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# Bill Labov: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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## ABSTRACT

Bill Labov passed away peacefully at home on December 17, 2024, with his wife and fellow Penn linguist Gillian Sankoff by his side. He leaves behind a legacy so large that it is hard to put into words. All three authors were fortunate enough to have had Bill as our PhD supervisor (Laurel: 2012, Meredith: 2014, Betsy: 2018). We feel that the many hours we spent in his presence and with his work have given us a good insight into who and how he was. We also feel deep love and gratitude for him and for his imprint on the field and on us. As such, this piece is our reflection on Bill as a person, an advisor, and a scholar, from our perspective as three of his students from his later years.

## 1 | Introduction

When we were asked to write a piece about Bill Labov for the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, all three of us felt the weight of this task. How could we do justice to Bill's brilliance, his intensity, his quirkiness, and his love of humanity? And what could we add to the rich canon that he's written about his own work, or that other scholars have written about his work and about the field? But we found that as incomplete as our contribution must be, that we still had something to say. All three of us were fortunate enough to have had Bill as our PhD supervisor (Laurel: 2012, Meredith: 2014, Betsy: 2018). We feel that the many hours we spent in his presence and with his work have given us a good insight into who and how he was. We also feel deep love and gratitude for him and for his imprint on the field and on us. As such, this piece is our reflection on Bill as a person, an advisor, and a scholar, from our perspective as three of his students from his later years. It is not intended to be a complete biography or an exhaustive summary of his many and towering contributions—for those, we point readers to Hazen (2010), Gordon (2006, 2013, 2018), and the special issue of *Journal of Sociolinguistics 20*(4) (2016). For Labov's own reflections on his career, see Labov (2001a, 2009) and Labov and Sankoff (2023); for those of other students of his, see Chambers (2017).

In this piece,[1] we try to give equal weight to Bill's personhood and his scholarly achievements. We aim to capture his intensity, warmth, and generosity. We also take the opportunity to spotlight certain of his scholarly contributions, in a noncomprehensive way. Specifically, we discuss some points on which he is often misinterpreted, and some areas of research he left ripe for the next generation. As such, we also intend this piece to be a call to work. Rather than comprehensively enumerating what he did, we focus on the contributions he set future generations of scholars up to make. Given his generosity as a mentor and his confidence in young scholars' ability to make worthy contributions, we think this is a suitable way to honor his memory.

## 2 | Bill's Career

### 2.1 | A Brief Academic Biography

Bill transformed the field of linguistics several times in just a few short years, introducing the tape recorder to capture how people really talk, developing the linguistic variable as an analytic object that could be quantified and statistically analyzed, and rapidly producing a landslide of evidence that in fact the linguistic variability long dismissed as noise was (1) deeply intertwined with

social factors and (2) often an indication of ongoing language change. His Master's thesis on Martha's Vineyard (1963) quickly convinced linguists of a critically important new idea: that social meaning can impact sound change. Just 1 year later, his PhD dissertation, later published as *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (1966), leveraged cutting-edge social science sampling methods and new quantitative techniques to capture the social profiles of both stable and changing variables. The work was immediately recognized as foundational, and Bill's advisor Uriel Weinreich nominated it for Columbia University's prestigious Ansley Award, stating in his recommendation letter that the field is "likely some day to look back to this book as the Magna Charta [*sic*] of its foundation as a discipline" (Weinreich 1964). Bill did not win the award, but the field emerged all the same.[2] One piece of this work, the Department Store Study, showcases his characteristic blend of clever field experimental design and rigorous testing of hypotheses. It is written in such an accessible style that it has become a mainstay of introductory undergraduate sociolinguistics classes around the world and has inspired endless "fourth floor" quips over the years. These early projects represent major strides toward Bill's career-long project of breaking down the long-held Saussaurian separation of synchrony from diachrony.

Immediately after finishing his PhD in 1964, Bill became an Assistant Professor at Columbia, where he undertook a groundbreaking study of Black teenagers in Harlem. This project produced the first of many papers on Black English and advocacy for Black speakers. Through his characteristic care, rigor, and clear-eyed insistence on the equality of nonstandard varieties, Bill echoed the calls from Black scholars to acknowledge the logic of nonstandard English(es). This work put him in a position to testify to the regularity and legitimacy of Black English in front of Congress during the Ebonics controversy and in court during the now-famous Black English trial in Ann Arbor. Bill believed strongly that linguists have an obligation to use their knowledge to make speakers' lives better, and he showed how to put this belief into action.

