BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

William David Labov

December 4, 1927–December 17, 2024
Elected to the NAS, 1993

A Biographical Memoir by Miriam Meyerhoff

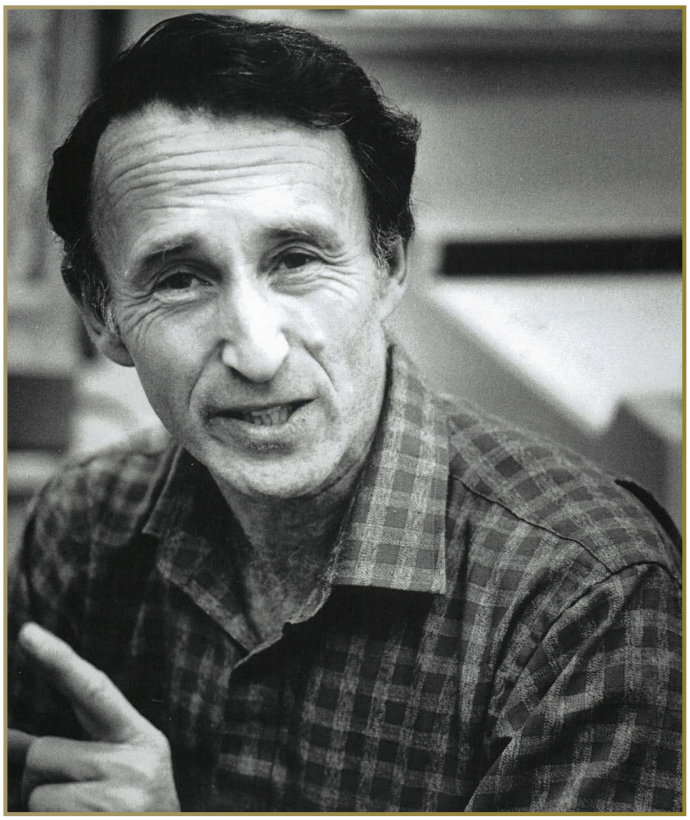

Figure 1 William D. Labov. *Courtesy of Gillian Sankoff.*

There is social pressure after someone dies to elevate and rewrite everyday lives as heroism and in superlatives. It is not hyperbolic revisionism to record that William Labov (known universally as Bill) created, and then systematized, an entirely innovative approach to linguistics. For Labov, linguistics was about history and community—what we knowingly and unknowingly carry with us, and what we knowingly and unknowingly pass on. He acknowledged his debts to philology, dialectology, and anthropology throughout his career, but his methods and approaches for studying language in everyday use were a profound revision of the mentalist and cognitive approach which dominated Western linguistics in the mid-twentieth century.

At the time Labov was in graduate school, the dominant view in the United States was that language could be studied as a wholly cognitive system; Labov begged to differ. He did not see language as a behavioral response, although (like behaviorists) he viewed variation as central to human interaction. But he was dismayed by a field then dominated by theories devised by academics introspecting about their own intuitions. He envisaged a linguistic science that was based on language in use, on vernacular norms, and that no one could shrug and say "So what?" about—in short, a linguistics that was socially relevant and empirically grounded. As he noted in his 1970 article, "Through the direct study of language in its social context, the amount of available data expands enormously, and offers us ways and means for deciding which of the many possible analyses is right."[1]

In pursuing this goal, he made unique contributions to the study of sound change in progress, the links between synchronic variation and historical change, the structure of narrative, and the process by which the abstract representation of sounds and meanings are negotiated among speakers in everyday interaction.

Education and Influences

William David Labov was born on December 4, 1927, in Rutherford, New Jersey, the son of Benjamin Labov and Rhea (White) Labov. The family moved to Fort Lee, New Jersey, when he reached high-school age, and even that early on,

he was already noting the accent differences between the two towns. He completed his undergraduate degree at Harvard University in 1948, when Harvard still restricted its enrollment of Jewish students to 10 percent of admissions. He majored in English and philosophy, and after graduating worked for the next eleven years as a chemist at Union Ink Company, the printing firm owned by his father. He later credited this time with honing his skills in experiment, observation, empiricism, and—by dint of many hours spent in the company of the other workers—a fine appreciation of the verbal arts.

In 1961, Labov decided to enter graduate school to study English and was accepted at Columbia University, where he worked closely with Uriel Weinreich. Labov credited many of his later ideas to Weinreich's influence and dedicated his award-winning, three-volume work, *Principles of Sound Change,* to Weinreich.

Weinreich's own sensibilities were influenced by André Martinet and Antoine Meillet, both of whom (especially Meillet) emphasised the social nature of language and the social causes of language change. Although Labov worked for his entire career on the East Coast of North America, it would be a mistake to think that this region was his only, or even his principal, influence.

