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Preface

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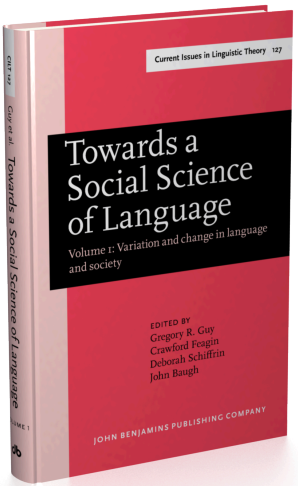

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Towards a Social Science of Language: Papers in honor of William Labov . Volume 1: Variation and change in language and society
Edited by Gregory R. Guy, Crawford Feagin, Deborah Schiffrin and John Baugh
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Preface

This book is intended to provide a survey and a synthesis of the field that may be called 'Labovian linguistics' — the research areas and methods that were pioneered, and are still being sustained and inspired, by William Labov. This discipline has long lacked a suitable name. The term most commonly applied to it is 'sociolinguistics', which has its merits, but is often misconstrued as involving nothing more than the enumeration of the social correlates of certain linguistic features — a sort of perpetual rewriting of a few chapters of *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Labov 1966). For this reason, Labov himself has often preferred to characterize his own work merely as 'linguistics'. While this makes a rhetorically effective aphorism, it is deficient as a general term for the Labovian field, because it neither captures the distinctive characteristics of that approach, nor contrasts it with other areas of linguistics that are not Labovian. And even the term 'Labovian' is inappropriate; although convenient and readily apprehensible for informal purposes, it tends to undermine what it tries to describe. The central feature of the approach to the study of language that Labov has always espoused is the 'dynamic paradigm': that is, seeing language not as a static structure but as a dynamic social system, which is continuously moving, changing, interacting, and working. It would be profoundly undynamic of us to fix a cult of personality around the pioneer, and name the field after him.

We have therefore preferred to define the field in terms of its methods and goals, rather than its subject matter or its practitioners. Hence, the title of this book is *Towards a Social Science of Language*. We want to pursue a "science of language", because we seek to do work that is empirically founded, and follows Labov's 'principle of accountability'; it is a "social science", because we want to account for language use, and because language itself is quintessentially social, the fundamental medium for the creation and maintenance of distinctively human society. And finally, we say "towards" in recognition of the dynamism of the discipline itself: we are part of a process, not an edifice.

In keeping with the dynamic theme of the enterprise, it is appropriate to say something about the process by which this book came about. Some of the story is personal, about my own involvement with linguistics, and with this project. My part of the story began a quarter-century ago, almost exactly, when I was an undergraduate at Boston University. In my junior year, I was sort-of-a-linguistics major; I say 'sort of' because there was no linguistics department there, so I couldn't be the real thing, but I had taken whatever linguistics courses were offered and I used to hang around the library reading all kinds of things on linguistics.

One afternoon I picked up a journal and read something that changed my life. That article was "The logic of nonstandard English", and it was the first piece of work I had ever seen by William Labov. To me, the experience was absolutely electrifying. I can still feel, to this day, the shock of excitement and recognition that I felt when I read it. The BU library was poorly lit and uncomfortable, and it was a grey and blustery afternoon, so I was sitting in a carrel by the window in the spreading gloom. I started to turn the pages of this article, and it was like the whole room suddenly lit up from what was on them.

My initial entry into linguistics was through historical linguistics, and one of the things that fascinated me about the field was the fact that human history was alive in language: remote events like the Norman Conquest, the Black Death, and the colonization of the Americas still materially affect how we speak today! This human drama was what first drew me into the discipline, but meanwhile, the things I was studying in synchronic linguistics were rather pale and bloodless by comparison. Linguistic form does have its own appeal, but I was beginning, as an undergraduate, to be nagged by uneasy questions such as: Where are the people? What happened to communication? I was also feeling, in 1970, a lack of relevance in the field. I was a social activist, deeply involved in the anti-war movement, civil rights, and social justice, and it made me uneasy that the linguistics I was studying seemed to be so remote from these concerns.

So this was my state of mind the day I picked up that article, and in it I found the people. I also found the history, the communication, the relevance that was lacking in the rest of the field. Reading Labov's work, I saw that it matters who the speakers are, and what they have to say, and what they are doing with their language. And he showed me that linguistics as a discipline

matters; that it can have something to say about how we organize our society, and about the search for equality, and dignity, and justice. And the truth of those words shone off that page at me like a revelation, and drew me in, and kept me going along a path that has brought me to where I am today.

But this is not the important thing about William Labov's work. It is not remarkable that he had that effect on me; what is remarkable is that he had a similar effect on so many people. Many people whom I know in the field, including many contributors to these volumes, have similar stories to tell. And all of us in the field are indebted to him in some way. Obviously all of sociolinguistics is in his debt, especially studies of variation, discourse, and nonstandard language varieties. But this is true of many other areas as well: dialectology and historical linguistics, language contact, language education, language acquisition; he has made important contributions right across the field. And, perhaps even more important, he has worked outside the field, and outside of academia, for social justice, against racism and prejudice, and for recognition of the importance of the words and language and logic of the people, the people that are missing from too much of linguistics.

