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His life is his message

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Abstract

This tribute about William (Bill) Labov is focused on his work on AAVE (African American Vernacular English), establishing his career-long commitment to social and educational justice for the Black community. The title ("His Life is His Message") are the words of Mahatma Gandhi and reflects Bill's work and spirit—his words, his principles, and the motivation he instilled in others to act with authenticity and integrity. Although society continues to generate false and negative stereotypes about Blacks, his voluminous work about AAVE—which began in the 1960s—dismantled many harmful myths about its speakers and Black people generally. His work on AAVE and its speakers ultimately led to wider work in the field and established him as the icon of variationist sociolinguistics. He bestowed prestige on his students, making us proud to claim professional and social identity among those he taught and mentored.

Keywords: Labov; AAVE; race; education; sociolinguistics

Introduction

William (Bill) Labov was not the first linguist to study AAVE (African American Vernacular English). The descriptive linguistics of his predecessors contributed to various aspects of AAVE, including its historical development. As far back as 1914, creole roots were suggested (notably, by Hugo Schuchardt [1914]; Leonard Bloomfield [1933]; Claude Wise [1933]; and T.E. Pardoe [1937]). In 1949, Lorenzo Dow Turner established a relationship between Gullah and AAVE. Beryl Bailey, early in the 1960s and predating Bill's work, gave us a preview of coming attractions when she argued that Jamaican Creole—as well as AAVE—were structured languages, not dialects. Bill acknowledges Beryl's contribution to his work:

> One source is the work of Beryl Bailey, who brought to AAVE the insights from her description of Jamaican Creole English, drawn from her internalized knowledge as a native speaker. The recognition of my indebtedness to her work was the original motivation for this paper (Labov, 1998:110–153)

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Of particular interest to me was how Bill's work bore the imprimatur of linguistic (and social) equality for Blacks without any apparent motivation from his personal experience with racism. One of the gifts Bill gave the linguistic community is his autobiographical piece (Labov, 1997a), detailing his compelling pilgrimage from his hometown of Rutherford, NJ, to the University of Pennsylvania via Harvard and Columbia University with important linguistic tours in Martha's Vineyard (Labov, 1963), Harlem, and New York's Lower East Side (Labov, 1964). My first impressions about Bill made me "curiouser and curiouser." Could he really be White? He studied AAVE and defended the language and the people who spoke it.[1] Later, I learned he had little social contact with Blacks until adulthood. After his family moved to Fort Lee, NJ, a little closer to New York City (NYC), he attended Fort Lee High School. In his 1944 yearbook, there are no photos of Black graduating seniors.[2] He once told me that he was in his 30s before he shared a personal social relationship with a Black person. Like much of New Jersey, the Black population of his hometown of Rutherford was heavily segregated by the 1930s (Chernoski, 2015). The Black population in Rutherford is currently about 4% (U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts, 2025). His class at Harvard had few Blacks, admitting a record number of four Blacks in 1948, just when Bill was graduating (Kodama, 2006). Segregation was widespread in the US Marines when he was drafted in 1951, and the Marines did not fully integrate until 1960 (Browning, 2013).

The headwaters of sociolinguistics

In 1965, Bill began his study of AAVE (then referred to as NNE—Nonstandard Negro English). By then, he was an Assistant Professor at Columbia University, where he had completed his PhD in 1964, writing his dissertation under the direction of Uriel Weinreich, who also supervised Beryl Bailey's dissertation.[3] During his studies, Bill performed federally funded fieldwork in South Central Harlem about language and education—specifically about reading failure among Black students. Working with colleagues both White (Paul Cohen) and Black (Clarence Robins, John Lewis), he remembers this as "one of the most fascinating intellectual and social adventures" of his life (Labov, 1997a).

At the time that Bill began studying the language of Black teenagers, the general view of Americans—including educators—was that Black students themselves were the cause of their own educational achievement gaps. Reasons that were suggested included speaking so-called "Bad English," cognitive impairment, and cultural deprivation. In response, Bill wrote "The Logic of Nonstandard English," which was later published in *The Language of the Inner City* (Labov, 1972a:201–240).

Bill analyzed reading failure in the context of the structure of Black English Vernacular (BEV). He concluded that it was neither language deficit, nor inherent inabilities of Black students, nor structural interference between the two forms of English—BEV and SE (Standard English)—that negatively impacted reading skills (Labov, 1972b:241–243). He cited cultural and political conflict in the classroom as a reason why Black students tested more than two years behind the national norm in reading comprehension. He also warned that "the myth of verbal deprivation is particularly dangerous, because it diverts attention from real defects of our educational system to imaginary defects of the child" (Labov, 1972b:202). The battle was on.

