

Labov, William (1927–2024)

David Sankoff

Department of Mathematics and Statistics, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding author: David Sankoff. Email: sankoff@uottawa.ca

This special article summarizes William Labov's contributions, written by David Sankoff, co-founding editor of *Language Variation and Change*. A version of this piece was originally published in 2001 in the *Concise Encyclopedia of Sociolinguistics*.

William Labov was the dominant figure in sociolinguistics from its emergence in the mid-1960s until the current era. Having studied with Uriel Weinreich at Columbia, he also taught there until 1970 before founding the sociolinguistics program at the University of Pennsylvania, which has become the mecca for the discipline.

Through Weinreich, Labov was exposed to the most progressive view of language extant in classical linguistics, its variability and changeability across space, time, speakers, domains, and contexts. With Weinreich, Labov laid down a program for the empirical study of language in the speech community in 1968 (Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog, 1968), thus making the bridge between the traditional study of language and the new field of sociolinguistics.

His 1963 MA project on a sound change in progress in Martha's Vineyard and his 1964 PhD thesis on the sociolinguistic stratification of New York City introduced techniques of sample surveys, natural experimentation, and quantitative analysis into sociolinguistic research (Labov, 1966). However, it was in his independent study of African American vernacular English in Harlem starting in 1965 that he made the paradigmatic breakthroughs underlying the modern field of linguistic variation theory (Labov, 1972a, 1972b). Labov's intent was an empirical, rigorous, and reproducible approach to language as it is actually used, namely a *scientific linguistics*. His ambivalence about the label "sociolinguistics," in analogy to other hyphenated domains such as psycho-linguistics and educational linguistics, reflects his overarching project of advancing linguistic theory by grounding it in solid data and objective analyses rather than subjective intuitions and polemic debate, without sacrificing the creative roles of scientific insight and intricate inductive and deductive reasoning. Key components of this approach include the following:

- (a) The resolution of Saussure's paradox—the incompatibility of synchronic and diachronic theorizing—through the establishment and validation of the

linguistic variable concept. This is an explicit way of measurably linking the important structures of linguistic theory with time and other extralinguistic factors, through the quantitative effects of these factors on the choice among two or more different articulations of a given phonological form in a given context, involving no change in the denotational value of a lexical item, or the syntactic function of an affix.

- (b) Principled sampling procedures, together with sufficient demographic, social, and linguistic characterization of the speaker within the speech community.
- (c) Fieldwork methods designed to circumvent observer effects when eliciting and recording spontaneous speech samples of varying register in natural context, as well as quality control technology for speech data collected in field conditions.
- (d) Scientific respect for the speech corpus, including data preservation and the principle of accountability, whereby *all* tokens in the corpus of the structure under study must be included in the analysis and calculations.
- (e) Multivariate quantitative models of performance for attributing usage tendencies to linguistic and extralinguistic factors. This work made it possible to investigate questions of central interest to linguistic theory using statistics, based on the linguistic variable.
- (f) Research-based advocacy for minority speech communities. He was the first to study and “revalorize” minority and vernacular speech forms. He fought against Bernsteinian views of working-class language, against the deficit hypothesis and against elitist language attitudes in the educational establishment. This linguistic activism is clear in his choice of communities to study, in his recruitment of students, in his writings, in his advocacy in the courts, and in the media.

This program, carried out by Labov, his students, and disciples worldwide, has met with undeniable success. The principles of sound change he established and the universal and language-specific constraint hierarchies he discovered (Labov, 1994) have had a great impact on phonology and other areas of linguistics. His studies of /t,d/ deletion, auxiliary contraction, and others have been replicated many times and have served as models for entire research traditions in New World Spanish, Canadian French, Brazilian Portuguese, and other languages. However, despite its unwavering focus on the linguistics of spoken language, or perhaps because of it, the intellectual power of this approach, studying usage instead of intuition, and concentrating on the elucidation of linguistic structure in social and historical context rather than using predefined language features as tools for properly social science investigations, has also revolutionized many other disciplines within language science. His Harlem work, followed up by a generation of students in the US and the Caribbean, rescued the field of creole studies from its ethnolinguistic backwater to become one of the most intellectually rigorous and socially relevant ongoing research areas.

