

William (Bill) Labov (1927–2024)

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William (Bill) Labov died peacefully in the early morning of December 17, 2024, after ninety-seven years of a brilliant, generous, and joyous life. He leaves behind a large and devoted family, innumerable admirers and loving friends, and an enormous legacy.

Bill was born and raised in New Jersey, spending his childhood in Rutherford and his teen years in Fort Lee. As a high school student, he was already his ebullient, humorous, and radical self, honing his politics and his arguing skills as the leader of a small group of nonconformists known as the ‘Syndicate’. He went from high school to Harvard, where he majored in English and philosophy, and pursued his interest in chemistry. As he later reported, his advisor was horrified by his ‘idolatry of science’, but nobody was going to rein in Bill’s broad vision and intellectual energy. In fact, his work in linguistics was a perfect and unusual blend of science and the humanities.

After graduating from Harvard in 1948, and a brief flirtation with the publishing world, Bill went to work as a research chemist in the family business, Union Ink, which to this day is known for the quality of its screen-printing ink and continues to produce the inks that Bill formulated. Bill often attributed his interest in working-class people and their speech to time spent with colleagues on the factory floor at Union Ink, and his empirical focus on language in the real world to the real-world requirements of the ink he was developing. After twelve years, which included a two-year stint in the Marines, Bill quit the ink business to become a linguist, beginning graduate school at Columbia in 1960. Despite leaving the ink world, he never lost his high standards for print and had no tolerance for messy dittos and mimeos.

In his four short years as a graduate student, Bill founded the field of sociolinguistics. His advisor and contemporary, Uriel Weinreich, had argued in his work on language contact for the fundamental heterogeneity and social embeddedness of language. Bill’s graduate work brought these principles to the study of variability and change within a single variety. His MA thesis, the Martha’s Vineyard study (Labov 1963), and his dissertation, the New York City study (Labov 1966), are arguably the two most famous works in sociolinguistics.

The Martha’s Vineyard study established that sound change is socially embedded and quantifiable and can be captured in spontaneous speech. Bill credited his lifelong college friend, Academy Award winning documentary filmmaker Murray Lerner, with not only getting him to visit Martha’s Vineyard, but introducing him

to the professional sound quality of the Nagra tape recorder and to ways of getting people to talk. Thus was born the sociolinguistic interview. This ethnographic study focused on the island shibboleths, the centralized diphthongs (ai) and (au). Bill arrived on the Vineyard at a time when mainland encroachment in the form of a growing tourist and summer economy was posing an existential threat to traditional life on the island, particularly the fishing economy. Age differences in the pronunciation of (ai) and (au) indicated that recent generations had been assimilating to the lower pronunciation of the mainland, but those who were most threatened by mainland incursion were recentralizing these vowels, laying claim to their authenticity as island residents. In addition to the quantitative analysis, the thesis included penetrating qualitative observations such as the fact that the two variables under study appeared to be part of a larger set of changes corresponding to a ‘close-mouthed’ articulatory style. He suggested that this was tied to social affect, and he noted the kind of evidence that would be required to prove such a dynamic. This is not a line that he ever pursued but the fact that he raised this point is evidence of the depth and constancy of his observation of language, which certainly guided him throughout his career in his observations of speech. But his commitment to scientific rigor made him extremely careful in his treatment of the subjective side of variation and sent him in search of more widely replicable patterns. This led him to New York City, where he could examine change in progress in a large enough urban population to build a structured sample based on replicable macrosocial categories, and to trace the spread of change through a large population.

Bill’s dissertation was the beginning of a new era in linguistics, putting to bed forever the notion that structure entails invariance, uncovering the orderly relation between linguistic form and social structure, and demonstrating its role in change. Following on his dissertation, Bill began as an Assistant Professor at Columbia. In the time before Uriel Weinreich’s tragically early death, Weinreich, Bill, and Bill’s classmate and colleague Marvin Herzog co-authored the classic paper ‘Empirical foundations for a theory of language change’. This paper set out the founding theory of variation and change, resolving the Saussurian paradox and building change into generative grammar by positing variable rules constrained equally by internal and social constraints. The questions raised in this paper (the problems of constraints, transition, evaluation, and actuation) guided Bill’s work on sound change for the years to come, work that had a powerful effect on historical linguistics and dialectology.

