

**William Labov.** *Principles of linguistic change: Social factors.* In the series, *Language in Society* 29. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc. 2001. Pp. xxviii + 572 pages. US \$43.95 (soft cover).

*Principles Of Linguistic Change: Social factors* serves to illuminate the intricate social factors that affect language change. The forward begins with recognition of Uriel Weinreich, his influence on the field of linguistics, and more particularly, his leadership in researching linguistic change and variation (p. xi). The afterword ends with a similar tribute to Weinreich's influence on the history of sociolinguistics (p. 520), "whose name must stand opposite the title page in the volume as it does in the first."

The book has four different sections. The first section is Part A, "The Speech Community," whose central focus is Philadelphia. Labov explains its vowel system, recaps previous research involving Philadelphia and issues involved in sociolinguistic variables. Part B, "Social Class, Gender, Neighborhood, and Ethnicity" concerns socioeconomic location of speakers in the community, subjectivity of the respondents, the definition of what a neighborhood is as well as the ethnicities represented in those neighborhoods, and gender and its influence on linguistic usage and change. The third section, Part C, "The Leaders of Linguistic Change," Labov tackles two topics, social networks and the gender paradox. The last chapter of this section is a profile of the leaders of linguistic change. The final section, Part D, "Transmission, Incrementation, and Continuation," relates to how changes are transmitted and stabilized. Labov compares sound change in Philadelphia to changes in North American English to answer question of (social support of) continuation for language change. The book concludes with a summary of issues and ponders further questions that affect linguistic change that were beyond the scope of this endeavor.

In the forward, Labov mentions the groundwork to researching social factors involved in linguistic change that Weinreich developed. He cites Weinreich's principle, observing that, "The key to a rational conception of language change--indeed of language itself--is the possibility of describing orderly differentiation in a language serving a speech community" (p. xi). Labov notes that this principle encounters an immediate challenge in the first chapter and seeks resolution throughout the book.

In the first chapter, Labov begins with how within the Darwinian paradox, evolution cannot explain linguistic change. According to *The Descent of Man*--in reference to parallels in biology and language—Labov summarizes Max Müller and Schlegel. Darwin's two key proposals postulated that,

(2) A struggle for life is constantly going on amongst the words and grammatical forms in each language. The better, the shorter, the easier forms are constantly gaining the upper hand, and they owe their success to their own inherent virtue.

(3) In those languages which appear to be at the lowest grade of intellectual culture, we frequently observe a very high and elaborate degree of art in their grammatical structure.

This is especially the case of Basque and Lapponian, and many of the American languages. (p. 9)

The crux of the paradox reveals evolutionary process should confirm and conform to these notions, but Labov admits "the general consensus of 20<sup>th</sup>-century linguists gives no support to this contention, and finds no evidence for natural selection or progress in linguistic evolution" (p. 9). Furthermore, because research concerning linguistic change does not support evolutionary explanations for those changes that occur, Labov concludes,

But it is not merely the absence of evidence for evolutionary adoption that runs

counter to the Darwin's argument for natural selection. The almost universal view of linguists is the reverse: that the major agent of linguistic change--sound change--is actually maladaptive, in that it leads to the loss of the information that the original forms were designed to carry. (p.10)

The second and third chapter frame the context of the work and much of Labov's previous research in Philadelphia, commenting that, Philadelphia "is a well-studied city--amongst the best known in the country" (p. 41). Much of the work for this volume results from the National Science Foundation study of Linguistic Change and Variation in Philadelphia (LCV) from 1973 to 1977. This was followed by a wider study of Eastern Pennsylvania from 1977-1979. Finally, many of the subjects were studied again in a longitudinal study of normal aging. He ends the third chapter by modifying a principle espoused earlier in chapter one, concluding that, "Stable linguistic variables are not a function of age among adults, but are a monotonic function of social class" (p. 119).

