

REVIEW

Sociolinguistics beyond social variables: the promotion of social justice

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ABSTRACT

In this text, we review the lecture entitled *Language as a linguistic matter*, delivered by William Labov at Abralín Linguists Online event on May 19th, 2020. Labov discusses the contributions of the study on /r/ variation in New York City, and the description of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) for sociolinguistic research. According to the lecturer, these works made it possible to develop new methods of description and quantitative analysis of linguistic and social factors in play in the processes of language variation and change. Labov argues that descriptive studies can be useful in the educational and legal spheres, promoting efficient language teaching and acting as a tool for the promotion of social justice.

RESUMO

Neste texto, resenhamos a conferência intitulada *Language as a linguistic matter*, ministrada por William Labov no evento Abralín ao vivo em 19 de maio de 2020. Labov discorre sobre as contribuições do estudo sobre a variação do /r/ em Nova Iorque e da descrição do *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE) para a pesquisa sociolinguística. Segundo o conferencista, a partir desses trabalhos foi possível desenvolver novos métodos de descrição e análise quantitativa dos fatores linguísticos e sociais que atuam nos processos de variação e mudança linguística. Labov aponta como os estudos descritivos podem ser úteis às esferas educacional e jurídica, promovendo um ensino de língua eficiente e atuando como ferramenta para a promoção de justiça social.

KEYWORDS

Linguistic variation. Sociolinguistics. Social Justice.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Varição linguística. Sociolinguística. Justiça social.

In this text, we review the lecture *Justice as a linguistic matter* delivered by William Labov at Abralín ao Vivo – Linguists Online on May 19th, 2020. At first, Labov states that the theme of his lecture has its roots in the assessment of his work made by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which awarded him the Talcott Parsons Prize due to his contributions for linguistic variation and change, the development of linguistics as a science, as well as his concerns about social justice. Then, the lecturer defines the objective of his talk: to demonstrate how the study of linguistic variation may contribute to the promotion of social justice, a relation that is not so evident according to Labov.

The lecturer discusses the fact that even though his work is recognized for the efforts to improve literacy among speakers of stigmatized varieties, the relationship between the quantitative study of linguistic variables and social justice is not clear. For example, it is known that the deletion of postvocalic /r/, a particular feature of the English spoken by New Yorkers is stigmatized. Still, it is not a factor that causes social damage to them. However, the same does not apply to African Americans who speak a variety which is considered non-standard.

In the study conducted in the Lower East Side, which aimed at investigating variable phonological features, as the deletion of postvocalic /r/ among speakers of this region (LABOV, 2006, p. 97)¹, only 24% of the informants were African Americans. Therefore, there was no reason to believe that this percentage represented the speech of this ethnicity. This led the lecturer to seek for funds in order to perform a comprehensive analysis of Non-Standard English. In reading tests based on the standard variety of English, the African Americans had low performance. This is why Labov decided to verify if there were a connection between these speakers' variety and the low performance of students in Harlem. For that, the researcher used a methodology similar to the one employed in the Lower East Side.

In order to study African American English, hereinafter AAVE, Labov, with the help of two speakers from Harlem, executed individual and group recordings with street groups: the cobras, the jets, and the thunderbirds. The speech feature which stroke him the most was the realization of the copula (*am*, *is*, or *are*) which could appear in contracted form, full form (as in “That’s what he is: a

¹ The stratification model of this study as well as the structure of the sociolinguistic interviews were elaborated based on the Mobilization for Youth (MYF), a large scale survey composed by open questions about social aspirations, participation in the community, attitudes towards the neighborhood, and juvenile delinquency.

brother”) or deleted (as in “But everybody Ø not black”). Labov found that Standard English and AAVE share the same structure: where the standard variety allows copula contraction, AAVE deletes it (“He Ø fast in everything he do”, example of deletion of the copula in AAVE, where the standard variety allows copula contraction “s”). Where the standard variety does not contract, AAVE does not delete (in the standard variety, “He’s as nice as he says he’s” does not occur, thus, in AAVE, the construction “He’s as nice as he says he” is not possible either).

