Labov in anthropology

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Early sociolinguistics was determinedly multidisciplinary and Labov's work was eagerly read by anthropologists. Nevertheless, the ethnographic and interpretivist commitments of anthropology contrasted with Labov's correlational method and positivist philosophical assumptions. This paper discusses three debates between those two broad methodological/ philosophical traditions and traces their outcomes: on the nature of linguistic heterogeneity; the (re)production of social inequality; and the significance of linguistic style. I argue that the debates were productive. Although anthropologists often forcefully critiqued Labov's methods and conceptual proposals, dialogue with Labov's research has had positive effects: current work bears the marks of these engagements.

KEYWORDS: Early sociolinguistics, interpretivism and positivism, anthropological debates with Labov, linguistic ideology

INTRODUCTION

It is an honor to participate in marking the 50th anniversary of *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Labov 1966; henceforth *SSENYC*), a text that inspired a variationist subdiscipline in linguistics; one with its own journals, conference circuit, internal debates and faculty lines. But in asking me to reflect on Labov and anthropology, the editors surely wanted me to step outside this quantitative paradigm. I take their disciplinary phrasing as convenient shorthand, for they know well that in the early sociolinguistics of the 1960s the intellectual excitement was multidisciplinary. Shared assumptions for the study of language brought together scholars from linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, folklore and rhetoric. Indeed, among faculty and graduate students at the Language Behavior Research Lab of Berkeley in the 1970s, it was hard to distinguish scholars by formal discipline. At the University of Chicago, the Joint Degree Program in Anthropology and Linguistics was, at that time, starting to turn out similarly inter-trained students. Subsequent developments in disciplines and departments have re-established boundaries, so that scholars are now calling for new coalitions across disciplines.[1] To do justice to Labov's

contributions, therefore, and with coalitions in mind, it is useful to set aside the disciplinary frame in favor of a thematic one.

Labov's early works were empirically rich agenda-setters. I have chosen to highlight their part in three linked debates that have extended well beyond quantitative variationism. I seek to suggest the directions research has taken in each, as inspired by and against Labov:

1. the nature of heterogeneity in linguistic practice and society;
2. the role of language in (re)producing social inequality; and
3. the significance of linguistic style.

Even a brief glance across these issues shows that Labov has been an influential model, but also a powerful provocateur, inviting productive arguments and lines of thinking that challenged and often rejected his numerous theoretical and methodological innovations.

A word of personal history: along with my cohort of graduate students at the Language Behavior Research Lab, I read Labov's early publications avidly. One morning in 1972, Gillian Sankoff, then a visiting professor at Berkeley, put into my hands a long article on the history of studying language change. For me, as for many others, the work of Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968) was a revelation. I did not meet Bill Labov in person until years later, at one of the first conferences I attended. Backed into a corner of the cafeteria, I found myself the somewhat overwhelmed recipient, for an hour or more, of Labov's genuine interest, expressed in a barrage of near-inquisitorial questions about my work. Apparently this was not an unusual form of introduction. Later still, I learned he was the generous (anonymous) reader who had recommended my first book for publication. The book was not about phonological variation and was only minimally quantitative; it built on Labov's work, yet argued against several aspects of *SSENYC* methods. I mention this to note that a 'yes, but . . .' engagement with Labov's work was not exceptional. For his many interlocutors, he has often been an inspiration through generative disagreement and debate.[2]

HETEROGENEITY

The first of the debates I discuss concerned the nature of heterogeneity. It is hard today to recall how very strong was the presumption that 'homogeneity of language – assumed to be found in the idiolect,' must be 'a prerequisite for analysis' (Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968: 99), and that 'synchronic structural systems and diachronic [historical] developments' should be studied separately and without attention to non-linguistic matters (*SSENYC*: 9–12). In dialogue with the other leaders of early sociolinguistics, Labov moved decisively against these assumptions. He famously argued that phonological heterogeneity was orderly; systematicity was to be found in the speech of a

socially structured speech community, not in any idealized language system, nor in the intuitions of individual speakers. The goal was to locate processes, not socially decontextualized units: not a phonemic inventory, but rather speakers' alternation among realizations of a variable; not grammaticality judgments, but speakers' use of variants in controlled interviews. Extending this approach became everyone's project. For example, my work (1979) took up a point about process Labov had emphasized: that variability of linguistic usage at any one moment in time is a key source of change. But I examined language shift and codeswitching, not phonology. Further, I noted that class was hardly the only kind of social category that structured linguistic variation.

