3
SOCIAL DIALECTOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Prior to the early 1960s, dialectology had scored its main successes in studies of regional differentiation. Researchers had certainly been aware of linguistic distinctions of a social nature within a region, but had not developed systematic ways of describing them. This chapter, by contrast, takes as its central concern why different accents and ways of saying things should arise within the same community. Moreover, as the excerpt from the short story by George Rew shows, such differences can carry great social value. Speech can serve to mark the distinctiveness of people not just in terms of their region, but also in terms of their sex and social standing.

Class and divisions over accent

A prominent regional feature of many British varieties of English is the glottal stop, when certain sounds, notably /t/, are pronounced with a momentary closure of the glottis, producing words like *foo'ball*. Although heavily stigmatised in educational contexts, the sound is a stable one, if not on the increase. The opening excerpt from George Rew's short story 'Wa'er' (1990) vividly portrays class and regional divisions over accent:

> 'What is the more usual name for H_2O Ballantyne?'
> I realise that the teacher has spoken my name. I look up to see Mr Houston's thin face peering expectantly at me through his thick round glasses. He is almost smirking with anticipation. Does he think I don't know the answer? Surely not! What has he planned for me, I wonder frantically.
> 'Wa'er' I answer confidently, in my distinctive Dundee accent.
> Houston's smile grows slightly wider.
> 'Pardon?'

> He puts a hand behind his ear and cocks his head.
> 'Wa'er' I say again, thinking perhaps I had mumbled the first time . . .
> [After several repetitions and growing confusion] I look over and see Caroline Paterson leaning toward me . . .
> 'James, it's water!' she whispers, and suddenly I understand I am not speaking correctly, at least not in the opinion of Mr. Houston. He is mocking my Dundee accent.
>
> (As the story unfolds, the student defies the teacher's efforts to 'correct' his speech, and in the ensuing confrontation is, to his surprise, supported by the headmaster. Cited by Chambers 2003: 209.)

Earlier explanations of language variation within a dialect area fell into one of two categories: dialect mixture and free variation. 'Dialect mixture' implies the coexistence in one locality of two or more dialects, which enables a speaker to draw on one dialect at one time, and on the other dialect(s) on other occasions. 'Free variation' refers to the random use of alternate forms within a particular dialect (for example, two pronunciations of *often*, with or without the /t/ sounded). The proponents of these two views assumed that language is an abstract structure, and further that the study of language excludes the choices that speakers make. William Labov, a US linguist, argued, instead, that language involved 'structured heterogeneity'. By this he meant the opposite: that language contained systematic variation which could be characterised and explained by patterns of social differentiation within speech communities. This body of work has come to be known by various names: variationist theory, the quantitative paradigm, urban dialectology, the Labovian school and secular linguistics.[1]

3.2 PRINCIPLES AND METHODS IN VARIATIONIST SOCIOLINGUISTICS: THREE CASES STUDIES

Case Study 1: Children in New England

Labov was not the first to point to the interplay between social and linguistic determinants of certain linguistic alternations: John Fischer had discussed the social implications of the use of *-in* versus *-ing* (e.g. whether one said *fishin'* or *fishing*) in a village in New England in 1958. Fischer noted that both forms of the present participle, *-in* and *-ing*, were being used by twenty-one of the twenty-four children he observed. Rather than dismissing it as random or free variation of little interest to linguists, Fischer tried to correlate the use of the one form over the other with specific characteristics of the children or of the speech situation. Girls,

for example, used more *-ing* than boys. 'Model' boys (i.e. ones whose habits were approved of by their teachers) used more *-ing* than 'typical' boys (those whose habits make them less favoured by their teachers). Fischer interviewed the children briefly in settings which ranged from relatively informal, to relatively formal, to the most formal involving classroom story recitation. One ten-year-old boy who was interviewed in all three situations showed more *-in* than *-ing* in the informal style, about the same number of occurrences of *-in* and *-ing* in the formal style, and almost no *-in* in the classroom story recital. Fischer (1958: 51) concluded: 'the choice between the *-ing* and the *-in* variants appear to be related to sex, class, personality (aggressive/cooperative), and mood (tense/relaxed) of the speaker, to the formality of the conversation and to the specific verb spoken'. Fischer thus approached the topic of variation in fairly sophisticated ways that foreshadowed much of the concerns of urban dialectology. In particular, his observation (1958: 52) that 'people adopt a variant not because it is easier to pronounce (which it most frequently is, but not always), but because it expresses how they feel about their relative status versus other conversants' remains a central tenet of variationist sociolinguistics.

Basic methods in variationist studies

1. Identify linguistic features that vary in a community (e.g. *-in* and *-ing*).
2. Gather data from the community by selecting a suitable sample of people.
3. Conduct an interview involving informal continuous speech as well as more formal dimensions of language use like reading out a passage aloud.
4. Analyse the data, noting the frequency of each relevant linguistic feature.
5. Select relevant social units like age groups, sex, social class.
6. Ascertain significant correlations between the social groups and particular speech.

Labov took some of Fischer's concerns further, creating an elaborate body of work which broke new ground in understanding language in its social context, accounting for linguistic change of the sort that had preoccupied historical linguists, and broadening the goals of linguistic theory. His book *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972a) is a foundational work within sociolinguistics.

Map 3.1 US places cited in the text

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

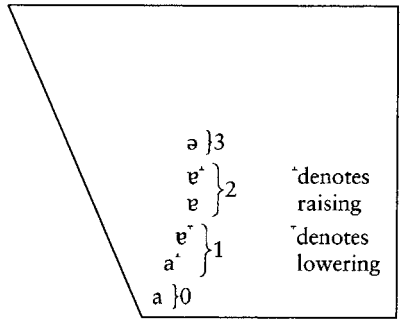


Figure 3.1 Variants of the first element **/a/** in the diphthong in PRICE, WHITE, RIGHT, in Martha's Vineyard, and values assigned to them

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 [ɔɪ]. 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.

