

# 9. Social Variation II

Ling 380/Soc 427 (Spring 2021)

Joseph Pentangelo

The College of Staten Island, CUNY

# Social Variation

- Last week, we talked about social variation.
- We discussed Gumperz's (1958) study involving caste in Khalapur, India. What were the important takeaways of his study?
- We talked about how difficult it can be to define "class," and even whether it's linguistically relevant, even though it is often taken as a given within sociolinguistics.
- We also discussed Ross's (1954) study of U and non-U English. What social factor was Ross concerned with?



# This week

- In this week's reading, there's basically a survey of several important studies within sociolinguistics.
- We're going to go over some of these studies together to unpack them a little bit.



# Fischer's study

- What is the linguistic variable that Fischer (1958) examined?

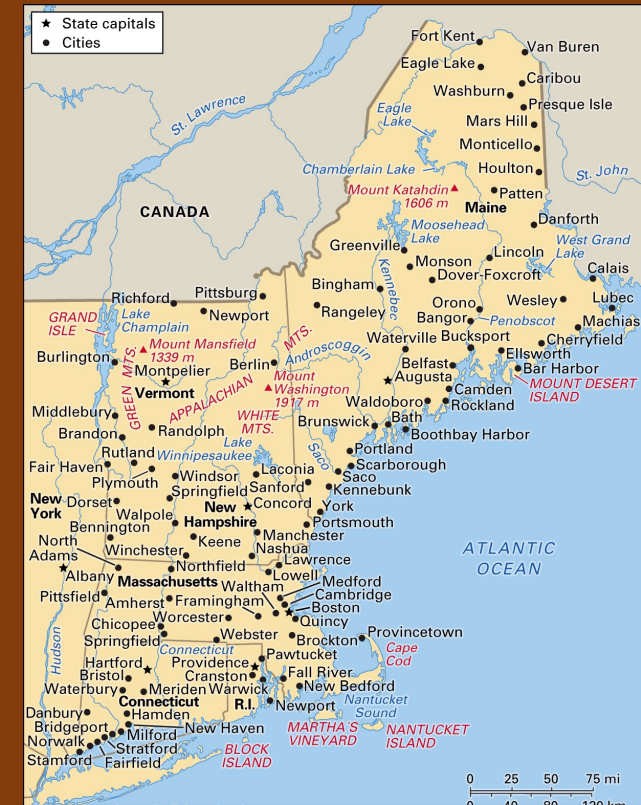
[ɪŋ] vs. [ɪn] (or *-in'* vs. *-ing*)

- Fischer found a whole constellation of factors influenced the use of [ɪŋ] vs. [ɪn]. What is the main social factor that he considered?

sex (boys vs. girls)

- He also found “class, personality [...], and mood [...] of the speaker, to the formality of the conversation and the specific verb spoken.”

Fischer's actual study can be found on our Readings page.



Fischer's study was conducted among children in New England.



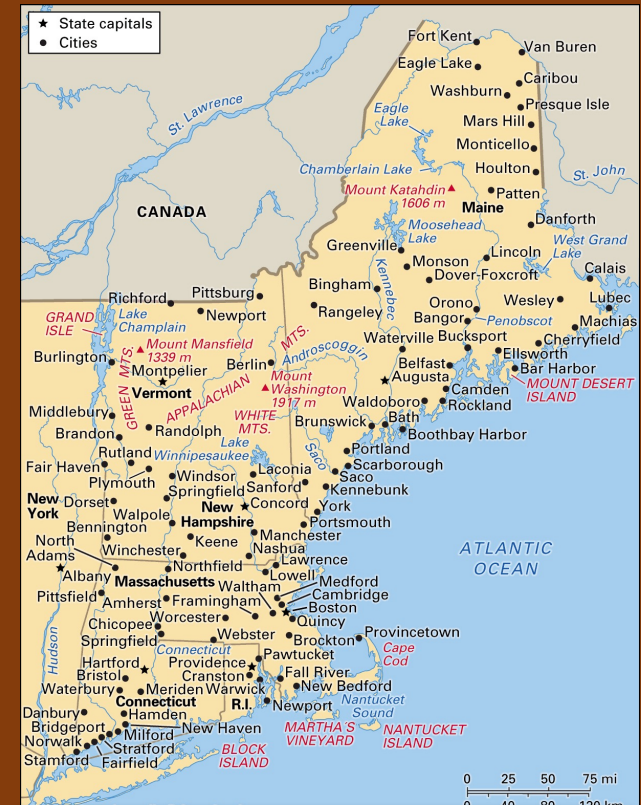
# Fischer's study

“As part of a study of child-rearing practices in a New England community, Fischer conducted interviews with young children, twelve boys and twelve girls, aged 3–10. He noted their use of [ŋ] and [n] in a very formal situation [...], in a less formal interview, and in an informal situation.”

Table 7.1 Preferences for *-ing* and *-in'* endings, by sex

	<i>-ing</i> > <i>-in'</i>	<i>-ing</i> < <i>-in'</i>
Boys	5	7
Girls	10	2

Source: Fischer (1958, p. 48)



Fischer's study was conducted among children in New England.

# Fischer's study

“Fischer also compared the use of [ŋ] and [n] of a boy described by his teachers as a ‘model’ boy with that of a boy described as a ‘typical’ boy. The model boy worked well in school and was described as being popular, thoughtful, and considerate; the typical boy was described as being strong, mischievous, and apparently unafraid of being caught doing something he should not be doing.”

