The Social Stratification of English in New York City

SECOND EDITION

WILLIAM LABOV

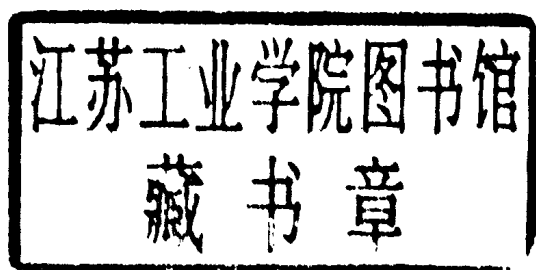# The Social Stratification of English in New York City

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Introductory note to the first edition

The Clearinghouse for Social Dialect Studies, a joint instrumentality of the Center for Applied Linguistics and the National Council of Teachers of English, collects and distributes social dialect research information. It operates under the guidance of an Advisory Committee whose members are, at the present writing: Harold B. Allen, University of Minnesota; Alva L. Davis, Illinois Institute of Technology; W. Nelson Francis, Brown University; Alfred S. Hayes, Center for Applied Linguistics; Robert F. Hogan, National Council of Teachers of English; Albert W. Marckwardt, Princeton University; Raven I. McDavid, University of Chicago; David W. Reed, University of California at Berkeley; William A. Stewart, Center for Applied Linguistics. This Committee, known as the Clearinghouse Committee for Social Dialect Studies, also encourages the publication of selected documents. The present publication, essentially the author's 1964 Columbia University dissertation, was unanimously approved by the Clearinghouse Committee, and by the Commission on the English Language of the National Council of Teachers of English, acting on behalf of the Executive Committee of that organization. It is a ground-breaking study, a milestone in the emerging field of sociolinguistics, and we are pleased to make it available to the scholarly community.

Alfred S. Hayes
Director
Education and Research Program
Center for Applied Linguistics

Preface to the first edition

The work presented in the following pages is a linguistic analysis of one speech community. Like any linguistic analysis, it is concerned with a system of contrastive relations, the code by which speakers communicate with one another. In this particular community, New York City, the system of the individual speaker appears to be less coherent than that of the speech community as a whole. The isolated idiolect of the individual New Yorker shows so much unaccountable variation that it has been described as a case of massive "free variation." But when this individual speech pattern is studied in the larger context of the speech community, it is seen as an element in a highly systematic structure of social and stylistic stratification. It has therefore been necessary to extend the study of linguistic structure to include continuous social and stylistic variation, and unconscious subjective reactions to the variables concerned – areas that have previously been considered inaccessible to formal linguistic analysis.

In the past few years, there has been considerable programmatic discussion of *sociolinguistics* at various meetings and symposia. If this term refers to the use of data from the speech community to solve problems of linguistic theory, then I would agree that it applies to the research described here. But *sociolinguistics* is more frequently used to suggest a new interdisciplinary field – the comprehensive description of the relations of language and society. This seems to me an unfortunate notion, foreshadowing a long series of purely descriptive studies with little bearing on the central theoretical problems of linguistics or of sociology. My own intention was to solve linguistic problems, bearing in mind that these are ultimately problems in the analysis of social behavior: the description of continuous variation, of overlapping and multi-layered phonemic systems; the subjective correlates of linguistic variation; the causes of linguistic differentiation and the mechanism of linguistic change. The final Chapter 14 is devoted to the integration of the individual findings, in an analysis of structural consequences for the vowel system as a whole, and outlines the evolution of the New York City vowel system over the past sixty years.

The data also face in another direction: they bear on many problems of

sociological theory – the discreteness of socio-economic stratification, the integration of ethnic groups into the social system, the role of exterior reference groups, the relation of normative values to social behavior, the transmission of prestige patterns, and the nature of social control. In order to make this material accessible to sociologists and anthropologists, special phonetic symbols and technical linguistic terms have been kept to a minimum, and defined in the text. A glossary at the beginning of the Appendixes defines symbols and linguistic terms.

Many of the techniques for gathering data, as developed in this study, may apply generally to the study of any complex speech community. Fairly complete descriptions are provided on the methods of sampling through secondary surveys (Chapter 6, Appendix C), the quantitative analysis of linguistic variables (Chapters 7, 8), interview construction (Chapter 6), eliciting a range of contextual styles (Chapter 4), subjective evaluation tests (Chapters 11, 12), methods of sampling non-respondents (Appendix D), and rapid and anonymous surveys (Chapter 3, Appendix B).

