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Labovian sociolinguistics of literacy: Theoretical, practical, and political developments from 1964–1972

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ABSTRACT

William Labov carried out literacy research throughout his career from the 1960s to 2010s. This developed in tandem with his linguistic documentation of African American Vernacular English. Both began in 1965, when Labov received funding for a three-year fieldwork project on Black youths' language and schooling in Harlem, New York. Literacy was an important political issue in the 1960s, with substantial funding to raise basic education levels, as part of socioeconomic development agendas. In the US, this coincided with civil rights movements, shifting race relations, and a period of social unrest. In this article, Labov's first phase of literacy research is traced through this historical moment, from the late 1960s to early 1970s. Also charted is the development of one deficit theory Labov contested during this period—cultural deprivation theory. Three parts are described: foundational conferences in 1964, research and reports from 1965–1968, and centers of contestation from 1969–1972. (Sociolinguistics, ethnography, literacy, reading, cultural deprivation theory)*

INTRODUCTION

Although not the most renowned area of his work, the foundational sociolinguist William Labov carried out research on literacy throughout his career, from the 1960s to 2010s, albeit with stronger emphases at the beginning and towards the end. This developed in tandem with his linguistic documentation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Both started at the same time in 1965, when Labov received funding to undertake a three-year fieldwork project on Black youths' language and schooling in Harlem, New York.

Historian of literacy Harvey Graff argues whilst twenty-first-century ethnographic and sociocultural work on literacy has tended to focus on writing or

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inscription, prior studies in the 1960s began with an emphasis on reading (Graff 2022). This was the case with Labov, whose literacy research started with one specific problem, what he called 'reading failure' amongst lower class youths (Labov & Robins 1967). Curiously for such an exact scholar, Labov did not define reading in this early work, nor literacy.[1] It seems taken for granted what was being considered was elementary reading as *decoding*.[2] If that suggests a limited view, his investigation was anything but. Rather than seeing Harlem youths' language as a deviant version of Standard English (SE) as commonly referred,[3] Labov researched AAVE as a dialect, and through contrastive analysis of AAVE and SE, identified aspects of AAVE structure, and areas of interference, which could be used to improve teaching and learning of reading. Alongside this structural linguistic aspect (Chomsky 1965), he adopted ethnographic approaches to language (Hymes 1962), as well as broader sociological analyses. In sum, in one direction Labov researched the linguistic worlds of Harlem youths being asked to read, whilst in the other their social worlds, especially outside of schools where they were being tested.

Literacy was an important political issue in the 1960s, with substantial funding to raise basic education levels, as part of socioeconomic development agendas (Arnove & Graff 2008). In the US, this coincided with civil rights movements, shifting race relations, and a period of social unrest. Educational development plans focused especially on expanding urban poverty, and Black communities located within that. Compensatory schooling programs based upon a range of theories and ideologies were put forward into a complex and changing political landscape. Here, what became known posteriorly as *deficit* and *difference* perspectives on culture came to prominence and into conflict.

In this article, I trace the trajectory of Labov's first phase of literacy research during this historical moment. The period covered is from the start of Labov's career in 1964 at Columbia University, until his professorship at the University of Pennsylvania in 1972.[4] I also chart the concurrent development of one deficit theory Labov contested from the late 1960s to early 1970s—*cultural deprivation theory*. Three phases are described chronologically: foundational conferences in 1964, research and reports from 1965–1968, and centers of contestation from 1969–1972.

1964: FOUNDATIONAL CONFERENCES

One starting point in sociolinguistics is a series of conferences in mid-1964. The first was at UCLA, in May, where Labov presented findings from his New York City research on 'social variation in language', and 'the mechanism of linguistic change, in which the dynamics of social interaction appear to play an important part' (Labov 1966a:84). The book from these proceedings was entitled *Sociolinguistics* (Bright 1966), becoming one of the first uses of this term.

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Shortly after came the Linguistics Society of America (LSA) Summer Institute, in July, which included a focus on this new area with a seminar led by Labov. Whilst both events are widely acknowledged, it was at another conference, one month later, that Labov's work on literacy began to emerge. Held in August, this was the Bloomington, Indiana, Conference on Social Dialects and Language Learning, sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and Center for Applied Linguistics.

The sense of sociolinguistics setting new directions through these overlapping conferences is captured by Roger Shuy—a colleague and friend of Labov who he met in 1964, as well as another researcher who adopted sociolinguistic approaches to literacy in the 1960s (Shuy 1969, 1974).

> I first met Labov at the LSA summer meeting. I was then a linguistic geographer teaching at Michigan State. Bill spoke about his NYC research, which I believe was his Columbia linguistics dissertation. He had not yet received his PhD. We were all excited about his work. I talked to him, and I asked him to advise me about planning a similar study of Detroit speech and he said he'd be glad to help… The NCTE conference followed the summer LSA meeting. NCTE already had a strong interest in social dialects and its director Bob Hogan attended. After that meeting, Hogan asked me to assemble the presentations into a book that NCTE would publish, and I hastily edited it. Very little had been thought about social dialects and reading at that point. We were still too busy trying to figure out what social dialects were… At the LSA and those other meetings, Labov was pointing out the future of what became sociolinguistics. (p.c., Roger Shuy, 2025)

Social dialects and language learning

During this moment, there were two ways Labov's work on literacy developed via the NCTE conference, initially via panel discussions on the opening talk by dialectologist Raven McDavid, then in more detail via Labov's own presentation on 'Stages in the Acquisition of Standard English'.

On McDavid's paper named 'Social Dialects: Causes or Symptoms of Social Maladjustment', five summary points were made by a panel that included Labov, Shuy, and eight others. The first emphasised a need for research in urban centres. The second was how more extensive fieldwork was required, especially concerning 'the Language of Negroes' (Shuy 1964:7). Third, pedagogical implications relating to dialects were acknowledged, where 'Labov pointed out that teachers often need help in such matters… because they are under the effects of certain folk mythology' (1964:8–9). The fourth concerned how and when to teach 'standard dialect… in addition to [learners'] original dialect as the social situation might dictate' (1964:9). Then, lastly, how bilingualism and bidialectism were not the same, how when 'we switch from one dialect to another, it is often hard to identify where the switch occurs', and in light of this, how to adapt methods 'in the teaching of a second dialect… to encourage the change from passive to active knowledge' (1964:9). As we see below, all five points would be addressed by Labov shortly after, in his research on AAVE and reading levels in schools.