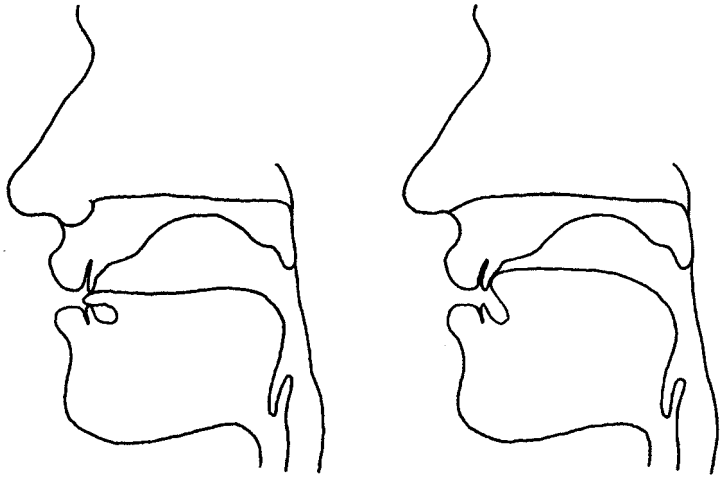


Figure 3.2 Tongue position for interdental fricative (left) and dental stop (right) variants of (th)

The variants [θ], [tθ] and [t̪] 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

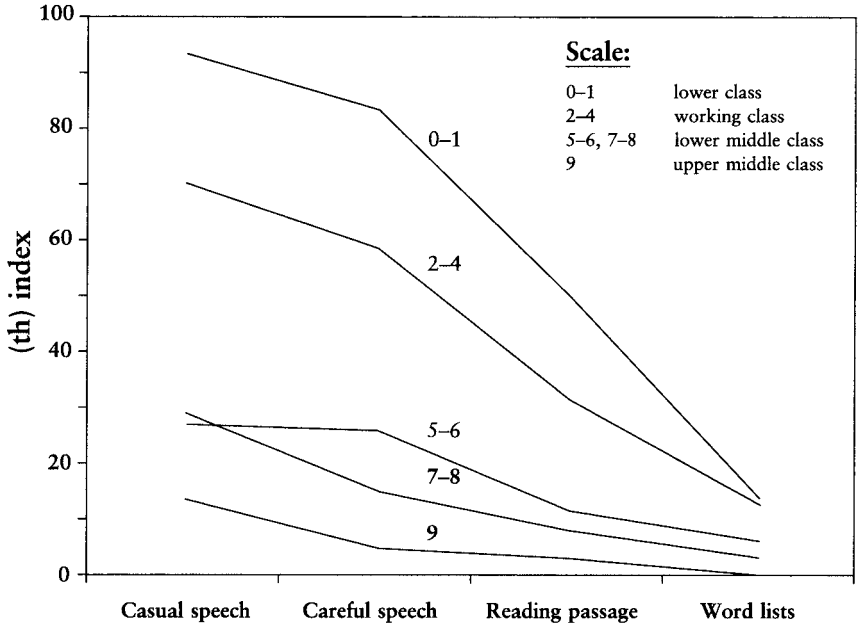


Figure 3.3 Social stratification of (th) in New York City (from Labov 1972a: 113)

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

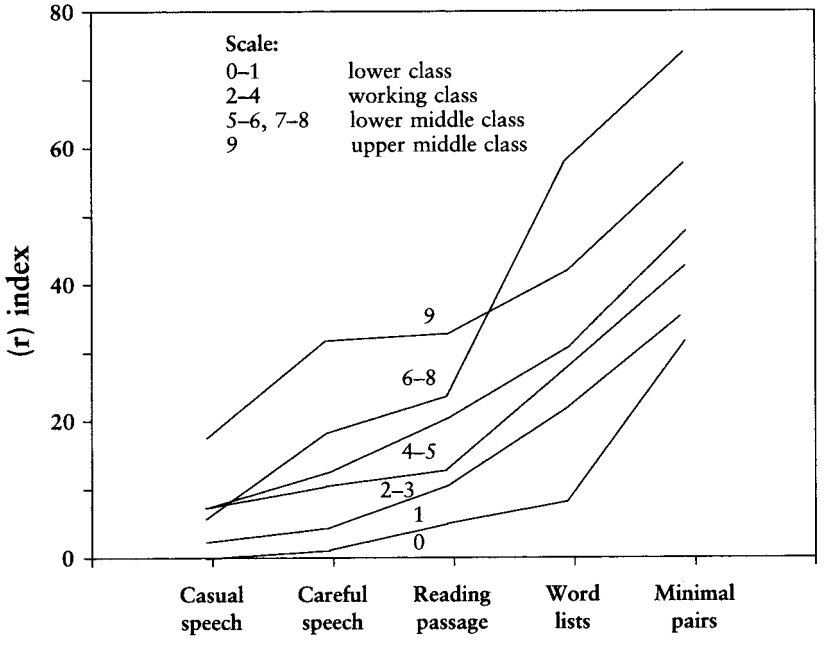


Figure 3.4 Social stratification of (r) in New York City (from Labov 1972a: 114)

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 SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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,

On surreptitious recording of friends

The British linguist Jennifer Coates (whose research focuses on women's norms of conversation, rather than phonetic variation) presents the following account of her early lesson against 'candid' (or covert) recordings, even of a group of friends who met regularly:

> At this point I chose to tell the group that I had been recording them for nearly a year. I was staggered by their reaction: they were furious. In retrospect, I'm amazed by my own naivety. Recording people talking without their consent is a gross violation of their rights . . . (1996: 5)

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.

Assumptions of early variation theory

1. Society is hierarchically structured, like a ship or a layered cake.
2. Social class is basic to this structure; other categories like gender and ethnicity are also significant factors which cut across class stratification.
3. Social class can be characterised as a composite of several factors pertaining to education, income and so on.
4. Much variation in language correlates with this pre-determined hierarchy.
5. Style can be arranged on a single dimension from least to most formal, according to context.
6. Style shows a correlation with linguistic variants similar to that of social class.

