

## BOOK REVIEWS

WILLIAM LABOV. *Dialect Diversity in America: The Politics of Language Change*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press. 2012. 173 pp. Hb (9780813933269) \$30.00.

Reviewed by JOHN BAUGH

*Dialect Diversity in America: The Politics of Language Change* is the product of the 2009 Page-Barbour lectures at the University of Virginia. A wealth of information is contained within the eight chapters that compose this highly informative book, which begins with an insightful preface where Labov describes his plan to 'overcome the problem of communication between the linguist and the public at large' (p. vii). His task, while stated simply, is quite formidable because he notes that 'Most of the sound changes I will discuss are inaudible and unknown to those affected by them' (p. vii). As a result of choosing to describe language that is beneath thresholds of personal awareness, he sets the stage to display a broad array of findings, mostly devoted to extensive studies of the Northern Cities Shift and African American vernacular English, which prepares for the transition to chapters devoted to interdisciplinary considerations that show incontrovertible linkages between on-going language changes across the United States, as well as transformative political circumstances in red and blue states that have flipped voter allegiances through the passage of time.

A great deal of valuable information is contained within the notes, references, and index that accompany this book, and readers would be well advised to consult various notes whenever they appear within the text. This reviewer failed to do so initially, only to discover that I needed to reread the corresponding sections of the book to which various notes referred. Thanks to this carefully crafted text, the flow of reading is not disrupted by the parenthetical information provided by the useful content found in various notes supporting the substantial linguistic findings and political observations that are contained herein.

The preface prepares readers for the collection of analyses that draw from the entire arch of Labov's extraordinary linguistic career: 'Most of the dialect diversity in America is the result of the great divide between mainstream white dialects and African American vernacular English (AAVE)' (p. viii). Unlike many of Labov's other publications, however, he acknowledges that this book – written for non-linguists – has been informed by his 'fruitful interactions' with distinguished anthropologists, as well as a host of psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists who have informed his thinking about the relationships between language change and the political conclusions he draws at the end of the book. He also pays gracious tribute, as follows, to his 'colleague and wife, Gillian Sankoff, who has

pondered these matters with me over three decades, and corrected innumerable efforts of fact and logic in these lectures' (p. ix).

The opening chapter is titled, 'About Language and Language Change' and it provides the foundation for interdisciplinary consideration of the topic, beginning with a section devoted to 'Some commonsense views of language that are wrong.' Labov then provides several illustrations where he guides the reader through some glaring misconceptions about language that are shared by many people. He then explores some classical variable uses of (ing) and (in) that are conditioned by a combination of linguistic and social factors that confirm the value of detailed analyses of speech derived from everyday language usage. The remainder of the opening chapter describes vital differences between 'The search for universal grammar' and 'Understanding language change,' followed by an account of the remainder of the book, which, again, is the product of a series of lectures.

The (ING) variable is the main object of analyses described in Chapter 2, titled 'A Hidden Consensus.' Readers who are familiar with Labov's (1966) book, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*, will find echoes of that work in this chapter, along with a range of findings that extend from Fisher's (1958) analyses along with some poignant observations about president Obama's speech. The third chapter, 'Hidden Diversity,' introduces 'the sounds of language rather than words,' (p. 17) including the full array of sound changes that culminated in the Northern Cities Shift. Labov takes care to introduce the non-linguist to some inescapable technical linguistic concepts associated with the acoustic measurements that underlie the findings associated with the regions and people who embody the Northern Cities Shift

found in all the cities of western New York State: Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo; in Cleveland, Elyria, Massillon, and Toledo in Ohio; in Detroit, Ann Arbor, Flint, Grand Rapids, and Kalamazoo in Michigan; in Chicago, Rockford, and Joliet in Illinois; in Madison, Kenosha, and Milwaukee in Southeastern Wisconsin. (p. 28)

The chapter also includes detailed maps of this dialect diversity, along with commentaries from speakers in different localities as they embody these sound changes in progress.

The fourth and fifth chapters of this book introduce African American vernacular English, and a host of linguistic and political facts that are organized beginning with 'the racial divide between black and white forms of English' (p. 38). Issues regarding diverse nomenclature open chapter 4, describing labels such as 'Black English,' 'Ebonics,' and the term preferred by most linguists, namely, 'African American vernacular English' (AAVE); all are described along with an array of noteworthy linguistic studies by several highly regarded linguists. Building upon his previous analyses of white dialects, Labov poses the question: 'How uniform is AAVE?' His answers are both informative and somewhat understated, because he is largely responsible for many of the linguistic discoveries about AAVE that have graced the most sophisticated linguistic analyses ever written on the subject. He generously cites the work of many scholars, including those of former students and colleagues

to whom he has served as a mentor, while providing extensive linguistic details about r-less variability, the heritage of AAVE, and its structure.

Chapter 4 further illuminates the absence of elements found in other American English dialects, along with exacting explanations for why this diversity exists. The chapter proceeds with descriptions of the 'Presence of grammatical elements not found in other (American English) dialects,' which includes 'HAD as a marker of the simple past, BE as a marker of habitual aspect, BEEN as the remote present perfect, (and) BE DONE as a marker of sequential tense' (p. 55). Upon presenting these technical linguistic observations for the non-linguist, he poses another crucial question, 'Why are Black and White differences increasing?' (p. 65). His answers provide a lucid transition to chapter 5, 'The Politics of African American English' (p. 67) where many of the controversies associated with AAVE are laid bare. Gaps in black and white reading achievement open the fifth chapter, which contains some longitudinal differences in reading scores based on racial heritage. He then recounts some of the iconic milestones of his career, including publication of 'The logic of non-standard English' (Labov 1969) where he challenged some of the prevailing and misguided opinions that AAVE 'then called Black English Vernacular' does not contain the full capacity for logical thought. Some memorable excerpts from his original discussion are reprinted in this work before Labov returns to his experience with the 'Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge' (SEEK) program at Brooklyn College, which suffered from further misconceptions about AAVE as well as efforts to help students gain greater fluency in standard American English.