His theoretical contributions established a comprehensive foundation for quantitative sociolinguistics and at the same time touched nearly every other subfield of linguistics. As a linguist, Bill really cared about what was real in language. Of course, he is well known for his careful attention to how language is really used in everyday social context, but he was also happy to make contact with the reality of morpheme boundaries, or consonant resyllabification, or chain shifts—to Bill, these were all part of the same linguistic package as the topics that get labeled "sociolinguistics" per se. Indeed, he objected to the very label of "sociolinguistics," to the point of naming his lab the Linguistics Lab, on the grounds that there could be no linguistics that is not social. At the same time, he also cared deeply about people and the realities of their lives. In his essay *How I got into linguistics and what I got out of it* (published as Labov 2001a), he says "some facts—the ones that affect people's life chances—are more important than others" (Labov 2001a, 462). Bill's concern for how language shapes people's lived experiences exerted a constant force on his work throughout his career. Just as he understood the elements of our social worlds and our grammars to be part of the same package, he also viewed the scientific study of language as inseparable from the consequences of language in the world.

### 2.2 | A Common Theme: Rejecting Hierarchy

Throughout his career, Bill aggressively rejected a status quo idea of hierarchy. This enabled him to clearly see speakers of stigmatized varieties as language experts in their own right, and to see their language as a valued object of study. His rejection of hierarchy also carried with it a rejection of the academic tendency to dragon-slay. He insisted constantly that "in general, linguists are an alert and intelligent subset of the population" (Labov 2016, 596). He cared about understanding what is true about language, not about winning an argument. So as graduate students in journal clubs, when we were excited to be able to point out flaws in an article that we read, Bill re-oriented us to the better question of "what have we learned?" from each article. When scholars challenged him or provided a new research direction, Bill was often one of the strongest champions of their new contribution. Alan Bell writes, for instance, that Bill "was instrumental for bringing [my] Audience Design article (1984)—which included critique of [Bill's] approach—into publication in *Language and Society*" (Bell et al. 2016, 406). After Shana Poplack ignored Bill's advice to avoid trying to develop a variationist approach for code-switching, she writes: "A couple of years later, he was the first to say, 'Thank god you never listen to me, Shana!'" (Chambers 2017, 19). In line with his insistence that linguists are smart people, Bill rejected anything that had a whiff of tribalism. He always asked the most generous form of any question at conferences, and his Linguistics Lab was always open to visitors (see Chambers 2017 for some recollections of memorable visits to Penn at Labov's invitation). When it came time each year for the Penn sociolinguistics students and faculty to put together the selected proceedings of New Ways of Analyzing Variation (NWAV), to be published in the *Penn Working Papers in Linguistics*, it was Bill who ensured representation from every major sociolinguistics program.

Bill's rejection of hierarchy meant that his advisees were faced with the double-edged sword of his respect and his sky-high expectations. Working with Bill was *intense*. He saw all work as an opportunity to really find something out about language, not just as an opportunity to train students with the skills to find things out in the future. So John Rickford ended up with a 600-page dissertation because Bill thought it was incomplete without a component on morphosyntactic variation (Chambers 2017, 16). And when a recent high school graduate named Joshua Waltezky came into Bill's orbit, Bill responded like he did with so many other people: by inviting him to join the work. The result was Labov and Waletzky (1967), which launched a new scholarly field of narrative analysis. Bill's intensity was so palpable even late in his career that when he got in a minor bike accident in his early eighties, it did not surprise any of his students to learn that a precautionary magnetic resonance imaging revealed that he had the brain of a 25-year-old (a fact that he repeated with delight in response to questions about the injury on his neck).

Still, Bill contained multitudes. His intensity was counterbalanced by his warmth, good humor, and mischievous streak. As his students, we scribbled down his best *bon mots* in our class notes. He memorably called vowels "rascals," described certain software as "fiendish," and hid within Plotnik—the vowel

plotting software that he taught himself programming in order to create—easter eggs of laughing demons, "because vowels are devilish." Penny Eckert, in Chambers (2017, 12), described his lab at Columbia as a "joyful oasis," and that was our experience at Penn as well. He regularly burst into our offices to show us something on his laptop, ranging from the brilliant to the comical—as when, faced with a capital "E" in a PDF that he needed to turn into a capital "B" but could neither delete nor type over, he figured out how to superimpose tiny vertical lines connecting the open spaces, resulting in a vague, angular approximation of a capital "B" which Laurel remembers him crowing over.

