

WILLIAM LABOV LAUDATIO

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5th of June 2012
Poblenou campus auditorium
UNIVERSITAT POMPEU FABRA

William Labov, the man to whom Universitat Pompeu Fabra is awarding the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa, is among a handful of outstanding minds that have laid the foundations of linguistic theory and practice. We honor him today, not just for being the founder of quantitative sociolinguistics, and for his brilliant research task during more than 50 years, but also because he has been the proponent of a new way of looking at language, linguistic analysis and method, and linguistic change, thus contributing to a general theory of language that is still pending.

The second half of the 20th century, during which for the most part Labov was working, witnessed a scholarly and scientific tradition that involved a quite remarkable fragmentation of knowledge, seen as the due toll to be paid for scientific development and which demanded specialization. For decades, this specialization led sciences to having to live 'back to back',

although during the last two decades of the 20th century an effort was made to try to overcome this situation. Moreover, this effort was renewed at the turn of the new millennium and, since then, social scientists have witnessed a need to develop inter-disciplinary and intra-disciplinary models and methods. In this sense, Labov was – is – a visionary of his time; his years of work as an industrial chemist helped him anticipate himself to his times and become an example of inter-disciplinary and intra-disciplinary scientific approach and focus, thus bridging communication between linguistics and other social sciences.

If I were to say that, in developing a Theory of Language Change and Variation, Labov has indeed proposed a social approach to, and a sociolinguistic model of, language, he himself, and many of you in this room, would be frowning upon this statement. The fact is that Labov has always resisted the term "sociolinguistics", because by using it, it seems as if there could be linguistic theorization which is not "social"; at the same time, he has insisted in using it, because a merely formal linguistic model has proven insufficient to reach a general theory of language.

A retrospective look at the Labovian model of sociolinguistic variation involves referring to three seminal works in variationist literature. On the one hand, the collective chapter by Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968), "Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change", which involved a formulation of several principles that frame the empirical foundations of a theory of language change, followed by "Building on Empirical Foundations" (1982), where Labov evaluated how the building of these foundations stepped forward; on the other hand, Labov's monograph, *What is a Linguistic Fact?* (1975), where he questioned the introspective method used by generativists and emphasized the need to observe spontaneous speech in linguistic analyses. These three works are at the basis of Labov's proposal to integrate linguistic variation - the greatest *bugaboo* of Neo-grammarians - within a theory of language change; however, it is probably the book *What is a Linguistic Fact?* that best reflects Labov's outstanding efforts to accommodate the existence of language variation to the diachronic study of languages.

Labov's influence on today's linguistic research and practice is international. His model of linguistic change and variation is

acknowledged not only by linguists, but also by sociologists, linguistic anthropologists and discourse analysts. Throughout his academic and research life as a linguist, William Labov has been awarded many prizes and distinctions: the Leonard Bloomfield Award by the *Linguistic Society of America*, the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in English; the Guggenheim Fellowship (1970-71, 1987-88); Doctorates Honoris Causa by Uppsala University, Université de Liège, The University of York, The University of Edinburgh, and Université de Paris X, Nanterre. He is a member of several academies in the United States (US) such as the *National Academy of Arts and Sciences* and the *National Academy of Sciences*, and *Fellow* of the *American Association for the Advance of Science*.

On the theoretical and epistemological axis, Labov's most important contribution to linguistics has been to prove that variation is a significant linguistic fact, *vis-à-vis* the resistance of some linguistic schools to acknowledge this variation; on the methodological axis, his ongoing rigorous research has allowed him to confirm over and over again that "precision of method" is needed for the observation of an individual's most spontaneous speech variety – the vernacular – and also that some principles of "quantitative reasoning" are required, to go "from measuring the surface linguistic changes to proposing the principles that cause them", as Labov himself puts it.

The best way to grasp Labov's outstanding contribution to linguistics and other social sciences is by reviewing his most important theoretical and methodological findings and proposals. Let me mention some of them.

Labov's MA thesis (1963), the study of Martha's Vineyard Speech by using acoustic and auditory measurements, showed the emergence of a variable of sound change as a symbol of social identity.

Through the study of -r social and stylistic stratification in the Lower East Side of New York City by eliciting narratives, Labov a) proposed a new view of urban speech, from chaotic to orderly heterogeneous, b) accounted for speech community stratification and degree of social mobility and c) showed how language change moves through the social system, leading to a new paradigm in sociolinguistic enquiry. These

findings appeared in his PhD dissertation (1964), and in his books: *The social stratification of New York City* (1966) and *Narrative analysis* (1967), co-authored with Joshua Waletzky.

Funded by the US Office of Education, Labov's research within New York's South Harlem (1963-1970), on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speaking preadolescents, adolescents and young-adults, disentangled two social problems: a) the minority gap in academic achievement *vis-à-vis* mainstream US youngsters and b) severe linguistic prejudices, even among linguists, towards AAVE, which led to social prejudices; this research also showed that language variation is controlled by internal linguistic factors, as observed in the behavior of "to be" as a lexical verb and as an auxiliary in AAVE, and that there are systematic patterns of copula deletion that show that this vernacular has the same uniform grammar across the United States. Most importantly, the methods used by the linguists and African American field-workers involved in this project helped them to come close to solving the observer's paradox, that is, observing people when they are not being observed. Publications derived from this research include: *The Study of Nonstandard English* (1969), *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular* (1972) and *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972).

