

William Labov: An Introduction

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29 October 2011

NWAV 40, Georgetown University

When Natalie asked me (yesterday) to introduce Bill Labov tonight, I realized I had a bit of a conundrum, of how to introduce someone who truly needs no introduction. The unmarked introduction strategy – of talking about all his books and papers and grants and other accomplishments – seems really superfluous in Bill's case. I mean, who here needs me to remind them that Bill is the author of a whole stack of momentous, pathbreaking books in sociolinguistics, like the *Atlas of North American English*, the monumental three volume work on the *Principles of Linguistic Change*, and some of my personal favorites like *Language in the Inner City* and *Therapeutic Discourse* (co-authored with Dave Fanshel), and then of course *Social Stratification of English in New York City* – the only book I know of in linguistics that reads like a novel! When I first read it, I was riveted: I kept going page after page, chapter after chapter, to see what would happen next, and to find out how it all turns out. So, yes, I could talk about Bill's publications, but mostly you're all already aware of them, and furthermore, there's a significant practical problem, in that the list is too long to get very far into without using up all the available time. This I know all too well; when Corky Feagin and I tried to put together a complete bibliography of Bill's publications for the festschrift we edited for Bill (here's the plug – the two volume set entitled *Towards a Social Science of Language*, published by John Benjamins), it went on for many pages, and was still probably incomplete – and that was 15 years ago, and he's produced lots more works since then! So, suffice it to say, Bill has published more than all of us, in fact, more even than most of us put together.

The same is true of the rest of his CV. I could come up here and talk about his honors, like having been the President of the LSA, or talk about his grants and projects, like the Harlem study, the Philadelphia project, the Atlas project, his work on teaching reading, etc., but this would be familiar territory to most of you, and would take too much time to even give the headlines. I could try to describe his influence on the field by mentioning

all the linguists who were once his students, but that turns into a veritable Who's Who of sociolinguistics, including many of the plenary speakers at this conference, like John Rickford, Penny Eckert, and Deborah Schiffrin, as well as Malcah Yaeger, John Baugh, Sherry Ash, Miriam Meyerhoff, Naomi Nagy, Charles Boberg, etc., etc. But like I said, the lists are too long, and this approach has been done so often that most of you have probably already heard several versions; in fact, you may have already heard ME give such an introduction. So it seemed like Plan A, for introducing Bill, was out.

So then I thought of the Introducer's Plan B – also known as the Walt Wolfram strategy – which is telling amusing anecdotes about the person being introduced. Again, there were problems – I along with many others have done this kind of intro for Bill in the past, so I've used up most of my best material. Not all of it, as you will see, but again, been there, done that, so something else was needed. I was looking for a Plan C.

Fortunately, at this point my training as a sociolinguist and ethnographer came to my rescue. I realized that of course, an introduction is a typical speech act, with a social as well as a communicative purpose. By calling it an “introduction”, we pretend that it is informational and presentative – it's like when you come to visit me, I'm presenting you your room, and telling you where you can find the towels. But that's not all that it's about. The point of me being up here is that I come, dear friends and Romans, to HONOR Bill, not to introduce him. And evidently the honor is magnified by having someone else introduce me before I introduce him. Apparently the process is recursive. Today we have answered the question of ‘who will introduce the introducers?’, but fortunately we have discovered that in actual performance, this rule is not TOO recursive (like center embedding).

So let me proceed to honor Bill, not by reciting his stupendous achievements, but by offering a brief reflection on some of the major themes in his work that underlie much of what goes on at NWAV, and that are an inspiration to me and to so many of us. And along the way, to use up the rest of my amusing anecdotes.

So what are some of Bill's central themes? Well, he works on narrative, and argues that narratives are a central path to accessing the vernacular; so I'm going to tell you a narrative. He also believes that language cannot be understood without studying its usage in social interaction, so my narrative is about Bill's interactions with some of his students. But above all, Bill has enunciated two themes that I want to talk about, that are central to the NWAV project: inherent variability and orderly heterogeneity.

To start, let's think about inherent variability. This is one of the basic foundations for the theory of language variation and change that Bill Labov articulated along with Uriel Weinreich and Marvin Herzog in their classic paper from the 1960s, which has long served as a kind of theoretical manifesto for variationist work. I think it is fundamental to all 'new ways of analyzing variation', because it reminds us why we have variation at all. Inherent variability says that language, as the communicative system of a society of human beings that are diverse (used by people of different ages, sizes, language experiences, etc.), under diverse circumstances (often noisy, in all kinds of settings both social and physical), for a variety of purposes – such a system must of necessity be variable, and capable of accommodating and incorporating variability. A diverse world implies a diverse language, and a somewhat unpredictable world implies a somewhat unpredictable language. There is, in other words, a random component to language, just as there is to life. If you do not believe this, if instead you think everything is somehow determined, if only we could be detailed enough in our analyses – then all linguistic behavior will be in the end categorical – and the only issue for the analyst will be working out the right category or the right set of constraints that determine a particular linguistic outcome on a particular occasion. But such a deterministic model of language is clearly at odds with 40 years of NWAV work, which confirms the postulate of inherent variability.