In the rest of this piece, we discuss four major themes that we see in Bill's work and which we consider to be often misinterpreted and/or underexplored. This is not meant to be exhaustive, and it is naturally biased toward our own scholarly interests in linguistics. But it demonstrates the diversity of Bill's interests within sociolinguistics and the wide-ranging implications of those interests for the study of language more generally.

## 3 | Themes in Bill's Work

### 3.1 | Finding Generalizations in Language

A consistent throughline of Bill's scientific rigor is how he drew order out of apparent chaos by operationalizing as much as possible. As his students, we have always understood these operationalizations not as inviolable truths, but rather as frameworks from which to understand how language typically changes, and what the limits of those frameworks are. For instance, one of Bill's early transformative contributions was the methodological Principle of Accountability: the idea that we must not only count the number of instances of a particular variant, but also the number of times that it *could* have appeared but did not (Labov 1972, 72). Normalizing an analysis in this way allows us to directly compare speakers and obtain a clearer picture of language change in the community. It also connects variation directly to generative grammatical theory, by treating variation as "a closed set of possibilities generated by a set of ordered processes" (Labov 2016, 596). But while the Principle of Accountability is fundamental in most cases, there is also work showing that sometimes it can be valuable to violate it by looking outside of the envelope of variation: because doing so can help us understand why or how a feature is changing (see, e.g., Aaron 2010; Bailey, Cukor-Avila, and Salinas 2002; Blake 1997; Brook 2018). In a similar way, Bill's Attention Paid to Speech paradigm (Labov 2006[1966], ch. 4) is best understood as a methodological tactic, one "which was designed as a means of ordering variation within the interview rather than a description of style shifting in everyday life" (Labov 2016, 586)[3].

Bill also posited a number of theoretical principles of language change: for instance, principles of gender differentiation (Labov 1990), principles of vowel shifting (Labov 1994, 116), the apparent time hypothesis (Labov 1963, 2006[1966], ch. 9), and *inter alia*. We understand these principles to be about capturing statistical likelihoods, identifying the broad realities of language change, and providing a clear direction for research that investigates their edges, inviting refinement or rejection of them. We are reminded of the joke where a physicist draws a perfect circle, saying "Consider this cow!": spheres are easy to calculate big-picture effects for, and the results are close enough to the real world for us to still learn something new and valuable from them.[4] It is not a claim that cows are spheres, but rather a simplification for the sake of enabling a big-picture understanding. Once the big picture is in place, it is easier to then identify the nuances that are not captured by the broad principle. For instance, the Apparent Time hypothesis enables synchronic analysis of language change by relying on the idea that once speakers are adults, they basically speak the way they are going to speak for the rest of their lives. Of course, we know that speakers can exhibit perturbations to the pattern, as in lifespan change (Sankoff and Blondeau 2007) and age grading (Wagner 2012), often triggered by major life events (MacKenzie forthcoming, Stefánsdóttir and Ingason 2018). From the general principle, we gain the ability to capture general patterns of large-scale language change, and a framework that allows us to identify the limits of the principle and the creative capabilities of speakers.

On occasion, Bill's operationalizations have been misinterpreted. There are two in particular that we would like to highlight because we think that, in these cases, the confusion emerges from the fact that the social outcomes of the principles have been misinterpreted as the principle itself. The first of these is Bill's use of the term *vernacular*, which he has attempted to define as a "purely technical term" to "signify the language first acquired by the language learner [and] controlled perfectly" (Labov 2006[1966], 86). This variety is, by this definition, the most valuable for scholars of language change because it is the most systematic on an individual level and provides the best snapshot of how the speech community as a whole is changing (Labov 1972a: 208; 1984, 2001, 104). All speakers have their own vernacular, "some quite close to the network standard, some quite remote from it" (Labov 2006[1966], 86). So, Bill's interest was in obtaining the vernacular from speakers because that are the data that can best illuminate how the language of the speech community overall is changing. But this term is regularly conflated with *nonstandard*. This is due in part to the common use of the term *vernacular* to refer to dialects (see Coupland 2016 for an overview). This lay use of *vernacular* dovetails with the label *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE), in which the *vernacular* part conveys something like "syntax that is distinct from network standard syntax." The confusion is also in part due to sociolinguists' interest in studying speech from working class or otherwise normatively devalued speakers, whose language variety is deemed *nonstandard* by the social elite. For these speakers, the most vernacular sections of their speech will also contain the highest rates of nonstandard forms. The nonstandard forms are an *outcome*, not a defining criterion, of those speakers' vernacular.