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Early formulations of this Harlem research appear in Labov's 1964 NCTE presentation. Although he did not say what, Labov mentioned he was already doing research in Harlem, as part of his doctoral thesis on *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (*SSENYC*, Labov 1966b/2006), supervised by Uriel Weinreich, a Jewish-American linguist whose lineage informed Labov's sociolinguistic turn (Labov 1970a). Following an overview of the *SSENYC* findings, during his NCTE talk, Labov put forward a sociolinguistic model of language acquisition; however, he focussed upon 'obstacles to standard acquisition' (Labov 1964a:95). In doing so, he suggested intersecting linguistic, cultural, and social practices which would become central to his subsequent Harlem research.

Amongst the panellists at the NCTE conference was the creole linguistics researcher William Stewart, who Labov claimed was 'the first [who] pointed out that Negro English should be studied as a coherent system' (Labov 1969/1973:62). 'Following his lead' (1969/1973:63), but already positing alternative theories on *linguistic divergence,* Labov argued this 'vernacular of the New York City speech community evolves in its own consistent pattern, following a mechanism that is not yet wholly understood' (Labov 1964a:95). Three reasons suggested were (i) *isolation*, where 'lower class speakers… have less opportunity to hear [and interact] with the prestige dialect' (1964a:95)*; (ii) structural interference* as conflicting linguistic features between the 'vernacular and the structure of the prestige pattern' (1964a:95); and (iii) in what would become his most significant explanation during the 1960s, *conflict of value systems*. Labov argued 'there are signs of a developing lower class group which is breaking away… a group which has adopted other reference points and other values, and is drifting in a different direction from the main group' (1964a:95). This observation was considered in relation to 'urban school problems' (1964a:99), especially low levels of reading and high dropout rates. As a linguist, he affirmed the point of departure must be a more thorough study of what was then called Nonstandard Negro English (NNE; i.e. AAVE), and 'there is little to say about educational problems, or motivation, or interference, until one can give an account of the linguistic behaviour of the native speakers of the particular speech community in question' (1964a:99). Relating to schools, he asked as one aim that 'given a regular pattern of social and stylistic stratification, how can one give lower class children the same wide range of stylistic variation that is open to middle class children?' (1964a:102). In sum, across these themes, we see the first formulations of what Labov later studied during his fieldwork.

Project Literacy

Two more conferences in 1964 were significant in shaping Labov's Harlem research. The next was the second in a series of Project Literacy conferences, held in September. In February 1964 the literary scholar and psychologist of reading Harry Levin founded Project Literacy as an interdisciplinary research endeavour, based at Cornell University, New York. Carried out from 1964–1969, funded

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by the Cooperative Research Branch of the United States Office of Education (USOE), this large-scale project formed part of the USOE's commitments in the field of child and adult literacy (Levin & Mitchell 1969). Although the term *literacy* was foregrounded, for Levin, as for Labov later, there was a strong emphasis on reading research. This tendency in the 1960s towards innovative interdisciplinary approaches to reading is captured in the mission statement.

> The purpose of Project Literacy is to organize, in various universities, laboratories and state departments of education, research which is essential to understand the acquisition of reading skills. The major initial effort is to bring together researchers and educators from a variety of disciplines to plan research which, when taken as a whole, will give us more substantial results than any single study can provide… We believe that much current and potential research in learning psychology, visual perception, cognitive behavior, neurophysiology of vision, child development, descriptive linguistics, psycholinguistics, the sociology of educational innovation, research with culturally disadvantaged children and programmed instruction… are essential to understanding literacy. Consequently, we are endeavouring to locate research interests which heretofore may not have been considered relevant to this crucial educational research area. (Levin 1964:53)

From 1964–1969, there were ongoing conferences that led to nine Project Literacy reports. These included multiple entries by Labov. In between the first and second Project Literacy conferences in February and September 1964, Levin had been another of the panellists at the NCTE conference in August 1964, and it might have been there that he met Labov. This seems probable as the second Project Literacy conference, one month later in September, now included Labov's first entry in Project Literacy records. Of the type he suggested during his NCTE presentation, this entry was entitled, 'A Proposed Study of Negro and Puerto Rican Speech in New York City' (Labov 1964b). The general aims were stated as follows.

> A. To determine the socially significant variables in English structure which separate Negro and Puerto Rican speakers from the rest of the New York City speech community.
> B. To define those structural and functional conflicts of the Negro and Puerto Rican vernaculars with standard English which may interfere with the acquisition of reading skills
> … Whereas older Negro people in New York City participate in the same sociolinguistic structure as the rest of the population, many of the Negro youth seem to be moving in a different direction, along with many Puerto Ricans and lower class white youth. Among older Negroes, there is general agreement that Southern speech characteristics are 'rough' and uncultivated compared to Northern speech. Yet there has been a rapid increase in the use of non-standard forms of Southern Negro speech in recent years: in part, this is due to the influx of Negroes raised in the South, but it also reflects a reversal of the value system held by the older generation, and a rebellion against middle class norms. (Labov 1964b:14–16)

Labov received funding for this proposal and started fieldwork shortly afterwards in 1965. However, prior to describing this fieldwork, there is one more conference in 1964 to mention. This one is significant because of how it introduced theoretical and political tensions that would become increasingly central to Labov's rationale for research on language and literacy in New York ghettos.

