

Case Study 2: Martha's Vineyard

The island of Martha's Vineyard off the New England coast was the setting of Labov's study (1963) of the significance of social patterns in understanding language variation and change. The island is inhabited by a small number of Native Americans, larger numbers of descendants of old families of English stock, and people of Portuguese descent. Furthermore, it is overwhelmed by tourists from the mainland who come to stay in the summer. Among a range of phonetic characteristics of English on the island, Labov chose to study variations in the diphthongs [aɪ] and [aʊ]. We focus on the first diphthong only, which occurs in the lexical set PRICE, WHITE, RIGHT. This sound is called a **linguistic variable** since its pronunciation varies in the community. Linguistic variables like (aɪ) are written within round brackets. The different ways in which they are pronounced are called **variants**, and are written in square brackets. On Martha's Vineyard, the main variants of the variable (aɪ) were the [aɪ] pronunciation common in the surrounding mainland area known as 'New England' and a centralised pronunciation [əɪ], whose phonetic properties were described in section 2.4 (in connection with the English Fenlands.) There were four other pronunciations intermediate between these two variants. These are diagrammed in Figure 3.1.

Variables like (aɪ) fulfil three criteria that make them focal elements in the study of language in its social setting:

1. they are frequent enough in ordinary conversation to appear unsolicited in brief interviews;
2. they are structurally linked to other elements in the linguistic system – in this case, to the system of diphthongs in the dialect;²
3. they exhibit a complex and subtle pattern of stratification by social groupings.

Labov undertook sixty-nine tape-recorded interviews, during which variation along a number of dimensions including ethnicity, occupation and

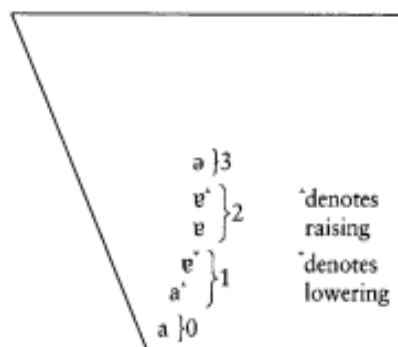


Figure 3.1 Variants of the first element /a/ in the diphthong in PRICE, WHITE, RIGHT, in Martha's Vineyard, and values assigned to them

Age in years	Index score for (aɪ)
75+	25
61–75	35
46–60	62
31–45	81
14–30	37

Table 3.1 Centralisation index for (aɪ) in Martha’s Vineyard
(Labov 1972a)

geographical location became apparent.³ In his analysis, Labov used a scoring system of 0 for [aɪ] and 3 for [əɪ]. The intermediate variants (see Figure 3.1) were assigned values of 1 or 2. The scoring system thus assigns zero to the pronunciation that is used by some Vineyarders, but which is more characteristic of the mainland USA. It assigns higher scores for pronunciations involving greater degrees of centralisation. Labov divided his interviewees into age groups which he felt showed significant differences in usage, and calculated the average scores per age group, expressed as an index. Scores may thus range from 0 to 300: the higher the score, the greater the use of typically centralised island variants rather than the general New England [aɪ]. These figures are given in Table 3.1. For short, Labov called this a ‘centralisation index’, that is, a measure of the degree to which different age groups used centralised pronunciations of the diphthongs.

Table 3.1 shows an interesting pattern by age. The index scores increase as one scans down the column, except for the last row: the 14–30 age group. This indicates that the ‘island’ way of pronouncing the diphthongs was generally on the increase: the younger the age group, the higher its score on the island variant (with the one exception). On the other hand, why should the 31–60 age group have relatively high scores for the ‘island’ variant, while the 61–75 and 14–30 age groups have roughly similar scores showing less use of the island variant?

