

**Handout 3: Social factors in non-standard language use**  
Seminar *English Dialects*, A. McIntyre

**1. Labov (1966): Social stratification and New York English**

- Labov studied the variable (r): **rhotic** pronunciation (use of /r/ in coda of syllable, e.g. in *fourth, floor*) vs. **non-rhotic** pronunciation (no /r/ in coda).
- Historical background: New York had been mainly non-rhotic (due to British immigrants) but after WWII r-dropping lost its prestige with the decline of the British Empire and the influx of people from other parts of the USA.
- Labov wanted to find out which pronunciation was used by whom and under what conditions. His hypothesis was that it was sensitive to sociolectal and stylistic factors, where other linguists surmised that rhotic pronunciations were in random (free) variation.
- Labov's methods aimed to overcome the **observer's paradox** (i.e. the problem that if people know their speech is being monitored, they will not produce the kind of *natural* speech that the linguist is trying to observe; rather they will use higher style levels not corresponding to natural speech).

**1.1. The department store study**

- Labov checked whether employees of New York department stores pronounced /r/ in *fourth floor*, which he elicited by asking questions like *What floor are we on?* or *Where can I find men's shirts?* Each time he secretly wrote down whether the employees used /r/, as well as their age, sex, race.
- Representativeness: he asked over 250 people (i.e. over 1000 potential instances of /r/).
- He did this at three department stores catering for specific socioeconomic groups. Results:
  - **Saks** (a store for the rich, fashion-conscious): employees pronounced /r/ most often (except older people) (**62%** pronounced /r/ at least once)
  - **Macy's** (middle-class): employees pronounced /r/ less often (**51%**)
  - **S. Klein** (low-price store): employees pronounced /r/ least often (**20%**).
- Labov pretended not to hear the employees' answers the first time, prompting them to repeat their answers. In all shops, /r/ occurred much more frequently the second time they said *fourth floor*. (Can you think why?)

A. Can you see why Labov only saw this as a **pilot study** (i.e. a preliminary test to see whether more representative research was worthwhile)?

**1.2. Other experiments**

- Labov later did more formal experiments, involving over 150 randomly chosen people.
- He assessed their use of /r/ in contexts demanding different styles (where 'higher style' = more conscious attention paid to language):
  - Casual speech (Labov asked people to talk about emotional situations, e.g. a narrow escape from death)
  - Formal: reading texts
  - More formal: reading word lists
  - Most formal: reading minimal pairs like *sauce/source* where /r/ is targeted.
- /r/ was used more often with higher style and increasing social status.
- Apparent anomaly: in the more formal tasks lower middle class produced more /r/ than all other classes, including hypercorrection. Possible reasons for this: desire to distance themselves from lower class, linguistic insecurity.
- Similar results were obtained for other variables tested (e.g. (th) as [t] or [tθ], not as [θ]).
- Labov also tested the subjects' **subjective reaction** to variables like (r):

- Labov played recorded speech and asked the subjects to guess the professions of the speakers. Subjects thought that speakers using rhotic pronunciations in recordings were likely to have higher-status occupations (even in cases where recordings with rhotic and non-rhotic accents were made by the same speaker).
- Upper middle class and people below 40 all said that rhotic pronunciation is 'better' (even if they did not use it consistently themselves). This attitude is presumably partly responsible for the development towards rhotic pronunciation.
- This suggests that New York (r) is a **marker** (a variable that is noticed by non-linguists, which varies according to class and style level), not just an **indicator** (a variable not subject to style variation and not subject to positive/negative evaluation).
- Markers (especially if they lead to **stereotyping** (jocular/contemptuous imitation by non-linguists)) are likely to be subject to change, especially by upwardly mobile society members (notably middle class); sometimes they are only retained due to covert prestige.

- Other summaries of Labov's work on NY: Wardhaugh (2002:162ff), Mesthrie (2000:84ff)

**2. Labov's studies of English in Martha's Vineyard**

- **Martha's Vineyard (MV)**: An island off the New England Coast (North-East USA). Full of tourists in summer, who were not always popular with the locals.
- Labov (1963, 1972) studied the variables (ai) and (au): centralised pronunciation of the first element of the diphthongs: /aɪ/ as [əɪ], /aʊ/ as [əʊ].
- His results are another illustration of the importance of social facts in dialect study. In this case, *centralised diphthongs correlate with a sense of belonging to the island, solidarity with islanders and distance from tourists*.
- Labov interviewed 69 islanders from various regions and occupations. Results:

Age	Percentage of /aɪ/ as [əɪ]	(based on a calculation where [əɪ] gets 3 points, [aɪ] 0 points, 1 or 2 points given to intermediate pronunciations)
75+	25%	
61-75	35%	
46-60	62%	
31-45	81%	
14-30	37%	

