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“Raising Reading Levels in Inner-City Schools”  
by William Labov University of Pennsylvania

William Labov, Professor of Linguistics and Psychology and Director of the Linguistics Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, discussed raising reading levels in inner-city schools. He exclaimed that the failure of inner-city schools to teach reading effectively is among the most serious social problems facing the country.

The principal investigator of the linguistic component of the African American Language and Culture Project, Labov noted that a majority of students in many inner-city schools fail to achieve reading skills that are strong enough to allow them to use reading to learn math, science, or any other subject. This situation, he said, is found in most large cities and largely affects those living in poverty and those in minority groups. This "minority differential in reading achievement," he said, "is a persistent problem that has not changed substantially in four
years." Low reading skills make it difficult for "children to take advantage of the educational system to improve their life chances."

Labov explained that this differential reading achievement is not a psychological problem but one of the English language. He pointed to research that indicates that learning to read in English is more difficult than learning to read in other languages. One example of this difficulty is the fact that the alphabet was created for languages with five vowel sounds, but English has 16 vowel sounds, he said. In addition, the English language has borrowed vocabulary patterns from several different languages which has complicated the "sound-to-spelling rules" — crucial to learning to read.

In his examination of the minority differential reading achievement, Labov noted that this disparity is "accompanied by the home language of children that may affect reading." For example, he pointed to the "large systematic and regular differences between African American English and other dialects." The home language of African Americans and Latino children is often different from the standard language taught in the classroom. He said that researchers are unsure, however, if these differences impair a child's ability to master phonemic awareness — knowing how words and syllables are built out of consonants and vowels.

Labov also pointed to a social dimension as part of the explanation for reading difficulties. He said that by the fourth grade children begin to read for content and those who "cannot read begin to have a sense of failure." It is at this grade that pre-adolescent peer groups are also first fully formed. These groups align themselves for or against the goals of the adult community and the school system. Those who see themselves as failing at reading may "reject reading in school programs as a whole."

For children to become successful readers of English, Labov noted that they should be taught both phonics and whole language approaches. The National Research Council report on reading, of which Labov was a committee member, declared that these two approaches must be combined for a successful approach to teaching reading.

John Baugh, Professor of Education and Linguistics at Stanford University, served as the closing speaker. During his brief remarks, Baugh suggested the irony of having a briefing on linguistic diversity here, "where Members of Congress bring with them the standard dialects from their home regions and treat each other with tremendous decorum and respect." He said that he would like to "see that model extended to the educational arena."

Linguistic abilities have direct economic consequences. This, he said, is particularly important with the advent of the global economy. In this global environment, people with diverse linguistic abilities have a resource and are
greatly advantaged by their language abilities. Children coming to this country from abroad have historically been told to abandon their home languages to talk like "Tom Brokaw or Jane Pauley." Baugh called this a mistake and stressed that linguistic diversity needs to be accepted.