Whereas Fischer’s study (case study 1, above) had shown a consistent pattern of variation by sex and by other factors like ‘acceptance of school norms’, the Martha’s Vineyard study shows ups and downs. By consulting older records of the dialect, in the *Linguistic Atlas of New England (LANE)* undertaken by Kurath et al. (1939–43), Labov argued that these ups and downs could be related to changes in speech norms over time in Martha’s Vineyard as well as the rest of the USA. The centralised variant of (aɪ) was once the more usual one, going back to seventeenth-century England, and still recorded in moderate numbers in New England and Martha’s Vineyard in the *LANE* records. In comparing *LANE* records with those of late twentieth-century Martha’s Vineyard, it became evident that there had been an intervening drop in centralisation on the island,

reflected in the low scores of the over-75 age group. That is, Martha's Vineyard was once in line with the rest of New England in showing a decline in centralisation; but the trend has been reversed, with younger people accentuating a pronunciation that was becoming less common in the speech of their elders.

In answering the question of why younger people of Martha's Vineyard seemed to be turning their backs on the older island and mainland trend in the USA, Labov cited social relationships between the relatively poor inhabitants of the island and the rich summer residents. A high degree of centralisation of (aɪ) is closely linked with strong resistance to the incursions of the summer people, which have to be tolerated for economic reasons. It is especially since around the Second World War that the social and economic pressures have brought on this resistance among younger groups. Using a pronunciation like [rəɪt] ('right') is a subconscious affirmation of belonging to the island and being one of its rightful owners (Labov 1963: 304). Or, as a subsequent commentator remarks, it has the same effect as wearing a t-shirt that says 'I'm not a tourist, I live here' (McMahon 1994: 242).

Although the oldest groups show reduced levels of centralisation, the one resistant group was a group of fishermen from a part of the island called Chilmark. Labov argues that the ways of these Chilmark fishermen – independent and stubborn defenders of the old way of living – served as a reference point for those of the younger generation throughout the island who might be seeking an identity opposed to that of the tourists. Finally, in answering the question of why the 14–30 age group does not exhibit the revived island-centralisation pattern, considerations regarding attitude and identity are again crucial. According to Labov's argument, these speakers do not feel the full stress experienced by the 30+ age groups, who had grown up in a declining economy, and who had made a more or less deliberate choice to remain on the island, or, having once sought work on the mainland, had elected to return to Martha's Vineyard. The youngest group, which included many high-school pupils, either harboured hopes of going to the mainland or had not yet made their choice. This indecision is unconsciously reflected in their indices for linguistic variables such as (aɪ).

More than any previous study, the analysis of diphthong variation in Martha's Vineyard showed the importance of studying the vernacular speech of individuals in its community setting. Labov used the term **vernacular** in this context to refer to the least self-conscious style of speech used by people in relaxed conversation with friends, peers and family members. Labov suggests that this is one's most natural style, whose grammar and phonetics is mastered at an early age via the influence of peer groups. The vernacular style represents informal speech oriented

towards a local community. It may be modified in some ways during various stages of one's life, under the influence of more public-oriented interaction as in educational settings, media language and the influence of other social groups. Labov argues that the vernacular nevertheless remains the most basic style, one which can be studied with considerable reward from a variationist point of view. This is so since the vernacular is itself not devoid of variation: it may involve **inherent variation** – that is, alternate forms belonging to the same system acquired simultaneously, or nearly so, at an early age. The rules governing variation in the vernacular appear to be more regular than those operating in formal styles acquired in post-adolescent years. Each speaker has a vernacular style in at least one language: this may be the prestige dialect or a close version of it (as in the relatively few speakers whose vernacular is standard English) or, more usually, a non-standard variety. (The issue is clouded by arguments over the exact definition of 'standard English' – see the different views of the term 'standard' in section 1.4.)

