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# The social motivation of language change

### I The social stratification of language: the evaluation of linguistic variables

What is perhaps the most important contribution towards an understanding of the actual mechanism of language change has come from the detailed sociolinguistic investigation of living speech communities. The examination of the linguistic behaviour of the individual speaker within his community has proved to be of the greatest relevance to diachronic linguistics but, before we can appreciate its full significance, we must first return to what is in fact a synchronic problem, namely that of the relationship between the linguist's description of a language and the actual data upon which his description is based. As we already pointed out in the Introduction (p. 2ff.), any conventional description of a language presupposes a certain degree of abstraction or idealization of the data. Thus a description which aims at representing the linguistic competence of 'an ideal speaker-hearer in a perfectly homogeneous speech community' will achieve descriptive uniformity by relegating to performance all variation which is cognitively irrelevant. A corpus-based description on the other hand, which selects as its data what is considered to be a representative speech sample (for example the careful colloquial style of an educated speaker), achieves descriptive uniformity by ignoring those aspects of the language which are outside the corpus and by treating as free variants functionally equivalent forms within the corpus. Both models, then, clearly disregard a great deal of overt linguistic *variation* in the actual speech habits of the members of the community. Until relatively recently such variation had never been systematically studied, partly due to the fact that there was no established methodology by which to do it and partly because it was simply considered to be without importance. We shall however see that it is precisely this variation within a speech community which provides the key to the

mechanism of language change. By acting as a living vehicle or medium for the retraction and promotion of competing forms, which will show themselves in retrospect as members of the successive grammars of the language, it makes change possible. This does not mean that all linguistic variation is necessarily associated with ongoing change but simply that any change which does take place assumes the presence of linguistic variation. Before, therefore, we can turn to an examination of the change process itself we must first look at the methods employed in the analysis of synchronic linguistic variation.

Sociolinguistic research has established the fact that certain differences in the speech of the members of a community can be correlated in a systematic way with specific social factors. The first large-scale study which was able to show such correlation was undertaken in New York City in the early sixties by William Labov. He had the advantage of being able to base his linguistic survey of the Lower East Side of Manhattan (Labov 1966) on the results of a sociological survey which had previously been carried out in the area. By the interviewing of a random sample, this survey had grouped the population of some 100,000 individuals into a number of socio-economic classes on the basis of three criteria: (1) the occupation of the bread-winner, (2) the education of the informant, and (3) the income of the family. Labov in turn selected from among the informants of that survey a sample for linguistic interview, imposing only one further condition, namely that all should have been born in New York City. His eighty-one principal informants were subjected to a carefully prepared linguistic interview based on a questionnaire the aim of which was to determine the social distribution of a number of specific linguistic features.

Fortunately, and as it turned out significantly, not all aspects of a language are subject to variation at any one time. Thus, in New York City, both variations between socially determined groups and inconsistencies within the speech of individuals were found to be limited to particular areas of the linguistic system. One such area at the phonological level is that of the vowel in words like *bad*, *half*, *dance* etc., for which pronunciations with [i:ə] (the vowel of *beard*), [ɛ:ə] (the vowel of *bared*) and [æ:] can all be heard. This means that [i:ə] and [æ:] are sometimes found to contrast ([bi:əd] *beard* ≠ [bæ:d] *bad*) and sometimes to occur in free variation ([bi:əd], [bæ:d] *bad*), making a conventional phonemic analysis impossible. Similarly the pronunciation of words like *car*, *guard*, *heart* etc. would sometimes have an *r*-glide and

sometimes not, so that again *guard* and *god* could either contrast ([gp:rd] ≠ [gp:d]) or both could be pronounced alike as [gp:d]. Theoretically of course in both these cases the different pronunciations might be assigned to different phonemic systems, implying the co-existence in New York speech of two independent systems in one of which *beard*, *bared*, *bad* have different vowels (/ih/, /eh/, /æh/) and in the other all three have an identical vowel. Similarly, in the case of *car*, *guard*, *heart*, etc., in the one system /r/ would have word-final and preconsonantal allophones and in the other it would be restricted to prevocalic position. Such an analysis would however fail to account satisfactorily for the fact that no single speaker adheres consistently to either system.

Labov was able to show that the distribution of these variant pronunciations is not a completely random matter and that such variations are in fact rule-governed. He found that (1) there is a systematic correlation between the linguistic behaviour of a speaker and his social status (measured in socio-economic terms), and (2) that inconsistencies in the speech of one individual (which had previously given rise to the view that in New York not even the idiolect was amenable to systematic description) are dependent on the speech style (or 'register') employed. As a theoretical framework within which the patterns of variation could be stated, Labov postulated for the whole community a single phonological system characterized by a certain number of variable units. Each segment of the phonological system which was found to be subject to variant realizations was considered to form a *phonological variable* and its different realizations were made the object of inquiry. Thus an '(r)-variable' was set up to represent the variation in the pronunciation of words like *car*, *heart*, *guard*, and an (eh)-variable for that in *bad*, *dance*, *half*. It was then the task of the survey to determine the rule which governed the variation pattern in each case. This kind of phonological analysis is of course incompatible with traditional phonemics and Labov presupposes, like generative phonologists, a systematic distinction between an underlying and a surface representation. The theoretical bases of the two approaches are however quite different for, whereas generative phonology justifies a systematic phoneme on the basis of morphological alternation ([ka:] ≠ *car* ≠ ['ka:-r-ænd] *car and*), socio-linguistic analysis postulates a phonological variable on the basis of phonological variation within the community. In each model, however, the realizations of an underlying unit are governed by a phonological rule.