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Education and cultural deprivation

Overlapping with the first three examples in mid-1964, this event was the Research Conference on Education and Cultural Deprivation, at the University of Chicago, in June. This concept, *cultural deprivation*, has a complex genealogy, developing through a range of sociological, anthropological, psychological, and educational lineages. However, its consolidation can be traced back ten years earlier to the American Psychological Association School Psychology Division (APASPD) annual meeting in 1955. Entitled Cultural Deprivation and Child Development, its focus was on a recent experimental study amongst children from low socio-economic backgrounds in New York, where researchers started to define a kind of 'attitudinal syndrome… based on environmental limitations and handicaps' that was impacting on school performances (Friedman 1967/1976:120). Notably, this was envisaged only shortly after the ending of segregated educational facilities, via the Brown v. Board of Education legal ruling in 1954. Tracing the onward trajectory of this concept, from 1950s psychology, via compensatory education, into popular fiction on New York's ghettos, Friedman (1967/1976) cites the following profile of a 'disadvantaged learner' from a language teaching publication, as a common portrait during the 1960s of so-called 'culturally deprived' children.

> He is essentially the child who has been isolated from those rich experiences that should be his. This isolation may be brought about by poverty, by meagerness of intellectual resources in his home and surroundings, by the incapacity, illiteracy, or indifference of his elders or of the entire community. He may have come to school without ever having had his mother sing him the traditional lullabies, and with no knowledge of nursery rhymes, fairy stories, or the folklore of his country. He may have taken few trips—perhaps his only one the cramped, uncomfortable trip from the lonely shack on the tenant farm to the teeming, filthy slum dwelling—and he probably knows nothing of poetry, music, painting, or even indoor plumbing. (Brooks 1966:516–17)

If this misguided stereotype of deficit seems like a caricature retrospectively, beneath its surface were scientific theorisations concerning language, culture, and cognition, which had come to the forefront of educational psychology by the 1960s. Moreover, the early 1960s period marked a turning point for cultural deprivation theorists, who believed they had made a recent breakthrough, via new experimental research emphasising pre-school years. Seen as a critical period for compensatory educational interventions, educational psychologists now argued what they called 'planned enrichment' (Deutsch 1964:256) was needed during this early phase, simultaneously counteracting assumed deficiencies, whilst attempting to align pre-school experiences of lower-class children with those of middle-class the school system was based around. The special significance of the Research Conference on Education and Cultural Deprivation in Chicago in June 1964 was that it brought together leading names in the field to establish 'a consensus position on the nature, causes, characteristics of, and remedial measures designed for culturally deprived students' (Friedman 1967/1976:121). These guidelines would

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be disseminated thereafter via a publication named *Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation* (Bloom, Davis, & Hess 1965).

Amongst participants at the Chicago APAPSD conference, two in particular should be highlighted. These were developmental psychologist Martin Deutsch whose research on planned enrichment was based in Harlem schools, and educational psychologist Arthur Jensen whose shift toward genetic theories of IQ would become controversial later in the 1960s. Both figures become targets of Labov's critique.

Deutsch was the most prominent figure at the APAPSD conference, presenting multiple papers. Amongst these were two arguments which would become controversial. First, in 'The Disadvantaged Child and the Learning Process' (1963), Deutsch argued there was a lack of effective 'stimulation' in lower class households, including 'visual, tactile, and auditory stimulation, [and where] if language is taken as prerequisite to concept formation and problem-solving, then this deficit has tremendous effect at all levels of learning' (cited in Bloom, Davis, & Hess 1965:101). Second, in 'Social Influences in Negro-White Intelligence Difference' (Deutsch & Brown 1964), he investigated sociological data on fatherless families, presenting findings that 'Negro children at each socio-economic level score lower than white children [whilst] further investigation showed a significantly lower score for children in father-absent homes as compared to children in intact families' (cited in Bloom, Davis, & Hess 1965:104).

Jensen offered one talk. Although he was not yet tying IQ scores to genetics (Jensen 1969), his discussion of experimental methodology would have already seemed provocative to non-psychologists encountering his work. For instance, his 'Learning in the Pre-school Years' abstract stated how 'the amount and variety of verbal and sensory stimulation the organism experiences have considerable effect on learning behaviour, [for example], rats raised in a stimulating environment… compared to a group raised in plain cages showed much more success in discrimination tasks' (Jensen 1963, cited in Bloom, Davis, Hess 1965:124–25). This analogy would be expanded by a colleague of Jensen, who summarised shortly after 'the difference between the culturally deprived and the culturally privileged is, for children, analogous to the difference between cage-reared and pet-reared rats and dogs' (Hunt 1964:236).

What we see from this point onwards in 1964 becomes a growing tension between such educational psychologists on cultural deprivation or *deficit* theory, versus linguists and others who critiqued them from perspectives of structural, functional, and ideological *difference*, or more precisely in the case of Labov, ultimately, through a lens of social and cultural conflict. It is important to remember both positions were being funded by the USOE and other related funders. Ostensibly, both were seeking solutions to entrenched problems during a period of intense changes. 1964 was the year President Lyndon B. Johnson launched his Great Society initiative offering extensive funding for projects 'combating' poverty (sometimes referred to as the War on Poverty). 1964 was the year of the

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Civil Rights Act, prohibiting discrimination based on race, colour, and other identity categories. It was also the year Martin Luther King Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet if progressive changes were underway, many of the ways forward were still very much in debate.

1965--1968: RESEARCH AND REPORTS

The Moynihan report

In March 1965, a highly controversial research report was published, a text with themes Labov would explore in Harlem. Written by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, that report was 'The Negro Family: The Case for National Action'.

Moynihan's argument developed on a prior work …*The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Glazer & Moynihan 1963). In this widely read book, the authors studied how immigrants became 'recreated as something new, but still as identifiable groups' (1963:13). Central to their sociological analysis was a hypothesis that fatherless families among Black communities played a role in lower economic and educational indices (i.e. an idea Deutsch researched via developmental psychology). Glazer & Moynihan (1963) showed statistics in New York that one quarter of Black families were headed by a woman in contrast to one tenth of white families. Regarding literacy, they highlighted reading scores in Harlem that were two years behind New York standards. Of the five groups, their analysis compared Puerto Ricans, who were also living in ghettos, but whom they argued had more durable cross-generational family-support structures via parents and godparenting.