The realization of the copula is not random in AAVE: the frequency of its contraction or its deletion is determined by the previous and subsequent grammatical contexts (lower occurrence before noun phrases, and higher occurrence before adjectives, locatives, verbs, and future constructions with *going to*). In addition to the internal features of the linguistic structure, the researcher verified that speakers’ age and social histories influence their linguistic behavior, a pattern that was observed in other places in the USA.

Despite the evidences that Standard English and AAVE share the same structure, these analyses have not been absorbed by educational psychologists. Bereiter and Engelman, for example, claimed that AAVE was illogical, and that African American children, for being deprived of culture, used an underdeveloped version of Standard English used by white people. Therefore, if children from Harlem answered the question “Where is the squirrel?” in their vernacular “In the tree.”, they would be repressed because this is not a logical answer since the school teaches them to answer according to the standard variety: “The squirrel is in the tree.”. This is the social weight impinged upon AAVE and its speakers that lacks social justice according to Labov.

One of Labov’s attempts to promote social justice to AAVE and its speakers was publishing the article *The logic of non-standard English*. Among the analyzed speech data in this article, the lecturer displays an excerpt from an interview in which there are several examples of typical AAVE:

K.C.: Just suppose there is a God.

Larry: Mm hmm.

K.C.: Would he be White or Black? Do you know?

Larry: He be White, man.

K.C.: Why?

Larry: Why? I’ll tell you why, man. ‘cause it – the average whitey out here got everything, you dig? And then, we ain’t got shit, you know? You understand? So, uh, for – well, then for that to happen, you know it ain’t no black god that’s doing that bullshit!

[general laughter]

K.C.: Yeah I gotta go for that, boy! I gotta go for that!

Larry: Dig it, that’s square business, man! (LABOV, 1972, p.217)

In this excerpt, there are different examples of AAVE which suggests that, despite not being in Standard English, they present an underlying logic: “it”, indefinite pronoun, is used in place of the dummy subject “there”, the presence of the copula “ain’t”, and the negative reinforced with “no”. According to Labov, these examples on their own do not represent the desire for justice, but the judgment about them and the consequences from this judgment do.

The inadequate treatment given to the differences between AAVE and Standard English has catastrophic results in regard to the teaching of reading, and, as a consequence, to mobility and social ascent. In order to illustrate that, Labov mentions The Ann Arbor Trial. In the 1970's, in Michigan, due to their difficulties in learning how to read, African American children were threatened to be expelled or were expelled from regular classes, and placed in classes for disabled children. When testifying for the case organized by the children's parents against the school board of education, Professor Geneva Smitherman of Wayne State University compared data from the black speech community from Ann Arbor with the data from Labov's Harlem study. She found the same pattern as Labov's study, revealing AAVE logic as well as its structural pattern. This fact led Judge Charles Joiner, in charge of this case, to sentence the school board to create a teaching plan to help identifying AAVE speakers and gathering knowledge to teach these speakers to learn how to read Standard English, overcoming any linguistic barrier which could cause social damages to the students. Labov claimed that there has not been much progress since Judge Joiner's decision, due to the fact that the general public has not understood the linguistic view of AAVE, which was confirmed by the Ebonics case in Oakland².

Studies that describe patterns of language variation are made from sociolinguistic interviews. Through them, the researcher not only acquires data but also knowledge about each speaker and their reality. There is an exchange in this situation. This is why Labov claims that linguistic description must be based on the "Principle of the Debt Incurred". The knowledge obtained from linguistic data of a speech community must be available to it when it needs it. Even though he had dedicated his book *Language in the Inner City* to the street group members who were participants of his research in Harlem, he had not given back to that community.