Throughout the seventies and eighties of the 20th century, William Labov's research in ten Philadelphia neighborhoods, stratified by social class, allowed him to account for the causes and the course of linguistic change and to identify the leaders of this change: that is, young women, 2nd and 3rd generation of newly arrived ethnic groups, upwardly mobile and defiant to social norms. A thorough study of short /a/ and diphthong /aw/, by using the socio-metric network method, which considered parameters such as inside and outside contacts, social mobility and generations of ethnic groups under defiant social norms, enabled him to hypothesize the *curvilinear pattern*, according to which internal linguistic change initiates in the groups centrally located in the social scale (*upper working class and lower middle class*) and not in the highest or lowest groups. Along these 50 years of variationist historiography, this curvilinear pattern has been tested in many speech communities and for many languages, and it has been confirmed in most of them.

These and other findings (for example, that social nonconformity was an "incrementational" factor of linguistic change and that upward social mobility was an "exponential" factor of this same change) were published in numerous articles in the journal *Language Variation and Change*, of which Labov is one of the founding editors, and in two outstanding books, *Principles of Linguistic Change. Internal factors* (1994) and *Principles of Linguistic Change. Social factors* (2001), which systematize Labov's findings, validated and confirmed in many English and non-English speaking communities.

The project on *Cross Dialectal Comprehension*, conducted by Labov and some of his associates in several US big cities, revealed that there were, and there are, radical dialectal differences which affected, and affect, peoples' comprehension of each other, and also that in the second half of the 20th century, after many centuries of stability, the English short vowels of northern cities were beginning to shift positions, thus being able to propose what is known as the *Northern Cities Shift*. Results of this research appeared in *The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology and Sound change* (2006), an outstanding piece of work that Labov co-authored with Ash and Boberg.

This project was also very productive in two directions. On the one hand, it shed light on the differences between individual and group variation. It is well known that Labov's view of language is community-wise. Individuals belonging to a speech community are out-speakers of their community norms so that "their vernacular", in Labov's own words, "is archetypical of their speech community". This individual/speech community binomial has proved to be very useful, not only in studies of linguistic variation but also in other areas of applied linguistics such as, for example, the linguistic profiling aspects of forensic expert witness work; on the other hand, the results derived from this project highlighted the nature of sound shifts, in that they are not isolated; rather, according to Labov, "changes are locked into a tight structure, in which one change triggers another in rotation".

Another major contribution of Labov's, worded in *Principles of Linguistic Change. Cognitive and Cultural Factors* (2010), is to have accounted for the origins, principles and forces behind linguistic change

by a) examining the cognitive and cultural influences responsible for this change, b) demonstrating under what conditions dialect divergence is favored, and c) establishing an essential distinction between change transmission within the speech community and diffusion across communities.

Other outstanding contributions to the study of sociolinguistic variation and language change derive from the "quantitative reasoning" that Labov has proposed for the linguistic analysis of variation and change: the definition of the linguistic variable (the dependent variable), as well as its discreteness, and the location of the constraints on that variable (the independent variables); the exploration of single dimensions of variation by the binary division of linguistic and social factors; the use of multivariate analyses, to show the simultaneous effect of all relevant independent variables and the use of cross-tabulation, to give a more refined view of the distribution of the data and the degree of independence of intersecting variables; the establishment of stable sociolinguistic variables; changes from above, changes from below; inferences on the independence and interaction of independent variables or factors; the analysis of apparent and real time.

As early as 1975, in his seminal work *What is a linguistic fact?*, Labov advocated for the need to count on general linguistic principles which would be at the basis of the linguists' agreement on the nature of those linguistic facts which would be acceptable in linguistic research. At the time, he also suggested that a set of propositions that would relate general findings on language variation and change would deserve to be called a general *Theory of Language Change and Variation*. After considering the basic aim stated by this theory (to describe linguistic variation), the data it analyses (an individual's most spontaneous variety, that is, his/her vernacular) and the methods it applies to measure this variation (observation, description, explanation) – all leading to theoretical and methodological principles –, it can be stated that Labov's model is without any doubt "theory-building".

In the last years, and as a member of the *National Academy of Sciences*, Labov was appointed to a committee called *Preventing Reading*

Difficulties among Young Children. Over a period of ten years he has developed an in-school training program, known as *The Reading Road*, which is addressed to undergraduate tutors of struggling readers and whose main aim is to try to help overcome the minority gap in reading achievement in the United States. Through his involvement in this project, Labov has taught us that, apart from helping linguists to formalize language – as the human capacity that makes "living beings" human – linguistics can be successfully operational in social "problem-based" projects.

By conferring this honorary doctorate upon professor William Labov, Universitat Pompeu Fabra is acknowledging not only his rigor in developing quantitative sociolinguistics, but also his capacity for motivating students and scholars who have been trained by his leadership and mastership in laying the foundations of this powerful linguistic paradigm and who, although not mentioned in this *Laudatio*, have undoubtedly contributed to the consolidation of this paradigm; Universitat Pompeu Fabra is expressing its recognition for Labov's capacity for reinforcing intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary team work, for sharing research findings and fostering intellectual debates, and for conducting linguistic research that is socially useful and helpful in trying to solve community problems.