> There is little question where the major part of the answer must be found: in the home and family and community… It is there that the heritage of two hundred years of slavery and a hundred years of discrimination is concentrated; it is there that we find the serious obstacles to the ability to make use of a free educational system to advance into higher occupations and to eliminate the massive problems that afflict colored Americans and the city. (Glazer & Moynihan 1963:49–50)

These postulations were expanded in Moynihan's 1965 report. As civil rights discourse shifted from liberty to equality, Moynihan argued a new aim should be to aid 'the establishment of a stable Negro family structure' (Moynihan 1965:preface) to tackle a cycle of poverty. More controversially, Moynihan pathologized Black families, claiming 'the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which… seriously retards the progress of the group' (1965:30). Drawing on psychology by Deutsch, Moynihan showed IQ statistics from Harlem where 'a third of the children are scoring at levels perilously near to those of retardation' (1965:36). Another problem emphasised was increasing segregation. Counterintuitively, Moynihan claimed 'the present generation of Negro youth growing up in the urban ghettos has probably less personal contact with the white

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world, [whilst] the American school system has become more, rather than less segregated in the past two decades' (1965:44).

Although President Johnson initially found Moynihan's report persuasive, by August his administration disowned it. Coincidentally, a few months after its publication there were protests in Watts, a Black neighbourhood, where thirty-four people died. Conservative media appropriated Moynihan's findings, arguing such 'riots' occurred because 'the family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown' (Moynihan 1965:5). From the political left, Moynihan was strongly criticised,[5] most famously by the psychologist William Ryan, who in a rebuttal coined the term 'blaming the victim' (Ryan 1971). Ryan argued besides its methodological weaknesses, Moynihan's report 'seduces the reader into believing that it is not racism and discrimination but the weaknesses and defects of the Negro himself that account for the present state of inequality between Negro and white' (Ryan 1965:383).

This publication of Moynihan's report overlapped with the beginning of Labov's fieldwork in Harlem. Labov never cited the report (though he did cite Glazer & Moynihan 1963), probably because of the controversy. However, since late-1964, he had based his research proposal on a comparison of Black and Puerto Rican communities' educational problems, before narrowing down to Black male youths in 1965, similarly to Moynihan. Moreover, whilst Labov was critical of cultural deprivation arguments in Moynihan's report, he developed similar conclusions on segregation—including explanations of AAVE linguistic divergence.

Reports from Harlem

From 1965–1968, Labov carried out the fieldwork project 'A Study of the Non Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City'. During this period, he was working at Columbia, and three members of his research team were from that university. These included Paul Cohen and Benji Wald, linguistics postgraduates, and Teresa Labov who was a sociologist. Joshua Waletsky worked on narrative before moving to Harvard midway through. Nancy Gluck from Teacher's College (NYC) conducted analysis of classroom tests. Besides academic collaborators, Labov employed two fieldworkers ('participant observers'), who were both Black, and from or already familiar with Harlem. These were Clarence Robins and John Lewis. Labov emphasised both made major contributions, as reflected in their co-authorship of the project's final publication.

Funding came from the Cooperative Research Program of the Office of Education, US Department of Health, Education and Welfare (Project Numbers 3091 and 3288). 3091 was Project Literacy funding for a preliminary study in

1965. 3288 supported the project to its final report in 1968. Prior to that, from 1965 work-in-progress reports addressed a range of audiences.

The first was Labov, Cohen, & Robins' (1965) 'A Preliminary Study of the Structure of English Used by Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City'. Introduced in this report were reviews of local educational projects, exploratory fieldwork methods, and linguistic analysis which Labov called 'the first approach to quantitative relations in NE [Nonstandard English]' (Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis 1968:12). Already in this preliminary study, Labov claimed to have isolated 'the chief linguistic variables responsible for structural conflict between Nonstandard English [NNE] and Standard English [SE]' (Labov, Cohen, & Robins 1965:1). In turn, he began to argue awareness of such variables could be applied to literacy and 'direct the thinking of reading teachers along lines which have been ignored in the past' (1965:1). Examples included language training on NNE variability in oral reading tasks, testing of perceptual ability, and the teaching of grammar.

In 1966 came an updated 'Outline of Research on the English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City' (Cohen 1966). Developments in their fieldwork were summarised as follows.

> We have gathered, to date, several hundred tape-recorded interviews with different elements of the population, with geographical emphasis on the Central Harlem area. Last summer, over fifty interviews were conducted with Negro boys aged 9–12 in summer day camp centers throughout Harlem. Interviews are still being gathered among Negro boys aged 10–17 from selected lower-class, working-class, and middle-class blocks in different parts of Harlem. For the sake of comparison adult interviews and interviews with working-class white boys are currently being gathered… From a purely linguistic standpoint, the purpose was to elicit as full a spectrum of speech-style variation as possible, from the most formal-reading of word lists and minimal pairs—to the most casual—discussions of games and fighting, joke-telling, etc. (Cohen 1966:13)

Two notable points concerned interview dynamics and subjective-reaction test results. Regarding the first, Labov and colleagues started to compare minimal types of speech offered by Harlem children interviewed in 'formal' settings versus vibrant conversations of children during group interviews conducted by the fieldworkers Robins and Lewis. Second, it was suggested that a 'functional conflict in value systems represented by the non-standard and standard dialects is a very real one, though in many cases… below the level of conscious attention' (Cohen 1966:18). Via subjective-reaction tests, amongst other findings, they identified 'a strong difference between the relative prestige of various speech forms as judged by white and Negro listeners' (1966:18).

The first report about literacy (Labov 1966c/1967) was 'Some Sources of Reading Problems for Negro Speakers of Nonstandard English' in 1966. Labov began by arguing there was a kind of *reciprocal ignorance* where 'teacher and student are ignorant of each other's system' (Labov 1966c:140). Labov focussed on the former. Though he did not mention deficit theories, he alluded to these,

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claiming it was common for teachers to assume 'teaching English is a question of imposing rules upon chaotic and shapeless speech, filling a vacuum by supplying rules where no rules existed before' (1966c/1967:141).

