

4 The Reflection of Social Processes in Linguistic Structures

IN the last chapter, we presented five phonological variables of the New York City system and showed how a wide range of styles could be isolated within the individual interview. When styles are organized along a single dimension according to the amount of attention paid to speech, it can be seen that most speakers follow a regular pattern of style shifting in the same direction. We will now examine a second dimension of linguistic variation: the differentiation of speakers by their social status.¹ Our debt to sociology and survey methodology is very great: the main findings are based on a secondary survey of the Lower East Side, utilizing the careful and exhaustive enumeration of the population by the Mobilization for Youth research staff and their construction of a random sample; the clarity of the results depends upon a sophisticated index of socioeconomic status, itself the product of a long line of sociological development. This chapter is therefore addressed directly to sociologists and those who are interested in the more systematic, quantitative aspects of class stratification. But we will also consider other aspects of social differentiation of language which emerged from the Lower East Side survey. Our focus will be frankly and directly sociolinguistic, and the conclusion will consider more generally the ways in which the study of language and the study of society may interact.

The procedures of descriptive linguistics are based upon the conception of language as a structured set of social norms. It has

been useful in the past to consider these norms as invariants, shared by all members of the speech community. However, closer studies of the social context in which language is used show that many elements of linguistic structure are involved in systematic variation which reflects both temporal change and extralinguistic social processes.

As a form of social behavior, language is naturally of interest to the sociologist. But language may have a special utility for the sociologist as a sensitive index of many other social processes. Variation in linguistic behavior does not in itself exert a powerful influence on social development, nor does it affect drastically the life chances of the individual; on the contrary, the shape of linguistic behavior changes rapidly as the speaker's social position changes. This malleability of language underlies its great utility as an indicator of social change.

Phonological indexes—based upon the elements of the sound system of a language—are particularly useful in this respect. They give us a large body of quantitative data from relatively small samples of speech: 50–200 occurrences of a single item in a half-hour conversation. To a large extent, the variation on which these indexes are based is independent of conscious control of the subject. Finally, phonological systems show the highest degree of internal structure of all linguistic systems, and thus provide the investigator with an extensive series of parallel and convergent results.

The five phonological variables described in Ch. 3 were studied in a population drawn from a linguistic survey of the Lower East Side. This survey was based upon a primary survey of social attitudes of Lower East Side residents, carried out by Mobilization for Youth in 1961. The original sample of the population of 100,000 consisted of 988 adult subjects. Our target sample was 195 of these respondents, representing about 33,000 native English speakers who had not moved within the previous two years. Through the assistance of Mobilization for Youth, and the Columbia School of Social Work, we had available a large body of information on the social characteristics of the informants, and we were able to concentrate entirely on their linguistic behavior in this secondary survey. Eighty-one percent of the target sample was reached in the investigation of language on the Lower East Side.

New York City presents some exceptionally difficult problems for the study of linguistic systems. As we have seen in Ch. 3, New

1. This chapter first appeared in Joshua Fishman, ed., *Readings in the Sociology of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), pp. 240–51. It has been revised for publication here.

Yorkers show a remarkable range of stylistic variation, as well as social variation, to such an extent that earlier investigators failed to find any pattern, and attributed many variables to pure chance. To study social variation, it was first necessary to define and isolate a range of contextual styles within the linguistic interview (see Ch. 3). Since the context of the formal interview does not ordinarily elicit casual or spontaneous speech, the methods which were developed to overcome this limitation were crucial to the success of the investigation. Our success in defining and eliciting casual conversation is evident in the convergence of these results with other studies which utilized anonymous observations (Ch. 2), and also in the consistency of the patterns of stylistic variation which were found.

Although there is a great range in the absolute values of these variables as used by New Yorkers, there is great agreement in the pattern of stylistic variation. Almost 80 percent of the respondents showed patterns of stylistic variation consistent with the status of (r-1) as a prestige marker, and stops and affricates for (th) as stigmatized forms.

This pattern of stylistic variation is primarily of concern to linguists and to students of the ethnography of speaking. However, it is closely associated with the pattern of social stratification which pervades many aspects of urban society. The pattern of stylistic variation and the pattern of social variation enter into the complex and regular structure which we see in Fig. 4.1.

