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Toward a Theory of Social Dialect Variation

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## **Toward a theory of social dialect variation**

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years the study of language in its social context has become a mature field with a substantial body of method and empirical results.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this work we are arriving at new insights into such classical problems as the origin and diffusion of linguistic change, the nature of stylistic variation in language use, and the effect of class structure on linguistic variation within a speech community. Advances in sociolinguistics have been most evident in the study of co-variation between social context and the sound pattern of speech. The results reported in numerous monographs have laid the basis for substantial theoretical progress in our understanding of the factors that govern dialect variation in stratified communities, at least in its phonological aspect.<sup>2</sup> The formulation of theories of the causes of phonological variation that go beyond guesswork and vague generalities appears at last to be possible. Therefore, we offer the following discussion, based on the material that is now available, as a contribution to the development of an explanatory theory of the mechanisms underlying social dialect variation. Although we shall state our views strongly, we know that they are far from definitive. We present them, not as positions to be defended at all costs, but as stimuli to further theoretical reflection in a field that has been, thus far, descriptively oriented.

The thrust of our proposal can be expressed in the form of the following two-part hypothesis that, while not exhaustive, covers a wide range of recently investigated cases: *First*, the public prestige dialect<sup>3</sup> of the elite in a stratified community differs from the dialect(s) of the non-elite strata (working class and other)

[1] I want to thank the many people, too numerous to mention, who have read and commented on an earlier version of this paper. Special thanks must go to W. Labov, whose comments have been so helpful to me in revising the paper for publication.

[2] This paper directly concerns only the phonological aspect of social dialect variation and, therefore, it cannot hope to present a comprehensive theory of variation. There may well be important parallels between variation and change at the phonological and at other levels; but claims about the one certainly cannot be extended to the others in any direct or automatic way. In our opinion further empirical studies of syntactic and semantic variation will be necessary before it becomes possible to propose substantial theoretical hypotheses in these areas.

[3] The exact relationship between this dialect and the social elite is far from clear at present. For one thing the dialect seems most characteristic not of an economic and/or political ruling class but of the professional representatives of the dominant culture; i.e. the elite in such professions as academia, the law, business management, medicine and the mass media.

in at least one phonologically systematic way.<sup>4</sup> In particular, it characteristically resists normal processes of phonetic conditioning (both articulatory and perceptual) that the speech of non-elite strata regularly undergo. This tendency holds both for dynamic processes of linguistic change and for diachronically stable processes of inherent variation.<sup>5</sup> *Second*, the cause of stratified phonological differentiation within a speech community is to be sought not in purely linguistic factors but in ideology. Dominant social groups tend to mark themselves off symbolically as distinct from the groups they dominate and to interpret their symbols of distinctiveness as evidence of superior moral and intellectual qualities. This tendency shows itself not only in speech style but also in such other areas of social symbolism as dress, body carriage, and food. In all these areas dominant groups mark themselves off by introducing elaborated styles and by borrowing from external prestige groups; but in the case of pronunciation they also mark their distinctiveness in a negative way – that is by inhibiting many of the low level, variable processes of phonetic conditioning that characterize spoken language and that underlie regular phonological change. Because these processes are of variable application, they admit readily of non-linguistic influences. Of course, since the different social strata belong to the same speech community, their speech patterns influence one another profoundly. Processes that originate in the popular vernacular infiltrate the prestige dialect and processes of the prestige dialect extend to popular speech. The extent of these mutual influences is variable from case to case, depending on such social factors as the degree of linguistic self-consciousness of the prestige dialect speakers and the strength of their ideological influence on the population as a whole (see Barber 1964). It depends as well on a complex of linguistic, articulatory and perceptual factors.

In the discussion that follows we shall attempt to confirm this hypothesis by investigating, on the one hand, recent descriptions of the phonological differ-

[4] Our discussion of phonological differentiation must be limited to contexts where there are established prestige dialects. Dialects which are in the process of becoming established, say as standard languages, may easily be less conservative phonetically than the local vernaculars they replace. In the historical process whereby the standard languages of Europe, for example, arose the relationship between prestige and vernacular dialects was quite different from the one we shall be discussing between established prestige dialects and their vernaculars.

[5] This view is, of course, not original with us. For example, H. G. Schogt (1961) says:

Passant maintenant à l'examen des couches sociales d'un seul dialecte géographique, nous constatons deux forces opposées: la langue populaire riche en innovations, qui a pour elle le grand nombre, et la langue des classes aisées, qui est plus conservatrice et qui s'impose par son prestige (p. 91).

[Passing now to the examination of the social strata of a single geographic dialect, we ascertain two opposed forces: the popular language, rich in innovations, which has numbers on its side, and the language of the well-to-do classes which is more conservative and imposes itself by its prestige.]

The point of our paper is to show that the evidence made available by recent sociolinguistic research can be interpreted so as to support and elaborate this perspective.

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ences among social dialects and, on the other hand, the evidence that has become available concerning the ideological motivation for these differences. We shall discover that popular dialects exhibit their greater susceptibility to phonetic conditioning in such features as simplified articulation, replacement or loss of perceptually weak segments, and a greater tendency to undergo 'natural' vowel shifts.<sup>6</sup> As far as ideology is concerned, we shall see that there is both experimental and historical evidence that prestige dialects require special attention to speech, attention motivated not by the needs of communication but by status consciousness.

