

# Martha's vineyard – labov

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



1.0 Introduction 1.1 Martha's Vineyard - where old traditions are still of value Martha's Vineyard is a small island located south of Cape Cod in Massachusetts, USA. The island has a permanent population of about 6000 inhabitants. It is separated from the mainland by the Atlantic Ocean and there are no big businesses or any McDonald to be found on the island. Here, life is not as hectic as on the mainland and old traditions are still of value. The inhabitants have a way of showing their connection and dedication to their homeland, which is also a way of identifying themselves.

This term paper will be about sound changes in connection with social identity. I will examine the innovative study of language variation and change in the islands community, observed and examined by William Labov (1963). I will analyze and discuss the study made by Labov. Labov's study is based on the characteristic sound pattern discovered while listening to the inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard. This sound change has a focus on the centralization of diphthongs. Centralization is the phonological change in which a vowel becomes more central than normal (Lawrence Trask 2000 : 53).

Diphthong is a vowel sound which is pronounced by quickly moving from one vowel position to another (Deckert, Vickers 2011 : 33). The sound changes made by inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard, observed by Labov were: /ay/ as in fight, right and sight and /aw/ as in loud and about. Labov's observations exposed that the centralized diphthongs only occurred in a particular linguistic context. Some groups used the sound change more than others. The group of fishermen was among these. Labov also observed that some

inhabitants purposely did not pronounce the diphthongs differently to people from the mainland.

Having looked at different social factors, as for example, age, ethnic group and occupation it became obvious that the attitude towards the island was an essential aspect to explain this phenomenon. The decision whether or not to use the island or the mainland pronunciation depended the attitude towards Martha's Vineyard, whether or not being positive or negative. Labov named this phenomenon "island identity" (1963). To understand what "island identity" is it is important to define the term "identity". What is identity and how do we identify ourselves?

Can there be a connection between identity and speech? In this term paper I will attempt to answer these questions.

2. 0 The study, sociolinguistic pattern and meaning

2. 1 Background knowledge

Martha's Vineyard is divided into two parts, which are the up-island and the down-island. By the time Labov made this study, the island had approximately 6000 inhabitants. The majority lived in an area of the down-island which contains of three small towns, called Vineyard Haven, Oak Bluffs and Edgartown. The remaining inhabitants lived in the rural up-island area with only a few villages (Labov 1972: 5).

The inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard were divided into four major ethnic groups. The main group was the descendants of old families with English origin. The second major group was descendants of Portuguese origin who migrated from the Azores and the Cap Verde Islands. The third group was descendants of remnant native Americans. The last group consists of inhabitants of various origins, who were of no relevance for this study (Labov

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1972: 6). Another group became relevant for this study. This was the group of summer visitors who came in large groups in June and July.

There would be around 42. 000 visitors on the island every summer (Labov 1972: 6). It could be a possibility that the summer visitors brought the sound change from the mainland to the island, which would mean that this group would have the major influence on the pronunciation of the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/ but it becomes clear that the influence of visitors are not as obvious as it might seem, since Labov only mentioned that this group had an indirect influence. To clarify this, it is essential to have a look at the economic situation of the island.

In 1960 Martha's Vineyard was the poorest of all counties of Massachusetts and this was not only due to the high unemployment rate in Massachusetts back then (Labov 1972: 27). The island's major industry was the fishing industry on the up-island. The large-scale of fishing went out of New Bedford on the Grand Banks and as a result it became harder to keep this industry going (Labov 1972: 27). It became almost impossible for the fishermen to make a living from their wages and their families became dependent on two earnings. Another problem forced the economic and psychological pressure.

Convenience goods were at a very high price (Labov 1972: 28) and the goods were brought on the island with ferry from the mainland. This transport was expensive and permitted the salesmen to expand the prices of their goods. Some would say that the constantly growing tourism came as a blessing for the inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard, but at the same time it also became a curse, especially for the fishermen who felt very connected to

the island and the traditions connected to it. For them it was difficult to accept the increasing dependence on tourism.

The following observations and results are of importance in order to understand the connection between the above mentioned background information and the language variation in this study.

## 2.2 Accomplishment by Labov and its meaning for the inhabitants

In 1963, as the study of Martha's Vineyard was realized, Labov observed a striking way of pronouncing words such as fight, right and sight, and words such as loud and about. This striking way of pronunciation clearly diverged from the near parts of the mainland (Meyerhoff 2006: 16f. ). The inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard pronounced the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/ in a more central position which is a phonological change termed centralization. In order to figure out why many inhabitants used the centralized diphthongs, Labov elaborated an interview schedule in which /ay/ and /aw/ frequently occurred (Labov 1972: 12). Here Labov did not only put his focus on the linguistic aspect but on the social aspect as well. This means that Labov did not only put focus on the language but furthermore he wanted to examine the reasons for this sound change and in which way it was used in a social context and by whom. Why did some speakers use the centralized diphthongs more than others?