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We will consider in detail the rule governing (r). Labov found that, although it was impossible to predict whether or not any individual speaker would use a glide in any particular word and on any specific occasion, it was possible to state the class of words within which *r*-glides *could* occur and to predict the overall frequency of *r*-glides in a person's speech. With very few exceptions, the class of (r)-words was found to consist of those lexical items which in other varieties of American English are regularly pronounced with an [r] and which in the standard orthography, by reference to an earlier pronunciation, are spelt with an *r*. For the purpose of assessing the overall frequency of *r*-glides, an (r)-score was obtained for each informant by attributing a numerical value of 1 to each occurrence of an *r*-glide and the value 0 to its absence in a position in which its occurrence would have been possible. The percentage of (r = 1) realizations was then plotted against the informant's position in the social scale (six socio-economic classes being distinguished, ranging from 0: 'lower class' to 9: 'upper middle class') on a graph designed to show the relationship between actual, as opposed to potential, glide realizations as a function of class. Labov repeated this operation for each of five speech situations, namely (A) 'casual speech'

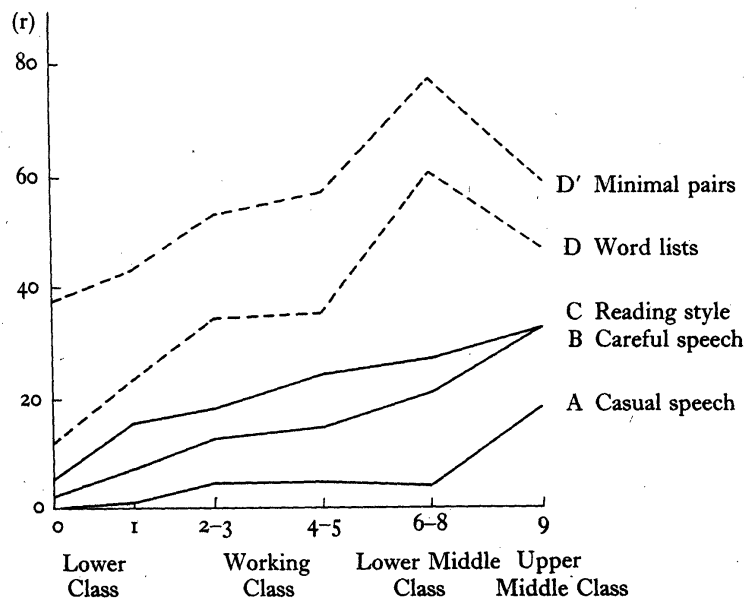


Figure 1

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(elicited by asking the informant whether he had ever been in a situation in which his life was in danger, the informant's emotional involvement in the event supposedly making him forget that he was being interviewed for linguistic purposes); (B) 'formal style', the normal free style used in a tape-recorded interview; (C) 'reading style', in which the informant read aloud material handed to him; (D) the reading of word lists, more formal than (C); (D') the reading of minimal word pairs, most formal of all. When the graphs resulting from all these tests were combined it was clearly visible that the frequency of ( $r = 1$ ) realizations (that is, pronunciations of ( $r$ ) as a constricted glide) was directly dependent on the social class of the speaker and the speech style that he was employing (Figure 1: Labov 1966: 240).

Labov also plotted the  $r$ -score against style for each of the six social classes, as shown in Figure 2 (Labov 1966: 240).