3.4 A CLOSER LOOK AT STYLISTIC AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES

Influential as Labov's work was in the 1970s, almost all of its assumptions have been the subject of intense research and debate. In this section, we present research which has questioned, revised and extended some of these assumptions.

Style

Labov's account of style has been criticised for its one-dimensional nature. According to his account, styles can be arranged on a continuum, depending on the amount of attention people pay to the act of using language. The most natural style for Labov is the vernacular, during which a speaker is least conscious of the act of speaking. The least natural style in his model is the one which requires conscious attention to language, as mirrored in the word-list and reading-passage exercises. Later commentators (discussed in Chapter 5) argue that this conception of style does not really correspond

Five styles outlined by Joos (1959)

- **Intimate style** involves a great deal of shared knowledge and background in a private conversation between equals. 'Pillow talk' between partners is probably the best example of intimate style.
- **Casual style**, which is typical of informal speech between peers, includes ellipsis (or omission of certain grammatical elements) and slang between peers. (Joos's examples of ellipsis are *Friend of mine saw it*; *Coffee's cold*.)
- **Consultative style** is the norm for informal conversation between strangers. Slang and ellipsis might not be used to the extent that they are used in casual speech with a friend; but informal markers of rapport like *hmm*, *yes*, *I know* and informal linguistic elements like about, so, thing and so on may still abound.
- **Formal style** is determined more by the setting than by the person(s) interacting. Markers of formal English style include *whom*, *may I*, *for the purpose of* and so on. Some, but not all, of the language associated with formal style is school-based.
- **Frozen style** is a hyper-formal style designed to discourage friendly relations between participants.

with any aspect of speech. Reading words and passages cannot be claimed to be the same kind of activity as speaking. The latter is an interactive process between two or more participants. Labov had failed to build on an earlier account by Martin Joos (1959) which had outlined five styles, varying on a scale of formality from least to most formal (see accompanying box):

1. intimate; 2. casual; 3. consultative; 4. formal; 5. frozen.

Labov's field methods aimed to elicit as wide a range of styles as possible within the confines of the interview situation. Whereas the initial parts of an interview may show a consultative style, a successful interview gradually leads into casual style. The difference between a consultative style with an interviewer and an intimate style showed up dramatically in one of the interviews discussed by Labov (1972a: 89–90). Dolly (a pseudonym) was a friendly and relaxed interviewee whose speech in the interview may be characterised as consultative to casual. In a part of the interview pertaining to the meanings of certain words in the local dialect, she said: 'Smart? Well, I mean, when you use the word *intelligent* an' *smart*, I mean . . . you use it in the same sense? . . . [*Laughs*]: So some people are pretty witty – I mean – yet they're not so intelligent.'

Later the interview was interrupted by the telephone ringing, affording

glimpses of Dolly's intimate to casual speech, which was radically different from even the most relaxed interview style.

> Huh? . . . Yeah, go down 'e(r)e to stay. This is. So you know what Carol Ann say? Listen at what Carol Ann say. Carol Ann say, 'An' then when papa die, we can come back' [*belly laugh*] . . . Ain't these chillun sump'm? [*falsetto*] . . . An' when papa die, can we come back?

Although it is rare for such an intimate style to appear in an interview, techniques like the 'danger of death' allow one to get relatively close to the most casual style. However, some sociolinguists (see Chapter 5 and 6) question whether speech styles can be adequately characterised without considering basic aspects of the speech context like the speakers, their relationship, communicative aims and the range of speech repertoires available in a community.

More on Class and Language

In Labov's formulation, classes can be delineated by means of a composite socioeconomic index. Classes tend to form a continuum, which correlates with scores for particular variables. On the whole, linguistic stratification mirrors social stratification. Labov argued that speech communities are in subconscious agreement about the relative values of different variants of a variable irrespective of their own scores for such a variable. This model of class is not without problems. In many instances, there appear to be more fundamental divisions over language than the New York City study suggests.

(a) Class differences in Norwich

An important study (published in 1974) that adopted Labov's approach to language research was undertaken by Peter Trudgill in the English city of Norwich. Like Labov, Trudgill aimed at describing the norms of a whole city via detailed interviews with a sample of its populace (in this case, fifty adults and ten schoolchildren). Trudgill analysed several linguistic variables pertaining to accent and grammar. We discuss two of these for the further light they shed on variation, social groupings and attitudes to language use. The first is an example of a grammatical variable: that is, it involves two or more alternative forms for the same grammatical unit. In Norwich as in some other parts of Britain, there are two alternative forms for the third-person singular present tense: *she sings*, *works*, *eats* and so on (the standard form) and *she sing, work, eat* and so on (the local dialect form without the *-s* inflection). Trudgill found that there was a correlation between social class and use of this variable. These findings are shown in Table 3.2.

In this table, the norms for casual speech are given for five classes that

MMC	100%
LMC	98%
UWC	30%
MWC	13%
LWC	3%

Table 3.2 The use of third-person singular *-s* in Norwich (Trudgill 1983a)

Trudgill delineates on the basis of a socioeconomic index constructed along similar lines to Labov's New York City. The figures represent use of the standard variant (-s). Like the example of New York City (th), this is a sharply stratified variable: there is a considerable gap between the norms for the middle classes and the working classes apparent from the figures for the LMC (98 per cent) as opposed to the group below, the UWC (30 per cent). In this regard, Norwich patterns are fairly typical of dialect grammar in England. The idea of shared norms and common evaluation does not seem to apply.

A more complex case involves the variable (oʊ) in Norwich, the vowel sound in the lexical set NOSE, ROAD, MOAN. There are a range of pronunciations for this sound, from the [oʊ] through [u:] to [ʊ]. Phonetically, the first sound is rather like (but not identical to) the RP vowel in the word *nose*, whereas the [u:] and [ʊ] are similar to (but again not exactly the same as) the RP vowels in the words *rude* and *put*. Trudgill found that the variant [U] was used only by the working class (although it was not the only variant they used). Furthermore, he found little difference between casual style and formal style, apart from the LMC, which does seem to exhibit 'correction' of their speech towards MMC norms in formal, reading-passage and word-list styles.

