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Foreword

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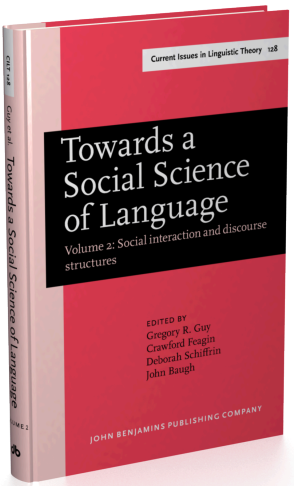

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Foreword

Present at the Creation: A Reminiscence of the Summer of '63

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How I, a sophomore at a small college at which linguistics was not among the subjects taught, came to be at the 1963 annual meeting of the Linguistic Circle of New York (now the International Linguistics Society) is a tale best saved for another time. Suffice it to say that on perusing the program I could not help but notice a paper bearing the intriguing title 'The social stratification of *r* in New York City department stores' to be given by one William Labov of Columbia University. As luck would have it, we ended up as lunch companions that Saturday in New York (conferences were shorter in those days!), arguing spiritedly about whether pragmatics could or should be made a part of linguistics. (I believed the answer was 'yes'; Labov was not so sure.)

A month or so passed, summer vacation arrived, and I returned to my parents' home in Westchester County. Since I was only 20 miles north of Manhattan and wanted to take advantage of a golden opportunity to discuss linguistics with someone who actually knew something about it, it seemed reasonable to get in touch with Labov. So I wrote to him and got an answer back in short order inviting me to come to Columbia and see him. He also set me straight on a misapprehension under which I had been operating to that point. I had written to Prof. Labov and had to be told that this was a bit premature, since he was still a graduate student about to begin research on his dissertation.

When we met a few days later, he explained to me something of what the thesis involved. He also told me that he had money from the ACLS for the engagement of an assistant and asked if I might be interested. I told him I was, and that was that — I was hired.

The work in which I participated that summer is reported in Bill's now classic study *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. The techniques employed therein to obtain reliable data regarding linguistic variability and its relationship to changes in the (perceived) social context, in such common use today, were pioneer stuff back then. It's not often that one gets a chance to see a whole new field of investigation in the making, but that is what I was given in 1963. Bill Labov was inventing quantitative social dialectology, and I was watching him do it.

My first few days on the job were spent mostly in the offices of Columbia's School of Social Work (wherein resided the files containing demographic data on the population from which the sample of subjects for the study was to be drawn) and at the Lower East Side headquarters of Mobilization for Youth — an antipoverty program responsible for conducting the survey in which the data had been compiled.

In the evenings, I accompanied Bill to the sites of a number of pilot interviews. There was a certain amount of agonizing over recording equipment, the state of which would strike anyone brought up in the era of cassettes and integrated circuits as appallingly primitive. The advent of the transistor had at least made it possible to create portable machines of reasonable quality but even they were awkward and bulky; I will confess to having been more than a little anxious about being seen in the streets of some of New York's grimmer neighborhoods carrying valuable electronic gear in a manner that couldn't help but be conspicuous. That the summer passed without incident may partly explain why, my general dislike of New York City notwithstanding, I have never in these many years since felt fearful there for my personal safety.

When the work started in earnest, I went into it with some trepidation. I am not by nature especially gregarious and the thought of approaching complete strangers — let alone ones with the built-in brusqueness and suspicious nature of lifelong New Yorkers — was daunting. At the same time, I could not help but be fascinated by the way in which the nitty-gritty of everyday urban life bore on certain fundamental questions about the nature of language, some of them of a highly abstract nature.

One particular incident, perhaps more than any other, stands out in my mind today as emblematic of the entire experience of that remarkable summer. In an attempt to secure at least limited data from prospective informants who had refused to participate in the study, Bill developed the following

strategy. Taking advantage of the fact that we had worked in different neighbourhoods, and were therefore each unknown on the other's turf, we exchanged territories and, pretending to be conducting a survey regarding television reception under various conditions, had much less difficulty in persuading the recalcitrant subjects to answer a few quick questions which could be asked without requiring that we actually be allowed inside their homes.*

The questions were designed to elicit responses containing certain specific words, such as *off* (to check on the (oh) variable) and *bad* (to do the same for (eh)). Getting the former was easy, requiring only that the informant answer the question 'Is your television set on or off at the following times?' and including some ridiculous hour of the night among the choices. But getting the latter turned out to be considerably less straightforward. The question put was 'Is your reception bad or not so bad when ...' followed by a list of conditions including 'when the vacuum cleaner is running' and others which typically produce electrical interference. But for whatever reason, it turned out to be far more difficult to get people to actually utter the word *bad.*

As luck would have it, I ended up with the toughest nut of all. Angela P. submitted readily to my questioning, but no matter how I tried to put the question about reception with the vacuum cleaner on, all I could get out of her was 'It's okay' and other equally useless variants of this answer. I tried every trick I knew to no avail until finally, with almost no way left to prolong the encounter without beginning to arouse suspicion, I somehow managed to get her to say the magic word. I still remember Bill's delight on listening to the tape afterward, as well as the excellent Chinese dinner he bought me that evening by way of reward.

Bill and I no doubt remember the summer of '63 in quite different ways. For him it was an important step in the advancement of a second career, undertaken at considerable cost both monetarily and psychologically by a person in full maturity. For me it represented a crucial step in a maturation process that still had quite a way to go (and not just intellectually either!). Some of what went into taking that step was exhilarating, some difficult and painful. But it confirmed me more than ever in my vision of what I wanted to do with my life. Others helped later to keep me on course, but it was with Bill looking over my shoulder that I took the first, decisive steps. The readers of this festschrift do not need me to recount the subsequent progress of Bill's distinguished career, nor is there any reason to suppose that they should have

any interest in the small part that I played in it. But it seems appropriate to try to convey some sense of the excitement that accompanied the chance to be a part of what Bill brought into being when it was still in its infancy, and to acknowlege my own indebtedness to my first real linguistic mentor on a significant occasion in his own life.

So thanks, Bill. I needed that.

Note

This entailed recording subjects without their knowledge via a concealed microphone, a breach of ethics with which I will admit to some discomfort. I console myself with the thought that the data elicited by this means could not in any way cause harm to those from whom it was obtained.