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Tongue-twisters

WHEN William Labov, a dialect specialist at the University of Pennsylvania, visited London recently he recorded five young British blacks in Battersea Park. The next day he played the tapes to several white people, asking them if they could tell from the accents whether the speakers he had taped were black or white. They could not — a result that would be unimaginable in the United States.



There, he says, nobody would have had the slightest difficulty because American blacks speak what is, in effect, a different form of English. Not only are the sounds different, but also the grammar. Scholars call the language Ebonics (from "ebony" and "phonics") or, more formally, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). Last week Professor Labov organised a discussion of Ebonics and other dialects at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Philadelphia.

His studies have shown that despite the unifying force of radio and television, spoken English in the US is drifting apart. This applies within the white community as well as across the races. Regional dialects are not as strong in the US as they are in Britain, but they are diverging: so much so that white people from Chicago, Birmingham (Alabama) and Philadelphia find it increasingly hard to understand one another.

White vowel sounds have shifted significantly since the last century, he said. For example, the word "sawed" has come to sound like "sod", while "sod" is now pronounced "sad". In Philadelphia, the sound of "ou" in "about" is rolled around the tongue to form a double-vowelled diphthong

sound. Not only does this differ from white speech in other northern US cities but, says Professor Labov, "you could search for years in Philadelphia without finding a black person who has picked this up".

Dr John Rickford, of Stanford University, another participant, agrees that there was no evidence of convergence between the black and white

vernaculars. "Ebonics remains different from white vernacular varieties and is even diversifying from them in some respects, even though whites and blacks are supposedly in contact with one another," he said. Dr Rickford, who himself speaks with a rich Guyanese accent, says that years ago he asked 25 whites and 25 blacks what was meant by the Ebonic sentence "She *bin* married", with strong emphasis on "bin". What this actually means is that she has been married for a long time and still is. Of the black Americans, 23 understood the sentence correctly, but only eight of the whites did so. "She bin married" without the emphasis on "bin" would mean that she had been married but no longer was — a usage most whites can understand.

So why do young British blacks and whites still speak the same language? Professor Labov says: "First-generation immigrants don't follow the speech patterns of their parents, and there is no segregation in housing in Britain as there is in the US.

From: *The Times*, Feb. 23, 1998, p. 15



(120)

Part A: Approaching the text

Exercise 1: Skim the Times article and indicate which physical paragraph(s) (there are 6 in the article) correspond(s) to the following functional categories:

- 1. Brief summary of the main purpose and results of the London experiment (par. _____)
- 2. General assumptions and definitions derived from previous related research (par. _____)
- 3. Detailed findings of previous research (par. _____)
- 4. Other researchers' findings (par. _____)
- 5. Conclusions/comments (par. _____)

Exercise 2: The table below compares and contrasts the experiments carried out by Professor Labov and Dr Rickford in the UK and the US respectively. Complete the table by inserting the missing information:

Subjects involved	Procedure	Purpose	Results
five young British blacks + several British whites	Taping of _____ _____ _____	Recognize speakers' race on the grounds of differences in accent	_____ _____ _____
_____ + _____	Reading aloud of _____ _____ _____	Recognize _____ on the grounds of differences in grammar and intonation.	23 black Americans understood the sentence correctly, while _____ _____

Part B: Intensive reading

Exercise 3: Read the text carefully and choose the appropriate answer(s):

- 1. What is the overall function of the article (**choose 2 answers**)?
 - to evaluate Labov's research
 - to illustrate Labov's research
 - to account for Labov's different findings in the UK and the US
 - to account for differences between Labov's and Rickford's findings

- 2. How would you explain the choice of the headline ("Tongue-twisters") ?
 - it plays on the word "tongue" as a synonym for "language" and conjures up the idea of language change
 - it plays on the word "tongue" as a synonym for "language" and conjures up the idea of language variety as a source of racial discrimination
 - it plays on the word "tongue" as a synonym for "language"



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and conjures up the idea of difficulty in communication among people speaking different language varieties

3. For whom is the article mainly intended?

- specialists in the field
- general readers
- students

4. Justify your choice in question 3 by selecting **2 answers** from the following:

- abundance of technical terms
- large amount of background knowledge required
- presence of definitions of highly technical terms
- specification of Professor Labov's research interests

5. How has the pronunciation of the words "sawed" and "sod" changed in the US over the last 100 years?

- "sawed" is now pronounced /sɒd/ while "sod" is pronounced /sæd/
- "sawed" is pronounced /sɔ:d/ while "sod" is pronounced /sa:d/
- "sawed" is pronounced /səʊd/ while "sod" is pronounced /sɔ:d/

6. Which is, in Professor Labov's opinion, one of the reasons why young British blacks and whites still speak the same language ?

