

NWAV, the beginnings

Roger Shuy

NWAV October 28, 2011

When I was a small boy I recall asking my daddy exactly where I came from. His answer, still a mystery to me, was “Roger, you came from the mud puddle.” So now, after 40 years of NWAV, I’m being asked the same question. My memories may be fickle or tainted, but I’ll try as best I can to recall the mud puddle from which NWAV sprang.

The aura of linguistics

First, we need to know the aura of linguistics in 1971. Those of you who weren’t active in linguistics (or perhaps even born yet) must know that Chomsky had taken over the definition of linguistics from the descriptivists who had dominated linguistics to that point. I place the turning point at the 1964 Indiana University Summer Institute of Linguistics, when Chomsky and Pike were invited to square off in a series of lectures. Chomsky’s ideas won the minds of most participants and it became clear that if we studied the actual language used by actual people, we were headed for trouble.

But wait. There were also other speakers and participants at that summer meeting who championed the study of language variation, including Labov, Ferguson, Hymes, Gumperz, Bright, Fishman, McDavid, and Haugen. They were from different academic traditions, of course, including ethnography, linguistic geography, language planning and policy and, in Labov’s case, new contexts and methods of analyzing language variation. Shortly after that LSA meeting, I moved from Michigan State to CAL and I managed to talk

Fasold and Wolfram into joining me there. Our work for the following two years was to analyze the data from our Detroit Dialect Study. Although the Detroit study was a stratified random sample of over 600 Detroiters, much of our focus was on Vernacular Black English that supported Labov's earlier study in New York and focused on how the findings applied to educational settings.

The aura at Georgetown

Second, the aura at Georgetown, where NWAV started. To understand this properly, you'd have to be aware of what was going on at this university at that time. While still at CAL 1968, I had helped Georgetown get a large NSF grant to initiate a new doctoral major in sociolinguistics. The first problem for Georgetown was hiring faculty to teach it. Wolfram, Fasold and I then agreed to relocate our work on Black English from CAL to Georgetown. We also hired Dave Smith, an anthropologist from Michigan State to join us.

We tried to conceive of what a new PhD program might look like, but we didn't have any model to copy. We knew that sociolinguistics involved more than the VBE we had been studying, and we also knew that there was a lot for us to go on, including Labov's exciting work on variation, Hymes's and Gumperz' work on ethnography of communication, Fishman's and Haugen's work on language planning and bilingualism, and of course, the century of work on regional variation in which McDavid had trained me. We also knew that all of these had deep implications for many areas of society, including education, medical communication, politics, and the legal arena.

Although we were flying blind about what a curriculum should be, we constructed one anyway and started with ten doctoral students in 1969. The program caught on immediately and it didn't take long to attract many more grad students who were as excited as we were about the future of language variability in all its forms and applications.

After Walt Wolfram left Georgetown, CJ Bailey joined us and he, Ralph Fasold, and I realized that we were onto a really hot topic that needed to be spread. But we also felt that the usual academic conferences were not providing much opportunity for studies of language variation to grow. LSA papers were dominated by Chomsky's new followers. TESOL, SECOL and most of the annual Georgetown Roundtables were dominated by language learning and teaching, and ADS was dominated by linguistic geography. None of these organizations seemed to fit our need. In addition, their meetings seemed too large and impersonal to offer much in the way of informal exchanges of ideas among those who shared beliefs about what really mattered in linguistics.

Bailey suggested that we host a very different kind of meeting at Georgetown, one that focused only on language variation and was informal and small enough for personal interaction and growth. Fasold and I agreed, thinking it could offer a forum for new trends and ideas to spread widely.

Bailey also suggested that it be called New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English. Again, Fasold and I agreed. It is important to note the individual words in this name. **New** conveyed creativity, change, and excitement.

Ways was significantly pluralized, conveying that we were thinking about

more than one **Way** that variation might be conceived and treated in the present or the future. **Variation** was interestingly unspecified about what type of variation we had in mind. **English** was used in our early meetings but, consistent with its other title words, **New** and **Ways**, it eventually was dropped entirely after it became more and more clear to all that English was not the only language in which **Variation** was important.

Planning the first meeting

Georgetown was already scheduled to be the site of the annual SECOL meeting that October, so I negotiated with the organizer that we could hold our own meeting, called NWAVE, in conjunction with it. The name indicated that our focus was then on variation in English-- thus the final E-- which made it easier for the SECOL people to see some relevance to their organization. We didn't really know whether we'd have enough participants in our first meeting, so holding it in conjunction with SECOL was a way of saving face in case nobody showed up. Our fears were soon abandoned when more people showed up for NWAVE than for the concurrent SECOL meeting.

