

## Conditions for divergence and convergence in the micro-evolution of language

William Labov  
Department of Linguistics  
labov@babel.ling.upenn.edu

Recent studies of linguistic change in progress in North American English show increasing diversity on a regional scale, along with some degree of convergence within regional dialects. The divergence of neighboring dialects requires alternating states of bidirectional changes followed by unidirectional changes in the form of mergers or chain shifts. The fluctuations of bidirectional changes resemble the micro-evolution of finch beaks in the Grants' study of the Galapagos, although no correlate of fitness or natural selection has yet been identified for the linguistic changes. On the whole, linguistic evolution resembles biological evolution in form, but not in the functional mechanism that drives it.

Among the unidirectional changes, mergers tend to diffuse across speech communities, while chain shifts remain within the boundaries of the original settlement. Such chain shifts, comparable to correlated growth in organisms, are faithfully transmitted by child language learners, but not by adults who are the principal agents of geographic diffusion once the original settlement patterns are established. Uncorrelated elements of chain shifts do show diffusion, but not the structural rotation as a whole.