So, in recognition of my mentor and friend, Bill Labov, and to satisfy some of the debt that I and all of us owe him, I wanted to do something to honor him, and carry forward the enterprise that I learned in his laboratory. Now in his case, this was not the simple thing it might seem. When I was a student at Penn, Bill always used to rail against respect for authority. I think that he thinks academic prestige is like linguistic prestige, representing the arbitrary norms of the dominant group, and since he was an iconoclast and a fan of the vernacular in his own work, he never wanted to become part of a respected elite. Nevertheless, there is another kind of importance that is not arbitrary, or based on power and authority, and that is why Bill Labov merits recognition. He is important to all of us in the field because of his stature, not his status; because of the substance of what he has done. So we undertook this project not in deference or reverence for his authority, but in recognition and appreciation of what he has meant to us all.

The next part of the story of this book might be called "The Philadelphia Story", but it is not the Philadelphia story of Hepburn, the Main Line and the upperclass (although some of their story is told herein as well; see the paper by Anthony Kroch). Rather, this is the Other Philadelphia story. It begins in

the early '70s, when Bill Labov moved himself and his work from New York to Philadelphia, to the University of Pennsylvania. That move has turned out to be highly significant for the history of sociolinguistics, and in particular for many of the people involved in this project. Much of Labov's work in the last 25 years has been drawn from his continuing research on language change and variation in Philadelphia. And it was through Labov's Philadelphia projects and other work at Penn that three of the editors (John Baugh, Deborah Schiffrin, and myself), as well as 18 other contributors to this book, got our real education as linguists, and began working towards a social science of language. As it happens, Deborah Schiffrin and I are native Philadelphians, and John Baugh is a native once removed. We all met as students at Penn studying with Labov. Our co-editor Crawford Feagin, as any sociolinguist who hears her speak will realize, is not a native Philadelphian; nevertheless, Labov was her dissertation advisor, and she has had along involvement with his laboratory and research facilities at Penn, and this is what led to her participation in this project. And there are still other Philadelphia connections among the people involved in this work; Anthony Kroch and Ellen Prince are adopted Philadelphians and colleagues of Bill's at Penn, and Charles Ferguson is a native, as well as a long-time student of the Philadelphia dialect.

Thus it came about that we assembled this cabal of the Other Philadelphians, together with their spiritual kin, the Other New Yorkers, Norwichers, Montrealers, Mineiros, and all the rest, to try to repay part of the debt that we all owe to William Labov, and in the process, to carry forward the enterprise that he in such large measure inspired. In pursuit of this goal, we have put together this book: a two-volume collection of original research papers that are designed to reflect the breadth and depth of the impact that William Labov has had on our discipline. We see his impact as having its greatest effect in four main areas, which are the focus of these volumes. These are areas of linguistic research that would hardly exist, or would be unrecognizably different, without their Labovian content.

First is the study of variation and change; sections I and II of the first volume comprise papers that take this as their central theme, with a focus on either the social context and uses of language (I) or on the internal linguistic dynamics of variation and change (II). Second is the study of African Ameri-

can English, and other language varieties in the Americas spoken by people of African descent and influenced by their linguistic heritage. This, of course, is the area of Labov's work that drew me into the field, and it is the subject of the papers in section III of the first volume. Third is the study of discourse, in which Labov's involvement goes back to his work on narrative (Labov & Waletzky 1967), dwelling descriptions (Linde & Labov 1975), and therapeutic discourse (Labov & Fanshel 1975). The papers in section I of our second volume extend this strand of Labovian linguistics. Fourth is the emphasis on language use, the search for discursive, interactive, and meaningful determinants of the complexity that appears in human communication. Papers with these themes appear in section II of our second volume.

The Philadelphia motif of the story of these volumes appears again in connection with their publication; we are particularly pleased to bring this work to print with the support the John Benjamins Publishing Company, of Philadelphia and Amsterdam. The editors would like to express our appreciation to the people at Benjamins, and particularly to the general editor of the Current Issues in Linguistic Theory series, Konrad Koerner.

There are a number of other people who were part of this effort to honor William Labov, and lent their support in many ways, even though their names may not appear on the dustjacket. We cannot do justice to them all, but we particularly want to thank Joshua Fishman, Marilyn Merrit, Arvilla Payne, Haj Ross, and Arthur Spears for all of their efforts. The editors also wish to express our deep appreciation for the assistance we received at various stages in the work on these volumes from the following individuals: Catherine Ball and Kathryn Taylor for help with computer applications beyond our own skills, Joyce Albergotti for providing us with bibliographic materials, James W. Stone for his computer assistance and his editorial pinch-hitting, and especially Marie Kopf and Kaarin Kruus for all their diligent editorial work and long hours at the keyboard. We also thank the York University Department of Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics for the provision of financial support, facilities and supplies, without which this project might never have been completed. Gregory Guy's participation in this project was also supported in part by grant number 410-92-1765 from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Although the publication of these volumes is a happy occasion, our joy is tempered by the loss of one of our contributors, our departed friend, Fernando Tarallo. All who knew him grieve that he cannot be here to celebrate with us. Nevertheless, we take some consolation in being able to memorialize Fernando by publishing here what is his last work.

Finally, a few words about the timing of this project: these volumes are not intended to mark the completion, or even the culmination, of Labov's career. Of course, it is true that he has attained an honorable age, but honors can be given at any age, and this one is, if anything, long overdue. Part of the continuing dynamism of this field is the ongoing contribution that Bill has made and continues to make, and we fully expect to go on being excited by his new ideas for decades to come.

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York University, Toronto
25 February 1995