

Sociolinguistic Analysis and Social Justice

Remarks by William Labov in response to
the award of the Talcott Parsons Prize
by the AAAS, March 17 2020

I very much appreciate this meeting as a recognition of the contribution I have made to linguistics among the social sciences since I entered the field in the 1960s.

1. Entering the university

I had worked for ten years as an industrial chemist, and I brought with me the habits of numerical recording, testing and experimentation. I left behind a career of accumulation of trade secrets and entered into the pursuit of the universal properties of human language at Columbia University. There I found a very different mode of gathering data; for most linguists at that time it was by asking “Can you (or I) say this?”

It occurred to me that the field could profit by the adoption of the new invention, the tape recorder, which preserved what people actually *did* say. I also found that it was good that I brought my numerical habits with me, because there was considerable variation in the way that people said the same words or sentences.

2. The use of numbers

In my first efforts to record linguistic variation, I introduced the concept of the linguistic variable: a closed set of possible options. In conversations with strangers, the values of these variables were found to reflect the central values of the community.

I expected decades of stiff resistance to the quantitative study of change and variation. But I was surprised. My first report on “The Social Motivation of a Sound Change” on Martha’s Vineyard was greeted with a wave of approval at the national meeting of the Linguistic Society of America. It showed that the sounds [rɔɪt] *and* [nəʊ] were correlated with the maintenance of the traditional values of the whaling and fishing industry on the island.

I took a course on Survey Methodology with Herbert Hyman of Columbia’s Bureau of Applied Social Research. I then carried out a study of New York’s Lower East Side, sampling from a survey on Delinquency and Opportunity. The graph in Figure 1 is typical of the sociolinguistic result. It builds on the fact that New Yorkers sometimes pronounce the /r/ in words like *hard core* and sometimes do not. The vertical axis is the percent pronunciation of consonantal /r/, the horizontal axis the style of speech in the

interview, ranging from the most casual to the reading of word lists and pairs of words distinguished by only the presence or absence of [r]. The various lines show the graduated performance of speakers from across the spectrum in terms of social class. Note that members of the second highest social class, represented by the red line, correct their pronunciation in the most careful style, reaching 80% (r) pronunciation in the context of minimal pairs. The (r) variable reflected the speaker's distance from the heavily stigmatized New York vernacular.

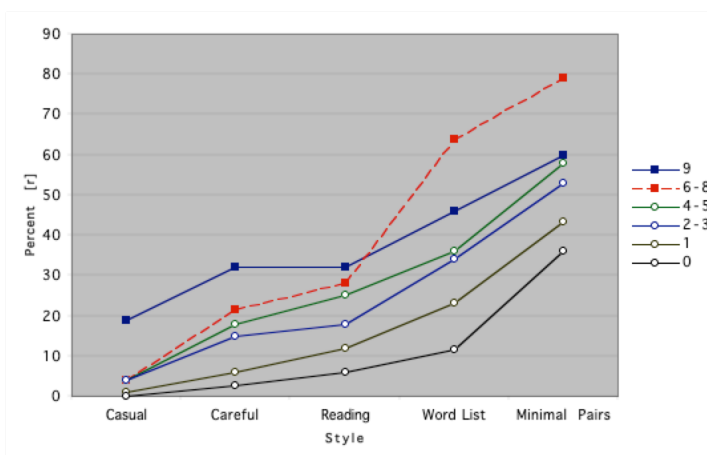


Figure 1. The social and stylistic stratification of /r/ in New York City

This work and the further efforts of myself and my students were accepted as a valuable addition to the field of linguistics, building on the closed sets of values that were the products of linguistic analysis. Many other speech communities were studied—Detroit, Boston, San Francisco, London, Sydney, and many other languages, in Montreal, Paris, Buenos Aires, Panama City, Helsinki. Societies for the quantitative study of linguistic change and variation grew up in the U.S. and elsewhere. Variation in dialects was found to be controlled by sets of many independent variables and change by the interaction of linguistic and social variables.

