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1. Topic and Introduction

The topic of this term paper are “Labov’s studies in New York and Martha’s Vineyard”. Labov’s observations in Martha’s Vineyard served Labov as a model for his Master’s essay and his observations in New York as a model for his dissertation.

The second chapter will give a survey of William Labov’s motivation for studying sociolinguistics. Chapter 3 is about his observations in Martha’s Vineyard. After that I’ll give a detailed description of his studies in New York (chapter 4) divided up into the two parts: First, the social stratification of (r) in New York City Department Stores (4.1) and second The Lower East Side (4.2). These studies are Labov’s most famous works and two of his early publications. With his studies he created the base for a modern way of analysing language without using tape-recorded interviews (see also chapter 5 of this term paper, the meaning of Labov’s studies for modern sociolinguistics). Finally a conclusion will be given in chapter 6.

2. Labov’s motivation for studying Sociolinguistics

William Labov was born on December the 4th 1927 in Rutherford, New Jersey. He is know as the founding father of sociolinguistics. Labov first came in contact with the subject of sociolinguistics during his time at the Columbia University, from which he graduated with his Master’s Essay concerning his studies in Martha’s Vineyard. There he met Uriel Weinreich, one of his linguistics teachers. Weinreich tried to establish new ideas of the subject how to collect data for empirical studies. Labov identified with the idea of the anti-homogeneity of linguistics. He took part in Weinreich’s lectures and seminars about syntax, semantics, dialectology and historical linguistics. Labov was fascinated of Weinreichs resistance to authorities of linguistics, such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield. Three years after his Master’s Essay, Labov wrote his dissertation about his studies in New York City. As a reaction to Noam Chomsky’s way of studying linguistics, he developed his ideas of a spontaneous and anonymous observation of linguistic behaviour of people of different regions, ages and social classes.

3. Labov’s observations in Martha’s Vineyard

Labov’s studies in Martha’s Vineyard are characterised by a first effort to study the distribution of (r) in its social context. While studying that case, Labov remarked a change in the realisation of the (ay) and (aw) diphthongs and focused on their centralisation process from 1933 to 1961.

3.1 Geographical and historical conditions of Labov’s studies

Martha’s Vineyard is to be found close to the cost of New England where early settlers coming from Europe landed. The population of Martha’s Vineyard can be divided into three main groups: English Yankee settlers, aboriginal Indians and recent Portuguese settlers. Martha’s Vineyard is a contrasting island because on the one side there is a congested area at the down-island where the population of the main town lives of tourism during the summer months, while on the other side there are mostly farmers and fishermen at the up-island.

As a base of his studies Labov used some data from the Linguistic Atlas of New England (1933). There it was mentioned that
in that period the island speech was characterised by mild centralisation of the (ay) diphthong in words such as *wife*, *night*, *right*, *I* and little to no centralisation of the (aw) diphthong in *house*, *out*, *about*, *month*.

![Diagram showing the quadrilateral of (ay) and (aw) diphthongs]

(Whelpton. p 46)

3.2 Repetition of the studies in 1961 by Labov

About 30 years later Labov returned to Martha’s Vineyard to restart the studies which he had found in the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* and interviewed about 70 people. There he developed his idea of anonymous interviews by asking people questions like “When we speak of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, what does right mean? ... Is it in writing? ... If a man is successful at a job he doesn’t like, would you still say he was a successful man?” (Trippel 1997) so that they would use some of the words containing the (ay) or (aw) diphthongs in their answers.

In 1961 he discovered several changes. One of them was that the centralisation in the quadrilateral of (ay) variable had spread to the (aw) variable. In a more concrete way this means that in Martha’s Vineyard the (ay) turns out to be realized as [ɪ] and [ɛ] while (aw) is realized as [ʌ] and [æ]. One of the results was that the centralisation most often happened by people around the age 30 to 60.

