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# William Labov: An Appreciation

Jack Chambers

Department of Linguistics, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3, Canada;  
email: [jack.chambers@utoronto.ca](mailto:jack.chambers@utoronto.ca)

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## Abstract

William Labov launched the branch of language studies known as language variation and change or (more vaguely) sociolinguistics with several influential studies in the 1960s and seminal publications in the early 1970s. As the discipline spread to universities and research institutes in North America and, with remarkable rapidity, to Europe, Asia, the Antipodes, and ultimately all corners of the globe, Professor Labov has remained at or near the forefront of its various movements, including historical sociolinguistics, narrative analysis, sociometrics, subjective evaluation testing, educational and forensic applications, and sociophonetics, as well as mainstream variation studies. His breadth and depth as a scholar have influenced countless linguists and policy makers, and his enthusiasm and boundless optimism have inspired numerous colleagues, collaborators, and students. Several of them relate their personal experiences with the man and his ideas here.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

William Labov has the unique distinction of inaugurating a discipline that has spread and is now practiced as a branch of language science in all parts of the world. Before him, there were sporadic attempts at studying language in its social context, the core component of what would become known, following Labov, as language variation and change or (more generally) sociolinguistics. Some of those early attempts were carefully conceived and well articulated, notably those by the Swiss philologist Louis Gauchat (1866–1942) and the Japanese dialectologist Takesi Sibata (1918–2007), but for all their noble intentions their studies remained largely local matters, admired by a few scholars but limited in their influence and evanescent in their currency.

By contrast, Labov's sociolinguistic studies on Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963) and in New York City (Labov 1966a) attracted the attention of scholars around the world. At the same time, Labov produced clear arguments comparing his methods to the structuralist orthodoxy of the day and justifying his departures from it, thus providing the foundations of the new discipline along with exemplary realizations of them. Labov's impetus toward a socially realistic linguistics undoubtedly rose out of his natural inquisitiveness about people, an attribute that many of his students and colleagues comment on in their remarks below. His penchant for rationalizing methods was almost certainly inspired by the times. The 1960s and 1970s were a tumultuous time in linguistics, as in many academic disciplines and in many social and civil movements. Linguistics was deeply polemicized first by warring camps of upstart generativists led by Noam Chomsky against the entrenched structuralists, and soon after by generativist rebels against Chomsky (Harris 1995). It was a time when conventions of all kinds were being challenged, and new movements were proliferating. The intellectual climate encouraged, perhaps demanded, that scholars at the edge vindicate their choices, and Labov proved more than willing.

Labov was also blessed in his choice of Columbia University, where he entered graduate studies in 1961. He had earned his first degree at Harvard, graduating in English and philosophy in 1948. He then worked in industry for more than a decade, mainly as an inkmaker at a print company. He says, "I picked up from my industrial work a firm belief in the existence of the real world" (Labov 1997). Linguistics at Columbia was more cosmopolitan than many American departments of the day, with the French functionalist André Martinet as its head from 1947 to 1955. Uriel Weinreich, a Columbia PhD, who had escaped from Soviet-dominated Lithuania as a 13-year-old after attending a linguistics conference in Copenhagen with his father, was appointed to establish the Yiddish Studies Program at Columbia in 1952. Weinreich's father, Max, coined the oft-quoted maxim, "A language is a dialect with its own army and navy" (Weinreich 1945). Uriel Weinreich was one year older than Labov, and by the time Labov arrived he was head of linguistics. Labov (1997) says, "Weinreich was the perfect academic: passionately interested in the ideas of others, brimming over with intellectual honesty, vigor and originality." He provided academic shelter for Labov, who entered graduate studies with firm convictions about the unconventional course he was intent on pursuing. Labov recently explained it this way (Khodorkovsky 2016):

When I entered the field in 1961, the primary data of linguistics was drawn from answers to questions that linguists asked themselves: "Can I say this?" I had the notion that a more solid foundation could be built on the basis of how people speak in everyday life, using the newly developed instrument, the tape recorder, and engaging people in conversation on subjects of vital interest to them so that the focus was on what was said rather than on how it was said.

Uriel Weinreich died of cancer tragically young, age 40 in 1967, just as the publication of his protégé's dissertation was beginning to have its impact further afield.

Labov's research paradigm introduced the variable as a structural element, a radical departure from the invariant, qualitative phonemes and morphemes of the linguistic mainstream at the time. The variable is variant, continuous and quantitative. The challenge is to demonstrate that language, embedded in its social context, is "an object possessing orderly heterogeneity," in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog's resonant phrase (Weinreich et al. 1968, p. 100). Discerning order in a variable medium required admitting three concepts into linguistic studies that were never integral before Labov's arrival. First, he introduced social attributes such as age, sex, social class, and ethnicity as independent variables against which dependent linguistic variables could be correlated. Second, he studied the speech of people interacting in natural social settings so that contextual styles ranging from casual to formal conditions became a locus of variation. Third, he drew inferences about language change based on synchronous differences in variant usage between age groups. This latter concept is the Apparent-Time Hypothesis, which Labov's predecessors had outlawed in principle (Labov 1972a, pp. xiv, 21–22; Chambers 2009, pp. 198–200), and it allows linguists to apprehend language change as a dynamic, socially instantiated phenomenon. It brought about the immediate reform of traditional fields of study such as historical linguistics and dialectology as well as sociolinguistics.

Notwithstanding these radical departures from prevailing notions, the study of language variation and change met relatively little resistance in its ascendancy as a branch of the language sciences. There was a sense of revolutionary fervor among Labov's early adherents but no serious opposition to its tenets by reactionaries. It was a movement whose time had obviously come. The paradox was not lost on Labov, of course. He recalled the anxiety he felt when he first presented his results to the Linguistic Society of America in 1962 (Labov 1997):

In those days, there was only a single session, and you practically addressed the entire profession when you advanced to the podium. I had imagined a long and bitter struggle for my ideas, where I would push the social conditioning of language against hopeless odds, and finally win belated recognition as my hair was turning gray. But my romantic imagination was cut short. They ate it up!

Now, some 55 years after that inaugural presentation, we celebrate William Labov's initiatives and insights and influences. To do so, I asked his students, colleagues, collaborators, and friends for "a personal reminiscence or an anecdote that shows how he encouraged or influenced or affected you and your work." I have arranged their replies thematically in a kind of loose oral history. Though Labov officially retired in January 2015, a month after his eighty-eighth birthday, it is a very active retirement. Gillian Sankoff, his colleague and wife, says, "Bill still devotes tremendous intellectual energy to graduate students, to new ideas and new research projects." Fortuitously, this celebration of William Labov's achievement comes at the beginning of his very active ninetieth year.

## 2. VARIABLES (NOT VARIETALS) IN THE VINEYARD

Although the New York City study discussed in Section 3, below, was certainly the seminal research in the spread of the new discipline, Labov first honed his methods on a smaller study he undertook on the island of Martha's Vineyard, a well-known vacation colony south of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. Its summer population swells the numbers of residents by seven times. In 1961, Labov conducted interviews among "the 6,000 native Vineyarders," the permanent inhabitants. His principal publication from this research, "The social motivation of a sound change" (Labov 1963), which he presented to the Linguistic Society of America in December 1962 on the occasion that he recalled so vividly in his memoir years later, marks the first auspicious unveiling of his

methods and is thus the effective starting point of sociolinguistics as an international discipline with its own goals and methods. The article later featured prominently as Chapter 1 of Labov's (1972a) *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, the compilation that became the professional sourcebook for researchers adopting the new methods and the first textbook as courses began springing up across the land.

Murray Lerner is an Academy Award–winning documentary film director and producer:

Bill Labov and I have a unique friendship going back to the start of our Harvard days together. Each of us feeds the other's interest in recording life around us in our different ways, me by way of film and him, of course, by way of sociolinguistics. In 1961 my wife and I celebrated our marriage by spending the summer on Martha's Vineyard, the beautiful island off the coast of Massachusetts. For my wife and me, it was the beginning of a long romance with the island, and it has always been a very special place for us. That first summer, 1961, we invited Bill to come over and see this newly-discovered physical beauty. At the time, Bill was making a change in his life by enrolling at Columbia University and studying linguistics. When he arrived on the island, he opened up a world of social interaction and linguistic strategies by plunging right into the lives of the Vineyarders around us. As everyone who reads this certainly knows, the result was his M.A. research on the dialect variation of the island. I am proud to say that I contributed a crucial component to his work by introducing him to sophisticated recording equipment, namely the Nagra, of which he was unaware until then. I believe this was crucial in opening a new pathway for his work on the social structure of language.