Fig. 4.1 is a class stratification diagram for (th), derived from the behavior of 81 adult respondents, raised in New York City (Labov 1966a, Ch. 7). This is the first of the sociolinguistic patterns which are the main focus of this and the following two chapters. The vertical axis is the scale of average (th) index scores. The horizontal axis represents the four contextual styles, A-D, established in Ch. 3. The horizontal lines connecting the values show the progression of average index scores for socioeconomic class groups. These groups are defined as divisions of the ten-point socioeconomic scale constructed by Mobilization for Youth on the basis of their data in the original survey. The socioeconomic index is based on three equally weighted indicators of productive status: occupation (of the breadwinner), education (of the respondent), and income (of the family).²

2. The original socioeconomic index, as developed by Mobilization for Youth, utilized the education of the breadwinner rather than of the respondent. The net result of both approaches in the study of social stratification is the same.

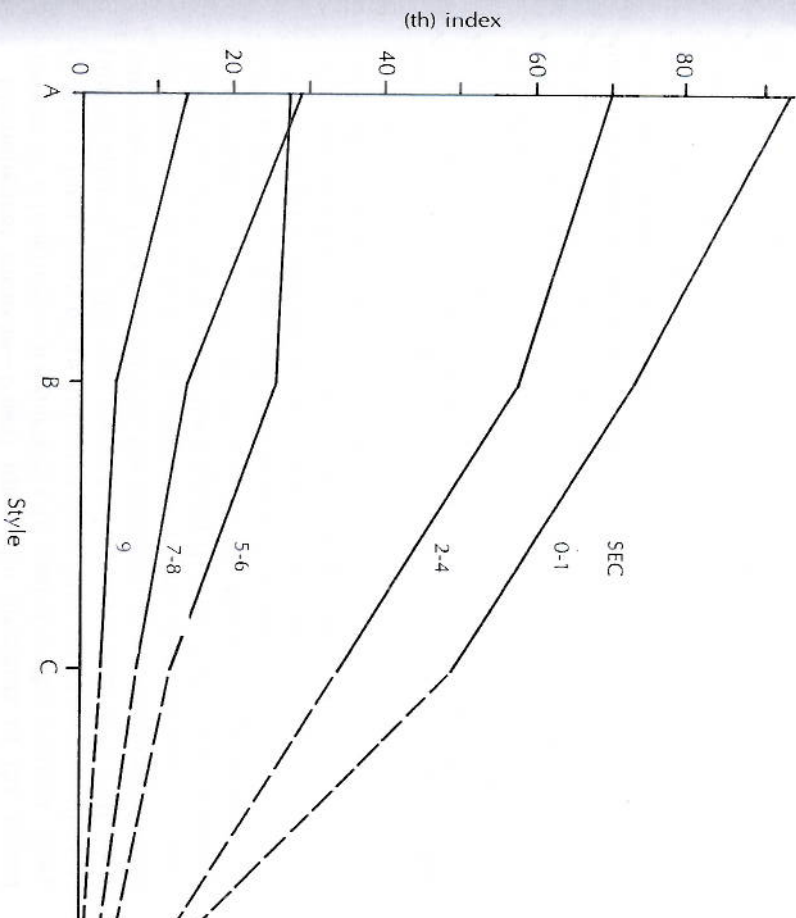


Fig. 4.1. Class stratification of a linguistic variable with stable social significance: (th) in *thing, through, etc.* Socioeconomic class scale: 0-1, lower class; 2-4, working class; 5-6, 7-8, lower middle class; 9, upper middle class. A, casual speech; B, careful speech; C, reading style; D, word lists.

Informally, we may describe these class groups as follows: group 0-1, lower class; 2-4, working class; 5-8, lower middle class; 9, upper middle class. Classes 2 and 5 are marginal groups, which sometimes show the linguistic behavior of the next lower group, and sometimes that of the next higher group.