Labov's focus on vernacular speech as a data source can be traced through Weinreich to Meillet. This was a rejection of the usual modes of data collection at the time (and still prevalent among many theoretical linguists) of introspection and eliciting fixed phrases. His creativity in devising methods to elicit different speech styles from adults and children was entirely his own. Labov's signature contribution to linguistics was to use modern technology and to apply statistical methods to the exploration of the systematic patterns that underpin what appears to be chaotic and unordered vernacular speech. For example, the magnetic tape recorder developed by the Germans during World War II and brought back by the U.S. military allowed for extended recordings of everyday speech. Labov argued that the most subtle and persistent regularities are to be found in the vernacular. He introduced a research paradigm (the "Labovian sociolinguistic interview") that was designed to foreground the narratives of everyday life and death and also provide the researcher with some controlled data that they could later use to better interpret the complexity of variation in less monitored speech.

The diverse interests that characterised his long career bridge and link post-World War II North American linguistics with the European traditions that took seriously the study of language in use and linguistic formula. This European tradition is more closely associated with Milman Parry's and Albert Lord's work on oral tradition, but it is also evident in Labov's focus on the internal structure of narratives and their social function for expressing cultural and moral values.[2,3,4]

Labov and Joshua Waletzky decomposed narratives into six parts: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda.[5] Not all are required for a story to successfully address the ever-present question, "Why say anything at all?"; but they have endured as useful heuristics in narratology. Labov[6] responded to developments such as the "small story" approach of Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou[7] but again made the claim for the centrality of linguistic analysis of features such as tense and mood to understanding the dynamic, attention-getting quality of successful storytelling.

A New Approach to Dialectology

Labov's 1962 master's thesis focused on variation in the pronunciation of English on Martha's Vineyard, in which he concluded that the synchronic variation could best be understood by knowing both what the historical trajectories of change were in that region and also how speakers felt about living on the Vineyard. Those whose families, professions, and personalities tied them more closely to a local lifestyle used more of the distinctively local pronunciations. This research revolutionized linguistics by showing that what appeared to be free, and unconstrained, variation did have structure.

In his doctoral thesis, completed in 1964, he expanded the approach to examine variation in the speech of residents of New York City's Lower East Side. Labov took the novel perspective that variation in the speech of a single speaker did not simply reflect idiosyncratic differences (idiolects). Instead, he demonstrated that if the variation within and across speakers was quantified, then consistent patterns across individuals would emerge. Speakers might differ in the raw frequency with which they used a particular word, pronunciation, or grammatical construction (the "variants" of a "linguistic variable"), but they might nevertheless be all constrained in their use of the options available to them by common linguistic and sociological factors. This came to be known as the "orderly heterogeneity" of a "speech community."[8] Defining a "speech community" divides sociolinguists, anthropologists, and sociologists, but for Labov it was an empirical question—if speakers changed the relative frequency with which they used a variant under the same linguistic or stylistic conditions, they were members of a speech community. If the conditions under which they selected one variant over another were different, then this was evidence that speakers were members of different speech communities. This insight became crucial for understanding how to deal with language variation and change in a diverse city like New York. It became especially important to the question of whether Black and White speakers of English were part of the same speech community, and when the conclusion was that

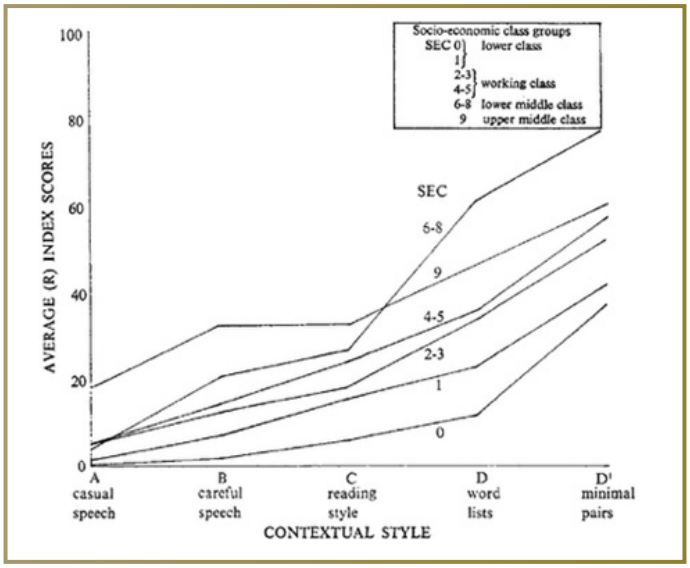

Figure 2 "Hypercorrection" in the second highest social group. *Courtesy of Gillian Sankoff.*

they were not, the extent to which this spoke of ongoing or even increasing social segregation.

