

Where It Begins

“What people thought was chaos turned out to be regular.”

William Labov

William Labov stopped being an industrial chemist in 1960. He went back to school, to a graduate program in New York City at Columbia University. He was 33. Bill¹ had been working in the world of industry making dyes for a myriad of different clients. The work was laboratory based, but it also involved interacting with all kinds of people from factory workers to businessmen. Bill had a knack for listening. He discovered that you can learn a great deal about people when you notice how they talk. Indeed, he observed something quite intriguing – people sometimes speak one way and sometimes another. Even more curious is that the same person in the same conversation can pronounce a word differently from one time to the next. Often Bill is quizzically pondering why people are doing this rather than attending to what they are saying.

Language has many different parts and levels – sound, word, sentence, expression – and it all can vary. In the course of conversation one person might say, “*I came from town this morning,*” whereas another might say “*I come from town this mornin’.*” Now, notice the different ways of speaking. The verb *come* is pronounced as *came* one time and *come* the next. Words with final *ing* can be pronounced at the back of the mouth, *ing* or at the front of the mouth, *in*. These alternations are called *linguistic variables*. A linguistic variable in its most basic definition is two or more ways of saying the same thing (Labov, 1964: 166). Pronunciations can vary, *you say po-tay-to; I say pot-ta-to* (phonology). Words can vary, *potato, tatter, teeter, tatti* (lexis). Parts of words can vary, *I say; I says* (morphology). Word order can vary, *I do not know; I know not* (syntax). Even the funny little words that most people think don’t mean anything vary, *you know, well, gosh, by golly*, and stuff like that. In Variationist Sociolinguistics (VSLX) all this difference is called “inherent variation” because it is an alternation of different forms (variation) and yet it is a core attribute of language (inherent).

Bill sets out to explore this problem – why do people sometimes say one thing and sometimes say another? As it will soon become apparent, such people have odd antennae for language.

Martha's Vineyard – 1960

There is an island off the northeastern coast of the United States called Martha's Vineyard. It is a place of rugged shores, sandy beaches, and lighthouses. Fishermen have been going out to sea from the many marinas on the island for hundreds of years. People from the mainland go to enjoy the sun and sand. When visiting, Bill notices the same phenomena he was surrounded with at work. The islanders pronounced certain words a little different than other people. Words like *mice* and *mouse* rhyme with *price* and *house* but sometimes they can sound quite different. People hear these alternative pronunciations as a “twang” or an “accent.” Some islanders use the strange pronunciations and others do not and sometimes even the same person varies from one pronunciation to another. Bill wonders, “Why?”

Bill also notices that people talk in very different ways from one situation to the next. When they talk about their life experiences, their childhood, and the stories from their experience, their voices change a lot. To Bill it seems that their words shine with the expression of their innermost selves. He calls this instinctual type of language the *vernacular*, the style in which minimum attention is paid to speech (Labov, 1972b: 108). Bill decides to go to Martha's Vineyard to tap into the everyday talk of the island. In so doing, he will find out about the place and its language. He talks with many people born and raised on the island, the locals. Bill has a flair for talking to people with straightforward interest and honest enthusiasm. “Hi, my name is Bill Labov. I'm from New Jersey, I'm interested in what life is like around here.”

In the course of conversation, the people Bill talks to discover an opportunity for reflection. Opinions, ideas, and memories spill out cathartically and often poignantly. In the sounds of the vowels in words such as *right*, *about*, *now*, Bill discovers a striking array of alternations. Some of the people use a particular sound a lot and others use it only a little. Sometimes one of the sounds appears to go with age and sometimes it seems to go with the area of the island and sometimes it goes with occupation. Fishermen speak differently than shopkeepers and young people yearning for the mainland sound more like the mainlanders than the Vineyard fisherman. Bill wants to make sense of it all. With his science background, he is used to counting and figuring and tallying things up. So, he applies the same method. How many times did one sound occur; how many times the other, and under what circumstances? This is what has come to be referred to as the *Principle of Accountability* (Labov, 1966: 49; 1969a: 737–738, n. 20; 1972b: 72), the tenet that dictates that all the relevant forms, not simply the variant of interest, must be included in an analysis. Then, how many times for fishermen compared to how many times for storekeepers? Bill's ability to quantify who said what, in the precise circumstance in which it was said, leads him to an astounding discovery. The more people identify with the island, the more they want to stay on the island, to work and live and make their way in the world on the island, the more they use certain pronunciations – traditional, older pronunciations. It is a relative thing, not absolute. Everyone on the island uses the same sounds, but they use

them to different degrees. The mainlanders, however, do not make these sounds. The whole system is a dynamic with an intricate underlying orderliness.

Bill had tapped a pattern that has now been found in hundreds of other places since. People in small rural communities under pressure from metropolitan regions tend to use traditional pronunciations, expressions, words, and ways of speaking as a symbol of their local identity. The Vineyarders loyal to the island were sub-consciously using the sounds that link them, linguistically, to the island.

The results of Bill's Martha's Vineyard study were published in *Word* (Labov, 1963), an academic journal, but one that reaches across a broad range of disciplines and professions. Libraries around the world carry this journal. Far away in the north of Wales in the small town of Bangor, Ron Macaulay is spending a year away at a British University. The Linguistics Department has a small library. Ron likes to go in and sit and read things that he comes across on the shelves. He reads everything that interests him. One day he finds the issue of *Word* with Bill's Martha's Vineyard paper.



Ronald Macaulay 1

This is the first time that anybody had ever made any sense about the relationship between the way people spoke and what they thought or believed and everything else. So, I mean this was a total revelation for me and I knew this is what I wanted to do from that moment on.

Little did Bill know that many people around the world would start having similar revelations. Meantime, Bill had set his sights on another community.

New York City – 1963

Bill grew up in a small town in New Jersey, far enough away from New York City so that he could always view it from a distance. At the time, people in New York were widely thought to speak in a chaotic and unpredictable way. New Yorkers themselves were so convinced of this they had developed an extreme dislike for their own speech. In fact, when trying to speak properly, they attempted to sound like they were *not* from New York. Bill wanted to study this situation and understand it.

One of the conspicuous features of New York City speech is the use of the sound *r* in words where it is in the middle or at the end. The traditional way of speaking in New York does not pronounce these *rs*. People say *pahk the cah* for *park the car*. However, this way of speaking is not highly regarded. When New Yorkers want to sound posh they pronounce more *r*. Bill devises a clever plan to find out how this happens. There are at least three types of department stores in New York City. Each one caters to a distinct social group. Saks is upper-class, Macy's is middle-class, and S. Klein is lower-class. Bill goes to each store and asks employees for the location of shoes, furniture, or appliances – whatever items are found on the fourth floor. "Where can I find shoes?" "They're on the fourth floor." In the words *fourth floor* are two possible instances of *r*. Each time Bill pretends not to hear what the employee says and asks the question again. The employee must repeat him- or herself. He records what is said both times. Is there an *r* in *fourth*; is there an *r* in *floor*? And what happens when the person repeats? Bill is careful to ask all types of employees

in each store, managers, salespeople, and shelf-stackers. Then he goes back to his office and counts all the *rs* and absence of *rs*. He discovers that the use of *r* correlates with the type of store. More *rs* in Saks, less in Macy's, even less in Klein's. Moreover, use of *r* correlates with the different responses. More *r* when the employee repeats the answer. But that's not all. Use of *r* also correlates with the rank of the employee. Managers used the most *r*, shelf-stackers the least. It is all highly ordered according to store, style, and job type.

