
Javier Díaz Vera
Universidad de Castilla—La Mancha

The *Language and Society* series, directed by Peter Trudgill, has recently produced the first of a group of volumes that, under the generic name of *Principles of Linguistic Change*, are intended to bring William Labov’s latest research before the general public. This book, concerned with the study of the factors that govern the internal development of languages, will soon be followed by two more volumes dealing with external and cognitive factors respectively. However, as the author states in the ‘Introduction’ (p. 2), no complete separation among these three aspects of linguistic change is intended.

By and large, this first volume deals with the mechanisms of linguistic change, the constraints on change, and the ways in which change is embedded in the larger linguistic system. The material used by the author is mainly based on preliminary research projects conducted by himself and other linguists from the Linguistic Laboratory of the University of Pennsylvania.

As all the other volumes included in the *Language and Society* series, this compendium opens with a brief ‘Editor’s Preface’ by Peter Trudgill, which is followed by a few pages on ‘Notional Conventions’ and ‘Acknowledgments’. This foreword closes with an introductory note (‘Introduction: The Plan of the Work as a Whole’), intended to give the reader an overview of the principles underlying this work. The rest of the volume is composed by twenty-one chapters (grouped together into five parts), a reference list and an index.

Part A, ‘Introduction and Methodology’ (pp. 8-112), begins with a chapter on ‘The Use of the Present to Explain the Past’ (pp. 10-27). Mainly based upon his homonymous article from 1975, this chapter deals with the use of synchronic principles as a complement to diachronic data. This preliminary methodological discussion on the so-called *uniformalitarian principle*, a term that will result by now extremely familiar to the reader acquainted with Labov’s recent work. This principle, inherited from the field of geology, insists on the possibility of inferring processes of change that occurred in the past by the observation of ongoing processes in the present. Following this statement, Labov has made of the use of synchronic patterns of linguistic change in progress to historical problems the central point of his whole research.

Chapter 2 (‘An Overview on the Issues’, pp. 28-42) gives a brief outline of the different arguments dealt with in the rest of the volume. Chapters 3 (‘The Study of Change in Progress: Observations in Apparent Time’, pp. 43-72) and 4 (‘The Study of Change in Progress: Observations in Real Time’, pp. 73-112) concentrate on the description of the techniques for the study of change in progress through the analysis of recent research. In spite of the many difficulties of carrying out a real-time study, as attested by the investigations by Hermann (1929), Fowler (1986), Cedergren (1984) and Trudgill (1988) described in pp. 85-98, it is evident that only this type of analysis can give us a reliable picture of a process of linguistic change. However, the evidence drawn from apparent-time studies is not to be neglected: as demonstrated by his studies of New York City (Labov, Yaeger and Steiner, 1972) and Philadelphia (Labov 1989a, 1990), the analysis of the distribution across the different age groups in the speech community of the various allophones
intervening in a sound change has contributed to increase our understanding of the S-shaped trajectory of linguistic change.

Part B (‘Chain Shift’, pp. 113-292) focuses on the delimitation of the different types of phonetic and phonological change that can take place in any language. This section opens with a discussion on the analysis of the constraints on vowel change (Chapter 5, ‘General Principles of Vowel Shifting’, pp. 115-154). The three classical patterns of vowel shifting, as prefigurated by Henry Sweet already in 1888, are reintroduced at the beginning of the chapter:

PRINCIPLE I: LONG VOWELS RISE.
PRINCIPLE II: SHORT VOWELS FALL.
PRINCIPLE IIIA: THE NUCLEI OF UPGGLIDING DIPHTHONGS FALL.
PRINCIPLE III: BACK VOWELS MOVE TO THE FRONT.