A brief history of Philadelphia vowel system (Chapter 4), concludes this first section. Labov contrasts earlier data from 1930s and 1940s and observes that there were five levels of sound change in progress in 1930:

1. Completed changes: none.
2. Nearly completed changes: the fronting of the nucleus of /aw/, and the raising and backing of /ahr/ to mid position.
3. Mid-range changes: the lowering of the nucleus of (eyF); the raising of /oh/ and /ohr/ to lower mid position.
4. New and vigorous changes: the fronting and unrounding of /uw/ and /ow/.
5. Incipient changes: the lowering of the nucleus of free (iyF). (p.132)

Using these observations, he compares his 1970 data to the earlier data and explains that target quotas for vowels: three samples for vowels like (ahr) having little change in progress; five for vowels like (aehN) or (owC) in midrange change; and ten for vowels engaged in new and vigorous changes, like (ayO) or (aw). The chapter ends with the conclusion that real time change provides evidence that “age distributions reflect a diachronic development in the Philadelphia speech community” (149).

In the second section, Labov explores a second principle Weinreich postulated, that “The grammars in which linguistic change occurs are grammars of the speech community...idiolects do not provide the basis of self-contained or internally consistent grammars” (p. xi). Chapter 5 provides a socioeconomic construct of the leaders while Chapter 6 addresses the subjective dimensions of change in progress. Though Labov maintains the influence of key people, he does not allow just one person to influence and cause such languages changes.

In Chapter 7, given the vast size and diversity of Philadelphia, the samplings had to focus on specific neighborhoods and explicitly included or excluded other neighborhoods based on ethnicity. Labov explains,

A random sample of individuals, constructed by enumerating the population and giving every individual an equal opportunity of entering the sample, is the only reliable way of finding out what are the behaviors, opinions, and practices characteristic of a large urban community or nation. Most of the findings of quantitative sociolinguistics that support the principles put forward in this and the previous volume have been discovered and replicated by this method. (p. 224)

The scope of the research is then limited to white neighborhoods (p.226), but by the end of the book, he maintains that some of the exclusions, such as the Black community, might have some

important influence on linguistic change (p. 506).

Chapter 8 deals with the gender paradox, that it is mainly women in a lower socio-economic setting with an eye on a better position in life who lead and influence most of the changes. He considers three main characteristics of those that influence language change include gender, upward social mobility, and nonconformity. In Chapter 9, Labov remarks that women avoid any language noted for its negative features (p. 319) and thrive on features that are positive and prestigious (pp. 279-284).

In the third part of the book, Labov indicates upward mobilization, gender, age, education, and popularity as factors that contribute to leaders in linguistic change. Chapter 10 describes social networks and he reviews information concerning Belfast to compare with the Philadelphia data. He writes, “leaders of linguistic change are people at the center of the social networks, who other people frequently refer to, with a wider range of social connections than others” (p.356). He also brings linguistic fashion into the discussion, arguing that linguistic change is similar to fashion. Linguistic fashion rests on the notion that such change is motivated by the need to be liked by others as well as the desire to be different (p. 361).

Chapter 11 explores another paradox that stems from evolution and linguistic change, that of gender. Gender is an important linguistic attribute since transmission is often situated within the mother/child dyad. While acquisition studies abound, the issue of why children deviate from the speech of their parents is a constant source of conflict for both parents and children, though a great source of research possibilities for linguists. Labov concedes that how children learn from their mother in a Skinnerian mode of behavioral imitation but then deviate and have their own standard of speech among peers is a crucial factor in language acquisition (p. 416). This inconsistency in acquisition has its roots in his first chapter since it is part of the

Darwinian paradox. The issue of gender should indicate men as the leaders in change (see Pancsofar, N. & Vernon-Feagans, L. 2006), but it is women (p. 366).

Labov affirms the difficulty in resolving the continuing paradoxes and offers character portraits (the content of Chapter 12) of the leaders to help assuage some of the quandary (p.384).