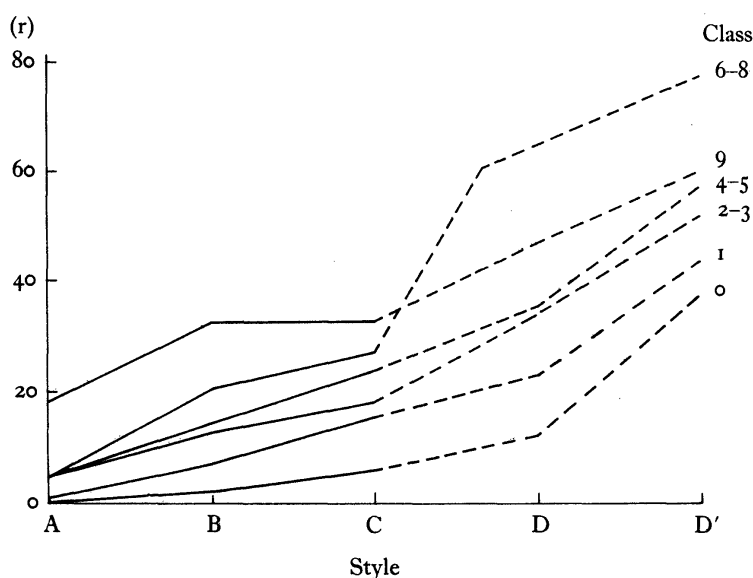


Figure 2

The pattern of variation which emerges from these two sets of graphs may be interpreted as the stratified progression of the variable along the axes of class and of style as if towards some imaginary target set by the upper middle class. It can be seen that the only deviation from this regular pattern consists in some degree of exaggeration of the goal by

the lower middle class informants in the two most formal styles (D and D'), reflected in peaks in the minimal pair and word list lines in Figure 1 and in the crossing of the upper middle class line by the lower middle class line in Figure 2. We shall come back to the significance of this phenomenon at a later stage; for the moment we shall simply note it as a deviation and observe that, in all other respects, the pattern is both regular and directional.

We have chosen the (r)-variable for detailed examination because of its simplicity. Some of the other variables examined by Labov – such as the case of (eh) already mentioned, or that of (oh) in words like *lost*, *caught*, *all* where there is variation ranging from [u:ə] to [ɔ:] – are more complicated since their realizations are not just dependent on class and style but also on the realization of other variables in the vowel system. However, the rules governing their variation, although not the actual distribution pattern across classes and styles, proved to be quite as regular as those for (r).

Labov supplemented the performance tests described so far by evaluation tests which were of two kinds: (1) evaluation by the informant of the speech of others and (2) evaluation of the informant's own speech by himself. In order to evaluate the speech of others, tape recordings of selected passages containing different shades of realization of the variables and read by what appeared to be different speakers, although it was in fact the same 'bilingual' speaker, were played to the informant and he was asked to assess the job prospects of the 'different' readers. These so-called 'matched guise tests' showed that evaluation of the speech of others followed the same scale of values as the performance tests and was in fact even more regular, in spite of the fact that informants, when questioned about the criteria they were using, were unable to identify the linguistic basis of their assessment. In the self-evaluation tests informants were asked to select from among several current pronunciations of diagnostic words the one they would themselves normally use. It is interesting that the results of this test were very different from the informant's actual performance, reflecting his feelings of what his pronunciation *should* be rather than what it actually was. It was also noted that speakers who themselves used a stigmatized feature (for instance pronunciations like [bi:əd] for *bad*) were most sensitive to the occurrence of that feature in the speech of others. In the case of the (r)-variable the tests showed that its realization as a glide constituted a prestige feature for speakers of all classes between the ages of 18 and 40

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and that persons who themselves pronounced *guard* and *god* alike, even in the minimal pairs test, would still claim that they used an (r = ɹ) pronunciation in the former. This shows clearly that sensitivity to (r) goes beyond the classes who actually use an (r = ɹ) pronunciation.

Labov's investigations showed that, in spite of substantial differences in the speech of social groups there is a uniform system of values or norms which has validity for the community as a whole, that is to say alternative pronunciations are given social values which are shared by all members of the society.<sup>1</sup> Thus the New Yorker who pronounces an r-glide in postvocalic position has better job prospects in the society because speakers of all classes feel (r = ɹ) to be a prestige feature, although they are not necessarily consciously aware of doing so. The synchronic rule governing the (r) variable may thus be expressed by the formula:

$$(r) \rightarrow n [r] / \text{---} \left\{ \begin{array}{c} C \\ \# \end{array} \right\}; n [r] = f(\text{class, style})$$

which states that (r) is realized as a glide in preconsonantal and final positions with the frequency *n*, where *n* is a function (*f*) of class and style.

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After considering these purely synchronic aspects of linguistic variation, we must now introduce the diachronic dimension by asking whether such variables as were revealed by Labov's investigations are constant factors in a language or whether they reflect change in progress. Now if, in the sort of situation we have been describing, it could be shown that a particular variable were restricted to the younger speakers in the community, or that the younger speakers were socially sensitive to its occurrence whereas their elders were not, such difference in behaviour according to age group might reasonably be assumed to represent a change in progress. It must be realized, however, that such generation differences do not *necessarily* reflect a process of historical

<sup>1</sup> Labov's observations have been substantiated in principle in a number of subsequent studies, for British English for example by Trudgill who investigated the social differentiation in the Norwich dialect of such variables as the third person singular marker in verbs (the presence versus the absence of *-s*), the *-ing* suffix (pronunciation with [n] or [ŋ]), intervocalic *t* ([t] versus glottal stop in words like *butter*), and initial *h*- ([h] versus 'dropped *h*' in words like *house*) (Trudgill 1974b, 1974a: chapter 2).

