

**ICHL 2007 Montréal**  
**Plenary Sessions / Conférences plénières**

**The Life History of Linguistic Chance**  
**William Labov**  
**University of Pennsylvania**

As Meillet and Saussure both pointed out, we cannot hope to explain the sporadic course of linguistic change by the operation of invariant physiological or psychological factors. Studies of linguistic changes in progress over the last half-century have illuminated our understanding of the causes of change by locating the events in specific social and linguistic structures. This paper will draw upon these studies to trace the characteristic life history of linguistic changes: *the triggering events* which initiate change; *forks in the road* that are responsible for the differentiation of contiguous dialects, *driving forces* which move the changes forward; and the *rising levels* that lead to completion.

The paper will first consider the triggering events that led to the differentiation of English dialects in the inventory of the low vowels: the instability of the opposition of long and short open *o* and the variable split of short *a* into tense and lax forms. It will then take up the chain shifts and mergers that were initiated or inhibited by these conditions, and their progress as shown in the recently completed *Atlas of North American English*. The structural consequences of the initial changes are shown to lead to the sharp and increasing differentiation of regional dialects. The continued advancement of these changes will be linked to their correlations with social class and gender. Reinterpretations of the social significance of innovating forms by successive generations of language learners eventually leads to the consolidation of the community pattern and the creation of the uniform structural base that is characteristic of metropolitan speech communities.

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