Language and Society (CL2.203)

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Quiz 2

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Languages: English, Hindi, Malayalam

Question 1

Part 1

Labov's study on the variety of English spoken in Martha's Vineyard is considered a very important seminal work in sociolinguistics, as he proceeded in an extremely methodical and scientific way. He carefully collected linguistic data and studied its correlation with respect to social variables like age, profession, ethnicity and place of residence.

This study was the first of its kind that followed such rigour, and therefore has been considered a model for sociolinguistic studies since.

Part 2

The overarching conclusion that Labov drew from his study was that a high centralisation in the first vowel of the diphthongs /ay/ (more accurately /aj/) and /aw/ is considered to be almost representative of the island and its traditional way of living, in a manner opposed to that of the mainland.
All further results and correlations Labov made are tied to this central link.

First, the English-origin population is considered. They are roughly split into two groups – the elderly and the youth. The elder ones are worried about the economic pressure on island life, but still unwilling to leave and opposed to the mainland's summertime incursion. In particular, the fishermen of Chilmark are strongly against these things – fishing is the backbone of the Vineyard economy, and the fishermen are implicitly considered the most original "Vineyarders". Among this group, a very high degree of centralisation is noted.
The younger English-descended residents of the island are divided in their opinion about the island. There is a section of them who look to the mainland and aspire towards a city life and a high-paying job away from the insecurity and

unemployment of their home. Centralisation is *not* a marked feature in their speech. The rest of the youth, who wish to stay on the island (or return to it eventually), retain a high degree of centralisation in their speech. In fact, hypercorrection was noted in a speaker who lived in the city for a time and returned to the island later.

The second ethnic group to be considered is the Portuguese-descended population. Here, a distinction is made, not based on age, but generation. Centralisation is not significant in 1st- and 2nd-generation Portuguese immigrants, but 3rd- and 4th-generation speakers show it a good deal more in their speech. Correspondingly, it is the latter two generations, for the most part, who identify with the island and its way of life more.

Finally, the Native American population (referred to as "Indians" in the book) is studied. Theirs is a case of being stuck between two options – while their native language is English and nothing about their livelihood is traditional, there has been a recent rise in Native American crafts and trades (although primarily for tourist purposes). Furthermore, they have been discriminated against and oppressed until not a long time ago. Thus, they express their resentment against the white population in their speech, in a kind of derision and sarcasm, but at the same time wish to be included and considered on par with the rest of the islanders.
It is the latter desire which wins out, and they too maintain a fairly high degree of centralisation in their diphthongs.

Part 3

The approach Labov followed consisted of the following steps.

First, the linguistic variable was selected. He listed out a number of properties that it was desirable for a linguistic variable to have (frequently used, stratified distribution, etc.) and isolated two such – the presence of the phoneme /r/ and the centralisation of the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/. Finally, he selected the second one.

Next, he made a study of the history of the variable, starting from the settlement of the island by Thomas Mayhew several generations previously, right up to the previous generation, from a reference called the Linguistic Atlas of New England, or LANE.

The third step involved the actual study – finding out how people actually pronounced the variable. This was done by means of a lexical questionnaire, conversation on social matters, a reading, and continual casual observations.

The findings were then measured in an objective way, plotting their formant curves on acoustic spectrograms and and quantifying their degrees of centralisation so as to obtain a numerical scale.

Then, the linguistic and social environment of the variants was studied. The

segmental environment, prosodic factors, stylistic influence, lexical considerations and distribution by age and time are some of the aspeccts considered in this section.

The final step was an investigation into the reasons for the variation. Each of the ethnic groups was considered separately, and conclusions were drawn from the correlation with the opinions of the islanders with regard to the summertime vacationers from the mainland.

Question 2

The Whorfian Hypothesis is a particular argument concerning linguistic relativism, originally propounded by Benjamin Lee Whorf. What Whorf initially put forward was that the grammar of the language one speaks affects the thoughts one has; the "implicit" structure of a language (what he referred to as *cryptotypes*[1]), he claimed, has the strongest affect on our cognition. He described language as a kind of mental strait-jacket, completely restricting and constraining our thought processes to a certain path, outside of which we are incapable of thinking.
Furthermore, he presented this statement as a *principle* and not a hypothesis – he considered it undeniable fact.

Note, furthermore, that Whorf's initial pronouncement was with regard to the *grammar* of a language (its structure) and not its lexicon. In fact, he actively dismissed the contribution of the lexical aspect in comparison to that of the grammar, to the shaping of a person's mental processes. However, widely accepted versions of the hypothesis today encompass all aspects of language, including the lexical and the grammatical.

Part of the reason why the hypothesis is so widely debated is surely the vagueness inherent in many of the terms necessary to state it. There are multiple versions of the hypothesis, of which some are obvious, some obviously false, and some simply untestable and therefore unverifiable.
The main question, however, can be divided clearly into two hypotheses – the *strong* and the *weak* ones. The strong statement of the hypothesis claims a completely deterministic affect of language on cognition, similar to Whorf's initial proposition (but, as mentioned, involving more than just grammar). The weak statement of the hypothesis only posits an influence, rather than a complete fixing of thought, by language.

My position on the strong version of the hypothesis is that it appears extremely implausible. One major point against it come immediately to mind.
If language completely fixes our thoughts, for the statement to be non-trivial, there must be something that a person's language *prevents* them from thinking.

[1]Scholz, Barbara C., Francis Jeffry Pelletier, and Geoffrey K. Pullum, "Philosophy of Linguistics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/linguistics/.

Therefore, there are some thoughts that a person is *incapable* of thinking, simply by virtue of their language. However, the possibility of bilingualism is a rejection of this theory; if the speaker of one language cannot think in any way other than what is specified by their language, they cannot learn a language which requires them to think in a different way. But we know that people do this frequently.

The weak version appears far more likely, both abstractly and in the results of studies. A common area in which the weak version commonly seeks confirmation is colour terminology across various languages.
Colours present an ideal example of a continuous space, made discrete by the terms for parts of it in a certain language. In other words, the divisions imposed on the colour scheme are not universal or fundamental in any way – they are unique to languages, and may or may not overlap. For example, the Hindi word बैंगनी encompasses the English words *purple*, *violet* and *indigo*. Similarly, the Malayalam word ചുവപ്പ് `cuvapp` encompasses *red*, *orange*, *crimson*, *maroon* and *scarlet*.

Studies of colour terms in different languages and users' perception of the corresponding colours show that if a language has different terms for two nearby regions A and B of the spectrum, they find it easier to recognise the difference, but it does not prevent them from understanding a term which covers both regions, and the same time does not preclude speakers of other languages (which conflate the regions) from recognising the difference.
Thus, speakers of Hindi can in fact distinguish, say, purple from violet, and so can Malayalam speakers differentiate orange and maroon. Conversely, English speakers have no trouble learning a word that covers all the regions of the spectrum corresponding to four or five English terms.

In conclusion, the Whorfian Hypothesis, in it strong version, is highly improbable and unlikely to hold in all generality. In contrast, the weak version is much more reasonable and has a high likelihood of being true universally, in my opinion.