## CURRENT THEORY OF DIALECT DIFFERENTIATION

Before we proceed with our argument, let us clarify the difference between our hypothesis and others' explanations for social dialect variation. In particular, we must state explicitly the relationship between our views and those of Labov, since his work provides so much of the empirical material available to theoretical reflection. Labov's research has generated considerable evidence for the proposition that working-class speech is more susceptible to the processes of phonetic conditioning than is the prestige dialect. Unfortunately, Labov and other contemporary sociolinguists neither state this principle explicitly nor attempt to provide an explanation for it. Indeed, Labov is not willing to make a clear empirical claim on the linguistic character of social dialect variation. His theoretical statements sometimes point towards our characterization of social dialect differences, but on other occasions he seems to take a position contrary to our proposal.

In the article 'The social setting of linguistic change', Labov states that ordinary phonological change, what he calls 'change from below the level of conscious awareness', generally does not originate in the highest status group in a speech community. He says:

It does sometimes happen that a feature will be introduced by the highest class in the social system, though as a rule this is not an innovating group (Labov 1972: 295).

Changes which are introduced by the highest class tend to be conscious attempts to imitate an even more prestigious dialect outside the local area:

Innovation by the highest-status group is normally a form of borrowing from

[6] By '“natural” vowel shifts' we mean regular changes in vowel quality, especially chain shifts, which appear frequently in diverse languages and which seem to have a phonetic motivation, but for which there is as yet no adequate phonetic theory. Thus, we use the term 'natural' in an informal sense to indicate a faith in an eventual substantive (as opposed to formal) explanation of the phenomena, not out of adherence to any theory of naturalness. For systematic exposition of a substantive perspective on phonology see, among others, Lindblom (1971) and Chen & Wang (1975).

outside sources, more or less conscious; with some exceptions these will be prestige forms (Labov 1972: 290).

In a more recent article, however, he says:

Dialect differentiation is not confined to uneducated, lower-class people. It is well known that some linguistic changes originate in the upper social groups. Many of these represent the importation of forms from high-prestige foreign languages or classical standards. But some new developments seem to be pushed faster and faster among educated speakers, at least until the change becomes noticed and subject to strong social correction (Labov 1974: 224).

In his extensive study of vowel shifts currently in progress in English dialects (Labov, Yaeger & Steiner 1972) Labov does indicate that these shifts seem to originate in the popular vernacular, but elsewhere he explicitly denies the existence of processes of phonetic conditioning in that dialect. For example, he denies that the vernacular differs from the prestige dialect in ease of articulation. In the 'Study of language in its social context', he says:

Why don't all people speak the prestige dialect? The usual response is to cite laziness, lack of concern, or isolation from the prestige norm. But there is no foundation for the notion that stigmatized vernacular forms are easier to pronounce (Labov 1972: 249).

In this passage, Labov is clearly concerned with discrediting the class-prejudiced notion that the working class vernacular is an inferior or 'lazy' dialect. He is, of course, correct to want to defeat this prejudice; but the proper way to do so is not to deny the fact, obvious from his own research, that non-prestige dialects tend to be articulatorily more economical than the prestige dialect. Defeat of prejudice requires rather that we give a better explanation of this fact than the laziness 'theory' provides. The only evidence Labov gives that vernacular forms are not easier to pronounce is that the vowel shifts in progress in urban working class vernaculars increase the muscular effort needed to pronounce tense vowels over that required in standard English. This point is, however, irrelevant to the existence of a tendency toward ease of articulation because that tendency manifests itself primarily in the consonant system, which Labov does not mention. On another point, Labov's statement explicitly equates ease of pronunciation with 'laziness' and lets the reader believe that if the non-prestige dialect were easier to pronounce, then the charge of laziness would be valid. This is, of course, not so as we shall see in our discussion of the motivation of social dialect differences.

One of the reasons why Labov and other sociolinguists have not seen the link between phonetic conditioning and social dialect variation more clearly is that linguists' traditional attitudes toward this variation are incompatible with the

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relationship that recent studies have revealed. Because these attitudes, in one form or another, underlie most sociolinguistic theory, including the best and most recent work, the implications of the empirical research have been obscured.

The central assumption of linguists about the origin of dialect variation has been that when sound changes arise in the speech of individuals or small groups, the further spread of these changes depends on the prestige of their users. Under this assumption there is no reason to expect the speech of non-elite groups to be more susceptible to phonetic processes than that of the elite. Indeed, it would lead one to expect either that social dialect variation was phonologically unsystematic or that the speech of the elite showed more phonetic conditioning than that of the common people. The first alternative results if one assumes that sound change is not governed by substantive factors (as in Postal 1968), the second if one assumes that sound change is so governed. A position close to this latter is put forward in Joos (1952) and argued for in Fischer (1964), although neither gives any empirical findings to support his claim. Fischer says (quoting Joos's comment in its entirety):

The clearest and most comprehensive statement of social factors in linguistic change which I have encountered is found in an article by Martin Joos (1952) . . . . He speaks of 'the phonetic drift, which was kept going in the usual way: that is, the dialects and idiolects of higher prestige were more advanced in this direction, and their speakers carried the drift further along so as to maintain the prestige-marking differences against their pursuers. The vanity factor is needed to explain why phonetic drifts tend to continue in the same direction; the "inertia" sometimes invoked is a label and not an argument.' This protracted pursuit of an elite by an envious mass and the consequent 'flight' of the elite is in my opinion the most important mechanism in linguistic drift, not only in the phonetic drift which Joos discusses, but in syntactic and lexical drifting as well (Fischer 1964: 286).