The diversity of social categories to be considered was a key question for many linguistic anthropologists. Scholars asked how Labov's approach in his New York City studies could be made relevant to analyses of caste dialects, honorification, politeness phenomena, and speech levels. These forms of linguistic variation are most elaborated in non-Western contexts where they signal hierarchies and relationships that cannot be equated with class or any other familiar Western sociological categories. Arguing with Labov, scholars showed that to integrate these forms of sociolinguistic variation within a single theoretical framework one must explore how speakers themselves, through their cultural systems, define modes of speaking and how they perceive differences in speaking as evidence for differences in social categories (Irvine 1985). Thus, non-Western forms of variation provided a provocation to Labov's positivist methods of defining the object of study independently of speakers' perceptions. Such variation raised a fundamental challenge by claiming that in addition to speakers' observable and recordable speech behavior, their cultural categories were indispensable factors in any analysis of linguistic variation.

Whether in non-Western or in familiar Western urban contexts, ethnographers of speaking insisted that speakers' own understandings of variation are *theoretically* important as meta-commentary about their own usage, commentary that channels usage and can change it. Ethnographers of speaking also differed from Labovian approaches in their ultimate goals. To be sure, both were interested in patterns of variation, linguistic change, and the striking regularities that enabled creativity in verbal arts such as narrative genres and verbal dueling. But ethnographers of speaking had the broader ambition to demonstrate how 'society and culture are communicatively constituted' through 'speaking as a cultural system' that could be studied comparatively across widely differing social formations (Bauman and Sherzer 1989: xi).

There was, however, one aspect of Labov's methodology in *SSENYC* that responded directly to the concern with cultural significance: the attempt to gauge speakers' evaluation of their own and others' speech. Many pages of *SSENYC* were devoted to studies of social and subjective evaluation. But how should evaluative reactions to non-denotational aspects of speech be incorporated into a

conceptual framework? In the handling of such evidence, Gumperz distinguished between 'correlational' and 'interactional' sociolinguistics. The first,

> sees the relationship of linguistic to social categories as a match between closely connected but nevertheless independent systems . . . [while interactionists point out that] information on social categories is obtainable only through language . . . status and role are . . . always perceived in particular contexts. (1972: 14–15)

A deep methodological and philosophical distinction was at issue. In correlational studies, the linguist is in positivist mode, choosing what variables to track, what social categories to sample. It is assumed that speakers simply display one or another of the predefined identities. Ethnographies, by contrast, start from interpretivist presumptions: speakers define and reproduce, through their interactional practices, the linguistic differences that communicate culturally defined social meanings. For ethnographers, categories of social life – types of identities, events and social relations not limited to the sociologists' trinity of race, class and ethnicity – are performatively emergent in interaction.

Labov worked on both sides of this divide. The New York City (NYC) studies were carefully correlational, in contrast to the ethnographic work on Martha's Vineyard (1963, 1972a) and with African American adolescents (1972b). Yet, the two kinds of study have different theoretical implications; they are not conceptually compatible or complementary because only the ethnographic mode embraces theoretical attention to speakers' online moment-by-moment meta-communication. Labov did not theorize the import of his ethnographic method; it remained one of several ways of arriving at rich linguistic data. Nevertheless, Labov's work on Martha's Vineyard inspired important fieldwork-based studies that did conceptualize the centrality of social meaning as (re)producing variation (Eckert 1989). There emerged a body of revealing research exploring how speakers negotiate identities through linguistic and other signs of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality – along with other kinds of differences that, like the non-Western variation discussed by ethnographers, were more specific to localities. These studies described 'not merely kinds of speech but kinds of speakers, who produce and reproduce particular identities through their language use' (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 369).