The next step is to go out into the streets of New York City to find out what is happening in the city as a whole. Bill wonders how to circumvent the problem of people wanting to sound different to how they normally would sound. He remembers the vibrant stories he heard in Martha's Vineyard. What better way to get people to forget their linguistic inhibitions than to get them to tell stories? Deeply embroiled in the retelling of an emotional experience, a person no longer pays attention to how he or she is speaking. Authentic expression spills out just like water held back by a dam rushes forward when the gates are let loose.

In the summer of 1963 in New York City, Bill walked around the Lower East Side knocking on doors and talking to people and asking them questions that would invoke stories. One of the best questions for doing this was: "*Have you ever been in a situation where you thought you were going to die?*" The answers to this question lead to gripping stories of personal experience. You can read about some of them in Bill's latest book, *The Language of Life and Death* (Labov, 2013). Another favorite interview question was "*Did you ever get blamed for something you never did?*" How many people have not been blamed for something they never did?

Bill discovered that individuals shifted from less *rs* to more *rs* as they paid more attention to how they were speaking. People from all walks of life did this, men and women, working class and middle class. Indeed, this behavior of shifting the frequency of pronouncing *r* united the city as a whole. Everyone used far less *r* when they told stories.

It was natural to Bill to try to make sense of all these patterns by using quantitative techniques. As a scientist he knew the best way to figure out how something works is to measure what happens and record what makes a difference. When all those *rs* were tallied up and attributes such as social class, age, sex, and formality of the context were taken into account, he discovered a complex and systematic pattern. As the topic of conversation shifted from story-telling to discussions of opinion and politics, *r* became more frequent. Further, the more people used language in their jobs, the more they used *r* as well. The patterns of language use became comprehensible when the social and stylistic components of individuals and context were taken into account. This led to the discovery that the language of New York City was not chaos at all, but neatly organized. Bill called it *orderly heterogeneity* – order but variation, difference but regularity (Labov, 1982: 17). This is the beginning, Bill putting together his inherent scientific nature with the ability to talk to people and discovering that language has this hidden organization. He illustrated all these patterns using measurements and calculations plotted in graphs in his book *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Labov, 1972b). Through the pages in the book you see Figures with social attributes like style of speech, social class, age, and sex on the x or y axes, often with arching lines at regular intervals. The way language works in the speech community becomes visible as layers operating regularly across social dimensions. Figure 1 provides a stylized example of

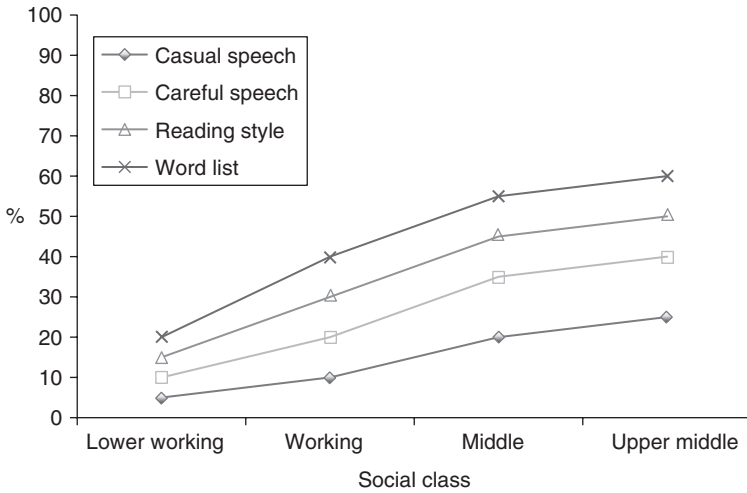


Figure 1 Regularity of sociolinguistic patterns at the community level – stylized.

a linguistic variable that is layered by social class and style. Images such as these captured the imagination of the next generation.

Suppose the graph displays the proportion of *r* pronunciations, *car* vs. *cah*. It shows how *r*-full variants become more frequent as the speech style becomes more formal. When reading a text or list of words people pronounce more *r* than in conversation. Further, every social class shifts the use of *r* in the same way, demonstrating how each one has its own strata in the community. The community is variable, but look at the regularity in it. This is what Bill means by social stratification.



J. K. Chambers 1

Bill Labov didn't realize what a revolutionary move he made when he did that Martha's Vineyard analysis and then the broader analysis in New York City that he was in fact making a move that completely revolutionized any kind of linguistic study that had ever been made before with a few individual exceptions. But he founded a school of linguistic thought that was totally different from anything that had ever gone before. I've written about that lots of times that the social uses of language were simply not considered until – like not considered by a large group – until he came along and did stuff in 1963.

York, England – 1963

At about the same time in England the University of York was being set up with a mandate to innovate, offer a creative perspective, and achieve high standards of excellence. The university administration recruited a man named Robert B. Le Page to head up the new Department of Language and Linguistic Science.

Bob had been trained at Oxford with a specialty in Anglo-Saxon poetry at a time when J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis were lecturing on *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and many other poems. Bob was influenced by Tolkien, in particular by his fascination with legendary tales, but also because Tolkien had

irresistible enthusiasm for his subject (Le Page, 2015: 14). When Bob graduated in 1950, he got a job at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica. But Jamaica was not ideally suited to Anglo-Saxon poetry, so Bob needed another research topic. Bob says, “I became increasingly intrigued by the fact that I could understand hardly a word most of the working-class Jamaicans said to each other on the street or in the market” (Le Page, 2015: 97). He was soon attracted into the world of story-telling and language variation.

Fred Cassidy arrived in Jamaica in 1951 on a Fulbright Fellowship. Fred had lived in Jamaica until the age of 11 but had moved to the United States and gone on to become an English professor at the University of Wisconsin. At the time he was already a leading member of the American Dialect Society, an organization dedicated to the study of dialects.² Fred was in the process of setting up a project to collect Jamaican dialect words across the social spectrum and wanted a collegial collaborator. Bob didn’t know anything about how to study language systematically, but Fred did and he taught Bob all he knew. Soon Fred and Bob were off on a trip to one of the most inaccessible parts of Jamaica.

Fred suggested we make a trip together to visit the Maroons in Accompong. There was an old storyteller in the village. The next morning he and I sat under a tree with the tape-recorder and a bottle of rum between us and I recorded some of the Old Witch and Anansi stories he would have told at such celebrations. It was a revelation to me – my first encounter with a genuine oral tradition. I was hooked. (Le Page 2015: 96)

Bob discovered that people like to tell stories and he enjoys listening to them. Bob and his students get involved in the project and go on to collect stories and dialect words from all over Jamaica. He and Fred had many adventures together and together they compiled the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (Cassidy & Le Page, 1980). This work was considered to have great distinction and perhaps was one of the reasons that Bob was recruited back to England, to the new university in York. He offered York a balance between tradition and innovation.

At the University of York, Bob is charged with setting up a new department of Linguistics, which he designs on a model of multiple languages with two people in each. His idea is that researchers will talk to each other about the social aspects of language (Sociolinguistics) and the structural aspects of language (syntax) or the pronunciation aspects (phonology) across these languages. The underlying framework is oriented toward the sociology of language as outlined in Bob’s book *Acts of Identity* (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985). In it, Bob and his coauthor Andrée Tabouret-Keller attempt to put forth a general theory of language that is based on the relationship between what people actually say and what motivates their ways of speaking. Before too long York becomes one of the top universities for Sociolinguistics in the United Kingdom.