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(r) indexes for classes 0-8 in relation to (r) for class 9 by age in Styles A-D'

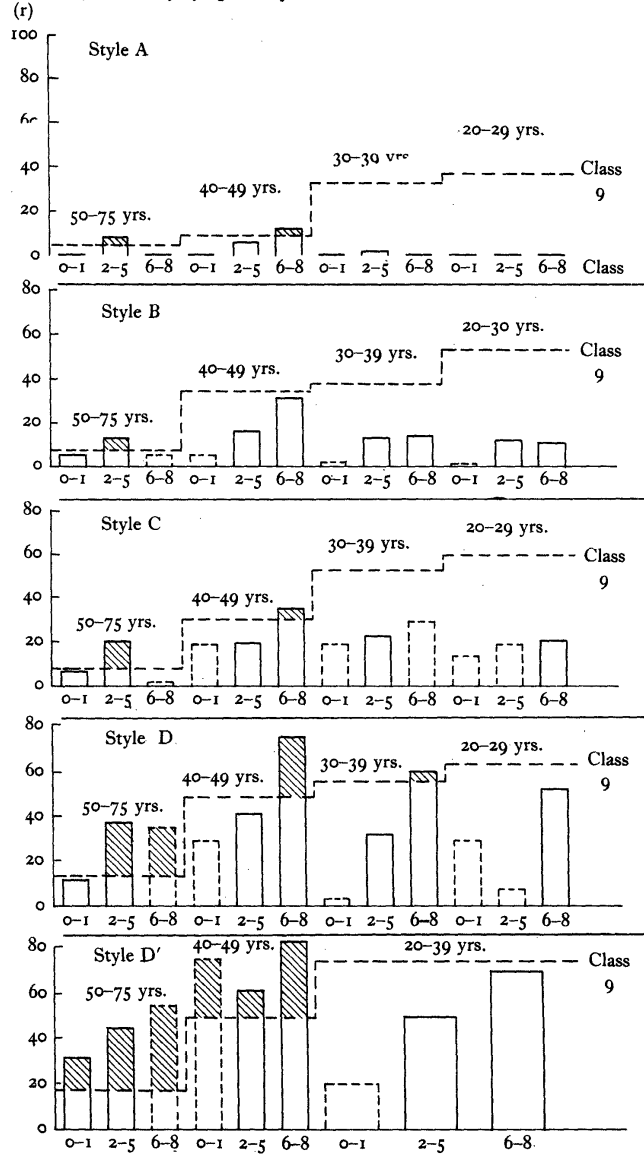


Figure 3

change since there is no theoretical reason why they should not simply be recurrent features characteristic of particular age groups, to be adopted or abandoned by the individual speaker as he progressed through the generation sequence. Thus, although the investigation of the behaviour of different age groups within the community will introduce into our analysis the factor of time, it will not yet be *real* time in the historical linguist's sense, since such a survey assembles what are after all strictly simultaneous data. This synchronic time factor then we will refer to as the factor of *age*.

We shall first examine the impact of age on the (r) variable studied by Labov. Figure 3 shows the (r)-scores for classes 0 to 8 as compared with that for class 9 according to age groups and styles (Labov 1966: 344f.). The dotted line rising from left to right by steps shows the (r)-score for the upper middle class and represents the target against which the scores for the other classes are measured. It is plain that in all styles the upper middle class has a higher ( $r = 1$ ) score the lower the age group of the speaker and this, Labov suggests, might be taken to indicate that glide pronunciation is on the increase in the prestige class. Another prominent feature in the graphs is the excessively high ( $r = 1$ ) scores obtained for middle-aged speakers from the lower middle and the working classes in the more formal styles (represented by the cross-hatched upper parts of the columns where these pass the target line set by the upper middle class). Labov calls this over-performance 'hypercorrection'. It can now be seen that this hypercorrective behaviour on the part of the lower middle class is the reason for the crossing over of the lines in Figure 2, which upset the regular stratification pattern. Labov advances the hypothesis that the crossing over of lines in a stratification pattern coupled with different value patterns in different age groups might be taken as an indication of a change in progress.

After this examination of performance with regard to the (r)-variable, we will now turn to the question of its evaluation by the speaker. Evidence that younger people of all classes are sensitive to the (r)-variable, even when they themselves do not in fact use a glide, is brought out by evaluation tests. This is important, since our statements about the realization of (r) so far might be considered somewhat marginal in view of the fact that only a small percentage of the population does in fact ever use a glide. The results of the evaluation tests shown in Figure (4b) however, when compared with those of the performance tests shown in (3) and (4a), demonstrate that quite irrespective of their own speech

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younger speakers react uniformly to the (r)-variable. Thus speakers of all classes below the age of forty will rate the same speaker higher on the job scale when he pronounces [r] than when he does not (Labov 1973: 263f.). This means that *age* must be added to the factors which determine