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The sound of Philadelphia

In 1971, Bill joined the University of Pennsylvania Department of Linguistics and was "astonished at the rapid change of linguistics in Philadelphia" (Labov, 2009). This, along with his general interest in linguistic change in progress, motivated him to establish the Linguistic Laboratory at Penn, a hub for students and researchers to do their own work to improve educational outcomes for underserved communities. He also developed The Reading Road, working for more than a decade with undergraduates who applied sociolinguistic knowledge to a tutorial reading program designed to improve reading skills among early learners in West Philadelphia—continuing his work with the Black community. In the late 1990s, Bill collaborated with the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, co-developing the Penn Reading Initiative. This program continues to train undergraduate and graduate tutors to help struggling students.

The tutors also gain valuable social, educational, and linguistic skills working with students who reside in low-income neighborhoods where poverty, illiteracy, and social conflict are obstacles to educational success.

Linguistic inequality and eugenics

Also in 1971, Bill gave an address to teachers in Hawaii, in which he explained his criticism of Operation Head Start because it was based on the "verbal deprivation hypothesis." He warned of the dangerous implications of the hypothesis, citing an article in the Harvard Educational Review written by Arthur Jensen, a psychologist, professor of educational psychology, and writer who was a proponent of race-based IQ differences and one of those originally associated with the idea of "cultural deprivation" (Labov, 2024). Bill characterizes Jensen's position as follows:

> [T]hat if Head Start has failed it must be the fault of the basic assumption that all children have the capacity to develop logical thought. His own position, in my paraphrase, is that racism is the most probably correct scientific hypothesis: that there are large numbers of children in the United States and elsewhere who lack genetically the capacity to form concepts. This deficiency is said to be heavily concentrated among lower-class Negroes—but is characteristic of all Negro groups. Jensen adds that undoubtedly the greatest cruelty shown towards the Negro is to give welfare without "eugenic foresight"

Then, Bill concludes with the implicit threat that Jensen's ideas represent to Blacks:

> Those of whom lived through the 1930s will be able to translate that phrase without any difficulty. But it has been translated for us by a group headed by the physicist William Shockley, who has introduced Jensen and Jensenism to the National Academy of Sciences. Shockley's group has been advocating eugenics based upon such possibilities as giving a person $1,000 for every I.Q. point under 100—IF he agrees to be sterilized … You don't have to have a great many psychologists going around saying that it is time for the gas ovens or mass sterilization. All you need is a few, because those who want to apply eugenic foresight only need one or two experts to tell them that what they are doing is scientifically correct and morally justified (Labov, 2024)

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Bill would fight his entire life to expose the harmful and dangerous effects of racist ideas and lies about Black children, their families, and their communities—especially those put forth by educational psychologists and others. Unlike Bill, these "professionals" had never studied anything about Blacks or their culture and "know very little about language and less about Black children" (Labov, 1972b:59).

Bill's research on AAVE spawned decades of work. His quantitative sociolinguistic methods provided data that supported previous research about features of AAVE and its systematic logic. He celebrated the verbal artistry of AAVE and educated people about the creativity in Black culture as demonstrated in their rich verbal traditions. He provided evidence that AAVE was not the product of verbal deprivation or deficit. He remained disappointed that his early work about AAVE had not translated into wider acceptance about the cause of reading failure among Blacks; nor had it generated more response to his recommendations that BEV be acknowledged and integrated into school curricula as a bridge to SE. Ultimately—and most disheartening to him—reading scores for Black children did not improve. How long might it take? Would there ever be the kind of educational equality that Bill hoped and worked for? That is a daunting question when we consider that it took 148 years to complete the abolition of slavery nationwide after the 13th Amendment (abolishing slavery) was ratified in 1865.[4]

If you're Black, stay back[5]

AAVE spoken by Blacks provides convenient explanatory value for those—including educators—who "are being taught to hear every natural utterance of the child as evidence of his [sic] mental inferiority" (Labov, 1972a:240). These negative stereotypes about AAVE are part of general racism and negative stereotypes about Blacks.[6]

From personal experience, I know that misperceptions about the linguistic abilities of Blacks can create confirmation bias: Blacks who speak SE also face linguistic profiling and generate negative assessments. Like most Blacks in my middle-class community, I spoke SE.[7] My parents' language acquisition occurred before the second half of the 20th century—prior to the migration of Southern Blacks to the segregated North, which solidified AAVE (Fasold et al., 1987). Yet, teachers barred me from buying books at book fairs above my grade, assuring me that it was "beyond your ability." My reading comprehension scores were withheld from me and my family because, as I was told later, the results were "too high." The message was clear: whether Black students speak AAVE or SE, they face systemic racism designed to impede achievement in language and reading skills.