William Bright’s Conference – 1964

Back in the United States, things were brewing in California. Due to the rising interest in the social aspects of language, William Bright organized a conference focused on this topic at Lake Arrowhead, near Los Angeles in 1964. At the time,

there are several prominent American scholars laying the foundations of the study of language in relation to society, including Charles Ferguson, Joshua Fishman, John Gumperz, and Dell Hymes. They are all invited. So is Bill Labov. Students already exposed to the Martha's Vineyard and New York City study anxiously seek Bill out. Among the students attracted to the conference is Ron Macaulay who has just returned to California from his sojourn in Wales.

Bill presented some new research arising from his New York City study. He describes how members of the lower middle class actually use prestige features more than the middle class. He argues that this is due to the desire of the lower middle class for upward mobility. It is a linguistic push for higher status. He calls this phenomenon *hypercorrection*. A more down to earth way of describing this is the axiom "when you're second best you try harder." In his conference presentation he speculates that this tendency will lead to language change. His paper is called "Hypercorrection by the lower middle class as a factor in linguistic change." The conference proceedings are published in an edited volume (Bright, 1966). The book is titled *Sociolinguistics*. It is one of the first times the word has been used in a publication.³ Naming a thing has a certain power, almost like calling it into being.

This edited volume ends up in a bookstore in Cambridge, England where a student at Cambridge University named Peter Trudgill is studying with John Lyons. He is a left-wing young man wanting to make the world a better place. Peter happens to be in the bookstore one day and he looks down and sees the word *Sociolinguistics* and it intrigues him. He buys the book and finds a lot of things of interest, but he is especially intrigued by a paper written by a man named Bill Labov.



Peter Trudgill 1

But I was really excited by Bill's article. I thought, "Now that's what I want to do. I would like to do that."

In the traditional British university system, students write essays every couple of weeks on something of interest to them. Peter decides he will write on the topic of the new field of Sociolinguistics he has just discovered. Peter had grown up in Norwich in East Anglia surrounded by the abounding accents of his family and friends. He understood much of what Bill was talking about from personal experience. When Peter got his essay back from John Lyons, John had written, "This is very good. I think you should continue this."

The LSA Summer Institute – 1964



Henrietta Cedergren 1

What can I say, 1964 was an interesting year. Sali: Interesting year! Henrietta: Exactly.

The bus trip from Montreal, Canada to Bloomington, Indiana takes 25 hours. Gillian Sankoff was watching the miles pass away and thinking about the LSA Summer Institute. She is very excited. She has always been interested in languages. As an undergraduate she took Arabic, Greek, Latin, French and had ended up with a degree in Anthropology. She wants to combine her two prevailing interests and do Linguistic

Anthropology. Unfortunately, there is very little Linguistics going on in Montreal. Gillian has taken every Linguistics course she can, but it has all been descriptive and structural. The LSA Summer Institute that year is focused on a new discipline in Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, and there is going to be a special seminar, which will be attended by Bill Labov. Gillian is intent on participating in the seminar but when she arrives at the institute she discovers that it is a closed meeting. No students can attend; it is meant only for faculty. If that wasn't bad enough, the professor of the field methods course she had dreamed of taking only wants students who have had experience in the field. In retrospect this is kind of funny. Not much more than a year later, Gillian will write an enormous annotated bibliography on fieldwork methods and go on to innovate in fieldwork well beyond many researchers in the field. But at the time, she is devastated. What use will it be to be surrounded by sociolinguists and experts in fieldwork if she can't get at them? All her plans seemed scuppered. But during that summer institute Gillian meets a lot of people, some she will be friends with for the rest of her life, among them Henrietta Cedergren.

Detroit

Roger Shuy completed his PhD dissertation while working on the Illinois Atlas Project under the direction of Raven McDavid. He was also teaching at Wheaton, a Christian College in Wheaton, Illinois near Chicago. In his classes are two smart young students, Walt Wolfram and Ralph Fasold. When Roger finishes his PhD in 1961 he gets job offers from Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan State. He chooses Michigan State because it is a university on its way up.

In 1964, he decides to go to the LSA Summer Institute in Bloomington. As a faculty member, he is able to attend Bill's seminar and it exposes him to a whole new approach to language and society called Sociolinguistics. Having spent many years interviewing elderly farmers in Illinois about words, the new approach fires him up. It involves far more than simply finding out whether people said *skillet* vs. *frying pan*. It probes whole systems of language and their evolving mechanisms.



Roger Shuy 1

I was all full of the notion of Socio, so I taught a course in Socio. I had no idea what I was teaching but I picked up what I learned from the summer and called it a course.

Then, Roger decides, "I want to do the same kind of study as Labov did in New York City." Roger invites Bill to come to Michigan to help him design a project to study Detroit. When Bill arrives, Roger has to buy him clothes that are appropriate for the target neighborhood. Then they go off to Detroit and Bill does some interviews. Roger and his team observe. Then, Roger applies to the US Office of Education for a grant. The study will use Bill's methods and techniques. A former classmate of Roger's, Jim Alatis, is working at the Office of Education as a program officer and he helps Roger write the proposal. In due course, Roger is awarded the funding.

The Detroit project is huge. There are ten interviewers living in a hotel in Detroit. Roger's wife is doing the coordinating. It's a quagmire of people coming and going. Each day the fieldworkers go out and do three or four interviews. One of the main

fieldworkers is Walt Wolfram. At the end of each week all the fieldworkers must transcribe phonetically a list of words that they have had each person read aloud during the interview. The words tap various sounds that are undergoing change in the local community. All told, they conduct 700 interviews from people of all ethnicities, working-class and middle-class, Catholic and Protestant. It is perhaps the largest sociolinguistic study in the history of the field.

Walt Wolfram considers himself to be an accidental linguist. In high school he was a jock. When he went to university he had every intention of being a missionary. But in his Linguistics classes he discovers something else he is very good at. Then, there is a special professor, Roger Shuy. Roger isn't like other professors. He has energy; he has zeal. He invites students to his house and they all talk about Sociolinguistics. Walt and Roger become good friends. Walt even spends a lot of time baby-sitting Roger's kids. He keeps on working on a PhD at Hartford Seminary Foundation with Henry Gleason and Bill Samarin. When Roger starts the Detroit Project, he hires Walt as a fieldworker. The Detroit data are coming in with wonderful linguistic phenomena and there is a ton of it and Walt still has no dissertation topic. Roger says, "Walt, there's a great dissertation topic here. You want to work on this?" So, Walt starts to work on the Detroit data for his dissertation. It becomes *Detroit Negro Speech* (Wolfram, 1969). In it he demonstrates how social and linguistic variables combine to account for systematic variation in African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Meantime Ralph Fasold is finishing his undergraduate degree and figures he'll go back home and become a German teacher. Roger gets to him first. Roger says, "Where are you going to go to grad school?" Ralph says, "What? Go to grad school?" Roger says, "Ralph, you're excellent. You should go to grad school in Linguistics." Roger contacts Eric Hamp at the University of Chicago Linguistics Department. At that time, students can get scholarships that will pay their way through graduate school. Roger insists that Ralph submit an application and Ralph gets accepted to do a PhD in Chicago.

Meanwhile at Michigan State University the ideas of Bill Labov and John Gumperz are swirling around in Roger's mind. He begins to construct what he thinks a university program in Sociolinguistics should be like. Then he tries to set up a Sociolinguistics program, but the faculty are not interested. Not too long after, Roger gets another chance.



Roger Shuy 2

Sali: Now can I just stop you there, what made you think that Sociolinguistics was a good thing? Roger: Ah, because it was, I think related to my ... altruism, concern for people who were downtrodden. These farmers in Illinois were not downtrodden, you know. But boy, when I heard Bill talk about inner city New York, I said, "That's what I need to do."