Naomi Nagy is Associate Professor in Linguistics at the University of Toronto:

Like, I suspect, most people in the field, I was first influenced by Bill through his writing. Assigned to read "Les motivations sociales d'un changement phonétique" (Labov 1976) or, affectionately, "Le vineyard de Martha" at McGill, I was struck by his ability to organize the variation inherent in spoken language—a sharp contrast to the various disorganized ways I was learning about language variation "live" in Montreal (for instance, discussing in Montreal French an English article in its Parisian French translation in a course taught in French at an English university in a Francophone city in an Anglophone country).

The next year, I was applying to grad school at Penn, hoping to work with Gillian Sankoff. I was struck by the good luck that Bill also taught there—two sociolinguists for the price of one! With every passing year, I realize more just how great a deal that was. Maybe the best measure is that, although my focus on variation in multilingual contexts was ignited by Gillian and remains fueled by her pioneering work, I don't think I've ever published a paper that didn't cite Bill. I'm always keen to hear his contributions at conferences—new outcomes in his own research program as well as his feedback on *so many* other presentations. Input from Bill is a stable factor in our field, and it triggers important changes, according to my longitudinal study.

### 3. STRATIFYING NEW YORK CITY, UNIFYING A MOVEMENT

William Labov's PhD dissertation at Columbia University, published as *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Labov 1966a), was for many linguists the initiation into a socially realistic approach to language in the community. Labov began with a stratified random sample of New York's Lower East Side, and from this sample he selected adult native speakers who represented all ethnic groups, age levels, and social classes. He and his associate interviewer, Michael Kac, set about engaging 157 adults in conversations and, as opportunities arose, added interviews with 58 of their children. From the tape-recorded results, Labov then analyzed the occurrence of three vowel variants and two consonant alternations in their situational context, and correlated them

with social patterns according to the age, sex, and social class of the speakers. “It is a study of a linguistic structure which is unusually complex,” he says in his preface (Labov 1966a, p. 3), “but no more so than the social structure of the city in which it functions.”

For all its methodological innovations and sociolinguistic intricacies, the 650-page book captivated readers. For one thing, Labov tempered its analytic rigor with humanist motifs. He cites his subjects tellingly, and affectionately, as in this middle-aged man’s covert pride in his New York accent (Labov 1966a, p. 494): “To me, I t’ink I got de New York speech. At one time I had good speech, and vocabulary too, when I first came from Massachusetts. But I lost it.” Many readers latched onto Labov’s illustration of what he called “casual and anonymous” data gathering (Labov 1966a, pp. 63–87), which became known as “the department store gambit” and quickly passed into linguistic lore. It simply involved approaching shoppers and asking, “Excuse me, where are the women’s shoes?” and then recording the reply, “Fourth floor.” But the stores where the question was asked, Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy’s, and S. Klein, were frequented by socially stratified shoppers, and their replies contained two instances of (r), the variable changing rapidly at the time along class lines. Labov’s research design is a sociolinguistic tour de force, and it got talked about not only in classrooms but in cafeterias and common rooms. It became a kind of teaser for recruiting linguists to sociolinguistics.

For me, the initiation came with another fragment of the New York study, in an early, uncollected article called “The linguistic variable as a structural unit” (Labov 1966b). In it, Labov focuses narrowly on the phonetic variation of one subject, Susan Salto, and then shows how her variability reflects the larger variability of her class, age, and sex on the Lower East Side. I had been raised on Chomskyan transformational grammar and indeed was teaching it, but after I came upon a photocopy of this article on my first sabbatical, dog-eared and underlined, 10 years after its publication, I could not imagine working with disembodied, closeted data ever again. By then, I knew I was not alone.

Michael B Kac is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, and an accomplished harpsichordist:

In the summer of 1963 through a series of happy accidents I found myself employed as an assistant to Bill Labov. There was never any doubt in my mind that we were doing interesting work as we trudged around the Lower East Side lugging electronic gear, and I sometimes sensed that maybe we were doing important work, but it was really a few years later when the work I participated in that summer was reported in *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* that its importance really hit home. It is not often that one gets a chance to see a whole new field in the making, but that’s what I was given. Bill Labov was inventing quantitative social dialectology, and I was watching him do it. When I wrote about that summer in Bill’s *Festschrift*, I called it “Present at the creation” (Kac 1997).

I was a sophomore at Haverford College that year and linguistics was not on the curriculum, but I was curious about it. By chance, I came upon the program for the annual meeting of the Linguistics Circle of New York and I noticed a paper entitled “The social stratification of *r* in New York City department stores” by one William Labov of Columbia University. As luck would have it, at the conference lunch I sat beside him and we talked, naturally, about linguistics. When summer came and I was back home in Westchester County, I got in touch with “Professor Labov” to see if he would meet me and talk more about linguistics. He invited me right away, and the first thing he did was let me know that he was not a professor but a graduate student about to begin his dissertation research. He told me that he had an ACLS grant for the research with budget for an assistant. Would I be interested?

For Bill, that summer moved him a giant step toward a social science of language, a new direction that he would steer the discipline into in a long, groundbreaking career. For me, it was a kind of maturation ritual, often exhilarating, sometimes difficult and painful. It confirmed in me a commitment to language

and learning, and it is a point of pride knowing that it was with Bill looking over my shoulder that I took those first, decisive steps.

Roger W. Shuy, Distinguished Research Professor of Linguistics, Emeritus at Georgetown University, is a pioneer and leading figure in forensic linguistics:

Some scholars experience straight career paths. Others, like me, experience right angle turns that dramatically change their lives. Bill Labov caused that right angle turn when he presented an exciting lecture at the 1964 Summer Linguistic Institute at Indiana University. I had been trained as a dialect geographer, and my research consisted of interviewing old white male farmers who had never moved away from their homes. I was awed to hear Bill describe his New York City research on the speech of people of all ages, races, and social status. “That’s it,” I thought. I went back to my university and planned the Detroit Dialect Study along the lines of Bill’s research. Bill graciously spent a week helping me plan it and showing my team how to do urban fieldwork. We carried out our study in 1966, which provided the first validation of Bill’s pioneering research.

Bill Labov is a missionary of linguistics both to the academic community and to the general public. His studies opened the door to the education of vernacular speaking children in the schools, and once again my colleagues and I followed his lead, first at the Center for Applied Linguistics and then at Georgetown University, where we initiated a doctoral program in sociolinguistics that produced many linguists studying language variation and spreading it all over the world. None of this would have happened without Bill’s efforts to redirect linguistics away from the study of static language into the constantly changing ways that real people actually talk. He also took advantage of the developing tools of acoustic analysis to demonstrate how rapidly vowel systems evolve. That changed our previously accepted doctrine that language change evolves slowly by demonstrating that language continues to change dynamically all around us.

We have the deepest appreciation of Bill’s dignified, calm, friendly, and professional leadership in the field of linguistics. He provided reasoned proof based on scientific evidence, and he carried it out with a highly energetic and effective concern for humanity.

Gillian Sankoff, now a retired Professor of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, initiated the project on *le français parlé à Montréal* with Henrietta Cedergren and David Sankoff in the 1970s:

Bill Labov is an indomitable force. His time, energy, and irrepressible enthusiasm have centered on linguistic research for as long as I’ve known him. At his Columbia University office where we met in 1969, multitasking seemed normal for Bill, and he was generous, encouraging and helpful with advice for the planned Montreal French project. Not that we followed all of it. Our long dispute about the “linguistic marketplace” versus standard SES coding was finally resolved when, applying both systems to our participant data, the difference was found to be statistically insignificant. Our research adapted Bill’s methods from the Lower East Side of New York to a setting that was culturally and linguistically distinctive, testing their generality for the first time and demonstrating their adaptability.

I credit Bill’s influence with more than one career milestone. His excitement about the potential findings of research on creolization was crucial in my decision to return to Papua New Guinea to study it. The tapes are now being archived along with Bill’s own research materials in the library of the University of Pennsylvania.