Not all sociolinguists agree that the vernacular in this sense is basic, and that it should be the starting point of sociolinguistic analysis and a baseline for understanding other styles acquired by a speaker. They argue that all styles and registers are used in a complementary way by speakers and are equally deserving of sociolinguistic attention. A further problem pointed to by Ronald Macaulay (1988) is that the term 'vernacular' is used in two different senses by sociolinguists. In Labov's main formulation, it is the most informal speech style used by speakers. Another equally common meaning of the term refers to a non-standard variety that is characteristic of a particular region or social group. This sense can be found even in Labov's work, for example in his description of **African American Vernacular English** (formerly known as Black English, and sometimes referred to as *Ebonics*, on the insistence of many community leaders) as 'that relatively uniform grammar found in its most consistent form in the speech of Black youth from 8 to 19 years old who participate fully in the street culture of the inner cities' (1972b: xiii). It is quite usual for linguists to describe the vernacular of a city as a non-standard variety used by a majority of speakers, but not everyone.

Labov developed an empirical approach to the study of language that involved careful sampling of populations to ensure representativeness, fieldwork methods designed to elicit a range of styles from the least to the most formal, and analytic techniques based on the concept of the linguistic variable. The Martha's Vineyard study was a clear illustration of the interplay between linguistic and social factors in a relatively simple setting. The variation boiled down to a change in community norms per age group arising out of a stronger sense of 'us' (islanders) versus 'them' (mainlanders/tourists). In subsequent studies, Labov worked on more complex

situations – large urban centres, and large populations with several ethnic groups and with rapid social change and mobility.

Case Study 3: Sociolinguistic Variation in New York City

One of Labov's most influential studies, published in 1966, showed essentially that if any two subgroups of New York City speakers are ranked on a scale of social stratification, they will be ranked in the same order by their differential use of certain linguistic variables. One of the most notable is the variable (*r*) after vowels in words such as *lark* or *bar*. English speakers in various parts of the world differ in the extent to which [r] is pronounced after vowels. RP for example is 'r-less', while Scots English is 'r-ful'.⁴ To demonstrate that patterns of variation do exist for as large and complex a city as New York was an ambitious task, especially since earlier views held by linguists were discouraging:

The pronunciation of a very large number of New Yorkers exhibits a pattern . . . that might most accurately be described as the complete absence of any pattern. Such speakers sometimes pronounce /r/ before a consonant or a pause and sometimes omit it, in a thoroughly haphazard pattern. (Alan Hubbell (1950), *The Pronunciation of English in New York City*, cited by Chambers 2003: 17)

Labov's hunch was that this was not true; that, as for Martha's Vineyard, seemingly fuzzy patterns of variability could be studied systematically and could contribute to linguists' knowledge of language and societal patterns. As a preparation for studying the speech habits of the city, Labov undertook a pilot survey, that is, a small-scale investigation meant to investigate the feasibility of a larger and more costly project. Labov's pilot study has become something of a classic in its own right.

The department store study

For his pilot survey Labov decided to study three sites, which he believed would show patterns of variation, typical of the city. His hypothesis was that the speech of salespeople at departmental stores would reflect, to a large extent, the norms of their typical customers. He then picked three large department stores in Manhattan:

- Saks Fifth Avenue: a high-status store near the centre of the high-fashion district.
- Macy's: a store regarded as middle-class and middle-priced.
- Klein's: a store selling cheaper items and catering for poorer customers.

By pretending to be a customer, Labov carried out a quick check of what items were found on the fourth floor of each store. He then asked the

salespeople on different floors ‘Excuse me, where are the women’s shoes?’ (or whatever item), knowing that the answer had to be ‘fourth floor’, a phrase containing two tokens of postvocalic [r]. (This term was introduced in section 2.3, as a shorthand way of describing the sound [r] after a vowel, though not between two vowels. Patterns of postvocalic [r] usage in England are depicted in Map 2.5.) By pretending to be hard of hearing and leaning forward with an ‘excuse me?’, he obtained two more tokens in more careful, stressed style as the salesperson repeated ‘fourth floor’. On the fourth floor itself, Labov asked assistants, ‘Excuse me, what floor is this?’ As soon as he received these answers, Labov moved out of sight and wrote down the pronunciation and details like the sex, approximate age, and race of the sales assistant. Since these are large stores with numerous assistants, Labov was able to gather answers from 264 unwitting subjects. All in all, over 1,000 tokens of the variable (*r*) were collected (multiplying the number of speakers by four for the number of tokens) in a mere six-and-a-half hours, making this a remarkably successful (and amusing) pilot study.