The role of government in educational disparities of Blacks

However, to embrace Bill's findings, the educational system would have had to come to terms with the prevailing racial prejudice and discrimination against Black people that resulted in educational disparities. Decades-long laws and policies advanced and institutionalized by federal, state, and local governments ensured racial segregation and discrimination. The creation of the FHA (Federal Housing Authority) in 1934 resulted in redlining (refusal of mortgage, insurance, and financing in predominantly

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Black communities): FHA and VA (Veterans' Administration) funded White (only) housing; and federal programs ensured segregation of public housing in inner cities. Underfunding of schools in minority communities is directly attributable to fewer dollars for students due to low property tax rates which support schools (Rothstein, 2017).

AAVE: eye of the tiger

Given the relationship between government, politics, and education (or lack thereof) for Blacks, it is not surprising that Bill would step into the public fray—governmental, legal, and political—armed with his mountains of evidence-based research, ready to take on doubters about the nature of AAVE—and, more importantly, expound on the educational implications for children who speak AAVE and are falsely regarded as having deficient verbal skills and low intelligence. In the late 1970s, AAVE was at the center of the Ann Arbor Black English Case, also known as the Ann Arbor King Case (Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al., v. Ann Arbor School District Board, 1979).

Federal District Judge Charles W. Joiner, who presided over the case, explained the central question: "Was there something in their [the students'] Blackness to prevent them from learning to read? And, if so, was there something the School Board should have done about it?" The lead attorney for the students, Gabe Hillel Kaimowitz, summarized the case as "discrimination against Black English speakers who are invariably poor and most of whom live or have been in isolated Black communities often in housing projects" (Mitchell, 2024).

Geneva Smitherman—now University Distinguished Professor Emerita of English at Michigan State University—was working at Wayne State University Center for Black Studies in Detroit when she served as an expert witness for the plaintiffs. She reached out to other linguists—including Bill Labov—who understood the social importance and significance of BEV and knew that the curriculum discriminated against poor, Black, Latino, disabled, and other children who spoke a different language. School children were wrongly assigned to speech therapy and special education classes—actions which were consistent with ill-informed opinions about AAVE and the intellectual capacity of the students.

Bill was called on to testify that the language spoken by the students in Ann Arbor was similar to the language spoken in large cities in the East (and therefore was a regional dialect). This weakened the defendants' argument that the language (BEV) of Black children was a deficient form of language—and not a regional dialect. The Equal Opportunities Education Act of 1974 required that schools address regional language differences.

The students won the case. By finding that the Ann Arbor School Board violated the Equal Education Opportunities Act, Judge Joiner validated BEV as a regional dialect—a legitimate language. The School Board was given one year to develop a teaching plan, ensure that teachers undergo training to teach children skills to "code-switch" from BEV to SE, and teach the reading of SE in inclusive classrooms with the goal of eliminating linguistic discrimination.

More than two decades after the Ann Arbor Black English decision, the University of Michigan held a two-day event ("Revisiting the Ann Arbor King Trial") to discuss

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the case (Michigan News, 2004). Among those linguists who participated (along with Bill) were Geneva Smitherman, John Baugh, John Rickford, and Lesley Milroy (moderator). Richard Bailey and Jerrie Scott—both expert witnesses for the plaintiffs in the King trial—also participated, along with Orlando Taylor, a communications professor and Dean at Howard University. Filmmaker Aliyah Mitchell, director of *Right to Read: The Ann Arbor King* Case (Mitchell, 2024), updated the Ann Arbor case as a point of reflection.

Bill was called on again in another controversial case involving AAVE. This time, he addressed Congress about "Ebonics," the central issue of the Oakland, California case, which began in 1996 (Labov, 1997b). In this case, media coverage misinterpreted the intention of the Oakland School Board, believing that SE would be abandoned and "Ebonics" (i.e., AAVE) would be taught as the primary language of many Black students. Later, the school board clarified their position, explaining that Ebonics would be used to provide contrastive analysis between Ebonics and SE to improve literacy, similar to the directive in the Ann Arbor case.

The initial controversy about Ebonics created a firestorm of criticism from people of all races, inviting racist satire. It also exposed knowledge gaps in the understanding of SE from some who considered themselves educated speakers of SE.[8] As a result of the furor, the term Ebonics was abandoned in favor of AAVE.[9] John Baugh (2000) developed a comprehensive Ebonics outline which describes some of the arguments and discussions of the time.

