

Lub dat Labov

Sociolinguist tracks speech and solves crimes.

By Karina Hof

When the trial of a man suspected of making bomb threats to the PanAm counter at a Los Angeles airport took place in 1987, William Labov reported to court. The 'father of sociolinguistics' and long-time director of the University of Pennsylvania Language Laboratory, Labov declared: 'This is ridiculous. The man who made these threats is from Boston. A New Yorker says *baahm*. By analysing the telephone calls, Labov convinced the judge that the chief suspect in the case could never have uttered the vowel sounds heard on the recording, even if he wanted to. Though it had been 20 years since the suspect moved to LA, there was no way he could shed the three 'vocalic phonemes', or units of sound, which were indigenous to his New York dialect and not found anywhere else. That marked the last day of a man's unjust 15-month stay in jail.

Labov, a native of New Jersey who received his bachelor's degree at Boston's Harvard University, and his MA and PhD at New York's Columbia University, told this story last week during the five-day course he taught in Amsterdam. This was his first involvement with the Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics (quaintly known as 'LOT', the *Landelijke Onderzoekschool Taalwetenschap*) but not his first time to these parts. The 79-year-old professor began his lecture by stating, 'I'm in my favourite city in the whole world, Amsterdam.' He gave two reasons why: 'Well, for one thing, my wife and I got together in Amsterdam. And, there's a heavier concentration of good linguists and phoneticians here than any other country.'

The series of classes entitled 'Sound Change in Progress' did not deviate from his work of the past five decades. Since Labov, sociolinguists have been in the business of tracking the way people speak and tracing their speech to aspects of identity: gender, race, class and, as more contemporary studies reveal, cultural affiliations and aesthetic preferences, such as whether you belong to the jock crowd in high school, interact with Latino gangs or shop in fancy stores.

But as Labov's latest work demonstrates, what is prestigious to one group differs from sea to shining sea. Published this year, the *Atlas of North American English* is perhaps the most comprehensive repository of dialect variation in the New World. The CD-Rom, with companion book, provides 139 mouse-friendly maps on which a user can click to hear samples of English from every urbanised area of the US and Canada. Through telephone surveys of 762 speakers, Labov



SHARON VAN DER DRAWING

and co-authors Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg recorded evidence of how sounds—particularly vowels—continue to 'shift'. (A comparable phenomenon is also occurring in Dutch, says retired UvA linguist Jan Stroop. Known as 'Poldernederlands', the shift entails the lowering of diphthongs—two vowel sounds sandwiched together like the 'eeuh' in 'deer'—so, for example, a word such as 'rij' sounds more like 'raai'.)

But why would anyone east of the prime meridian care that John S, a 74 year old from Kenosha, Wisconsin, pronounces 'bad' like 'beh-hud'—a striking characteristic of the Northern Cities Vowel Shift? Or that 30-year-old Melody L of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, makes no distinction between her pronunciations of 'caught' and 'cot'—the result of the American Midland's Vocalic Merger?

'In regard to what our atlas would mean for the people of the Netherlands,' says Labov, 'it might be interesting—a little help—to people who would like to improve their already excellent English by being able to recognise the different varieties of American accents.' He explains, 'It's not just written as a scientific treatise on the development of dialect. It makes possible for people all over the world to listen to American dialects and hear what they sound like. People from other countries oftentimes have excellent

English, but when they hear a local accent, they're lost, particularly true of the South [of the US].'

With the influence of American English prominent in the Netherlands as both a fertile soil for academic research and the lingua franca of popular culture, what about the Dutch language's persuasive power? While English vocabulary has been enriched by many word borrowings, when asked whether there are lingering Dutch phonetics in the language of New Amsterdam (aka New York City), Labov is quick to say no: 'The general principle is that the people who arrive first in the community do set the mould.' So, although Henry Hudson may have been sailing for the Dutch East India Company, it was the language of his motherland, England, that prevailed in the US.

In the last few minutes of Friday's lecture, which was taught at the Vrije Universiteit in a 10th-floor room with a panoramic view of the city, Labov thanked the class for granting him the wish he expressed at the start of the course. Encouraging students' questions and the submission of papers in progress, he had said, 'I don't want to leave the Netherlands as ignorant as I came.' Labov continually praised the work of local linguists, though he did admit, 'The only thing I have against the Dutch is that their English is too good.'

Portable City



BY JAN ROTHUIZEN

Time share

I saw her walking on the other side of the street. I didn't recognise her from her hair or the jacket which she had worn for years, but from her way of walking: short, quick steps in heels that clicked on the pavement. She still walked with a sort of hungry tread, as if afraid she might miss something about to happen.

The last time I'd seen her was at the wedding of some friends last year, but we hadn't really spoken. We'd had a brief exchange of information, as one does with acquaintances or distant family.

I followed her from the other side of the street. I could have called her name, but then I wouldn't have been able to watch her. She'll look around any moment, I thought. When she did look my way I'd wave and laugh as I crossed the street, then I'd kiss her and ask how she was. But she didn't look around; she carried on walking with the same solid steps.

We'd been lovers once. The whole affair, including my grief, lasted more than two years. We were full of love and determined to do it right, but we didn't find what we needed in each other. We talked endlessly in cafés, on benches in parks and into the night at my kitchen table. We thought you should always say what was on your mind, that we should always be honest, and that that would make everything come right. We went too far, though, and told each other so much that our conversations continued in our heads, even when we'd stopped talking.

I crossed the street and followed her past shop windows. She was still walking steadily, but I had to adjust my pace several times to avoid walking into her.

We got to a big square and at the stop light she suddenly turned around, moving her head as if it were a camera, scanning the environment. Just as I thought she'd seen me, the light turned green and she turned around and walked on.

I stood on the square, looking at her.

Now I realised that we hadn't got to know each other, despite all those endless talks. It was the time that we'd shared that had, in the end, shown who we were. We'd done our best.