Two fundamental facts of language are (a) that it is always changing, in all areas of structure (phonology, grammar, discourse style, semantics, and vocabulary) and (b) that it changes in different ways at diverse places and times. Some societies have made efforts to check the mutability of language; where literacy is present, special efforts have been made to stabilize written languages in particular. Such attempts typically involve prescriptive grammars, as well as codified orthographies made accessible through authoritative dictionaries; these identify conservative usages, linked with traditional literature and established social values, and they discourage departure from the established norms. In some countries, learned institutions like the Académie Française or the Academia Real de la Lengua Española have been given official responsibility for maintaining the linguistic status quo. In such a literate milieu, the written language is typically held up by educational institutions as a model for the spoken language; and innovative linguistic usages are discouraged in speech as well as writing – such as slang vocabulary (e.g., Eng. *booze* instead of *liquor*), analogical simplification in grammar (*he don’t* instead of *he doesn’t*), and departure from the orthographic norm in pronunciation (such as the merger of the vowel in *bad* and *bared* with that of *beard* [biːd] in some New York City speech). To the extent that such efforts to retard change are effective, they may be said to exemplify socially conditioned nonchange of language.

What is more typical, however, is that efforts to control language change have only limited success. Even in written English, which has been subjected to efforts at prescriptive control since the eighteenth century, changes of vocabulary, grammar, and spelling have taken place steadily; this is clear to anyone who now reads novels written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In spoken language, prescriptivism is even less effective, and numerous changes can be observed within an individual lifetime. Speakers of English nowadays say and write *ice cream* with no awareness that, in 1900, this form was considered a vulgar error for *iced cream*; they also say, and sometimes write, *ice tea* for *iced tea*, as well as *can peaches* and *smoke fish* for *canned peaches* and *smoked fish*. Phonological changes by which American English *whine* [hwain] merges with *wine* [wain], or *caught* [kɔːt] with *cot* [kɒt], or *pin* [pin] with *pen* [pen] – or, indeed, *Mary* ['meiə] and *marry* ['mæri] with *merry* ['meiə] – are common over broad geographical areas. In Great Britain, by contrast, the merger of *whine/wine* is standard, but the others are rare. Furthermore, such mergers are mostly below the level of awareness, and typically go uncensured by schoolteachers (who are likely to use the same pronunciations themselves).

The fact that language is universally changeable, and that it changes in different ways at different times and places, is of course the basic fact of historical linguistics. This is the reason behind the facts that Modern English is spoken in different ways in London, New York, Cape Town, and Sydney; that Modern English shows many differences from, as well as similarities to, the Old English of King Alfred the Great, with which it is mutually unintelligible; that French and Spanish are mutually unintelligible with each other and with Latin, although the modern languages show systematic correspondences with Latin; and that a more remote level of systematic correspondences involving Old English and Latin – as well as Ancient Greek, Sanskrit and other languages – enables us to relate those languages historically as “sisters” to each other, and as descendants of a prehistoric language that we call Proto-Indo-
Types of influence In view of the above, it is understandable that linguists have wanted to understand the reasons why linguistic change occurs. Certain types of changes – involving a more or less simultaneous effect on large groups of people, up to entire societies – may be called macrolinguistic; these involve entire language structures, and often involve deliberate, conscious decisions, institutionally promulgated as part of language planning programs. One such process is that of standardization, in which a single dialect is put forward as the official norm for an entire multidialectal area. Again, when languages come into contact on a large scale, such as Spanish and English in the US, bilingualism may become common (sometimes with encouragement from governments and schools); this is likely to produce such typical language contact phenomena as code-switching between Spanish and English, the introduction of loanwords from one language into the other, and the assimilation of grammatical patterns toward those of the language to which social value is attached (in this case, English). A further result in some cases may be the limitation of Spanish language use to more restricted social contexts (e.g., the home), even to the point of the obsolescence of Spanish in some communities, and ultimate complete language shift in the direction of English. The ultimate stage of obsolescence is, of course, language death. Still other changes which may be called macrolinguistic, although they do not involve institutional actions, are pidginization and creolization, in which contact between two or more languages – e.g., in the situation of a colonial plantation economy – results in a new language with vocabulary mainly derived from the socially dominant language, but with a drastically simplified grammar.

