

Sociolinguistics
With Dr. Bassiouney
Assignment 1: Methods and Approaches
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When William Labov studied the class, accents and the speech through the people of Martha's Vineyard in 1961, he created groundbreaking work that is now the basis for all further study. He created the methodology upon which further work by linguists such as Lesley and James Milroy, and Penelope Eckert would build their work. Whereas Labov's work created the methodology (the approach for gathering information from the speakers and the community), Lesley Milroy and Eckert expanded on his findings and techniques through their approaches.

Labov's breakthrough was in using established techniques like the reading of minimal pairs or word lists, but then skillfully leading the interviewee toward more and more casual conversation until he and the subject were just talking. His most welcomed and prized achievement in these situations was when family members or friends would "walk in" to the interview and elicit speech that was between them and didn't involve Labov except by his presence.

He expanded on his own work both by going to New York to study speech there, and on the creation of the "rapid and anonymous" survey type in which he asked department store workers a question, which would elicit multiple versions of the phrase "Fourth Floor." His work focused mostly on what he defined as class differences. This inspired both criticism and further work by other linguists.

Springboarding off Labov's work was Lesley Milroy's criticism that Labov's work only perceived the interviewees through class. Her approach varied in that it focused on her theory of social network. With its characteristic expansion on Labov's work stressing locality rather than just class alone, she also felt that Labov's interview techniques needed refinement. Instead of visiting a place where she was patently not a member, she chose to study in Belfast because not only was she of Irish descent (and therefore a kind of "insider") but she was also introduced to her community of study as a friend of friend, thus layering her introduction. This allowed her highly valued access to the group members, but also the prized position of a kind of overlapping "outsider" status that allowed her the unique position of one who can ask questions. It was this combination that gave her study a perspective that Labov's Rapid and Anonymous survey, or his studies in Martha's Vineyard and New York City could not have.

Another technique Milroy used was to reinterpret data that Labov had collected. Labov was certainly a ground-breaker, and deserves credit for his innovative and productive study, but that is not to say that his data had been mined for all it was worth. With Milroy's approach using Social Networks, she was able to reinterpret information that had previously only been examined from a class perspective. Her findings while sometimes challenging the weight and judgment Labov gave to class, they also independently expand on our view of Labov's interviews by showing that the island itself was not just divided by class and occupation, but by rich layers involving the examination of the density and "plexity" if you will of social networks within the Belfast neighborhoods. The proof

of her approach is in the recognition that in a neighborhood like Ballymcarratt, the Milroys found that it was the most dense and most multiplexed, leading to the least amount of change. This is further supported by Jenny Cheshire's work in Reading, England teenagers where their use of terms like "what" and "never" in place of standard English "who/that" and "didn't go" respectively showed their position within their group. This placement was independent of class which (as critics of Labov stress) does not go far or deep enough in explaining linguistic variation within class, or even within groups. Sometimes it goes all the way to the individual who may or may not even be aware that they alter their speech based on variable of which they may or not be aware. An example is the way siblings speak with each other within a family, or the way twins may speak with each other within a group of siblings. The Milroy's work further showed that their approach could find new data by the term "broker," as someone whose connection to an outside social group brings in new terms.

Penelope Eckert's work with teen groups expanded on the idea of social networks. Within a group of students she studied, she drew relationships based on the definition within the groups members. Because the "friends" so to speak, did not always agree about who was friend, or who was a best friend, it created a map of sorts that demonstrated "membership." So called "core" members saw each other on equal terms, while "secondary," or "peripheral" members — regardless of how they saw themselves — were defined by the self-defined membership by the group itself.

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Eckert's further work emphasized that not just speech, but clothing and styles of behavior can also signal communities of practice. In her landmark study of Detroit teens, *Jocks and Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in the High School*, Eckert not only isolated a particular sound (/bus/ sounding like /boss/) but narrowed its advanced use to boys, revealing that gender also plays a role as a subset of a community of practice. This evolution away from class helped define the term community of practice, for which a group must qualify based on three criteria: mutual engagement, a jointly negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertoire. What is interesting about mutual engagement for instance is that it would negate the most popular current use of the term 'social networking,' namely, Facebook. This restriction will probably lead to newer fields of study in which an "electronic community of practice," or ecop, would be the major focus.