Labov also noticed that especially fishermen living in the up-island regions centralised the two diphthongs. But here was not only a difference between groups of different ages and occupation but also between the different ethnic groups. As a result of Labov’s observations it turned out that “the English Yankees and Indian inhabitants were more likely to use centralization than the Portuguese” (Trippel 1997).

3.3 Labov’s explanation of the observations

Labov concluded that the centralisation of the (ay) and (aw) diphthongs was marked by the social attitudes of the interviewed people and closely linked to the fact that in this time many people left the mainland and went to the down-island because of the economic pressure in their hometowns. The Yankees would therefore change their speech by emphasising the (ay) and (aw) diphthongs to keep distance to the mainland immigrants who didn’t centralise the diphthongs at all. That explains why the centralisation first came up in the up-islands where most of the native Yankees lived as fishermen and from there spread to the Indian
population which was a link between up-island and down-island. This means that the new arrived Portuguese settlers who lived mainly in the towns at down-islands, attended to centralise the (ay) and (aw) diphthongs a lot later than the other two groups. The centralisation itself therefore spread from the up-island to the down-island.

A further observation led to the result that people who wanted to leave the island soon and go to the mainland didn’t centralise the diphthongs as much as people who wanted to stay in Martha’s Vineyard like most people from the up-island. Labov marked this by an either positive or negative attitude towards Martha’s Vineyard and the wish to accommodate the individual’s language to the to the language of the speech community with which he/she identifies or plans to belong to.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>(ay)</th>
<th>(aw)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Labov 1972:39)

All the observations Labov made in Martha’s Vineyard gave him the idea that speech is always linked to social attitudes and linguistic change of several groups of society. As shown in the next chapter, he extended his studies in New York City by studying the social stratification of (r) and the speech community of the Lower East Side.

4. Labov’s studies in New York

The two studies chosen in this term paper (The Social Stratification of (r) in New York City and the study of the Lower East Side) are exemplary for Labov’s whole work. They are two of his early studies and influenced the following. Also today Labov’s studies in New York City are seen as “a reaction to the formal generative school of Noam Chomsky, which idealised away from society, located linguistic competence in the individual, and defined linguistic knowledge in terms of rule systems which defined formal structural properties” (Whelpton. p 40)

4.1 The Social Stratification of (r) in New York Department Stores

1966 the study of the social stratification of (r) in three new York department stores was Labov’s breakthrough on the field of sociolinguistics. It was followed by a series of other studies in New York (see also 4.2) and is Labov’s best known work today. It’s known as a reformatory way of studying sociolinguistic variables.

4.1.1 Preliminary considerations

Before Labov started his studies in New York department stores, he formulated his main hypothesis: “if any two subgroups of New York City speakers are ranked in a scale of social stratification, then they will be ranked in the same order by their differential use of (r)” (Labov 1972:44).
This hypothesis was based on several exploratory interviews. Concerning the department store studies, Labov specialized his hypothesis: “salespeople in the highest ranked store will have the highest values of (r); those in the middle ranked store will have intermediate values of (r); and those in the lowest ranked store will show the lowest values”. (Labov 1966:65)

Labov’s aim was to see if these two hypothesis were provable or not. Therefore he decided to do his studies in three New York department stores which could be easily differentiated by their different social status and social stratification of their clients. The three department stores Labov chose are:

Highest-ranking: Saks Fifth Avenue
   at 50th St. and 5th Ave., near the center of the high fashion shopping district, along with other high-prestige stores such as Bonwit Teller, Henri Bendel, Lord and Taylor

Middle-ranking: Macy’s
   Herald Square, 34th St. and Sixth Ave., near the garment district, along with Gimbles and Saks-34th St., other middle-range stores in price and prestige.

Lowest-ranking: S. Klein
   Union Square, 14th St. and Broadway, not far from the Lower East Side. (Labov 1972:46)

Labov didn’t illustrate the different social ranking only by the aid of the location of the department stores but also with the different height of the prices. He compared the prices for women’s coats which confirmed the store-ranking mentioned above. Also the number of pages of advertising in the New York Times which is comparable to the German Kölner Stadtanzeiger and the Daily News which is more like Bild and Express, that means more often read by lower-income employees.