Fig. 4.1 is an example of what we may call sharp stratification. The five strata of the population are grouped into two larger strata with widely different use of the variable. The parallel variable (th) shows the same kind of sharp stratification (Labov 1966a:253). Fig. 4.2 is a class stratification diagram which shows a somewhat different

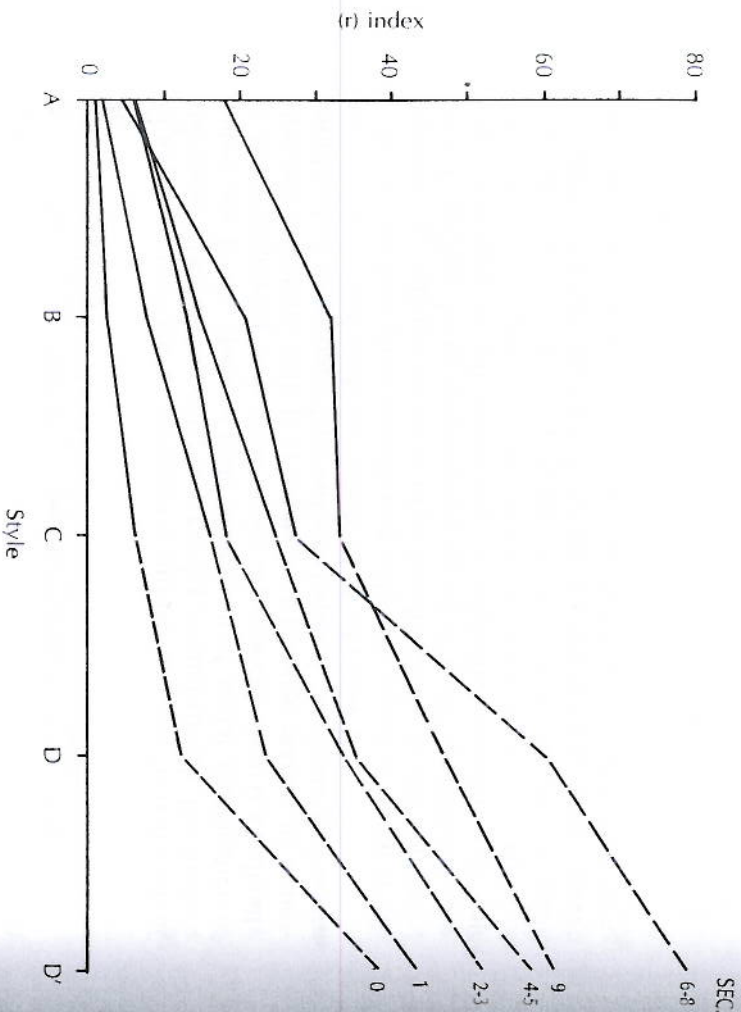


Fig. 4.2. Class stratification of a linguistic variable in process of change: (r) in guard, car, beer, beard, board, etc. SEC (Socio-economic class) scale: 0-1, lower class; 2-4, working class; 5-6, 7-8, lower middle class; 9, upper middle class. A, casual speech; B, careful speech; C, reading style; D, word lists; D', minimal pairs.

type of stratification. The vertical axis is the phonological index for (r), in which 100 represents a consistent r-pronouncing dialect, and 00 a consistent r-less dialect. The horizontal axis shows five, not four, stylistic contexts, including: at D', the reading of word pairs in which (r) is the sole focus of attention: guard vs. god, dock vs. dark. This structure is an example of what we may call fine stratification: a great many divisions of the socioeconomic continuum in which stratification is preserved at each stylistic level. Other investigations carried out in New York City, including the department-store survey, support the general hypothesis on the fine stratification of (r) advanced in Ch. 2: any groups of New Yorkers that are ranked in a

hierarchical scale by nonlinguistic criteria will be ranked in the same order by their differential use of (r).

The status of (r-1) as a prestige marker is indicated by the general upward direction of all horizontal lines as we go from informal to formal contexts. At the level of casual, everyday speech, only the upper middle class (9) shows a significant degree of r-pronunciation. But in more formal styles, the amount of r-pronunciation for other groups rises rapidly. The lower middle class, in particular, shows an extremely rapid increase, surpassing the upper-middle-class level in the two most formal styles. This crossover pattern appears at first sight to be a deviation from the regular structure shown in Fig. 4.1. It is a pattern which appears in other diagrams: a similar crossover of the lower middle class appears for two other phonological indexes—in fact, for all those linguistic variables which are involved in a process of linguistic change under social pressure. On the other hand, the social and stylistic patterns for (th) have remained stable for at least 75 years, and show no sign of a crossover pattern. Thus the hypercorrect behavior of the lower middle class is seen as a synchronic indicator of linguistic change in progress. We will consider this hypercorrect pattern in much greater detail in the next chapter, and its significance for the study of change in progress will be examined in Ch. 9.