Dennis R. Preston is Regents Professor of English at Oklahoma State University and University Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Michigan State University:

I first encountered Bill Labov one afternoon in my kitchen on Olentangy Street in Columbus, Ohio, in 1967 when I opened a package from the Center for Applied Linguistics. It was, of course, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. I read every word and got up from the kitchen table just as the sun peeped up, hoping, maybe against hope, that my historical linguistic-dialectological upbringing would allow me to be a sociolinguist.

I then actually met Bill at a Methods conference in Victoria, British Columbia, while I was a visiting professor in Hawai'i. After the conference Bill offered me a ride to the airport since our flights were close and he had a rented car. On the way there, we fell to discussing Bill's observation that "nasty" with reference to taste and food was limited to African American Vernacular English; I assured him that, at least in New Albany, Indiana (a suburb of Louisville, Kentucky, my home ground), it was not, and that I could say such sentences as "That was the nastiest tasting barbeque I ever ate," a not uncommon sentence, by the way, for a South-Midlander like me in the Wisconsin–Ohio–New York–Michigan venues where I spent most of my professional life. Our lively discussion caused Bill to miss the turn to the airport, but he hung a U-ie, and we made it—both the U-ie and the flight. When Bill talks about language, he is engaged and he engages you.

While I was still in Hawai'i, Bill and his family came to their place in Oahu and invited Carol and me for the day. When we arrived Bill was preparing for some snorkel spearfishing, and I joined him. Out in the Pacific, maybe a little too far out for a landlubber like me, I tended the boat while he spear-fished. He was good at it and tossed 4 or 5 into the boat in a short time. Then I took a turn; I did manage to get 2 or 3 pretty small ones but made the mistake of coming up on the other side of the boat, and Bill whacked me in the head with an oar. He always seems to enjoy this story. I hope he believes he knocked some sense into my head. After his apologies, we rode a very large wave back to shore for my first (and last) successful surfing adventure.

As a result of my presentation at the Methods conference, Bill invited me to an early NWAV conference at Penn, and my work in perceptual dialectology actually got an audience and set off a minor subindustry in folk linguistics. I am enormously grateful to Bill for his confidence in me and his interest in my work and that of my students over the years, including most recently his selection of me as his coeditor for the CUP *Journal of Linguistic Geography*, now in its 4th volume. He has been the best friend, colleague, and unofficial mentor in the profession one could have asked for. I have never regretted reading *SSENYC* and redirecting myself, at least, into what Chambers & Trudgill (1998) call "sociolinguistic dialectology." It's all Bill's fault.

James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, principal investigators of the seminal study of Belfast, Northern Ireland, and later studies in Newcastle, Michigan, and elsewhere, are professors emeriti living near Oxford, England:

If it hadn't been for Bill's scholarship and his considerable personal support and encouragement, we believe our academic careers would have followed a much less satisfying trajectory. In fact, we would probably never have become known as sociolinguists. In late 1973, we got the idea that we'd like to study language variation in Belfast. Jim had already worked extensively on English historical linguistics, and both of us were fascinated by the phonology of the urban dialect of the city. We'd also had some experience of the methods of traditional English dialectology and realized that these had to be very radically adapted and updated. It was Bill's study of the Lower East Side of New York City that showed us how this could be done but at the same time, it was clear that it would not be easy to operationalize the crucial variable of social class in a study of the urban dialect of Belfast. So we did a bit of thinking on how we might proceed, and in early 1975 Lesley carried out fieldwork in five working class districts, carefully chosen to enable us to examine the relevance of the social variables of gender, region of the city (east versus west) and ethnicity (Catholic versus Protestant).



We circulated information about our general plans to a number of senior scholars, including Bill. We received several replies, some of them quite helpful. But in April 1975, Bill arrived on our doorstep. He happened to be visiting Ireland and Britain, and the help and encouragement he gave us during the time he stayed with us was tremendous. He took us along with him on fieldwork outings in Belfast and surrounding rural areas, and we still feel rather awed and privileged to have seen him at work. He also listened to our pilot recordings and gave us extremely valuable advice on how to use them as the basis of an application for research funds. And it worked like a charm! Bill set us on course for a successful research program, and in subsequent years offered us kind and very pleasant hospitality in his home in Philadelphia during our many academic visits to the United States. We were delighted to be able to repay some of his hospitality when he and Gillian visited Oxford in 2015. Thank you, Bill, for some wonderful academic and personal conversations over those forty years.

#### 4. THE IVORY TOWER MEETS THE INNER CITY

Just as Bill Labov's articles on Martha's Vineyard and the Lower East Side were gaining momentum, they were complemented and sometimes elucidated by fresh discoveries about the social uses of language from Bill's new research project in Harlem, the uptown Manhattan neighborhood that in the 1960s was almost exclusively populated by African Americans. The project began in 1965 with a grant from the Office of Education to investigate "the reading failure that was painfully obvious in the New York City schools" (Labov 1972b, p. xiv). Labov and his associates expanded the purview, so that African American Vernacular English as spoken in Harlem and other large cities was for many years the most thoroughly studied dialect in any language. Many fundamental concepts in the study of language variation and change originated in these studies, and it persists as a fecund area of sociolinguistic research.

Walt Wolfram is William C. Friday Distinguished University Professor and Director of the North Carolina Language and Life Project at North Carolina State University in Raleigh:

I first met Bill Labov in 1966 at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington, DC. CAL was publishing his tome on New York City English to kick off its Urban Language Series, and I was engaged in the study of social stratification of African American speech in Detroit. At the time, I was a temporary academic preparing for a "more meaningful life" as a missionary linguist. The conversation with the CAL staff at that time focused on the deficit-difference controversy taking place in educational psychology and speech and language pathology. Our resident speech pathologist at the meeting, Joan Baratz, strongly encouraged Bill to write something to address the controversy—and he did, "The Logic of Nonstandard English" (Labov 1969). We all know the profound influence of that article on students and on the world outside of linguistics. Bill never flinched at the challenge to apply his linguistic skills to social inequality. He didn't make a distinction between "descriptive" and "applied linguistics." It was all simply linguistics, just as he has steadfastly refused to be bounded over his career by the arbitrary dichotomy between "sociolinguistics" and "linguistics." His action at the time demonstrated to me and others that the study of language in society could indeed make a difference and was completely relevant to everyday issues of language subordination and inequality. Bill has taught us that academicians could be elite researchers and scholars while using research data naturally to address fundamental issues of social justice and equality. For me, it showed that there were ways of doing linguistics in academe that intersected with the more meaningful life. And that realization, modeled throughout Bill's career, has made all the difference in my own.

John Baugh is Margaret Bush Wilson Professor in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis:



I arrived in Philadelphia to attend Temple University as an undergraduate transfer student from a community college in 1969, to study accounting. All accounting majors were required to take public speaking and, at Temple, that class exposed me to Philadelphia's diverse dialects: Irish, Italian, Jewish, Black, and Puerto Rican, all Philadelphia dialects and all quite different, and utterly fascinating—especially to a 19-year-old Black man from Los Angeles.

My grandmother cringed when I told her of my decision to change my major to communication; she didn't think I would find a job. As a newly minted communication major in 1970 I took a class on the history of Negro dialects, which is where I first read "The logic of nonstandard English" (Labov 1969). I will hopefully be forgiven for my ebullient racist reaction to that article which—quite literally—changed the course of my life. I was then living in the heart of North Philadelphia, a destitute slum that still suffers from political neglect and urban decay. My experiences in North Philadelphia and in other African American communities in California triggered my belief that William Labov must be a Black man. At that point in my life I had difficulty believing that anyone but a fellow African American would ever come to the conclusions that Bill expounded throughout that seminal article.

Marilyn Merritt, then a doctoral student in linguistics at Penn who was teaching part time at Temple, encouraged me to contact Bill. I was too intimidated, and Marilyn gave me the telephone number for his secretary. I eventually summoned the courage to initiate the call, only to have Bill answer the phone. After a brief stint of stammering I managed to tell him that I read his article, was a senior at Temple, and wanted his advice about the prospect of studying Black English. He invited me to his office the very next day, showed me his lab, and gave me several reprints of his previously published articles. He then invited me to his home to attend a party the following Sunday with his family and some of his graduate students. The late Beatriz Lavandera was in attendance, as were many other notable up-and-coming linguists.