Bill often avowed his love for science and the best evidence for this love was his faith in the data—a deep conviction that there can be nothing irregular about language, and that it is our job to see and account for the regularity. It was in this spirit that he undertook the study of language in its raw state, relishing those dirty details that generations of linguists had been shoving under the rug. From the very start, Bill was intent on establishing a scientific research practice that would allow studies of variation to build on each other. He argued for measures to ensure the comparability of studies, beginning with the use of a single socioeconomic scale,

and the sociolinguistic interview as a systematic elicitation of the vernacular and a range of more consciously controlled styles. His casual and approachable manner in general drew people to him, and his lab at Penn was viewed far and wide as a hub of industry and innovation. And his publishing practice was extraordinary, as he published his own work prolifically and quickly, making methods and results almost immediately available to the growing field. He self-published scientific reports to his granting agencies (Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis 1968; Labov, Yaeger, & Steiner 1972), guaranteeing that his work would be available without delay. His publication of the twin volumes *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972a) and *Language in the Inner City* (1972b) collected published papers and new material into rich and eminently readable presentations of his work that reached people who would not be reading journals. And his three massive volumes on the principles of linguistic change (Labov 1994, 2001, 2010) put years of research in one place.

This scientific commitment, combined with his interest in people and his commitment to social justice, brought about a lifelong engagement with speakers of all kinds, particularly those whose ways of speaking were commonly judged unsystematic. It is not surprising, then, that he followed up his dissertation with the study of African American Vernacular English. In 1965, with funding from the Department of Education, Bill launched a project in Harlem aimed at gathering a naturalistic sample of African American speech, particularly of the vernacular shared by school children and considered the source of reading problems. With this pioneering work he hoped to bring the world, and particularly educators, to recognize the value of this variety, and to overcome the failure of our education system to teach Black children to read. He recruited community members Clarence Robins and John Lewis, who were experienced working with preadolescents, to pursue long-term participant observation with kids from the south central neighborhood in Harlem. The names of the participating preadolescent peer groups (Thunderbirds, Aces, Jets, and Cobras) are well known to the sociolinguistic community, as are many of their antics. Recordings of casual gatherings with the preadolescents while hanging out, and on expeditions in Bill's van, offered a wealth of completely spontaneous and often quite juicy speech. The resulting data included kinds of speech acts that never surface in an interview, providing unique and valuable data and no end of fun for Bill, who thrived on the kids' raucous creativity.

Bill knew that reading failure in the schools was due not to AAVE itself, but to its devaluation by society and particularly by educators—that reading problems were rooted in the schools' inability to recognize the integrity of their pupils' language and to take its structure into account when teaching reading. He reached out to educators in a variety of ways, including his widely-read paper 'The Logic of Nonstandard English' (1972c) which was a powerful refutation of the deficit theory that dominated educational theory and practice. A 1971 working paper based on a talk he gave to teachers in Hawaii on how to do just this is currently appearing in *Language Variation and Change* (Labov 2025). He worked tirelessly throughout his career to bring about educational equity involving Penn students

in reading programs, developing compelling reading materials, as a witness in the Ann Arbor 'Black English' trial in 1979, testifying before a US Senate subcommittee on the Oakland Ebonics controversy in 1997, working with teachers, and attracting African American students to linguistics.

The analyses of AAVE morphosyntax from these data provided clear proof of the systematicity of patterns that had long been considered errors. They also figured in important advances in the study of variation. In the early seventies, Gillian Sankoff and Henrietta Cedergren launched a study of variation in Montreal, and Henrietta Cedergren and mathematician David Sankoff took on the need for statistical analyses of variation. Bill worked closely with this group as they developed multivariate analyses of variation, refining the variable rules developed in Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog (1968) and developing software (Varbrul) to implement these analyses. Bill applied these advances in his work on AAVE, beginning most notably with his analysis of the copula (Labov 1969). This advanced the field of variation to a new level, as statistical validity became the norm and Varbrul's accessibility made it possible for all variationists to provide statistically valid analyses.

The Harlem data also demonstrated the verbal artistry that flourishes in African American communities and launched Bill into the study of discourse. His paper on ritual insults (Labov 1972d) chronicled the talent of these kids in the structure of their sequences and the artful raunchiness of the lines. (The theoretical interest of these events also afforded Bill the opportunity to perform the spicier lines in the presence of his more prudish colleagues.) From the very start, narratives of personal experience were at the center of Bill's work both as the source of his best data and as an object of analysis. His famous paper with then-student, now filmmaker and songwriter, Joshua Waletzky (Labov & Waletzky 1967), is a classic that had a profound influence on the field of narrative analysis. Because his work on narrative was qualitative, Bill did not pursue it as vigorously as his work on sound change, but his feel for the drama and eloquence of the speech of 'regular people' led him to come back to it throughout his life, publishing several books on the topic. From the Harlem narratives he moved to *Therapeutic Discourse* (1977) co-authored with his affine David Fanshel, and the *Language of Life and Death* (2013) based on narratives of death from interviews over the years.

