

Language and Society

Quiz 2

Q1.

Read Labov's study on Martha's Vineyard (LabovVineyard.pdf provided with this quiz) carefully and answer the following questions.

1. Why is this study concerned a seminal work on linguistic change?
 2. What are the key findings of the study?
 3. What approach did Labov follow for his study?
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1. Labov's study on Martha's Vineyard is a groundbreaking discovery in the field of sociolinguistics. It was simple as well as revolutionary, the way which Labov chose to approach this. He sought to probe deeply into the correlation between the different local dialects based on social influence. The rich ethnicity of the Vineyard was also an aiding factor that gave him the leeway to study more about the region. The reason why this study is now revered is that it was one of the first ones which went beyond just making simple generalized observations pertaining to the differences in speech communities concerning a certain linguistic variable. It attempted a first scientific study of social factors behind the sound change and language alteration. It is now widely believed that the robust correspondence between linguistic facts, social factors, and speaker's attitude set the foundations for Variationist Sociolinguistics.
2. A significant feature of Martha's Vineyard study was a comparison of the centralized and decentralized variants among speakers of different ages. The work concerns the direct observation of a sound change in the context of the community life from which it stems. The change is a shift in the phonetic position of the first elements of the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/. The point of view of the study was that one cannot understand the development of a language change apart from the social life of a community in which it occurs. While paraphrasing this, we can say that social pressures are continuously operating upon language, not from some remote point in the past, but as an imminent force acting in the living present. The key findings, so to say, were various factors which affected the centralisation. These factors are
 - Stylistic Influence - Most Speakers have a variety of shifting styles of speech, and that interviews under varying conditions will produce varying amount of phonological feature, which was not the case with most Vineyarders. The tone of conversation does not influence or significantly affect the percentage of centralized forms.
 - Lexical Considerations = A few special words are given more centralisation than their phonetic form or prosodic position would usually account for. Example - words like sliding (with an alterant form sledding), which are seldom spelled, are more prone to centralization.
 - Distribution by Age and Time - Labov found that there was an increase in the degree of centralization among younger speakers in the selected sample of speakers.
3. His approach relied on quantitative methods. Often the patterns of co-variation between linguistic forms and social variables become apparent only in the light of statistical analysis, which is what he adopted. He explored a wide range of linguistic phenomena within the

variationist paradigm. The study was not a simple questionnaire, nor was it just any study of hearing and noting down the observations. His work involved *knowing* the people of the island and their spread through the different social factors (mentioned above). The fact that MV was a beautiful place (hence a booming tourist attraction) was also accounted for (though it was later deemed insignificant). The ethnic variance in the MV and the way in which this factor influenced the amount of centralization was one of the most impressive findings of his work.

Q2.

Whorfian hypothesis is much debated in linguistic literature. What is the hypothesis and why is this so debated? Do you agree with the hypothesis? Argue your case.

The hypothesis states that language influences perception and thought. It is also known as the theory of linguistic relativity. Linguistic relativity stands in close relation to semiotic-level concerns with the general relation of language and thought, and to discourse-level concerns with how patterns of language use in cultural context can affect thought. This principle suggests that the structure of a language affects its speakers' worldview or cognition, and thus people's perception are relative to their spoken language. The idea of linguistic variability has been often stated in two forms, the strong hypothesis, which is now referred to as linguistic determinism, while the weak hypothesis is the one which is mostly held by many modern linguists.

- The strong version, or linguistic determinism, says that language determines thought and that linguistic categories limit and determine cognitive categories.
- The weak version says that linguistic categories and usage only influence thought and decisions.

The reasons why this hypothesis is so widely debated can be summarised as follows :

- The argument is fundamentally circular: We argue that psychological differences give rise to linguistic differences, and we use linguistic differences to argue psychological differences.
- If languages represented completely different world-views, then the translation from African Languages to Indo-Aryan Languages should have been impossible. But demonstrably, translation and bilingualism are possible.

The second point though, can be countered by stating as a matter of fact that the translations are never exact. Consider the following famous shlok from Sanskrit, which has been translated successfully to Hindi, Marathi, Marwari, Tamil and Telugu but the English Translation of the same proved to have many semantic inconsistencies :

nīrantarāndhakārīta-digantara-kandaladamanda-sudhārasa-bindu-sāndratara-ghanāghana-
vṛnda-sandehakara-syandamāna-makaranda-bindu-bandhuratara-mākanda-taru-kulā-tālpa-kalpa-
mrḍula-sikatā-jāla-jāṭila-mūla-tala-maruvaka-miladalaghu-laghu-laya-kalīta-ramaṇīya-
pāṇīya-śālīkā-bālīkā-karāra-vinda-galantikā-galadelā-lavaṅga-pāṭala-ghanasāra-
kastūrikātisaurabha-medura-laghutara-madhura-śītalatara-saliladhārā-nirākariṣṇu-tadīya-
vimāla-vilocana-mayūkha-rekhāpasārīta-pipāsāyāsa-pathika-lokā

Meaning as per given by the English version of the translated text is highly inconsistent, (for a lack of better words) :

"In it, the distress, caused by thirst, to travellers, was alleviated by clusters of rays of the bright eyes of the girls; the rays that were shaming the currents of light, sweet and cold water charged with the strong fragrance of cardamom, clove,

saffron, camphor and musk and flowing out of the pitchers (held in) the lotus-like hands of maidens (seated in) the beautiful water-sheds, made of the thick roots of vetiver mixed with marjoram, (and built near) the foot, covered with heaps of couch-like soft sand, of the clusters of newly sprouting mango trees, which constantly darkened the intermediate space of the quarters, and which looked all the more charming on account of the trickling drops of the floral juice, which thus caused the delusion of a row of thick rainy clouds, densely filled with abundant nectar."

There is no argument that concretely proves that linguistic habits completely determine a person's world view and ideas; but demonstrably they do play a role. But it is still not certain just how much of a role they play. Also the above argument about circularity remains. Hence I agree that there is *some* correlation, but I refuse to see it as an absolute.

As for the weak hypothesis, there could a few arguments made in its support as follows:

- Consider languages with grammatical genders (Like Marathi or Hindi), where the masculine qualities are associated with male nouns and female qualities with female nouns.
- In English, (with the prevalence of egocentrism), the directions are referred to as turn left, then turn right etc. But among the aboriginal tribes of Africa speaking Kikuyu, the sense of directions are absolute and not egocentric. These prevent a possible conversation between people from the two speech communities to be intelligible
- Finally, Benjamin Whorf himself cited the Hopi language, which does not have the concepts of past, present, and future.