In contrast, Labov demonstrated NNE language patterns and structural differences between SE and NNE which required attention pedagogically. Two guiding principles were emphasised. The first was to distinguish mistakes from pronunciation differences in oral reading tasks, because 'there are many [NNE] phonological rules which affect [Harlem boys'] pronunciation, but not necessarily his understanding of the grammatical signals or his grasp of the underlying lexical forms' (1966c/1967:155). More controversially, the second principle was an argument for the acceptance of aspects of NNE in early-stage SE learning.

> The key to the situation in the early grades is for the teacher to know the system of homonyms[6] of nonstandard English, and to know the grammatical differences that separate her own speech from that of the child. The teacher must be prepared to accept the system of homonyms for the moment, if this will advance the basic process of learning to read, but not the grammatical differences. (Labov 1966c/1967:164)

These pedagogical ideas were developed in reports from 1967–1968. Indeed, 1967 was an important year for the Harlem research, where five publications presented linguistic, sociological, and pedagogical findings. I mention two here. The first was 'Systematic Relations of Standard and Non-Standard Rules in the Grammars of Negro Speakers' (Labov & Cohen 1967). In this linguistics paper, Labov & Cohen now postulated a set of rules differentiating SE and NNE. However, importantly, from a structural perspective those differences were considered relatively minor. What was being suggested had implications for understandings of NNE. Labov was putting forward a model of different levels of rules in contrastive analysis of SE and NNE, based on the transformational-generative grammar of Noam Chomsky. Although Labovian Sociolinguistics emerged, in part, in critical response to what Labov called *asocial* aspects of the dominant Chomskian approach (Labov 1970a), throughout the Harlem research, Labov's structural linguistic analysis was still indebted to Chomsky.

What Labov argued was 'the most abstract or "deepest" rules are basically the same for [NNE] and other varieties of English, while the rules closer to the "surface" account for the differences between [NNE] forms and other English forms' (DeStefano 1973:149). This positioned Labov within a debate between creolists and dialectologists on the status of AAVE as a dialect. Labov's account differed from prominent creolists such as J. L. Dillard. Dillard (1972) believed Black English derived from a West African English based creole, and consequently, there were fundamental 'differences between the "deep" rules for Black English and for other English varieties' (DeStefano 1973:149). Counter to that, Labov argued 'although Negro speech patterns have been explained as the product of dialect mixture of two originally uniform grammars… both standard and non-standard rules are part of a larger linguistic structure, [which accounts] for the syntactic variation

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inherent in all styles of the speech of this community' (Labov & Cohen 1967:14). Whilst this debate would continue throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the important point, especially for AAVE and language education, concerned Labov's contemporary scientific affirmation that 'there are sets of rules which govern all varieties of English' (DeStefano 1973:149).

Shifting from a linguistic to sociological focus, the next report in 1967 was 'A Note on the Relation of Reading Failure to Peer-Group Status in Urban Ghettos' (Labov & Robins 1967). This presented initial findings on conflicts of values.

> For the past several years, we have been studying certain conflicts between the vernacular of the urban ghettos and schoolroom English, especially in relation to reading failure. We work primarily with peer-groups of Negro boys within the culture of the street, since we believe that the major controls upon language are exerted by these groups rather than the school or the home. Our research has recently revealed a sharp and striking relationship between participation in this street culture and reading failure. The pattern is so clear and plainly so important in understanding the educational problems of ghetto areas, that we are sending this brief note to all those who have shown interest in our progress reports. (Labov & Robins 1967:1)

Labov and colleagues did not do classroom observations. These findings were statistical, based on basic reading scores of youths they worked with, then broader comparisons. Labov used the term 'reading failure' to emphasise the seriousness of the results, where 'only one group member read on grade level [and] no group member could read at more than fifth grade level no matter what his age' (DeStefano 1973:312). Reading results were indicative of academic records generally.

> The pattern of failure is so widespread, in many urban areas, that one cannot hold responsible any one system, school or teacher. The majority of these boys have not learned to read well enough to use reading as a tool for further learning. For many of them, there is no realistic possibility of graduating high school. (Labov & Robins 1967:11)

Rather than focussing on family as Moynihan had, Labov investigated this educational problem via a study of peer groups. He had suggested this since the NCTE conference in 1964, where he had highlighted how during 'the preadolescent years, roughly ages five to twelve… the influence of the parents is submerged under the influence of the peer group' (Labov 1964a:91). That period coincides with children learning reading in school. Thus, in this 1967 report on 'Peer Group Status in Urban Ghettos', Labov offered findings on the 'social structure, history, activities, and value systems' (Labov & Robins 1967:1) of street groups or gangs studied through this lens.

> Focal concerns of the groups are toughness, smartness, trouble, excitement, autonomy, and fate. Intelligence or smartness is used and valued as a means of manipulating others, [not] obtaining information or solving abstract problems… Sources of prestige within the group are physical size, toughness, courage and skill in fighting; skill with language in ritual insults, verbal routines with

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girls, singing, [toasts],[7] jokes and story-telling; knowledge of [Black] nationalist lore. (Labov & Robins 1967:4–5)

For educationalists, school was shown as a hostile environment for Harlem youths, yet one where practices they were supposed to engage in were deemed irrelevant, or worse counterproductive to prestige within peer groups. Outside of school, reading was seldom if at all utilized. However, there was one exception Labov documented, which beyond conflicts of values, problematised the causes of 'reading failure' in schools. Whilst the other examples of oral genres demonstrated the richness of local language practices, offering a counterpoint to cultural deprivation theorists (Labov et al. 1968, vol. 2), the last item listed showed scholastic learning and literacy.

Rifting

Rifting was a 'formal display of occult or "heavy" knowledge' (Labov et al. 1968, vol. 2:136) associated with the religious ideologies of Black Nationalism. Labov described rifting as a speech style involving 'an elevated, high flown delivery which incorporates a great many learned Latinate words, spellings, and uncontracted form[s]' (1968:136). Diverging from the oral poetry of singing and toasts, this was 'the most formal branch of the vernacular' (1968:136) in terms of register, and one that incorporated lexico-grammatical patterns of SE most extensively.