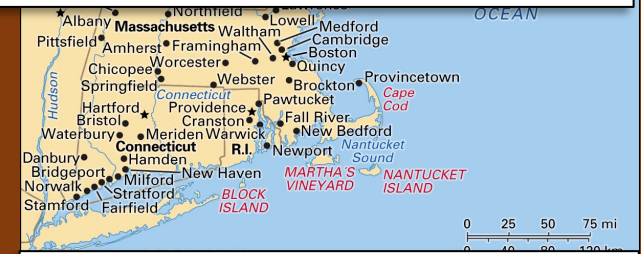
Table 7.2 Preferences of two boys for *-ing* and *-in'* endings

	<i>-ing</i>	<i>-in'</i>
‘Model’ boy	38	1
‘Typical’ boy	10	12

Source: Fischer (1958, p. 49)



What are possible issues with this “model” vs. “typical” dichotomy?



Fischer's study was conducted among children in New England.

# Fischer's study

“In the most formal situation these two boys produced the numbers of instances of *-ing* and *-in'* reported in table 7.2. However, Fischer further observed that the model boy also used *-in'* more as the formality of the situation decreased, as can be seen in table 7.3.”

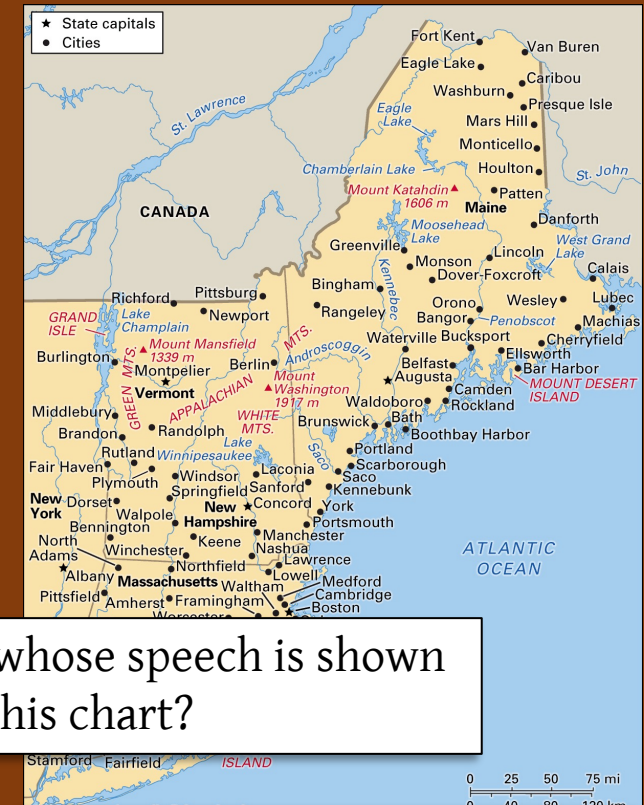
Table 7.3 Preferences for *-ing* and *-in'* endings, by formality of situation

	<i>Most formal</i>	<i>Formal interview</i>	<i>Informal interview</i>
<i>-ing</i>	38	33	24
<i>-in'</i>	1	35	41

Source: Fischer (1958, p. 50)

So whose speech is shown in this chart?

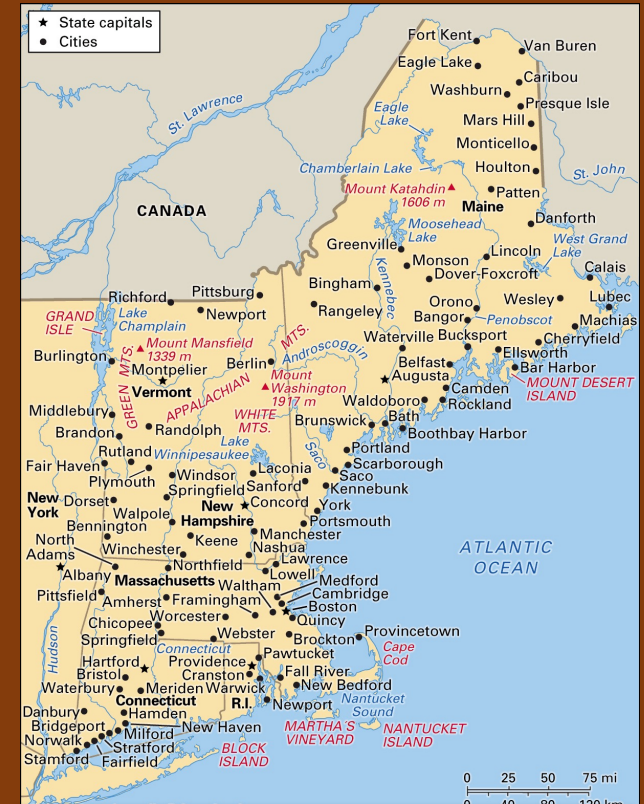
Fischer's study was conducted among children in New England.



# Fischer's study

Something that I thought was really interesting:

- Usage was “associated with specific verbs,” so that some verbs were more likely to appear with the *-in'* form than others.
  - a) hit, chew, swim, punch
  - b) criticize, correct, read, visit
- Words in group (a) “were much more likely to be given *-in'* endings” than the verbs in group (b). Fischer contended that the verbs in group (b) were themselves more “formal.”
- What's another possible explanation?



Fischer's study was conducted among children in New England.



# Fischer's study

In Fischer's actual study (rather than the summary in the textbook), he wrote that:

The ['model' boy] used *-ing* in *criticizing, correcting, reading, visiting, interesting* and used *-in* in *punchin, flubbin, swimmin, chewin, [and] hittin*. For some common verbs, however, such as *play, go, and do* he used both alternatively. Probably only a few verbs are formal or informal enough in their connotations so that the same variant would always be used with them.



Fischer's study was conducted among children in New England.