The past is not dead. It's not even past (Faulkner, 1951)

Ann Arbor, Michigan

In Ann Arbor, which has been acknowledged in a survey as America's most educated city, achievement for Black students continues to lag, although there were small gains in 2025 assessments. Educators expressed disappointment about students of color, English-language learners, disabled, and economically disadvantaged students—all of whom continue to lag behind their White counterparts. Black students often score below 20–30% proficiency in comparison to White students (who score about 40–50%) (MLIVE, 2024).

Oakland, California

Black and Hispanic students continue to lag behind White and Asian students. In 2025, about 21% of Black and 22% of Hispanic students were found to meet or exceed proficiency (or advanced comprehension skills) in English. For White and Asian students, the percentage was about 69% and 55%, respectively. (CAASPP, 2025).

New York City (NYC)

In 2023, NYC—where Bill began his sociolinguistics career—Mayor Eric Adams implemented a reform focused on literacy. It began with elementary schools and was gradually rolled out to middle schools. The focus was on phonics, and the goal was to improve the English Language Arts Program and student achievement. In 2025, all

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students had improved reading scores, although Black and Hispanic students continued to lag behind White and Asian students (Gould, 2025).

In addition, the representation of Black and Hispanic students continues to decline at competitive high schools in NYC because of disparities in admissions scores required for entrance (CSSNY, 2025).

We are never going to reach equality in America until we achieve equality in education (Sotomayor, 2017)

In 2009, more than four decades after Bill's "fascinating intellectual and social adventures" with Cohen, Lewis, and Robins, he presented at the Page-Barbour Lectures (published in 2012 as *Dialect Diversity in America: The Politics of Language Change*). Hosted at the University of Virginia, this event invites distinguished scholars to discuss "some fresh aspect or aspects" in their field. Bill discussed the relationship between dialect boundaries and political histories, citing "the steady divergence of white mainstream dialects, and the growing divergence between black and white dialects" (Labov, 2012). Perhaps most importantly, this work highlights the perseverance of residential segregation that continues to separate and isolate racial populations, reducing socioeconomic status for Blacks (Potter, 2022).

Bill also warns of the power of linguistic intimidation: children who are taught that their native dialect is "bad" suffer psychological and educational damage by alienating students and promoting pervasive linguistic discrimination. That, in turn, diminishes their academic opportunities (Labov, 2012).

The beat goes on

Bill's enthusiasm for his work never waned, even as he neared retirement. He continued to teach, mentor, and produce research. I once asked him if he didn't feel a sense of satisfaction for all he had done to educate people about AAVE. Without hesitation, he responded with a question: "If I've done so much, then why haven't reading scores improved for Black children in the last 30 years?" Fifty years after his work with gang members of the Cobras and the Jets who contributed to his work on "The Logic of Nonstandard English," Bill was still pained that they "never benefited from our work; ten years later we learned that many of them were shot up, in prison or dead … we have not yet repaid our debt to the youth who helped us on our way" (Labov, 1997a).

Academic contemporaries/collaborators

Although Bill's work to improve reading scores did not produce the results he hoped for, his research demonstrated the link between education, language, and social inequality, magnifying the not-so-subtle ways in which America slow-walks equal educational opportunity for Blacks, especially speakers of AAVE. His studies provided historical and social contexts for the development of AAVE such as relationships with Creole languages (e.g., English-based creoles in South America, the West Indies, Gullah, Samaná English), and his research topics and methods influenced the work of his distinguished contemporaries/collaborators including Gillian Sankoff (Montreal French, Tok Pisin, language change); Walt Wolfram (AAVE and social and ethnic dialects in America);

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John Gumperz (1922–2013; language, culture, and society); Roger Shuy (sociolinguistics, forensic linguistics); and Lesley Milroy (urban and rural dialectology, social networks in Belfast).

Academic descendants

No area of sociolinguistics engenders more interest than AAVE, with continued intense public debates about its validity, which have spread to social media sites (Ayanna, 2021). The Appendix lists selected publications of only a few of Bill's academic descendants, but represents decades of ongoing research which preserves Bill's work while expanding the breadth and depth of AAVE and its continuing linguistic importance, social and cultural relevance, and relationship to socioeconomic issues and educational performance of Black students.