It's hard to recall what Bailey, Fasold, and I were thinking of as we planned the meeting. I eventually came to understand that Bailey was thinking about pushing his Wave theory model as an alternative to Chomsky's ideas. Fasold will have to tell you what he was thinking about. As for me, I was still remembering my own training in linguistic geography, when just a few years earlier I had done about 100 five-hour Linguistic Atlas interviews of old, white, rural, uneducated farmers all over the state of Illinois. This contrasted sharply with what I learned at that LSA Summer Institute in 1964, where I

first met Labov and heard his exciting ideas about discovering variation that represented all ages, races, genders, and socio-economic status. Our following Detroit Dialect Study grew out of Labov's inspiration and our results supported his findings at that time. But this area was still a work in progress and I was hoping to hear what other linguists were doing and thinking about variation in the hope of expanding such study even more.

Although the term, sociolinguistics, was becoming more and more used and developed in many areas, I'm not sure that any of us had in mind for NWAVE to be limited to sociolinguistics, however it was defined at that time or in the future. I believe all three of us had the study and analysis of language variation in mind, by whatever label it carried and wherever it might take us.

We decided that late October would be a good time for the meeting, since the Christmas and Spring breaks were already taken by LSA and TESOL. As we sent out snail mail announcements to people we knew and to most linguistics departments in the US, we were hopeful that some of them would be interested and might agree that coming to this meeting was a reasonably good idea. We invited them to send abstracts so that we could organize our time appropriately. As a result, we got far more positive and enthusiastic responses than we could imagine. Historical linguists such as Elizabeth Traugott, semanticists and phonologists such as Bruce Fraser, Haj Ross, Jerry Morgan, Theo Venneman, John Lawler, and Robin Lakoff, and many linguistics grad students, such as Ivan Sag brought their exciting ideas. We came to understand that we were not alone in believing that the study of actual language used by actual people was an increasingly hot topic.

Holding the first meeting

Attendance and participation in this first meeting was comparatively small in light of meetings that have taken place since. Georgetown graciously provided a free venue for the first four meetings. The only cost to attendees was for the wine and cheese we provided at the evening party. The first meeting was held in the Hall of Nations where the participants could attend all of the presentations rather than meeting in concurrent sessions. Our small size added to intimacy and led to great discussions. Georgetown faculty and students did the best they could to provide crash space for attendees, which not only made it less expensive but also greatly aided the personal flavor. Long discussions at our homes often went into the night. I can recall one of these marathon sessions at my home in which Haj Ross, Bruce Faser, John Lawler, Bill Labov and I got very little sleep.

We held what might be called a business meeting at the end, discussing whether have future NWAVE meetings like this. The answer was a unanimous “yes.” Most agreed that we might also create a new society, which Bailey named the Lectological Association, a sufficiently vague name that clearly left the door open for other **New Ways**. Unlike other organizations, it would have no membership rules and no dues—only an annual meeting. In about a year the Lectological Association came to an early death, although the “no membership rules and no dues part” has endured to this day. Many consider the absence of an official organization a great strength, even though over the years there have been advocates for a more formal organizational structure that might better suit the needs of our increasingly larger group of participants.

The following meetings

We continued to hold the meetings for four years at Georgetown until Fasold and I grew weary of the task of organizing and finding space for the rapidly increasing number of people who wanted to attend and give presentations.

The University of Pennsylvania agreed to take over the next year and it has been held at a number of different universities ever since, returning to Georgetown every once in a while, especially on anniversaries, including the 40th today.

Directions of growth

The other speakers will describe the directions that NWAV has taken since its humble beginnings. It is notable, however, that over the past 40 years a wide variety of **Ways** of Analyzing Variation have included implicational scales, variable rules, contact linguistics, ethnographic approaches, quantitative sociolinguistics, linguistic change, creole studies, generative semantics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, bilingualism, language planning, and issues of gender and ethnicity, to name only a few.

Some may feel that NWAV has expanded its scope too far away from core linguistic variation and language change. Others may feel that it should always be open to **New Ways** and theories about language variability, even in areas formerly considered to be the sole territory of anthropology, psychology, or other fields. Some may feel that NWAV has grown too large to preserve the wonderful intimacy that it once had and that the mud puddle of our origins has grown a bit too muddy.

It's always the nature of successful small groups to grow larger and eventually need to split into other smaller groups that can focus on the more specific areas that develop during their growth. NWAV is facing this issue as well. Its specific focus seems to be consistent in its title, **New Ways**, which implies that the meetings will continuously change in focus and direction as **New** theories, research, and applications about **Variation** develop. In many ways this can be taken as a sign of sound academic progress. But whether NWAV can maintain its unity, intimacy, and excitement despite its growing diversity and size is a question for future meetings to keep in mind.

As we consider these things, T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* may have some prescient advice for us:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Those of us who contributed to the birth of NWAV may not have exactly the same memories about how NWAV began its exploration but, mud puddle or not, it did start its exploration, and I'm sure that everyone in this room will agree that it has become one of the vital meetings in our field and that just maybe we now know this place pretty well, even if not for the first time.

Thank you all for making this 40 year-old NWAV dream continue to be realized. I'm very proud to have had something to do with the mud puddle from which NWAV sprang and I'm delighted to see everyone still

wallowing in it, turning the variable language mud into solid bricks for future generations to use as they construct more realistic and functional buildings of language **Variation**. That's what the **New Ways** are all about.