# Fischer's study

In Fischer's study, he makes a very important observation:

While these are “free variants” in the standard type of description of languages [...] if we widen our scope of study to include the meaning of these variants to the conversants we might call them “socially conditioned variants,” or “socio-symbolic variants,” on the grounds that they serve to symbolize things about the relative status of the conversants and their attitudes toward each other, rather than denoting any difference in the universe of primary discourse (the “outer world”).



Fischer's study was conducted among children in New England.



# Discussion! (p.164, q.1)

- If you were interested in the same phenomenon as Fischer, the (ng) variable among young children, how would you design an investigation so that you would be in a position to make much stronger claims than Fischer was able to make?

# Discussion! (p.164, q.2)

- What particular difficulties do you think there are in investigating children's language that do not exist in investigating adults' language? How might you try to get around these difficulties?

# Labov (1966) in NYC

- What linguistic variable was Labov interested in?

The pronunciation of postvocalic [ɹ].

- What was the social factor that Labov was interested in?

Class (high, middle, and low)

- Labov conducted his study in three department stores. Which ones were they, and how did they correspond to class?

Saks (high), Macy's (middle), S. Klein (low)



Labov conducted his study in three department stores associated with particular social classes.

# Labov (1966) in NYC

- Labov conducted his experiment by getting shop assistants in these stores to say “fourth floor.” He did this by asking for the location of departments he knew to be located on that floor, and then asking them to repeat themselves.
- Why did he do it this way, rather than just by asking them outright to say “fourth floor”?



Labov conducted his study in three department stores associated with particular social classes.

# Labov (1966) in NYC

Table 7.4 Percentage of *r*-use in three New York City department stores

	<i>Saks (%)</i>	<i>Macy's (%)</i>	<i>S. Klein (%)</i>
All [r]	32	31	17
Some [r]	30	20	4
No [r]	38	49	79
Number	68	125	71

Source: based on Labov (1972b, p. 51)

- If we assume that Labov is correct about the relative class status of these stores, what can we say about this linguistic variable and class?



Labov conducted his study in three department stores associated with particular social classes.



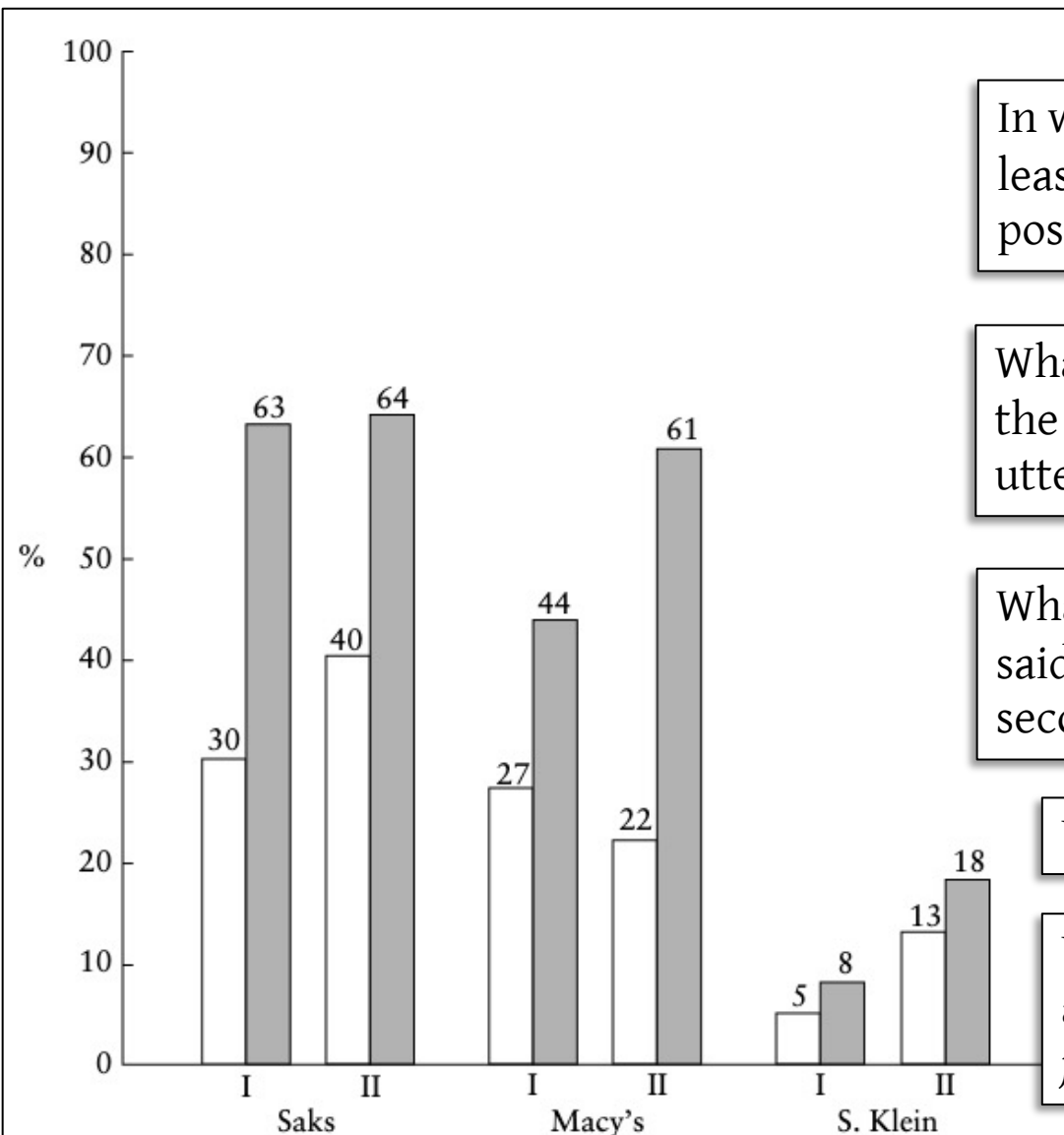


Figure 7.1 Percentage of (r); [r] in first (I) and second (II) utterances of *fourth* (white) and *floor* (solid) in three New York City department stores  
 Source: based on Labov (1972b, p. 52)

In which store were speakers least likely to pronounce postvocalic *r*?