3. Searching for linguistic justice

But at several points in the citation for this award, there is mention of a concern for social justice. It does not follow that the quantitative analysis of the pronunciation of /r/ automatically led to an involvement with such matters. The link was a methodological one. The sampling methods I had used worked fine for most tenement residents of the Lower East Side, but did not help me record the speech of the African American youth hanging out on New York City street corners. I applied for funds from the Office of Education to record what we then recognized as “non-standard Negro English”, and to find out if there was any connection between that speech pattern and the high rate of reading failure in Harlem schools. I enlisted two young African American men to interview members of local street clubs, and rented a club house on 112th Street. One result of that work appeared in the *Teachers College Record*. It points to an

overwhelming difference in reading progress between the 62 members of the local groups--the Cobras, the Jets, the T-Birds—and 32 isolated individuals who for one reason or another were not members. While those isolated speakers were a year behind, there was a general upward movement. We found correlated differences in the use of language. The street club members were differentiated by the highly uniform dialect that we described as African American Vernacular English [AAVE].

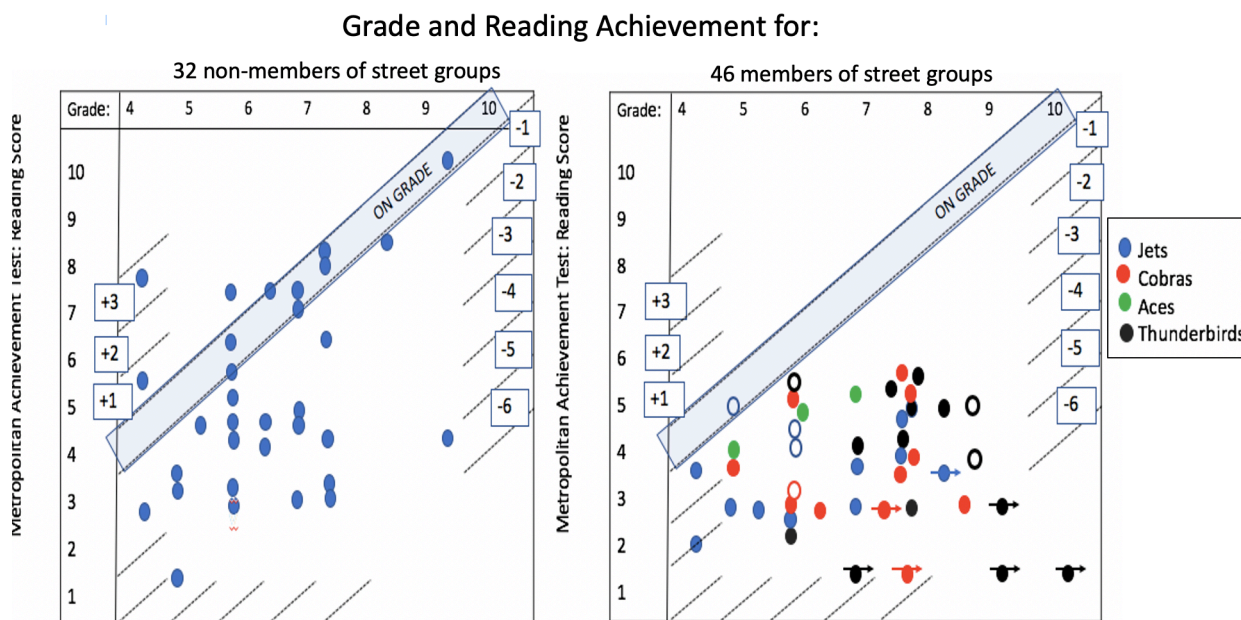


Figure 2. Reading achievement by grade in 112th Street neighborhood of Harlem, 1986.

This dialect was identified by many of the authorities in the field as more than the correlate, but the *cause* of reading failure. They believed that it did not have a logical structure and must be replaced by another language before progress in reading could take place. Linguists generally disagreed. A paper that I wrote on “The logic of non-standard English” argued that many of the standard speakers were more diffuse, not more logical, than the AAVE speakers. Most often reprinted was this discussion between the interviewer [KC] and Larry Hawthorne, a 16-year-old member of the Jets [LH].

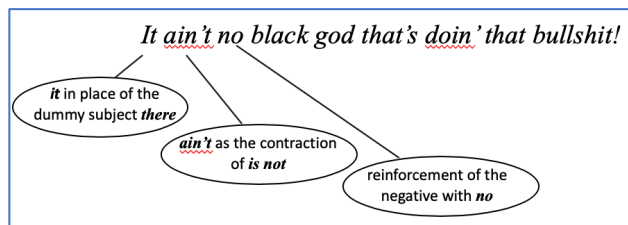
KC: But, just say that there is a god. What color is he? White or black?