Washington

In the 1960s, the Ford Foundation was funding projects all over the world to study little-known languages. One of the projects is in Washington, DC and the object of study is AAVE. Joey Dillard was the original head of the project and Bill Stewart worked on it too.⁴ The project is based in a yellow house in an African American

neighborhood in Washington. At great expense all the walls in the house have been wired for sound. The idea is that the house will be a Recreation Center where teenagers will come in and play ping pong and the researchers will study the way they talk (with permission of course). It ends up a colossal failure. Roger says, “No one could hear anything because the ping pong made too much noise!” They needed to find someone to take over the project. Roger has just finished the Detroit study and is dissatisfied at Michigan State University. The idea of taking over a large project in Sociolinguistics appeals to him and so he takes on the job of directing the project.

Center for Applied Linguistics – 1967

When Roger first moved to Washington, he worked out of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). Not long after, he recruits his former students Ralph Fasold and Walt Wolfram to work with him.



Ralph Fasold 1

So, I came to Washington, went to work for Roger at the Center for Applied Linguistics. A few weeks later he hired Walt Wolfram. So, the three of us were there and we were - you know it was just like ... Sali: What was it like? Ralph: It was like a frat house almost.

CAL had just published a book written by an up-and-coming sociolinguist who had recently completed a study of the Lower East Side in New York City (Labov, 1966). Roger is quick to tell his new faculty to get up to speed in Sociolinguistics.



Ralph Fasold 2

Roger said, “The first thing you want to do is read this,” and he picked up The Social Stratification of English in New York City which the Center published as you may remember. He says, “Read this last because it’ll be dessert.”

Ralph has to write a PhD dissertation. He is captivated by the burning topics of the day. Everyone is discussing the differences between AAVE and Standard English: invariant *be*, *I be happy*, 3rd person *-s* absence, *She go*, and consonant cluster simplification, for example *-kt*, in the past tense form *walked*, becomes *-k*, *They walkØ to the store yesterday*.⁵ He says to himself, “Why don’t I rake these things together and do a dissertation on tense.” By the time the analyses are completed, Ralph has discovered that those features aren’t about tense marking at all. One is a grammatical distinction, one is morphological, and the last is the result of a phonological process. He writes up his findings in a book, ironically entitled *Tense Marking in Black English* (Fasold, 1972).

Ralph reflects on the good fortune he has had in his life, having been embraced by what he thinks of as a “perfect storm of influences.”



Ralph Fasold 3

I was lucky. Here’s Roger. I’m getting to work with Roger and Walt on this project that’s exactly what I’d dreamed of. I think 1968 was maybe one of the two best years of my entire life.

LSA Annual Meeting – 1968

At the LSA annual meeting in December 1968 Bill presented an analysis of a linguistic phenomenon that is destined to become one of the principal objects of study in the VSLX world – the copula. The copula is the verb that links two parts of a sentence together. In English the copula is the verb *be*, in sentences such as the following: *She is lucky, He is in New York*. The verb *be* also functions as an auxiliary, as in *She is going to Martha's Vineyard, He is doing interviews*.⁶ In English the forms of the copula are highly variable. Sometimes people use the full form, *am, is, are*; sometimes they contract it, as in *I'm happy, She's lucky, They're in New York*. However, in the stories and interactions Bill collected in the Lower East Side of New York City sometimes there is no verb at all, as in *I happy, She lucky, They in New York*. The same is true of the auxiliary constructions. Absence of the copula is a well-known feature of AAVE. But Bill discovers something about it that had never been realized before. There are regular patterns that predict when the copula is contracted and when it is absent. Moreover, there is a regular relationship between AAVE and Standard English in terms of where the different forms occur: where Standard English can contract, AAVE can delete. In 1969, the study is published in *Language*, the premier journal in the world for Linguistics (Labov, 1969a).



Ralph Fasold 4

Once I read Bill's stuff, especially his 1969 Language article on contraction deletion which he had given the previous December at LSA and it was widely recognized as the best paper at the conference. ... You know the phonology that I had learned at Chicago was Chomsky and Halle Sound Patterns of English and here we had variable rules. All you had to do is replace the pluses and minuses with alphas, betas and gammas and you have the right way to do phonology and I had no doubt the right way to do Linguistics was to meld what I'd learned from Jim McCawley⁷ and other people with what I was now learning from Bill Labov and we would have a socially realistic and you know technically sophisticated way of studying language.

In the copula paper, Bill introduced the idea of *variable rules*, based on the dominant theory of grammar at the time, *Syntactic Structures* by Noam Chomsky,⁸ which described language structure in terms of rewrite rules, $S \rightarrow NP VP$ (Chomsky, 1957).⁹ The formal structure was not the important thing. The breakthrough was in the methodology and what the analysis revealed. Variation in the realization of the copula – the alternating patterns of full, contracted, and zero variants – were highly structured, in fact an inherent part of language. As the results from Detroit and Washington came in, there was a building consensus for the same quantitative patterns confirming the force of variationist methodology and theory.

Meantime, Bill started to experiment with the implementation of variable rules. In an attempt to create a tool for analyzing them he spent an entire summer in France programming logistic regression for binary variables¹⁰ in Basic.¹¹ He says, “What terrible waste of time!” At that time, he had not yet met David Sankoff.

Papua New Guinea – 1968

At about the same time Gillian Sankoff was about to start the fieldwork for her PhD dissertation. Undaunted by her disappointments at the LSA Institute, she chooses a field site. She is interested in places that have multiple languages and a variety of cash crops because her intended focus is Economic Anthropology – counting oranges and making lists of trading practices. Papua New Guinea in the southwestern Pacific is ideal. It is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world with more languages per square mile than anywhere else. Gillian sets off enthusiastically. At the time, it is a Australian territory and permission to travel into the interior where many languages and crops can be found can only be obtained from the colonial officer in charge. When she asks for permission to go to the location she has in mind, the officer says, definitively, “no.” The officer probably looked at the innocent-looking, blonde-haired young woman and thought, “I don’t want to be responsible for her!” Stymied again, Gillian hangs out and talks to people. “I want to do a multilingual study; where should I go?” At some point somebody says, “Why don’t you go up to the Buangs. They’re nice.” She goes to the officer in charge of that area. This time, the officer says, “Okay, I’ll set you up with a patrol.” What is a patrol? You get a patrol box, which is a large metal container. It comes with an official list of paraphernalia that you are supposed to collect and put into the box, a stove, dishes, etc. The box has a long pole so that bearers can put it on their shoulders and carry it along for you. Then Gillian goes on patrol up the river valley to the Buangs.

She starts by trying to understand the many dialects of the area and how they are related to each other. To do this she makes word lists and tries to construct a family tree of the languages based on what they share. It is easy to find the two most related dialects, but the problem is how to decide on the next most related dialect. Her husband at the time, David Sankoff, is with her. He is working on a PhD in mathematics. He notices Gillian’s dilemma trying to sort out the relationships between dialects and steps in to help out. As it happens, the problem Gillian is grappling with is a classic problem in cluster analysis in statistics. She has come up with a solution that happens to be one of the methods that statisticians are using at the time (1950s and 1960s), but it doesn’t quite work. David comes up with another solution, which turns out to be an alternative method classically used in statistics. They end up doing contrastive statistics together in order to sort out the Buang dialects. With David’s expertise, they develop a mathematical formulation for making reasoned dialect comparisons. This type of collaboration becomes a repeating theme over the following years.