- Interpretation of the age-related tendencies:
  - The youngest group had mostly not decided whether to stay on the island, so did not identify with it very strongly.
  - [əɪ] commonest among 31-45 year-old group because they had committed themselves relatively recently to living on the island (often after living on mainland to go to college).
  - The statistics for the older group reflect that [əɪ] had been dying out (as known from research in the 1930s). It had revived after WW II, with increasing tourist invasions (with consequent desire among locals to signal solidarity with islanders, distance from tourists), but the older peoples' speech patterns were fixed by then.
- Labov found other socially motivated trends:
  - More [əɪ] with those who liked the island than those who were thinking of leaving it to look for work on the mainland.
  - More [əɪ] among fishermen than among those who worked with tourists.
  - More [əɪ] from people who had decided to return to MV from mainland.
- Other summaries of the MV studies: Mesthrie (2000:80ff), Wardhaugh (2002:194ff)

### 3. Gender, class and covert prestige: Trudgill's research on Norwich

- Trudgill (1974) studied some features in Norwich dialect (partly fairly stigmatised):
  - **(ng)**: [ŋ] instead of [ŋ] in present participles (*working*)
  - **(h)**: [h] sometimes deleted in unstressed syllables
  - **(t)**: [ʔ] instead of [t] between vowels (*water*)
  - **(j)**: [j] dropped after consonants ([tu:n] instead of [tju:n])
  - **(er)**: [ɪə], [ɛə] as [ɛ:] (*beer* and *bear* are both [bɛ:])
  - **(o)**: [ʊ] instead of [oo] in some words (*home, road, nose, suppose*)
- Percentage of uses of [ŋ] for (ng) variable according to style and class (after Wardhaugh 2002:169). Style is lower as one moves to the right (less attention paid to language).

	Word list	Reading passage	Formal talk	Informal interview
Middle middle class	0	0	3	28
Lower middle class	0	10	15	42
Upper working class	5	15	74	87
Middle working class	23	44	88	95
Lower working class	29	66	98	100

#### B. What conclusions can you draw from this table?

- In a self-evaluation test, informants were asked how much they used these variables, and their answers compared with taped interviews. A striking observation:
  - **Overreporting** (claiming to use the prestige variant more than one actually does) was commoner among women
  - **Underreporting** (claiming to use the non-prestige variant more than one does; an instance of **covert prestige**) was commoner among men.
- Trudgill suggested the following explanations for the gender differences:
  - Working-class linguistic features are associated with masculinity.
  - Women trying to compensate for their lower social status.
  - Women are (rightly or wrongly) more likely to be judged by outward appearance than actions, and language is part of appearance.

### 4. The importance of social network strength: Leslie Milroy's on Belfast English

- Two dimensions of social network strength:
  - **Multiplex** networks: members are linked to each other in more than one capacity (e.g. co-worker, relative, friend), members of **uniplex** networks: people know each other in only one capacity
  - **Dense** networks: one's acquaintances all know each other; if not: **loose** network
- Examples:
  - Close-knit (high network strength) communities are dense and multiplex.; e.g. rural villages, often urban working-class
  - Loose-knit (uniplex, loose): upwardly mobile middle class; Migration, commuting, urbanisation lead to reduction in network strength
- Relevance: High network strength favours norm enforcement in behaviour (dress, gestures etc.) but also in language (including low-prestige linguistic features); varieties spoken in loose-knit communities are open to more influences from outside the community and thus more prone to change (e.g. towards standard)
- Three districts in Belfast (Northern Ireland) studied by Milroy:
  - Ballymacarrett (Protestant, East Belfast)
  - The Clonard (Catholic, West Belfast)

- The Hammer (Protestant, West Belfast)
- All working-class communities, social problems (unemployment, crime, sickness, poverty)
- Contact between them reduced by the Catholic-Protestant divide and fear of sectarian violence at the time of the study (70s/80s).
- Linguistic variables studied by Milroy:
  - (th) = deletion of voiced dental fricative between vowels (*mother, bother*)
  - (a) = [æ] becomes low back unrounded [ɑ] (*at*)
  - (u) = [ʊ] as [ʌ] in some words (*shook, pull, took, foot*)
- Methodological points:
- **Participant observation method**: Leslie Milroy acted as a friend of a friend in communities studied, avoiding observer's paradox problems.
- Subjects: 46 people (recordings), evenly distributed between genders and among the three communities; avoided subjects prone to standard speech (teachers, community leaders).
- Subjects rated according to their network strengths.

#### Some results

- Men: Ballymacarrett men used more non-standard features than other men. They were in more multiplex networks since many men worked in a local shipyard and thus spent work and leisure time together.
- The other districts had high unemployment, so men looked for work elsewhere, reducing network density.
- Women mostly used the non-standard features less than men, except the variable (a) was much more frequent with young Clonard women, who shared a workplace (department store just outside Clonard) so had a more multiplex network than Clonard men and other women. (The store had customers from outside, so more external influences.)

#### Conclusions

- Vernacular use, despite lower prestige, is more likely to persist in close-knit networks (rural, old urban working-class districts). It is a symbol of a heightened sense of solidarity in these cases.
- Results have less to do with social stratification than e.g. Labov's results, since Milroy's research focussed exclusively on working-class speakers

### 5. References

- Labov, William 1963. The social motivation of a sound change. *Word* 19: 273-309.
- Labov, William 1966. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Labov, William 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Milroy, Lesley 1995. *Language and Social Networks*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Trudgill, Peter 1974. *The social differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge University Press.