Although independent, these universals of language change can combine. Three different combinations or patterns are distinguished at this point\(^\text{1}\), which includes a wide number of illustrations from the history of different languages: (P1) Principles I and II, (P2) all three principles, and (P3) Principles I and III. The final part of chapter 5 deals with the analysis of some exceptions to the three principles presented above (i.e. lowering of long vowels, raising of short vowels and nuclei of upgliding diphthongs and backing of front vowels) and their significance for our understanding of the concept of chain shift as different from merger. This part of the discussion includes a reexamination of two traditional problems inherent to the study of the Great Vowel Shift (the lowering of the diphthong /iy/ from Middle English /iː/ and the evolution of front vowels before /tr/) with the following result: a revision of these principles, included Garde’s (1961) Principle of the irreversibility of mergers, is needed in order to give satisfactory solutions to these questions within the framework of formal phonology (a task undertaken by Labov in the following chapters).

This argument, based on completed historical changes, has a continuation in Chapter 6 (‘Chain Shifts in Progress’, pp. 155-221), which presents a thorough analysis of a wide group of chain shifts in progress as attested in the vowel systems of contemporary English dialects spoken in Britain and America. The results of these investigations have allowed a redefinition of the concepts of phonological space, which implies the neglect of the traditional quadrilateral and its substitution by a triangle-shaped acoustic space whose three sides can be divided into a [+peripheral] and a [-peripheral] track for both front and back vowels. At the same time, this analysis permits a restatement of the general principles of chain shift in the following way:

PRINCIPLE I: TENSE NUCLEI RISE ALONG A PERIPHERAL TRACK.
PRINCIPLE II: LAX NUCLEI FALL ALONG A NONPERIPHERAL TRACK.
PRINCIPLE III: TENSE VOWELS MOVE TO THE FRONT ALONG PERIPHERAL PATHS, AND LAX VOWELS MOVE TO THE BACK ALONG NONPERIPHERAL PATHS.

Further, a fourth combination affecting Principles II and III is presented, based on the evolution of ME /əː/: the nucleus of /iy/ laxed, so that it moved to the [-peripheral] track. The resulting /eɪ/ changed to /æ/ as a consequence of its continuing descend (Principle II), and finally the lax nucleus of /æ/ is moving to the back along the [-peripheral] in the dialects spoken in Southern England, Australia and New Zealand, where /ɔy/, and even /uəy/, are common (Principle III).

---

\(^{1}\) A fourth combination will be introduced in Chapter 6.
This restatement of the general principles and patterns of chain shifts, based on the analysis of the changes in progress presented in chapter 6, will allow a reexamination of the contradictions arisen along the review of the historical processes in chapter 5. This task is undertaken in chapter 7 (‘Resolution of the Paradoxes’, pp. 222-244), which includes a new discussion on the Great Vowel Shift based on the hypothetical existence of peripheral and nonperipheral tracks in the ME vowel system. The merging between the results of ME \( i \) and \( ai \) on the one side, and between OE \( ar \) and lengthened ME \( er \) on the other, becomes an unnecessary step within this theoretical framework. Chapter 8 (‘Reduction of the Rules and Principles’, pp. 245-270) tries to present a simplification of the set of principles of change shifts previously presented. Also in this case the Great Vowel shift serves to illustrate Labov’s discussion, which focuses on the diphthongization of ME \( e \) and \( e: \) into \([i]\) and \([au]\). The resulting Vowel Shift Principle, which holds for articulatory position as well as acoustic properties, is defined by Labov with the following words: “In chain shifts, peripheral vowels become more open and nonperipheral vowels become less open” (p. 262). Finally, Chapter 9 (‘Chain Shifts across Subsystems’, pp. 271-292) mainly deals with the different ways in which sound change moves across systems. The analysis of some cases of cross-dialectal miscommunication in American English leads to the assumption that changes across subsystems usually operate affecting the degree of peripherality of the nucleus. Changes in peripherality are governed by five principles, which the author tentatively defines in the following way:

**PRINCIPLE IV (LOWER EXIT PRINCIPLE):** LOW NONPERIPHERAL VOWELS BECOME PERIPHERAL.

**PRINCIPLE V (UPPER EXIT PRINCIPLE):** ONE OF TWO HIGH PERIPHERAL MORAE MAY CHANGE PERIPHERALITY, AND THE SECOND MAY BECOME NONPERIPHERAL.