LH: He be white, man.

KC: Why?

LH: Why? I’ll tell you why. ‘Cause it-- the average whitey out here got everything, you dig it? an’ we ain’t got shit! So, for that to happen, you know it ain’t no black god that’s doin’ that bullshit!

The climactic sentence, “It ain’t no black god that’s doin’ that bullshit!” uses three rules that all linguists regard as perfectly logical though non-standard: the use of *it* in place of the dummy subject *there*, *ain’t* as the contraction of *is not*, and the negative reinforcement of the negative with *no*.



Many of the most common features of AAVE are quite superficial, but lead to an underassessment of their speakers’ mental ability. For example, the absence of *is* in *He tired* was taken as an absence of logical connection by many educational psychologists. But linguistic analysis shows that AAVE deletion can take place only in a situation where the standard can contract. This implies that there is something there that must be shortened before you can get rid of it.

	<u>Full</u>		<u>Contraction</u>		<u>Deletion</u>
StdE	He is tired.	→	He’s tired.		
AAVE	He is tired.	→	He’s tired.	→	He tired.

Figure 3 shows that the deleted forms occur mostly after pronouns and in group sessions where the group members are talking to each other, but the whites on the right of course just show C for contraction—they never delete at all.

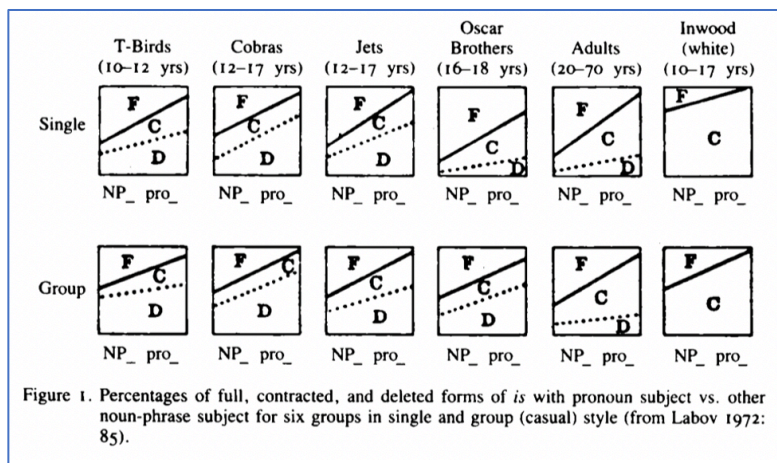


Figure 3. Full, contracted and deleted forms of the copula with full Noun Phrase and Pronominal subjects, in single interviews and group recordings.

5. The Ann Arbor trial

The weight of sociolinguistic information on AAVE accumulated until it was brought to bear in a cry for social justice through legal channels. Citizens of Ann Arbor, Michigan brought suit against the city of Ann Arbor for failing to teach black children to read by ignoring their language differences from standard English. Federal Judge Charles Joiner found the case valid under federal statute 1703(f) and quoted President Nixon's 1972 message to Congress:

School authorities must take appropriate action to overcome whatever language barriers exist.



Judge Charles Joiner



Dr. Geneva Smitherman

Linguist Geneva Smitherman assembled the witnesses (including myself) to testify before Judge Joiner who found for the plaintiffs. He directed the Ann Arbor School Board to submit to him within thirty days a plan defining the exact steps to be taken to help the teachers (1) to identify children speaking "Black English", and (2) to use that knowledge in teaching such students how to read standard English.

In the years that followed, not much progress has been made in following Judge Joiner's order. Programs for contrastive analysis have met violent objections from parents, teachers, and the general public who have not absorbed linguists view of African American English as was most evident in the "Ebonics" controversy. But the issues have been stated: the Linguistic Society has taken a stand in a position paper by President John Rickford and more than one program for contrastive analysis is underway. Linguists Lisa Green, Anne Charity Hudley and Christine Mallinson, among others have initiated programs designed to give teachers knowledge of African American English.

In 1970 I left Columbia and came to Penn, where I created two courses that played a major role in the development of variation sociolinguistics: (1) "The study of the speech community" where students entered Philadelphia neighborhoods to gather speech data; and (2) "Quantitative Analysis" where they learned to analyze it. My colleague Gillian Sankoff joined me in 1979, she focusing on multilingual communities and me on the single dialects that are learned early in life. Over the decades, we received strong support from NSF and from the university, sustaining the first of many sociolinguistic labs.