When observing that the situation of some places in Philadelphia was similar to the ones in Harlem – the reading performance of African American speakers was low –, with the support of the University of Pennsylvania and the National Science Foundation, Labov decided to develop a tutoring project to teach children how the alphabet works in a wider perspective which includes the relationship between AAVE and the world, involving segregation and institutionalized racism. The main instrument of this project is the graphic novel *The Reading Road*, which is based on stories told by AAVE speakers from Harlem. In this material, as reported by the lecturer, there is a story called *Take off your coat*, in which a student unfairly ends up in detention.

According to Labov, *The Reading Road* presents the world as AAVE speakers know it: unjust and segregating. The researcher also argues that for approaching students' reality, the material has the power to convince them that they do not need to be good little kids to learn how to read. The practice with *The Reading Road* is based on African American students' reality and a model of teaching how to read that takes their speech variety into account to be successful. Therefore, it is a way of

² The Ebonics case refers to the fact that school board in Oakland decided to recognize Ebonics as the primary language of African American children. This decision was received with great hostility by the society and the press (RICKFORD, 1999)

promoting social justice in the educational field, in order to provide students greater chances of social mobility through a good performance at reading.

Labov indicates that the educational sphere is not the only one to which descriptive studies may be useful. Beyond the description of AAVE speech patterns and the proof that this variety is logical and shares the same structure with the standard variety, and the promotion of social justice through educational and legal paths, the advance in quantitative method of linguistic analysis allowed for the elaboration of the *Atlas of North American English*, which Labov is one of the authors. In the 1990's, more than 50,000 telephone interviews were recorded, with at least two people per city in the United States and Canada. Performing acoustic analysis on the speech of all these speakers provided further evidence of changes in progress: vowel merger and shift, signaling the influence of linguistic and social variables in the process of linguistic variation and change.

Data on dialectal differences such as those from the *Atlas of North American English*, though apparently without consequence to people's lives, were pivotal to justice being made in Prinzivalli's case, a man who was arrested for bomb threats to Pan American Airlines, in 1984. Prinzivalli's was a case of voice identification: the threat audio was produced by someone with phonetic features from the Southeast of New England, while the defendant was a typical New Yorker. The differences between the phonological aspects of these two varieties were mentioned by Labov in court, and, thanks to the development of technics of acoustic analysis, Prinzivalli was considered innocent.

At the end of his talk, Labov makes explicit everything that informed his lecture – and, mostly his practice as a sociolinguist: the importance of listening to the informants and of understanding them, not only recording them. His talk evidences not only phonetic and structural patterns, but also social aspects of speakers' places in society. Labov ends his talk claiming that the quantitative study must give voice to the speakers highlighting their needs in an attempt to make the world a little more just.

The importance of listening to the informant guided all the discussion which followed the lecturer's talk. The audience restated the importance of sociolinguistic work as a practice of social justice, which has been made through educational sociolinguistics in Brazil. Besides that, the relation of prestige and stigma between Standard and Non-Standard English is similar to the one shared by Standard Portuguese and *Pretoquês*. Labov believes that this relationship takes place due to the wrong concept that languages stem from one single form, which is recognized as correct; and everything that differs from this initial pattern reflects a deterioration process.

Because Labov's work has worldwide importance, the audience of the lecture was composed by people from different countries. The fact that sociolinguistic research usually reports data mostly collected from Western countries was mentioned by one participant from Asia. Labov argued that the methods described in the lecture contributes to a vertical stratification of social structures, but the relationship between languages spoken in Asia and their speakers must be studied in more specific contexts, since gender issues are different in different languages, as an example. The researcher restated that crosslinguistic studies, for instance, may benefit from the observation of an understanding of social class and gender specific to their communities.

The reflection made by Labov, departing from the lecture title *Justice as a linguistic matter*, emphasizes our role as linguists in society: from the quantitative description of linguistic patterns of different groups, whether they are privileged or not, to make all speakers heard in order to make the world a little more just.

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