

THE NOTION OF INTERMEDIATE PHONETIC FORMS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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The notion of so-called "intermediate forms" is not confined to sociolinguistics, but it is implicit in Labov's (1966) definition of the linguistic variable, which is the starting point for many sociolinguistic analyses. Labov (1966, 15) has defined the linguistic variable as a class of variants which are ordered along a continuous dimension and whose position along that dimension is determined by some independent or extralinguistic variable. This concept assumes, among other things, a continuum, and hence, intermediate stages between one end of the continuum and the other.

Although a number of phonetic and phonological variables are handled quite easily within such a gradient framework, others are not, and are better considered as discontinuous or discrete. In cases where variation may be treated either as discontinuous or continuous, the construction of variable scales is often done without consideration of the extralinguistic nature of the variation, i.e. how heterogeneous it is in a given speech community.

Using evidence from variation in word final /r/ in Scottish English, I will attempt to show that the fact that variation can be observed and described by a continuous process with intermediate stages, does not demonstrate that the variation cannot also be generated by an underlying discontinuous model. Furthermore, I will argue that quantitative evidence is not always a sufficient basis for deciding whether or not a linguistic process is continuous or discontinuous or whether one rule or separate rules is/are involved.

Reference

Labov, W. (1966): The Social Stratification of English in New York City, Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.