are provided on the methods of sampling through secondary surveys (Chapter 6, Appendix C), the quantitative analysis of linguistic variables (Chapters 7, 8), interview construction (Chapter 6), eliciting a range of contextual styles (Chapter 4), subjective evaluation tests (Chapters 11, 12), methods of sampling non-respondents (Appendix D), and rapid and anonymous surveys (Chapter 3, Appendix B).

The material as presented here is essentially my 1964 Columbia University dissertation, with minor changes. Chapters 12 and 13 formed part of the original plan of Part III, dealing with social evaluation; though they did not appear in the dissertation, they have been restored here. The work as presented here was carried out under the direction of Uriel Weinreich. It is impossible for me to acknowledge properly my indebtedness to him by footnotes and citations alone; his influence may be seen most strongly in the focus of the work upon the general problems of linguistic structure and linguistic change. Many suggestions of Herbert Hyman of the Department of Sociology, Columbia University, have been incorporated in this study, not only in the approach to survey methods, but in conceptual analysis as well. William Diver's help has been important in sharpening the initial approach to phonemic analysis.

The financial support of the American Council of Learned Societies, throughout the major portion of this study, is gratefully acknowledged. With this help, it was possible to enlarge the field work to a point where the results stand upon adequate empirical data, and are not merely suggestive or programmatic. The assistance of Michael Kac, of Haverford College, was of great value in standardizing the field techniques; Mr. Kac not only served as a reliable and efficient field worker, but also as a valuable associate in the attack on problems of transcription and codification.

The linguistic survey of the Lower East Side gained considerably in accuracy and reliability through the use of the primary survey carried out by Mobilization for Youth in 1961. For permission to use the survey materials, I am deeply indebted to Mobilization for Youth and the Columbia School of Social Work. I would like to acknowledge particularly the help of Lloyd

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Ohlin, Director of Research of the Columbia School of Social Work, and Wyatt Jones, Director of Research of Mobilization for Youth, who provided material support and advice at many critical points. Many suggestions have been derived from discussions with members of the Mobilization for Youth staff; I am particularly indebted to Donald Pappenfort, John Michael, Paul Lerman, and Warren Mintz.

Kenneth Lennihan of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, provided many important suggestions on the empirical procedures used in this study. I have profited greatly from discussions with Marvin Herzog of the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry, Columbia University, whose searching questions precipitated a number of re-analyses of the relations of linguistic and social behavior.

It would be difficult to assess the full importance of the support given by my wife Teresa, whose thoughtful criticism contributed to the solution of many analytical problems.

W. L.
New York City

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Preface to the second edition: forty years later

The original edition of this book was printed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, photographed from the pages of the dissertation that was finished in the spring of 1966. In spite of the rough form of the diagrams, the prevalence of typos, and pages that terminated in mid-sentence, the book reached its audience and had considerable effect in stimulating further research. As the first quantitative study of a metropolitan speech community, it launched a mode of work that is well developed today in the annual NWAVE conference on *New Ways of Analyzing Variation*, now in its 34th year, and the journal *Language Change and Variation*, in its 17th year.

SSENYC introduced a number of concepts that have proved useful in the study of change and variation: the linguistic variable; social and stylistic stratification; the cross-over pattern; apparent time; covert prestige. It also introduced a number of procedures that were new to linguistic studies: the creation of a representative sample; the sociolinguistic interview and the control of style shifting within it; subjective reaction tests to measure the effect of particular linguistic variables; self-report and linguistic insecurity tests. Many of these methods and results were encapsulated in chapters of *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972a) and developed further in later publications, especially those connected with the study of Linguistic Change and Variation in Philadelphia which followed (see Chapter 15).

There were also aspects of this work that were not so widely generalized, and when the book went out of print, were not so often reproduced in the work of others. SSENYC was a bit formal in its prose style, but it dealt with people. It reached out into the community and brought to life a number of individuals whose special characteristics did much to clarify and illuminate the linguistic processes at work. I think of Nathan B., an academic who could not control the (dh) variable; of Steve K., the Jungian who wanted to go back to Brooklyn; of Dolly R., who showed me what style switching was really about; and of Mollie S., who developed a linguistic sensitivity to compensate for her loss in vision. The Appendices to SSENYC contained analytic procedures that have not been replicated in later work: in particular, the study of out-of-town respondents and the analysis of those who refused the ALS interview through the television interview. I would especially direct

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the new reader to the pages of Appendix B, the punch-ball game, where the sounds of New York City street life are captured in IPA.

SSENYC is not up-to-date in several respects. Its analyses are based on cross-tabulations and graphic display; there is no multivariate analysis and very little statistical evaluation. The high degree of regularity of the results made this problem seem less urgent at the time, or so it seemed to the statisticians I briefly consulted. I considered updating this treatment, but decided against it: it would have created a different book. On the positive side, the absence of multivariate analysis favored the discovery of many important interactions between gender, age, ethnicity, and social class.

The main contribution of this second edition is a series of interventions, in each chapter, where Labov 2006 breaks in with the viewpoint of forty years after. These are marked by square brackets. I point out to the reader what political issues were involved, which new efforts seem to have succeeded and why, what were the unforeseen further implications, what has worked and what hasn't, and what has been left out and why. I have made an effort to give fuller credit to those who I had learned the most from, like William Moulton and Allen Walker Read, and to those who have carried my work further on the basis of what they read in this book, like Walt Wolfram, Peter Trudgill, Henrietta Cedergren, and Gillian Sankoff. On the whole, I hope that these thirty pages of new interventions will make the book more useful to the current reader, and I hope that my junior colleague of 1966 will forgive me for looking over his shoulder with the hindsights gained over the past four decades.

Chapter 15 is entirely new. It reviews 37 studies that followed SSENYC, and then tries to answer some general questions about where the field is heading.

There is another figure in the background, who I would have step forward if I could. In my regular meetings with Uriel Weinreich, I rarely got direct suggestions about what to do next. He inserted only occasional questions as I talked at length about what I had been doing. Afterwards, I would ask myself where it was that I had talked altogether too much. There was the problem that would have to be fixed. Uriel died a year after the book was published, not much older than I was at the time. Reading over his unpublished papers, I found an outline for the study of the New York City speech community that anticipated my earliest notes for the project. I find it very hard to say where his influence is to be found, since it has merged so deeply with my own approach to language, so I must assume that it is everywhere.

This second edition of SSENYC was the idea of Andrew Winnard, and I am duly grateful for his persistence in pushing this project to maturity.

W. L.
Philadelphia

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