Heavy or secret knowledge is learned by rote; adepts are examined in a speech event known as 'putting someone on the square'… They are asked a series of difficult questions before an audience; and must deliver the right answers to maintain their claim to know. There is a great deal of status to be gained from possessing this knowledge, wisdom and understanding… The Muslim religion has developed a profound and intense interest in learning among the NNE adolescents. The passionate concern for study and learning which is generated by this religion is what the schools would like to develop, but have failed to do so. Nothing is more striking than the respect for the Muslim written word and for Muslim learning expressed by the NNE adolescents, as compared to their reaction and contempt for the learning offered in school… This learning involves reading and writing, the study of science and history; and logical disputation as well as rote memorization. (Labov et al. 1968, vol. 2:136–37)

The same year Labov started fieldwork, a Harlem resident who had become a leader of Black intellectuality and self-determination was shot dead—Malcolm X. US Black Nationalism flourished in the years after (mid-1960s to early-1970s). Labov portrayed these developments through rifting. Examples of being 'put on the square' showed youths' turn to literacy, as well as adherence to testing regimes, because of the status gains and group pressures associated with Islamic knowledge. In sum, whilst Labov's other examples of vernacular language practices demonstrated stylistic variation, rifting showed changes underway relating to literacy.

Arriving in 1968, the final publication of the Harlem fieldwork (Labov et al. 1968) included 400 pages of descriptions of language in use, including rifting.

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Another 400 presented linguistic analyses of AAVE and pedagogical suggestions. In short, this major publication expanded on structural and functional findings outlined so far. Yet, there was a notable new element in the conclusions, Labov's first explicit criticisms of cultural deprivation theorists. From 1969–1972 these criticisms intensified.

1969--1972: CENTERS OF CONTESTATION

1968–1969 was a period of protests in the US, especially concerning race. Violent protests followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The Black Power and Black Panther movements came to prominence. There were regular actions at universities, including demonstrations at Berkeley and other campuses against a faculty member named Arthur Jensen, whose article 'How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?' (1969), was accused of 'providing academic respectability to pseudoscientific theories of black inferiority and segregationist public policies' (Southern Poverty Law Centre 2025).

During that moment, an anthropologist named John Szwed made a proposal for a new Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE) to research ethnic relations. The project got funding in 1969, based at The University of Pennsylvania. Szwed became CUE director alongside Dell Hymes and Erving Goffman as associate directors. Szwed's account is significant as it overlaps with Labov's work from 1969–1972.

> In the late 1960s… politicians suddenly began to gear up for some kind of increased control of Black neighbourhoods, and they were inviting proposals for means of doing it. They were beginning to get plans for further arming police and possibly using the military. During the same period, there was a sudden increased interest in Black English as an important source of educational failure, crime, and social disorder. There was a lot of political and educational controversy about language, with two main bodies of opinion at opposite ends. One was the assumption that there was something wrong with this speech, some going as far as to say it was a kind of pathology, or at least a cause of poverty. At the other extreme, others were saying that such claims were coming from those who didn't understand the speech of Black people, and had failed to know how language works. Newspaper articles, school board debates, lawsuits, I found all of this bizarre, and around this time began giving talks about vernacular languages, and the dangers and bias of existing forms of tests, especially IQ testing. Once, when I was giving one of these talks, at the American Psychological Association, on a panel during an Advancement of Science meeting in 1968, someone who worked at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), came up to me afterwards, and told me that in Washington cultural and linguistic differences were being misunderstood, and were being addressed in dangerous ways. My talk concerned the racial bias of IQ testing, as well as the misuse and neglect of African American cultures. People at the NIMH were worried about this and other racism related issues, and this man from the NIMH asked me if there was any interest in these topics in the social sciences. He asked if I had the money, would I be interested in developing some kind of program that opposed cultural deficit thinking, one that could show that Black communities were far from the abnormality that was being assumed in these new government plans. (p.c., John Szwed, 2021)

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CUE received a five-year NIMH grant to pursue this purpose. Szwed, Hymes, and Goffman invited Labov to participate, offering him a research professor position in 1969 (Leeds-Hurwitz 2025). This was delayed because Labov received a Guggenheim fellowship from 1970–1971. Officially, his CUE position followed from 1971–1972, although he participated informally from 1970.

Whilst at CUE, Labov was working on several projects, including two important books, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Labov 1972a) and *Language in the Inner City* (Labov 1972b). The latter was a collected volume of reports from the Harlem research alongside related material. One of those republished texts was 'The Logic of Nonstandard English' (Labov 1969/1973), first published as a monograph by the Center for Applied Linguistics in 1969. Throughout the early 1970s, this would become Labov's most widely republished paper. It was one which adopted a slightly different style and tone.

Rather than descriptive linguistics or a fieldwork report, 'The Logic of Nonstandard English' (LNSE) read like an argumentative essay and an impassioned one. Essentially, LNSE was a critique of cultural deprivation theory. But it had a particular focus on the ideas and implications of *verbal deprivation* (Bereiter & Engelmann 1966), and Jensen's (1969) work on IQ, race, and genetics. Whilst Labov mentioned Bereiter previously in the conclusions of the Harlem fieldwork, this was a more forceful response. This was the first time Labov mentioned Jensen in publication.

In retrospect, rather than a standalone text, LNSE can be seen as a set of themes and methodological approach Labov was working on from 1969–1972. Thematically, this contrasted AAVE systematicity and language skills with educational theories and practices, which positioned AAVE speakers as culturally and verbally deviant, or worse. Methodologically, Labov presented a kind of proto-discourse analysis. Labov first used the term *discourse analysis* one year earlier (Labov et al. 1968). However, he did not define the concept. Rather, he stated at that time that 'fundamental units for such an analysis have not yet been established' (1968:1). Labov was working out ways of doing discourse analysis, across different levels, from broad ideological critique to closer interactional pragmatics. These themes and methods can be seen in a series of LNSE publications from 1969–1972.