By the spring of 1968 Gillian and David are back in Montreal. Gillian starts writing up her research findings for her PhD. David, who had begun a dissertation in pure mathematics before they left for Papua New Guinea, discovers that his thesis topic has already been done. His supervisor suggests that he try something else, something that he is more interested in. David decides to switch his topic to lexical statistics, the same type of research that had developed out the ideas and methods he and Gillian worked on comparing dialects in Papua New Guinea. David’s combined interests in mathematics, language, and statistics are set.

While Gillian is writing up her dissertation, she starts thinking about getting a job.



Gillian Sankoff 1

So, here I come back from Papua New Guinea and I've done this fieldwork and I was writing this dissertation on language contact and multilingualism in this area which was- it was a wonderful experience. It's the spring of 1968 and so- Sali: You have reverse culture shock. Gillian: By then I get into the writing of the dissertation and then I'm thinking, "Well, what am I going to do next year?" So the fact that, you know, we had been in New Guinea for – Didi¹² had actually been in New Guinea for like a whole year with me more or less and so missed out on that work for his dissertation. So, he wasn't going to be able to graduate for another year. So, I thought, well, I would just look around and see if there were any jobs. So, I walked into the University of Montreal to the chairman's office of the Anthropology department and asked him if he was hiring anybody and he said, "Oh, okay."

It was in the end a charmed journey – Gillian had come full circle from an undergraduate degree in Anthropology, to the disappointment at the LSA Summer Institute in 1964, to the wilds of Papua New Guinea in 1968, to an academic position in the intellectual hub of French Montreal. Then, she discovered Bill's research on New York City.

In a special issue of *American Anthropologist* Gillian noticed a paper called "Phonological Correlates of Social Stratification" (Labov, 1964).



Gillian Sankoff 2

Both of us read it. Didi read it and I read it and we thought, "Wow this is great!" And I think he, especially, was the one who said, "This is amazing! This is new stuff. This is amazing what this guy is doing." Sali: Why was he attracted to that, because it was quantitative? Gillian: I don't know, he just thought it was great. And I had done some work similar to that in New Guinea partly under his aegis where I had done a lot of quantitative stuff with kinship and things like that, like asking people questions and seeing variation. I was really interested in variation.

As a new professor of Anthropology, Gillian wants to engage her students in research and she believes in working in the community where she lives and works. As an undergraduate she had designed a project to tap the system of address in Montreal French. French marks formality and the relationship between conversers by the use of certain pronouns. If you are talking to a friend or someone of lower status than you, you address him or her as *tu*, *Qu'est ce que tu pense?* "What are you thinking?" If you are talking to a stranger or someone of higher status, you address him or her as *vous*, *Qu'est ce que vous pensez?* However, depending on the situation and context the choice of *tu* or *vous* can vary. This offers insight into the nature of human relationships and regard in a community. The project was meant to tap how a person's use of *tu* or *vous* was influenced by how he or she was addressed first. But it was a thought experiment for a course project. Gillian had never actually done it. It was time to put her ideas into action.

Now, this is Montreal. It is the end of the sixties, an era of massive growth and development in the city. Gillian is at a French university. The political climate is hot with debate over language issues. Canadian French is damned by many due to its nonstandard features and supposed English influences, a highly unpalatable aspect of Quebec French according to many. Quebecers are being told by

politicians – even the head of the provincial government – that their variety of French is bad. However, Canadian varieties of French are fervently championed by their speakers. In the wake of English infiltration, Quebecers are adamant to preserve their language and culture. A study of Canadian French in Montreal is just waiting to happen.



Gillian Sankoff 3

Then you know we saw this work of Bill's. It's like, well, we could do a study like that. Why don't we do a study like that? That would you know, that would involve all kinds of students. So, we went down to Columbia to see Bill and just see what he said.

At Columbia, they met with Bill and told him what they wanted to do in Montreal. Of course, Bill said, heartily, what he has come to be well known for saying, “Great. Go do it!”

Norwich – 1968

By then, Peter Trudgill had moved to Scotland to do a PhD at Edinburgh University and he is ready to start working on his dissertation. He has read Labov's New York City study and he also reads up on random sampling, dialectology. He gradually develops his research strategy. In the summer of 1968 he goes home to Norwich for the summer to do his fieldwork. He decides on four neighborhoods based on the electoral wards and their social characteristics. He will to do a random sample of each ward. When he has selected his target individuals, he writes each person a letter on University of Edinburgh letterhead explaining his project. “I am very interested in Norfolk. I grew up in Norfolk and my family grew up in Norfolk and I'm interested in the way people speak. I hope you don't mind if I come around and talk to you sometime.” Then he starts knocking on doors. Peter targets several phonological variables for investigation, some vowel pronunciations and some consonant pronunciations, like the variation between *in* and *ing* in words such as *working*. He counts everything up just as Bill has detailed in his writings. Then, remarkably, the results come out virtually replicating the results from New York City. He discovers layered patterns by age, sex, and social class. In some cases the arrays are a bit different. In Norwich, nonstandard forms are used a lot more than in New York City. Peter notices that there is a certain esteem associated with non-standard features. The men, for example, seem to proudly pronounce *working* as *workin'*. Peter calls this pattern “covert prestige” because it is a masked kind of prestige, the type that makes people want to use certain pronunciations even though they are not part of the standard language. Peter's study was the first VSLX study in the United Kingdom. He wrote up his dissertation in the summer of 1971 and it was published as a book called *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich* (Trudgill, 1974).

Around about the same time, a job comes up at Reading University in England (near London) advertising for a sociolinguist. Peter is uniquely qualified for the job. He applies for it and gets an interview. The train trip from Edinburgh to Reading takes about five hours.



Peter Trudgill 2

So, I was sitting on the train and about Newcastle, suddenly occurred to me that they might ask me what – if I was going to teach a course in Linguistics – what I would teach. Hadn't thought about it before. And I thought, "Well, what would I teach in a course on Sociolinguistics?" Because as Wim¹³ had said to me, that "You hadn't ever taken a course in Sociolinguistics, had you?" "No." "And there weren't any introductory books on Sociolinguistics, were there?" "No." "Well, so how did you decide what to teach?" So, I sat on the train and I wrote a list of things which I thought would make a good Sociolinguistics course based on what I'd read in connection with my thesis and also what I'd read which wasn't to do with my thesis. And that list pretty much turned out to be my Penguin book, Sociolinguistics: An Introduction.

Peter starts working at Reading University in the autumn of 1970. He is among great colleagues there – David Crystal, Frank Palmer, and Peter Matthews, all famous British linguists. Soon after he arrives, David Crystal says, "It's your turn to give a Staff Seminar." Peter is scheduled to invigilate an exam that week. As he sits there, he gets the idea to base his presentation on the covert prestige patterns that he has just discovered in Norwich and he writes the first draft and presents it at the Staff Seminar. After the talk, all his colleagues clap. David Crystal says, "There's a new journal starting up with Cambridge University Press called *Language in Society* (LiS) and it's being edited by Dell Hymes. I want you to submit this paper to the new journal." Peter writes up the paper and sends it off to LiS and they accept it (Trudgill, 1972b). Then Peter goes to Norway for his summer holidays. The next thing that happens is Peter gets a letter from his mother. She writes, "Do you know someone named Bill Labov?" Bill had read the covert prestige paper and liked it. That summer he was traveling around England interviewing people and – whether by design or happenstance – he passes through East Anglia.