Of course, our view, as put forward in the introduction to this paper, contradicts all approaches that derive sound change from innovation by a prestige group. We are proposing instead that:

1. ordinary unconscious phonological changes are definitely not arbitrary but are, in general, phonetically motivated processes;
2. prestige is a secondary factor in the propagation of phonetically motivated linguistic changes, whose linguistic character is the original basis of their diffusion;
3. the main force of social prestige is to inhibit phonetically conditioned processes, both of change in progress and of stable inherent variation, in the speech of high status groups and those whom they influence.

These three propositions immediately imply that social dialect variation should be

systematic and that popular speech should be more 'advanced' than the standard. The evidence which we shall provide in this paper will make it clear that they provide a better basis for sociolinguistic theory than the traditional view.

In view of his empirical work, it is surprising that Labov's theoretical position on the causes of variation and change is in some respects a version of the traditional view as we have outlined it. Labov does criticize Bloomfield and others for their assertion that new forms originate among speakers with the highest social status and are then borrowed by those of lesser status. He says:

Oddly enough, a great deal of the speculative literature on dialect borrowing is based on the notion that all movement of linguistic forms is from the higher-prestige group to the lower (Labov 1972: 286).

He then quotes a passage by Bloomfield that puts forward this view and comments:

This is simply a remark, with no more justification than any of the other general observations in Bloomfield's treatment of dialect borrowing. Studies of current sound changes show that a linguistic innovation can begin with any particular group and spread outward and that this is the normal development; that this one group can be the highest-status group, but not necessarily or even frequently so (Labov 1972: 286).

But although he rejects the notion that new forms originate at the top of the social hierarchy, he does not abandon the idea that the spread of linguistic innovations depends on the social prestige attached to them. Instead he proposes that popular speech has its own prestige, perhaps as a marker of local identity.<sup>7</sup> He suggests that a change often originates among individuals in a non-elite stratum and is then adopted by their peers, becoming a linguistic symbol of the group's solidarity. This view, which Labov has adapted from Ferguson & Gumperz (1960), we might call 'linguistic pluralism' because it maintains that different social groups within a language community have different prestige norms, much as pluralist social

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[7] In one place Labov puts his position as follows:

A linguistic change begins as a local pattern characteristic of a particular social group, often the result of immigration from another region. It becomes generalized throughout the group, and becomes associated with the social values attributed to that group. It spreads to those neighboring populations which take the first group as a reference group in one way or another. The opposition of the two linguistic forms continues and often comes to symbolize an opposition of social values. These values may rise to the level of social consciousness and become *stereotypes*, subject to irregular social correction, or they may remain below that level as unconscious *markers*. Finally, one or the other of the two forms wins out. There follows a long period when the disappearing form is heard as archaic, a symbol of vanished prestige or stigma, and is used as a source of stereotyped humor until it is extinguished entirely (Labov, Yaeger & Steiner 1972: 279)

For another statement of this position see Labov (1974: 250 ff.).

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theory claims for those groups different interests and values generally. In this view linguistic variation in the speech of individuals when they switch between more and less formal speech styles is due to the opposition of values between the overall prestige value of the standard and the solidarity value of the popular vernacular.

Labov's linguistic pluralism is certainly less objectionable than earlier views of the popular vernacular as an imperfect imitation of standard speech. Because it still relies on the notion that arbitrary social values are the motive force behind phonological innovation and social dialect variation, however, it cannot adequately account for these phenomena. His theory still gives one no reason to expect the speech of the common people to be more open to phonetic conditioning than that of the elite. In fact, his pluralistic conception of prestige leads one to expect change to originate equally at all social levels and social dialect variation to be, therefore, linguistically random. Thus, the result of Labov's theoretical commitment is that where he notices the greater susceptibility to phonetic conditioning of popular dialects (i.e., in vowel shifting) he can give no explanation for it<sup>8</sup> and that he fails to recognize some of the ways in which this susceptibility manifests itself.

#### PHONETIC CONDITIONING IN SOCIAL DIALECTS

Having set out our theoretical perspective, we shall now present the evidence by which we justify it. We shall discuss the three main processes of change or inherent variation on which substantial empirical results are available, and we shall see that all three types more readily affect vernacular dialects than standard ones. The processes are: (1) consonantal simplifications, including both articulatory reductions and the loss or replacement of perceptually indistinct segments; (2) vocalic processes of chain shifting; and (3) assimilations of foreign phonemes to a native pattern. Of course, these processes do not exhaust the phonological differences between social dialects nor do they cover all possible kinds of phonetic conditioning in language.<sup>9</sup> Our purpose in presenting the material below is to provide evidence for our basic hypothesis, not to describe exhaustively the range of sociolinguistic phenomena.

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[8] Our analysis of Labov's views on the underlying causes of social dialect variation has the advantage of explaining one striking feature of his work: the contradiction between his empirical results and theoretical statements on sound change. The former universally point to the working class and lower middle class as the originators of sound change in contemporary American English; but the latter claim that sound change can originate in any social stratum.

[9] In particular it is not the case, nor are we claiming, that regular phonological processes can all be reduced to simplification of some sort. Simplified articulation is just one of the possible manifestations of phonetic conditioning. It happens to be a very common one that covers much of the available data.