Following the LNSE monograph in 1969, the next was 'Systematically Misleading Data from Test Questions' (1970b/1976), a paper presented at the University of Michigan School of Social Work. After that came 'Finding Out about Children's Language' (1971/2025), a University of Hawaii Working Paper. Lastly, there was an edited version of the LNSE monograph in 1972, appearing in *The Atlantic* current affairs magazine, with an updated introduction and a new title 'Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence'. Whilst Labov's approach was consistent across these texts, one noticeable difference concerned an increasing intensity of his criticism, especially concerning IQ testing, and Arthur Jensen.

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The logic of nonstandard English

Labov credited the psychologist Joan Baratz at the Center for Applied Linguistics for drawing his attention to the implications of cultural deprivation theory in the late 1960s (Labov 1969/1973). Labov's response through the 1969 LNSE monograph began with a critical review of the major deprivation theorists, before offering counterpoint cases based on the Harlem research.

> The view of the Negro speech community which we obtain from our work in the ghetto areas is precisely the opposite from that reported by Deutsch, Engelmann and Bereiter. We see a child bathed in verbal stimulation from morning to night. We see many speech events which depend upon the competitive exhibition of verbal skills… We see the younger child trying to acquire these skills from older children—hanging around on the outskirts of the older peer group, and imitating this behavior to the best of his ability. (Labov 1969/1973:33–34)

So, how could deprivation theorists' characterisations have deviated so far from what Labov encountered? In the LNSE section on logic, Labov argued there were a series of steps through which coerced minimal or non-responses in classroom contexts and testing situations were being miscategorised, that is, where children were positioned via educational discourses as lacking in verbal capacity and logical thinking, which in turn became a causal explanation for schooling problems.

1. The lower–class child's verbal response to a formal and threatening situation is used to demonstrate his lack of verbal capacity, or deficit.
2. This verbal deficit is declared to be a major cause of the lower–class child's poor performance in school.
3. Since middle–class children do better in school, middle–class speech habits are seen to be necessary for learning.
4. Class and ethnic differences in grammatical form are equated with differences in the capacity for logical analysis.
5. Teaching the child to mimic certain formal speech patterns used by middle-class teachers is seen as teaching him to think logically.
6. Children who learn these formal speech patterns are then said to be thinking logically and it is predicted that they will do much better in reading and arithmetic in the years to follow (Labov 1969/1973:53).

Resulting from such mischaracterisations, Labov argued there was a radicalisation underway. The sociological and psychological theories of Moynihan and Deutsch on matriarchal families had intensified in dissemination. Labov cited one researcher who argued there should be a literacy test for motherhood, but if not possible, compensatory pre-school should start as early as six months (Caldwell 1967). If eugenics was only suggested here, in the work of Jensen it would become more explicit.

Jensen (1969:2) was now arguing 'social class and racial variations in intelligence cannot be accounted for by differences in environment but must be attributed partially to genetic differences'. He had shifted from a cultural deprivation perspective towards 'basic biological factors' (Jensen 1968:167). White middle-class

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populations and Black working-class populations were divided into two distinct levels of 'cognitive and conceptual learning' ability (Jensen 1969:112). Childhood IQ was shown to gravitate towards parental IQ through data on Black mothers in 'slums [with] the highest known prevalence of identified retardation' (1969:62). Labov (1969/1973) and others highlighted these data sources as having been misrepresented. However, the main point was Jensen's research was being used by right-wing politicians for racist purposes, including defunding of socio-educational programs, as well as more drastic issues soon to emerge.

Systematically misleading data from test questions

In LNSE, Labov discussed ways school testing was problematic. In 'Systematically Misleading Data from Test Questions' (SMDTQ; 1970b/1976) he elaborated. He also elaborated on Bereiter & Engelmann's (1966) research on verbal deprivation and direct instruction—DISTAR.

> Its fundamental assumption is that the lower-class children coming to pre-school… lack all of the linguistic means necessary for logical thought. Therefore, they must be provided with a new language… The Distar method is designed to provide this new language. (Labov 1970b/1976:148)

Schools Labov was working with had been adopting this program, replacing a more holistic approach known as *language experience* 'because they felt the children didn't have enough language to use as input' (Labov 1970b/1976:152). The remainder of SMDTQ demonstrated why such assumptions were false, focussing on testing regimes which constructed erroneous understandings of children's linguistic competence.

Labov presented a set of 'rules of discourse' and a list of 'test questions assumptions'. Both explained interactional processes resulting in minimal and non-responses by children in tests and classrooms. Notably, in current IQ tests such as Wechsler-WISC and Stanford-Binet, non-responses received zero, impacting on children's overall scores.

> The fundamental sociolinguistic question is: 'Why does anybody say anything?' Many people assume that if you ask somebody a question, it's going to make them talk. It's not so. Questions are often very poor devices for getting people to talk, [moreover, they may] lead to some violent feelings on both sides. (Labov 1970b/1976:152)

The 'rules of discourse' section put forward an analytical framework, which differentiated ways of making requests and refusing requests, including subclassifications of requests; their pre-conditions; direct, indirect, and mitigated versions; and senses of completion. The list of 'test question assumptions' was less technical. This showed how grasping assumptions can inform children's performances. Labov mentioned seven categories. These included the 'obviousness

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of the obvious' where it was necessary to articulate redundant information ritualistically. The 'harmlessness of talk' related to teachers' and students' differing assumptions about consequences of talk. Labov's most important example was the 'little-old-lady assumption', or shared moral prerogative, which he claimed was 'basic to our entire educational system [and] almost every test question' (Labov 1970b/1976:161). On IQ tests, Labov summarised this as follows.