A similar conflation of outcome and criteria can be found with the terms *change from above* and *change from below*. Labov has often used these terms in ways that capture several characteristics at once: the level of speaker consciousness involved with the change (e.g., changes from above are above the level of conscious awareness), the direction of the change in the social hierarchy (e.g., changes from above are often led by members of higher status social groups), and their origins vis-à-vis the speech community (e.g., changes from above originate outside of, rather

than within, the speech community undergoing them).[5] We understand the first of these characteristics to be the definition of the terms, and the second and third to be common outcomes of the different types. Baranowski (2013, 291) cites personal communication from Bill that "the defining element in change from above or below is the level of social awareness and not the direction of change in terms of social groups." So, for instance, presumably changes from above the level of conscious awareness can be actuated among lower social groups, but the community's necessary awareness of them will make them unlikely to progress given the low social standing of those groups. We see a notable common exception to this in the regular borrowing of African American English lexical items into standardized varieties as new slang terms, a clear instance of change from above moving from a stigmatized variety into more socially prestigious varieties. Labov's work here pushes us to ask whether these characteristics always go together in the same way, or whether (and, if so, when) mismatches can occur.

### 3.2 | The Limits of Social Evaluation

A related thread running through several decades' worth of Labov's work is the observation that some linguistic phenomena are consistently below the social radar, that is, immune from social awareness and/or evaluation. Much of this thinking seems to have been set in motion by Labov 1993 (though the idea can be found in even earlier work of his). Labov (1993) is a draft version of a talk presented at New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English (NWAVE) 22, Ottawa, titled "The unobservability of structure and its linguistic consequences." It has been cited dozens of times (according to Google Scholar) but was never actually published or even finished. Our own copy is that draft .doc file, which Bill had emailed out to a number of students over the years. Because that paper is influential, often misconstrued, and not really in circulation, we take this opportunity to present its ideas in some detail.

Labov (1993) concerns itself with the "unobservability of structure," that is, the observation that "the hierarchical sets of phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic relationships that make up the body of linguistic structure are not accessible to observation or evaluation by members of the speech community" (2). Labov interprets "structure" broadly, to comprise phonological mergers and splits (on which see Eckert and Labov 2017), the internal constraints on variation (as in the greater use of the [in] variant of English *-ing* in verbal than nominal forms), and the disruption of paradigmatic relationships between morphological forms (as in the contraction *aren't* for *am + not* in tag questions, which differs from other forms of *be*, which contract transparently with *not*). He sums up these generalizations with what he calls *the Interface Principle*: "Members of the speech community evaluate the surface forms of language but not more abstract structural features. More specifically, social evaluation bears upon the allophones and lexical stems of the language, but not upon phonemic contrasts, rule ordering, or the direction or order of variable constraints" (Labov 1993, 5). The Interface Principle has sometimes been misinterpreted as referring specifically to the idea that (morpho)syntactic variables cannot attract social evaluation, but the wording quoted above makes it clear that it was not intended to be this narrow. For further critique of the idea that (morpho)syntactic variation is somehow sociolinguistically special, and a metastudy of sociolinguistic literature testing this assumption, see MacKenzie and Robinson (forthcoming).

A considerable portion of Labov (1993) is dedicated to the idea that language-internal constraints on variation are independent from social ones. He captures this in his *Principle of Relative Independence*: "Where individual constraints on language are not entirely independent, the set of external [social] and the set of internal [linguistic] constraints on language variation are independent relative to each other" (Labov 1993, 11–12). This idea has not been pursued much in the variationist literature, though it surfaces in Weiner and Labov (1983) (and see Cutler et al. Forthcoming). We suggest that there is work to be done exploring the validity of the Principle of Relative Independence across different types of variables and different domains of sociolinguistic knowledge.