The linear nature of the ten-point scale of socioeconomic status is confirmed by the fact that it yields regular stratification for many linguistic variables, grammatical as well as phonological. The linguistic variables have been correlated with the individual social indicators of productive status—occupation, education and income—and it appears that no single indicator is as closely correlated with linguistic behavior as the combined index. However, an index which combines occupation and education—neglecting income—gives more regular stratification for the (th) variable. For education, there is one sharp break in linguistic behavior for this variable: the completion of the first year of high school. For occupation, there are sharp differences between blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, and professionals. If we combine these two indicators, we obtain four classes which divide the population almost equally, and stratify (th) usage regularly. This classification seems to be superior to the socioeconomic scale for analysis of variables such as (th) which reflect linguistic habits formed relatively early in life (Labov 1966a). However, the combined socioeconomic index, utilizing income, does

show more regular stratification for a variable such as (r). Since (r-1) is a recently introduced prestige marker in New York City speech, it seems consistent—almost predictable—that it should be closely correlated with a socioeconomic scale which includes current income, and thus represents most closely the current social status of the subject.

Fig. 4.3 shows the distribution of (r) by age levels, a distribution

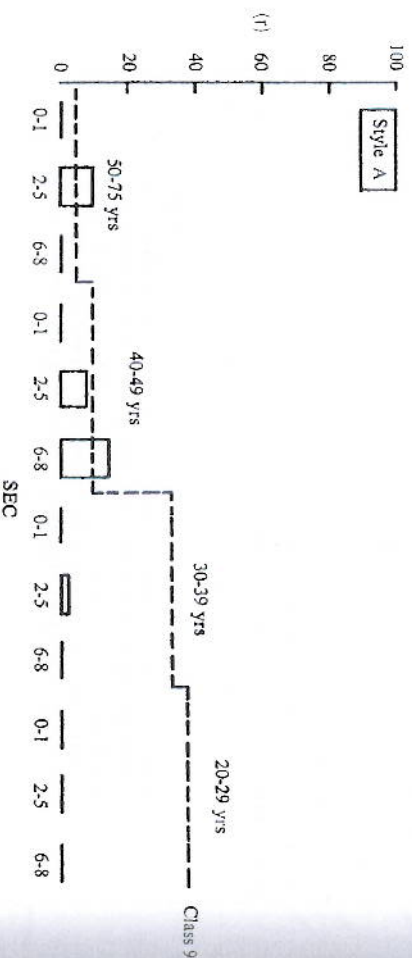


Fig. 4.3. Development of class stratification of (r) for casual speech (Style A) in apparent time. SEC = socioeconomic class scale.

in apparent time which indicates a sudden increase in real time of the social stratification of (r) in everyday, casual speech. For the two oldest age levels, there is little indication of social significance of (r-1). But beginning with those under 40 years old, there is a radically different situation, with (r-1) acting as a prestige marker of upper-middle-class usage only. This sudden change in the status of (r) seems to have coincided with the events of World War II.

So far, we have been considering only one aspect of social stratification: the differentiation of objective behavior. In our studies of New York City, the complementary aspect of social stratification was also examined: social evaluation. A subjective reaction test was developed to isolate unconscious social responses to the values of individual phonological variables. In these tests, the subject rated a number of short excerpts from the speech of other New Yorkers on a scale of occupational suitability (see Fig. 6.1), and cross com-

parison of these ratings enabled us to isolate the unconscious subjective reactions of respondents to single phonological variables. This subjective dimension will be examined in detail in Ch. 6; most striking is the uniformity of New Yorkers under 40 years old. All subjects between 18 and 39 agreed in their positive evaluation of (r-1) (Fig. 6.2) despite the fact (as shown in Fig. 4.3) that the great majority of these subjects do not use any (r-1) in their everyday speech. Thus sharp diversification of (r) in objective performance is accompanied by uniform subjective evaluation of the social significance of this feature. On the other hand, the subjects over 40 years old, who show no differential pattern in their use of (r), show a very mixed pattern in their social evaluation of this variable.