Peter Trudgill 3

And he got to Norwich and he looked in the phone book. And there was two or three Trudgills. I don't know how many he had to try. And my mom answered or maybe my dad. And he said, "I'm trying to make contact with the family of Peter Trudgill who has a working at Reading University." And mum said, "Well, that's right." And he said, "Have you please got a copy of his PhD thesis? Believing that all parents should. And she said, "Yes, I already have." And he said, "Well, I wonder if I could come and have a look at it?"

Bill visited Peter's parents and read his PhD dissertation over tea and cake. When Peter gets back to Reading that fall, he receives a letter from Georgetown University in Washington, DC inviting him to present his research on Norwich at NWAV 1, the inaugural conference for VSLX. It is Peter's first trip to the United States. It is his first conference and his first conference paper and the very first time he has ever met any genuine sociolinguists.

Founding a Sociolinguistics Department – 1969

In the 1960s the National Science Foundation (NSF), an agency that funds research and development in the United States, introduced a grant to revitalize university departments. Its goal was to refurbish stale departments and start new programs.

By this point, Roger Shuy has become the Research Director at CAL in Washington, DC and his friend Jim Alatis is Assistant Dean at Georgetown University. Jim knows that the language department at Georgetown University is in decline. The older generation of Jesuit priest/teachers is getting old and nothing is coming out of the department in terms of research. He hits on the idea of starting a Sociolinguistics program at Georgetown. Roger puts together the proposal and they send it in. The committee at NSF is impressed. The proposal is timely and innovative. NSF agrees to support the proposal, but with the stipulation that Roger will head up the new program. Rogers thinks “How can I say no to the advisors at the NSF?” (among them Dell Hymes, Charles Ferguson, and Joshua Fishman). So, Roger goes to Georgetown and the first bona fide Sociolinguistics program in North America gets going. Hymes insists on a faculty member in the ethnography of speaking and Fishman insists on someone with expertise in language planning. Roger has the ideas from the LSA Institute in his head and is hot on the ideas of Labovian variation. Then there is dialectology. Should they have a course in regional dialectology? Roger thinks to himself, “not if we have one in Sociolinguistics. We can put dialectology within Sociolinguistics.” Roger sees the two as integrated and compatible ways of talking about language.

The new department is given space in the Georgetown cow barn next to the famed Exorcist stairs, a long staircase that leads down from the campus to the river. The cow barn is a huge building with no windows but the offices are luxurious. Roger moves in furniture, desks, books and prepares for students. He sets up what he thinks a Sociolinguistics program should look like. First, he hires Ralph. Roger says, “Ralph, you teach Intro.” Ralph reads everything he can and teaches the first Sociolinguistics course at Georgetown. Walt says, “I’ll come for a year.” Walt is intent on teaching at CAL and the Federal City College (now the University of the District of Columbia) where he will be able to teach inner-city African Americans. Although Walt did not end up a missionary in the traditional sense, he follows an analogous path.



Ralph Fasold 5

In those days – still true to some extent – among some people I was known as Fuzz and the grad students called the variation course “Fuzz three.”

When Walt leaves Georgetown, Roger hires CJ Bailey. A little later on, in 1979, he hires Deborah Tannen.



Deborah Tannen 1

It’s interesting – by the way you know again – when you’re starting out you don’t know how unusual things are. I knew that Georgetown was the place I wanted to be if I could be there. But I didn’t really know how unusual it was and how it was starting out. And I think it was Roger’s vision to hire a discourse analyst, to hire someone that did what I did. Because that was not what Sociolinguistics had been.

In due course Debby Schiffrin, who has been doing her PhD dissertation under the joint supervision of Bill Labov and Erving Goffman at Penn, joins the team. In Roger’s mind he is building his vision of Sociolinguistics. He wants it to be linguistically rigorous, socially responsible, and cover all the bases.



Roger Shuy 3

I wanted to have some organized way of carrying out all the good stuff I saw at that '64 Institute. And I knew Del¹⁴ would be hitting on the ethnography stuff and I thought, "Okay, he's doing it in the Anthropology ... We want to get some of that in here." So, I had Dave Smith. I got Joan Rubin for a while. Muriel Saville. I wanted it to be under-not just in Anthropology but we should do this in Linguistics. And Bill, I knew was going to be doing the – he's so focused – he would be focused on the variation theory and historical change. And I thought that's a good thing to be part. This is a good thing to be part. Who's going to put it together? I wanted to put it together. Language planning. Whatever it is that turns out to be Sociolinguistics. I wasn't sure that I knew what it all was. But if something new comes along as it did, with Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics. We added it there. And at Georgetown, Pragmatics and Discourse were part of Socio. They were not part of the rest of the department. Fieldwork was so important. I wanted that to be there. I like building things and I like things to work and last.

Ralph goes on to write two foundational textbooks for Sociolinguistics (Fasold, 1984; 1990) that bridge Sociolinguistics and Sociology, while Deborah Tannen and Deborah Schiffrin merge variation and discourse. Deborah says, "Whereas I used analysis of linguistic features to understand discourse, Debby used discourse to understand grammatical features." It isn't long before the Georgetown Sociolinguistics program has 40 students a year and the program thrives.



Deborah Tannen 2

I think of the glory days as when it was Debby Schiffrin and I and Ralph Fasold and Roger Shuy.

Belfast – 1970

Let us go back across the Atlantic, this time to Belfast, Ireland where Lesley and Jim Milroy are living. Lesley had not really planned on doing a PhD. She intended to have a peaceful life teaching and taking care of her three children, but in her own words, "it was not to be." Lesley is working at the Polytechnic College in Belfast and it is becoming apparent that she needs to get a PhD after all. So, she is trying to find a topic. Jim Milroy, her historical linguist husband, has noticed that much of the phonological system in Belfast English is comparable to English several centuries earlier. His expertise in the history of English has enabled him to understand the phonology in terms of its development and evolution. Lesley's background in Linguistics and Anthropology gives her insights into how a language's sound system operates within the community, why it is the way it is and how different pronunciations go along with different social groups. There are many vibrant discussions at the Milroys' kitchen table. Together, Lesley and Jim begin to realize that peripheral dialects – like Belfast English – have not standardized along with mainstream varieties of English. Instead, they are lagging behind.



Jim Milroy 1

But I think you can use dialects like Belfast to throw light on what happened in the past. You can go back.

They pooled their ideas and wrote up their nascent ideas in a paper. However, what they proposed goes against the traditional understanding of the history of standardization in the United Kingdom. No one would publish it. About the same time, they came upon the research of Bill Labov. It was an incredibly important discovery to both of them.



Jim Milroy 2

I suddenly realized that – when I read Labov’s New York study – this would be about ’72, three, something like that ... And it was a paperback thing with covers falling off almost, you know? And I think both of us would say it sort of inspired us.

Determinedly, they wrote to Bill to tell him about the marvelous vowel systems that were operating in Belfast. The next thing they knew Bill came to visit them.



Jim Milroy 3

Well, we had written to him together with a number of other well-known people at the time, just saying we were interested in this and wondered if they had anything helpful to say about it. My God he appeared on the doorstep!

Bill was riveted by the vowels systems of Belfast. He encouraged Lesley to do fieldwork in the city and taught her his fieldwork techniques and methods. To demonstrate, he and Lesley would hang out in parks and talk to people. With several models for doing research at the community level – New York City, Detroit, and Norwich – Lesley and Jim embarked on a research project in Belfast. However, the social structure of Belfast was very different from what had been reported in the other cities. In Belfast, there was a huge working class, a small elite upper middle class, and very little in the middle. The working-class dialect was extraordinary – conservative but dynamic, lively, and rich in variation. Then Lesley came across the idea of social networks. When working-class couples marry, they keep their social networks; when middle-class couples marry, they merge their social networks. Straightaway, Lesley wondered what the implications of this were for face-to-face interaction and for language variation and change. To Lesley all this is feeding into what she should do in Belfast and how. The intellectual ideas came together and she had a solid model for fieldwork. The question was how to gain access to the vernacular in a hotbed of political unrest and religious prejudice?