In more recent years, we have developed at Penn computational methods to analyze our recordings, measuring simultaneously the physical and social dimensions of the data. The FAVE program for forced alignment and vowel extraction was developed here at Penn to analyze the changes in the sound system of the language with great gains in speed and accuracy. It is now used by our colleagues throughout the world. We are very pleased to report that the University of Pennsylvania Library has digitized our entire archive of 7,100 interviews (just 1,000 of my own) to create the Penn Sociolinguistic Archive, and we are working with the Linguistic Data Consortium to make it available to other researchers.

6. The Reading Road.

Returning to the university, I wrote a report on the Ann Arbor Trial, “Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science” (1982) which included a *Principle of the Debt Incurred*:

An investigator who has obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community has an obligation to make knowledge of that data available to the community, when it has need of it.

By that time, my salary was ten times what it had been at Columbia. But the speakers we had recorded in Harlem had not done so well. I dedicated my 1972 book, *Language in the Inner City*,

To the Jets, the Cobras and the Thunderbirds
who took on all odds and were dealt all low cards.



Ira Harkavy

We finally got around to doing something useful with our knowledge of AAVE. I had lunch with Ira Harkavy of the Netter Center, the strongest advocate of the application of academic work to matters of social justice, and with the help of Harkavy and Cory Bowman, converted my course on African American Vernacular English to an Academically Based Community Service Learning course.

Over ten years we developed *The Reading Road*, a tutoring program for the early grades that used our knowledge of the alphabet and its relation to the speech of kids in Philadelphia. We used our laboratory recorders to interview kids in Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles (the linguistic basis for Houghton Mifflin’s *Portals to Reading*). Then suddenly in 2008, a grass roots movement sprang up among Penn undergraduates, with 50 to 60 volunteers using the *Reading Road* to tutor 2nd and 3rd graders. This is the Penn Reading Initiative: <http://web.sas.upenn.edu/penn-reading/>. I’m only the guy who gives encouraging talks at the beginning of the year.

The Reading Road embodies three principles drawn from our work in Harlem:

- When things seem to be going wrong in oral reading, it is as likely due to differences in pronunciation as mistakes in meaning.
- When kids don't use a rule of the alphabet, it is because it hasn't been explained very well.
- When things go wrong in narratives, it is as likely to be the fault of the grown-ups as the kids.

One reason for the success of the *Reading Road* was that the stories give voice to young people with a long history of being blamed for things they didn't do.

Sociolinguists often take the side of the speakers they study. The three Past Presidents of the Linguistic Society of America who nominated me for this award have all done so. Wolfram has spoken vigorously in support of marginalized communities throughout North Carolina (Wolfram & Reaser 2014; Rickford, who gave voice to the eloquence of the cane cutters of Guyana (1991) calls attention to the ways in which the voices of minority witnesses are obscured in the courtroom (Rickford and King 2016). And Eckert, who speaks for women everywhere, shows how the use of negative concord by young women known as “burned out burnouts” supports their anti-establishment stance (2019).

7. Dialect geography

Much of our study of language change in progress has focused on Philadelphia. But one of the large scale projects that our laboratory undertook was the *Atlas of North American English*, created by telephone interviews of all cities of the U.S. and Canada of more than 50,000 population. The mapping of all these vowel systems was accomplished in only a few years using the methods of automatic vowel analysis in our Sociolinguistics Lab. The Atlas now forms the base for all studies of sound change in North American English. It also provides a dramatic example of how large scale quantitative research can decide matters of social justice.

8. The case of Paul Prinzivalli

This is the case of Paul Prinzivalli, a cargo handler for Pan American Airways in Los Angeles. A series of bomb threats against the airline had been made by telephone. Executives of the airlines thought the voice sounded like Prinzivalli, who was known to be a “disgruntled” employee. The police, the judge, and executives of Pan American thought that the caller sounded like Prinzivalli, who was arrested in February 1984. He was able to post \$20,000 bail, but when the bomb threats continued in April, he was arrested again, and held on \$50,000 bail in the Los Angeles County Jail. Prosecutors offered him a plea bargain: time served and five years' probation for a guilty plea on the first three

counts. Prinzivalli refused, although he knew he faced a possible six to eight years in prison if found guilty at his trial.