The final section of the book attempts to explain the quandaries and paradoxes of linguistic change. In Chapter 13, gender receives more attention as it deals with transmission and how caregivers influence language acquisition and subsequent usage. He writes, “there are more than a few puzzling and anomalous aspects to the concept of ‘transmission of change.’ Yet in the simplest cases, there seems to be no problem at all in understanding what happens” (p. 421). A series of polarities result from the observations (informal/formal; older/younger; local/outsider). This chapter concludes with Labov espousing five important principles of (urban) transmission:

1. Children begin their language development with the pattern transmitted to them by their female caretakers, and any further changes are built on or added to that pattern.
2. Linguistic variation is transmitted to children as stylistic differentiation on the formal/informal dimension, rather than as social stratification. Formal speech variants are associated by children with instruction and punishment, informal speech with intimacy and fun.
3. At some stage of socialization, dependent on class status, children learn that variants favored in informal speech are associated with lower social status in the wider community.
4. Linguistic changes from below develop first in spontaneous speech at the most informal level. They are unconsciously associated with nonconformity to

sociolinguistic norms, and advanced most by youth who resist conformity to adult institutional practices.

5. Linguistic changes are further promoted in the larger community by speakers who have earlier in life adopted symbols of nonconformity without taking other actions that lessen their socioeconomic mobility. (p. 437)

In Chapter 14, Labov presents a working resolution for incrementation, deducing, “A combination of mechanical factors (step-wise incrementation from caretakers) and socially driven factors (the logistic incrementation) produces a near-linear decline with age for adults and a less linear increase with age for children” (p.463).

Labov clarifies the influence of outliers towards the conclusion of Chapter 15. He reports, “a striking demonstration that stressed monosyllables lead in the vowel changes that are sweeping across America... This in turn reinforces the proposition that in the course of sound change, outliers carry more weight than more central members of the distribution” (p.496). He ends the chapter with a question of how such changes that occur in the city will affect the entire continent.

The final chapter culminates in two final principles for linguistic change that Labov condenses the issue to nonconformity,

1. The Nonconformity Principle: *Ongoing linguistic changes are emblematic of nonconformity to established social norms of appropriate behavior, and are generated in the social milieu that most consistently defies those norms.*

Labov asserts that this principle is an explanatory principle, “directed at the motive force that leads to incrementation, transmission, and continuation” (p. 516). But the mere characteristic of nonconformity is not enough to explain the influence, thus principle two explains,

2. The Constructive Nonconformity Principle: *Linguistic changes are generalized to the wider community by those who display the symbols of nonconformity in larger pattern of upward mobility.*

Thus, the two principles offered conclude the book and summarize social factors of linguistic change.

It is easy to speak about the many accomplishments of Labov in sociolinguistics, and this reviewer certainly acknowledges his tremendous impact on the field of linguistics in general and sociolinguistics in particular. While the book is nearly exhaustive in exploring some areas, other issues not involved in the analysis require explanation. There are slight hints that some of the issues not addressed in the two volumes thus far (V. 1 Internal Factors; and this volume) may be resolved in the last volume (Cognitive Factors). One of the most important features that requires attention is that of the media. The prevalence of television, radio, and the pervasiveness of music and movies certainly impact style, prestige, and change in language. Just in terms of lexicon, *yada yada yada*, *fo shizzle*, and *bootylicious* exemplify Television and musical influences upon the culture. But there is no mention of media influence on variation though significant influence on language arguably comes from media. This lack of mention is considerable since the question of how one city influences the nation's language can perhaps be answered in part by the influence of media.