Such studies of identity are necessarily embedded in institutional and community contexts. It is puzzling that, despite his emphasis on heterogeneity of speech, Labov based his definition of speech community on 'uniformity' of evaluations within a social system (*SSENYC*: 7). This points to a gap between the striking findings of the NYC studies on the one hand and their conceptualization on the other. The claim of uniformity in evaluations contradicts the logic of linguistic change as explicated in Labov's most inspiring and important work based on the same NYC materials. Indeed, the

claim of evaluative uniformity was soon contested with the observation that phonological change, as described by Labov, requires diversity in the evaluation of variables within a single population (Kay 1978). The subtle interaction of evaluative factors (judgments about speech), social factors (the position of evaluator), and variable linguistic features has been widely recognized as the crucial and invaluable contribution of Labov's explication of the mechanism of linguistic change.[3]

The deeper significance of relations between evaluation, speakers' positionality, and linguistic form were further clarified when Labov's findings were integrated within a semiotic framework that put meta-communication in central place. This explained how the non-denotational signaling accomplished by phonological variables works in interaction to convey social meaning. Phonological variation does not carry denotational meaning but rather points to some social phenomenon; it is an indexical sign. As with any indexical sign, interpretation of phonological variation requires cultural knowledge – meta-communicative frames – that participants presuppose and invoke in situations of speaking (Silverstein 1976). Evaluation is just one among many sources of evidence about such frames. Thus, today's studies of language ideology can well use the results of Labovian evaluation, along with other data, to gain a sense of situated ideology, although Labov did not use the label or concept of ideology. Framings are always positioned views in studies of language ideology. Because there are many possible social positions, framings and ideologies are multiple by definition. How multiple perspectives and uptakes on linguistic variation intersect and interact with each other is a key research problem in studies of linguistic ideology.

Labov's implicit understanding of multiple perspectives emerged repeatedly in his analyses of variation. In traditional dialectology, comparative philology and everyday commonsense, speakers' separation and isolation from each other is supposed to produce linguistic difference; contact is expected to produce convergence and assimilation. Yet, as Labov observed, a major empirical finding of *SSENYC* was that 'groups living in close contact are participating in rapid linguistic changes which lead to increased diversity, rather than uniformity' (*SSENYC*: 7). Although Labov offered no explication of this striking phenomenon, it was also evident in Martha's Vineyard where returnees to the island diverged from long-time residents rather than assimilating to them. At about the same time, Frederik Barth in his ethnographic work had found contact-induced cultural differentiation emerging as a result of cross-ethnic interaction. And anthropologist Gregory Bateson also found that contact among people with somewhat different forms of demeanor could produce increased differentiation, not convergence. He coined the term 'schismogenesis' to label the polarization of demeanor via contact. In later work, Labov continued to point to such unexpected patterns; for instance, the historical divergence of African American speech from standard English, arguably *because* of closer contacts among speakers. The

concept of linguistic ideology and the distinction in perspectives that it implies have enabled the integration of these parallel findings as instances of general semiotic processes that are mechanisms of sociolinguistic differentiation (Irvine and Gal 2000).

SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Differentiation is often hierarchical. This is the focus of the second debate around Labov's work that I wish to discuss. His findings pointed towards the role of language in (re)producing social inequality. Many pages of *SSENYC* document the devaluation of NYC speech by outside observers as well as by the NYC speakers themselves. Stigmatization and its effects were especially salient in studies of AAVE. Attuned to the stereotyping that claimed 'non-standard English' lacks logic, Labov famously showed that a sample of AAVE speech was in many ways more logical than its standard counterpart. Yet, recognizing the logic of AAVE, while important, is not sufficient for understanding the sources of prejudice against it and against other forms of non-standard speech. It does not explain why speakers continue to use such forms despite the stigma. Many scholars have since taken up these questions, often directly inspired by Labov's work, while pushing it further.