At the time, Belfast was a dangerous place. Religion was a huge societal divide. Catholics and Protestants had different schools. The names of the letters of the alphabet are different depending on religion and everyone is aware of it. If you are Catholic the IRA is the EE-ARE-UH and the letter *h* is HAITCH. If you are Protestant the IRA is the EYE-ARE-EY and the letter *h* is AITCH. Thugs would stop people at roadblocks and ask people to spell out words in order to identify their affiliation. Lesley says, “but you would never know what lot of thugs were doing questioning and which pronunciation would get you out of trouble!”

The Polytechnic College where Lesley is working is filled with working-class students, kids from the country and kids who couldn’t get into university. Through them, Lesley realizes she can get into any neighborhood in the country. She decides she will get a contact in each location, not priests or teachers, but someone familiar

with the neighborhood, to assist her to gain the confidence of community members. She gets a hold of students she knows and secures an introduction to someone in each of her target areas.



Lesley Milroy 1

And I said, "Right, now I'm going to go and do some linguistic work. Can you give me the name of somebody you know there and the address? And tell them I'm going to be calling on them and I'm going to mention your name."

Lesley went into each neighborhood in Belfast and introduced herself to people as a friend of someone they knew. Lesley called this the *friend of a friend* method. She collects materials from east and west Belfast and Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. The Belfast study is published in *Language and Social Networks* (Milroy, 1980). It was published even before she received her PhD.¹⁵

Montreal – 1970

There are fateful times in life. Sometimes a chance meeting can make your life move in a different direction. Sometimes what you're looking for is right under your nose, or just outside your door. Maybe it is the place you live, the context you find yourself in, or the people sitting at your kitchen table. There are also times when destiny influences an entire intellectual path. A school of thought emerges as though it was always meant to be. These are the little shocks in the fabric of space and time that make you think that God really doesn't play dice with the universe.



Henrietta Cedergren 2

I guess it was in the stars in the sense that- well, Gillian, David and I were all interested in language.

There is a bank off one of the main streets of Montreal, Côte des Neiges, called Banque Nationale. In 1970, Henrietta Cedergren moved to Montreal with her husband, Bob Cedergren. Bob, a biologist, had accepted a position at the University of Montreal. Henrietta is writing her dissertation on Panamanian Spanish and teaching Spanish at a school in the suburbs. One day she is standing in line at the bank. Gillian has just come back from seeing Bill in New York City. She is poised to submit a grant proposal to conduct a sociolinguistic survey of Montreal French modeled on Bill's New York City study. She stops off at the bank near her apartment. What happens next is one of those serendipitous moments in the development of science, two forces coming together at just the right time.



Gillian Sankoff 4

Didi and I went to see Bill in New York. He was very encouraging. You know, we said what we wanted to do. We wanted to do like a New York City type study in Montreal. And one day I'm in the bank three blocks from my house- my apartment close to the University of Montreal, and there's Henrietta. Sali: You recognized her from- Gillian: Yeah, we recognized each other. It was just five years before. We looked pretty much the same, you know? And I said, "Well what are you doing here?"

Henrietta Cedergren 3

We had just come to Montreal. I was in the bank just right off- the Banque Nationale, right off Côte des Neiges and this person in front of me turns around and she says, "Henrietta!" Gillian Sankoff! Sali: No kidding! Henrietta: She said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I just moved here." And she had just come back from New Guinea. Yeah.

Gillian's immediate response to this chance encounter is, "Henrietta, why don't you come to my seminar? We're reading Bill Labov's book *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*." Henrietta joined the seminar and together she and Gillian, and Gillian's students studied the book chapter by chapter, one chapter a week for a whole year. As they read the book, they discussed how they would conduct the Montreal French survey. Then they went out and did it.

You don't realize when you are in the midst of something what you're actually doing. To the goldfish in a bowl, the water is not apparent. To the scientist in the midst of unearthing there are only trees, no forest. Very special times pass without notice. In retrospect you think, "Did I really do that? Did I really say that?" At the time, you are just going with the flow of what is piquing your curiosity and holding your attention.



Gillian Sankoff 5

Sali: I mean did you know at the time you were doing things that were going to be, you know foundational? Gillian: No, no, no, no, no, no, not at all. No, we just doing something that was interesting and fun and seeing where it went, you know? Really.

Henrietta Cedergren 4

See the thing is that when you're in the middle of a revolution, you don't really know. You're not aware of it. You're just doing something because you're interested in it and you try to understand what you're doing. And I was trying to understand my data.

David Sankoff 1

Yeah it was like- didn't realize it at the time, but it was a very special time.

From 1966 into the 1970s VSLX gained momentum and the people who were racing forward with the new discipline apparently had no idea what they were starting. When I asked Ralph Fasold about the founders of Variationist Sociolinguistics, he, in typical Ralph fashion, said, "I'm not a founder." So did Walt and David and just about everyone else.



Ralph Fasold 6

Sali: So what do you think makes a person a founder then? I mean if you can name those people, what do you think makes them founders of this field? Ralph: Because they had a vision. They could see forward. Were doing something new that's going to be important. I didn't. I was just doing something that was fun and interesting and meaningful to me and the fact that Sociolinguistics was a new thing was interesting but you know, it was just sort of a setting in which I could do the kind of Linguistics that at that time I really wanted to do.

The forefathers and foremothers of VSLX seem extraordinarily unaware – or at least will not acknowledge – that they were founding a discipline. Perhaps it is not the nature of founders to be cognizant of their place in history. They are simply the

kind of people who like to figure things out. If “vision” is involved, perhaps it is only perceptible in hindsight.

NWAV 1 – 1972

The New Ways of Analyzing Variation conference (NWAV) is the premier conference for the study of language variation and change. Every year, usually in October, the community of linguists who study language variation and change get together. How did it begin?

In the early 1970s the new Sociolinguistics program was getting going at Georgetown University with Roger at the helm. The new faculty were hanging out and enjoying their lives as sociolinguists. They all had nice offices and ideas were flying. They came up with a plan to bring like-minded people together.



Ralph Fasold 7

After we hired C-J,¹⁶ he said, “Wouldn’t it be nice to have a conference on variation?” Of course Roger said, “Sure.” And I was just the kid so I said, “Yeah, sure.”

Ralph Fasold 8

It was C-J’s idea. And it was an acronym, first of all for New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English. Sali: That I knew. Ralph: From the beginning we were embarrassed by English, you know because it shouldn’t be only about English. We tried New Ways of Analyzing Variation Everywhere. That sounded a little stupid so finally the “e” got lopped off.

The first conference was held at Georgetown University in October of 1972. There was an aura of excitement in the air. For the participants, it seemed the field was going to converge. Instead of differences, there would be an integration of different strands of Linguistics all coming together to form an empirically-based discipline for the scientific study of language.



Gillian Sankoff 6

So, Didi was with us too. And I remember meeting Peter. He was this guy in England. So like, well there were all these young people from here and there who had suddenly picked up on this idea of what Bill did and we didn’t know each other or anything, right? And then this meeting was going to be held at Georgetown so we all showed up.

Going to NWAV was a big deal for the researchers who were embracing variation for the first time. Among the scholars were dialectologists, statisticians, semanticists, sociologists, and syntacticians. They came mostly from the United States, but the Montreal group was there and Peter Trudgill came from England adding international luster.