This result is typical of many other empirical findings which confirm the view of New York City as a single speech community, united by a uniform evaluation of linguistic features, yet diversified by increasing stratification in objective performance.

The special role of the lower middle class in linguistic change has been illustrated here in only one example, the crossover pattern of Fig. 4.2. We can look ahead to the more detailed discussion of the next chapter and consider other evidence for the special behavior of this group. When Fig. 4.3 is replicated for increasingly formal styles, we see that in each age level, the lower middle class shows the greatest tendency towards the introduction of r-pronunciation, and in the most formal styles, goes far beyond the upper-middle-class level in this respect. A great deal of evidence shows that lower-middle-class speakers have the greatest tendency towards linguistic insecurity, and therefore tend to adopt, even in middle age, the prestige forms used by the youngest members of the highest-ranking class. This linguistic insecurity is shown by the very wide range of stylistic variation used by lower-middle-class speakers: by their great fluctuation within a given stylistic context; by their conscious striving for correctness; and by their strongly negative attitudes towards their native speech pattern.

A simple yet accurate measure of linguistic insecurity was obtained by an independent approach, based on lexical behavior. The subjects were presented with 18 words which have socially significant variants in pronunciation: *vase*, *aunt*, *escalator*, etc., and were asked to select the form they thought was correct: [veiz - va:z], [æ · nt - a · nt], [eskaletə - eskju:letə-], etc. They were then asked to indicate which form they usually used themselves. The total number of cases

in which these two choices differed was taken as the Index of Linguistic Insecurity (ILI). By this measure, the lower middle class showed much the greatest degree of linguistic insecurity (see Table 5.1).

Social stratification and its consequences are only one type of social process which is reflected in linguistic structures. The interaction of ethnic groups in New York City—Jews, Italians, blacks, and Puerto Ricans—is also reflected in these and other linguistic variables. For some variables, New York City blacks participate in the same structure of social and stylistic variation as white New Yorkers. For other variables, there is an absolute differentiation of white and black which reflects the process of social segregation characteristic of the city. For example, there is a southern phonological characteristic which merges the vowels /i/ and /e/ before nasals: *pin* and *pen*, since and sense, are homonyms: "I asked for a straight [pin] and he gave me a writing [pin]." In New York City, this phonological trait has been generalized throughout the black community, so that the younger speakers, whether or not they show other southern characteristics in their speech, regularly show this merger. Thus this linguistic characteristic acts as an absolute differentiator of the black group, reflecting the social processes which identify the racial group as a whole. Similar phonological characteristics can be found marking the Puerto Rican group.³

Segregation of black and white may be seen in aspects of linguistic behavior quite distinct from the phonological system. Our investigation of New York City speech includes a number of semantic studies: one of the most fruitful of these concerns the semantic structures which revolve about the term *common sense*. This term lies at the center of one of the most important areas of intellectual activity for most Americans. It is a term frequently used, with considerable effect; its meaning is often debated, and questions about common sense evoke substantial intellectual effort from most of our subjects. Blacks use the term *common sense*, but also an equivalent

3. Most New Yorkers differentiate the vowels of *can* as in "in can" from those of *can* in "I can." None of the Puerto Rican subjects interviewed showed a consistent use of this phonemic distinction. Puerto Rican speakers also show patterns of consonant cluster simplification which are different from those of both black and white New Yorkers. Clusters ending in *-rd* are simplified, and preconsonantal *r* is treated as a consonant: a good car' game. This does not fall within the range of variations open to other New Yorkers, who treat *-r-* as a vowel tactically, quite different from *-l-* in good ol' Mike.

term which is not a part of the native vocabulary of any white speakers. This term is *mother-wit*, or *mother-with* [maðə-witθ]. For a few white speakers, *mother-wit* is identified as an archaic, learned term: but for blacks, it is a native term used frequently by old members of the household, referring to a complex of emotions and concepts that is quite important to them. Yet blacks have no idiom that white people do not use *mother-wit*, and whites have no idiom of the black use of this term. Contrast this complete lack of communication in an important area of intellectual activity, with the smooth and regular transmission of slang terms from black musicians to the white population as a whole.