What % of speakers in Saks said the *r* in *floor* on their first utterance?

What % of speakers in Macy's said the *r* in *fourth* on their second utterance?

Why is this unusual?

What can we say is true about *r*-pronunciation in *fourth* vs. *floor*, in all cases?



Labov conducted his study in three department stores associated with particular social classes.



# Labov (1966) in NYC

“[...] *r*-pronunciation has not always been highly valued in New York City. New York City was *r*-pronouncing in the eighteenth century but became *r*-less in the nineteenth, and *r*-lessness predominated until World War II. At that time, *r*-pronunciation became prestigious again, possibly as a result of large population movements to the city; there was a shift in attitude toward *r*-pronunciation, from apparent indifference to a widespread desire to adopt such pronunciation.”

- How do we feel about the social esteem afforded *r*-pronunciation today?



Labov conducted his study in three department stores associated with particular social classes.

# Labov (1966) in NYC

This desire is clearly demonstrated on subjective reaction tests carried out in the 1960s. These tests required subjects to evaluate speech with and without *r*-pronunciation by asking subjects to judge the job prospects of people who differed only in their pronunciation of words containing *r*, and to say which of two pronunciations they used of words containing *r*. The tests showed that New Yorkers in the upper middle class and under the age of 40 almost unanimously approved *r*-pronunciation even though fewer than half actually used *r* in all possible instances. People below the age of 20 also used more *r*-pronunciation than people between the ages of 20 and 40, a fact that would suggest *r*-pronunciation to be on the increase. Above the age of 40, approval fell off to about 60 percent and use showed a dramatic decline to less than 10 percent. Other classes exhibited much the same pattern of approval and use, though, in all cases except one, at much lower levels. In one case – that of the lower middle class – the use of *r* actually exceeded such use in the upper middle class in certain circumstances. Not only did lower middle-class speakers approve of *r*-pronunciation, but they also tended to exceed what appear to be the norms for its use in the next highest class in reading word lists and in pronouncing minimal pairs of words.

Why might lower middle-class speakers value *r*-pronunciation so highly?

How can we connect this to Gumperz's work on caste?



Labov conducted his study in three department stores associated with particular social classes.