Like Labov, Trudgill used sociolinguistic interviews to collect speech samples. As part of these interviews, he used a self-evaluation test in which informants were asked how they usually pronounced words like these. In the prototype test in New York, people showed a distinct tendency to claim higher use of the prestige form than was evident in their interview speech. In Norwich, this was not necessarily the case. In particular, male informants were much more likely to under-report their use of the prestige variants (in favour of working-class norms). Female informants, on the other hand, had a tendency to over-report their use of prestige norms. This involves a kind of double wishful thinking: the men claimed to use the 'rougher' non-standard forms characteristic of some of their fellow workers more than they actually did, and the women reported using the standard prestige forms more than they actually did. Like Labov, Trudgill distinguished between overt and covert prestige attached to speech forms. Women in Norwich seem responsive to the overt prestige of the standard

variety, while men seem more responsive to the covert prestige of localised Norwich speech. Although Labov had pointed to the existence of covert prestige in his New York study, he was unable to tap into it in evaluation tests. Trudgill conjectures that the difference in attitudes reflects differences in class-consciousness in the two countries – especially a lack of militant class-consciousness in the USA and the relative lack of 'embourgeoisement' of the British working class in the 1970s. Thus, while the study by Labov showed clear stratification by status in New York City over the variable (r), Trudgill's study emphasises the dimension of solidarity by men in Norwich as reflected in the variable (oʊ). Trudgill (1978: 194) describes this difference between status and solidarity in the two territories as follows:

> Levine and Crockett (1966) have demonstrated that in one American locality 'the community's march toward the national norm' is spear-headed by middle-aged MC women (and by the young). In Norwich, at least, there appears to be a considerable number of young WC men marching resolutely in the other direction.

(b) Class struggles in Cane Walk

John Rickford (1986) studied variation in a village in Guyana. This study supports Trudgill's idea that in some societies there are class divisions over language, rather than class continua and consensus. Rickford goes one step further than Trudgill in questioning whether the sociological model implicit in Labov's work is adequate to deal with this kind of variation. (Of the three sociological approaches to society discussed in section 1.6, of particular relevance here are functionalism and Marxism.) Cane Walk (a pseudonym for the village studied by Rickford) is still based along the lines of a colonial sugar-cane estate. The local stratification system involves three groups: (1) the 'senior staff', that is, the upper class whose members run the estate but live in exclusive areas elsewhere; (2) the 'estate class', made up of drivers, field-foremen, clerks, shopowners and skilled tradesmen who live close to the estate; and (3) the working class who, until the 1950s, had lived in inhospitable barracks on the estate and are still involved in cane-cutting, weeding, shovelling and so on. The roots of all three groups lie in the semi-forced migrations of indentured workers from India to the British and other colonies in the mid-nineteenth century. Although all three groups are bound by ethnicity and historical ties, Rickford argues that ethnicity is of far less importance here than class differences. The upper class and 'estate class' have 'life chances' that differ greatly from those of the workers who have far smaller and less stable incomes and very few opportunities for social and educational mobility. Samples of working-class and lower middle-class speech in Cane Walk are shown in the accompanying box.

Class division shows up in dramatic differences in language use. The

vernacular of Cane Walk ranges from a **creole** form of English to a variety that is close to standard English. (Creoles and their relations to standard forms of European languages are discussed in Chapter 9.) Rickford analysed the degree to which the working-class and the 'estate class' drew upon nine subcategories of the singular pronoun forms – for example *I* versus *me* (for the first person). Working-class people in the survey used the standard

Working-class speech (Irene, a weeder in the cane fields)

Irene:	Mii bin smaal, bot mi in staat wok aredi wen di skiim kom – lang ting. mii staat wok fan twelv yeer.
Interviewer:	Twelv?
Irene:	Ye-es.
Interviewer:	How yu start so yong?
Irene:	Wel, akardinlii tu, yu noo lang ting, praiveeshan. Yu sii, mi modo an faado bin separeet, den mii – em – aftor mi sii ponishment staat, mii staat fu wok . . . mi goo op tu foot standard.

(Guyanese Creole is not generally written down, and Rickford here employs the common practice among linguists in using 'phonetic' spellings to give an indication of pronunciation. A version of the conversation in standard English is as follows: 'I was small but I had started to work already when the Housing Scheme came, a long time ago. I started to work at twelve years of age. (Twelve?) Yes. (How did you start so young?) Well, according to, you know how it was long ago, deprivation – You see, my mother and father had separated. Then I started – em – after I saw punishment starting, I started to work . . . I went up to fourth standard.')

Lower middle-class speech (Bonette, a senior civil servant)

Bonette:	An ai tingk is wuz n ohfl weest ov taim, an wai ai tingk dee kep mii bak tu – am – rait it, iz biikoz ai felt di hedmaasto wohntid tu hav oz moch passiz oz posibl ogeens iz neem. Yu noo wot o miin?

(This passage is essentially that of standard English apart from pronunciation, though in other excerpts Bonette draws upon some features of Creole grammar. In more conventional spelling, the passage reads: 'And I think it was an awful waste of time. And why I think they kept me back to – uhm – write it, is because I felt the headmaster wanted to have as many passes as possible against his name. You know what I mean?')

(Rickford 1987: 144–5, 192)

English variants only 18 per cent of the time, while the corresponding figure for the lower middle-class is 83 per cent. This basic difference extends to other areas of language use: accent and other grammatical and lexical features.