The process of social segregation springs from causes and mechanisms which have been studied in detail. However, the opposite process of social integration is less obvious, and on the plane of linguistic structure, it is not at all clear how it takes place. Consider the semantic structure of *common sense*. When we analyze the semantic components of this term, its position in a hierarchical taxonomy, and its relation to coordinate terms in a semantic paradigm, we see great differences in the semantic structures used by various speakers.

I can best illustrate this diversity by contrasting two types of responses to our questions on common sense, responses which usually fall into two consistent sets. Respondent A may think *common sense* as just 'sensible talk.' If he understands the cognitive content of an utterance, that to him is common sense. Respondent B considers common sense to be the highest form of rational activity: the application of knowledge to solve the most difficult problem. Do most people have common sense? A says yes, B says no. Why has a great deal of common sense? A thinks that doctors, lawyers, professors have the most. B thinks that uneducated people are most apt to have common sense, and immediately calls to mind several highly educated people with no common sense at all. If we say "I and two make four," is that an example of common sense? A says yes, B says no. Can we say that a person is intelligent, yet has no common sense? A says no, because intelligence is the same as common sense. B says yes, common sense and intelligence are quite different. A believes that if someone can be called smart, he would also have common sense; B sees no connection between smartness and common sense. Can one have wisdom, and yet no common sense? A says yes, B says no.

The extreme differences between types A and B, which are in

independent of social stratification, lead us to question the possibility of semantic integration. Can such individuals, who have radically opposed semantic structures for *common sense*, be said to understand one another? Can the term *common sense* be used to communicate meaning between these speakers? Some writers (particularly the followers of General Semantics) feel that native speakers of English usually do not understand one another, that such opposing structures inevitably lead to misunderstanding. My own results lead me to infer the opposite. People do understand one another: semantic integration seems to take place through a central set of relations of equivalence and attribution upon which all English speakers agree. With only a few exceptions, all subjects agree that *common sense* falls under the superordinate judgment: it is 'good judgment'. Equally high agreement is found in the collocation of *practical*, or *everyday*, with *common sense*. We have no simple term to describe the quality of 'not being learned from books', yet there is also a very high degree of agreement in this attribute of *common sense*.

If semantic integration takes place, it must be by a social process in which extreme variants are suppressed in group interaction at the expense of central, or core values. Further studies are required to determine if such a mechanism does in fact operate.

This discussion has presented a number of aspects of language behavior in which linguistic structures are seen to reflect social processes. In the overall view, there is a wide range of benefits which may be drawn from the interaction of sociological and linguistic investigations. These may be considered under three headings, in order of increasing generality:

1. Linguistic indexes provide a large body of quantitative data which reflect the influence of many independent variables. It does not seem impractical for tape-recorded data of this type to be collected and analyzed by social scientists who are not primarily linguists. Once the social significance of a given linguistic variant has been determined, by methods such as those outlined above, this variable may then serve as an index to measure other forms of social behavior: upward social aspirations, social mobility and insecurity, changes in social stratification and segregation.
2. Many of the fundamental concepts of sociology are exemplified in the results of these studies of linguistic variation. The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use

of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage. Similarly, through observations of linguistic behavior it is possible to make detailed studies of the structure of class stratification in a given community. We find that there are some linguistic variables which are correlated with an abstract measure of class position, derived from a combination of several non-isomorphic indicators, where no single, less abstract measure will yield equally good correlations.

3. If we consider seriously the concept of language as a form of social behavior, it is evident that any theoretical advance in the analysis of the mechanism of linguistic evolution will contribute directly to the general theory of social evolution. In this respect, it is necessary for linguists to refine and extend their methods of structural analysis to the use of language in complex urban societies. For this purpose, linguistics may now draw upon the techniques of survey methodology; more importantly, many of the theoretical approaches of linguistics may be reinterpreted in the light of more general concepts of social behavior developed by other social sciences. Thus the main achievements of linguistic science, which may formerly have appeared remote and irrelevant to many sociologists, may eventually be seen as consistent with the present direction of sociology, and valuable for the understanding of social function and social change.