

**Matthew J. Gordon. *LABOV: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, xii+252 pp.)**

**Costin-Valentin OANCEA  
"Ovidius" University of Constanța**

Matthew J. Gordon's book *LABOV: A Guide for the Perplexed*, published in the "Guide for the Perplexed" series by Bloomsbury is devoted to the work of one of the most important sociolinguists of all time – William Labov. The book contains a list of figures (p. x), nine chapters (pp. 1-237), a Bibliography (p. 238- 246) and an Index (pp. 247-252).

The first chapter, "*The challenges of Labov*" introduces the reader to Labov's field of expertise and also provides important biographical information about the American sociolinguist. The chapter starts by addressing two questions: "Who is William Labov? What is the significance of his work?" Gordon draws a distinction between sociolinguistics and linguistics, the former "clearly advertises the field's primary address at the intersection of language and society" (p. 7). Included in this chapter is a brief biography of Labov, born on December 4, 1927. He graduated in 1948 from Harvard University with a degree in English and Philosophy. He worked as an industrial chemist and he entered as a graduate student at Columbia University where he completed an MA in 1963 and a PhD in 1944. The last part of this chapter is devoted to the so-called Labovian sociolinguistics, and stresses the idea that Labov relies on quantitative analysis (statistical comparisons) and correlates linguistic variables with social ones like age and social class. An overview of the structure of this book ends this chapter.

Chapter 2, "*Linguistics and sociolinguistics before Labov*" starts by discussing linguistics as "the science of language" (p. 22). The author highlights the idea that language is a "highly structured system, a kind of network of connections that link forms (sound and words) with meanings" (p. 24). Phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics are described as rule-governed components of a larger language system. This discussion is then followed by a more in-depth analysis of the concepts used in phonetics and phonology as this is the area that Labov concentrated most in his studies. Gordon also discusses the approaches to variation used before Labov and he mentions "one of the giants of American linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century", i.e. Leonard Bloomfield (p. 31). The chapter finishes with a thorough analysis of dialect geography, with a focus on the (ing) variable and some of the findings regarding this variable (Fisher 1958).

The third chapter, "*How to establish a field as a graduate student*" comprises three important parts which are actually three of the most important studies carried out by Labov when he entered the field. The first subchapter presents Labov's master thesis, i.e. his Martha's Vineyard study (1963), which focused on the pronunciation of two diphthongs, /ai/ and /au/. The second part of this chapter presents his doctoral dissertation on the social stratification of New York City speech, which was completed in 1964 and published in 1966 as *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. The chapter ends with a discussion of his department store study, which focused on the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/. The data collection methods, the methodology, fieldwork, findings and ideas are described in detail and show why Labov has become one of the most cited sociolinguist worldwide.

Chapter 4, "*A variationist approach to language*" expands on ideas discussed in the previous chapters and centres upon three key tenets of what is known as the "Labovian paradigm": (i) Variation is inherent to linguistic structure; (ii) A socially realistic linguistics offers valuable insights to the study of language; (iii) Quantitative methods can reveal

patterns where casual observation sees only chaos (p. 78). Notions such as ‘orderly heterogeneity’, ‘speech community’ ‘linguistic variable rules’, and ‘the accountability principle’ are introduced and discussed at length accompanied by well-chosen examples which testify the importance of these concepts in Labov’s work.

Chapter 5, “*Speech styles and discourse*” considers the significance of Labov’s research on style for methodology as well as theory in sociolinguistics. Included here is a discussion of the sociolinguistic interview, the techniques used by Labov to collect data, as well as the problems he faced (e.g. overcoming the Observer’s Paradox). Gordon also presented insights from the study of style, showing the way in which Labov investigated style. According to Labov (2001:86) “the direct study of style shifting in social groups has been an auxiliary undertaking designed to throw light on the main findings of the community pattern.” The last part of this chapter examines Labov’s contributions to the study of discourse analysis, more exactly to the study of narratives and interactive talk.

The sixth chapter, “*The ‘socio’ of sociolinguistics*” delves into the social aspects of language, more precisely the social variables used by Labov in his studies. The social variable of social class is discussed at length and Gordon insists on the statistical methods used by Labov (the multivariate analysis) which enabled him to “explore class-related effects in various ways” (p. 137). Next, the term of social network is presented, which the American sociolinguist used in his Harlem study (1972). One of the most researched social variables is then reviewed, i.e. gender. There are countless studies focusing on this variable in the English-speaking communities. Among the sociolinguistic principles formulated by Labov we find the following: “For stable sociolinguistic variables, women show a lower rate of stigmatised variants and a higher rate of prestige variants than men. (Labov, 2001: 266); “In linguistic change from above, women adopt prestige forms at a higher rate than men (Labov, 2001: 274). This chapter ends with a discussion of ethnicity and its role in sociolinguistic variation.

Chapter seven, “*Labov as a historical linguist*” presents the study of language change. The author describes the variationist paradigm and the methodological issues involved. According to Labov, systematic observation of variation within a speech community can detect active changes (see also Eckert 2012). This notion was first introduced in his study of Martha’s Vineyard and was later on refined in his seminal work on New York City and Philadelphia speech. This marked a turning point in sociolinguistic analysis as Labov proposed a variationist theory of language change and a new field of study was born – variationist sociolinguistics (see also Tagliamonte 2006, 2011). Gordon astutely presents the key factors which led Labov to propose such a theory: the social factors involved in language change as well as the general patterns of sound change, since Labov’s work tackled phonological variation. The chapter concludes by introducing “The Atlas of North American English” (ANAE) which is a large-format volume strewn with over 120 maps charting the results.

Chapter eight, “*African American English: lessons learned, lessons taught*” commences with a few remarks on the features of African American English, and answers the question “What is African American (Vernacular) English?”. After this preamble, Gordon reviews Labov’s analyses of AAVE and the ways in which studying dialects have shaped the models and theories developed by Labov. He was one of the advocates of the importance of dialects and of non-standard speech and he has tried to combat the negative attitudes towards AAVE. Labov was also involved in two legal cases (Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1977 and Oakland, California in 1996) as several African American parents filed suit against school officials. The chapter ends with the ways in which African American English can be further studied as well as its grammatical features, the formation of creoles and changes with other varieties.

The last chapter, "The revolution at 50" highlights the ways in which researchers carry on Labov's work, and continue to use his revolutionary ideas by applying them to different speech communities. Moreover, new areas of research, shaped by Labov's work have arisen: sociophonetics, perceptual dialectology. The chapter ends with a short summary of Labov's contribution to the field of sociolinguistics, urging your researchers and non-specialists alike to read and delve into Labov's work.

Writing a book about the work of William Labov is no easy task. Gordon manages to present his revolutionary ideas in a coherent way and in a chronological order. It represents a guide for young or senior researchers as well as for neophytes into the intricate domain of sociolinguistics. It is important to highlight the fact that all the basic concepts used by Labov are presented in a clear and easy-to-grasp way so that everybody can get acquainted with the methods and theories developed by the American sociolinguist. All the information presented in this guide is chronological, as aforementioned, as this is one of the strengths of this book. It allows you to follow Labov's mind and see the ideas which shaped his theories and the things he used to develop the models of analysis.

To sum up, this book is a valuable contribution to the library of any researcher interested in sociolinguistics, as nowadays it is really difficult to write a paper on sociolinguistics and not quote William Labov. If Labov were to write his memoirs, they would certainly look like Gordon's book. For achieving all of these, the author is to be congratulated.

#### **References:**

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