Rickford concludes (1986: 217–18):

> If we assume in functionalist terms that both groups share a common set of values about language and social mobility, we are hard put to explain this dramatic sociolinguistic difference, especially since their responses on a matched guise test indicate that both groups associate the most creole speech with the lowest status jobs and the most standard speech with the highest . . . . However, a separate question about whether speaking good English helps one to get ahead reveals sharp differences between the groups about the nature of the association between language and occupation. The estate class essentially share a functionalist view, seeing use of the standard variants as leading to increments of economic position, political power, and social status. For the [working-class] members, however, whose efforts to move upwards within the sugar estate hierarchy (and even outside of it) have rarely been successful, the social order is seen as too rigidly organised in favour of the haves for individual adjustments in language use by the have-nots to make much difference . . .

It is not the case – as is often assumed – that the working-class speakers don't use standard English because they cannot (through limited education, contact with standard speakers and so on). Rickford argues that many working-class speakers use creole rather than standard English as a matter of choice, as a revolutionary act emphasising social solidarity over individual self-advancement and communicating political militancy rather than accommodation.

(c) Class divisions among adolescents: Jocks and Burnouts in Detroit

Penelope Eckert (1989a) studied the sociolinguistic patterns of high school pupils in several high-schools in Detroit in the USA. The fieldwork technique which she used in one particular school is known as 'participant observation', since it involves observing people's behaviour while participating in their daily lives. Eckert noted the existence of two main groups of students: the first intends to continue its education at college level and cooperate in the adult-defined adolescent world of the school. Students in this group make the school their community and hence the basis of their social identity. The other group, made of students who intend to leave high school directly for the workplace, especially in blue-collar (i.e. largely manual) jobs, views the role of the school differently. While school is subconsciously viewed as a necessary qualification for employment, the extracurricular activities on offer are not seen as good preparation for their next life stage. Instead, better opportunities are afforded by gaining familiarity with places likely to become their future workplace. This involves making

contact with those who will aid them in the pursuit of employment. Students accordingly are forced to minimise their participation in school outside classes and to maximise their contacts in the local communities. The school's reward system, according to Eckert, precludes friendly coexistence between the two groups of students since 'it repays extracurricular activity with freedoms, recognition, and institutional status. The result is the ascendancy of one student category over the other, which elevates differences on their interests to the level of a primary social opposition' (1991: 216). This opposition is a familiar one in most US schools, and is explicitly recognised in names for the groups in different schools at different times, for example *Greasers* versus *Preppies*. In the Detroit schools that Eckert studied in the 1980s, the terms were *Jocks* for the group in the social ascendancy, and *Burnouts* for the 'alienated' group. (The labels refer to the association of Burnouts with drugs and the Jocks with sport.)[5]

Like Rickford, Eckert had used prior existing social groupings in the community being studied, rather than assuming a class continuum. Differences between the groups occur not just in career expectations and involvement in extra-curricular school activities, but also in symbolic forms of behaviour, dress and speech. Burnouts in the 1980s were wearing dark-coloured, rock-concert T-shirts while Jocks wore colourful and fashionable designer clothes. A third group exists within the school system which is sometimes explicitly labelled 'in-between'. However, according to Eckert, this third group does not have as strong an identity as the first two, and is in some ways defined by what it does not belong to.

Jocks and Burnouts have a lot to say about the way the other group speaks. Jocks consider the Burnouts' speech to be ungrammatical, full of obscenities and inarticulate; the Burnouts consider that the Jocks 'talk just like their parents' (Eckert 1991: 220). Eckert points out that while Burnouts of both sexes make regular use of obscenities in normal speech, male Jocks also use obscenities, but only in private interaction with other male Jocks. Jock girls avoid obscenities altogether. As for accent, there are similar trends: Burnouts adopt more local vernacular variants, while the Jocks remain more conservative in reproducing societally prestigious forms. Eckert (1988: 206) explains these in terms of pupils' ties with the city. The Burnouts see their future social roles as tied to the urban centre, while the Jocks are less motivated to adopt regional markers. Among the most salient of such markers that Eckert found were a backing of the vowel [e] so that in Burnout speech the vowel in BET, LED, BED sounds more like the vowel of BUT, BUD, CUT in adult, middle-class speech. (Some of the complex ongoing changes in the vowels of northern US cities like Detroit are discussed in Chapter 4.) That the difference in attitude towards a local identity results in subtle differences between Jocks' and Burnouts' speech is reminiscent in a broad sense of Labov's findings on Martha's Vineyard.

Eckert observes that the Jocks versus Burnouts split is not the same as the adult working-class/middle-class dichotomy, since some children of middle-class background become Burnouts and vice versa. On the whole, however, she shows that this is an adult class system in the making. The polarisation between students is surprising given the kind of stratification cited in other US Labovian studies. It may well be that linguistically speaking the job market in the USA transforms the high school polarity into a continuum. It is to the upper end of such a continuum that we turn in the final subsection on class.

The upper classes

The upper classes are often conspicuous by their absence in sociolinguistic surveys. Tables and diagrams compiled by Labov and Trudgill have as their upper limit the 'upper middle class'. There are two reasons for this: the smallness of the upper class as a group compared to the working class and middle class, and the inaccessibility of this group to outsiders. Until recently, linguists have had to rely on somewhat speculative accounts of upper-class linguistic mores. Fischer (1958: 52), in his account of variation between *-in* and *-ing*, referred in passing to 'the protracted pursuit of an elite by an envious mass and consequent "flight" of the elite'. He thus foreshadowed Labov's account of hypercorrection among the lower middle class. (Of course, the idea of an endless chase between elites and the lower middle class is not borne out in variation theory, since many linguistic variables are quite stable.) One indication of the 'flight' of the elite comes from the old debate in England about U and non-U language. The terms 'U' and 'non-U' were coined by the linguist Alan Ross (1959) for 'upper class' and 'non-upper class' respectively. Ross argued that the upper classes (i.e. the remnants of the old aristocracy) in Britain were distinguished solely by their language, rather than wealth and education as in former times. He differentiated between on the one hand 'gentlemen' and, on the other, 'persons who though not gentlemen, might at first sight appear or would wish to appear as such' (1959: 11). Examples of U and non-U language from the 1950s given by Ross were of the following sort:

> *greens* meaning 'vegetables' is non-U.
> *home* (*They've a lovely home*) is non-U; *house* (*They've a very nice house*) is U.
> *horse-riding* is non-U against U *riding*.