**PRINCIPLE VI (MID EXIT PRINCIPLE):** PERIPHERAL VOWELS RISING FROM MID TO HIGH POSITION DEVELOP INCLIDES.

**PRINCIPLE VII (REDEFINITION PRINCIPLE):** PERIPHERALITY IS DEFINED RELATIVE TO THE VOWEL SYSTEM AS A WHOLE.

**PRINCIPLE VIII (UNMARKING PRINCIPLE):** ELEMENTS OF THE MARKED SYSTEM ARE UNMARKED.

As Labov claims at the end of the chapter, these principles are designed to call the reader’s attention on a series of problems involved in the study of change across systems, and many modifications will be required by these working definitions.

Under the generic name of ‘Mergers and Splits’ (pp. 293-418), Part C deals with the principles that govern these two opposite phenomena: the merging of two phonemic elements into one and the split of one phonemic element into two. Chapter 10 (‘Some Impossible Unmergings’, pp. 295-309) reports two traditional cases of reversed mergers from the history of English, which affected the word classes containing MEAT/MATE on the one hand, and LINE/LOIN on the other. Previous research on the question of unmerging has pointed to an influence of spelling uses (Jespersen 1949), a hypothesis that is discussed in detail in the following chapter (‘The General Properties of Mergers and Splits’, pp. 310-348). Taking Garde’s Principle on the irreversibility of mergers by linguistic means and Herzog’s (1965) Principle on the expansion of mergers at the expense of distinctions as his starting point, Labov offers in this chapter an approach to the problem based on dialect geography. Later the mechanisms and causes of merger are considered, which leads to a redefinition of Garde’s Principle based on the relation between the factors causing a merger and the possibility of its reversal. Likewise, this chapter presents the three possible types of split: split by loss of a conditioning factor, by borrowing and by
redistribution of one word class into two. This last type, known as lexical split, is illustrated with a detailed examination of two processes of split affecting OE short diphthongs and Middle Atlantic short a. Some sociolinguistic factors concerning mergers and splits are considered at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 12 ("Near-Mergers", pp. 349-370) studies situations of merging and unmerging in contemporary dialects of English, in order to introduce the difficult term of near-merger, i.e. uncompleted mergers that produce very closely approximated sounds. This concept implies the speaker’s possibility to maintain phonemic distinctions that they are not able to perceive, and the existence of such a phenomenon has been attested by Labov in his studies of the linguistic behaviour of single individuals from different English-speaking communities. However, no satisfactory analysis of it has been made so far. In spite of the paradoxical character of the concept, the author makes use of it in chapter 13 ("The Explanation of Unmergings", pp. 371-390), which includes a reexamination of two problematic linguistic changes previously dealt with in chapter 10: the merging of LINE/LION (based on Nunberg, 1980) and of MEAT/MATE (based on Milroy and Harris, 1980). This confrontation between data from the past and data from the present allows Labov to demonstrate that no complete merger existed between the word included in each of these pairs of classes in Early Modern English, which explains the differences in their later evolution.

Chapter 14 ("The Suspension of Phonemic Contrast", pp. 391-418) presents the results of various previous experiments, which are aimed to complete our understanding of near-mergers from a cognitive perspective. The main question here deals with the speakers’ possibility to acquire and maintain distinctions that they cannot recognize. The most important discussion in this chapter deals with the suspension of phonemic contrast in Philadelphia (based on LCV), where near-mergers have become an integral part of the linguistic economy.

Parts D ("The Regularity Controversy", pp. 419-543) and E ("The Functional Character of Change", pp. 545-605) constitute an attempt to solve two traditional controversies around Neogrammarian theories on the regularity of sound change: the Regularity Principle and the Mechanical Principle. Part D concentrates on the way linguistic changes expand: the preliminary data analysed in chapters 5 ("Evidence for Lexical Diffusion", pp. 421-439) and 6 ("Expanding the Neogrammarian Viewpoint", pp. 440-471) are clearly contradictory, since they evidence both types of change. The discussion then turns to focus on the evidence of dialect geography (Chapter 7, "Regular Sound Change in English Dialect Geography", pp. 472-501), which serves to support the Neogrammarian theory that regular sound change, and not lexical diffusion, is the basic mechanism of change. However, diffusion word by word is not to be neglected, and chapter 18 ("A Proposed Resolution of the Regularity Question", pp. 502-543) proposes a classification of the different types of change where regular sound change and lexical diffusion are most likely to be found (p. 543):