John Rickford 1

But it was exciting having him too because he was showing, you know with data from Norwich that the same kinds of regularities that Bill found, you know were there too so it was it was exciting and then you know. So, C-J Bailey talked a different kind of

language but he was taking some of that stuff and reinterpreting it and so on. I don't know, it felt, in a sense, good to be alive and you felt like you were on the cutting edge of things.

Several first-year graduate students attended as well, including John Baugh, Greg Guy, John Rickford, and Barbara Horvath. Barbara remembers the buzz of seeing all the famous people, the Sankoffs, Bill Labov, and so on. John remembers, “Bill told us about these bright upcoming linguists, Gillian Sankoff and Henrietta Cedergren. And then I saw them running around full of energy and coming up with ideas.”



Barbara Horvath 1

The thing that I remember most about that was that the graduate students were going to do the wine and cheese, right, for the opening night. Somebody was giving a talk. It was Haj Ross¹⁷ giving his talk on fuzzy concepts- you know nounyness and all that kind of stuff. And we were in the kitchen cutting up the cheese and doing all the other stuff and trying to hear what he was saying. I always think how funny that was.

The scholars at the conference were brought together by variation. They were all doing something they thought was intrinsically interesting and fun and seeing where it went. There were 64 presentations at the first NWAV. Today there are over 100 talks and 40 or more posters.

Soon there was a boom of VSLX research. In the process, there are critical developments: embracing the task of building a corpus, grappling with appropriate ethical practice for using a corpus, and creating guidelines for accessibility to a corpus. What is a corpus? It is a set of materials, either text files or audio files, that represent a body of data, for example from a city or a community. When sociolinguists started collecting data, they realized that transcribing the data into computer files would be a boon for their analyses. In this format the data could be electronically stored and processed. It could be sorted and categorized. The secret orderliness would unfold from out of the mass of words and sentences and conversations.

The Montreal French Project – 1970s

When the Montreal French project got going, Gillian, Henrietta, and David had not yet realized they were building a corpus. It was just a project. They specifically wanted to take the same approach as Bill's New York City study but they also wanted to modify its shortcomings. In the beginning, they worked very hard at figuring out how to do it. For example, Bill had been criticized for not including the upper class so they decided to include them. About the same time, they became aware of the Brown Corpus, the first modern, computer-readable corpus of American English – 500 samples of text transcriptions from works published in the United States in 1961. It occurs to them that the study of spoken language they are planning should be transcribed as well. But there was no precedent for making spoken language into a corpus. Nobody had ever done it. Because they want their students to use the materials, they also spent a lot of time working out ethical guidelines. They felt that they should protect the speakers in the sample. During the 1970s there was considerable stigma associated with Canadian French. In the buses

slogans admonished people: *Bien parler, c'est se respecter*, "To speak well is to respect yourself." So, they devised an elaborate set of guidelines for using the data. Among the statutes was a stipulation that no-one who worked on the corpus could use it to denigrate the language of its speakers. Then, David devised a procedure so that the sample would be random and yet target the Francophone neighborhoods and different social classes. The Montreal Corpus – 120 interviews across age, sex, and social class – was collected in 1970–1971 (Sankoff & Cedergren, 1972). It was the first machine-readable corpus of spoken vernacular language and the blueprint for innumerable sociolinguistic corpora to come.

Summary

Sociolinguistics was in the air in the 1960s and early 1970s. Bill Bright's conference in California had been agenda-setting. The LSA Summer Institute in 1964 with its Sociolinguistics theme galvanized the spirit of integration between language and society. Bill Labov's New York City results consolidated the ideas into a practical, replicable framework. The climate was conducive to expansion and growth and funding opportunities were plentiful. People came together and projects got started. The scope of the community-based enterprise required team effort. Researchers put their energies and talents together and got to work. They started finding incredible variation and innumerable linguistic features undergoing change. The revolution had begun.



David Sankoff 2

And it was a very short burst of time between around 1969 and '76 or '77 or something like that. A period of seven or eight years where all this stuff suddenly happened and laid the foundation for so much work that happened later.

Outside this intellectual arena, the social and political climate in North America more generally in the 1960s was riveting. Civil rights were at the top of societal consciousness, freedom of speech was advocated, revolutions were gathering speed, and people wanted to make a difference. In the United States, President Johnson's war on poverty led to extensive funding opportunities through the Office of Education. The cognitive deficit hypothesis, the idea that certain populations were lacking in basic mental functions, was challenged. In Canada, Quebec was asserting its independence, *Vive le Québec libre!* and its erstwhile ill-regarded language became an emblem for social change.

Bill Labov's work brought to consciousness the idea that language was awash with structure and meaning, that its variation was not aberrant or unsystematic, but part of the very fabric of the human communication system, inherent to its organization. In variation, sociolinguists saw the means to champion difference and to dismiss intolerance. In the ability to tie together linguistic, social, and historical and cultural life, they saw a way to affect societal change.



J. K. Chambers 2

You know Sociolinguistics developed- it supplanted dialectology as the study of linguistic variation. And it wasn't an accident, it was because the world had changed in

lots of ways and so, I mean what became more important than regional differences were social differences, social class and men and women especially.

Sometimes the time is ripe for certain ideas to come to fruition. There is not a single reason or motivation for an idea, but a series of related understandings that excite individuals and then perpetuate themselves across human networks. The broader sociocultural setting is conducive and the individual personalities form a symbiosis that becomes a synergy.

Notes

1. William Labov is known in the field as Bill. Since there are very few other Bills in this book I will use “Bill” for “William Labov” most of the time.
2. In particular North American dialects or other dialects influencing or influenced by it (see <http://www.americandialect.org/>).
3. An earlier edited volume had used the term “Socio-Linguistics” with a hyphen (Capell, 1966).
4. Joe Dillard and Bill Stewart were sociolinguists whose research focused on AAVE.
5. Consonant cluster simplification, also called *-t/d* deletion, is when people pronounce only one sound at the end of a word when the orthography shows two or three, e.g., *-kt* or *-skt*. Many words that end in *t* or *d*, such as *just*, *slept*, *send*, etc. are often pronounced *jus*’, *slep*’, *sen*’, etc.
6. Some constructions comprise a two-verb unit, a main verb and an auxiliary verb. The main verb provides the main meaning of the sentence and the auxiliary verb expresses tense, aspect, modality, etc., e.g., *She is going*, continuous; *He has come*, recent past.
7. Jim McCawley was a prominent syntactician who worked at the University of Chicago during the time that Ralph was working on his PhD dissertation.
8. Noam Chomsky is regarded as “the father of Modern Linguistics” and the founder of the MIT Linguistics Department. He has also done many other things from philosophy to politics.
9. This rewrite rule means a sentence consists of a noun phrase followed by a verb phrase, e.g., *She eats*.
10. Binary variables are variables that have two values.
11. A popular type of computer program.
12. David Sankoff is known as Didi by his friends and close colleagues.
13. Wim Vandenbussche had invited Peter to give a talk in Brussels before his interview.
14. Dell Hymes was a founding scholar in the ethnography of language use who was very prominent in the 1960s and beyond.
15. According to Lesley her PhD is a slightly revamped (more boring) version of the study.
16. C.-J. Bailey, a sociolinguist, was working at Georgetown at the time. He wrote a book about incorporating sociolinguistic factors into a general description of language.
17. Haj Ross is a linguist who played a founding role in the development of generative semantics and syntax. He is also well known for various processes that involve variation, including squishes and nounyness.