- because British blacks and whites live in closed communities
- because the children of black immigrants do not usually conform to their parents' speech patterns
- for none of the above reasons

Exercise 4: Making reference to the text, decide whether the following statements are TRUE (T), or FALSE (F), or INCOMPLETE (I) paraphrases of the information conveyed (N.B.: the various statements appear in the order in which the information is presented in the text):

1. The white people involved in Professor Labov's London experiment were from the US ()
2. American blacks' pronunciation is different from that of their white counterparts ()
3. The terms "Ebonics" and "AAVE" denote the same language variety ()
4. Differences among regional dialects are bigger in the UK than in the US. Still, in the US even white people may have difficulty understanding one another ()
5. In Philadelphia, black people pronounce the word "about" in a way that differs from white speech in other northern US cities ()
6. The Ebonic sentence "She *bin* married" means that she has been married for a long time ()
7. In Britain, blacks and whites often live in the same neighbourhood ()

Exercise 5: The following is a list of synonyms for words which appear in the text in the physical



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paragraph indicated in brackets and in the order given on the list. Find the corresponding words and write them in, together with their respective line number:

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|--|-------|-------------|
| 1. inconceivable (par. 1) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 2. experts (par. 2) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 3. drifting apart (par. 3) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 4. varied [word class: "verb"] (par. 4) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 5. learned / acquired [word class: "verb"] (par.4) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 6. share(s) a similar view (par. 5) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 7. allegedly (par. 5) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 8. strong (par. 5) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 9. really (par. 5) | _____ | (line ____) |
| 10. models [word class: "noun"] (par. 6) | _____ | (line ____) |

Part C: Guided writing

Exercise 6: Re-read the lines indicated in brackets and then complete the following paraphrases by choosing ONE word/expression for each missing item:

- (ll. 1-8) After (recording / having recorded) five young British blacks in Battersea Park, Professor Labov asked (to / ---) several British whites to (say / tell) him whether the speakers were black or white. (None / Nobody) of the British people interviewed could answer.
- (ll. 9-13) The result was all the more surprising in that the difference (between / among) blacks and whites would have been immediately evident in the United States.
- (ll. 23-27) (This is because / That is why) English in the US is (very / much) more differentiated across the races, in terms of both sounds and grammar, than it is in Britain.

Exercise 7: Complete the following extract from William Labov's book "Sociolinguistic patterns" (Philadelphia, 1972, pp. 209-210). The extract deals with what Professor Labov calls the "Observer's Paradox", i.e. one of the major problems to be faced by the sociolinguist when conducting interviews. Choose one option for each missing item from the list below:

[...] The aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people (1) when they are not being systematically observed; yet, we (2) only obtain these data by systematic observation. The problem is of course not insoluble: we must (3) find ways of supplementing the formal interviews with other data, or change the structure of the interview situation (4) one means or another. [...] One way (5) the paradox is to break through the constraints of the interview situation by various devices which divert attention away from speech, and (6) the vernacular to emerge [...]. (7), we can involve the subject in questions and topics (8) recreate strong emotions he has (9) in the past, or involve him in other contexts. One of the most successful questions of this type is one dealing with the "Danger of Death": "Have you (10) been in a situation where you were in (11) danger of (12) killed?" Narratives (13) in answer to this question almost always (14) a shift of style away from careful speech towards the vernacular.

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|-----|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| (1) | a. are talking | b. talks | c. talk |
| (2) | a. may | b. can | c. are able to |
| (3) | a. either | b. or | c. both |
| (4) | a. by | b. with | c. through |
| (5) | a. of overcome | b. of overcoming | c. to overcome |
| (6) | a. let | b. make | c. allow |



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|------|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| (7) | a. For example | b. More specifically | c. Consequently |
| (8) | a. who | b. which | c. --- |
| (9) | a. feel | b. feeled | c. felt |
| (10) | a. never | b. ever | c. not ever |
| (11) | a. strong | b. hard | c. serious |
| (12) | a. being | b. been | c. having been |
| (13) | a. give | b. gave | c. given |
| (14) | a. show | b. are showing | c. will show |

Exercise 8: *Illustrate the main reasons why you think/do not think that dialects should be preserved:*