# Labov (1966) in NYC

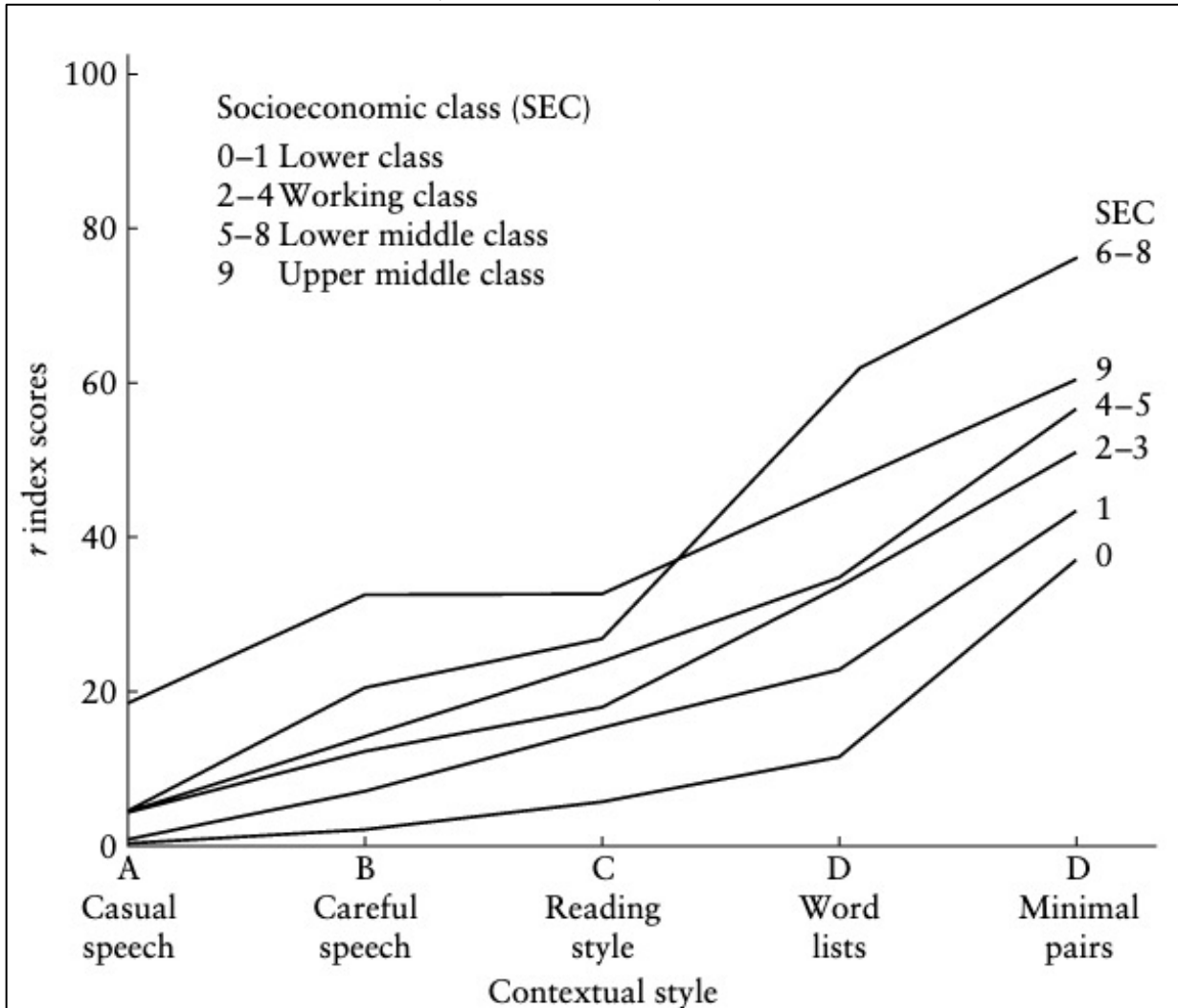


Figure 7.2 R-pronunciation in New York City by social class and style of speech  
Source: Labov (1966, p. 240)



What is happening here?



In what context(s) do lower middle class people exceed upper middle class people in *r*-pronunciation?

Labov conducted his study in three department stores associated with particular social classes.

What is *hypercorrection*?

# Discussion! (p.170, q.4)

- *Hypercorrect* linguistic behavior is not at all unusual. What examples do you know of? Who gives evidence of such behavior, and on what occasions?

# Trudgill (1974) in NYC

- What linguistic variables was Trudgill interested in?

16 phonological variables, including:

- [ŋ] vs [n] as in *singing*
- [t] vs. [ʔ] as in *butter*
- [h] vs. ø as in *hammer*

- What social factors was Trudgill interested in?

Class and gender.



Trudgill conducted his study in Norwich, England.

# Trudgill (1974)

- Trudgill found two “very important points.”
  1. When style is kept constant, the lower the social class the greater the incidence of the nonstandard variant
  2. When class is kept constant, the less formal the style the greater the incidence of the nonstandard variant

How can we relate these findings to what we know about standardization?

Does any class really consistently speak the standard variety of English?



Trudgill conducted his study in Norwich, England.



# The Detroit Studies

- What linguistic variable were Shuy et al. interested in?

Multiple negation

- What is multiple negation?

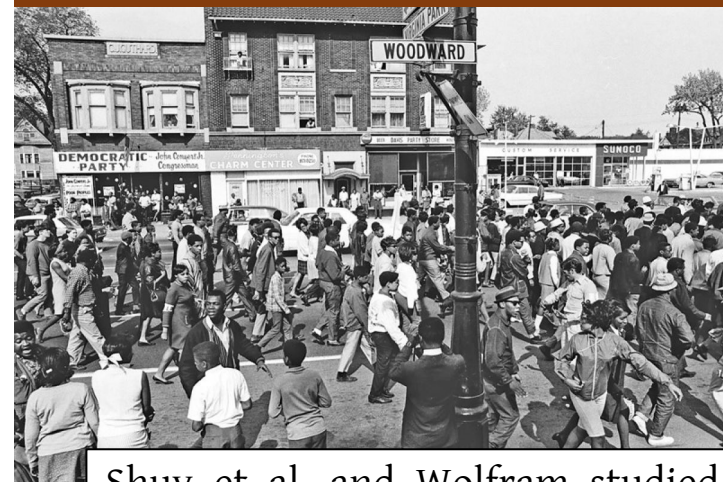
The “double negative,” as in *I haven't got no X*

- What was the social factor that Shuy et al. were interested in?

Social class

- How did class and multiple negation correlate?

Higher class corresponded with less multiple negation.

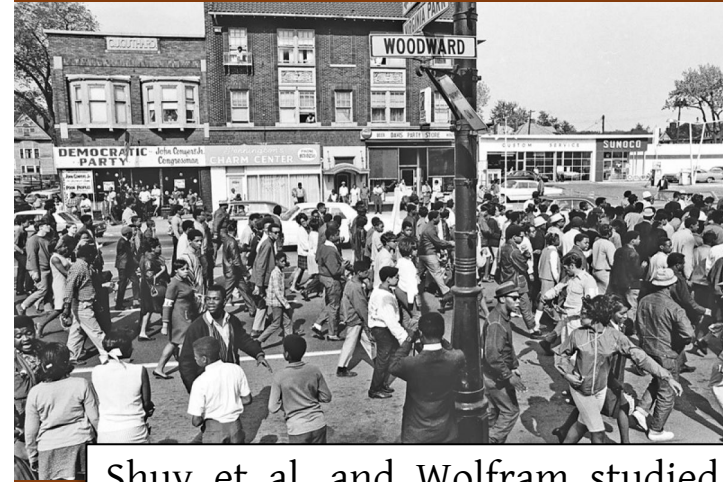


Shuy et al. and Wolfram studied variation in Detroit.

# The Detroit Study

Wolfram expanded drastically on Shuy et al.'s study by considering “social class, gender, age, and racial origin.” He also considered eight variables:

1. word final consonant cluster simplification
2. medial and final *th*, as in *nothing* and *path*
3. syllable final *d*
4. postvocalic *r*
5. zero copula (*He tired*)
6. invariant be (*He be tired*, as opposed to *He is tired*)
7. the -s suffixes (*girls*, *boy's*, *goes*)
8. multiple negation



Shuy et al. and Wolfram studied variation in Detroit.