There was no way I could afford to attend the University of Pennsylvania. Not only did Bill take a chance by admitting me to the doctoral program, but he also called the Ford Foundation to procure the initial funding that allowed me to begin my graduate education without incurring massive debt. One lasting memory includes an early occasion when I poured my heart out to Bill about some matter that I found perplexing, only to have him reply, "John, did you know your speech is free of idioms?" I had no idea.

Anthony S. Kroch is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania:

I met Bill for the first time in connection with the business session of the 1971 LSA annual meeting in St. Louis. He introduced a resolution stating that, from what linguists knew, there were no grounds for claiming that some ethnic groups or speech communities were less capable of logical and abstract thought than others. The resolution was in part based on the now well-known paper, "The logic of nonstandard English" (Labov 1969), that Bill had delivered at the Georgetown University Round Table in March of 1968. The point had become highly topical due to a wave of racist academic research that was being widely publicized in the media, including an article by Harvard professor Richard Herrnstein in the *Atlantic Monthly* of September 1971 (Herrnstein 1971). In response to the *Atlantic Monthly* article, I had gone to the business meeting as a political activist to propose a different, less temperate, resolution on the same topic, so Bill and I had lunch together to discuss whether the two resolutions could be reconciled. We agreed to disagree on the wording and, not surprisingly, Bill's version was carried at the meeting and submitted to a mail ballot of the membership. As one can read in the October 1972 LSA Bulletin (No. 54) available on JSTOR, the mail ballot came back with a vote of 270 for, 34 against, and 10 abstentions. The report cites a number of comments from voters and it's clear from the reactions of those on the losing end just how uncomfortable some members of the LSA were with the resolution's having been proposed at all. In June of 1972, the *Atlantic Monthly* published a slightly abridged version

of the Georgetown Roundtable paper under the title “Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence” (Labov 1972c), putting Bill’s argument before a broader public. The article, and especially the preface that he added for the magazine venue, is very much worth rereading in today’s political climate.

Anita Henderson is Senior Director to the Deputy Dean at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania:

In “Life without Principle,” Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Be not simply good; be good for something.” Shortly after I graduated, I asked Bill if he didn’t feel a sense of satisfaction for all he had done to educate people about AAVE. Without hesitation, he responded with a question, “If I’ve done so much, then why haven’t reading scores improved for Black children in the last 30 years?” His response was an implicit reminder to me about the inherent danger of complacency in one’s work and an explicit comment about social responsibility. What motivated me to study linguistics in the first place was reading Bill’s work which is infused with his advocacy for and commitment to African American communities. And there I was, one late afternoon in the Linguistics Lab, privileged to be reminded about my obligation to the community by the very person who inspired me. It was a Thoreauvian moment in Labovian terms.

## 5. SOCIAL MOTIVATION OF A PARADIGM CHANGE

No one was tracking the geographical progress of sociolinguistics as it hopped from the Lower East Side of New York City to the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC, and from there, in leaps, to Montreal, Canada, and Belfast, Northern Ireland, and, before long, to all of North America and western Europe, and then to Japan and other centers in Asia, the Antipodes, and Brazil, and eventually to all the savvy universities in the world. NWAV conferences started in 1971, at the very outset of the new movement, and attracted incipient variationists like a magnet. They were instigated by Roger Shuy and his colleagues at Georgetown University, and were originally called NWAVE for “new ways of analyzing variation in English” but the E was soon dropped. The proceedings, published at first by Georgetown University Press, broadcast research activities at great distances, and 46 years later both the conference and the proceedings, now usually published online by University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics, remain rallying forces in the discipline. Journals were also important disseminating vehicles. *Language in Society* (founded 1972) took an early interest, and then specialist periodicals came along: *Journal of Sociolinguistics* (founded 1997) and, eight years earlier, *Language Variation and Change* (founded 1989, by William Labov and David Sankoff). Probably equally influential, though it is hardly measurable, was the stream of scholars from abroad who found a warm welcome in Pennsylvania and then carried the torch back to their home countries.

Rajend Mesthrie is Professor of Linguistics in the School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology & Linguistics at the University of Cape Town, South Africa:

In 1989, Bill Labov graciously accepted me and another South African scholar, Qedusizi Buthelezi, on an Educational Opportunities Scholarship meant to afford disadvantaged South Africans an opportunity for academic contact. Mine turned out to be a sort of semester-long postdoctoral stint at Penn, where Bill, Gillian Sankoff, Sherry Ash, Tony Kroch and others gave generously of their time. Bill suggested we sit in on his LING 560 class on sociolinguistic field methods, and he integrated us by choosing to focus on variation in the English relative clause rather than a phonetic variable of North American English. I chose to work in the Black neighbourhoods as part of a team of four, and was initiated into the complexities of fieldwork in a community that found me pretty foreign. (“You can’t be from Africa; you must be from Korea.”)

I carry the first-hand experiences of that semester with me in many forms to this day. On returning to Cape Town I tried to inculcate the good practices of the Labovian methodologies in my students (including its ethnographic sensitivities). My postdoctoral manuscript on South African Indian English, with the advantage of Bill and Gillian's comments at Penn and their recommendation to Cambridge University Press, was published as a book three years later (Mesthrie 1992). When I ran the first fully international postapartheid conference of the Linguistics Society of Southern Africa in 2000 ("At the Millennium") Bill and Gillian accepted the invitation to make the long trip to the southern tip of Africa as keynote and focus speakers, respectively—despite our fears of the millennium bug. This remains the most talked-about conference of our Society.

Bill's work on dialectology, especially contact-induced varieties, resonates in South African English studies. Moreover, the practices of the new deracialising middle-classes responding to changing status and social hierarchies, as well as to globalising chain shifts, are all amply illuminated by the Labovian fire.

Rena Torres Cacoullos, Professor of Spanish and Linguistics at Pennsylvania State University, succeeded David Sankoff as editor of *Language Variation and Change*:

I was a bit anxious about the first issue of *Language Variation and Change* that I was responsible for, having come to the study of language variation and change without a genealogy. But as soon as my first edited issue arrived, Bill sent David Sankoff and me a message titled "Latest issue is fantastic!" Later, soon after arriving at Penn State, I visited Bill's lab at Penn for a transcription tutorial. With me was Hiram Smith, who remembers "how approachable" Bill was—"A true gentleman and a genuinely nice guy." But, I would add, one who gives straight answers about strengths and weaknesses of research reports, as I have appreciated in working on the journal. Bill's conciseness is implemented in his own publications. Blaise Pascal once apologized for writing at length due to a lack of leisure. Bill finds the time to be succinct and elegant.

Maciej Baranowski is Senior Lecturer in English Sociolinguistics at the University of Manchester, England:

This happened during my first few days at Penn in 1998. I was in the Linguistics Lab, the suite of offices that sociolinguistics students hung around, which housed the offices of Bill Labov, Gillian Sankoff, and Sherry Ash. I'd heard other students refer to the Lab informally as the socio lab or the sociolinguistics lab. I hadn't talked much to Bill yet and was still a little nervous to be in the same room with him, let alone speak to him, for fear of making my complete ignorance obvious to the man I was in awe of. Well, we happened to be working in the same room and the phone rang. I was nearer, so I picked it up, answering in the way I'd heard another student do, "Sociolinguistics Lab." It turned out to be the wrong number. After I put down the receiver, Bill turns to me and says, slowly and emphatically, "Maciej, there is no such thing as the sociolinguistics lab. This is the *Linguistics* Lab." I was petrified, but even then I knew what he'd said made perfect sense. Bill wasn't being petty; he had a deeper point, which became even clearer to me over the next few years. It reflected his insistence that there can be no linguistics without sociolinguistics, that is, that there can be no effective study of language without considering its social aspects. At the same time, though, I learnt that this also meant that in order to understand the forces shaping language change, we also need to look at linguistic structure and explore linguistic factors, which may be independent of social ones. In other words, not everything in language is social. Needless to say, from that moment on, I knew very well what the name of the Lab was.

Junko Hibiya is President of International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan:

In 1980, I started my Master's program in linguistics in Japan. "The Logic of Nonstandard English" (Labov 1969) was one of the assigned readings of the sociolinguistics course in the first semester.