*Consonantal simplification.* In his study *The social stratification of English in New York City*, Labov described the variation of several phonological elements in the city. The consonantal elements were: (1) the initial consonant in words like *thing, theater, thought* (th); (2) the initial consonant in words like *then, the, there* (dh); (3) the final and preconsonantal /r/ in words like *car, bear, card, beard* (r).<sup>10</sup> He discovered that these elements were realized differently by different social classes and by the same social class in different situations. In particular, he found that in casual speech there was a regular correlation between a person's class position and his pronunciation of the elements listed. Lower position in the social hierarchy correlated with: (1) greater use of a lenis stop [t] or the affricate [tth] where standard pronunciation has the fricative [th]; (2) greater use of the voiced stop [d] or affricate [ddh] where standard pronunciation has the voiced affricate [dh]; (3) greater vocalization and dropping of final and preconsonantal /r/.

As far as stylistic variation was concerned, Labov found that in the most formal contexts speakers of all classes shifted their speech away from working class patterns and toward upper middle class norms. Figure 1 illustrates this stylistic and class variation in the dropping of final and preconsonantal /r/.

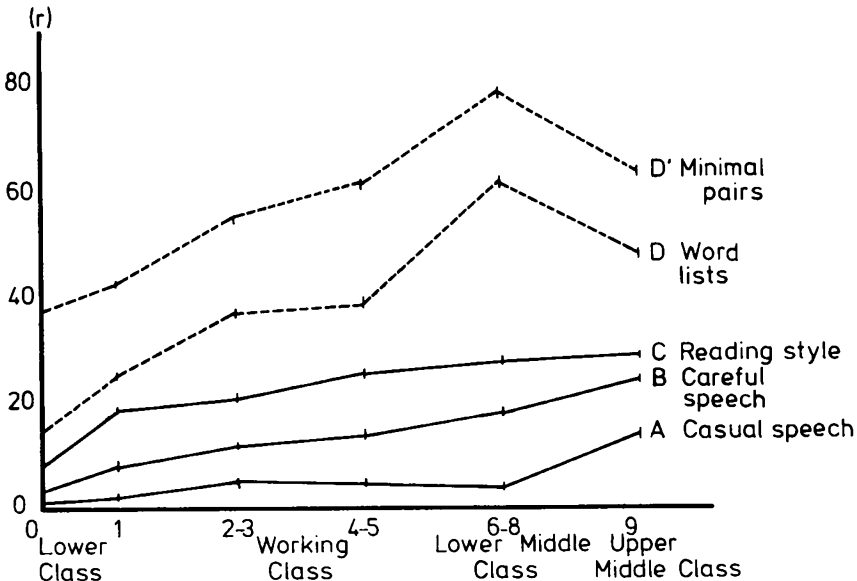


FIGURE 1. Simplified style stratification of (r): six class groups (Labov 1966: p. 240, fig. 10)

[10] The dropping of word final r was studied only when the following word began with a consonant. Among white New Yorkers r is rarely dropped in the environment r # #V.

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The data from Labov's study clearly exhibit the greater tendency toward simplification of consonant articulation that we have postulated for non-prestige dialects. The consonantal variables all exhibit articulatory simplification and all involve the loss or modification of perceptually indistinct segments. In the case of final and preconsonantal /r/ the vocalization or dropping of /r/ involves both an articulatory reduction that weakens or eliminates a tongue movement and the loss of a segment that is hard to distinguish from the preceding vowel. Also, the loss of /r/ before a consonant tends to create articulatorily more natural syllable structures in which consonant clusters are shortened or eliminated (Schane 1972). The substitution of stops for the fricatives [th] and [dh] eliminates segments that are at once difficult to articulate<sup>11</sup> and hard to distinguish from other fricatives.

Data comparable to Labov's have been collected on Panamanian Spanish by Henrietta Cedergren (1970), on Brazilian Portuguese by Gregory Guy & Maria Luiza Braga (1976) and on Montreal French by William Kemp & Paul Pupier (1976); and all of them confirm our hypothesis concerning consonant articulation. Cedergren's study involved the following five linguistic variables:

1. (R): the devoicing, fricativization, pharyngealization, and deletion of syllable-final /r/, with values ranging from 1 to 6 in the direction of these processes.
  2. (PARA): the alternation of the full form of the preposition *para* with *pa* with values of 1 and 2 respectively.
  3. (ESTA): alternation of the full form *esta* with *ta*, assigned values of 1 and 2 respectively.
  4. (S): the syllable final alternation of [s], [h] and [θ] with values of 1, 2 and 3 respectively.
  5. (CH): palatal versus retroflex and reduced stop onset of /ç/, with values of 1 and 2 respectively.
- (Quoted in Labov 1972: 293-4.)

The results of Cedergren's study are summarized in Table 1. Each of the five variables shows distinct social variation and in each case the less prestigious social groups use the articulatorily reduced variants more often than does the most prestigious group. That the variants favored by the lower class groups are articulatorily simplified is clear. In the case of (R) and (S) the non-prestige speaker tends to weaken or delete a syllable final consonant. In the case of (PARA) and (ESTA) the non-prestige tendency is to drop an entire syllable. With (CH) no deletion is involved but the tendency is still to replace an energetically pronounced consonant with a weaker one.

[11] The assertion that interdental fricatives are difficult to articulate is supported by a number of facts. Firstly, the sounds are relatively rare to the world's languages. Secondly, children learning to speak English acquire these sounds late. Thirdly, adult speakers learning English as a second language generally have difficulty mastering these sounds.