His long-standing interest in the vowel system of American English, particularly the Northern Cities Shift and the relationships among English dialects worldwide, has profoundly changed dialectology. Based on his experience in urban speech communities, he was able to dramatically increase the social validity of survey studies, while

introducing new techniques and technology to increase efficiencies and to multiply the kinds of discovery possible. This work culminated in the monumental *Atlas of North American English* (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2005), whose computer-based methods have transformed dialectology. Labov was later founding editor, along with Dennis Preston, of the *Journal of Linguistic Geography*.

Labov made many contributions to the analysis of narratives (e.g., Bamberg, 1997; Labov, 2013; Labov & Waletzky, 1966). While his deep insights into the transformation of everyday experience into narrative would be hard to rival, the example he set, and the protocols he established for the analysis of narrative discourse have inspired a proliferation of research in this area. In the study of social change, Labov's gender and class-based models of language variation and change remain fundamental for the understanding of the prestige and influence of sociodemographic groups, culturally-specific gender roles, and the modeling and quantitative dynamics of trait diffusion within the community.

Labov's role in the field is attested to by his presence as invited speaker at most of the annual NWave (New Ways of Analyzing Variation) conferences, the premier sociolinguistics meeting, since 1972, and the dedication volume collected by Guy, Crawford, Schiffrin, and Baugh (1997). He was a founder and the guiding spirit behind the major variation theory journal, *Language Variation and Change*. He was president of the Linguistics Society of America in 1979. In 1993, he became one of the first linguists elected to the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S.A. A medalist of both the Franklin Institute (Computer and Cognitive Science, in 2013) and the British Academy (Linguistics, in 2015) he was awarded honorary doctorates by numerous universities worldwide. His field methods and quantitative analysis protocols are taught in sociolinguistics classes everywhere.

PhD students who have studied with him include many of the top researchers in sociolinguistics and related areas today: M. Abtahian, S. Ash, J. Auger, M. Baranowski, J. Baugh, C. Boberg, A. Bower, S. Boyd, M. Braga, A. Charity Hudley, P. Cohen, E. Dayton, A. Dinkin, P. Eckert, S. Fisher, J. Fruehwald, G. Guy, N. Haeri, J. Hibaya, D. Hindle, R. Kim, S. Kwon, B. Lavandera, H. Lee, M. Lennig, C. Linde, L. MacKenzie, M. Meyerhoff, J. Myhill, N. Nagy, G. Nunberg, N. O'Connor, M. Oliveira, C. Paradis, P. Patrick, S. Poplack, J. Rickford, J. Roberts, S. Satyanath, D. Schiffrin, B. Sneller, M. Tamminga, F. Tarallo, B. Wald, J. Weiner, S. Wagner, D. Wilson, and M. Yaeger-Dror, while scores of post-doctoral students and scholars on sabbatical also worked with him.

References

- Bamberg, Michael (Ed.). (1997). Oral Versions of Personal Experience: 3 Decades of Narrative Analysis. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 7(1–4). <https://doi.org/10.1075/jnlh.7.01int>
- Guy, Guy R., Crawford, Feagin, Schiffrin, Deborah, & Baugh, John (Eds.). (1997). *Towards a social science of language: Essays in honor of William Labov* (Vol. 2). John Benjamins.
- Labov, William (1966). *The Social stratification of English in New York City*. Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Labov, William (1972a). *Sociolinguistic patterns*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Labov, William (1972b). *Language in the inner city*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Labov, William (1994). *Principles of linguistic change: Internal factors* (Vol. 1). Blackwell.
- Labov, William (2013). *The Language of Life and Death*. Cambridge University Press.
- Labov, William, Ash, Sharon, & Boberg, Charles (2005). *Atlas of North American English*. Mouton de Gruyter.

- Labov, William, & Waletzky, Joshua (1966). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In J. Helm (Ed.), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts, Proceedings of the 1966 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society* (pp. 12–44). University of Washington Press.
- Weinrich, Uriel, Labov, William, & Herzog, Marvin (1968). Empirical foundations for a theory of language change. In W. P. Lehmann, and Y. Malkiel (eds.), *Directions for historical linguistics*. University of Texas Press, 95–195.