Bringing more empirical data to bear on the Interface Principle and the Principle of Relative Independence will also shed light on the nature of how sociolinguistic variation and the conditions that govern it are stored and produced by the linguistic system (Tamminga et al. 2016). That is, if there are indeed some aspects of language that are "invisible" to social conditioning, this must be captured in models of how the linguistic system interfaces with systems of social cognition (Campbell-Kibler 2016). This interface is still not well understood. On this point, Labov puts forward a "black box" called the *sociolinguistic monitor*: "the device that is responsible for evaluating the social significance of utterances" (Labov 1993, 22). Labov and colleagues have probed the sensitivity of the sociolinguistic monitor to rates of variant usage (Labov et al. 2011), but we lack specifics on how this monitoring device may be grounded in other systems of social perception (Campbell-Kibler 2016), and why or how certain elements of language should elude it. More generally, these issues implicate questions about the linguistic reality of the sociolinguistic variable and whether the target of sociolinguistic evaluation is that variable or the individual variants that instantiate it (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2011; Dinkin 2016).

The isolation of some linguistic elements from social evaluation also has implications for change. On the nature of language change in the phonetic domain, Eckert (2019: 1) takes a strong position on the role of social factors, saying "while I cannot say that sound change never progresses without taking on social meaning, I have never seen a contemporary example of one that did." Language-internal constraints on variation are something that Labov proposes to be isolated from social evaluation—but the constraints that govern variation can themselves change (MacKenzie 2019). Do those changes actually take on social meaning in the way Eckert proposes phonetic changes do, in contravention of the Principle of Relative Independence? In fact, they might. Sneller, in a study of change in the phonological pattern of short-a tensing in Philadelphia English, finds that "older participants are found to produce negative evaluations of the *conditioning factors* rather than the phonetic realization of those conditioning factors. These results reveal a surprisingly abstract evaluation by older participants" (Sneller 2018, 166). Are cases like this—where internal constraints are rendered available for social evaluation in a situation of rapid change—the rule or the exception?

As we discussed in Section 3.1, Bill never intended his principles to be exceptionless. He regularly invokes negative concord, which he calls "an entirely structural variable," as a clear exception to his generalization about structural variables escaping social judgement (Labov 1993, 26; 2001, 28). He hedges his formulation of the Interface Principle in his 2001 book with "For the most part," and describes mergers there as "**almost** entirely without social evaluation" (Labov 2001b: 28, emphasis ours). How numerous are the exceptions to these principles? What explains them? Only broad typological studies across multiple variable at different levels of language, and across diverse speech communities, can answer how wide-ranging these principles actually are.

### 3.3 | The Relationship Between the Individual and the Community

Bill has written, in many publications, that the community is "analytically prior" to the individual (Labov 2012, *inter alia*), sometimes stating this point as strongly as "there are no individuals from a linguistic point of view" (Gordon 2006, 341). This point has sometimes been understood as a claim that individual speakers are not important or are not worth investigating closely. While the clearest articulation of Bill's orientation towards individuals and the community can be found in his own writing (especially Labov 2012), we think it's worth clarifying his position, as we understand it.

First, Bill's insistence on the community as the linguistic unit of interest falls out from the empirical data. The prevailing idea in the 1960s when Bill entered the field was that individual speakers have a "pure" idiolect developed during their early years (Chomsky's famous "ideal speaker-hearer"; Chomsky 1965, 3) and that the community is "seen as a vague average [...] of these idiolectal variants" (Labov 2012, 266). But as early as Labov's seminal piece *Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change* (Weinreich et al. 1968), he and his coauthors pointed to data that contradict this model of transmission. Their evidence is as follows: (1) children of non-local parents consistently acquire their community's pattern and (2) adolescents continue to develop their sociolinguistic repertoire and advance change beyond the period of initial acquisition, indicating an iterative process of looking outward to their slightly older peers as models for their own production. Labov highlights the outward orientation of children in his 2016 commentary: "Children everywhere reject the speech pattern of their parents if it differs from that of the community. The importance of this fact cannot be overstated. Language might have evolved as a form that is fixed on first acquisition, as found in many other species. But we know now that the critical period is a long one, and the driving forces of language change extend well into late adolescence" (Labov 2016, 598). These facts drew Bill to conclude that human language is "the capacity to perceive, reproduce, and employ" (Labov 2012, 266) the patterns in one's speech community, and *not* a static system acquired only via transmission from a caregiver. This is not a claim about the community being more *valuable* than individuals, but rather a claim about how best to *understand* individuals: that "the linguistic behavior of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the communities that they belong to" (Labov 2006[1966], 380).

