

EXPLORING SOCIETAL INFLUENCES ON LINGUISTIC EVOLUTION: FINDINGS FROM LABOV'S PHONOLOGICAL ANALYSES

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Abstract

This article primarily aims to examine the parallels and distinctions between William Labov's seminal investigations conducted in 1963 and 1972, focusing on phonological variations in speech sounds influenced by socio-cultural factors. Both inquiries underscore the profound influence of community dynamics and social interactions on nuanced pronunciation, despite their disparate geographical contexts. Analysis of the data gleaned from these investigations elucidates the pivotal roles played by social determinants such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, and regional distribution in driving linguistic evolution and diversity. These case studies collectively demonstrate that comprehending the ramifications of sound change necessitates a thorough consideration of the social milieu in which it unfolds.

Keywords: Phonological variations; Social factors; Linguistic change; Ethnic groups; Social class; Age Levels; Speech Sounds; Pronunciation Variations; Comparative Analysis; Sociolinguistic; Society.

Introduction

Labov (1963) had investigated the phonetic variations of diphthongs [aɪ] and [aʊ] pronounced by the community of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, on the coast of the New England. He studied the pronunciation varies in community (linguistic variable) and different ways of pronouncing (variant) of speech sound [aɪ] in several lexical sets by different ethnic origins of people: Native Americans, people of Portuguese and Indian descents, which resulted to discover 'centralization index' variation in those diphthongs. Furthermore, the particular case study covered the following main parts: The desire to preserve the unique identity; Social factors effecting social motivation of sound change; Acoustic analysis of diphthongs; In short, 69 recorded interviews from people are compared and contrasted and came to the conclusions that, social setting of the participants including ethnic groups, employment, age levels and geographical distribution, had a great significance and change in phonological variations of those diphthongs.

Whereas, the case study done in 1968 by Labov had dealt with social stratification of consonantal (r) in different level department stores in New York City, which carried out seventy individual interviews, along with anonymous observations in common sectors. Barber (1957, as cited in Labov, 1972) defined social stratification as the product of social differentiation and social evaluation. In particular, the most important example of social stratification is occupational groups of people. So, in this investigation, differentiated usage



and the presence or the absence of speech sound (r) on specific words: car, card, four, fourth pronounced by a single occupational group: sales people of 3 large department stores in Manhattan with 3 different status rankings and price scale is studied. The main point of this case study was that, Labov pretended as a customer and asked questions from different occupation members such as sales assistants, cashier, stockboy etc. knowing the answer to be containing (r) sound. It was concluded from the observations that, the pronunciation of (r) sound was a lot higher on the top rated department store with expensive merchandise comparing to middle and lowest ranking stores. It appears that, there is a clear social stratification of (r) speech sound, which was influenced and interconnected with Social Classes of the community.

It is important to note one of the similarities of these two case studies of Labov, is that both of them had primarily focused on phonological variations of speech sounds in community life with the social factors having its impact on differentiated pronunciation, despite the fact that, these investigations are conducted in completely different geographical locations. Additionally, another similarity of the studies is that, analyzed data from Labov's 1963 and 1972 case studies confirm that, social factors and patterns such as ethnic groups, social class, age level, geographical distribution can be seen and discovered beyond any certain Linguistic Change and differentiation. Similarly, as emphasized by Labov (1963), the way a language is spoken varies from person to person as well as from situation to situation encountered by the same individual, thus making it obvious to see the role of social interaction in linguistic change and to interconnect the society and the language closely with each other. On the other hand, one can easily notice the differences between two studies in terms of subject of the research, research location and most importantly relevant social factors influencing in linguistic change. And these very dissimilarities in social factors include ethnic groups, employment, age levels in connection with phonological variations in Labov 1963 study and a strong correlation between social class and pronunciation variations can be discovered in 1972 study.

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