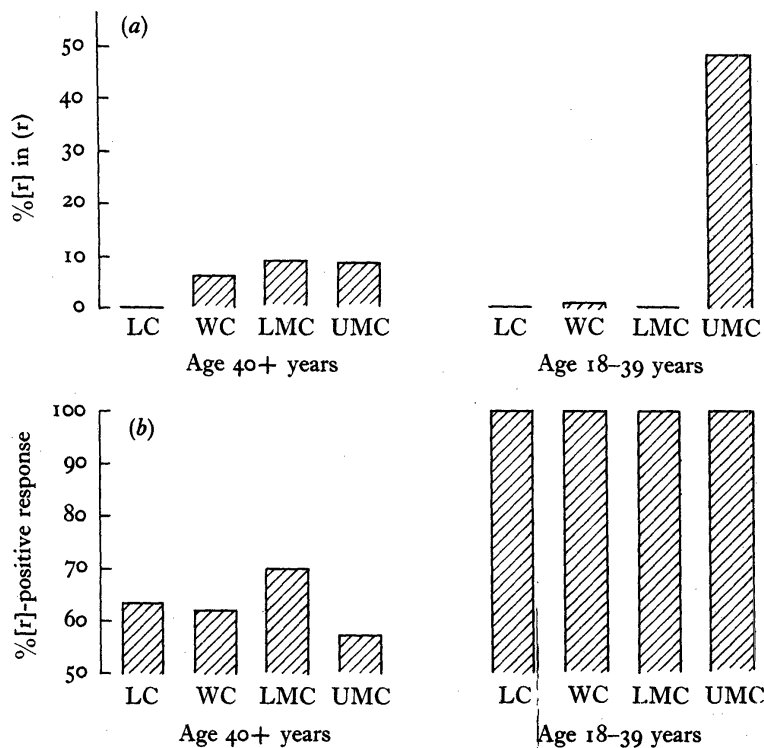


Figure 4

the occurrence of an *r*-glide in the speech of New York City and the rule governing the (r)-variable must be modified to read:

$$(r) \longrightarrow n[r] / \left\{ \begin{array}{c} C \\ \# \end{array} \right\}; n[r] = f(\text{class, style, age})$$

Confirmation of the diachronic hypotheses set up by Labov on the basis of the observed correlation between linguistic variation and age group must be sought outside his survey, which is purely synchronic in nature.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the (r)-variable such evidence does in fact exist.

<sup>1</sup> This work is too recent for follow-up studies aimed at testing the actual

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Both the Linguistic Atlas of New England (Kurath 1941) and a number of earlier monographs confirm that forty years ago New York speech was, with the exception of an occasional postvocalic glide in the speech of the uppermost class, entirely [r]-less. It would thus appear that the use of an *r*-glide constitutes a post-war innovation, a 'general American' feature introduced into New York speech in replacement of the old New England norms which had been current until then.

Another example in which language change can actually be demonstrated to have taken place will be drawn from Labov's work on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts (Labov 1963). The case is simpler than that of New York since it involves a relatively classless fishing and farming community, consisting essentially of the descendants of English settlers who have been on the island for nearly ten generations, to which must be added a minority of immigrants of Portuguese extraction and a relict population of Indians. In this case age is therefore the only non-linguistic parameter with which we need be concerned. The situation also forms a useful counterpart to that of New York in that, whereas the sensitivity to (r) was a feature imported into New York speech from outside, the pronunciation of the diphthong /aw/ with an increasingly centralized first element is a local development peculiar to Martha's Vineyard and without any counterpart on the surrounding mainland.

Field notes made for the Linguistic Atlas of New England (Kurath 1941) show that in the thirties the vowel of /ay/ was strongly centralized before voiceless consonants whereas that of /aw/ was not centralized at all. In the early sixties on the other hand the vowel of /ay/ was found to be centralized in all environments while that of /aw/ showed varying degrees of centralization (Labov 1963). We know therefore that a historical change has actually taken place.

progress of the changes in real time to have been possible. There is, however, one well known case in which the same informants were interviewed a second time after a period of about thirty years. This is Gauchat's (1905) study of the phonetic unity of the speech of Charmey, a small town in the Swiss Alps, which was followed up a generation later by Hermann (1929). During the course of his interviews Gauchat had found certain linguistic differences in the community which could be correlated with differences of age. Hermann found Gauchat's predictions regarding these variables confirmed in so far as the speech of the younger generation was concerned but also found that, of the speakers who had been young at the time of Gauchat's interview and who were now adults, some had modified their realization of the crucial variables further in the direction of the change whereas others had gone back to a more conservative position (cf. Weinreich-Labov-Herzog 1968: 171).