The results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of pages of advertising</th>
<th>October 24-27, 1962</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NY Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saks</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macy’s</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| S. Klein                          | ¼        | 10        | (Labov 1972:46)

While Saks only makes a few advertisements in the New York Times, Macy’s tries to reach as many readers of different social classes as possible and S. Klein tries intensified to address the advertisements to the group of lower income people and renounces completely of advertising in the new York Times.

Also important for Labov was the relation of space and amount of products. After having observed the department stores he came to the conclusion that

Saks is the most spacious, especially on the upper floors, with the least amount of goods displayed. Many of the floors are carpeted, and on some of them, a receptionist is stationed to greet the customers. Kleins, at the other extreme, is a maze of annexes, sloping concrete floors, low ceilings; it has the maximum amount of goods displayed at the least possible expense. (Labov 1972:47)
4.1.2 The experiment

After this preliminary considerations Labov started his experiment by questioning the employees of the different department stores. The method he used is that the interviewer (Labov himself, dressed in middle-class style and r-pronouncing) should approach the questioned employee and ask for a department with the expected answer: “fourth floor”. He would then repeat the question once more to get the answer “fourth floor” once more but in a more emphatic style. After having got the answer Labov turned away and made some short notes concerning

a) the following independent variables
   - the store
   - floor within the store
   - sex
   - age (estimated units of five years)
   - occupation (floorwalker, sales, cashier, stockboy)
   - race
   - foreign or regional accent, if any

and

b) the following dependent variable (use of (r) in four occurrences):

   casual: fourth floor
   emphatic: fourth floor

(Labov 1972:49f.)

The results Labov got were based on 264 interviews; 68 in Saks, 125 in Macy’s and 71 in Kleins. The interviewing time was about 6.5 hours. In the following chapter the general results will be shown; specific details such as results divided up into age and race will be left out.

4.1.3 The results of the department store study

The general results are shown in the following diagram

![Diagram showing casual and emphatic speech results.](image)

(Labov 1972:52)

The results shown in the diagram above seem to verify Labov’s hypothesis because the employees of the highest ranking store (Saks) use the postvocalic (r) most frequently and most emphasized when they repeating the answer “fourth floor”. Macy’s employees tend to
emphasize the postvocalic (r) especially at the word end but not necessarily inside the word. The number of values is lower than in Saks but higher than in Kleins. It’s striking that Kleins is the only department store where the number of values rises almost linear. From the diagram people might tend to consider Labov’s hypothesis as verified but regarding the percentage, Kleins increases from 5 to 18 percent which means the values are trebled while Saks and Macy’s only reach the double values. (according to Labov 1972:52)

4.2 Study of Lower East Side

(preliminary remark: the following paragraphs of 4.2 are based on Labov 1966 chapters 3 and 4)

The survey of the Lower East Side is the most important investigation of the stratification of language of New York City. The Lower East side doesn’t represent the upper portions of the city’s social structure, but it has a good section of the larger groups: middle class, working class and lower class New Yorkers. In a close neighbourhood are the main ethnic groups represented: Italians, Jews, Irish, Germans, Ukrainians, Poles, Negroes and Puerto Ricans, for which the Lower Eastside is a port of entry for immigrant groups. Another newcomers move in from other parts of Manhattan and there is a continuous stream in moving out or upwards in a higher social class.

Citizens who remain for a long time are often marked by either a strong sense of local tradition, or total inertia. This is the right population to test the proposition that the native New York City pattern of speech can absorb a bulk of foreign influence without being seriously transformed itself.

4.2.1 The MFY Survey

Labov started his interviews in the summer of 1962. Basic for his study of the social stratification of language was a comprehensive survey of the area made by faculty members of the New York School of Social Work of Columbia University. It had been conducted the year before as a preliminary to the Mobilization for Youth Program as an assault on the problem of juvenile delinquency (MFY Survey). The linguistic survey by Labov was called the American Language Survey (ALS).

