

SOCIOLINGUISTICS – AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM LABOV

William Labov
University of Pennsylvania

ReVEL – You have had an immense importance on the developments of Sociolinguistics in America. And you can be considered the founder of Variationist Sociolinguistics. Can you tell us a little about your history in the field of Sociolinguistics?

Labov – When I first entered linguistics, I had in mind a shift towards a more scientifically oriented field, based on the way people use language in every-day life. When I began interviewing and recording people, I found that their every-day speech involved a great deal of variation, which the standard theory was not equipped to deal with. The tools for studying variation and change in progress emerged from that situation. Eventually, it turned out that the study of variation gave clear answers to many of the problems that were not resolved by a discrete view of linguistic structure.

ReVEL – What is the object of study of Sociolinguistics?

Labov – It's language, the instrument that people use to communicate with each other in every-day life. That's the object that is the target of the work on linguistic change and variation. There are other branches of sociolinguistics that are primarily concerned with social issues: language planning, the choice of orthography, and others who are concerned with the social consequences of speech actions. These are all important areas of study, but I have always tried to

address the major questions of linguistics: to determine the structure of language—its underlying forms and organization, and the mechanism and causes of linguistic change. Studies of the use of language in every-day life have proved very useful towards that end.

ReVEL – When it comes to phonological variation, how do you see the relation between Variationist Sociolinguistics and generative theories, such as Lexical Phonology or Optimality Theory, for example?

Labov – I have just attended a workshop on variation held by phonologists who are interested in that very question. The work that I began in 1967 on the analysis of the internal constraints on –t,d deletion in English is still a central concern of the phonologists who are trying to incorporate variation into formal models. Harmonic Grammar, Stochastic OT, Stratal OT are all options being considered. The originator of Lexical Phonology, Paul Kiparsky, has developed Stratal OT as a means of capturing the insights of Lexical Phonology along with the ability of OT to deal with variable ranking of constraints. Again, the treatment of the fundamental relations discovered in sociolinguistic work is a central problem for these formal developments.

ReVEL – What is the future of Sociolinguistics? What is the future of Variationist Sociolinguistics?

Labov – Linguistics is not a predictive science, and I would prefer to let the future unroll under its own momentum. What will determine the future is whether studies of linguistic change and variation prove to be a cumulative and positive route to answering our fundamental questions about the nature of language and the people who use it.

ReVEL – Could you please suggest some essential readings in the field of Sociolinguistics?

Labov – Among the most important early studies I think one should be familiar with the work of Peter Trudgill in Norwich, Walt Wolfram in Detroit, and my own study of New York City, which has just appeared in a second edition, as well as in the book, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Some of the most important work on change and variation is done in Brazil, and one should be thoroughly acquainted with the research of Anthony Naro, Marta Scherre, Sebastian Votre, Gregory Guy, Eugenia Duarte, and Fernando Tarallo. Much of this work is correlated with and informed by research on Spanish variables in the studies of Shana Poplack, Richard Cameron, and Carmen Silva-Corvalán. My own more recent work is reported in the two volumes of *Principles of Linguistic Change* (1994, 2001). Finally, anyone who wants to be current on research in this field should read the journal, *Language Variation and Change*, in which the most important papers appear.