Where orderly heterogeneity seemed to break down, Labov took this as a challenge to dig deeper and think laterally. In his 1968 article with Uriel Weinreich and Marvin Herzog, they outlined a wide range of social, psychological, and linguistic factors for which a science of language needs to be alert.[9] Labov continued to pursue these orthogonal lines of enquiry throughout his career. He was sensible to the fact that language is an extremely complex system that crosscuts many ways of organizing human experience—from the physiological challenges of co-articulation, to cognitive challenges that maximize perceptual differentiation and favour convergence on abstract grammatical forms, to speakers' need to position themselves in a social space they are comfortable with and that allows them to evaluate and assess their own and their interlocutors' attitudes. Labov argued that these real-world facts could not, and should not, be controlled or set aside by researchers; social and cognitive facts can and should be used to triangulate linguistic data. Within them lie the explanations for unexpected findings.

One such finding has become the most famous image in linguistics. Figure 2 shows the pattern that emerged when Labov studied the pronunciation of the letter *r* in words like *guard* and *card* among Lower East Side speakers. He found that the second highest social class pronounced them more often in their most careful speech (Styles D and D') than even the speakers in the highest social class did. He suggested this should be called 'hypercorrection'. This observation fed Labov's decades-long attention to the role that speakers from these social classes, among all others, play as leaders of language change.[10,11]

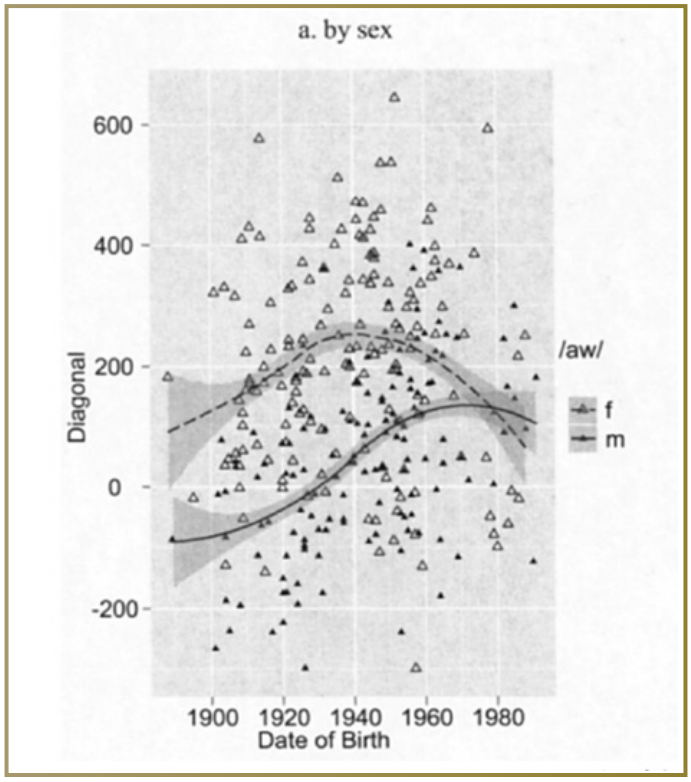

Figure 3 One hundred years of "apparent time" change in the pronunciation of *south* and *now* in Philadelphia led by women. *Courtesy of Gillian Sankoff.*

Likewise, Figure 3 shows the unexpected reversal of an ongoing change in Philadelphia English. This involved the pronunciation of words such as *loud, south,* and *now;* in Philadelphia the onset of these vowels is very often raised (something like *see-outh),* and women had been leading men in the use of these raised variants for decades. But in work that drew on decades of interviews that Labov and his students had made with people from all over Philadelphia, he showed women born in about 1940 had begun reversing the trend. What remains consistent is that men are about a generation behind women throughout the time course of the sound change.[12]

The reasoning here also drew on another very influential principle that Labov introduced to the study of language change. Observations of change in "real" time are the gold standard, but linguists often lack solid dialectological data from the past to use as a benchmark when evaluating synchronic variation. Labov argued that the average speaker more or less fixes their speech in adolescence or early adulthood. Hence, recording speakers of different ages at any one time can give you an "apparent" time picture of the changing norms in a speech community.

Hypercorrection, the apparent time construct, and the role of women as leaders of language change have been largely validated many times in studies of Western, urban speech

communities. When studies of language change in speech communities whose social structure is very different have questioned these principles, such as that by Suzanne Wagner and Gillian Sankoff in 2011,[13] Labov welcomed those findings and spoke with intense pride of his students who had branched out and risked applying his methods and principles to other speech communities.[14] This was especially true of his students working on Creole speech communities and in Japan and Korea.