Second, we have observed that Bill, throughout his entire career, had a tendency to highlight the piece that he felt was being overlooked in others' treatment of the data. So, his early work is a direct response to the "uncompromising background of the hegemonic [Chomskyan] theory of the time" (Bell et al. 2016, 402), which followed Paul (1880) in its focus on the individual as the unit of analysis. Against this backdrop, Bill brought the explanatory power of the community to the fore. This rhetorical strategy showed up in Bill's approach to advising, too. With Meredith, whose dissertation work was most concerned with how individuals' cognitive processes impact sociolinguistic patterns, Bill kept asking her to explain the community that those individuals are embedded in. With Betsy, whose dissertation was most concerned with how social networks influence structural change in the community, Bill kept asking about the specific individuals who made up the data, what they believed, and how their personal orientation could explain their position in the plots (see Sneller 2024 for the fruit of this effort).

Finally, we come back to Bill's research program. His fundamental theoretical interest has always been in understanding how language changes. Empirical data caused Bill to hold that the "language" undergoing change is best understood as a community-level phenomenon. So, understanding how language is changing requires an understanding both of what the community as a whole is doing, as well as how individuals react to and push forward language change. To understand how language changes, Bill starts with the need to understand the language as a community entity, with variation that is stratified and orderly in its heterogeneity. He reaches in both directions from that point. With the Atlas of North American English (Labov et al. 2006), he goes even more broad to provide a basic starting point of geographic patterns from which researchers can then better understand a given speech community. And throughout his entire career, he also pushed toward the individual, including powerfully clear treatments of individual speakers. Through Bill's writing, we meet and grow to love the real speakers whose language we analyze—speakers like Donald Poole in Martha's Vineyard (Labov 1963), Nathan B. and Josephine P. in New York City (Labov 2006[1966]), and Celeste and Latasha in Philadelphia (Labov 2001, 2009). Through his example (and often through his explicit advice), we are encouraged to "put a human face on [our] data" (Suzanne Evans Wagner in Chambers 2017, 20) by letting our participants' voices and individuality shine through.

### 3.4 | Sociolinguistic "Waves": All Part of the Same Project

The interplay between individual-level and community-level language, how they are influenced by and influence each other, and how they interact with social meaning strike us as major areas for future research in sociolinguistics. Of course, this work is not new; as highlighted in Section 3.3, Labov has considered individual orientation and social meaning as important to understanding language change from the very beginning (Labov 1963). And a focus on speaker identity, agency, and social meaning has been the central thrust of "third wave" sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012, *inter alia*). But there is occasionally a sense in the field that there is a fundamental tension between the individual-level approach and the large-scale community analysis that Labov is known for.

The operationalizations necessary for large-scale analysis brush over exactly that nuance and individualization that third-wave work so successfully reveals, but at the same time, individuals' linguistic choices are not interpretable without the context of their position in the broader structure of the speech community. While it can be useful to have labels for these different approaches to sociolinguistic variation, we highlight here that fundamentally, all of it is critical to understanding how language variation and change works. In other words, the field needs researchers focused on the "bird's eye view" and researchers focused on the "ant's eye view" (Eckert 2018: xi), and researchers whose work can bridge the two.

One area where work can fruitfully bridge these apparently different foci is in the question of how the outward orientation of children actually works. Labov (2007) hypothesizes that children identify an "age vector" of variation in the community, and shift their own production to the next step in that age vector, resulting in incrementation of language change on the community level. But the specific mechanisms of how children identify the age vector and implement it are still not well understood. Ethnographic work (e.g., Eckert 2011) suggests that adolescents can achieve this incrementation through style shifting as they embody *older teenage* stances, and longitudinal work (e.g., Holmes-Elliott 2021) shows that the strength of a change's covariation with age influences children's ability to increment that change. But how do all these pieces fit together? We can only understand incrementation with more data from multiple perspectives: large amounts of longitudinal production data from adolescents as they make the transition from middle to high school (one goal of Sneller's ongoing MI Diaries project, NSF #233904), as well as perception data confirming that children and adolescents really do recognize innovative variants as sounding younger (Hay et al. 2006, Cournane and MacKenzie 2022).