First 40 interviewers for the MFY Survey spent many months in the exact determination of the number of dwelling units, vacant or occupied, in each building, yielding a serial listing of 33,932 units in which informants might be found. For a stratified random sampling procedure the list was divided into 250 equal intervals of 133 units, and 5 households were randomly selected for each interval, yielding a sample of 1,250 household.

The result of the MFY Survey shows that this area is depressed as far as the education, incomes and occupations of its residents are concerned. Compared to the United States as a whole, the Lower east side is at the lower end of each of these scales.

4.2.2 The ALS (American Language Survey)

Based on the MFY Survey Labov took 122 ALS interviews by visiting the people and 33 interviews (so-called television interviews) were carried out by phone. It was the only way to get information of people who refused to have a talk with the interviewer. Interviewed were only native speakers (born in the USA) and informants who had been born in a foreign country but had come to the lower East Side before they were 8 years old.
The interviewer asked for words which give an accurate view of the treatment of the variables: (r) in four, (eh) in bad, (oh) in off, the (in) thirteen and (dh) in brother.

The results are shown in the following six diagrams taken from Labov 1966:222

The figures show the social stratification of the variables and their use according to different styles of speaking (A to D). The class stratification of (r) has already been discussed in chapter 4.1. Figures 2, 4 and 5 also show a fine class defined separation of the variables. But in figures 3 and 6 the diagrams have a cross-over pattern, also called “apparent deviation” (Labov 1966:227). Labov tried to arrange the data in different social classes to avoid the problem. For example he didn’t divide the lower class and working class up into 0-2 and 3-5 units but in 0-1 and 2-5. This case shows the problem of studying sociolinguistics. How can
social classes be defined clearly and in how far is the interpretation of results depended from the observer? Studying sociolinguistics always includes keeping these questions in mind.

5. The meaning of Labov’s studies for modern sociolinguistics

The meaning of Labov’s studies is, as already indicated in the previous chapters, said to be reformatory concerning sociolinguistics. Labov was the first who didn’t separate language from its social context: He declared his personal aim as “to avoid the inevitable obscurity of texts, the self-consciousness of formal elicitations, and the self-deception of introspection” (Labov 1972:xiii). His studies are not only known as a reaction to Noam Chomsky’s way of studying linguistics but also to the way Ferdinand de Saussure chose. Saussure said that “structural systems of the present and historical changes of the past have to be studied in isolation” (Saussure 1949:124) For Labov it was clear that linguistics couldn’t be separated of its usual context. Therefore his studies contain lots of information of people of different social classes, ages, origins and so on. He emphasizes that Chomsky’s “famous…competence-performance distinction made in such grammars must be either reformulated, weakened or abandoned” (Wardhaugh 2002:187).

As described in the Lower East Side study Labov also indicated the problems of analysing sociolinguistic data. Still today there are no strict guidelines how to treat linguistic data. That means that Labov’s studies can be seen as a beginning of a still continuing process of linguistic analysis.

Labov’s way of studying sociolinguistics became so popular that his studies were repeated once more about twenty years after his study of the Lower Eats Side.

6. Conclusion

In this term paper three of Labov’s studies have been described under many different aspects. One central point was Labov’s new way of gathering linguistic data by rapid anonymous and spontaneous interviews. A second important point was the discovery that (r) as a linguistic variable gives a detailed stratification of social classes. Finally the question of objectivity of linguistics analysis and interpretation was raised.

Labov’s case studies do not only give linguistic data, they also show different ways and new methods of studying linguistics. Labov’s work in New York and Martha’s Vineyard is still very popular today and has influenced sociolinguistic studies for more than 50 years of linguistic analysis. That’s why William Labov is known as the founding-father of sociolinguistics.
Literaturverzeichnis


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