> You cannot answer in terms of immediate profit to yourself, [or] in terms of utilitarian values if you want a high score; it must be in terms of… superarching norms. This is true of all intelligence tests more or less… They are discriminating between 'good kids' and 'bad kids', not in terms of their intelligence per se, in terms of their ability to figure things out, or of their craftiness or their cunningness or skill. They are discriminating in terms of who is good and who is bad. (Labov 1970b/1976:160)

Finding out about children's language

In the next paper in 1971, issues from the prior two expanded in scale. During 1970–1971, Labov researched creole languages and taught seminars at the University of Hawaii. He also worked with schools in the US Pacific territory of Guam. Perhaps because he was encountering dissemination from the mainland, this paper included Labov's strongest criticism yet of the DISTAR program and Jensen's IQ research.

In a section entitled 'A critical decision for teachers', he explained to teachers in Hawaii what he encountered in Guam was similar to Eastern US schools that had adopted DISTAR, but with a slightly different dynamic. Here is what Labov reported on bilingual schooling in Guam.

> The decision has been taken to teach both Chamorro and English in a bilingual program… Teachers had already decided that many of the school children… didn't know English and they didn't know Chamorro. When I asked them how they knew that, they described the very same kind of testing procedure [DISTAR]… So in Guam, teachers who themselves spoke Chamorro and English came to the conclusion that the children didn't know either language. It is therefore logical for them to use a method like Bereiter and Engelmann's based on the notion that children have no language of their own. (Labov 1971/2025:2–3)

For Labov, the DISTAR debate was about the negation of vernacular cultural practices, including but not limited to language, followed by the imposition of pseudo-scientific methods that he felt were prejudicial to the learning and well-being of respective communities. For him, that is what was at stake on the expansion of DISTAR in the US territories.

The next section was 'How standardized tests are constructed'. Its content was similar to the SMTDQ paper, but its commentary included one of the most remarkable passages Labov ever wrote, albeit not for linguistic theory. In 1971, Labov was a researcher at CUE and his discussion of Jensen's IQ research in this paper offered more detail on themes that had led to the founding of CUE in 1969.

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> Arthur Jensen [was] one of those originally associated with the idea of 'cultural deprivation', [but] Jensen disavowed this earlier point of view… His own conclusion, in my paraphrase, is that racism is the most probably correct scientific hypothesis: that there are large numbers of children in the United States and elsewhere who lack genetically the capacity to form concepts. This deficiency is said to be heavily concentrated among lower-class Negroes—but is characteristic of all Negro groups. Jensen adds that undoubtedly the greatest cruelty shown towards the Negro is to give welfare without 'eugenic foresight'. Those of you who lived through the 1930s will be able to translate that phrase without any difficulty. But it has been translated for us by a group headed by the physicist William Shockley, who has introduced Jensen and Jensenism[8] to the National Academy of Sciences. Shockley's group has been advocating eugenics based upon such possibilities as giving a person $1,000 for every IQ point under 100, if he agrees to be sterilized… You don't have to have a great many psychologists going around saying that it is time for the gas ovens or mass sterilization. All you need is a few, because those who want to apply eugenic foresight only need one or two experts to tell them that what they are doing is scientifically correct and morally justified. This wider view of the social consequences will outline for you the seriousness of the issues that are involved when you talk to children and report what their verbal abilities are. (Labov 1971/2025:4–5)

From 1971–1972, debates around Jensen's work expanded beyond educational settings through a series of articles in the current affairs magazine *The Atlantic*. In September 1971, a colleague of Jensen named R. J. Herrnstein argued heredity was more important than environment in intelligence. In December 1971, a range of social scientists contested the Jensen-Herrnstein position, including Deutsch and other cultural deprivation theorists. Then in June 1972, *The Atlantic* republished LNSE, now renamed 'Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence', where Labov contested both positions, and put forward his linguistic perspective (Labov 1972c). This edited article, and the republication of Harlem fieldwork reports such as *Language in the Inner City* (Labov 1972b), were both realised whilst Labov was a researcher at CUE. These publications marked the end of the first phase of Labovian research on literacy from 1964–1972. They also brought to a close his major criticisms of deficit theorists.

NOTES

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[1.] Labov defines literacy later in the 1980s: 'When we think about literacy, we are primarily concerned with the transfer by conscious training, in learning to read and write. But by examining the unplanned transfer, or non-transfer of other linguistic skills in the community at large, we may be able to learn something about the failure to transfer literacy within the schools… Two conceptions of language [need to be considered]. One is the set of socially significant symbols: the words and sounds that are perceived and recognized by most members of society as identifying a particular language variety… The other is the linguistic system, as the linguist describes it… These two types of language show radically different patterns of transmission and learning' (Labov 1987:128).

[2.] Decoding in reading education is explained as follows: 'in the first few years of the acquisition of literacy, the main channel for appraising a reader's progress is oral rather than silent reading. As the reader produces successive words and phrases, the teacher's first concern is to detect reading errors from the oral channel. This channel carries information about the reader's ability to decode the printed text, which is information coded in the spoken format that is the output of the reader's phonetics,

phonology, and morphology. This output is related to the text in a complex way, as a set of one to many and many to one relations' (Labov & Baker 2010:736–37).

[3.] In this article, terms from their time of use are retained for historical purposes (Nonstandard Negro English, etc.). In Labov's work and elsewhere such terms underwent several changes based on critique (Black English Vernacular, African American Vernacular English, etc.).

[4.] Labov's biographical records at the University of Pennsylvania state he began his Linguistics professorship in 1971. In fact, he was working as a researcher at Penn's Center for Urban Ethnography from 1971–1972 and began teaching afterward (Leeds-Hurwitz 2025).

[5.] Moynihan's findings on parenting and segregation were reappraised later in the twentieth century: https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2007/10/four-decades-later-scholars-re-examine-moynihan-report/.

[6.] AAVE produces homonyms in systematic ways via, for example, consonant cluster simplification. Labov & Baker (2010:736–37) state 'many different spellings are pronounced in the same way, and what first seems to be a correct reading may have been the selection of an irrelevant homonym'.

[7.] Toasts were a kind of proto-rapping and MCing, a speech genre mixing poetry, wordplay, storytelling, and so on.

[8.] Jensen was said to have ties to Nazi race theorist Hans Günther, as well as White Supremacist funding (Tucker 1994).

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