Regular sound change
Lexical diffusion
Vowel shifts in place of articulation
Shortening and lengthening of segments
Diphthongization of high vowels
Diphthongization of mid and low vowels
Consonant changes in manner of articulation
Consonant changes in place of articulation
Vocalization of liquids
Metathesis of liquids and stops
Deletion of glides and shwa
Deletion of obstruents

ATLANTIS XVIII (1-2) 1996
Part E focuses on the Mechanical Principle. Chapter 19 (‘The Overestimation of Functionalism’, pp. 547-568) tries to invalidate functional explanations of sound change, which argue that the tendency for speakers to choose one variant or another depends purely on their need to preserve semantic information on the surface. Labov proposes here a reexamination of some cases of stable phonological and morphological variation (i.e. deletion of final segments in English, Dutch, Ladakhi, Spanish and Portuuguess) with this result: the causes that determine the speakers’ choices are due to mechanical and structural factors. Likewise, chapter 20 (‘The Maintenance of Meaning’, pp. 569-599), deals with the different ways in which meaning is preserved in the course of linguistic change. The interaction between language and society, which is the central topic of volume 2, is anticipated here through the analysis of some cases of long-term stability. The concept of probability matching, drawn from the field of ethology, is applied to some situations of language learning. Mainly based on previous research on language acquisition (Labov, 1989b), this part of the analysis deals with the acquisition of linguistic variation through generations, which seems to be governed by two principles: the Prative Theory (which leads to conservative behaviour) and the Facultative Theory (which leads to innovative behaviour). This part closes with a brief account of the principles developed along the volume (Chapter 21, ‘The Principles Reviewed’, pp. 600-605).

This is just an outline of the many aspects of the problem of sound change dealt with by Labov in the first volume of this work. It is obvious that the density and heterogeneity of the topics discussed by the author render a review of the volume extremely difficult. For this reason, this brief account has been limited to the developing of Labov’s main ideas. By and large, the initial aim of resolving paradoxes of the past by invoking evidence from the present has been fulfilled. Many of the problems arisen along the discussion, and to which Labov proposes new solutions from this point of view, concern the changes involved in the English Great Vowel Shift (GVS) or processes related to it. In this respect, the book means a complete reexamination of many aspects of this paradoxical process. Labov’s approach has proven extremely elucidating in two different aspects of the GVS:

1° Since mergers cannot be reversed (as is clearly seen from previous analysis on contemporary English), explanations involving the merging and later unmerging of sounds (such as Orton, 1933 and Jespersen, 1949) are to be avoided: the notions of peripherality and near-merging become crucial in any explanation of this shift change.

2° Contrarily to Ogura (1987), the GVS extended basically by regular sound change, and not by lexical diffusion.

The Bibliography (pp. 606-625) is quite complete (with more than 500 references) and up-to-date, including an impressive range of material in terms of disciplines. References are found to studies on sound change in a wide number of classical and modern languages from all the language families, being obviously the different stages in the development of English the most represented topic in this section. Given the traditional neglect of the study of phonetics and phonology in our country, it is not surprising that reference to both research on sound change in Spanish and research made by Spanish scholars is almost inexistent. Less than ten of the publications cited in the bibliography focus on the different varieties of Spanish, and almost all of them deal with American Spanish (the few articles included in Esgueva and Cantisíno’s volume of 1981 constitute the only exception to this rule). We hope that the publication of Labov’s compendium will contribute to increase the interest in the study of sound change among Spanish researchers.
WORKS CITED


Fowler, Joy 1967. The social stratification of (r) in New York City department stores, 24 years after Labov. New York University ms.


Labov, William 1990. The intersect of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change. LV&Change 2: 205-54.


* * *