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TABLE 1. *Social stratification of five Spanish variables in Panama* (Cedergren 1970)

Variable	Social groups			
	I	II	III	IV
(R)	1.62	1.88	2.29	2.29
(PARA)	1.11	1.37	1.39	1.69
(ESTA)	1.26	1.56	1.62	1.71
(S)	2.03	2.24	2.31	2.36
(CH)	1.88	2.24	2.13	2.00

The highest social group is I, the lowest IV.

Guy & Braga (1976) studied the loss of redundant plural markers in Brazilian Portuguese noun phrases like the following:

1. *aqueles rapazes* 'those boys'.
2. *as minhas cadeiras* 'my chairs'.

They found a pronounced tendency for the plural morpheme to be deleted from non-initial elements of the noun phrase, often leaving only one marker of plurality per phrase. This articulatory simplification through the deletion of grammatically redundant consonantal segments was much more pronounced in 'lower class' than in 'middle class' speakers.

Kemp & Pupier (1976) studied consonant cluster reduction in Montreal French and found that in environments where this simplification was possible there was

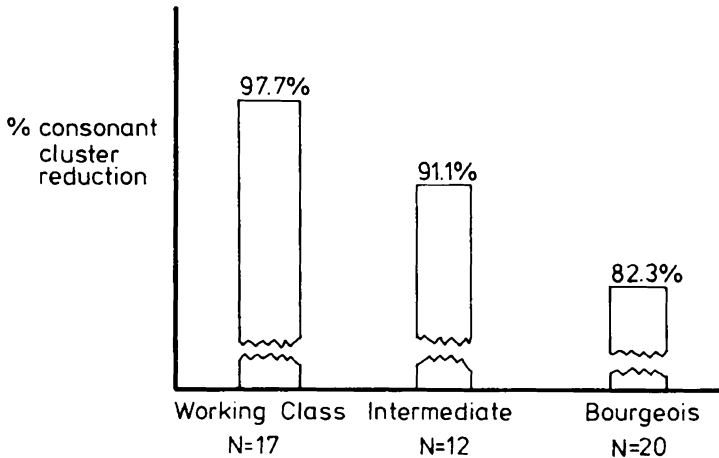


FIGURE 2. Consonant cluster reduction by class group in Montreal French (Kemp and Pupier 1976)

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a regular and marked class stratification of simplification in the direction we would predict. Figure 2 summarizes their results.

Aside from the specific consonant changes documented by Labov and others, there is a more general tendency towards simplifying consonantal articulation that is favored by non-prestige dialects—that is, a tendency to favor the articulatory reductions of rapid speech. An informal pilot survey of eastern Connecticut speech patterns that we conducted indicates that working class casual speech favors some very marked articulatory reductions and assimilations. For example, we frequently found among working class speakers reduced forms like [nʔəm] for 'and them' or [wəsəmaetə] for 'what's the matter?' and assimilations like the palatalized [laeʃeiyə] for 'last year' or [wəʃə duwɪn] for 'what are you doing'; such forms were rarer among middle class speakers.

The processes that go on in rapid or casual speech are perhaps the clearest examples of phonetically conditioned processes that linguists have discussed. Zwicky (1972) points out that:

Casual speech processes seem to be constrained to be phonetically natural. In the extreme case they can be explained as the inevitable result of increasing speed of speech: the articulators simply cannot achieve their targets in the time available. This is the sort of explanation suggested by Lindblom (1963) for certain vowel reductions in fast speech.

Even when such strong direct explanations are not available, casual speech processes are obviously 'euphonic', serving either ease – assimilation, neutralization, insertion of transitional sounds – or brevity – simplification of geminates, vowel contraction, deletion of weakly articulated segments, monophthongization (Zwicky 1972: 608).

He also points out that different speakers use rapid speech forms more or less readily at a given rate of speech. What seems to be true of our informants is not that working class speakers speak more rapidly than middle class speakers but rather that they are more likely to use the reduction processes of rapid speech at a given rate of speech. Indeed, many of the consonantal variations across social class and speech style that have been catalogued could simply be reflexes of the greater openness of non-prestige groups to the euphonic processes of rapid speech.

*Vowel shifts.* In addition to its findings on consonantal variables, Labov's study of the Lower East Side also shows that working class and lower middle class speakers in New York City tend to tense and raise low front and back vowels. This raising is part of a general vowel shift currently in progress in a number of American English dialects. Although there are detailed descriptions of vowel shifts in many languages, little is known about their functional effect on phonological systems or the reasons for their widespread occurrence. As Labov points out, ease of articulation does not seem to be a factor in such shifts, and we know

too little about how sounds are perceived to know whether perceptual prominence is involved. On the other hand, it seems apparent from the many vowel shifts that have been described that some regular forces are involved for these shifts tend to go in some directions rather than others. In particular, Miller (1972) and Stampe (1972) have pointed out that front and back vowels (which Miller calls 'chromatic' vowels) tend quite generally to raise. There are a number of examples of such raising, perhaps the best known of which is the Great Vowel Shift that occurred from late middle to early modern English.<sup>12</sup> Similar vowel shifts have occurred throughout the Indo-European language family and in other language families as well (see Wolfe 1972; Labov, Yaeger & Steiner 1972).

From the historical evidence Miller and Stampe conclude that the raising of front and back vowels, particularly tense ones, is a natural phonological change; and we can apply their conclusions, at least tentatively, to New York City vowel raising. Since this raising is most prevalent and extreme in working class and lower middle class speech, the New York City data suggest that non-prestige vowel systems may be more open to natural vowel shifting than prestige systems.

