

**Here the Inherent Variability Hypothesis Stops:
A Critique With Reference to Damascus Arabic Dialects**

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1. Introduction

The variable paradigm, which was originally proposed by William Labov (1966, 1972a) to counter many theoretical claims of the Chomskyan school of linguistics (see Jassem 1994a: Ch.2 for an overview), is perhaps one of the most widely researched of all contemporary sociolinguistic theories (see Figueroa 1994). I shall briefly discuss some of its main principles here and give a critical evaluation thereof.

The term variable is central to linguistic analysis. According to Labov, a variable is defined as different ways of saying the same thing: ie, the lexical meaning is the same while the social meaning is different. For example, saying car with r and without still means the same. The linguistic variable, however, does not occur haphazardly and randomly; rather it obeys certain rules: of a social kind such as social class, age and sex; of a stylistic kind such as casual and careful styles; and of a linguistic kind such as the phonetic and grammatical context in which it occurs. The linguistic variable intersects with social and stylistic variables in different ways. A variable that shows both social and stylistic variation is called a sociolinguistic marker such as the variables (th) and (ng) in New York (Labov 1972) and Norwich (Trudgill 1974). In both cases, the social classes are stratified in the normal manner with the higher the social status, the greater the use of the standard and vice versa. The same thing applies to styles where the standard

language occurs with steadily increasing higher frequencies as the formality of the style increases. If the variable lacks stylistic variation but shows social variation, it is called an indicator such as the variable (O) in Norwich.

There are two central issues in the Labovian framework which have gone unchallenged by his followers although they are of very critical importance to the tenets of the theory itself. These are (i) the notion of inherent variability and (ii) the notion of proportion or relative frequency of occurrence. I shall explain these briefly.

Labov calls the alternation between the different forms (ie, the standard and vernacular) of the linguistic variable such as *r* *inherent variability* (Labov 1972a:223-225) in the sense that this is due to the intrinsic nature and properties of the linguistic system or dialect/variety itself. It is not due to dialect mixture (between the standard and the vernacular) or borrowing but is an intrinsic attribute of the system itself. As he puts it (1972a:225; 1972b:82), "variation ... is not the product of irregular dialect mixture, but an inherent regular property of the system". Trudgill adopted this definition verbatim when he stated that (1983:45),

Inherent variability means that the variation is not due to the mixture of two or more varieties but is an integral part of the variety itself.

But how can one be absolutely sure of that and discard dialect mixing altogether? A great deal of variation is not inherent and is actually due to dialect mixture as we shall see in our case study later. Even Trudgill (1983:45) himself invokes the idea of dialect mixture when discussing the variation in verbs without -s (eg, "he/she go") in Norwich and Detroit. Trudgill argued that the situation of these verbs might be the result of dialect mixture in the past where one dialect (eg,

standard English) had the feature "-s" and another (eg, Detroit Black English) lacked it with the result that Detroit Black English speakers mix both dialects together. The present situation, however, cannot be explained by dialect mixture; rather it is one of "inherent variability", which is supported by the fact that this variation occurs at a large scale, involving all speakers and a very large number of linguistic variables and is also, more tellingly, found in the speech of children.

Furthermore, Labov maintains that a variable is neither totally absent nor totally present in an individual's speech. This means that it occurs with different proportions and so its percentage in a given style may increase or decrease correspondingly. (We have to remember that Labov does not specify the minimal and maximal limits of variation. Does 1% constitute sufficient variation?) Thus all variants of a particular variable are simultaneously employed in a given style. For example, for the hypothetical variable (A) with its variants [a & b] to be called a variable, both should occur in any chunk of speech, though with different proportions, of course, such as [a] = 25% while [b] = 75%. If they do not or if only one occurs 100% of the time, then they cannot be said to be involved in variation; they must be involved in something else.

Take the the variable (th) as in *thing*, which in New York City speech may have two variants [t] and [th]. So people can pronounce it as *thing* or *ting*. In actual reality, speakers may be one of three:

- a) Those who say *thing* all the time.
- b) Those who say *ting* all the time.
- c) Those who alternate *thing and ting*.

As far as variation is concerned, only c) meets the definition whereas a) and b) do not since either the standard or the vernacular is used. In other words,

variation is restricted to c) in which the standard varies with the vernacular whereas variation is lacking in the other two altogether.

Now the Labovian framework accounts for c) but not for a) and b). The literature is replete with examples which fall under a) and b) about which Labov and his followers are silent for no obvious reasons. Here are a few such examples.

1. In Trudgill's (1974) analysis of Norwich English, there are many instances of a) and b). Take the variable (ng) by class and style (p.98). You find that in WLS the MMC and LMC use the standard 100%; in RPS the MMC use the standard 100%; in FS the LWC and MMC have very slight variation in their speech. And in CS the LWC use the vernacular 100%. Thus variability does not occur everywhere and even when it does, it is slight in a great many cases.

Table 1. Non-RP Forms for (ng) by Style and Class in Norwich

	WLS	RPS	FS	CS
MMC	000	000	003	028
LMC	000	010	015	042
UWC	005	015	074	087
MWC	023	044	088	095
LWC	029	066	098	100

Source: Trudgill 1974:92, cited in Jassem 1993b:134.

We also notice the same phenomenon in the use of the variable (O) as in *top*. Here the women of the MMC and the LMC scored 0% and 1% respectively whereas the men of the MMC 1% and the LMC 11% (Trudgill 1983: 86). Grammatical variables also reflect the same tendencies. The usage of verbs without *-s* in Norwich is another example as is shown in Table 2 below in which the MMC and