The Ann Arbor (i.e. Black English) Trial which occurred in 1979 is then described, along with Judge Charles Joiner's ruling in favor of African American plaintiffs who won their case calling for the explicit educational recognition of the home language of AAVE speaking students who, prior to that ruling, had been placed in special education classes as a result of ill-conceived speech pathology diagnostics that were entirely inappropriate. The controversy regarding Ebonics that emerged in 1996 at the behest of an African American Educational Task force in Oakland California is described at some length, leading to a discussion of 'dialect readers' and some of the superior strategies that have been employed to advance reading for students who speak AAVE. The chapter concludes with some eloquent observations from 'Latasha,' a 7 year old who describes the educational paradox confronting many black children who strive to obtain a good education, along with some of her insights about the society in which we live.

The sixth chapter, titled 'Language Change as Local Politics' (p. 98) recaptures evidence presented earlier in the book, including various elements of the Northern Cities Shift. Here Labov steps back in time, reflecting upon 'the first study that I did on the social motivation of a sound change on Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963)' which resulted in new linguistic discoveries that had not been previously reported, and which lead to the development of quantitative sociolinguistic studies of language variability that have been the hallmark of Labov's extensive and distinguished scholarly career. In this chapter he moves beyond the realm of acoustic measurements in favor of social accounts of people and places where linguistic facts collide with local opinions about language and the ways in which

people from different backgrounds speak. He demonstrates that language usage and personal identity are inextricably intertwined.

'The Political Ideology of the Northern Cities Shift' is the title of the seventh chapter, where matters of language usage and local personal identity are further explored. His evaluation includes accounts of the place of slavery in Yankee ideology, as well as the intersection of religion and politics, all couched in terms of minute linguistic details that are displayed on maps depicting changing migratory patterns. The chapter culminates with a detailed account of linguistic change and the transformation of political demographics in blue states and red states over several decades that witnessed the realignment of party affiliations among voters in different regions of the country. These findings will be of considerable interest to political scientists who frequently overlook the potential significance of linguistic facts that may underpin their findings, which are often the product of surveys, focus groups, and in depth interviews that resemble similar methods to those employed by Labov and his colleagues who gather samples of language usage from vernacular conversations during everyday life.

The book closes with chapter 8, 'Putting It All Together,' which is deceptively brief, consisting only of five pages. However, Labov's skills as a gifted writer are abundantly on display in his closing remarks. Noting that 'the long history of slavery and racial inequality has left an indelible stamp on Americans' view of human identity' (p. 135), he brings the voices of native Americans and slave descendants to life through extremely sophisticated linguistic analyses of language change in progress that are beneath thresholds of conscious awareness at the very same time that he accounts for the transformation of diverse ideologies across the American political landscape. Ever the optimist, he closes with the positive observation that the language changes he has observed 'might be connected with the better part of our human nature' (p. 139).

A highly informative appendix is provided at the end of this work, which contains a summary statement pertaining to African American vernacular English that was submitted in 2008 to the California Curriculum Commission, signed by nine linguists, including this author. William Labov has produced a remarkable book that exceeds the linguistic inquiries for which he is most well known in favor of an interdisciplinary thesis that draws insights from anthropology, education, psychology, sociology, and political science. This book spans William Labov's entire career and will be of benefit to anyone from the professional linguist to the general reader who would like to learn about the linguistic evolution of the United States and our racial disparities, including a host of educational insights and unexpected political discernments that are simultaneously groundbreaking and captivating.

## REFERENCES

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GUNTHER DE VOGELAER AND GUIDO SEILER (eds.). *The Dialect Laboratory: Dialects as a Testing Ground for Theories of Language Change* (Studies in Language Companion Series 128). Amsterdam, The Netherlands/Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 2012. vi + 297 pp. Hb (9789027205957) / eBook (9789027-273475) €99.00/\$149.00.

Reviewed by JENNIFER CRAMER

*The Dialect Laboratory* is an edited collection of papers that were presented at the 2008 Methods in Dialectology conference. De Vogelaer and Seiler sought to address the issue of the use of dialect data in historical studies of language change, claiming that dialect data has the potential to answer fundamental theoretical questions 'with a well-defined, solid empirical base' (p. 1). Also, with the wealth of high-quality dialect data available today, the editors point out that scholars can easily access data that provides models of language-in-use, relatively free from standardization, which is better than the written sources typically used by historical linguists. Dialect data also allows for variant competition, such that the choice of one variant over another across time and space can be more easily discerned. Citing Moulton (1962: 52), the editors say that '... dialect comparison can be seen as a thought experiment, as a laboratory, because genetically closely related varieties demonstrate the effects language change may have under subtly varying conditions' (p. 2).

The individual chapters address several linguistic phenomena in phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax, while also tending to the socio-historical facts necessary in any historical/sociolinguistic study. These chapters explore many different languages, including American English, Scottish English, Iberian Spanish, Tunisian Arabic, German, Tibeto-Burman languages, Fijian, Catalan, Occitan, Dutch, and Japanese. Additionally, each chapter employs varying methods in analyzing dialect data, such that the scope of the theories and