On a more microlinguistic level, linguistic changes may be initiated by a single individual, or by a small group, and subsequently imitated by others who attribute social value to them; in some cases, such innovations may spread through an entire society. In the case of new vocabulary items, the motivation may be conscious, in the form of a new concept or invention such as radar, for which the English term was coined in the twentieth century; in such cases, the person who initiated the item, and the circumstances of its spread, are often well known. However, such new vocabulary items are far from typical of linguistic changes in general. When unconscious changes occur in grammar, as when the older plural kine is replaced by cows, or in pronunciation, as in which [hwitf] > [witf], we cannot pinpoint the initiating individuals or the paths of imitation. It is precisely the difficulty of discovering when and how such changes have occurred in the past, or of “catching them in the act” in the present, that has captured the imagination of many linguists and led them to study the mechanisms of language change.

Two types of misapprehension have often put obstacles in the way of this study. First, it used to be thought that it would never be possible to capture unconscious language change “in the act,” simply because its operation required too long a period of time. In this view, trying to observe language change is like trying to observe the motion of a clock’s hands: One cannot see the change, but if we look again later, we perceive that change has occurred. Second, people have sometimes thought of language history in terms of abrupt changes from one literary period to another, rather than in the variable daily use of individual speakers over time. If we study the speech of a single individual, the variation that we find may seem to contain a great deal of randomness; but as Labov has shown, if we undertake statistical and comparative study – involving multiple speakers, social contexts, generations, and geographical locations – it is possible to discover coherent patterns of variation and change that characterize contemporary spoken English. Of course, confirmation of linguistic change in real-time studies remains desirable.

Language change as simplification A traditional view of language change, sometimes expressed by prescriptive grammarians, is that unconscious change is in the direction of simplification, conceived as
a universal tendency toward the use of minimum effort. Prescriptivists have even characterized the processes of change as resulting from laziness. In these terms, English *whale* merged with *wail* in many dialects because people found it “too effortful” to pronounce the *h; caught* merged with *cot* because some speakers found that the vocal calibration required to distinguish the vowels was just too much trouble. But since such changes have always been in operation, we would expect that they would have ultimately reduced all speech to the easiest possible sound, perhaps [æː] – which has not happened. In fact, two other overriding motives are characteristic of language change: Speakers want to be able to understand each other, and they want to use language to express their social identity. All speakers frequently produce inadvertently simplified pronunciations of particular words; but in most cases, this low–level variability remains unimportant. The innovations are not repeated on later occasions by the original speakers, nor are they imitated by other speakers.

Again, in grammar, we can discern a tendency to simplify structure by *analogy*: Since English has *I don't, you don't, we don't, they don't*, we can save the trouble of mastering an irregularity if we replace *he doesn't* by *he don't*. But in fact *he don't* is stigmatized by most English speakers as rustic or uneducated, and there seems little chance of its becoming widely accepted. Furthermore, it is easy to find grammar changes which *increase* structural complexity. For instance, most English verbs have “weak” past tenses, formed by suffixation as in *walk/-ed*, but a minority are “strong,” with vowel change, as in *sing/sang*. The tendency to simplify grammar by analogy should change verbs from the strong to the weak pattern, and it is a commonplace that children learning English often produce “incorrect” verb forms such as *swimmed*. But more complex types of analogical change, from weak to strong, also occur, as in the currently used *sneak/snuck* and *squeeze/squoze*. Complex irregularities remain a feature of English grammar.

**Functional factors in language change** It has been proposed, especially by André Martinet (1955), that phonological change in particular is constrained and guided by the need to preserve communicative function in language. This view is associated in particular with arguments for patterns of internal change in language, involving *chain shifts*, in which one change is followed by others which serve to preserve contrasts that distinguish meaning; thus in Swedish, the fronting of *u* to high–mid [ʉ] was followed by the raising of *o* to [ʊ], and this in turn by the raising of å (originally [ɔː]) to [o] (Hock, 1991: 156–7). Such patterns are discussed in detail by Labov (1994), in volume 1 of his *Principles of Language Change*. However, it is clear that, whatever the importance of language–internal factors may be, a major role in language change is played by sociolinguistic factors; these have formed a central area of Labov's research for many years, and are the topic of his forthcoming volume 2.

