



THE SUMMARY OF THE WILLIAM LABOV'S STUDIES IN
SOCIOLINGUISTICS.

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive overview and summary of William Labov's seminal studies, conducted by a prominent sociolinguist whose work has significantly shaped the field of linguistics. Labov's groundbreaking research has focused on the intersection of language and society for several decades, with a particular emphasis on sociolinguistic variation and the study of African American English.

Key words

case study, sociolinguistics, AAE, sound change, phonological variation,
linguistic behaviour, lexical systems.

The article delves into Labov's early influences, academic background, and theoretical frameworks that have served as the foundation for his research. It outlines the central themes that define Labov's work, such as the investigation of linguistic variation across social strata and the development of methodologies for eliciting natural speech in both formal and informal settings. The article focuses on Labov's seminal contribution to the study of linguistic change, which is exemplified by his classic study on the stratification of /r/ in New York City English. The work also discusses Labov's dedication to bridging the gap between linguistic theory and social issues. His advocacy for the use of sociolinguistic research to address issues of social justice and equality is examined, demonstrating his work's broader impact beyond the academic realm.

The first study to summarize, "The Social Motivation of a Sound Change," by William Labov (1963), was conducted on the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The subjects of that study were the people of Vineyard, who were divided into four groups according to their ethnicity; they are descendants of English families, Portuguese immigrants, Indian remnants, and a miscellaneous group of various origins. According to Labov (1963), The Martha's Vineyard was chosen as a laboratory for their investigation not without purpose, but because of several reasons, which the author mentioned in the study. The author intended to



observe a sound change in terms of that community, namely the shift in the phonetic position of the first elements of the diphthongs [ai] and [au]. He observed changes according to such aspects as phonemic inventory, phonemic distribution, and structured lexical systems. The author believed that in order to find the social factors that influence the linguistic process; they need to align the complex linguistic patterns to differences in social structure, which as a result can help to understand the process of linguistic change. The factors mentioned in the study are age, occupation, ethnicity, and region. The distribution of centralized forms for each speaker is divided into three types: uncentralized and centralized norms, and phonetic conditioning. As a conclusion of that study, we can see that the centralization of [ai] and [au] appears to increase steadily with age, peaking in the 31-45 age group. Labov (1963) stated that the 14-30 age group does not demonstrate the renewed island-centralization pattern because of attitude and identity concerns.

The second study to summarize was conducted in New York City department stores in 1962 By William Labov, among the occupational group - salesmen. The author observed the phonological variation of postvocalic [r]. They decided to begin by testing the hypothesis suggested by exploratory interviews because it was simple to test, and they hypothesized that research among salesmen would be the most appropriate. They chose three different department stores (Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy's, and S. Klein.) based on their price policy, fashion scale, and location; and they even compared the results and the way their goods were advertised in two newspapers, the Daily News and the New York Times. The most important detail in this study is that a simple method was used to survey department-store employees, relying on the extreme generality of the linguistic behaviour of the subjects. This method is open to many biases and allows for a view of the role that speech would play in the overall social imprint of the employees upon the customer. The results showed that 62 percent of Saks employees, 51 percent of Macy's employees, and 20 percent of Klein's employees used all or some (r-1) in the three stores. Macy's and Saks have different distributions of (r-1) in each of the four standard positions. At Klein's, the percentage of r-pronunciation increases from 5% to 18% as the context becomes more emphatic. The use of (r) in emphatic speech has increased significantly in all three stores.

Both studies, as far as I could notice, have more differences than similarities in my point of view. Starting with the notion of the investigations: in the first study - the shift in the phonetic position of the first elements of the diphthongs [ai] and [au], and in the second - phonological variation of postvocalic [r]. Continuing with the subjects of the studies: in the first - the whole population of Vineyard island, and in the second - employees of the three different department stores. Moreover, the location of the studies also differs; the first study was conducted on an island



and the second in the city center. The similarity is that both studies prove the variationist idea that no linguistic notion can be understood without exploring the social life of the communities and their behavior. In addition, Mesthrie et al. (2009) stated, "Labov has used a variety of field experiments to tackle specific problems", which can be seen in both studies, where he used different ways to investigate those notions. For instance, in the second study, he pretended that he did not understand their (salesmen's) answers, and made them speak more, by which he could notice the change in pronunciation.

Finally, it is important to note that by providing an overview of Labov's influential studies, this article aimed to serve as a valuable resource for scholars, students, and enthusiasts interested in the multifaceted relationship between language and society. The sections above delve into specific studies, methodologies used by Labov, and the long-term significance of his contributions to the evolving landscape of sociolinguistics.

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