Analysis of the data confirmed certain patterns of variation in the use of postvocalic /r/ according to linguistic context, speech style and social class associated with each store. Some 62 per cent of Saks’ employees, 51 per cent of Macy’s and 20 per cent of Klein’s used [r] in at least one of the four tokens. In the more deliberate repetition, all groups show an increase in the use of [r], though interestingly it was the middle-status store’s employees who showed the greatest increase. Labov commented (1972a: 52): ‘It would seem that *r*-pronunciation is the norm at which a majority of Macy’s employees aim, yet not the one they use most often’. The results were even more finely grained – for example, on the quieter and more expensive upper floors of the highest-ranking store, the percentage of [r] was much higher than amid the hustle and bustle of the ground floor.

The larger New York City study

The pilot study showed that, contrary to the views of linguists like Hubbell, /r/ in New York City could be studied systematically. One of the prerequisites of a full-scale study was to find a way of establishing a more representative sample of the city than its salespersons. In the full study, a proper sampling procedure was followed – the first time this had been done in linguistic fieldwork involving extensive interviews. It drew on an earlier sociological survey of the Lower East Side of New York City conducted by a sociological research group. The original survey used a random sample of 988 adult subjects representing a population of 100,000. Originally aiming to interview 195 of those respondents who had not moved house in the previous two years, Labov managed to reach 81 per cent of this target group. Interviews were conducted on an individual basis and involved four types of activity:

1. the main part, consisting of continuous speech in response to the interviewer's questions;
2. reading of a short passage;
3. reading lists of words containing instances of pertinent variables;
4. reading pairs of words involving key variables (for example the vowels in *God* and *guard*, which both have the vowel [a:] in New York City English).

Labov argued that moving from (1) to (4) corresponds to increasing formality and focus on language itself. Later on, at the stage of analysis, Labov divided sections of the continuous speech into the subcategories 'formal' and 'casual', depending on the interviewee's responses.

In grouping his speakers, Labov used a ten-point socioeconomic scale, devised earlier by the sociological research group. It was based on three equally weighted indicators of status: occupation of breadwinner, education of respondent and family income. On a ten-point scale, 0–1 was taken as lower class, 2–4 as working class, 5–8 as lower middle-class, and 9 as upper middle-class. It has become common practice to refer to the different groups by abbreviations like LWC (lower working-class), UWC (upper working-class), LMC (lower middle-class), UMC (upper middle-class), and so on. Labov's unusual term 'lower class' denotes people who are unemployed, or under-employed, homeless people and so on. Of the many variables examined by Labov, we focus on two: (th) and (r).

The variable (th) in New York City

The main variants of the (th) variable – that is, the initial sound in the lexical set THING, THICK, THIGH – are the general interdental fricative [θ] and less prestigious variants, the affricate [tθ] and dental stop [t̪] (so that *thing* and *thick* would sound more like *ting* and *tick*).

As with vowel variables, the differences between the variants of (th) are subtle and result from slight changes in tongue position vis-à-vis other articulators.

The [θ] pronunciation which is the form used in RP and other prestige varieties in the USA, Australia and other English-speaking territories, involves the tongue making fleeting and partial contact with the teeth of the upper jaw, with air flowing out under friction during the contact.

For [t̪], the tongue makes complete contact with the upper teeth, stopping the air flow momentarily.

As the symbol suggests, [tθ] involves a combination of the above two articulations, with the tongue making contact with the teeth and then releasing the air.