**The role of imitation** A long–standing hypothesis in discussions of language change has been the idea that, once a change is initiated by a single individual (for whatever reason), its subsequent spread throughout a language community occurs when, and to the extent that, it is imitated by other speakers. This process indeed seems to operate in the area of new vocabulary, in cases where one person coin a new technical term (or creates a colorful new slang usage) and is then imitated by others. The way the process operates in the less conscious areas of phonology and grammar, however, is not so clear. There are anecdotes about how a change of *s* to *θ* in Castilian Spanish arose because a king of Spain had a lisp, or of how a French *r* changed to uvular [ʁ] because a French king had a speech defect – in each case the populace is supposed to have imitated the *prestige* of their monarch’s speech – but these stories are hard to authenticate. In any case, such proposed explanations say, in effect, that the innovating pronunciation was *borrowed*; but linguistic borrowing is not always characterized by complete regularity across all vocabulary items, which is observable in the Castilian and French cases. In addition, the notion that imitation follows prestige models raises the question of how prestige itself is defined. It has sometimes been too easily assumed that prestige is any quality that people imitate! In fact, it is often observed that higher social classes adopt features of lower–class speech, as in many cases where middle–class White speakers have borrowed slang vocabulary from lower–class Black speakers; for some individuals, the borrowed features have connotations of masculinity or of natural authenticity – a kind of “inverse prestige.” (Although many lower–class members assign low value to their own speech, they often feel that it would be “sissified” for them to imitate the upper classes.) Thus it is necessary to recognize both “change from above,” where the language of higher social strata is dominant, and “change from below,” where the model is the language of lower social strata. In short, although imitation must indeed be an important factor in language change, the concept is still not fully understood.
Grammatical change and phonological change Two major factors in grammar change are often cited. First, phonological change often does away with distinctions among morphological elements, or may delete them entirely; then new syntactic constructions may be elaborated to take over the functions formerly served by morphology. Thus the noun case suffixes of Old English were phonologically reduced and lost (except for genitive s); in compensation, the language developed rules of word order to differentiate subject from object, which earlier had distinct suffixes, and increased the use of prepositions to specify other relationships involving nouns. A second factor in grammatical change is the operation of analogy, discussed above; although it may not be possible to predict exactly when or how analogical processes will operate, their role is clearly important. In addition, some recent research on syntactic change indicates that external social forces may be important (Kroch, 1989).

Sociolinguistic motivations for change The research which opened the way for much subsequent work on social factors in phonological change was the study carried out by Labov (1963) on Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. There he found that a centralization of [a] toward [ə], in the diphthongs [ai] and [au], was a social marker of loyalty to the Island community, as opposed to the outside world. In subsequent much more detailed work in New York City (Labov, 1966c), Labov showed that what had appeared as random phonetic variation, when studied in the speech of individual New Yorkers, was statistically patterned when correlated with, on the one hand, social class, and, on the other hand, the degree of formality in speech. The latter factor could be categorized on a scale which included five styles, in order of increasing formality: (A) casual style, (B) careful style, (C) reading aloud from text, (D) reading aloud from word-lists, and (D’) pronunciation of minimal word-pairs. Furthermore, he found that higher rank on the scale of social class was correlated with higher degrees on the scale of formality, both favoring conservative pronunciations; alternatively, if an innovation occurred more frequently in working-class speech, it would occur more frequently in the informal speech of all speakers. This kind of quantitative social dialectology, which has become almost synonymous with sociolinguistics for some people, is often discussed under the label variation theory.

One social class in particular was found to play a special role, namely the upward-aspiring lower middle class. This social group demonstrated hypercorrect behavior in the sense that, when speaking formally, they went beyond the highest-status group in adopting new prestige features (Labov, 1966b). Other behavior patterns typical of the lower middle class were a wide range of variation among styles in speech, a high degree of phonetic fluctuation within a given style, and a conscious striving for "correctness." Perhaps the most striking feature of what Labov has called the linguistic insecurity (1972: 117) of this group was demonstrated when they were asked to give subjective evaluations of their own speech: They were strongly negative about it. Yet, as was later shown clearly in Labov’s Philadelphia research (see below), the lower middle class occupies a key role in the processes of language change in the urban eastern US.

The interaction of class stratification and style with the dimension of apparent time, as seen in change over generations, is shown with reference to syllable-final r in figure 5.1. In Style A (casual speech), for the two oldest age groups (50–75 and 40–49), there is little indication that the occurrence of r is significant. However, among speakers under 40 years old, r suddenly becomes a prestige marker for class 9 only (upper middle class). This sudden change in the status of r is apparently associated with the population changes accompanying World War II. Reading downward in the table, from more casual to more formal styles, we find a regular increase in the use of r. The larger left-to-right pattern shows the role of age group in two different ways: In class 9, younger speakers show more use of r than older speakers, but in the other classes, older speakers tend to use r more than younger ones. Reading from left to right, we see the familiar pattern of class behavior by which the lower middle class (levels 6–8) leads the working class and the lower class in the use of r.
Figure 5.1 Class stratification of syllable–final $r$ for five speech styles. Style A is casual; B, careful; C, reading; D, word lists; D', minimal pairs. Within each style, the vertical scale shows index scores (maximum 100) for the occurrence of syllable–final $r$. The horizontal scale shows four age categories, and within each of those, socioeconomic class levels 0–8. Class level 9, the upper middle class, is indicated by the dotted line. The hatched areas represent the degree to which a given index score exceeds the level of the upper middle class. (Adapted from Labov, 1972, fig. 4.3, p. 116 and fig. 5.4, p. 137.)