Ross's examples from accent, though impressionistic, are still worth quoting:

> U-speakers do not sound the *l* in *golf*, *Ralph* (which rhymes with *safe*), *solder*; some old fashioned U-speakers do not sound it in *falcon*, *Malvern*, either. Some

> U-speakers pronounce *tyre* and *tar* identically (and so for many other words, such as *fire* – even going to the length of making *lion* rhyme with *barn*.

One scholar who has managed to penetrate the social and physical barriers associated with the upper class is Anthony Kroch. He provides an account of upper-class life in Philadelphia, whose norms are that of a hereditary elite. Unlike classes defined by sociologists or sociolinguists, the upper class is a self-recognised group whose members frequently meet face-to-face in social institutions of their own. According to Kroch (1996: 25) the upper class of Philadelphia is extremely self-conscious and demarcates itself sharply from the middle-class. Membership in this group is dependent on the following factors: wealth (inherited), colour (white), descent (Anglo-Saxon) and religion (Episcopalian, i.e. Church of England). There is a social register which lists members of this group.

Kroch gained access to this network via acquaintance with one member, and was able to carry out sociolinguistic interviews with several members. One interesting difference between these interviews and those carried out by Labov and Trudgill was that speakers became more relaxed when Kroch made it clear that his main interest was in their speech patterns rather than their social life. This contrasts greatly with lower middle-class insecurity about language. Kroch found that in terms of phonological variables there was not much difference between the upper class and the middle class:

> The properties that distinguish upper class speech are not phonemic but prosodic and lexical. They constitute what Hymes (1974[a]) calls a 'style' rather than a dialect. In particular, upper class speech is characterized by a drawling and laryngealized voice quality, and, contrastingly, by frequent use of emphatic accent patterns and of intensifying modifiers. (1996: 39)

Kroch comments further on the image of relaxation and ease projected by this type of speech. The use of intensifying modifiers (like *extremely*) and hyperbolic adjectives (like *outstanding*) and the prosodic stress patterns project self-assurance and an expectation of agreement from the listener. This sense of 'entitlement' (Coles 1977) is inculcated from childhood and maintained throughout life. As Coles defines it, entitlement is the socio-psychological correlate of power, status and wealth. It includes a sense of one's own importance and the expectation that one's views and wishes will be treated with respect. Members of the upper class project their sense of entitlement in all social and interpersonal interactions.

From Ross's examples on U and non-U in Britain and from Kroch's study, it appears that differences between the upper classes and the lower middle class are suggestive of a competition over status (see section 1.6 on the difference between 'status' and 'class' in strict sociological terms). On the other hand, there seems to be a bigger linguistic divide between the

working and the middle classes, which seems a class division as opposed to differences over status. Much work has still to be done before any such conclusions about the links between language variation and class conflict can be firmly drawn. The centrality of class in sociology and in early sociolinguistics has been challenged by closer attention to gender as a primary category in social division.

Gender, Class and Language

It is seldom the case that class is the only sociological factor involved in language variation. There is a strong case for considering gender to be an equally significant (or more significant) factor. In Fischer's study in New England, girls were found to use more of the standard variant (*-ing*) than boys. Labov (1972a: 243) found that, in careful speech, women in New York City used fewer stigmatised forms than men. They were also more sensitive to prestigious variants. In formal speech, women were found to show greater style-shifting towards the prestige variants of their society than men. Labov believed that this was particularly a characteristic of lower middle-class women. He offered two tentative explanations for the difference in index scores between the sexes. He first raised the possibility that, as the ones generally more involved in taking care of children's development, women were more sensitive than men to what he called 'overt sociolinguistic values' (1972a: 243). A second, more 'symbolic' possibility that he offered was the following: 'The sexual differentiation of speakers is therefore not a product of physical factors alone . . . but rather an expressive posture which is socially more appropriate for one sex or the other' (1972a: 304). On Martha's Vineyard, for example, men were more 'close-mouthed' than women, and used more contracted areas of the vowel space in the mouth. This included a greater use of the centralised diphthongs discussed earlier. Labov comes close here to suggesting that linguistic variables don't just reflect different social categories, but are, in fact, involved in creating and maintaining a symbolic difference between the sexes.

In monitoring the (ing) variable among adults in Norwich, Trudgill (1974) came to a similar conclusion to Fischer: women use the standard variant to a greater extent than men. Trudgill put forth some possible explanations for this differentiation by gender, but as these have proved controversial and the basis for considerable debate in gender studies, we discuss them more fully in Chapter 7.

More recently, Eckert (1989b) has argued that there is no apparent reason to believe that gender alone will explain all the correlations with linguistic scores between men and women in a society. A more viable approach is one that combines gender and other categories like social class.