The variants [θ], [tθ] and [ɹ] were assigned scores of 0, 1 and 2 respectively. Figure 3.3 shows the stratification of this variable according to class and style for eighty-one speakers. The vertical axis is a scale of average (th) index scores per socioeconomic group; while the horizontal axis represents the four contextual styles. The scores range from a possible 0 (for fricatives only) to 200 (for stops only). Figure 3.3 shows the following patterns:

- Style: There is consistent stylistic variation of the variable. The greatest occurrence of non-fricative forms is in casual speech for all groups, with decreasing frequency when moving through the more formal styles.
- Class: There is a stable pattern insofar as the graphs for each class are roughly parallel (apart from the equal LLMC and ULMC scores for casual speech).

Defining the (th) index in the way that Labov did yields the following relationship between social class and the (th) variable: an increase in social class or status groups is accompanied by decreasing index scores for (th). The variable may be characterised as **sharply stratified**, since there is a relatively large gap between the LC and WC scores as against the MC scores.

Postvocalic (r) in New York City

In his analysis of postvocalic (r) as used by the same speakers, Labov used a scoring system of 1 for use of [r] and 0 for its absence. The results of his analysis are shown in Figure 3.4, which has an additional category under 'style' involving **minimal pairs** of words. The term 'minimal pair' refers to the use of pairs of words which differ in only one sound, in this case by the

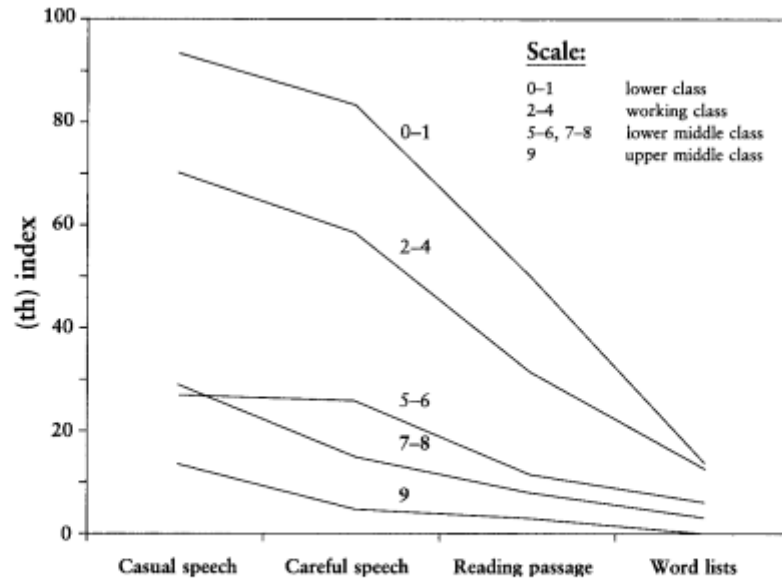


Figure 3.3 Social stratification of (th) in New York City (from Labov 1972a: 113)

presence or absence of postvocalic [r], for example *source* and *sauce* (in US English).

The New York study showed two aspects of sociolinguistic stratification: linguistic differentiation, and social evaluation. In terms of linguistic differentiation the patterning of (r) in Figure 3.4 shows the following tendencies:

- New Yorkers ranked on a hierarchical scale by non-linguistic criteria follow the same scale in (r) usage. There is *fine* rather than sharp stratification of the variable – that is, the divisions between the social classes are not as great as for (th).
- The differences between the groups are not categorical; that is, no group is characterised by the complete presence or absence of postvocalic [r].
- Nevertheless, at the level of casual speech, only the UMC shows a significant degree of r-pronunciation. The other groups range between 1 and 10 per cent on this variable. Thus, generally speaking, the pronunciation of postvocalic [r] functions as a marker of the highest-ranking status group.
- All groups show an increase when moving from informal to more formal styles. Thus the variable marks not only status but style as well.
- As one follows the progression towards more formal styles, the LMC shows a greater increase in the use of [r], until in word-list and minimal-pair styles they overtake the UMC averages.