This conclusion is greatly strengthened by the empirical work on contemporary vowel shifts reported by Labov, Yaeger and Steiner. They report that the New York City vowel shift is merely one example of an extremely widespread kind of vowel shifting currently in progress in many urban dialects of American and British English. In the more than a score of cities represented in the study, the authors found: (1) that the vowel shifts obey general principles (not very different from the principles of naturalness proposed by Stampe and Miller) and (2) that the vernacular speech of the working class uniformly carries the shifts further than the prestige dialect does.

*Phoneme assimilation.* When words are borrowed into one language from another, the phonologically simplest way for this borrowing to occur is for the words to be

[12] The effect of the Great Vowel Shift is illustrated in the following diagram:



(taken from Wolfe 1972: 1)

Thus we have the following correspondence between early modern English and middle English:

Middle English	Early Modern	Present Day	
[na:me]	[neim]	[neym]	name
[dæ:d]	[di:d]	[diyd]	deed
[geis]	[gi:s]	[giys]	geese
[wi:n]	[weyn]	[wayn]	wine
[stɔ:n]	[sto:n]	[stown]	stone
[go:s]	[gu:s]	[guws]	goose
[hu:s]	[hows]	[haws]	house

(taken from Bloomfield 1933: 387)

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assimilated to the native sound pattern. This assimilation enables the speaker to use already learned articulations and rules on the borrowed words instead of having to learn new patterns for the sake of a few lexical items. Sometimes, if the borrowing is on a very large scale, features of the phonology of the source language may be borrowed along with the words, as happened with the Romance Stress Rule in English after the Norman Conquest. This is not, however, the usual case. When we look at social dialects, we discover that prestige dialects often preserve in borrowed words the pronunciation of the source language, or some approximation to it, after the vernacular has completely assimilated the words to the native pattern. The blocking of this assimilation is another example of how prestige dialects inhibit phonetic processes that go on in the vernacular.

Examples of the difference between prestige and vernacular dialects in the assimilation of foreign words are easy to find. Thus, in English many words and phrases borrowed from the French are pronounced variably, with the more learned pronunciation being closer to the French original than is the vernacular one. An excellent example of this sort of variation is described by Bright & Ramanujan (1964) for Tamil, a Dravidian language of India. They compared the borrowing of foreign words into the Brahmin and non-Brahmin dialects of the language and found that the non-Brahmin dialect was more likely to assimilate the pronunciation to the native pattern.

#### PRESTIGE DIALECTS AND THE SUPPRESSION OF PHONETICALLY CONDITIONED PROCESSES

Linguists have long noticed that prestige dialects tend to preserve archaic forms that are changed or lost in the vernacular. Bloomfield states:

. . . the standard language, closely tied up with the literary language, tends to become archaic (that is to ignore the changes of the last generations) (Bloomfield 1964: 393-4).

This same position is put forward by Bright (1964) as regards Tamil and another Dravidian language, Kannada. Bright points out that in these languages the highest caste dialect often preserves phonological characteristics that have undergone change in the non-Brahmin dialect. Thus, he says:

. . . the non-Brahmin dialect [of Kannada] shows more sound change within native vocabulary; cf. non-Brahmin *ālu* 'milk', Brahmin *hālu* (Medieval *hāl*, Old Kannada *pāl*): non-Brahmin *gombe* 'doll', Brahmin *bombe* (Old Kannada *bombe*) (Bright 1964: 470).

Some evidence is available of a similar pattern [to that of Kannada] in the caste dialects of Tamil. For instance Old Tamil had a retroflex fricative which may be transcribed *ʒ*; this is preserved in Brahmin dialects but merges with *y*, *l*, *l* or zero in most non-Brahmin dialects (Bright 1964: 471).

A similar situation seems to exist in the Indonesian language Javanese with its prestige and non-prestige speech levels (Krama and Ngoko). There is evidence that some of the differences between these levels is due to the retention of archaic phonological features in Krama (White 1972: 26-7).

Facts like these fit quite well with Labov's results on present-day English, as he himself has pointed out (Labov 1972: 297). If we assume that systematic phonological changes resisted by prestige dialects are phonetically conditioned, then the facts fit our position as well. What is still lacking is a clear explanation for the facts. Bloomfield and Bright both suggest that the central factor retarding phonological change in prestige dialects is literacy. They argue that prestige speakers, being the most educated stratum of society, are more influenced by the literary tradition to resist change. Bright & Ramanujan (1964) suggest that in the non-written Dravidian language Tulu the Brahmin dialect is not phonologically more conservative than the non-Brahmin dialect.

The literacy argument for the tendency of prestige dialects to resist change undoubtedly has some merit. Thus, there are numerous cases in English where the written language has influenced the spoken language, not only by resisting change but also by altering pronunciation in the direction of spelling form (see Barber 1964). We believe, however, that more than the influence of the literary language is involved and also that this influence cannot simply be pointed out but requires an explanation.

Our position, as stated earlier, is that prestige dialects resist phonetically motivated change and inherent variation because prestige speakers seek to mark themselves off as distinct from the common people and because inhibiting phonetic processes is an obvious way to do this. Thus, we are claiming that there is a particular ideological motivation at the origin of social dialect variation. This ideology causes the prestige dialect user to expend more energy in speaking than does the user of the popular vernacular. In addition, there is another reason why prestige dialects would tend to resist phonological change. These dialects are maintained by social elites and such elites are by and large conservative. The use of conservative linguistic forms is for them a symbol of their whole value system. From this standpoint the conservatism of the literary language has basically the same source as that of the spoken prestige dialect, since the standards of the literary language are set by the elite. The influence of the literary language on the spoken standard is one manifestation among others of a socially motivated inhibition of linguistic change. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that prestige dialects not only inhibit changes that violate written forms but also resist changes in such features as vowel quality long before those changes would cause noticeable contradictions between the written and the spoken forms.