Quantitative Methods and Linguistics as a Science

Labov was an early adopter of sophisticated statistical tools for exploring the distribution of linguistic forms and played a central role in expanding their use, encouraging a truly scientific linguistics. He worked alongside statisticians such as David Sankoff and other early adopter linguists such as Henrietta Cedergren to develop appropriate methods for probabilistic modeling of linguistic data. These methods needed to contend with the (inherently) partial data associated with samples of naturally occurring speech, and the problem of how to model the non-attestation of a form. With his students, Labov emphasised the use of statistical modeling as a tool for exploring data and for helping linguists to ask more probing questions about language, either as a cognitive system or as a vehicle for expressing social meaning.

Two of Labov's major research milestones, *The Atlas of North American English* and *Principles of Linguistic Change,* demonstrated that some language change can be thoroughly understood only in relation to other change. Some of this work affirmed the hypothesis that sounds change as systems; some showed that the advancement or retreat from a given linguistic change interacts with social factors, such as speakers' increased geographical or social mobility and speaker attitudes. Some affirmed predictions made by linguistic theory; some highlighted linguists' susceptibility to be biased by their theories.[15] He was clear-eyed about the limits of theory: "theory can only be justified if it fits the facts, and […] some facts—the ones that affect people's life chances—are more important than others."

Labov returned to research on African American English throughout his career. He wanted the linguistic data about minority vernacular Englishes to address the structural factors that influence the life choices that are made for those speakers by others and those that they are able to make for themselves. In his 1976 article, Labov used qualitative and quantitative data that he had collected from African American children to critique school assessments.[16] Labov had a huge impact on educators and formal linguists, demonstrating that the rules for deleting *is* and *are* in African American English have striking parallels with the rules for contracting *is* and *are* in General American English.[17] In the 2000s, he turned to this problem again, and through the Penn Reading Initiative, sent dozens of University of Pennsylvania students into West Philadelphia to work on transforming linguistic findings into practical skills that can assist with the teaching of reading. It is sobering that after fifty years of this research, which has shown that non-standard varieties of English are just as logical and rule-governed as Standard English is (albeit by different rules), this message still struggles to have an impact with the general public.

Life Is More Than Work

As well as being the person who brought quantitative methods into linguistics, Labov was also someone who read widely and deeply appreciated poetry, jazz music, diving and spear fishing, word games like Boggle and the Dictionary Game, Johnny Cash, Mark Knopfler, running on the beach at La'ie (Hawai'i), photography, and movies—especially those starring Robert Duvall, and the ones made by his college roommate, Murray Lerner. He also was a writer. In high school, he wrote for a local newsletter, *The Manatuk Weekly and Literary Volcano and Bathroom Companion,* that stood in opposition to the school newspaper, and in private, he penned wild, creative fables to entertain himself and his children (he had five children during his first marriage and two more in his second).

He loved paradoxes—the word occurs frequently in his research—but he also relished them in everyday life and would triumphantly broadcast them without commentary. This was consistent with other inclinations to the gnomic. Although Labov was a patient and considerate supervisor to me, I also remember often sitting in his seminars and asking myself, "*Why on earth* is he telling us this?"

The people who were at the heart of Labov's work were an important anchor for him in his life. Clarence Robins and Wendell Harris conducted fieldwork with African American English speakers in Harlem and Philadelphia, respectively, and co-authored some of the more influential resulting papers in the 1970s and 1980s. He was a loyal friend, and Harris and his family remained part of Labov's family for decades. Likewise, his research into the Philadelphia vernacular was not done as an interloper. He, his wife Gillian Sankoff, and their daughters were essentially adopted into a large, multi-generation, extended family of Italian Americans in South Philadelphia. He had lasting friendships with kama'aina and long-time residents in Hawai'i that he nurtured after he began teaching there in the early 1970s. For Labov, linguistic interests were sustained through meaningful personal relationships, and he tried to impart these values to his many students over the years.

Labov struggled, as many academics do, with the challenge of how to achieve a decent work-life balance. He was

not always successful. In a "where are they now" piece he wrote for Harvard in the 1970s, he talked about the difficulties he and his first wife, Teresa, had in working out equitable ways to share childcare and household duties. He was sensitive, empathetic, and sociable, but he wasn't perfect. He was human, and he loved other humans for their inconsistencies, their fallibilities, and their honesty in testifying to their struggles.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Gillian Sankoff, Andrew Beach, Deborah Cameron, and James A. Walker for their suggestions. Bill's origin story is told in his words in Chapter 2 of *Conversations with Strangers*,[18] and in his essay "How I Got Into Linguistics," https://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/HowIgot.html.

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