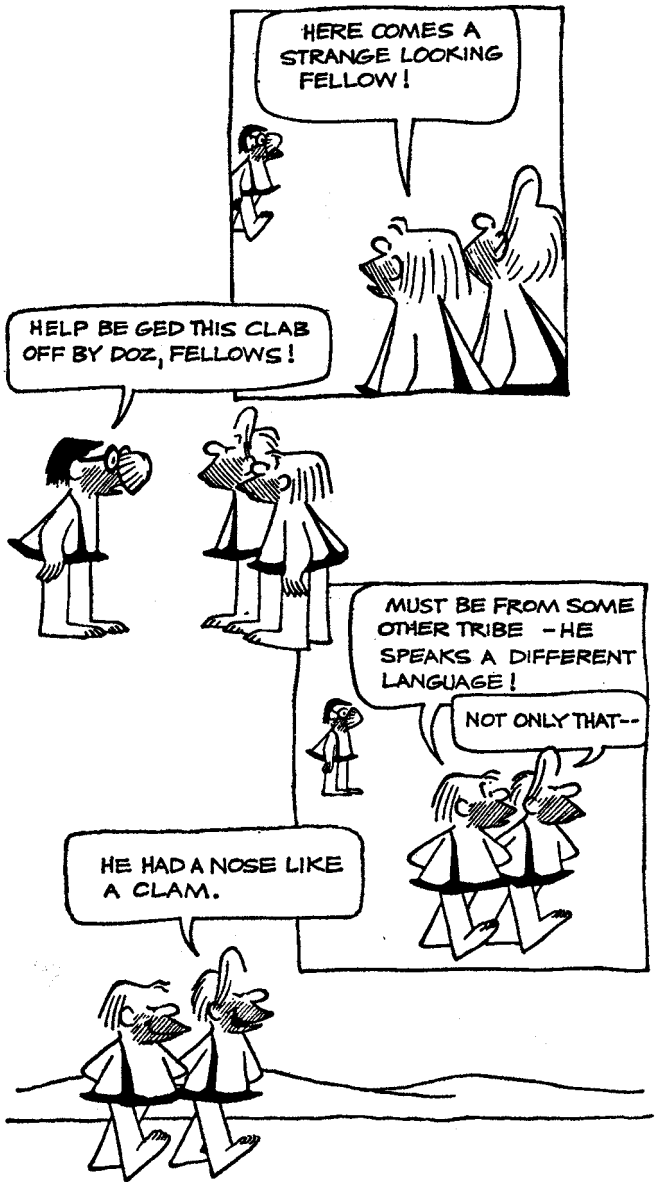
That is, a category like 'working class' may be too broad to account for the niceties of linguistic variation: working-class women may show crucial differences from working-class men. Similarly, 'male' versus 'female' may be too broad a division in itself, since gender – more than ever – is a fluid category admitting of various degrees of masculinity and femininity (see further Chapter 7 on these two categories).

Ethnicity and Dialect Variation

Another important factor that can upset the neat correlations between a speech community and its use of linguistic variables is ethnicity. Ethnic minorities may to some extent display the general patterns of the wider society but may also show significant differences. In his New York study, Labov (1972a: 118) made the following remarks about the city's Puerto Rican speech community:

> Puerto Rican speakers . . . show patterns of consonant cluster simplification which are different from those of both black and white New Yorkers. Clusters ending in *-rd* are simplified, and preconsonantal *r* is treated as a consonant: *a good car' game*. This does not fall within the range of variations open to other New Yorkers [who would say *a good card game*] . . .

Ethnic varieties such as Puerto Rican English in New York are called **ethnolects**. The factors that sustain an ethnolect are a sense of identity based on ancestry, religion and culture. Greater interaction within an ethnic group leads to differences from the dominant societal dialect or language. African American Vernacular English is ironically at one and the same time one of the more disparaged varieties of English in the classrooms of the USA and one of the best-studied by sociolinguists. We will use some of the vast research into this variety to illustrate the extent to which ethnic varieties (or ethnolects) may be polarised yet show degrees of overlap. As far as the postvocalic (r) and (th) variables studied by Labov are concerned, black speakers in New York showed the same patterns of stratification by class as other New Yorkers. Yet this is not true of certain other choices in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Labov (1972b: 39–42) discusses the use of intervocalic (r) – the pronunciation of [r] between two vowels in words like *Carol, Paris, borrow* – in New York City. All white speakers that Labov interviewed showed 100 per cent use of intervocalic [r]. For this group, intervocalic (r) is not a variable. For black speakers, however, there is variation, with (r) either being pronounced as [r] or being merged with the following vowel. Loosely speaking, the latter form may be thought of as the dropping of intervocalic [r], sometimes represented by writers in spellings like *Ca'ol* and *Pa'is*. All black groups show variation irrespective of class. This is an example of language variation reflecting what Labov called 'ethnic



processes'. Labov's later work in Philadelphia stressed ongoing divergence between black and white speech (Labov and Harris 1986: 17), as witnessed in innovations like the use of *-s* as the marker of the past in narratives, rather than the traditional third person singular of the present tense:

> So, Verne was gonna go wif us. So I says, 'Shit, she don' gotta go, we go.' . . .

In such sentences, the *-s* in *says* seems to have become a general marker of the narrative past (also known as the conversational historical present). The construction is characteristic of many varieties of English: compare white

middle-class US speech *Then she says* (followed by a quotation) *and then I say* (followed by a quotation). Whereas in such varieties the narrative past uses the same person-marking suffixes as the present tense, AAVE according to Labov and Harris (1986) is evolving a vernacular rule of zero (i.e. no suffix for all persons) for the present tense and *-s* for narrative past (in all persons). Labov and Harris (1986: 20) suggest that this divergence has to do with increasing ethnic segregation of blacks and whites in the USA. This applies more to working-class black communities than the middle classes. Not all linguists agree with this argument. Some argue that there is now greater cross-pollination of cultural and linguistic traits across race and ethnic barriers in the USA than in the past. Labov and Harris (1986: 22) respond that, whereas this might be true of the more obvious features like vocabulary and certain pronunciations, for more basic grammatical structures there is divergence: 'young black children from the inner city who must deal with the language of the classroom are faced with the task of understanding a form of language that is increasingly different from their own'. The disagreement seems to hinge around the issue we raised earlier about whether one style of language is more basic than another. In a sense, both parties are right: the vernacular varieties of white and black English (in the Labovian sense) might be diverging; yet at the same time there could well be convergence between non-vernacular styles of the two varieties.

Mismatches between home language and school language are discussed in Chapter 12. Labov's examples on ethnic differentiation call into question the view that he sometimes presents of New York as a community sharing norms of usage and agreeing about the social meaning of variability. The dialect divide between black and white in New York City portrayed by Labov and Harris seems more reminiscent of the basic divisions that Rickford studied in Cane Walk.