That was my introduction to Bill's work. Before long, Martha's Vineyard, Saks Fifth Avenue, the Lower East Side and Harlem became familiar places in my mental map. Back in those days, I had a very naïve conception that the scholars who wrote these great academic books and papers all lived in olden times and that they were already dead. That conception was put to rest by the thirteenth International Congress of Linguists, which was held in Tokyo from August 29 to September 4, 1982. The organizing committee recruited graduate students from universities in the greater Tokyo area to help run this huge conference. One day, while working at the registration desk, I was astonished to see a middle-aged woman right in front of me who wore a nametag "Victoria Fromkin." Is this really the person who wrote that textbook I had read so many times?

After the Congress was over, I began my search for William Labov. Without Google, it took me a while to confirm whether he was alive or not. Eventually I found out that he was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Exactly a year later, in September 1983, I found myself in the Linguistics Lab on Locust Walk, attending the First Friday Party. Since then, Bill has been my mentor. Not only did he guide me through my doctoral work, but he also assisted me greatly in getting a wonderful teaching position in sociolinguistics at the university where I have now served as the president since 2012.

In March 2012 and May 2015, I was fortunate enough to take a day out of my business trips and visit Bill at his home. It was gratifying that both times he made salad dressing from scratch and cooked salmon for me. What a fool I was, 38 years ago, to assume that it was impossible to meet him in person.

## 6. CLASSROOM TSUNAMIS WITH STRANDED SAILORS AND MORE

Many of Bill Labov's protégés caught his spark from the primary source in the classroom, one of his natural habitats, or, more accurately, in the natural habitats he turned into classrooms. Several generations of students, as Niloofar Haeri tells us, referred to the public meeting place for his field methods course as the "Labovatory." For him, teaching took place wherever learning was possible. The world, it seems, is his Labovatory.

Penelope D. Eckert is Albert Ray Lang Professor of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford University, California:

When I was a beginning graduate student at Columbia, Bill was a beginning assistant professor. He was young, informal, ebullient, inspiring. The off-campus apartment that housed his "Black English" project was a joyful oasis in a department that had a mean streak. When he came across something cool, he would shout out from his office. His exclamations—"You're kiddin'!" "Hey, Penny!" "What's *dat*?"—are not as loud nowadays as they used to be, but they're a hallmark of his style that I hold dear. And I will never forget the relish with which he once gave a seminar on "the dozens," reciting choice sounds for the benefit of a particularly prudish colleague. And in '68, when the university administration made a complete fool of itself over the student revolt about its complicity in the Vietnam War, Bill was on the right side, deeply engaged in the social and political issues of the day, and supportive of student activism. Bill left for Penn when I left for fieldwork in the French Pyrenees, and as much as I hated Columbia, I'll always treasure my time with Bill when he was just a young guy doing cool stuff, and nobody had to compete for his attention.

It goes without saying that without Bill's brilliant and paradigm-shifting work, I would not be doing what I am today. But it goes deeper than that. Without Bill's unwavering kindness and patience, I would probably not be in academics at all. My first semester I took his morphology course, and each day I'd bring my problem sets to class but then not turn them in for fear they weren't good enough. After a few weeks, he made me fork them over, saying, "If you give me shit at least I'll know you're capable of shit." I don't know why that made such a difference—perhaps the idea that producing shit

wouldn't disqualify me as a human being. Of course my solutions were better than shit, but my imposter syndrome followed me throughout graduate school. And Bill was always there to encourage me and to pick up the pieces. I suspect he didn't think I'd amount to much. But he didn't let on.

Malcah Yaeger-Dror is a variationist with a special interest in corpus and forensic linguistics:

Back when we were students, Bill Labov arrived at Penn, radically changing the grad student 'culture'. Before he arrived, the department was courtly, faculty were title-last-named, and you saw them in class or at carefully booked appointments. Research was neatly compartmentalized into nonoverlapping fields: acoustic phonetics, syntax, historical, anthropological. . . . Bill arrived with revolutionary new ideas, new research agendas, 'live' data collection plans, and Friday night soirées where everyone was expected to first-name [!] the professor and consider ALL of linguistics as a shared field of study.

As I recall, the first lecture he gave was not held in the linguistics department itself, but over munchies in the Hymes' living room, where Bill's lecture neatly conflated the interests of the young audience (obscenities!) with the concerns of anthropologists (Harlem youth!) and syntacticians (infixing of obscenities as evidence of sublexical, even submorphological, boundaries!). Linguistic variation within and beyond the social network! By half-way through the evening everyone was adding their intuitions to the scrum of research going on in the room; by the end of the evening our understanding of the goals of linguistic research and how to carry it out were changed forever.

For me, I recall an extra shock at that lecture: As a kid who grew up in an Irish neighborhood, I had picked up the expression "[Blessed] Mother [of Gd]!" and often used the shortened form ("oh mother!") myself when overwhelmed. I was horrified to discover that all my big-city classmates had been hearing me as saying something quite other, an expression ("Motherf\*\*\*er") that at the time I had never even heard. To say I was horrified (at what I'd been perceived as saying) is an understatement. But the horror lasted an hour. The linguistic tsunami that rolled over us that evening from Bill Labov's performance lasted all the rest of our student days, and well beyond.

Joseph DeChicchis is Professor in the School of Policy Studies at Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan:

I recall that it was 1977, and I was still an undergrad in the philosophy and math departments. Under a special arrangement, I had recently entered the Penn linguistics graduate program at the invitation of Ivan Sag, and I still thought that linguistics was all about algebra. The old guard (Leigh Lisker, Henry Hoenigswald, Dell Hymes, among others) was starting to open my eyes to the wonders of human speech and language change, but I'll never forget the day that Bill Labov showed up in a crowd of linguists gathered on Locust Walk one sunny afternoon. Wiry and energetic, he was clearly the darling or the envy of every other scholar in the crowd. The body language of deference and admiration was everywhere on display. Not until two decades later, when I found myself at Buckingham Palace in the presence of Elizabeth II, would I feel such a commanding aura around another human being. At that very moment on Locust Walk, I realized that I must read up on Bill's research and find out what he was doing. Bill's Locust Walk lab left its mark on nearly everyone, even those of us who were not his advisees, and his ability to inspire students to document Philly speech eventually spread the love of speech data far and wide as we moved out along our individual career paths.

Gregory R. Guy, Professor of Linguistics at New York University, is a native Philadelphian:

Before I met Bill Labov, I had already met his work. After reading some of his papers as an undergraduate, I became passionate about sociolinguistics, and applied to Penn's graduate program in hopes of studying with him. Penn offered me admission but no funding, so I didn't think I'd be able to afford it. But then came the wedding reception that changed my life.

By alphabetic coincidence, I happened to have several good buddies in high school who were related to linguists at Penn. The homerooms at Central High were organized by last names, so I spent four years there in the G-H group, in the company of Bob Hymes, son of Dell, and Joe Harris, nephew of Zellig. We stayed close during our college years, and when we graduated and Bob was getting married, I was invited to his wedding. At the reception, Bob and I were discussing our future plans, and I told him about wanting to study with Bill. He says, “Oh, Bill Labov? He’s here at the party. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

So suddenly there I am talking to the man himself, babbling about how I liked his work and had applied to Penn because of him. Bill chats with me for a few minutes, talking about Black English and language change, and then he says, “Well, don’t worry about the funding. Find a way to pay for your first semester and if things work out we’ll see if we can get you a research assistantship or something.” So on the strength of this vague assurance, I took out a loan and started graduate studies at Penn in the fall.

Life, like language, is pervaded by inherent variability. If Dell Hymes didn’t have a son my age, if we didn’t go to the same high school, if our names weren’t close enough in the alphabet to be in the same homeroom, Bill and I might never have met. But I subsequently discovered that my story also instantiates the phenomenon of orderly heterogeneity. My serendipitous path to Penn was not unique; a number of my classmates had similar stories—running into Bill as undergraduates, and after brief conversations, getting his apparent blessing to come and work with him, and becoming successful linguists. I was part of a larger pattern.

Exactly how this pattern worked is somewhat obscure, but Bill Labov was clearly the gravitational force. His work inspires people to seek him out. He can apparently winnow the wheat from the chaff from a brief conversation. And he’s a great educator, who brings out the very best in his students. These qualities have enabled him to draw out a creative order from the diverse swirl of people he encounters, simultaneously enriching their lives and advancing science.