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In order to investigate this situation Labov set up an (aw)-variable and studied its realization as a function of both non-linguistic and linguistic structure. His investigations revealed that the transition from the earlier stage in which (aw) showed no sign of centralization to the more recent situation in which it is very strongly centralized in certain positions, especially in the speech of the younger and middle-aged members of the old established settler families, is reflected in the distribution of the various realizations of (aw) according to age group. On the evidence of acoustic analyses Labov divided the phonetic continuum between an uncentralized onset of the diphthong on the one hand and a fully centralized one on the other into four discrete zones, to which he attributed the following numerical values:

(aw = 0) [aʊ] not centralized  
(aw = 1) [a<sup>+</sup>ʊ]                   ↓  
(aw = 2) [eʊ]  
(aw = 3) [ɔʊ] fully centralized

If for each lexical item in the test which contains an (aw) the informant's realization of this is assigned a value according to this scale, the extremes being 0 for no centralization and 3 for full centralization, the (aw)-index of a speaker may be calculated. Figure 5 shows the actual distribution of (aw)-values according to age for a number of speakers (Labov 1972a: 274).

The informants ranged in age from over 90 to 31 (column 1). Figure 5a represents the conflated scores of the four informants that were interviewed for the Linguistic Atlas of New England (LANE) in 1933. The average age of these was 65 at the time of their interview which means that, had they been still living in 1963, their ages would have matched that of Labov's oldest informant (5b). In the graphs in column 2 the horizontal axis shows the degree of centralization of (aw) and the vertical axis the number of lexical items for each of the four values. The relative frequency of each of these values for each age group can thus be readily seen. The lexical items used in the questionnaire were divided on a phonological basis into two sets: in the set represented in the graphs by a solid line (aw) is followed by a voiceless obstruent (*house, out, mouth, etc.*) and in that represented by a broken line it is followed by some other consonant or by pause (*town, found, now, how, etc.*). The absolute number of lexical items for each set is given in the third column, the upper line of figures representing words with (aw) before voiceless

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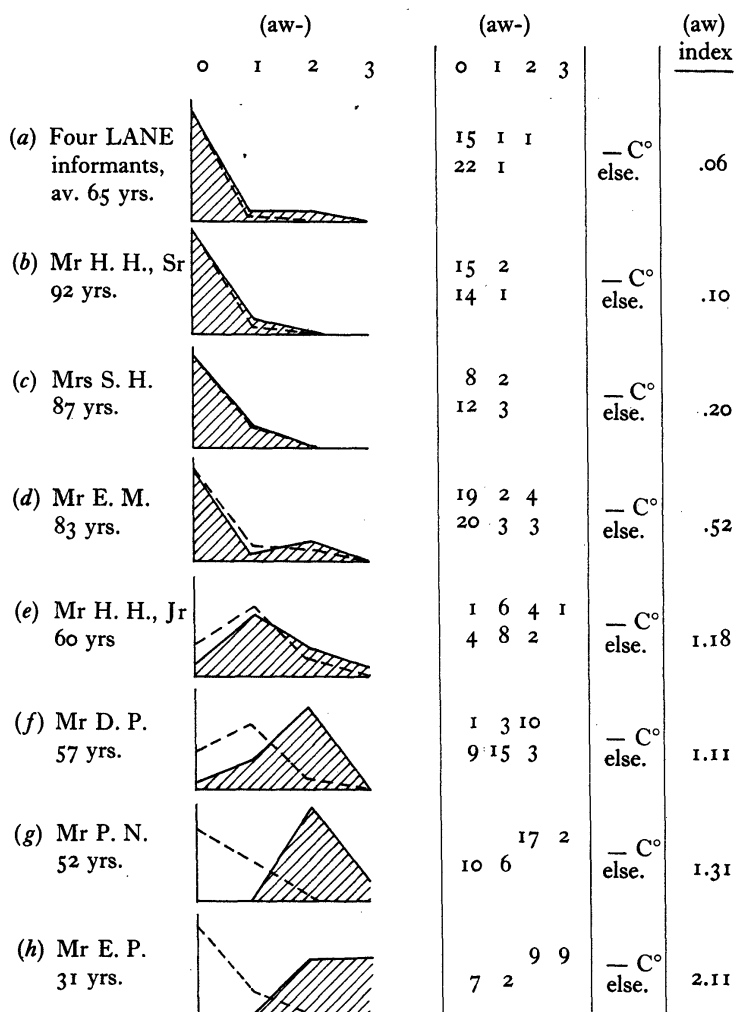


Figure 5

obstruent and the lower line the remainder. Finally the right-hand column gives the (aw)-index for each individual speaker.