Labov's championing of linguistic forms that are popularly derogated – as in his influential writings about African American English – has been very important. It continues similar stances among earlier students of language. Boas and Sapir, for instance, writing about Native Americans, famously argued that languages themselves are never unequal; they take on the social value accorded their speakers: when a category of speakers or functions is devalued, so are the associated linguistic forms (Philips 2004). Where then do the stigmatizing values come from? Looking beyond the properties of the language variety itself, Bourdieu (1991[1982]) relied in part on Labov's work to argue that the dominant institutions of a society legitimate some linguistic forms, endowing them with authority while derogating others. In particular, education imposes linguistic norms, so that even speakers who do not control the standard forms that are authorized by schooling are nevertheless inculcated with respect for them. Far from producing a definite variety of language, standardization is better seen as an ideology that creates hierarchies among linguistic varieties. In institutional contexts such as schooling, job interviews, and other evaluations for advancement, the stakes are very high and speakers are expected to display their knowledge of the legitimate, standardized linguistic forms, whatever else they might otherwise speak.

The effects of standard ideology were evident in what Labov called 'hypercorrection,' in the NYC study. This phenomenon is best analyzed not as a psychological effect ('insecurity') but as speakers' reaction to the interview situation. Due to the hegemony of standard ideology, speakers cannot simply say 'sorry, I don't speak school English.' Because of the inculcation and

orientation to standard that Bourdieu described, speakers are humiliated and shamed even in their own eyes if they cannot produce standard forms. Often, linguistic variants linked to nation-states (standard languages) come to seem a 'neutral' unmarked variety, the property of everybody who lives in that state, as against varieties that, by comparison, convey social diversity and particularity within the state. Though presented as neutral, standards are anything but. They are gate-keeping mechanisms that reproduce both the experience and the social effect of stratification and inequality. Schools and governments are most active in the complex social and ideological dynamics around standards, but economic hierarchies can also play a role (Woolard 1985; Urciuoli 1995). A large body of research has taken up Labov's work on dialects, extending it to minority languages and analyzing the frequent contestations against standard ideologies in many different parts of the globe (see, e.g. Duchêne and Heller 2012).

Ethnographies of schools, classrooms and literacy have been crucial in understanding the reproduction of inequality because they reveal the interactional process by which standardized rankings and exclusions are achieved. They show how acquisition of knowledge is entangled with linguistic variation: identities and academic learning emerge together (Wortham 2006). Yet, these settings also show how non-standard forms and their values are sustained, reproduced and valorized through counter-regimes of exclusion. Labov's notion of 'covert prestige' was, at first, invoked to understand this counter-hegemonic valuation of non-standard linguistic forms. Yet the rituals, processes and activities that valorize non-standard forms are anything but 'covert.' On the contrary, the creation of their value occurs quite publicly on internet sites, in popular music genres, political campaigns, playground games and in ritual events of all sorts. And the values with which they are endowed are more specific than 'prestige.' A rich literature, often inspired by Labov's work with African American youth has analyzed how forms *not* backed by states and schools are nevertheless endowed with value. Scholars have investigated the construction of alternative valorizations as these are produced and reproduced through a wide array of interactional and artistic and practices, through parody, satire and joking, but also in non-linguistic sign-systems such as clothing, food, voice quality, body-ornament, gesture, as these are linked to the more familiar forms of sociolinguistic variation.

STYLE

All these modalities of communication are resources for constructing stylistic difference (Eckert and Rickford 2001). The matter of style – long the province of literature and poetics – became controversial in sociolinguistics when Labovian interview techniques were widely adopted and replicated in quantitative studies of variation. In this third debate, two issues have been central. The first was the intriguing finding that the same variables that

indexed class differences among speakers also indexed differences along what Labov called the 'stylistic' dimension. The second was the claim that increasing attention to speech accounted for these differences from casual to reading style to word lists. Critics immediately denied that attention was the key, or that 'formality' was a single dimension. They pointed out that being interviewed by strangers, acceding to requests to read a text, and to recite word lists all recreated school-like situations. Differential success in such situations is just what distinguished Labov's 'class' categories. The interview technique tapped into a fraught educational terrain rather than speakers' wider abilities to wield styles.