This is why this study by Labov is not just a study of linguistics but also counts as a sociolinguistic study (Deckert, Vickers 2011: 1). Labov started asking inhabitants questions concerning their lives on the island. He also recorded them while they were reading lists of words naturally containing /ay/ and /aw/ sounds out loud (Meyerhoff 2006: 17). He interviewed 69 inhabitants of different ages, occupation, ethnic groups and from different

geographical distribution. The table underneath is taken from Labov's study and shows age levels and numbers of inhabitants using the centralized vowels /ay/ and /aw/:

Table 1 (Labov 1972: 22) | age |(ay) |(aw) | | 75- | 25 | 22 | | 61-75 | 35 | 37 | | 46-60 | 62 | 44 | | 31-45 | 81 | 88 | | 14-30 | 37 | 46 | Having a look at this table, it appears that inhabitants from the age of thirty-one up to age forty-five frequently tended to centralize the diphthongs. However, inhabitants younger than thirty-one and older than forty-five, did not have a high use of the centralized diphthongs.

This means that the sound change could not only be dependent on the age of inhabitants being interviewed. Therefore Labov focused on other social factors which might have an effect on the production of this sound change. He interviewed inhabitants from different parts of residence, hereby people from the up-island as well as people living at the down-island. The statistics shown below demonstrates different cities on Martha's Vineyard. It also shows the numbers of inhabitants from these cities using the centralized diphthongs: Table 2 (Labov 1972: 25) |(ay) |(aw) | | Down-island | 35 | 33 | | Edgartown | 48 | 55 | | Oak | 33 | 10 | | Bluffs | | | | Vineyard Haven | 24 | 33 | | Up-island | 61 | 66 | | Oak | 71 | 99 | | Bluffs | | | | N. 35 | 13 | | Tisbury | | | | West Tisbury | 51 | 51 | | Chilmark | 100 | 81 | | Gay Head | 51 | 81 | This table clearly shows that the inhabitants living on the up-island used the sound change more frequently than inhabitants living on the down-island, especially the inhabitants of the town Chilmark. In Chilmark they were shown to have a unique tendency of

centralized diphthongs. The up-island was more of a rural area and it was known for its fishing industry. Most fishermen were living and working in Chilmark. The following table shows the centralization by the different occupational groups observed by Labov. . Table 3 (Labov 1972: 26) | |(ay) | (aw) | | Fishermen | 100 | 79 | | Farmers | 32 | 22 | | Others | 41 | 57 |

According to this table which shows the usage of centralized diphthong by fishermen, farmers and other occupations, shows it becomes clear that the fishermen were the one group who most frequently made use of centralization. Some of the farmers and people of other occupations also used this sound change but their numbers were strikingly low compared to the numbers of fishermen using the centralization. When comparing the results of all three tables it becomes obvious that the Chilmark fishermen in the middle working age level were using the centralization more frequently than any other groups on the island.

However, hereby it is still not revealed why this group of inhabitants at this age and living and working in that one place where the fishing industry still played a big role in the island economy (Labov 1972: 29), were using the sound change more frequently than the other groups of inhabitants. It is central to understand the meaning and importance of the fishing industry for the inhabitants and the island itself to fully understand the interaction of social and linguistic patterns. Most of the fishermen from Chilmark felt deeply connected to the island since most of them were descendants of the old families (Labov 1972: 28).

The fishing industry used to be a major part of the economy, before the large-scale fishing went out of New Bedford on the Grand Banks (Labov <https://assignbuster.com/marthas-vineyard-labov/>

1972: 27). The fishermen were proud to be independent, to stand on their own feet and earn their living with their own bare hands. Fishing was an old tradition on this island (Labov 1972: 29) but as an ever-growing number of summer visitors came to the island a big part of the fishing industry moved away and the inhabitants became forced to be more dependent on tourism. Chilmark changed from the traditional fishing industry to modern tourism.

Many of the inhabitants accepted but the fishermen had a hard time acknowledging this change (Labov 1972: 28). They made their living from fishing. For these men fishing was not just a job, but it was also a way of living and an old tradition they did not want to give up. Two brothers from Edgartown which were also fishermen were among the interviewed. They both had a tendency to centralize the diphthongs very frequently (Labov 1972: 30). These two brothers were the last descendants from the old families (Labov 1972: 30).

If they were to leave the island, there would be no descendant left in Edgartown and there would be no one to keep up the traditions of the old families. These two brothers are another example that clarifies the importance of the fishing industry. It also clarifies that the Chilmark fishermen as well as the fishermen from Edgartown shared social orientation. They felt deeply connected to the island which was their home. For this reason they also both shared an aversion to the many summer visitors. The summer visitors would invade the cities of Martha's Vineyard, and thereby the growing tourism would invade a part in the economy. Though many of the inhabitants appreciate the tourism, the fishermen suffered more and more under economic as well as psychological pressure (Labov 1972: 28).