3.5 SOCIOLINGUISTICS ON TRIAL: AN APPLICATION OF URBAN DIALECTOLOGY

Language variation has often been studied 'for its own sake', treating language as the object of study. Yet such research may also have practical applications in various fields. In this concluding section, we illustrate the kind of contribution that variationists have made in courtrooms. Forensic linguistics is the name given to a branch of linguistics that is concerned with legal issues like voice identification, disputed authorship, anonymous letters and so on. The case that we use as an example here involved sociolinguistic testimony given on behalf of Paul Prinzivalli, an accused in a trial in Los Angeles in 1984. Prinzivalli, a cargo-handler for Pan American airlines, was alleged to have made bomb threats by telephone at Los Angeles

airport. He was said to have a grudge against the company on account of its handling of shift schedules. Part of the threat was as follows:

> There's gonna be a bomb going off on the flight to LA . . . . It's in their luggage. Yes, and I hope you die with it and I hope you're on that.

An attorney for the defence asked Labov to contribute to the case on account of his experience with American dialects and in particular the dialect of New York City. On listening to a tape of Prinzivalli's own voice, Labov was sure that the bomb-threat caller and Prinzivalli were not the same person. His concern was how to convey his linguistic knowledge objectively to a judge, especially since Prinzivalli was known to be from New York and those who heard the bomb-threats thought the caller to be from that city as well. Labov, however, concluded that the caller's speech showed the features of the Boston area rather than New York. Together with colleagues from the University of Pennsylvania, Labov made detailed transcriptions of the two sets of recordings showing the differences in accent. In court he replayed the recordings through a loudspeaker which projected a clear and flat reproduction of the voices to all parts of the courtroom. Several people who had thought that the two voices sounded similar were now struck by the differences that sound amplification projected. Labov pointed to specific and systematic differences between the two voices. The most significant of these differences between the two speakers was the way the vowels were pronounced in the sets LOT, COT, HOT and THOUGHT, CAUGHT, LAW respectively. In most English dialects these have distinct pronunciations, but in several US cities – including Boston – the vowels in these two lexical sets have merged. Thus in Boston *cot* rhymes with *caught* (see the Northern Cities Shift in section 4.5, and Map 4.4).

Labov was able to show that the bomb-threat caller had consistent merger in his pronunciation of the words *bomb* and *off*. On the other hand, Prinzivalli showed a distinction between these two words, which was typical of the New York region and the surrounding mid-Atlantic states. The last part of Labov's testimony involved measurements of the vowels of the two speakers via instrumental methods. This is a more objective means of presenting information than via auditory and perceptual means alone. The charts that Labov and his associates drew up, based on spectrograms (machine-drawn representations of the bands of energy released for vowels and consonants in speech), provided further testimony to subtle differences in the vowel systems of the defendant and the bomb-threat caller – for example in the way vowels were conditioned by following consonants.

On cross-examination, the prosecution asked whether a given speech sample could be identified as belonging to a given person. Labov pointed out that sociolinguists had less expertise in the identification of individuals than in the characteristics of speech communities. On the other hand,

there are limits to the range of variation for any individual who belongs to the community. The question that naturally followed was whether an individual New Yorker could imitate the Boston dialect – that is, whether Prinzivalli could have disguised himself as a Bostonian. Labov's reply was that when people imitate or acquire other dialects they focus on the socially relevant features: certain new words and individual sounds. But they are not able to reproduce the intricacies of the vowel systems and the exact lexical sets that individual vowels are associated with in such systems:

> If it could be shown that the defendant had a long familiarity with the Boston dialect, and a great talent for imitation, then one could not rule out the possibility that he has done a perfect reproduction of the Boston system. But if so, he would have accomplished a feat that had not yet been reported for anyone else. (Labov 1988: 180)

The defendant was acquitted, since on the basis of the dialectological testimony there was a reasonable doubt that he had committed the crime. Prinzivalli was offered his job back at Pan American on condition that he did not sue for damages or back pay.

3.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we introduced some of the aims, methods and approaches of variation theory. The central concept in this chapter is the linguistic variable. The variants of such a variable correlate with prominent social variables like class, gender, ethnicity and age groupings. They may also express different degrees of allegiance to a local identity. The majority of studies in the variationist tradition argue that society is stratified in terms of class, which is defined in terms of a socioeconomic index. Class stratification is mirrored by stylistic shifts towards the more prestigious linguistic variants in more formal contexts or contexts in which conscious attention is paid to language. Upward mobility among lower middle-class people and a concern for an increase in status is characterised in terms of hypercorrection in the use of certain variables. Ethnic and gender distinctions sometimes cut across class divisions so that the primary division for some variables may be along lines of ethnicity or gender. The prevailing model of class in variation theory is that of functionalism, involving shared norms, attitudes to, and evaluations of, language use by all classes. This model is called into question by some studies which argue that language shows up irreconcilable differences in some societies. Working-class speech in these instances expresses solidarity rather than a consciousness of status and upward mobility. The covert prestige of the vernacular is thus a counterbalancing force to the overt prestige of the standard variety.

Notes

1. The term 'secular' is meant to be opposed to the dominant ideas of Noam Chomsky which have become something of an orthodoxy in the USA. Labov has consistently argued that there cannot be a discipline of linguistics that is not social. 'Secular' also means 'long-lasting in time'. The rest of the terms are either transparent or will become clear in the course of this chapter.
2. Whereas the choice of a particular variant of a variable may sometimes depend purely on a linguistic context (i.e. usually the type of sound preceding or following the variable), the variables of greatest interest to sociolinguists are those which show social conditioning as well. (Hence the alternative term, 'sociolinguistic variable'.)
3. As with most linguistic variables, some of the variation is due not to social factors but to purely linguistic ones: centralisation was favoured in certain phonetic environments. Centralisation occurred most if the variable (aɪ) was followed by voiceless sounds like [t], [s], [p] or [f]. It was least favoured if the variable (aɪ) was followed by sounds like [l], [r], [m] or [n], which are phonetically liquids and nasals.
4. The usual phonetic terms corresponding to 'r-ful' and 'r-less' are 'rhotic' and 'non-rhotic'.
5. As Eckert points out, by no means all Burnouts actually use drugs.