# The Detroit Study

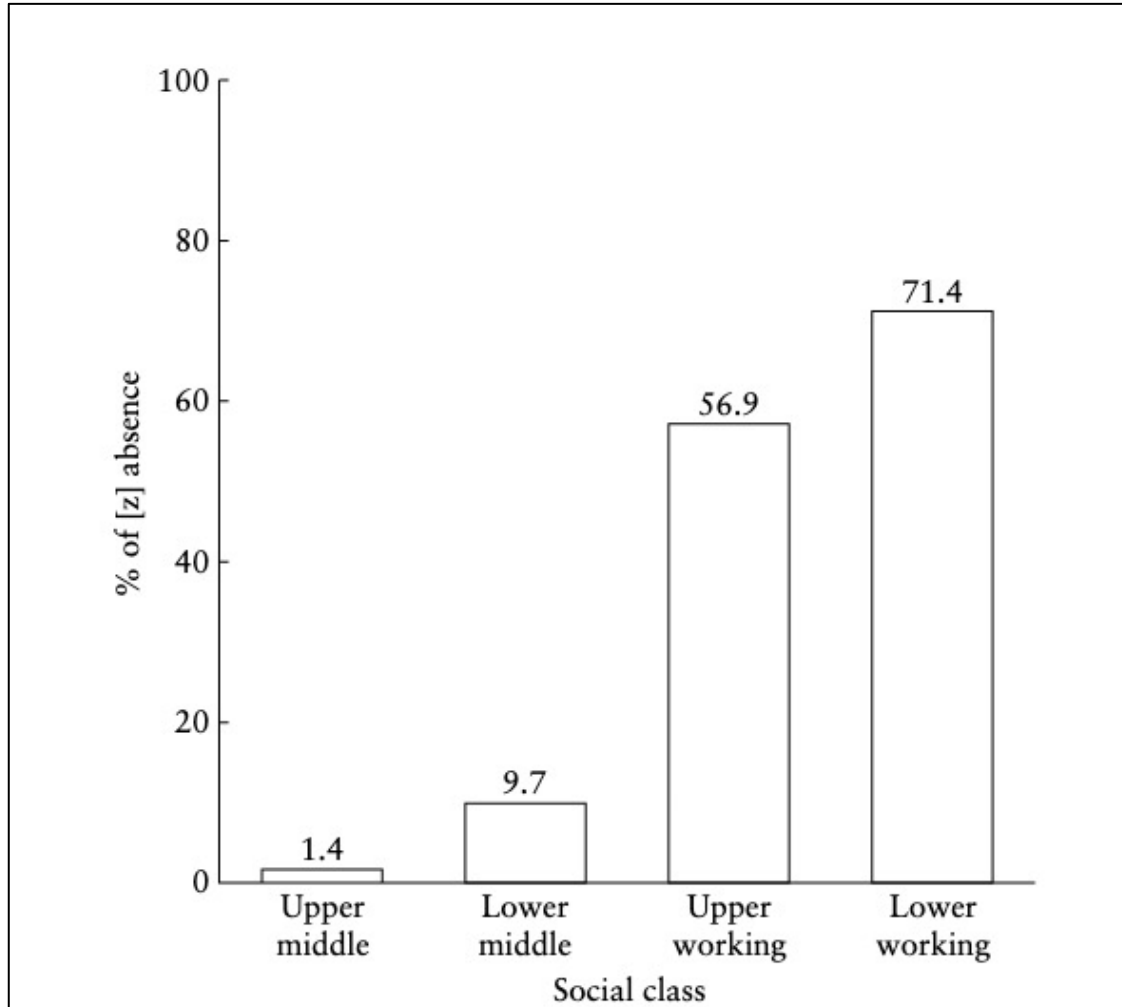
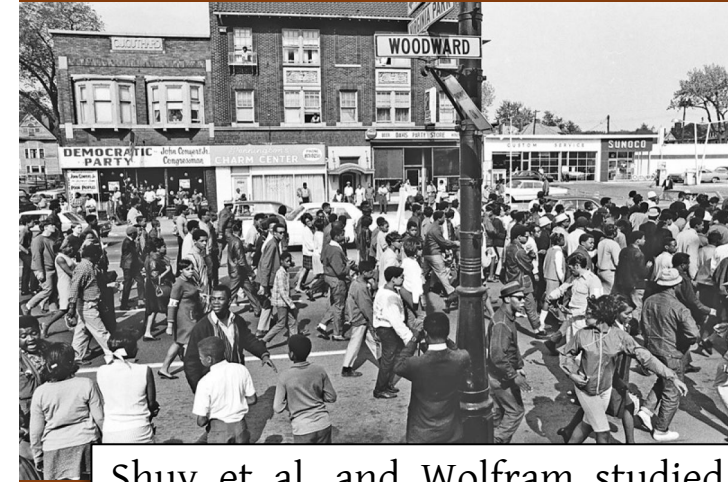


Figure 7.4 Percentage of (z) absence in third-person singular present tense agreement in Detroit black speech

Source: based on Wolfram (1969, p. 136)



Shuy et al. and Wolfram studied variation in Detroit.

What does this chart show?

What trend do we see here?

What is *sharp stratification*?