Another ripe area for bridging first- and third-wave approaches is in our understanding of broad social classifications like social class and what they are actually composed of. Labov (2016, 585–586), responding to Coupland's (2016, 418) critique of first-wave approaches as "overdetermined" and "fixed," writes: "That seems to me exactly right." Bill leans into the "overdetermined" nature of these classifications as necessary for comparative studies of language change over time (highlighting again Bill's primary interest in language change). But there is, of course, a lot of room for us to understand more about categories like social class and how they emerge from an aggregate of individuals' behavior.[6] On some level, we know that while individuals have a good deal of agency, the broad-brush social categories still matter. It is not surprising that, empirically, standard socioeconomic status (SES) is a strong predictor of language production because a speaker's SES is built up of personally meaningful factors like the social networks they participate in, the linguistic marketplace values that their community is adhering to, and the set of social norms a speaker is socialized into. Gillian Sankoff, in Chambers (2017), writes that "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" (6). The growing literature on covariation between multiple variables offers one promising direction for operationalizing the links between individual behavior and community patterns across different levels of granularity (for some recent contributions, see, e.g., Beaman and Guy 2022, Esposito 2024, Hurring et al. 2025). But for now, understanding exactly how social meaning, social networks, interactions, and agency build up to broad, "overdetermined" social categories—and how and when speakers can violate the overdetermined nature of their social categories—is still an open question.

We really want to highlight, with this section, Bill's perpetual refrain of "linguists are smart people" (2016:596, *inter alia*). We may be working on different angles of the problem of social meaning and language variation and change, but Bill taught us that we are all working on the same larger project.

## 4 | Conclusion: A Goodbye to Bill

Bill passed away peacefully at home on December 17, 2024, with his wife and fellow Penn linguist Gillian Sankoff by his side. He leaves behind a legacy so large that it is hard to put into words. We could go on at length about his towering scholarly contributions, but those are well documented. What we really want to end with is how he influenced the people around him. Bill shaped our field to take kindness and humanity seriously, making our little corner of the academy stronger by being more welcoming. His interactions with students and scholars, from his advisees and colleagues to strangers from around the world, were characterized by his endless generosity. He would reply to birthday cards from high school classes and converse seriously for hours with visiting undergraduates. At academic talks, he always asked the most generous form of any question, drawing out and building on the speaker's strongest points, and every reading group discussion began with "What have we learned from this paper?" He overflowed with boundless, contagious energy for the study of language. He spoke with glorious hyperbole and was truly delighted on the rare occasions when someone convinced him he was wrong about something. He jaywalked without a second glance, spearfished in Hawaii every summer, and biked to campus until well into his 80s. He never shied away from earnestness, but he also had a sly sense of humor that is recognizable in his traditional toast for a successful PhD defense: "Death to the enemies of sound change!"

We will miss him profoundly.


### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.


### Endnotes

[1] This piece is an expansion of the *In Memoriam* text written by Meredith Tamminga and Betsy Sneller for the Penn Linguistics Department website: https://www.ling.upenn.edu/people/in-memoriam.

[2] Many thanks to Isaac Bleaman, who shared Weinreich's letter of recommendation (see Bleaman 2017 for more excerpts from it) and to

Aaron Dinkin, who discovered that the 1964 Ansley award did not go to Bill.

[3] This being said, work exploring the impact of attention to speech outside of the sociolinguistic interview context finds it to be relevant there as well (e.g., Sharma 2018).

[4] As Cieri et al. (2025) point out, theoretical frameworks can become *so* abstracted from reality that they no longer provide a useful operationalization. The job of the researcher, then, is to determine the right level of abstraction (and thus the right level of granularity) for the task at hand.

[5] These three characteristics are the ones most commonly discussed, but as Hall-Lew (to appear) points out, Labov has also delineated a number of additional expected characteristics of each type of change (see Labov 1972, 2007, *inter alia*). The interested reader is recommended to consult Hall-Lew's chapter for more on this topic, as it contains a detailed survey of how the terms *change from below* and *change from above* have been used by Labov and others in the field.

[6] This is not a problem unique to sociolinguistic data, and some exciting directions emerge when we engage with sociologists (e.g., Archer 2007; Giddens 1984) working on how social structure emerges from individual behavior.

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