Ethnographically inclined scholars of language took a different tack that has had powerful effects on sociolinguistic research. The interview, they argued, is as much a social occasion and interactional event as any other scene of talk (Wolfson 1976; Briggs 1986), and the same considerations apply: what do the interactants assume is 'going on' as a social activity and what are the stakes (Goffman 1967)? What are the social personae inhabited by speakers and what are the role relations between them; how does that affect the kinds of stories told, the kinds of interactional strategies deployed, the kinds of linguistic features that (can) occur? Despite Labov's attempts to cast styles in strictly behaviorist (attention) terms, his keen phenomenological sense suggested otherwise. In a footnote, he remarked:

> The interviewer is not a passive agent . . . . At the termination of the interview, he can also terminate his role as interviewer, and behave like any other tired, hot or sleepy employee who has finished his job and is free to be himself. (1972a: 88)

Indeed. But who 'is' the interviewer? If he/she is a Valley Girl, or a nerd, a jock, a burnout, a lame, a Norteña, or some combination, then what kinds of speech can one expect? Neither identities nor situations are as constrained as the classic Labovian interview techniques suggested. The two are nevertheless linked through participants' presuppositions – language ideologies – about people types, how types sound or act as they create social situations.

'Styles' – also called 'registers' – are now more capaciously defined than in early sociolinguistic work. They are ways of speaking, acting, looking, even moving. They enact very diverse stereotypes of personhood that are recognizable by audiences in the know. Styles/registers are created all the time within fields of indexicality, along axes of differentiation (Eckert 2011; Gal 2016). For instance, nerdy speech, vocal fry, and rant are names for relatively new styles; literary usage, radio-announcer talk and legalese are more established and widely known. Styles/registers are the expressive aspects of political and cultural projects that are brought to life in scenes of social interaction and mass media. To study this, one focuses on *enregisterment* (Silverstein 2003): the cultural and institutional processes by which some set of linguistic and expressive forms come to be congruent, seeming to convey the

essence, the special qualities, of some type of culturally defined persona. Projects of urban recuperation, gender, sexual and cultural politics all provide powerful impetus to stylistic innovations and systematizations (e.g. Irvine 2001; Johnstone 2013).

It is instructive to bring these changes in the analysis of style back to Labov's early work. What is the difference, one might ask, between studying speakers' class standing and ethnic identities vs. studying enregisterment? As the meta-communicative process by which a cultural model is assembled, enregisterment identifies the indexical connection between a typified speaker, occasion, speech variety and value, as such a combination is recognized as a stereotype by some population of language users. In this approach, speakers are *not* embodiments of such stereotypes; they do not simply display their identities; nor are speech forms correlated with social positions. Identities are not laminated to persons. Rather, speakers construct identities – with varying degrees of awareness and success – by drawing on their own knowledge of such models and relying on that of their interlocutors. Speakers take up or enact various voices, roles and personae. To various degrees of coherence, sincerity, parody or irony, they quote, cite, voice and ventriloquate the social types indexed by phonological and other emblems, shibboleths and sign patterns (Bakhtin 1981; Agha 2005). Scholars working in this tradition argue that long-term linguistic changes are the results of style-making (enregisterment), via linguistic ideologies. Speakers enlist expressive materials in their creation of situated social meanings in their life projects. These starting points are philosophically and methodologically quite different than Labov's. Even in his sensitive ethnographic studies of youth styles and genres of verbal artistry, his agenda did not include multiple voicings and transient identities. Yet, current approaches were developed in part through debate with Labov and therefore show the effect of the questions he asked and the methods he pioneered.

Even so brief a tour of developments *outside* of quantitative variationism shows the profound influence that Labov's innovations have had. As models to be extended to new types of phenomena, Labov's work has raised foundational questions. Dialogue with his work has inspired productive controversies. In part from those arguments and coalitions – among scholars motivated by traditions embracing positivism, phenomenology and semiotics – have come current lines of research in sociolinguistics.

NOTES

1. Among the early cross-disciplinary collections were Hymes (1964), Bright (1966) and Gumperz and Hymes (1972). In the latter, the editors explicated the close connections among the papers. The contributors had long been in conversation, for instance at the SSRC Sociolinguistics Committee (Murray

1998). Strong calls for renewed linkages across disciplinary lines include Bucholtz and Hall (2008) and Eckert (2011).

2. Who were the debaters? Because this is a brief contribution and not a review article, I hope to be forgiven for a light and very selective hand with citations about matters that involved entire communities of scholars.

3. Some have therefore wondered at the division of these factors into separate volumes in Labov's magisterial overview of linguistic change.

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