The material as presented here is essentially my 1964 Columbia University dissertation, with minor changes. Chapters 12 and 13 formed part of the original plan of Part III, dealing with social evaluation; though they did not appear in the dissertation, they have been restored here. The work as presented here was carried out under the direction of Uriel Weinreich. It is impossible for me to acknowledge properly my indebtedness to him by footnotes and citations alone; his influence may be seen most strongly in the focus of the work upon the general problems of linguistic structure and linguistic change. Many suggestions of Herbert Hyman of the Department of Sociology, Columbia University, have been incorporated in this study, not only in the approach to survey methods, but in conceptual analysis as well. William Diver's help has been important in sharpening the initial approach to phonemic analysis.

The financial support of the American Council of Learned Societies, throughout the major portion of this study, is gratefully acknowledged. With this help, it was possible to enlarge the field work to a point where the results stand upon adequate empirical data, and are not merely suggestive or programmatic. The assistance of Michael Kac, of Haverford College, was of great value in standardizing the field techniques; Mr. Kac not only served as a reliable and efficient field worker, but also as a valuable associate in the attack on problems of transcription and codification.

The linguistic survey of the Lower East Side gained considerably in accuracy and reliability through the use of the primary survey carried out by Mobilization for Youth in 1961. For permission to use the survey materials, I am deeply indebted to Mobilization for Youth and the Columbia School of Social Work. I would like to acknowledge particularly the help of Lloyd

Ohlin, Director of Research of the Columbia School of Social Work, and Wyatt Jones, Director of Research of Mobilization for Youth, who provided material support and advice at many critical points. Many suggestions have been derived from discussions with members of the Mobilization for Youth staff; I am particularly indebted to Donald Pappenfort, John Michael, Paul Lerman, and Warren Mintz.

Kenneth Lennihan of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University, provided many important suggestions on the empirical procedures used in this study. I have profited greatly from discussions with Marvin Herzog of the Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry, Columbia University, whose searching questions precipitated a number of re-analyses of the relations of linguistic and social behavior.

It would be difficult to assess the full importance of the support given by my wife Teresa, whose thoughtful criticism contributed to the solution of many analytical problems.

W. L.
New York City

Preface to the second edition: forty years later

The original edition of this book was printed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, photographed from the pages of the dissertation that was finished in the spring of 1966. In spite of the rough form of the diagrams, the prevalence of typos, and pages that terminated in mid-sentence, the book reached its audience and had considerable effect in stimulating further research. As the first quantitative study of a metropolitan speech community, it launched a mode of work that is well developed today in the annual NWAVE conference on *New Ways of Analyzing Variation*, now in its 34th year, and the journal *Language Change and Variation*, in its 17th year.

SSENYC introduced a number of concepts that have proved useful in the study of change and variation: the linguistic variable; social and stylistic stratification; the cross-over pattern; apparent time; covert prestige. It also introduced a number of procedures that were new to linguistic studies: the creation of a representative sample; the sociolinguistic interview and the control of style shifting within it; subjective reaction tests to measure the effect of particular linguistic variables; self-report and linguistic insecurity tests. Many of these methods and results were encapsulated in chapters of *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972a) and developed further in later publications, especially those connected with the study of Linguistic Change and Variation in Philadelphia which followed (see Chapter 15).

There were also aspects of this work that were not so widely generalized, and when the book went out of print, were not so often reproduced in the work of others. SSENYC was a bit formal in its prose style, but it dealt with people. It reached out into the community and brought to life a number of individuals whose special characteristics did much to clarify and illuminate the linguistic processes at work. I think of Nathan B., an academic who could not control the (dh) variable; of Steve K., the Jungian who wanted to go back to Brooklyn; of Dolly R., who showed me what style switching was really about; and of Mollie S., who developed a linguistic sensitivity to compensate for her loss in vision. The Appendices to SSENYC contained analytic procedures that have not been replicated in later work: in particular, the study of out-of-town respondents and the analysis of those who refused the ALS interview through the television interview. I would especially direct

the new reader to the pages of Appendix B, the punch-ball game, where the sounds of New York City street life are captured in IPA.

SSENYC is not up-to-date in several respects. Its analyses are based on cross-tabulations and graphic display; there is no multivariate analysis and very little statistical evaluation. The high degree of regularity of the results made this problem seem less urgent at the time, or so it seemed to the statisticians I briefly consulted. I considered updating this treatment, but decided against it: it would have created a different book. On the positive side, the absence of multivariate analysis favored the discovery of many important interactions between gender, age, ethnicity, and social class.