The graphs show a definite increase in centralization with decreasing age. They also show that centralization is progressively associated with the presence of a following voiceless obstruent, so that in the case of the

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youngest speakers the distribution of centralized and non-centralized values of (aw) is phonologically determined, centralized allophones occurring before voiceless obstruent and non-centralized ones elsewhere. The situation might in its simplest form be represented by the rule:

$$\left[ +\text{voc} \right] \rightarrow n \left[ -\text{low} \right] / \text{---} \left[ \begin{array}{c} -\text{cons} \\ +\text{back} \end{array} \right]; n \left[ -\text{low} \right] = f(\text{age})$$

which merely states that centralization of the vowel onset is a function of age. The rule in this form does not, however, take account of any phonetic conditioning factors and in particular it does not bring out the fact that centralization is becoming increasingly associated with the voicelessness of the following obstruent. A more detailed formulation, in which variable elements are enclosed in angled brackets and their ordering represents their relative weight in implementing the rule, would thus be (Labov 1972d: 123):

$$[+\text{voc}] \rightarrow \langle -\text{low} \rangle / \text{---} \left[ \begin{array}{c} -\text{cons} \\ +\text{back} \end{array} \right] \langle +\text{obs} \langle +\text{tense} \langle -\text{cont} \langle +\text{segment} \rangle \rangle \rangle \rangle,$$

the degree  $n$  of implementation of the rule still being a function of age. This form of the rule embodies the information that of the variable features the obstruent nature of the following consonant is most decisive in producing centralization of the vowel, after that the absence of voicing (represented by [+tense]), next the fact that the segment is not a continuant, next that the diphthong is followed by a segment and not by pause. For younger speakers on the other hand the distribution of centralized and non-centralized values is entirely determined by a single property of the following consonant, namely absence of voice, and the rule is now mandatory. This means it no longer contains any variable elements and has become a categorical rule:

$$[+\text{voc}] \rightarrow [-\text{low}] / \text{---} \left[ \begin{array}{c} -\text{cons} \\ +\text{back} \end{array} \right] \left[ \begin{array}{c} +\text{cons} \\ +\text{tense} \end{array} \right]$$

It can thus be seen that there are two kinds of factor, one non-linguistic and the other linguistic, which govern centralization, namely the informant's age and the phonetic environment of the diphthong. The centralization process of (aw) in fact appears to be following that already taken in the local dialect by (ay). When the interviews for the

Linguistic Atlas were carried out in the thirties centralization of (ay) was noticeable and the phonetic conditions were very similar to those which now determine the variants of (aw); (ay) is now, however, centralized in all positions, so that the presence of a voiceless obstruent was only a transitional conditioning factor in the change process. It appears possible that (aw) will follow the same pattern as (ay) and finally end up centralized in all positions, although such an eventual outcome cannot of course be predicted with certainty.

Sociolinguistically, centralization may be said to correlate with status as a Vineyarder, that is to say with the speaker's sense of local identification with the island in the face of immigration and social pressures from the mainland. It can be shown to have originated with the old-established families but has, in the case of (ay) at least, been taken over also by the Indian and Portuguese inhabitants and has become generally identified with local loyalties.

In the above example, although the change has not altered the structure of the phonological system and although its effect on the two diphthongs concerned is not strictly in phase, these can be shown to be developing in a parallel way. This tendency towards the maintenance of structural symmetry is even more apparent in the case of the development of the long vowels in New York City. We shall see that both (eh) and (oh) are at present in the process of developing very high values ([i:ə], [u:ə]) in the casual speech of younger speakers (p. 214f.); this is however accompanied by hypercorrection to a low vowel ([æ:], [ɔ:]) in the more formal styles of the lower middle and upper working classes and by extreme sensitivity to [i:ə] and [u:ə] as stigmatized features in evaluation tests. As in the case of (ay) and (aw) in Martha's Vineyard, both variables can thus be shown to be developing in phonetically parallel ways although, here again, the changes are not simultaneous, (eh) being ahead of (oh). This fact may be taken account of if we say that (oh) is not only a function of class, style, and age but also of (eh). The values for two further variables on the other hand, namely (ah) in *heart, hard, father* and (ay) in *side, my*, appear to depend entirely on the values for (eh) and (oh). The development of all the long vowels may thus be considered to be interdependent in the following way: the realization of (eh) is a function of style, class and age; that of (oh) of style, class, age and (eh); that of (ah) a function of (oh); that of (ay) of both (ah) and (oh) (Weinreich-Labov-Herzog 1968: 172f.). We may interpret this as empirical support for the principle of symmetry and

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maximum distance between phonemes which was postulated in chapter 2 as governing phonological space.

### 3 **The mechanism of language change**

We have seen that the transition between successive language states is achieved by way of intermediate states characterized by the complex but systematic distribution within the speech community of 'old' and 'new' forms; we have also seen that this distribution is governed by variable rules which operate under the joint constraint of both linguistic and non-linguistic factors the forms and relative weightings of which differ from group to group within the community. Of the non-linguistic factors, age is obviously the most important for the historical linguist since its presence in a variable rule indicates that the variation pattern in question is likely to represent a change in progress. Thus, although in retrospect a completed change will give the appearance of a simple categorical rule having been added to the grammar of the language, we see that the process whereby this is actually brought about is the social evaluation by the speakers of the realizations of a linguistic variable within a community. What is relevant to change is thus not the linguistic function of a structural unit but the social information carried by its various realizations.