Epilogue

> Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be (Emerson, 1860 258)

As a Black woman who has lived all but 10 years of my life in the Philadelphia area, I think of Bill everywhere, every day. I hear the unique Philadelphia dialect he loved—"youse," "youse all," and "wooder" in everyday speech; "Murry Christmas/Happy Hahday" in December; the raised /æ/ among Blacks where /blæck/ becomes /blɛk/; and sports fans cheer on the "Iggles" and "Foitin Phils." Most of all, I remember his work on AAVE and his "Principle of Debt incurred" that obliges me to use the knowledge I obtain from the members of the speech community "for the benefit of the community, when it has need of it" (Labov, 1982).

Like Bill in his early career, I found a corporate job "agonizing and restricting" (Labov, 1997a). So, I quit and moved back to Philadelphia with the goal of graduate study at Penn. The courses offered in the English Department (my undergraduate major) did not appeal to me. Leafing through the course catalog (no computers back then), I found Linguistics and the name "William Labov," whom I remembered from news coverage about the Ann Arbor Trial about a decade earlier. I knew then I wanted to study linguistics. I had spent my life reading dictionaries for pleasure! Not only was I interested in language, but I was also drawn to Bill's work, which was infused with advocacy for African American communities. I was thrilled to think I might meet him but resigned myself to the fact that he wouldn't see me. I had never even taken a linguistics course.

In the spirit that you miss the shots you don't take—I contacted his office anyway, and he agreed to a meeting. I was terrified when I arrived and immediately surprised by his warmth and friendliness. Alas, I soon discovered that he thought I was there to interview for his administrative assistant position. To my shock, he was even more gracious when I said I hoped to study BEV with him. It was October 1989; he said I was the first student he had seen in the 1980s who had expressed interest in studying Black English with him. He sent me off with a checklist of what I needed to achieve to be a competitive applicant. By this time, the studies of Bill and his colleagues had resulted in making BEV one of the most thoroughly studied dialects (if not the most studied)

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in any language. Bill's work was a clarion call to those interested in AAVE, and I was ready to sign up.

In addition to being a towering figure in his field, Bill was a supportive academic advisor both academically and personally, and a congenial instructor when I was his Teaching Assistant (TA) for two semesters of his undergraduate linguistics course. He lifted my spirits when I needed to blow off steam about life—the restaurant that refused me service; the apartment complex that denied me an available apartment; and the boss who told me I was lazy. For that, I was able to forgive him for sending me a three-page single-spaced letter for corrections to my dissertation—the night before my appointment with the "margin lady."

I regret not telling Bill a story (repeated by my mother for decades, although she knew nothing about dialect awareness): when I was four years old, my family traveled from Philadelphia to western Pennsylvania to visit my mother's relatives. While my grandmother was in the kitchen, her sister (my great aunt) chatted with me. They were both raised in Athens County, Ohio. As the story goes, I kept repeating to her with some surprise, "You sound just like my grandmother!" Bill would have enjoyed that.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. John Baugh was also surprised to discover that Bill was White, after reading "The Logic of Nonstandard English" (Chambers, 2017:8).

2. Personal communication with Gillian Sankoff. Also, note that Fort Lee is more suburban than Rutherford and has always had a much smaller Black population. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/rutherfordboroughnewjersey/HSG445223.

3. Bill's publications, beginning in the 1960s and extending into 2024, reflect the contemporary terms used to describe the speech of American Blacks at the time. These synonymous terms include NNE ("Nonstandard Negro English"—common in the 1960s); BEV ("Black English Vernacular"—adapted in the 1970s and 1980s); and AAVE ("African American Vernacular English"—which emerged in the 1990s). All are linguistic sequelae related to social change most prominently recognizable in self-identification terms of ethnicity (e.g., Negro, Black, African American) (Henderson, 2003:54).

4. Mississippi finally certified the 13th Amendment in 2013: https://abcnews.com/blogs/headlines/2013/02/mississippi-officially-abolishes-slavery-ratifies-13th-amendment.

5. A well-known rhyme about colorism (Blake, 1979).

6. Bill's first reaction when he signed off on my dissertation (Henderson, 2001) was that my conclusions were evidence that the negative reputation of Black people rubs off on the language—not the other way around (personal communication).

7. My mother spoke Appalachian English; my father was born and raised in a Philadelphia suburb (Darby) which was only about 10% Black in the early 1900s.

8. There were public objections to "Ebonics," sometimes with criticisms that implicated SE. I remember one man (White and an SE speaker) on a news program forcefully claiming that "Ebonics" has no morphology, unaware that SE is a morphologically poor language.

9. In 1973, "Ebonics" (a portmanteau of Ebony and phonics) was coined by Dr Robert Lee Williams (1930–2020), a psychologist who tried to reinforce that the language of Blacks was not "bad English" or slang, but rule-governed with its own grammar.

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