Labov termed this last phenomenon **hypercorrection**. The LMC overshoots the mark and goes beyond the highest-status group in its tendency

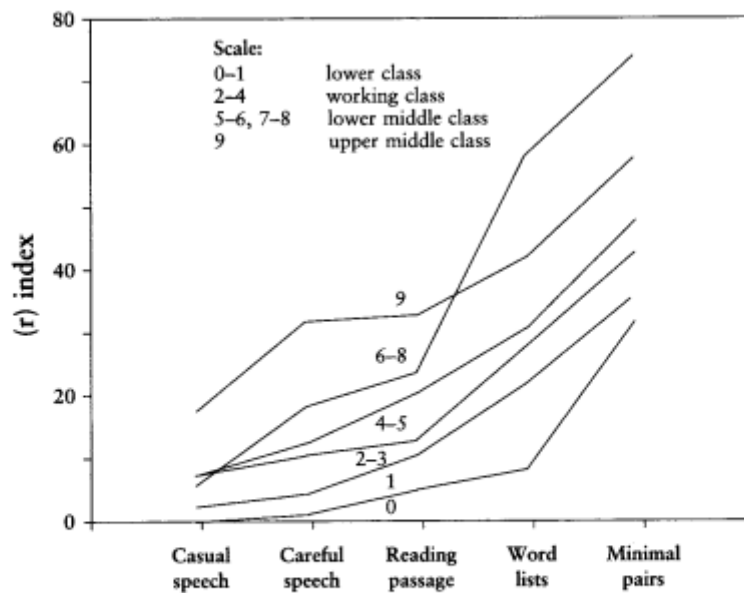


Figure 3.4 Social stratification of (r) in New York City (from Labov 1972a: 114)

to use the pronunciation considered correct and appropriate for formal styles. This is a consequence of the LMC's position in the class hierarchy, reflecting the wishes of its members to distance themselves from the working class and to become more like the upper middle class. In this sense, hypercorrection denotes the use of a particular variant beyond the target set by the prestige model. This crossover pattern differentiates the (r) variable from the stable (th) variable. Labov advances the hypothesis that this crossover pattern, coupled with differential scores in the various age groups (which we have not discussed here), is an indication of changing norms of pronunciation (see further Chapter 4).

Hypercorrection reveals a degree of **linguistic insecurity**: people who don't usually use a form in their casual speech try and improve on (or 'correct') their speech when it is being observed or evaluated. Social evaluation thus plays an important role in Labov's model. He used certain types of psychological tests to demonstrate his claim about linguistic insecurity. These were **subjective reaction tests**, modified from earlier tests devised by the psychologist Wallace Lambert. In one of the experiments, subjects were asked to rate a number of short excerpts on a scale of occupational suitability (that is, whether the speaker would be acceptable as a secretary, television personality, factory worker, and so on). The tape contained twenty-two sentences from five female readers in random order. Some of

the sentences contained words with postvocalic [r], others had none. As these were taken from the reading passage, subjects were already familiar with the material. All subjects aged between 18 and 39 agreed in their tacit positive evaluation of [r] usage, irrespective of their own level of use of the variable. As part of the test, Labov played two versions of a sentence by the *same* speaker, one showing greater use of postvocalic [r] than the other. Labov used the label 'r-positive' for the following:

- attributing a sentence with some postvocalic [r] to a speaker with a higher occupational position than a sentence without any postvocalic [r].
- assigning a speaker to a higher occupational position for a sentence containing more postvocalic [r] than (unknowingly) for the same speaker on a sentence containing fewer realisations of postvocalic [r].

The percentage of 'r-positive' responses of subjects between the ages of 18 and 39 years was 100. Subjects aged over 40 showed a mixed reaction in their social evaluation; but the LMC speakers showed higher r-positive responses than the UMC. These led Labov to conclude that norms governing the use and perceptions of postvocalic [r] were undergoing some change. Such linguistic change is the subject of Chapter 4.