# The Detroit Study

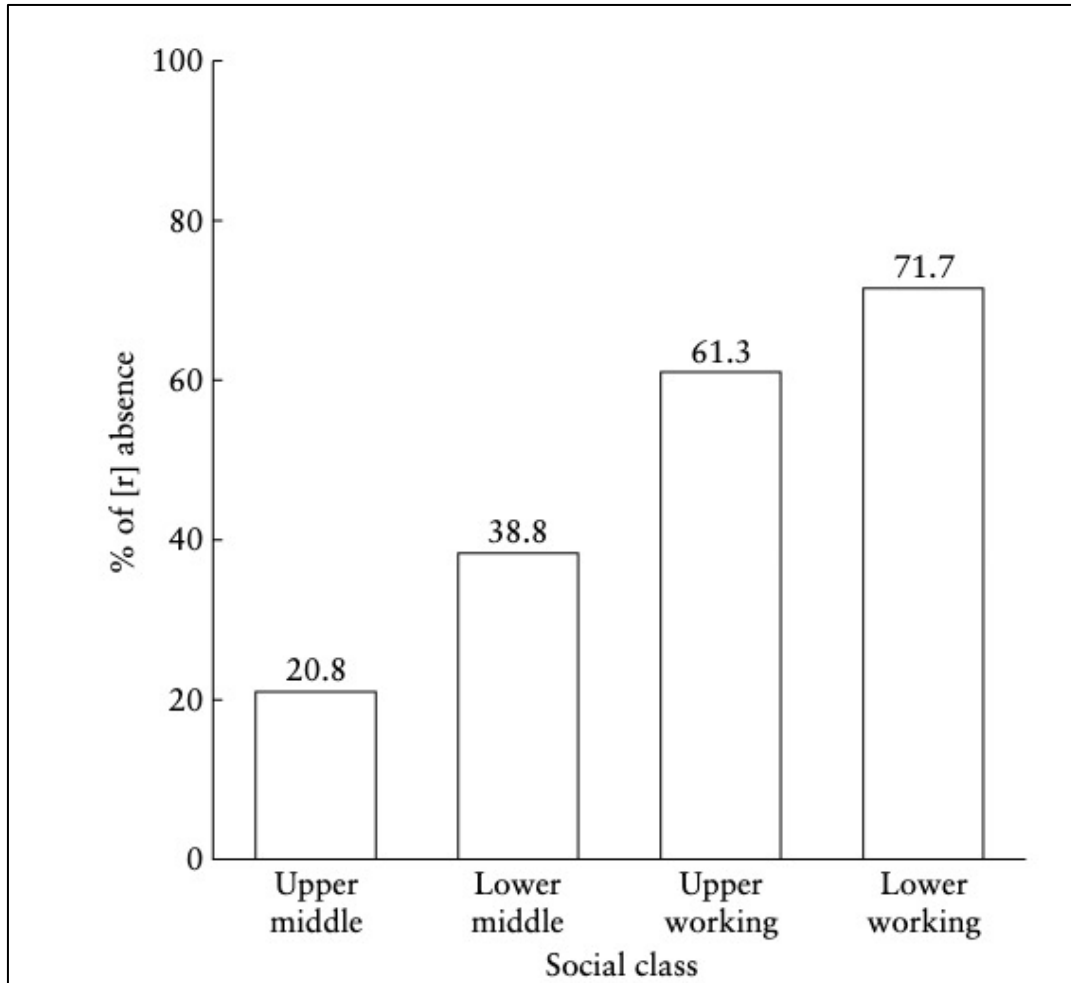
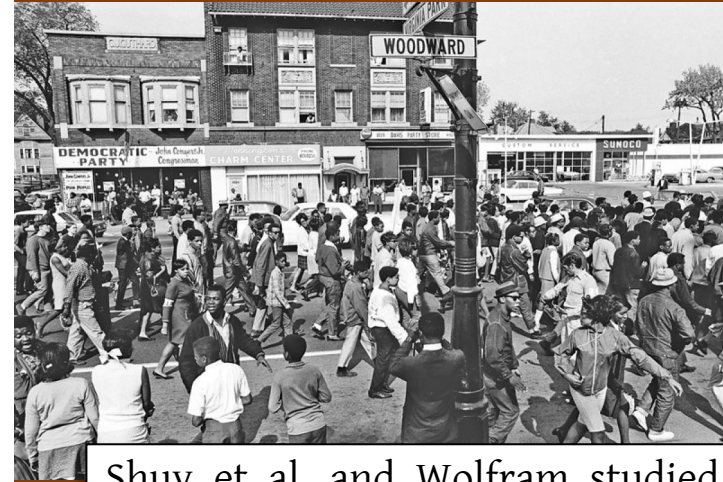


Figure 7.5 Percentage of (r) absence in words like *farm* and *car* in Detroit black speech

Source: based on Wolfram (1969, p. 110)



Shuy et al. and Wolfram studied variation in Detroit.

What does this chart show?

What trend do we see here?

What is *gradient stratification*?

# The Detroit Study

What does this say about the -s (as in *goes*) linguistic variable vs. the postvocalic-*r* variable?