Let me illustrate this point with the story of how I first met Bill Labov, which is how I ultimately came to be involved in NWAV, and standing (or rather, sitting) in front of you today. Three months before the first NWAV, in June of 1972, I met Bill Labov at a wedding (not my own). At this point in my life I had just graduated from college, I had

studied linguistics as an undergrad, and encountered Bill's work and was really excited by it. In fact, I had applied to Penn's grad program and been offered admission, but had no funding, so I didn't think I could go to grad school – I couldn't afford it! I was planning to get a job. But then came the wedding reception that changed my life.

It was the wedding of Bob Hymes. Bob, who is now a professor of Asian History at Columbia, was the son of Dell Hymes, who was of course then Bill's colleague at Penn. So Bill was at the wedding because he was a friend and colleague of the father of the groom, but why was I there? Well, Bob and I went to high school together – Central High School in Philadelphia. Since our last names began with adjacent letters of the alphabet, we were in the same homeroom all through high school – the G-H group, which coincidentally also included Joe Harris, who is Zellig Harris's nephew; it was a good group for linguists and their relatives. Therefore, Bob and I knew each other well, we sat beside each other every day in homeroom for four years, and became good friends, and hence when he got married, I was invited to the wedding. So I'm there at the wedding reception talking to Bob about my interests in linguistics and he says, "Oh, Bill Labov is here at the party", and he takes me over and introduces me to The Man. So now I'm standing there talking to my academic hero, and I start gushing about how I like his work, and how I had applied to Penn because of him. Bill chats me up for a few minutes, we talk about Black English and language change and stuff, and then he says, "Don't worry about the funding. Find a way to pay for your first semester and then we'll see if we can work something out with a research assistantship or something." So on the strength of this vague assurance, I took out a loan and started my graduate studies at Penn in the fall, and of course five weeks after I started, Bill dragged us all down here to Georgetown to the first NWAV.

Now all this string of coincidences surely is evidence of the inherent variability of life, of the sheer randomness of events. If I hadn't met Bill at the wedding, I wouldn't have started Penn that fall, or maybe ever. If Dell Hymes doesn't have a son my age, if we don't decide to go to the same high school, if our names aren't close enough in the alphabet to be in the same homeroom, if any of a dozen different things break slightly

oneway or another, Bill and I never meet, and I would not be here today. These things are not deterministic; individual events and outcomes cannot be categorically predicted.

But the second great organizing principle of Weinreich Labov and Herzog is ORDERLY HETEROGENEITY, which means that despite some randomness at the level of the individual event, there are probabilistic generalizations which lend very regular structure to a series of events. And this fact also began to emerge in my early experiences with Bill. There I was at Penn, thinking my personal history was a remarkable serendipitous series of events. But then I started hearing extremely similar stories from many of my fellow students. If I recall correctly, I heard stories about Bill meeting prospective students at parties and telling them to come to Penn from at least three of my classmates – Anne Bower, Liz Dayton, and John Baugh. John Baugh for example met Bill when Bill came to do some undergraduate event at Temple University and John was his undergraduate host and guide, and Bill did the same thing he did with me – on the basis of a brief conversation he urged John to come study at Penn. Ditto Anne Bower – she was an undergrad somewhere, Bill came and gave a talk, and at the reception afterwards they met and he told her to come to Penn and work on his research project. And so on with various other people.* So even though each of these individual cases have a random component, are you seeing a pattern emerge? It's not clear what the direction of causation or correlation is here. Maybe Bill is a good talent spotter, so he had a high probability of winnowing the wheat from the chaff. Or maybe he's a good educator, so he had a high probability of achieving good outcomes with any students he worked with. Or maybe there's an interaction term: talented wannabe linguist sharing a drink with Bill at a party favors good academic outcomes. But whatever the precise correlation, there was clearly some orderly heterogeneity in how my cohort at Penn got there, via social interaction with Bill Labov. And this orderliness and that interaction was how I and many other NWAV linguists got our starts, and contributed to what NWAV is today.

Finding order and meaning, finding hidden structures and dynamic systems, finding these things in the lush heterogeneity of life and language is the richly rewarding enterprise of all the work that we do at NWAV, and one of the original inspirations for that enterprise

is William Labov. So I ask you all now to welcome the man who showed us many new ways to embrace diversity and analyze variation, and to seek meaning in the social life of language: my mentor, my colleague, my friend, our speaker tonight, William Labov.

*After I gave this introduction at NWAV 40, two other Penn alums told me that Bill had also recruited them in similar casual fashion; especially notable was his luring of Anne Charity from Harvard to Penn.