

EXPLORING LABOV'S STUDIES ON LANGUAGE VARIATION

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Annotation

This thesis is about the crucial research that was conducted by William Labov. This research is about the relationship between language and social class. As a social identity, individuals can utilize the language differently. Social class plays an essential role in communicating and developing language. Individuals from different social classes use accents and speech patterns that distinguish them from others.

Keywords: phonetic variations, dialects, social groups, social stratification, speech patterns.

Introduction

Labov's ground-breaking research has tremendously aided knowledge of how language varies and evolves among social groups and contexts. In 1963, his first research was conducted to observe a sound change in community life on the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Martha's Vineyard was known for its diverse population with a range of dialects and speech patterns because of its permanent residents and summer visitors. He decided to study phonetic variations in the diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ because inhabitants produced the initial /a/ sound with the tongue in a more central position in the mouth. The study focused on several subgroups within the population of Martha's Vineyard, including fishermen, farmers, and other members of the local community. These subgroups were chosen to understand how their specific occupations and cultural backgrounds influenced their speech patterns. The research was conducted through extensive sociolinguistic interviews and observations of island speakers in various communities. The research showed that the older generation, who had not fully integrated with island society, used little centralization, while the younger generations, who were more involved in the local community, showed an increased amount of centralization.

Labov's other significant research looked at sociolinguistic tendencies in New York City citizens' speech in 1972. He looked at the relationship between social parameters including age, ethnicity, and social class and variances in language usage. To investigate the influence of social elements on linguistic variation, Labov



created the idea of sociolinguistic variables, such as the pronunciation of the postvocalic /r/ sound, highlighting its social class marker and revealing speakers' backgrounds and identities. This study found that linguistic variance was closely connected to social characteristics, indicating the presence of social stratification in language. He decided to observe three department stores for his research. Because they offer a diverse environment for analyzing language variation and social dynamics. The study analyzed the speech patterns and language use of working-class, middle-class, and upper-class speakers in department stores, examining variations in their language and speech patterns. Labov, as a customer, interviews the salesperson, asking for directions to the fourth floor. The findings demonstrated that employees at establishments with higher socioeconomic status were more likely than employees with lower socioeconomic status to pronounce the rhotic /r/.

Both Labov's (1972) Department Stores Study and Labov's (1963) Martha's Vineyard Study focus on language variation and social factors. However, while the Department Stores Study examines the influence of social class on linguistic behavior in a specific setting, the Martha's Vineyard Study explores how language variation is shaped by geographic location and community identity. Additionally, both studies highlight the significance of sociolinguistic research in understanding language change and its relationship to social dynamics.

As Labov (1963) mentioned, "we cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of the community" (p. 275). This statement emphasizes the importance of considering the social context when studying language change. By examining how linguistic behavior is influenced by social class and community identity, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how language variation emerges and evolves over time. Moreover, Patrick-Andre Mather (2012) argues that language change is not only influenced by social factors but also by individual factors such as age, gender, and education level. These individual factors can shape an individual's linguistic behavior and contribute to language variation within a community.

References

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