The hatched areas in the figure point up the phenomenon of hypercorrection. Although all class and age groups tend to use more $r$ as formality increases, it is lower middle-class speakers (class levels 6–8) of the middle-aged group (40–49 years) who show the greatest tendency to increase their use of $r$ in formal styles – until, in the most formal styles D and D', they far surpass the level of the upper middle class (class 9). But there is a generational difference in the middle class: Younger speakers seem not to be fully aware of the prestige attached to the new $r$ pronunciation, and have not acquired it to the
same extent as their elders (Labov, 1972a: 59). The overall pattern shown by this figure reflects the relatively recent introduction, and subsequent spread through generations, of syllable-final \( r \) as a sociolinguistic prestige marker.

From such research by Labov and his colleagues, a new sociolinguistic approach to language change emerged in the 1960s, and was put forward in a classic essay by Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968). The main features of this approach (conveniently summarized by Hock, 1991: 648–9) include the following: All speech involves low-level variation in pronunciation, with no consistent function. But sometimes, for linguistically arbitrary reasons, a feature of pronunciation may become associated with membership in a social group. At this point, the feature becomes important for speakers’ knowledge of their language; they arrive at a generalization – a “rule” from the linguist's viewpoint – as to how the variable use conveys socially relevant information. This generalization may then be extended to new environments, new word classes, or related segments. At the same time, the social parameters for the generalization of the variable rule may be expanded to include additional individuals. If there are no opposing social pressures, the rule may expand throughout the entire lexicon and the entire speech community; if it achieves maximum expansion, it changes from variable to categorical status, so that a regular sound change can be recognized. Labov (1972a: 275) introduced the term uniformitarian principle for the hypothesis that this pattern of sound change implementation, generally observable in changes currently in progress, must have applied to all sound changes in past history.

In subsequent years, Labov and his students have concentrated on linguistic variation in the Philadelphia area, moving out from there to other parts of the US and the English-speaking world. Important collections of papers on the social and geographical dialectology of English, and on current changes in English phonology, have been published by Labov (1980b) and Eckert (1991).

The actuation problem The heart of Labov’s system is the question of actuation: “Why do changes in a structural feature take place in a particular language at a given time, but not in other languages with the same feature, or in the same language at other times?” (Weinreich et al., 1968: 102). Labov has approached this question “by searching for the social location of the innovators: asking which speakers are in fact responsible for the continued innovation of sound changes, and how their influence spreads to affect the entire speech community” (Labov, 1980a: 252). Earlier linguists had suggested that innovation should originate more often among the lower social classes, because of their lesser exposure to the influence of the standard language – or alternatively, that innovation should originate among the upper classes, who would then provide a prestige model for lower classes to imitate. However, work in Philadelphia by Labov and his associates revealed that sound change could originate in any class other than the highest, and that the principal source of innovation was in fact located centrally in the social hierarchy (1980a: 253–4): namely, in that same lower middle class which had figured prominently in his New York research. But the riddle of actuation remained: What was the force that led to the continued renewal of sound change? It seemed evident that a key factor was the entrance of new ethnic and racial groups into the community; in Philadelphia this has been accompanied by strong emphasis on local ethnic identification, and by changes in both Black and White dialects which have the effect of making them increasingly divergent from each other (p. 263).

The influence of literacy Since written language generally changes more slowly than spoken language, it has been supposed that the presence of literacy in a community might act as a “drag” to retard change in the spoken language. However, the picture is complicated by the fact that in societies with limited literacy, as in India, literacy tends to exist mainly in the upper social classes; so, although we find that Brahmin speech is relatively conservative, it is not clear what the relative roles of social class and literacy are in producing this effect. Bright and Ramanujan (1964) attempted to study this question by examining the speech of Brahmin and non-Brahmin speakers of Kannada and Tulu, two neighboring and closely related Dravidian languages of South India. Kannada has a long-established writing system, in which most Brahmins (and many non-Brahmins) are literate. By contrast, Tulu has no commonly used script; when speakers of Tulu as a first language (L1) learn to read and write, they do so in a second language (L2) – Kannada, Sanskrit, or English. Studies revealed that, in Kannada, the Brahmin dialect was clearly more conservative than non-Brahmin speech; but in Tulu, the Brahmin dialect was as likely to innovate as that of non-Brahmins. This suggests that literacy in L1 does indeed exercise a conservative effect, independently of social class. For more recent work on the relationship between literacy and sociolinguistic change see Toon, 1991.