Evidence for our explanation of the tendency of prestige dialects to resist phonetic processes can be found in a number of sources. One source of evidence is Labov's documentation of the suppression of change by the upper middle class in

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New York City (Labov 1966). He found that changes originating in the working class and the lower middle class spread outwards from there to influence the speech of the upper middle class until at a certain point the change has advanced enough linguistically to be noticeable. Then a process of suppression begins in the upper middle class and slowly spreads downward through the social hierarchy. This suppression is associated with definite negative social evaluation of the suppressed feature as 'lower class' (Labov 1972). Thus, Labov's results indicate not only that the social elite suppresses change but also that the motivation for this suppression is a desire to maintain social distinctiveness in speech.

A second source of evidence for our position lies in the attitudes of intellectuals who set standards of usage for the prestige dialects. Such works as Fowler's *A dictionary of modern English usage* (1944) have as their express aim slowing down the rate of change in the language (see Barber 1964: 9). The French Academy is an even more obvious expression of the notion that the standard language should resist change. The guardians of usage view change as degeneration from a past epoch of linguistic and literary greatness; and for them the fact that an innovation arises in the popular vernacular is generally sufficient grounds for excluding it from the prestige dialect.

A third piece of evidence for our view can be found in an extremely interesting experiment conducted by the psychologist George Mahl and analysed linguistically by Labov. Mahl studied the effects of two factors on the speech of 17 middle class college students: (1) blocking a subject's self-monitoring of speech with white noise and (2) blocking his view of the interviewer's face. He collected samples of the subjects' speech under the following four conditions:

1. Facing the interviewer, without masking noise.
2. Facing away (so as not to be able to see the interviewer's face), without masking noise.
3. Facing the interviewer, with masking noise (i.e., wearing earphones through which white noise is administered at sufficient volume to prevent the subject from hearing his own voice).
4. Facing away, with masking noise.

The two alternations of the normal conversational situation introduced by Mahl would both seem to make communication more difficult. Therefore, one would expect that under the abnormal conditions 2-4, subjects would speak more distinctly so as to overcome the interference with communication. Indeed, the masking noise did cause the subjects to speak more loudly, even though the interviewer was not hearing the noise and told the subjects that they need not raise their voices (Mahl 1972: 225).<sup>13</sup>

[13] The masking noise does not really interfere with communication acoustically since only the subject hears it. The subjects seem to have behaved, however, as though the interviewer was also hearing the noise. The loudness of their speech is one indication of this phenomenon.



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Interestingly, however, Labov's linguistic analysis found that the subjects shifted toward the vernacular rather than towards prestige pronunciations under the abnormal conditions. Table 2 shows the shift toward replacing interdental fricatives with stops in the speech of one subject.

TABLE 2. *Percentage of 'th' variants in the speech of subject 13 in the 4 conditions (Mahl 1972: 237)*

Variants	Facing No noise	Facing away No noise	Facing Noise	Facing away Noise
$\theta$ $\delta$ (think, that)	86.5	75.9	74.5	68.8
t    d (tink, dat)	13.5	24.1	25.5	31.7
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N (occurrences)	333	261	541	362

The results of Mahl's experiment must be treated as tentative because only a limited body of speech was carefully analysed, but they are nonetheless extremely suggestive. Only if we assume that the use of standard English pronunciation is motivated by social ideology can we explain them. The removal of auditory feedback through masking prevents the speaker from monitoring his speech and so it drops to a more natural level. This demonstrates, as Labov points out (Labov 1972: 97-8), that the prestige dialect requires special attention to be paid to speech. Even more significantly, however, removing the subject's view of the interviewer's face causes just as great a shift toward vernacular forms. This result can only be due to the absence of visual cues lessening the psychological impetus for maintaining an elevated style of speech. If such a small change in the circumstances of conversation causes so significant a shift toward vernacular forms, we can reasonably conclude that social status motivation plays a large part in maintaining the prestige dialect.

Finally, we want to point out that the results of Mahl's experiment are excellent evidence against the 'laziness' theory of vernacular speech. Indeed, under that theory the results would be inexplicable. The laziness theory would certainly predict that under conditions that make communication more difficult, speakers who control both vernacular and prestige forms would favor the latter. However, the results of Mahl's experiment are exactly the reverse: it is precisely under conditions that are less favorable for communication that vernacular features occur more readily. Thus, we can conclude from Mahl's experiment that concern for social status, not concern for communication, is what maintains the prestige dialect.

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### POSSIBLE COUNTER-EXAMPLES TO THE THEORY

We shall conclude our discussion of social dialect variation with a discussion of some possible counter-examples to the theory we have proposed. The first such case is that of final and preconsonantal /r/ deletion in New York City and the rest of the East Coast (see Labov 1966). Labov says that at the turn of the century the speech of New York City was essentially /r/-less in final and preconsonantal position for all classes. In the 1930s a new prestige norm of /r/ pronunciation arose and this norm became dominant after World War II. This new prestige form (which may be related to the decision by radio and television to adopt a general mid-western pronunciation as the broadcast standard) appeared first in the speech of the upper middle class. Furthermore, even at the time of Labov's study, only the upper middle class used /r/ to any appreciable extent in casual speech. The form appears in working class speech only in formal styles. From our point of view the reintroduction of final and pre-consonantal /r/ is a phonetically unmotivated sound change since it revives a perceptually indistinct segment and increases articulatory effort. The change is an excellent example of the tendency, mentioned earlier, of prestige dialects to borrow prestige forms from outside the local area.