It will now be seen why it is possible for a change to take a considerable time to reach completion without the rule that governs it being lost in the process. For clearly its *direction* will be maintained and its ultimate *regularity* guaranteed as long as the rule continues to exist, not so much in the performance of individual speakers but rather in their social evaluation of the speech of those around them. In other words, although an individual speaker does not 'know' the rule which governs the change in question, he is aware of the social significance of certain features of performance, or 'accents', indicative of an individual's status within the community. This awareness may be said to form part of his *communicative competence*.<sup>1</sup> The class of words to which a particular

<sup>1</sup> In fact a delicate issue is raised here regarding the scope of linguistic competence, namely the question whether this is reflected in a speaker's performance or in his intentions (that is, the target towards which he is aiming). Labov has amply demonstrated the fact that there may be a considerable discrepancy between performance and intention by showing that speakers may be found who make systematically phonetic distinctions of which they are totally unaware (1972b). The opposite is, however, the more common, namely that items 'known' to be different are pronounced in the same way.

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change is applicable is held together by the distribution of the variation rule throughout the community as a whole no matter how incompletely it may be represented in the performance of any individual speaker. This is why the regularity principle does not make it necessary either for all speakers or for all eligible words to achieve the target of a change simultaneously.

It will be recalled that, in an earlier section of this book, we left open the question as to whether phonological change is gradual or instantaneous. The reason for this must now be obvious, for it is of course quite impossible to draw conclusions regarding the change *process* from a simple examination of rules set up in order to link successive grammars which are often separated from one another by centuries. The study of documented cases of change in progress has however helped us to obtain some insight into the way in which change actually appears to take place within a speech community and there is no reason why this process as currently observed need have been any different in the past. If indeed when dealing with past language states we find ourselves obliged to work with fictitiously uniform systems, this is not because we necessarily assume that there was no variation but simply because past variation is not recoverable, both because of the highly conventionalized nature of orthographies and because the methods of reconstruction, dependent on the regularity principle, are only able to recover completed changes.

All this unfortunately still tells us very little about how a change originates, apart from the fact that an innovation would appear to be associated initially with the speech of a particular subgroup of the community and to spread to adjacent groups given favourable socially determined conditions. We have seen that in the case of the *r*-glide the speech of the highest social class acted as the model for the classes situated immediately below it and that the change may be ultimately described as the spread of a prestige feature the origin of which lay outside New York itself.<sup>1</sup> The 'stigmatized' high vowel realizations of

<sup>1</sup> The change in progress in New York City affecting (*r*) raises an intriguing problem. Should the rule introducing an *r*-glide into preconsonantal and final position eventually reach completion, the resulting situation would in retrospect, and in the absence of detailed documentation of the currently observable intermediate stage, be interpreted diachronically as if no change had taken place at all, that is to say there would be no indication that New York speech had ever lost the glide allophone in these positions. In actual fact, however, it would have undergone first a partial merger and then a reversal of that merger, a situation which cannot be represented in a simple linear model of language change as described in the

### 3 *The mechanism of language change*

(eh) and (oh) on the other hand represented the spread of a local feature up the social scale from a lower class origin, though this process is accompanied by hypercorrection. The aspirations and loyalties associated with the [i:ə] and [u:ə] values of these variables must clearly be very different from those associated with the *r*-glide. Labov attempted to capture the social values associated with them by eliciting in the evaluation tests the informant's estimate of the speaker's chances of winning a street fight and to assess his attitude to the speaker by asking him whether he would want him as a personal friend. However, even informants who answered positively in respect of these values still responded to [i:ə] and [u:ə] as stigmatized features in so far as job prospects were concerned.

All this suggests that linguistic heterogeneity is in itself a constant source of change and that, at the phonological level at least, a great deal of language change is likely to have a social motivation. Very much less work has been done outside the phonological level, although in principle the concept of the variable is of course equally applicable to all structural levels. In the case of lexical replacement it is certainly a well-attested fact that on the one hand dialect words which do not have a cognate in the standard language are likely to be lost and that on the other dialects do constitute a source of lexical innovation for standard languages. However, if one considers the interchange which results from a contact situation as a source of linguistic innovation, there is no reason why this should be limited to varieties of one and the same language. We shall return to this aspect in the following chapter. It should however be stressed that, in spite of its undoubted importance in this respect, language contact is by no means the *only* innovatory factor in language change, both analogy (p. 32ff.) and sound symbolism (p. 11f., 42) being internal forces which have considerable creative potential.

first part of this book. The presently observable change affecting (r) is only meaningful in terms of a model of language change which takes account of co-existing varieties of a language in a contact situation. This example shows how large a discrepancy there may be between a living sociolinguistic situation and the retrospective appraisal of data which have survived only in documentary form and which are interpreted in terms of a linear model based on the principle of descriptive economy.