



The transmission and diffusion of sound change across three continents

William Labov, *University of Pennsylvania*

Tuesday, May 15th, 2:00-2:45pm, LSK LT6



Considerable progress has been made in understanding the nature of sound change since Wang and his colleagues, building on the first Dictionary on Computer (DOC), re-opened the debate on whether the basic unit of change is the word or the phoneme. Many cases of lexical diffusion have been located where change proceeds gradually through the vocabulary, largely controlled by word frequency. Many other cases have been found in which all words containing the affected sound move together and none are left behind. This report will renew the effort to define the conditions that determine which type of change is likely to occur.

The distinction is made between transmission--the regular incrementation of change among young children—and diffusion, the less regular pattern characteristic of the adult population. These two different modes of language learning are reflected in the family tree models and wave models of historical development.

Studies in Europe have regularly reported lexical diffusion supporting the finding that “Each word has its own history.” Almost all of these studies deal with the exchange of features among well known dialects, involving the borrowing of well known dialect features by adult speakers. Among the best known examples of lexical diffusion on the Asian continent are dialects that show an intimate mixture of classical and colloquial features dating from Middle Chinese.

On the other hand, new sound changes described in the large scale Atlas of North American English show only marginal lexical effects. In the small scale study of Philadelphia neighborhoods, new techniques of automatic measurement have been used to trace regular incrementation of sound change across a century or more. At the same time, continued lexical diffusion has been tracked in the well known split between tense and lax /æ/ and new lexical diffusion has been located in “Canadian raising”, triggered by the opacity of the conditioning rule.

It has been suggested by Bermudez-Otero and others that the life history of a sound change leads to lexical and morphological conditioning at later stages, and it is possible that the differences in empirical findings across the three continents are correlated with the difference between new changes in progress and more developed changes that respond to higher levels of social awareness.