Thus far the case of /r/ is unproblematic; but when we turn to the history of final /r/ pronunciation, a possible counter-example to our theory emerges. It has long been known that the /r/-less pronunciation of the eastern United States was originally due to Anglophile sympathies of the upper classes. In other words, this consonantal simplification originated as a prestige form and filtered down. Our theory, on the other hand, predicts that such a change would be resisted by the prestige dialect. Further examination of the history of /r/ dropping, however, shows that the case does not pose a real problem for our theory. First of all, there is some evidence (Labov 1972: 287) that the loss of final /r/ originated in England as a lower or lower middle class change later adopted by the upper classes for unknown reasons. When the change was adopted by the English upper classes, it became for upper class eastern Americans, who admired the British aristocracy, a symbol of refinement. Moreover, although the /r/-less pronunciation was originally adopted by the upper classes of the eastern United States, its spread to the other classes is easy to explain. Not only would these groups tend to adopt the pronunciation to the extent that they were influenced by the norms of the dominant social groups, but also the pronunciation would spread throughout the population because of its phonetic motivation. Thus, our theory predicts that the /r/-less pronunciation in nineteenth-century American should be different from other prestige forms. In particular, it should appear in all of the speech styles of the lower and working classes and not be restricted to the formal styles. Also, it should not reflect social stratification due to preferential usage by the dominant class. All the historical data that we

have on New York City confirm these predictions (see Labov 1966: 342 f., 564).

The second case that might be seen as a counter-example to our theory is the case of the centralization of the syllabic element in the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/ on the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, as described in Labov's article, 'The Social Motivation of a Sound Change' (see Labov 1972: chap. 1). As Labov, Yaeger & Steiner put it:

The centralization of (ay) and (aw) forms a striking reversal of a general drift in English (Labov, Yaeger & Steiner 1972: 309).

In fact, the change violates the principles of vowel shifting that the authors formulate and certainly seems an unnatural one. Moreover, since the change seems to have originated with and is most evident among the fishermen of the rural Chilmark section of the island, one could argue that, according to our theory, the change should have been in a natural direction.

Fortunately, Labov's work on the social context of this change was extremely perceptive and the apparent contradiction with our theory can be resolved. Labov points out that Martha's Vineyard is an archaic dialect area that often preserved linguistic features after they were lost in the rest of New England. Among these features was a somewhat central pronunciation of the syllabic element in /ay/. This pronunciation was characteristic of southern England at the time that Martha's Vineyard was settled (the seventeenth century) but disappeared in one of the last changes of the Great English Vowel Shift. Since the 1930s, Labov showed, the centralization of /ay/ has increased and it has spread by analogy to the parallel diphthong /aw/. The motivation for this change and other strengthenings of archaic features that are occurring is an increasing desire on the part of local residents to separate themselves symbolically from invading tourists and to reaffirm local tradition (Labov 1972: 28-32). In other words, the unnatural change in progress on Martha's Vineyard is an attempt to preserve and extend an archaic feature of the local dialect. The tourist economy has given native residents easily understandable reasons for wanting to mark themselves off from the rest of the population. Thus, the particular social situation on Martha's Vineyard explains why a non-prestige group is behaving linguistically in a way otherwise characteristic of elites without invalidating our general position.

Perhaps the most significant problem for our theory in available sociolinguistic studies is the fact, documented by Labov, that the lowest stratum of a community does not initiate phonological change. In his study of the Lower East Side, Labov found that such change originated in the 'working class' and the 'lower middle class' strata but not in the 'lower class'. Moreover, this result has been confirmed in studies of Detroit, Panama City, and Norwich, England (Labov, Yaeger & Steiner 1972: 16). On the other hand, the lower class, while it does not initiate phonological change, is less influenced by the prestige norm than are the working class and lower middle class strata. Thus, when a phonological

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change that originated in one of these strata is represented by the upper middle class, the lower class ends up using the stigmatized form more frequently than groups above it on the social hierarchy (see, for example, Figure 1 and Table 1 *supra* pp. 24, 26).

These facts are troublesome to us since we would expect the lower class, being the least influenced by the prestige norm, to also be the most common source of phonological change. Labov himself gives no detailed explanation for the phenomenon in print, but he has suggested that the lower class may less desire the local identity marking that he thinks causes phonological change (Labov, personal communication; also see *supra* footnote 5, p. 18). We would suggest that the explanation may lie rather in the degree to which the lower class is socially and linguistically integrated into the local speech community. For example, if the lower class contains a higher proportion of relatively recent arrivals in the local area or if it is geographically more mobile than working class strata with more stable and better paid employment, then its tendency not to originate sound changes would be explicable. Such changes, while they occur everywhere and have similar linguistic characteristics, differ in detail from one local community to another and would be less likely to arise in a less settled population. In any case, more research is needed not only to resolve the question of the linguistic behavior of the lower class but also to investigate many aspects of social dialect variation that have been as yet little explored. We hope that, in proposing our theoretical model of social dialect variation, we will contribute to making future research in sociolinguistics as fruitful as recent investigations have been.

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