It's well known that the name *sociolinguistics* didn't sit very well with Bill because, as he said (Labov 1972a:xiii), 'it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social'. This was not a one-off statement but it underlay the entirety of his career. The social was fundamental to Bill's linguistics, which was more a theory of boundaries than categories, based on a seamlessness between the linguistic system and the life of the community. He set out this fundamental notion early on in his brief venture into the lexicon, as he probed the shifting boundaries of words and the objects they refer to. In an apparently whimsical experimental study pursued off and on during the sixties, he presented people with objects that might be cups, glasses, vases, or bowls

depending on the context of their use. His report of the results (Labov 1973:341) went beyond his previous analyses rejecting the categorical tradition in phonology and morphosyntax, as ‘It is not only that words are shifters; the objects to which they must be applied shift with even greater rapidity’. This brought home that the variability of language is deeply embedded in all aspects of social life.

When Bill left Columbia for the University of Pennsylvania in 1971, he took the study of sound change to an entirely new level. Key to this work was the construct of apparent time, based on the established fact that a speaker’s dialect does not change significantly after adolescence, but reflects the state of the local dialect in their childhood years. This allowed a heterogeneous age sample of speakers to provide data for the *in vivo* study of sound change. Turning his focus to the Philadelphia dialect, he set up a robust sociolinguistics program and lab in which he trained generations of students with an emphasis on engagement with communities of speakers. His famous seminar, ‘The Study of the Speech Community’, ran for thirty-eight years, sending small teams of students to spend time in Philadelphia neighborhoods, getting to know the people and culture of the neighborhood, and recording interviews with the residents. These interviews constitute an important part of the corpus of 7,500 recordings (over 1,000 of which are Bill’s own interviews) that now reside in the Sociolinguistics Archive at the University of Pennsylvania library.

While Bill had used spectrograms to verify his identification of variants as early as the Martha’s Vineyard study, he moved acoustic measurement front and center in his study of sound change and dialect differentiation. Just a year after his arrival at Penn, he published *A Quantitative Study of Sound Change in Progress* (Labov, Yaeger, & Steiner 1972), his report to the NSF, primarily on his work on New York and Detroit. Based on spectrographic measurements (done by hand), he put forth his theory of chain shifts and mergers, taking as point of departure the work of his ‘academic grandfather’ André Martinet. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, he developed the monumental *Atlas of North American English* (2006) with Sherry Ash and Charles Boberg, based on phone interviews with speakers in cities in the US and Canada. This atlas offers a comprehensive examination of chain shifts and mergers across the continent, defining US dialect areas in terms of these structural events.

Just as Bill’s expertise on AAVE brought him to testify about the status of AAVE, his expertise on regional dialects allowed him to offer testimony that freed a man wrongly accused of calling in bomb threats to Pan American Airlines. Paul Prinzivalli, a Pan Am employee in Los Angeles, had been accused on the grounds that he ‘sounded like’ the caller, particularly on the basis of his accent. Bill’s evidence that the caller was from Boston while Prinzivalli was a New Yorker not only freed Prinzivalli but established the validity of linguistic evidence in legal proceedings.

Bill lived to be ninety-seven, but he never grew old. His engagement with people and his interest in all things endowed him with an unbelievable energy. His

playfulness made him a natural with kids, but he also took kids as seriously as he took everyone else. It's not surprising, then, that he enjoyed a large family—seven children, nine grandchildren, and a large extended family of friends. With his first wife, Teresa Gnasso Labov, he had five children—Susannah, Sarah, Simon, Joanna, and Jessie. And with Gillian Sankoff, he had two children—Rebecca, and his adoptive daughter Alice Goffman, Gillian and Erving Goffman's daughter.

Needless to say, Bill accumulated a raft of honors and awards in the course of his career. He was a fellow of the National Academy of Science and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the recipient of six honorary doctorates, along with the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in English (1966), the Leonard Bloomfield Award for the first volume of *Principles of Linguistic Change*, the Neil and Saras Smith Medal for Linguistics from the British Academy, and the Talcott Parsons Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

At the origin of all of Bill's work was his interest and enjoyment in striking up conversations with total strangers, and his faith in the human race that led him to expect great things from these conversations. His last book, with Gillian Sankoff, *Conversations with Strangers* (2023), looked back on conversations with ten of the thousands of speakers in his corpus, analyzing and celebrating their eloquence. This was a beautiful close to an amazing career. Bill was a giant. But rather than being impressed with himself, he was humbled by the people whose speech he devoted his life to studying.


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