Language change around us
Questions to be asked today

• How great are dialect differences in the English of North America?
• Are they becoming greater or smaller as time goes on?
• Do they interfere with communication?
• If so, what are the driving forces behind sound change?
Driving Forces in Linguistic Change

William Labov, University of Pennsylvania

Throughout the 20th century, our efforts to understand human language may be seen to be sharply divided into two distinct undertakings. Both spring from an acknowledgment that the language faculty, like the species, probably had a single origin. Given that perspective, one task is to discover those constant properties of language that reflect the innate biological endowment of the species, the language faculty. The other, equally challenging task, is to discover the causes of the present diversity among the language families of the world.

This report concerns the progress of efforts to achieve that understanding of the causes of diversity. At various meetings on the origin and evolution of language, I have become convinced that we will not be able to reconstruct the actual form of that original language. But if we can determine the forces that lead to diversity, and they prove to be of a general enough character that they may be assumed to have existed at a very early period in the history of the species, then we will have gained some understanding of linguistic evolution parallel to, but distinct from, the understanding of biological evolution.

First, I would like to suggest that there is no general problem of understanding diversity. The situation is radically different according to the state of communication between the speech communities being compared. When two sub-groups become separated by migration across great distances and physical barriers, we have no problem in understanding why their languages become differentiated. Random variation in structure and random replacement of the vocabulary are certain to lead to this result over time. We can restate the problem of language change as a pair of opposing propositions:

1. When two groups are separated so that communication between them is reduced, then divergence is expected, and any degree of convergence requires an explanation

2. When two groups are in continuous communication, linguistic convergence is expected and any degree of divergence requires an explanation

The expectations of divergence in case (1) and divergence in case (2) proceed directly from Bloomfield’s principle of density (1933:476), which argues that each communicative act is accompanied by a slight degree of convergence of linguistic systems of speaker and interlocutor. It is the defect of these
Two approaches to the understanding of language

• the search for what is unchanging and common to all languages (universal grammar)
• the search for the general principles that govern change and differentiate one language or dialect from another
The Lingotron
It was a very very small town until World War II . . . in the late forties.

We also have three universities. We have a Med School, we have a law school, and a school of nursing. It’s a very nice town. People are wonderful. People come here, and they say “Oh you don’t have. . .”

--Clara W., Lubbock, TX
That’s changed. I went down there a few years ago. I don’t get down there that often. I was like a hick from out of town, looking at the buildings. I never seen them buildings before. Now they got the Towers, U. S. Towers, U. S. Steel building. I don’t go down too often. They say it’s one of the prettiest views there is. You see the whole downtown, before you cross the river.

--John K., Pittsburgh
I love it. If you offered me ten million dollars, I would not leave where I am. The locale here . . the area, everything is perfect. I’m never lonely, I’m never in a position where I need help from anybody, because I’m surrounded by stores. I have everything right here, I don’t have to go too far if I don’t feel like walkin’ up the avenue for anything. --Nancy B., New York City
So I got to know the folks on the phone when I would make his arrangements to go. They would say “Oh! your secretary has the cutest accent!” [interviewer laughs] They would talk about how I talk, I thought that was funny.

--Tracy M., Birmingham AL
My mother used to send—I used to go to the movies, and she used to send a couple of boys up the street to watch—who I used to be in the movies with. (Did she really?) Oh yeah. But we were in cahoots, the boys and I. Yeah. That’s the only way you could get out of. . Like we’d date—I would date. and like My father would say, “Where are you goin’?” “Well Daddy, now look. Georgie’s gonna take me”, Georgie down the street. And Daddy thought, “Oh boy, she’s safe with Georgie (Sure!) So Georgie would go my way. And then we would meet, see, at a certain time I said, “Georgie, please, Georgie, don’t do that to me! You better be there!” If they don’t—’cause his father was just as bad as my father. And we would meet--we would come home like two nice little kids. Well I used to dance at the Canteen. Yeah, they had a Canteen, it was all servicemen. And you couldn’t get in if you didn’t have a date. And you’d have to be a service man, to take you in. But once you got in, you could leave this guy, you know, and dance with everybody else. And that’s what we used to do, stand in the corner, and wait for the fellas, and they’d--I’d say to one of the sailors, “Are you goin’ in there?” and he’d say “Yeah.” “Would you take me in?” “Sure!” And they would take. . . And nothin’ bad would happen in there. And the Salvation Army ran a beautiful thing. It was only coffee and doughnuts. There was no drinking. And soda. And music. All night, you’d dance, dance, dance! It was super!

--Celeste S., Philadelphia
Cross-Dialectal Comprehension : Chicago

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The intersection of consonants and vowels in the course of sound change
Gating Experiment, Project on Cross-Dialectal Comprehension:

Philadelphia

1. _______________  __________________  ____________________
    Word                  Phrase                      Sentence
Intervocalic /l/ in Philadelphia as [ʁ]:

Gating experiment: “I fell down the CELLAR steps”
Cross-dialectal confusion of Philadelphia intervocalic /l/

Bank teller [Phila, reads “William”]
WL [ NNJ] => WHAM.

Harvey S [Phila]: “Tell him it’s Harvey”
MBH [NE] => Thomas Harvey.

Tess [Phila]: Can Alice go on the volleyball courts?
Gillian Sankoff, WL => Bible courts.

Man [Phila]: Have you got a cooler?
Mark Karan [NNJ]: Have you got a Coor?
Homonymy of *balance* and *bounce* in Philadelphia:

Jeffrey W. [Phila]: . . . to see if the payroll sheets balance
Corey Miller [NY] => to see if the payroll sheets bounce.

Larry B. [Phila, to his 4-year-old son Jonathan] " . . . balance."
Jonathan, 4: bounce. [repeat, and began to bounce up and down.]
--observed by Ruth Herold
Philadelphia confusion of *owl* and *Al*

A: Yeah, that owl’s gonna be on TV tonight. [æɔ]
B: The owl. [æɔ]
Sam: Oh, the owl. [æwɔ̃]
B: The owl. [æo]

PH79-3-6: Sam Y., 48 (1979), Bottom Street.
A Philadelphian’s hyperperception of intervocalic /l/

Instructor [Phila]: Tell me what this sentence implies to you: "Mr. Williams strode into the office."

Student [Phila]: It means he was real casual.

Instructor: For strode? as in stride? Do you know what "stride" means?

Student: I'm sorry, I thought you said, "strolled". "Strode" means 'forcefully.'
The fronting of (aw) in Philadelphia from [æʊ] to [eːɔ]
Regression analyses of fronting of (aw) of men and women by decade in the Philadelphia Neighborhood Study [N=112]

MEN:
slope = -6.60
$r^2 = .788$

WOMEN:
slope = -5.38
$r^2 = .961$
Reversal of F2 fronting of /aw/ for Phila speakers born in 1960s and later by Sex

Reversal of F2 fronting of /aw/ for Phila speakers born in 1960s and later by Education
Driving forces in linguistic change

Sociolinguistic variation is parasitic upon linguistic variation. It is an opportunistic process that reinforces social distinctions by associating them with particular linguistic variants. It is the culturally dominant groups of society that are normally in the lead. The use of linguistic forms to increase distinctiveness of particular groups is a driving force for the acceleration of change.

The diffusion of linguistic change to neighboring groups is influenced by the tendency to accommodation and imitation by adults.

The major acceleration of transmission within a community is the result of the reinterpretation of social differences as gender differences. Once a social category is reinterpreted as a gender difference, it is subject to reinterpretation as the unmarked community level, leading to rising levels of linguistic change for the community as a whole.