Men’s and women’s speech It is well known that, within a speech community, differences may be found
between men's and women's speech (see chapter 8) and the question arises: What is the role of sex/gender differentiation in language change? The topic has recently been discussed by Labov (1990). He notes that, in a situation of stable sociolinguistic stratification, women are more conservative linguistically; they tend to favor variants with overt social prestige, whereas men do the reverse. However, in a situation of ongoing change – in which overt social prestige comes from outside the group – women tend to use a higher frequency of new forms than men; among women, it is the "hypercorrect" behavior of the lower middle class (as described above) which is especially important. Labov believes that women play a crucial role in change from below, precisely because of the sexual asymmetry of the care-giving situation: Most of the early language input received by young children is from mothers and other female caregivers.

Lexical diffusion It has been pointed out by William S.-Y. Wang and his associates (Wang, 1977) that phonological change sometimes seems to operate not in such a relatively rapid and sweeping manner as that envisioned by Labov, but rather through the slow borrowing or "diffusion" of individual lexical items between sister dialects. To the extent that sound change does proceed by lexical diffusion it is not gradual in the sense that it proceeds by phonetic gradations, but it spreads gradually through the lexicon and through social groups. When a large number of such borrowings occur, all involving the same phonological correspondence, we speak of a "sound change" as having taken place; however, numerous exceptions are typically found. Thus Early Modern English oo [u:] became modern [uw] in a large number of words, such as loom and boot; but in other words it becomes [uw] varying dialectally with [u] in other words (e.g., roof, root, or [u] alone (wood, book), or even [ʌ] (lood, blood; cf. Hock, 1991: 657). The linguistic and/or social factors that distinguish these two types of phonological change remain a matter of controversy.

Sociohistorical linguistics An approach developed by Suzanne Romaine (1982) focuses on the sociolinguistic analysis of historical texts, as illuminated by our understanding of language variation occurring in present-day societies. In accordance with the uniformitarian principle, it is held that language variation in the past must have been similar to that observable today. From this it follows that we should be able to reconstruct some of the sociolinguistic mechanisms which underlie the variation observable in philological study. In other writing, Romaine (1984: 30–1) has noted that, instead of studying variation in terms of statistics-based "predictive" rules – which in fact cannot tell us what variant an individual will choose on a given occasion, or why – we might consider a hermeneutic approach, aimed at understanding rather than predicting.

Social class and social network Whereas Labov has operated with social class as a key factor in sociolinguistic change, an alternative view emphasizes the concept of social network (cf. Blom and Gumperz, 1972). This approach has recently received increased attention and quantification (J. Milroy, 1992; L. and J. Milroy, 1992). In this framework, an individual's social network is definable as the sum of relationships which he or she has contracted with others, and these may be spoken of in terms of relatively strong or weak ties. The Milroys' research suggests that strong ties within communities result in dialect maintenance and resistance to change; but individuals who have large numbers of weak ties outside the community tend to be innovators, and to serve as instigators of language change. This approach does not replace the concept of social class, but coexists with it in a two-level theory: Small-scale networks, in which individuals conduct their daily lives, coexist with larger-scale social classes, which determine relationships of power at the institutional level.

Conclusion The importance of sociolinguistic variation in the processes of unconscious language change, especially phonological change, has clearly been established beyond doubt; historical linguists of the future cannot escape being, to some degree, sociolinguists. Nevertheless, many questions remain to be answered. When a variant pronunciation first acquires social value, given that its linguistic character is arbitrary, can we identify the exact social factors which cause that precise variant to take on such significance, rather than some other? When a new phonological element approaches the crucial stage of actuation, can we pinpoint the social factors which cause that particular element to move from variable to categorical status, rather than some other element? Whether or not these problems can be definitively solved, sociolinguists have shed much light on the processes involved. Here as in other areas, progress must be made not by collecting linguistic facts and looking for social correlates, or by collecting social facts and looking for linguistic correlates – or even by collecting sets of correlations between linguistic and social facts – but by attempting to formulate a comprehensive viewpoint in which scholars can deal with linguistic and social aspects of communication simultaneously, as indeed
we all do in our everyday lives.

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