Crawford Feagin is a variationist with a special interest in Southern US speech:

In the early 1980s, I had finished my dissertation on the grammar of white speech in Anniston, Alabama, supervised by Bill Labov, and gotten it published (thanks to Bill, who also wrote a glowing foreword [Feagin 1979]), when I ran into him at a SECOL conference at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, where he was the featured speaker. On the spot, he invited me to come up to Penn and learn to do vowel analysis, using my dissertation tapes. “You’re sitting on a gold mine of data!” he exclaimed. So, not long after, there I was up at the Linguistics Lab at Penn, sitting in front of a computer keyboard for the first time in my life! (At that time, the computer-assisted analysis they were doing at Penn was enormously more complex than it is today when you can simply download Praat from the internet, hook up your sound, and go at it.) Bill sat down next to me to begin my tutorial and said, “If you so much as say ‘I can’t!’ the computer will EAT you!!!”

Gerald Prince is Professor of Romance Languages at University of Pennsylvania:

Bill is a movie buff and I regularly talk about movies with him (and with Gillian Sankoff too). We don’t always agree: his favorite movie, or so he says, is *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and his favorite actor Robert Duvall. But I value his wit, his readiness to admire, his capacity for listening, and his clarity, all qualities that I also appreciate in his work on narrative (Labov & Waletzky 1967) and that explain, in part, the powerful influence this work has had on so many of us. When Bill praises a movie, I don’t necessarily rush to get it from Netflix but I seriously consider taking a look at it and I usually end up doing it. When he disses a movie, I decide not to see it. Which is why I will not see *Steve Jobs*.

Scott F. Kiesling, Associate Professor in Linguistics at the University of Pittsburgh, frames his story about finding linguistics in the narrative headings of Labov & Waletzky (1967):

Bill Labov is singly responsible for my discovery and love of linguistics. <Orientation> In 1986 I was an undergraduate at Penn, and a friend of mine (a fraternity brother!) suggested I might like linguistics. I found LING 102, which was the second semester of the year-long intro course at Penn. This half covered phonetics, phonology, historical linguistics, and sociolinguistics (at least those are the ones I remember). It was taught by this guy named Bill. <Complicating Action> Phonetics was cool. Phonology was a bunch of fun—ultimately relatively easy and doable puzzles (and even in 1986 Bill was using computers to assess the problems—we turned in big floppy disks for homework!). Historical linguistics was similarly fun and revealing. I already liked this class; it was fascinating and I was good at it.

Then Bill brought in the stories. I can remember where I was sitting in the lecture hall when I heard a sailor's shaking voice describe the terror of being stuck up high in a ship during a storm. <Internal evaluation>I said to myself, "Dude! That is rad." <External evaluation>I was transfixed and excited that one could have such a humanistic experience while at the same time chasing down 'scientific' mysteries. <Resolution>I was hooked, and it was Bill who expertly baited that hook and reeled me in. <Coda>Of all the things I might regret in my life, getting 'caught' by Bill will never be one. Thanks Bill, for your investment in undergraduates as much as all your other, more celebrated, projects.

## 7. DISSERTATION ODYSSEYS

Supervising dissertation research is a one-to-one teaching experience. Unlike classroom teaching, the student comes eyeball-to-eyeball with a passionate supervisor. It is intense, and there is nowhere to hide. Little wonder that it often leaves an indelible impression. For William Labov, it occupied a special niche as he tailored his supervisory strategies to the mettle of the candidates. There is no obvious formula in the strategies, but there is universal satisfaction in the outcome.

Julie Roberts is Professor and Director of the Linguistics Program at the University of Vermont:

Working with Bill Labov as a dissertation advisor was an experience of holding on tight and not letting go for a second. When I met with him, I brought lots of paper (this was a long time ago). He would launch into a stream (more like a fire hose) of feedback, rarely finishing one sentence before entering the next one somewhere in its middle. I would write as much as I could as fast as I could, not stopping to wait for comprehension. After the meeting, I read over my notes, piecing together the main points, often with the help of my classmates. I found this to be the best (really, the only possible) strategy for two reasons: (1) It was really hard to get a word in anyway; and (2) Embedded in this onslaught was one brilliant insight after another, all, no matter how it seemed in "real time," precisely relevant to my work. As all of his students know, it was a privilege to work with Bill, just as it is now a privilege to introduce him to my undergraduate students at conferences, hear him question them about their work, and watch their eyes light up just to be able to hear this linguistic rock star say "well, that's very interesting" before he moves on to the next fan.

Richard Cameron is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Illinois, Chicago:

Learning from Bill was like working alongside a master cabinetmaker. As you made a small table, he made a cabinet. In the classes that I took from Bill, it was clear that we, the students, were engaging in research derived from his, and at the same time that Bill was pushing into new research areas.

Now, as happens in the heat of working, Bill could be critical in ways that stopped me in my tracks. When I returned to Philadelphia from a month of fieldwork in Puerto Rico where I had interviewed



76 speakers, Bill told me that I had simply not done enough. I was baffled and angry. Two things happened. First, I vowed to prove him wrong. Second, I kept on moving forward on my dissertation with his tacit blessing. His responses to drafts were always encouraging, though minimal. I believe it was rooted in the idea that once you were in the dissertation, dealing with adult ideas, it was yours to complete. He would step in and engage with you if he felt that he needed to. Once when wrestling with VARBRUL results that contradicted the frequency findings, over lunch he said to me, “Richard, you have overlapping factor groups.” I separated the factor groups and the results came out in an interpretable way. Finally, towards the very end of the odyssey we call the dissertation, I happened to run into Bill on campus. He was on his bicycle. He got off, pulled me aside, and congratulated me on the work I had done. I don’t recall his exact words but I do recall feeling profoundly thankful for this very human moment of simple respect. In short, my experiences with Bill roamed across moments of insight, anger, humor, simple words on complex matters and, in the end, a moment of simple respect.

John R. Rickford is J.E. Wallace Sterling Professor of Linguistics and the Humanities at Stanford University, California:

I was lucky enough to get a Danforth fellowship in 1971 and headed off to Penn to begin graduate study in Linguistics, very conscious that I had escaped the fate of Guyanese intellectuals with only a Bachelor’s degree—returning to teach high school and going out to nearby clubs to drink beers with other teachers in free periods.

At Penn, Labov quickly emerged as the most powerful role model of how to do innovative theoretical and applied research at the higher level of a university professor, and I gravitated to him although others warned me that he might be a demanding dissertation supervisor. I wrote most of my 602-page dissertation on variation in Guyanese pronouns while teaching at the University of Guyana, but Bill responded promptly to my mailed chapter drafts with pages and pages of typed comments, and he put me up in his home and gave freely of his time whenever I visited Penn for closer supervision. After I’d written eight chapters and covered the phonological variables, Dell Hymes wrote to say that he felt I had amply demonstrated what a dissertation was supposed to—that I could do original research. My wife Angela and I danced a jig in our kitchen in Guyana, celebrating the possibility that I was “done.” But when I wrote Bill about this, he said that it was important that I deal with the grammatical variation too, and that ended up taking another year or two and another 200+ pages. I’ve drawn on those pages often in my academic career. As in other cases, Bill s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-d me, and I was the better for it.

So Bill apprenticed me richly into the craft of research, and in the process, into the craft of teaching and mentoring and supporting one’s students. Whatever my students have gained of value from me as teacher and mentor must be credited, in no small measure, to him. I’m conscious, of course, of what he’s meant to the field (see Rickford 2016a,b,c), but I welcome this opportunity to tip my hat to him on a more personal level, for what he meant to me as a teacher, mentor and friend.

## 8. MEETING LANGUAGE FACE-TO-FACE

Bill Labov is an avid fieldworker. He relishes encounters with potential subjects for their own sake as well as for the analytic returns. In 1994, as keynote speaker at the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association meeting in Moncton, New Brunswick, he was sitting with a half-dozen linguists in the cafeteria, one of the few moments he sat still during that conference, and he said, seemingly out of nowhere, “I’ve discovered that fire halls are good places.” We looked over, puzzled. “The fire fighters,” he explained, “they’re mostly locals, and they spend most of their workdays waiting, so they’re really open if someone comes along and wants to talk to them.” In his memoir, “How I Got into Linguistics and What I Got Out of It” (Labov 1997), he says, “The work that I really want

to do, the excitement and adventure of the field, comes in meeting the speakers of the language face to face, entering their homes, hanging out on corners, porches, taverns, pubs and bars.” It is the sentiment of a born fieldworker, and a sentiment he passed on to many others.