Labov also accepts a standard pertinent to linguistics that he and many others assume simply as fact. The first chapter brings to the forefront how problematic linguistic research is when assuming a Darwinian perspective of language and he rightfully calls this a paradox. If we take a cursory look at introductory linguistic textbooks, a common theme arises concerning the topic of sound and meaning. That theme suggests the relationship between sound and meaning

is arbitrary (Finegan 2004:10; Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams 2003:5; Gee 1993:70; & O'Grady, Archibald, Aronoff, & Rees-Miller 2001:706). The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines arbitrary as "To be decided by one's liking; dependent upon will or pleasure; at the discretion or option of any one." While this definition does not adhere to what we attribute arbitrariness in terms of evolution, we normally associate arbitrary as synonymous with random. But the *OED* mainly defines random terms of swift speed, though later a psychological definition offers the meaning as, "Of activity, movements, etc.: seeming to be without purpose or direct relationship to a stimulus, sometimes thought of as an organism's initial reaction to unfamiliar stimuli, and giving way to directed action as learning takes place." It is widely assumed and postulated that arbitrary/random qualities of sound and meaning have no intentionality as its impetus, yet both of these definitions from the *OED* include a volitional cognitive basis. But what we see in most linguistic textbooks is that the qualities that influence sound and meaning are unknown, unsystematic, and meaningless stimuli.

If the very foundation of sound and meaning is arbitrary, then at any given point in the life of a language, arbitrary influences on phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics must be constant, otherwise it would no longer be arbitrary. In other words, the stimuli for change at any level of language must remain unknown, unsystematic, and meaningless. Thus, the very nature of linguistic change--given the arbitrary foundation of language and its variation--must then reflect a consistent unpredictability as well. If the origin of language was random, its subsequent phonemic inventories were random, and the sound/meaning correspondence was (and is still) random, it seems contradictory that any current study of language "has possibilities to describe orderly differentiation" as Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog suggest (qtd. in Labov XI).

Is there another possibility that most linguists do not explore which would allow for

continued meaningful research concerning language change? Since we cannot really discern or know how languages began from any scientific endeavor, and since, as of yet, we have no physical evidence for what happened, it is rather spurious to conclude that the origins of language—sound, meaning, syntax—must have been arbitrary or random. If we have not found a pattern, does that mean there is no pattern? We do not have sufficient evidence for such a conclusion, and given the need for scientific inquiry, such a statement in light of negative evidence, is, at best, a hasty conclusion. At worst, it is wrong.

Fromkin et al suggested that the origin of languages has at least two different possibilities; language is part of God's gift in creating us, or language is a result of evolution (2003:57). Within the assumed Darwinian paradigm, Labov is accurate in asserting that what we see happening in linguistic change and how it happens remains very problematic, and will continue to be problematic. Yet it is important to note then that the two principles of nonconformity seem to postulate explainable, intentional, knowable and systematic influences affecting language change. However, to be consistent with the Darwinian notion, one must conclude that any language change that occurs must only be random, since from randomness order cannot follow. Injecting systematicity to language change--in order to understand that what happens now is orderly and systematic even though the foundation of language is arbitrary--reifies the evolution process. Whether it is at the phonemic or morphophonemic level, from syntactic complexity to syntactic simplicity, or any other observable linguistic change, the very cause of change itself must of necessity be random or arbitrary because evolution begins and ends with unexplainable, unintentional, unknowable causes that cannot be systematic.

Finally, Labov frequently warned that the issues of how and why linguistic changes occur and from whom those changes come are paradoxical. He also indicated that the research results of the

Project on Linguistic Change and Variation in Philadelphia “will be applied to illuminate and perhaps reduce the Darwinian paradox” (33), but the paradox still remains. We can only conclude that from the Darwinian perspective, understanding linguistic change will be impossible since any systematic explanation is self-refuting. In fact, since the very foundation of evolution is chance, understanding linguistic variation could never occur since the process of linguistic variation is arbitrary. What Labov has done with this book is to bring greater incredulity to the paradigm about which he admits, it “would be too ambitious to say that this paradox can be resolved” (14). While research about language change is very important and Labov’s effort in this field is unparalleled, the evolutionary paradigm in which we operate must be re-evaluated. We simply cannot complacently consign linguistic origins and variables to arbitrariness/randomness and then argue that language change is systematic and orderly though paradoxical. In light of Labov’s unyielding fidelity to evolution, and concerning his contribution to language variation research, we can only agree with the OED that a paradox is, “A statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief, *esp.* one that is difficult to believe.”

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