Judge Gordon Ringer

Judge Gordon Ringer told the LA Times that, based on the subjective comparisons of the two tapes and on motive evidence presented at the preliminary hearing, it would have been difficult for him to find Prinzivalli not guilty. What in fact convinced him was the acoustic evidence.

The Phonetics Laboratory at UCLA had sent me a copy of the tape. As soon as I heard the recordings I knew that he was innocent. The bomb threats were made by someone with a solid Eastern New England phonology, and Prinzivalli was a consistent New Yorker. But how to convey this to Californians, for whom New York and Boston were identical?

I was told that as an expert witness I was limited to giving my opinion of the evidence. I looked for a way to establish that Prinzivalli's innocence was a fact. I prepared for the judge—there was no jury—Figure 4 showing that Prinzivalli had distinct and non-overlapping phonemes for *bomb* and *off* while the bomb threat caller combined them in a single phoneme, as the Atlas displayed for Eastern New England.

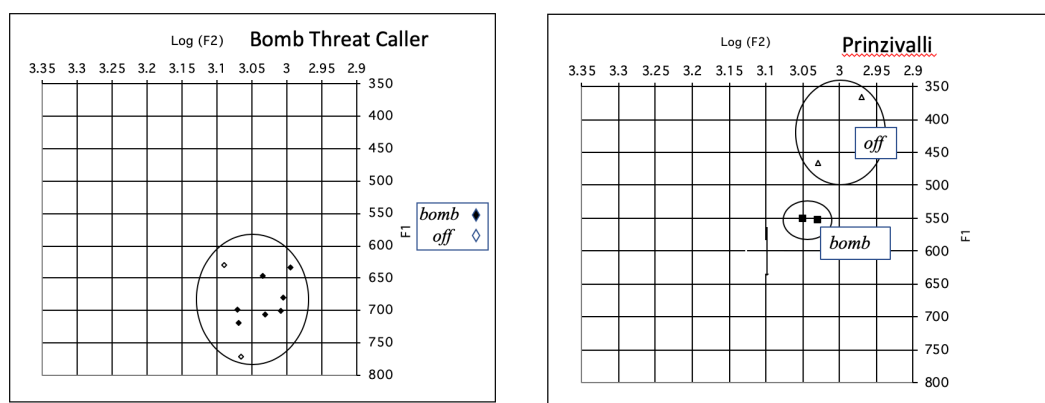


Figure 4. Acoustic measurements of vowels of the bomb threat caller and of Prinzivalli: in *bomb* and *off*.

The measurements of Figure 4 were accompanied by sound files. The Los Angeles Times reported that:

Labov's analysis did not rely on a simple aural comparison of the sound of the two voices, but rather on a categorization and typology of vowel sounds, or phonemes, according to the science of dialect geography, which has been developed over the last four decades.

Furthermore, it summarized the findings of linguistics that speakers rarely changed their vowel systems and that Prinzivalli could not have acquired a Boston accent in his twenty years in Los Angeles.

The judge then said to Prinzivalli "Stand up. Say the Pledge of Allegiance." Prinzivalli said, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. The judge said to me, "What can you tell me about *that*?" I said, "It shows he's a New Yorker, because it is the only dialect in the eastern United States where short a in *flag* is raised from a low front short vowel to an upper mid ingliding vowel."

On Monday morning the judge asked the prosecuting attorney if he add any further evidence to present. He did not. The judge then refused to hear further evidence from the defense. He found the defendant not guilty on the basis of the linguistic evidence, which he described as "objective" and "powerful." Later he told the LATimes: "It was the 'ah's' and the 'oh's' that did it."

The prosecutor agreed with this assessment. He told the LA Times reporter: "We were stunned. The man was so good--I tried to cross-examine him, but there was nothing I could catch him on."

Prinzivalli later sent me a thank-you card saying that he had spent fifteen months in jail waiting for someone to demonstrate the truth of the matter as I had done. I have had many scientific results where the convergence of evidence was so strong that I felt that I had laid my hands on the reality behind the surface, but nothing could be more satisfactory for any scientific career than to separate fact from fiction in this case. By means of linguistic evidence, one man could be freed from the corporate enemies who had assailed him, and another could sleep soundly on the conviction that he had made a just decision.