Gillian Sankoff, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, retired from teaching in 2012:

As colleagues at Penn since 1979, Bill and I often cotaught the “Study of the Speech Community,” the year-long field methods class. Bill’s tape archive runs to 7000+ hours, and a typical day in his life often involves recording an interview. The day after Bill received the Neil and Saras Smith Medal for Linguistics from the British Academy in September 2015, our first free day in London, Bill said he wanted to go to Battersea Park, where he had conducted several interviews in the 1960s and 1970s, and interview someone on his iPhone 6. I said something snippy like “The British people we’ve met seem to have trouble understanding you. You’re going to have to speak louder.” Then I got busy with my maps, and figured out how to get to Battersea Park.

After passing several dog walkers and baby carriage pushers, Bill walked up and started chatting with the first man sitting on a bench doing nothing, who turned out to be from “Olland” (Holland), so we carried on. The next park-bench sitter had his trousers rolled up (“to catch the Vitamin D in the sun”), and was delighted to be asked for an interview. A lifelong resident of the neighborhood, this gentleman was a 63-year old photographer and musician featured in dozens of YouTubes playing the guitar. He was happy to explain how he’d translated a Norwegian biography of his father, a well-known British actor popular in Norway, using optical character recognition, and to recount numerous other events of his own interesting life. After a very successful 71-minute interview we exchanged email addresses and he walked us to our bus stop, chatting amiably until the bus arrived.

Michael B Kac on that summer of 1963 as William Labov’s research assistant:

One of my small triumphs that summer was a fieldworking coup that earned me a pat on the back from Bill for my handling of a sensitive situation. Henry L was freshly out of the hospital after a diabetic crisis that had left him blind, and his wife was understandably reluctant to let me anywhere near him. Somehow I managed to overcome her resistance and was ushered into the kitchen, where, conveniently, her husband was already sitting. He told me, as I was setting up, that in addition to the loss of his sight he was afflicted with intractable itching in his arms, which he constantly and viciously scratched throughout the proceedings. But despite his suffering—or perhaps because of it—he proved ideal for the study’s purposes: given a rare and unexpected opportunity to occupy center stage he responded voluminously to every question put to him, and by the time we were done I had gotten the longest and richest of all the interviews I conducted. Though I’ve always felt some guilt about this exploitation of someone else’s misery, I can honestly say that I also helped, however briefly and slightly, to alleviate it. And I carry with me to this day an indelible mental picture of that Lower East Side kitchen in the fading light of a late-summer evening as, his wife hovering anxiously in the background, his fingernails raking his flesh and his unseeing eyes looking off into nowhere, Henry L talked, and talked, and talked.

Sherry Ash is a research specialist at the Penn Frontotemporal Degeneration Center, Department of Neurology, University of Pennsylvania:

For me, one of Bill’s most remarkable qualities has always been his aptitude for the pithy, spur-of-the-moment pronouncement, sometimes funny but always on target. In his field methods course, which I took my first year of grad school at Penn, one assignment was to collect instances of the GET passive from the speech of our friends and acquaintances. I was sharing a house with two young men at the time (one of whom was my brother), and I recorded the utterance “you’ll get laid” from one of my

housemates. I blithely included this datum in my report, feeling safety in the distance between student and professor afforded by the silence of the words on paper. A few days later, when Bill reviewed the results of our fieldwork for the class, he quoted this example aloud (without attribution), to the delight of my classmates. As the tittering subsided, he said, “Now, that’s a very deep subject . . .”

While enjoying such levity, Bill was always insistent on the utmost respect for the people whose speech we studied. When we held practice sessions for NWAV talks, on more than one occasion he said, “I don’t ever want to hear one of you say that you can’t properly quote one of your interviewees because you can’t pronounce what the person said.” We were linguists, and we were expected to produce examples that were faithful to their source. Furthermore, while our speakers often said things that made us laugh, it was never, ever right to laugh *at* our speakers for how they said something or for what they were gracious enough to share with us.

But it was a glib, offhand remark of Bill’s that has perhaps meant the most to me and influenced my thinking about speech and language over the last 45 years, something he tossed off during a class in my first year: “In any five minutes of speech,” he said, “there’s a Ph.D. dissertation.”

Niloofar Haeri is Professor in Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University:

As an undergraduate, I became attracted to courses in formal syntax, but gradually I became skeptical about spending my life looking for the deep structure and moving alphas and betas around. Then I took a course in sociolinguistics with Bill. He gave us a final in-class essay exam. The most difficult question had the highest number of points. It went something like this: What was positive about Basil Bernstein’s work for sociolinguistics? I chose this question and Bill liked my answer. He encouraged me to apply to Penn for the Ph.D. program. In graduate school, I became more and more interested in sociolinguistics and signed up for LING 560, the famous year-long fieldwork course.

It would take pages to explain how much I learned in this course and how I still use what I learned. The most important insight Bill helped me gain about doing fieldwork was: go in telling yourself that you know next to nothing, and find out about everything by asking good questions. To convey something of what these weekly classes in the “Labovatory” across from the old bookstore were like, I want to describe what it was that made them so fascinating for me: Bill listened with raw pleasure to how people talked and the more “nonstandard” their pronunciations, the bigger was his glee. He just could not hide his enchantment as the sounds of wildly nonstandard pronunciations streamed off our tape-recorders and effectively seemed to say fuck you to the middle class establishment. Yes, this is another thing we learned in 560—you could actually cuss into the tape recorder and nothing would happen. Bill amply demonstrated this as we sat there horrified watching one of the great founders of sociolinguistics use one cuss word after another.

Not to end on that note, Bill rarely gave explicit advice to us but while writing my dissertation, he told me, “Always write as though you are your own worst enemy.” I still try to remember this when I write.

Shana Poplack is Distinguished University Professor and Canada Research Chair in Linguistics at the University of Ottawa:

I came to Penn from years of studying linguistics in Paris (coincidentally, with one of Bill’s own teachers, André Martinet). There we were encouraged to sit around and think very hard about language. Bill’s mission was to get us to *do* something about it, which basically meant going straight from the redoubtable LING 562, his legendary field methods course, right out into the community. I knew Spanish, so Bill thought it would be a good idea for me to cover the Puerto Rican part of his Philadelphia study. This meant a long bus ride to North Philly, in those days one of the toughest neighborhoods in an already tough city. I was small, white, afflicted with a fancy Castilian accent, and saddled with Bill’s very heavy

and very expensive Nagra tape recorder. I was also terrified. Some of the kindlier residents of “my” block would come up to me as I was wandering the street and admonish me, “Don’t carry that thing around here, *amor*.” But how else was I going to collect the kind of high-quality data Bill insisted on? At home, when I played back my tapes, which became the basis of my Ph.D. dissertation, I could hear my voice literally shaking with fear. But as Bill knew would happen, instead of the dire fate I was convinced would befall me, my Puerto Rican informants welcomed me with open arms. I’ll never forget the many enthralling hours spent listening to their stories and eating their delicious food, for which I can only thank Bill. My North Philly experience was probably *the* watershed in my career. I went on to carry out many large-scale community studies of my own. In the process, I lost my fear of people, the one deficiency Bill accuses most linguists of suffering from, and which he insisted on teaching his students to overcome. I myself have promulgated those teachings in Urban Di—my version of LING 562—for decades. And I still can’t wrap my head around how terrified my own students are of walking into the comfortable middle-class neighborhoods of Ottawa.

Bill got me my first real job as a sociolinguist, as researcher on the Language Policy Task Force at the CUNY Center for Puerto Rican Studies. This was another huge turning point. At El Centro I had the very great privilege of working alongside a bunch of impassioned Puerto Rican intellectuals, who taught me first-hand that even the most stigmatized varieties deserved to be championed. I also had the distinct pleasure of collaborating with Pedro Pedraza, former student of Bill’s at Columbia and fieldworker extraordinaire. Pedro had spent years doing participant observation in Spanish Harlem. The data he collected was (and probably still is) the most revealing material on code-switching in existence, and it was crying out for systematic analysis. But code-switching is not a variable, so how do you analyze it within a variationist framework (a question which exercises me to this day)? I consulted Bill, who firmly advised me to stay away, assuring me that I wasn’t going to make any contribution there. A couple of years later, he was the first to say, “Thank god you never listen to me, Shana!”

