



**A Comparative Analysis of Labov's Sociolinguistic Studies
(1963 – 1972)**

Munisa Nabiyeva

MA TESOL, Master's degree student, Webster University in Tashkent

Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of two influential sociolinguistic studies conducted by William Labov in 1963 and 1972. The first study focuses on the social motivation of sound change and highlights the role of local identity in language variation. The second study examines the relationship between pronunciation and social stratification. The findings confirm that language variation is systematic and socially meaningful.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, language variation, social identity, prestige, Labov studies

Introduction

This article compares two important studies of Labov who did research work in the main aspects of sociolinguistics between in 1963 and 1972 years. This research paper plays a crucial role in sociolinguistics because his articles are valuable authentic resource for showing language variation in society and what social factors impact them.

William Labov's first study is about "**The social motivation of a sound change**" published in 1963. He chose a small island Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts for his first research and there are important factors for selecting this location. One of the main factors is that this island had a strong local identity and it is the best place to show language variations. Martha Vineyard is a strong example of showing language variations according to different social factors, because this island still maintains their traditional island life and old speeches (Mesthrie et al, 2009, pp. 78-80). Another point is that this island was influenced by tourists and mainland outsiders. Labov mainly explores the sound changes **ai/** and **au/** diphthongs and learn how to pronounce these



diphthongs in the local people's speech in Martha's Vineyard. The duration of this study Labov focused on selecting different groups in island such as: age groups from youngsters to older people who had different occupations and social backgrounds in order to see how pronunciation reflected social meaning. In this study, Labov used tape-recorded interviews and conducted 69 interviews. Especially he focused on fishermen subgroups in Chilmark rather than other groups, the reason for this is that those people were connected strongly to traditional island life and local identities. He compared the fishermen's pronunciation of diphthongs ai/ and /au with other different groups based on centralization of sounds and analyzed how strongly speakers used more their local forms in their speech. He found that people who felt strong loyalty to their traditional island life, used more centralized forms. Because, they got strong local identity and show resistance to outsiders, tourists. Overall, Labov (1963) in this study emphasized that language variation does not occur randomly, it strongly connected to social identity and meaning.

The second study of Labov is "**The social stratification of (r) in New York City department store**" and it was conducted in New York City in 1972. Labov (1972) chose three department stores as a research location and they are Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy's and S. Klein. Labov collected speech data from sales employees who worked in three different department stores in New York City. He selected these department stores related to their prestige and associated with social stratifications such as: Saks: highest-ranking store, Macy's middle-ranking store and S. Klein is lowest-ranking store. He examined how to pronounce postvocalic /r among the speakers according to different social classes and status which represented in department stores where they worked. While examining this postvocalic /r, Labov visited in three department stores as a customer and asked several questions from sales employees carefully. He aimed to observe them how to pronounce /r and made them say "fourth floor" and compared three department stores. He found that sales assistants who worked in higher-status store: Saks





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Fifth Avenue used /r more often rather than lower-status store: S. Klein employees. Macy's is middle and showed intermediate sample. Labov clarified and concluded pronunciation –r clearly connected social stratification and not only stores employees use it but also other speakers use it to show prestige in their speech. According to Mather (2012) noted that New York City maintains the use –r in their speeches in order to show prestige and connected it to social class.

There are some **similarities** between Labov's 1963 and 1972 studies, one of them is that language variation associated with social meaning and social position not randomly selected. Both studies focused on exploring linguistic variable and how it changes according to different social factors. Pronunciation is main factor in these studies because both of them investigate different sounds but used to show how speech connected to society. Martha's Vineyard study explores pronunciation changes based on local identity, ethnicity and age levels, while three department stores study linked to social class, status and prestige. Another main similarity of two studies is that research is conducted based on real-life speech data and it causes to show them more reliable. Both studies aim to collect data about natural speech in real community rather than only formal language (Mesthrie et al, 2009, p. 90).

On the other hand, there are several important **differences** between two studies. The main difference between two studies is location. Labov's first study was conducted in small island Martha Vineyard in 1963, while second study was organized in three department stores, New York City, in 1972. Another important difference is social focus which first study focus on exploring social identity and resistance to tourists, seasonal outsiders, the second study focus on prestige and social stratifications, style shifting. Mather (2008) explains that first-wave study examined language through categories such as class, gender, age, ethnic group while the second wave of studies focused on more social networks and social practice (p. 342). Language variables is also different, Martha Vineyard study highlighted to pronounce –ai and –au and how to centralized it



in local people's speech, New York City study focus on postvocalic –r. The final difference in both studies is the use of method. Labov (1963) used tape-recorded interviews as well as observation to analyze the –ai, -au in Martha Vineyard, rapid and anonymous method is used for Labov (1972) second study in department stores in New York City. To conclude, both studies are the best example of “variationist model” and important and valuable resources for showing language variations in sociolinguistics.

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