Three types of variables

- **Markers** are those variables like (r) and (th), which show stratification according to style and social class. All members react to them in a more or less uniform manner.
- **Indicators**, show differentiation by age or social group without being subject to style-shifting, and have little evaluative force in subjective- reaction tests. Only a linguistically trained observer is aware of indicators, for example the pronunciation of the vowels in *God* and *guard* (and similar sets of words) as the same in New York, and the use of 'positive anymore' in Midland USA (for example, *That's the way it is with planes anymore*). Positive anymore corresponds to 'still' or 'these days' in other dialects of English.
- **Stereotypes** are forms that are socially marked – that is, they are prominent in the linguistic awareness of speech communities, as in the case of 'h-dropping' in Cockney and other English dialects, or the stigmatisation of the *thoidy-thoid* street 'thirty-third street' pronunciation of New York speech. Judgements that bring about stereotypes are not necessarily phonetically accurate. The stigmatised New York City vowel, for example, is not the same as that in *toy*. *Bird* and *Boyd* are not pronounced the same in working-class New York dialect, though – influenced by comedians – outsiders might think so.

Labov suggested that generally members of the highest- and lowest-status groups tend not to change their pronunciation after it becomes fixed in adolescence; members of middle-status groups (UMC and LMC) may do so, because of their social aspirations. The linguistic insecurity of the LMC leads to especial fluctuation in formal speech contexts: hence Labov's claims about the consistency of vernacular speech over other styles. We noted earlier that these claims are specific to Labov's model of language. Sociolinguists with other perspectives do not see one style as more basic or consistent than others.

It is sometimes remarked that what linguists find socially significant in a variety are not what speakers themselves think important. The whole issue of speaker's evaluation is a complex one. Labov differentiated between different types of variables, depending on a speech community's consciousness of them (see accompanying box).

The issue of **prestige** is generally an important – and complicated – one in sociolinguistics. Labov distinguished between 'overt' and 'covert' prestige. **Overt prestige** refers to positive or negative assessments of variants (or of a speech variety) in accordance with the dominant norms of the public media, educational institutions and upper middle-class speech. In the New York City studies, interviewees who made the highest use of a stigmatised feature in their own natural speech showed the greatest tendency to stigmatize others for their use of the same form. On the other hand, the stability of working-class (WC) speech norms calls for other explanations, since these speakers did not, in fact, readily adopt middle-class (MC) norms. **Covert prestige** refers to this set of opposing values implicit in lower- and working-class lifestyles, which do not appear in conventional subjective-reaction tests. That is, WC speech is a mechanism for signalling adherence to local norms and values. In contrast to MC speech which reveals a concern for **status**, WC speech marks **solidarity**. (These themes are picked up in section 3.4 and in a different framework in Chapter 5.)

Generally, the New York study showed that socioeconomic differentiation cannot be ignored in studies of language structure. The character of (r) as a prestige feature within the linguistic system can only be gauged within the network of stylistic and social inequalities.

3.3 FIELDWORK METHODS IN VARIATIONIST SOCIOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS

Variationists stress the importance of the collection and analysis of a corpus that adequately represents the speech of members of the community under study. In practice, sociolinguistic surveys are based on anything from forty to 150 speakers. Samples going beyond 150 individuals tend to increase