Matthew Lennig, now retired, was Senior Vice President of Engineering at Nuance Communications and at Ordinate Corporation, two California speech technology start-ups:

While I was at Princeton, working on my senior thesis, Bill let me come to his house in Philadelphia and work in his second floor study using his real-time analyzer to extract vowel spectra from recordings of Parisian teenagers. Later, when I was Bill’s Ph.D. student at Penn, Bill invited me to dinner at his house with his family more times than I can count. The conversation was always incredibly stimulating. Bill organized a series of guest lectures at his house on topics from ethology to Mombasa Swahili.

Bill taught me how to do sociolinguistic fieldwork. The initial contact with a complete stranger was a barrier I had trouble overcoming. Bill went with me to South Philadelphia and showed me how to do it. It was a middle-aged Italian woman and I was sitting next to Bill in her living room listening while Bill interviewed her. She enjoyed the interview so much she didn’t want it to end. She was charmed by Bill’s charisma.

Bill embraced big data and technology ahead of his time. He took students to Bell Laboratories. He took a few students including me to the first IEEE International Conference on Acoustics, Speech and Signal Processing, where I heard my first technical paper on speech recognition. My career in speech technology is thanks to Bill’s commitment to turning linguistics into an empirical science.

Miriam Meyerhoff is Professor of Linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand:

From Bill, I have learnt that hard work leads to more questions than answers. That ethical research is much easier when you genuinely care about the people you are recording. That combining the two makes you a better linguist.

From Bill, I have learnt that it's not always clear who the bad guys are in life. That being a decent and moral person may mean suspending judgement long enough to see what good can be extracted from a situation. That it's OK to have a little bit of pirate in you, as long as you can acknowledge your piratical impulses and use them productively.

From Bill, I learnt to listen—not to *what* people are saying, but to *why* they are saying it. Why someone is telling you something connects you with them in a personal, lasting and meaningful way. Why they are telling you something keeps your interviews grounded in more than your academic interests. Why they are telling you something, far more than the what, speaks to the social life of language. And “*Why* is he telling me this” sometimes provided the essential link between what Bill was telling us in a lecture this week and what he was talking about last week.

From Bill, I have learnt that none of these lessons are independent of each other. And from Bill, I also know that the reason why it is worth enumerating them is that they lay the foundation for great satisfaction in doing linguistics.

Anne H. Charity Hudley is Professor of Community Studies at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia:

What did I learn from Bill Labov? I learned how to listen. At Penn, I learned to listen to the people who swiped my Penn Cards and drove the SEPTA trains. I listened to the children who crossed Locust Walk in the afternoons with the bustle of their coats and knapsacks. I asked them to tell me about their dreams. I listened carefully to the stories from which vowels were extracted and consonant clusters were measured. I learned that no matter how smart and fabulous you might be one day the most important thing you can do in your busiest moment is to stop and take the extra time to listen to someone that most of the world doesn't hear.

Betsy Sneller is a PhD candidate in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania:

I first met Bill during Prospectives Weekend at Penn, where each prospective student was assigned 30 minutes of meeting time with faculty members. I was so excited to meet BILL LABOV and so nervous that I wouldn't make a good impression—or worse, that he would realize that I didn't 'really' belong at Penn. But right away, he asked me questions about my work and made exciting suggestions for improving it, all while making me feel like a colleague, like someone whose ideas were interesting and who belonged. Even though we only had 30 minutes of allotted meeting time, Bill stayed and talked with me for two hours!

Throughout my time at Penn, Bill's delight in research, and his high expectations have brought out the best in my own work. But it isn't just Bill's attitude toward his students that has made an impression; it's also his attitude toward the people he works with. On one of the first days in LING 560 (the field methods course), he encouraged us to set aside our own cultural assumptions and recognize that value systems are not universal: “You're all highly educated. And you think that's a good thing.” Bill pushes us to understand the values of the people we work with, and to really listen to them. Bill's attitude toward data collection and toward research emphasizes the humanity of those around him, and encourages me to do the same.

Suzanne Evans Wagner is Associate Professor in Linguistics at Michigan State University:

When I was writing my dissertation, Bill pushed me to include snippets of interview dialogue and speaker portraits, telling me to put a human face on my data. This is the side of Bill—the warm, curious, delighted side—that you can hear in his own interviews, as he quizzes an elderly farmer about

the best way to call pigs, or sits at a bus stop with a sawmill worker. When I was a student at Penn, I benefited enormously from Bill's enthusiasm for listening and questioning. He made me feel that my experiences in the field and my opinions and ideas about my project were worthy of his interest and respect. For someone of his professional stature, Bill has the unusual capacity of deferring to the developing expertise of people who are his apprentices. Yet Bill is also relentless in his pursuit of perfection. He will continuously test and refine almost anything: even his bread recipe book is full of margin notes about experiments with different ingredients. Recently I had the privilege of collaborating with Bill on a project. For months, while the team was developing sociolinguistic interview questions, Bill would drop the questions into conversations with virtually anyone who crossed his path: a visiting younger relative, his own undergraduates, family friends. He was so focused that on one social occasion I had to beg him to stop asking *me* the questions! (*"Hey Suzanne, who do you talk to more, your mother or your father? Can you talk with them about anything?"*) But the questions undoubtedly got sharper thanks to the field tests that Bill disguised as ordinary conversations.

Daniel Ezra Johnson is Senior Research Associate at the Center for Craniofacial Molecular Biology, University of Southern California:

How many of us must have the same stories? How many sent email out of the blue to the legend, only to hear back the same day? And with no cursory reply, but an invitation to come to Philadelphia, meet the team, and later join it? Who was on that team? The names whose research filled your lectures; you were that generous. Who wasn't on it? If we found out, it was on our own; you were that positive. You rarely assigned your own papers, though it meant us missing a few dozen classics; you were that modest. If you told a few eyebrow-raising stories about yourself, you did it in third person; you were that private. I saw you angry only twice: at [REDACTED] at a conference, and at an abstract I wrote describing data I hadn't collected yet; you were that honest. When you called it "vaporware!" I felt your disgust, even though I heard "Weber-ware." Did I not know the word, or not expect you to know it? You were always up to date, and looking forward. You had fifty years on our cohort, but you had the first Titanium laptop. Did you really wish, in 1962, you'd met with more resistance? Were you really that scrupulous? Did I really think I might surpass you? How many of us were that audacious? How many ever knew someone so young when he was old? You made us who we are, Bill; when they made you, they broke the mold.

## 9. CODA

Before William Labov's New York research had made much of an impact beyond his immediate circle, Labov raised some eyebrows by wading into a theoretical controversy. Noam Chomsky and other transformationalists had noticed the occurrence of self-embeddings in sentences such as

[the boy [the alligator ate] took many risks]

They also noticed that multiple self-embeddings, though theoretically well formed, caused processing problems and as a result were seldom, perhaps never, used:

[the boy [the alligator [the man shot] ate] took many risks]

[the boy [the alligator [the man [his mother married] shot] ate] took many risks]

Proponents of linear processing, the antitransformationalists of the day, maintained that such sentences had never been observed in actual use, and therefore their "grammaticality" was an illusion.

Noting the impasse between the two sides, Labov (1973, p. 101) said, “We cannot wait for such embedded sentences to be uttered.” As an antidote, he sent his Columbia students onto the New York streets with clipboards to conduct what appeared to be an opinion poll. After a brief exchange with passers-by, the students asked, “Say, [do you think that [the report that [the stuff they put in diet soda] causes cancer] is a hoax]?”

Labov (1973, p. 102) pointed out that “the results of this naturalistic experimentation in everyday life showed clear comprehension. . . . Our conclusion is that native speakers of English do grasp the grammatical structure of self-embedded sentences in ordinary conversation: that they are grammatical in the strongest sense.”

At the time it simply seemed audacious. Numerous theoreticians undoubtedly peered out of their closets and wondered about this revolutionary notion of testing theory on the streets, of (in Labovian terms) meeting language face to face. For William Labov it just seemed natural, as it now does for the academic generations that have followed his lead.

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