The main contribution of this second edition is a series of interventions, in each chapter, where Labov 2006 breaks in with the viewpoint of forty years after. These are marked by square brackets. I point out to the reader what political issues were involved, which new efforts seem to have succeeded and why, what were the unforeseen further implications, what has worked and what hasn't, and what has been left out and why. I have made an effort to give fuller credit to those who I had learned the most from, like William Moulton and Allen Walker Read, and to those who have carried my work further on the basis of what they read in this book, like Walt Wolfram, Peter Trudgill, Henrietta Cedergren, and Gillian Sankoff. On the whole, I hope that these thirty pages of new interventions will make the book more useful to the current reader, and I hope that my junior colleague of 1966 will forgive me for looking over his shoulder with the hindsights gained over the past four decades.

Chapter 15 is entirely new. It reviews 37 studies that followed SSENYC, and then tries to answer some general questions about where the field is heading.

There is another figure in the background, who I would have step forward if I could. In my regular meetings with Uriel Weinreich, I rarely got direct suggestions about what to do next. He inserted only occasional questions as I talked at length about what I had been doing. Afterwards, I would ask myself where it was that I had talked altogether too much. There was the problem that would have to be fixed. Uriel died a year after the book was published, not much older than I was at the time. Reading over his unpublished papers, I found an outline for the study of the New York City speech community that anticipated my earliest notes for the project. I find it very hard to say where his influence is to be found, since it has merged so deeply with my own approach to language, so I must assume that it is everywhere.

This second edition of SSENYC was the idea of Andrew Winnard, and I am duly grateful for his persistence in pushing this project to maturity.

W. L.
Philadelphia

Contents

Part I

Problems and methods of analysis

1   The study of language in its social context

The work which is reported in this study is an investigation of language within the social context of the community in which it is spoken. It is a study of a linguistic structure which is unusually complex, but no more so than the social structure of the city in which it functions. Within the linguistic structure, change has occurred on a large scale, and at a rapid pace which is even more characteristic of the changing structure of the city itself. Variability is an integral part of the linguistic system, and no less a part of the behavior of the city.

To assess the relative complexity of the linguistic problem presented by New York City, it may be useful to compare this investigation to an earlier study of a sound change in progress that I carried out on the island of Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963). This earlier work traced the distribution of a particular sound feature as it varied through several occupational, ethnic, and geographic sub-groups of the population, and through three generations of native islanders. The objective pattern of language behavior was seen to be correlated with the overall social pattern of differential reaction to specific economic strains and social pressures; it was then possible to assign a single social meaning to the linguistic feature in question. It was thus demonstrated that social pressures are continually acting upon the structure of a language, as it develops through the mechanism of imitation and hypercorrection.

In turning to the speech community of New York City, we are faced with a much more complex society, and linguistic variation of a corresponding complexity. On the Vineyard, the six thousand native residents are close to single-style speakers: they show relatively little change in their linguistic behavior as the formality of the social context changes. In New York City, the population to be sampled is more than a thousand times as large, with many more divisions of social class and caste. Neither the exterior nor the interior boundaries of the New York City community are fixed, as Martha's Vineyard's are: for within the limits of the island, the sharp distinction between the native residents and the newcomer permits little equivocation. In New York, mobility is a part of the pattern, and the descendents of the

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earliest long-term native settlers are not necessarily the most powerful influence in the speech community today. Large numbers of people live within the city yet remain outside the boundaries of the speech community, and the line which divides the native speaker from the foreigner is broken by many doubtful cases. The area of New York City that was chosen for intensive study – the Lower East Side – does not represent a simplification of these problems. On the contrary, it is an area which exemplifies the complexity of New York City as a whole with all its variability and apparent inconsistencies.

The study of linguistic structure

The investigation of New York City is more complex than the Martha's Vineyard study in another sense: instead of limiting the investigation to a single sound feature, I will be dealing eventually with the New York vowel system as a whole. One view that would probably meet with general approval from all linguists today is that the prime object of linguistics is the structure of language, not its elements. In this study, we will be dealing with the structure of the sound system of New York City English – because it is the most amenable to quantitative techniques. Within this system, the question of structure can be approached on a number of levels of organization of increasing complexity.

The individual sound which we hear is in no way a structural unit. Many different sounds may have the same function in distinguishing words; the linguist considers them *non-distinctive variants* of a single structural unit, the *phoneme*. Phonemes in turn are organized into larger systems of vowels or consonants.