The dependence on summer visitors grew and thereby the independence of the fishermen was reduced. The more inhabitants lived a traditional way of life the more they used the centralization. This fact demonstrates the relationship to the diphthong centralization and the social orientation. Labov learned that another social factor had an outstanding influence on the sound change.

He observed attitude towards the island, whether it was positive or negative, was of reason for the usage of this sound change. Labov found out that high school students and their use of the centralization depended on their plan whether or not to stay on the island. He therefore interviewed students from Martha's Vineyard Regional High School. The students who wanted to stay on the island showed a much higher use of the centralized diphthongs than the students who wanted to leave the island after finishing school (Labov 1972: 32).

Not only inhabitants from the old families had a high use of the centralization, but Portuguese at the age of thirty-one to forty-five revealed to have a very high use of the sound change in comparison to the other age groups (Labov 1972: 26). The Portuguese of this age group belonged to the third and fourth generation. This generation was the first one which had entirely adopted the ways of life on the island (Labov 1972: 33). They too felt deeply connected to the island, their home.

The middle aged Portuguese showed a higher use of centralization than the younger Portuguese, even though the younger Portuguese showed a higher centralization than the young inhabitants with English origin (Labov 1972: 26). This phenomenon can be explained by the attitude towards the island.

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Most of the young inhabitants with English origin wanted to leave the island opposed to the majority of the young Portuguese who wanted to stay on the island (Labov 1972: 26). This proves that social attitude towards Martha's Vineyard was to blame for the use of the centralization.

In relation to the social attitude the term "island identity" becomes important. To fully understand this term it is important to explain what "identity" really means. To define what "identity" really is, is easier said than done. Identity can be a name of a person but it can also be a way of behaving or other details like gestures or mimics. In Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English by Langenscheidt, there are more than a few explanations. For example: "The qualities and attitudes that a person or a group of people have, that make them different from other people" (Langenscheidt 2006: 805).

The term "national/cultural/social identity" is listed in this dictionary as well and is defined as "a strong feeling of belonging to particular group, race, etc." (Langenscheidt 2006: 805). After having studied Labov's observations, his results and defining the term identity, it becomes clear that the inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard used the sound change to identify themselves. They created an access to their identity with the help of language, and used the centralization as a way to differentiate themselves from summer visitors. This strong bond to their home, the island, is termed by Labov as "island identity". "Island identity" describes the use of the centralization as an expression of the strong connection, the inhabitant's ancestry and their home land. Inhabitants who used this sound change also revealed their attitude and connection to the island. The ones using the

sound change were the ones who felt deeply connected and identified themselves with the island. Thereby the sound change became an indicator of the inhabitant's attitude. The inhabitants who showed a negative attitude towards the island the ones who did not feel connected to it and wanted to leave, did not use this centralization.

They simply did not identify themselves with the island. On behalf of those inhabitants who had a positive attitude towards the island the language variant hold prestige. For some inhabitants the sound change had a higher status than for others, although the speakers were not always aware of the importance of the sound change. This is the reason why there are two types of prestige which are termed overt and covert prestige (Meyerhoff 2006: 37). Overt prestige is linked with language variants that speakers use for special reasons.

The speakers using the overt prestige have the motive of sounding, for example, politer or even more educated, which means that they obviously are aware of using that variant (Meyerhoff 2006: 37). For the inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard the covert prestige played a central role. The speakers who were using the centralization did not want to sound nicer or better than other people on the island. This pronunciation was not the standard or the general norm but it was based on group identity and the way the inhabitants differentiated themselves from other inhabitants and summer visitors.

### 3. 0 Conclusion

Through the study of Labov, he demonstrated that social factors play a role in how people speak and he also clarified the deep social function language has to define an identity. Labov's study was of importance for the social

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linguistic. The centralized diphthongs observed by Labov were most frequently used by the thirty-one up to forty-five age group and was typically observed used by people who lived and worked on the island, who felt deeply connected to the island. The connection between the positive attitude towards life on the island and the usage of centralization was outstanding.

The inhabitants who lived a traditional way of life, had the highest degree of centralization. Since being a fisherman was a traditional occupation, this means that the main part of the inhabitants on the up-island had a higher use of the sound change since that was the place where the fishing industry was based. The down-island was the area where less people were using the centralization. It consist of small towns and these towns were the attraction for the increasing number of summer visitors.

Consequently, it can be said that the centralization is an indicator of solidarity. A way of showing where you belong and that you are proud of your home and its traditions. For the inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard it was also a way to oppose to the people of the mainland and the new service economy. This sound change made them stand out. By centralizing the diphthongs the inhabitants of island created a way to connect their social identity to language. The language functions as a tool to stick out of the crowd. It is as a reminder of their roots. . 0 Bibliography Deckert, Sharon K. ; Vickers, Caroline H. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics. 2011. London: Continuum International Publishing Group. Labov, William. Sociolinguistic Patterns. 1972. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Langenscheidt. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. 2006 Meyerhoff, Miriam. Introducing Sociolinguistics. 2006. Abingdon: Routledge

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