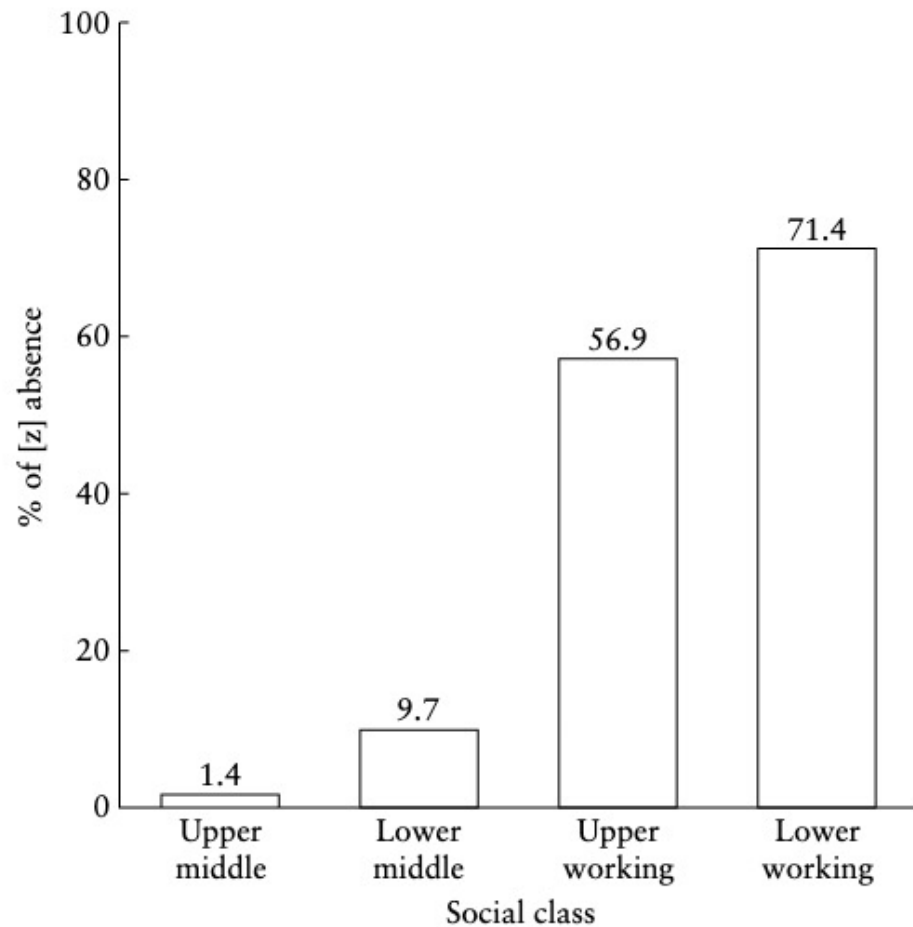


Figure 7.4 Percentage of (z) absence in third-person singular present tense agreement in Detroit black speech  
Source: based on Wolfram (1969, p. 136)

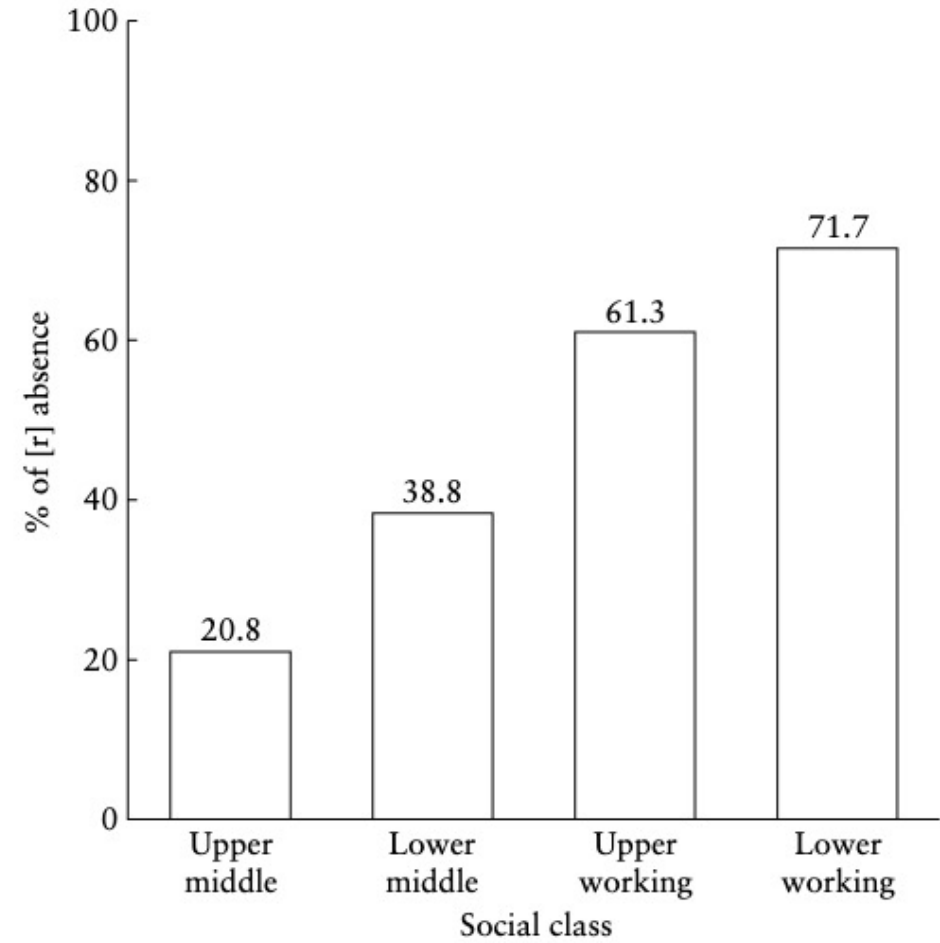


Figure 7.5 Percentage of (r) absence in words like *farm* and *car* in Detroit black speech  
Source: based on Wolfram (1969, p. 110)

# Discussion!

- What trend can we observe in going from studies like Fischer's to studies like Wolfram's?



# Discussion!

While these are “free variants” in the standard type of description of languages [...] if we widen our scope of study to include the meaning of these variants to the conversants we might call them “socially conditioned variants,” or “socio-symbolic variants,” on the grounds that they serve to symbolize things about the relative status of the conversants and their attitudes toward each other, rather than denoting any difference in the universe of primary discourse (the “outer world”).

- In linguistics, “free variation” refers to the situation where a speaker can freely choose between two variables, with no difference in meaning. Bearing in mind Fischer’s note about “free variants,” and considering what we’ve learned from the other studies discussed today, what can we say about the notion of “free variation”?
- Can you think of any true free variables?

# For next week...

- Read pp.191–207 in the textbook.