It is generally considered that the most consistent and coherent system is that of an *idiolect* – the speech of one person in the same context, over a short period of time. According to this view, as we consider the speech of that individual over longer periods, or the combined dialects of a neighborhood, a town, or a region, the system becomes progressively more inconsistent. We find an increasing number of alternations which are due to stylistic or cultural factors, or changes in time – and these are external to language, not a part of linguistic structure.[1]

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[1] A precise statement of this position and the disposition of the problems involved may be found in Harris (1951) page 9: "These investigations are carried out for the speech of one particular person, or one community of dialectically identical persons, at a time . . . In most cases, this presents no problem . . . In other cases, however, we find the single person or the community using various forms which are not dialectally consistent with each other . . . We can then doggedly maintain the first definition and set up a system corresponding to all the linguistic elements in the speech of the person or the community. Or we may select those stretches of speech which can be described by a relatively simple and consistent system, and say that they are cases of one dialect, while the remaining stretches of speech are cases of another dialect." The evidence first presented in Chapter 2, and then in the rest of this study,

The present study adopts an entirely opposite view of the relative consistency of idiolect and dialect in the structure of New York City English. We find that in New York City, most idiolects do not form a simple, coherent system: on the contrary, they are studded with oscillations and contradictions both in the organization of sounds into phonemes, and the organization of phonemes into larger systems. These inconsistencies are inexplicable in terms of any data within the system. To explain them in terms of borrowing from some other, unknown, system is a desperate expedient, which eventually reduces the concept of system to an inconvenient fiction.

[This vigorous attack on the idiolect anticipated the more thorough treatment of the issues in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968). The result of this program led to what I see as the central dogma of sociolinguistics: that the community is prior to the individual. Or to put it another way, the language of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the community of which they are members. In 1989, I attacked the problem of "the exact description of the community" by a treatment of the complex Philadelphia short-*a* system, and several hundred speech communities have been described in a reasonably precise and replicable way. Still, a very large number of linguists – including some sociolinguists – believe that the community is a fiction, and that language resides in individual brains. As far as I can see, nothing has come of the many efforts to develop a linguistics of individuals (see Fillmore, Kempler & Wang (1979)), except in those fortunate situations where the speech community has been well studied in advance. Language as conceived in this book is an abstract pattern, exterior to the individual. In fact, it can be argued that the individual does not exist as a linguistic entity. That is not to say that we do not study individuals – see the case of Nathan B. (Chapter 7) or the Chapter 12 of Labov (2001) that deals with the leaders of linguistic change. But the individuals we study are conceived of as the product of their social histories and social memberships.

Still, it would not do to be too dogmatic about the central dogma. Santa Ana and Parodi have described a Mexican community of Zamora where a number of older people seem to have limited recognition of community norms (1998), and Zwicky has made strong demonstration of the existence of individual grammars for less frequent syntactic phenomena (2002).]

The treatment of this inconsistency is the overall program of the present investigation. We will begin by turning our full attention to the sources of inconsistency, and treat them as continuous phonological variables rather

Footnote 1 (*cont.*)
    shows that the inconsistency found in most New York City idiolects is so great that the first alternative of Harris is impossible, and the second implausible.
        The attempt to find linguistic uniformity by retreating to the idiolect is more thoroughly criticized in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968).

than fluctuating constants. These will be codified and measured on a quantitative, linear scale. The data must then be enlarged to include the distribution of these linguistic variables over a wide range of stylistic and social dimensions – that is, distribution within the larger structural unit, the speech community.

That New York City is a single speech community, and not a collection of speakers living side by side, borrowing occasionally from each other's dialects, may be demonstrated by many kinds of evidence. Native New Yorkers differ in their usage in terms of absolute values of the variables, but the shifts between contrasting styles follow the same pattern in almost every case. Subjective evaluations of native New Yorkers show a remarkable uniformity, in sharp contrast to the wide range of responses, from speakers who were raised in other regions.

Traditional dialect studies have shown that isolation leads to linguistic diversity, while the mixing of populations leads to linguistic uniformity. Yet in the present study of a single speech community, we will see a new and different situation: groups living in close contact are participating in rapid linguistic changes which lead to increased diversity, rather than uniformity.

Our understanding of this apparent paradox stems from the recognition that the most coherent linguistic system is that which includes the New York speech community as a whole. It is a long-standing axiom of structural linguistics that a system is essentially a set of differences. De Saussure's conception of the phoneme has been applied to all kinds of linguistic units:[2]

They are characterized, not by the particular and positive quality of each, but simply by the fact that they are not confused with each other. Phonemes are above all, contrasting, relative, and negative entities.

For a working class New Yorker, the social significance of the speech forms that he or she uses, in so far as they contain the variables in question, is that they are not the forms used by middle class speakers, and not the forms used by upper middle class speakers. The existence of these contrasting units within the system presupposes the acquaintance of speakers with the habits of other speakers. Without necessarily making any conscious choice, they identify themselves in every utterance by distinguishing themselves from other speakers who use contrasting forms.

Some earlier restrictions on linguistic study

The procedure which is outlined above may be termed historical and contextual, and, above all, empirical. Its aim is the understanding of the

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[2] Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), page 164 (my translation).