data-handling problems without a significant gain in analytic insights. Stressing the need to study the vernacular in its social context gives rise to what Labov termed the **observer's paradox**. That is, the vernacular, which the linguist wishes to observe closely, is the very style which speakers use when they are *not* being observed. This is akin to the 'experimenter effect' in other disciplines – that is, the need to ensure that the data which one collects are unaffected by the process of investigation. Labov has used a variety of techniques to get around the problem, the most favoured being the sociolinguistic interview. This involves a tape-recorded, personal interview lasting about an hour per person. The session is designed to be as informal as possible in an attempt to defuse the relative status of participants (usually middle-class researcher versus the 'subject'). Identification of the interviewer with the teaching profession would invariably typecast him or her as a prescriptivist and the one from whom information flows, rather than the other way around. The counter-strategy of the sociolinguistic interview is to emphasise the position of the interviewer as learner (about local ways and attitudes), and hence in a lower position of authority than the person to whom the interviewer is speaking. Interviewees are encouraged to talk about everyday topics of personal interest, and thus to take the lead during some parts of the interview. Successful topics often centre around childhood games, accusations of blame for things one may not have done, family, religion and, in some societies, dating and the opposite sex. The most famous topic centres around what has come to be known as the 'danger of death' question. Interviewees are asked to talk informally about their most frightening moment, when 'you thought you were in serious danger of being killed – where you thought to yourself, "This is it".' Speakers embarking on such a narration often become so involved in it as to be temporarily diverted from the act of being interviewed. Their speech consequently shows a definite shift away from formal style to the vernacular.

Labov stressed that interview speech should not be mistaken for intimate vernacular style. However, by using an empathetic approach and the right techniques, it brought one as close to the vernacular as was possible, while still obtaining large quantities of comparable and clear data. Among the cues that signify a relatively successful interview are modulations of voice production, including changes in tempo, pitch and volume, alterations in rate of breathing, and occasional laughter. Regarding fieldwork ethics, surreptitious recordings are generally considered undesirable. They breach the privacy of individuals as well as trust between interviewer and interviewee. Such deceit may negate good relations and trust necessary for long-term contact with a community. Linguists have found that even surreptitious recordings of friends have led to unhappiness.

The individual interview is not the only technique advocated by Labov, who has used a variety of other methods for other purposes. First,

participant observation of adolescent gangs in Harlem (New York City) by a group of fieldworkers formed an important database for a study of African American Vernacular English. The significance of adolescent gangs lies in the naturalness of these self-selected groups and the checks (conscious and subconscious) by members on any individual who produces non-vernacular forms not typical of the group, solely for the benefit of the tape recorder. Some sessions resembled a party rather than a discussion with outsiders. By using separate-track recordings in several group sessions, the researchers obtained clear, varied and voluminous data which informed their study of phonetic variables, syntax, narratives (storytelling modes) and adolescent street culture.

This approach was refined by Lesley and James Milroy in their studies in Belfast (see Chapter 4), and by Labov in long-term 'neighbourhood studies' in Philadelphia (starting in the 1970s). The neighbourhood studies were designed to obtain a large amount of linguistic and social data from individual neighbourhoods as social units. Participant observation in Philadelphia has allowed unlimited access to the linguistic competence of the central figures in individual networks, and group recordings which elicit close to vernacular styles. Included in the neighbourhood studies are systematic sociolinguistic interviews developed along the earlier New York City models. These remain the best source for comparable data on all members of a social network. Labov's later work thus moves away from an emphasis on a random sampling of a large community to judgement-sample selection of neighbourhoods for intensive study.

The second method involves rapid and anonymous surveys. In certain strategic locations, such surveys enable the study of a large number of people in a short space of time, provided that the social identity of the subjects is well defined by the situation. Labov's pilot study of (r) in New York department stores is a paradigm example.

The third method involves telephone surveys. In later work, Labov complemented the intensive but non-random neighbourhood studies by broader

(and less detailed) representation using a telephone survey. Subjects chosen by a random sample participated in a fifteen-minute telephone interview, which included some spontaneous conversation, word lists and minimal pairs. The emphasis was on communication in Philadelphia, with reference mainly to telephone speech, and on special words and pronunciations in the Philadelphia dialect that might be sources of misunderstanding.

Finally, Labov has used a variety of field experiments to tackle specific problems. The subjective-evaluation test cited above is but one instance of these.