

Interview with Walt Wolfram

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The following interview was conducted in person by Natalie Schilling-Estes in August 2008. Portions were conducted via follow-up e-mail later that month. The interview has been edited somewhat from the original verbatim transcription of the conversation and from the e-mail exchanges.

NSE: *Walt, you're one of the world's leading sociolinguists and linguists and one of the founders of modern sociolinguistics. Among your many accomplishments, what would you say are your most important ones, whether insights you've given us, questions you've raised, research programs you've conducted, or specific works? What about a single most important accomplishment?*

WW: You're far too generous in your assessment, Natalie, but I appreciate the thought, nonetheless. To be honest, I consider myself an accidental sociolinguist who was fortunate enough to be active at the onset of the field. I was simply in the right place at the right time. I honestly think that my greatest contribution to the field is the gift of data. Of course, as my postmodern friends remind me, data is a socially constructed notion, as are other aspects of the descriptive and interpretive sociolinguistic research enterprise. Nonetheless, over the past four decades, I've learned always to respect data and to be cautious about the theories and the methods that frame that data. For example, I wrote a dissertation in the 1960s using Stratificational Grammar, a syntactic model which faded at about the same time that I completed my dissertation. The model is long gone, but the data from that dissertation has survived countless revisions of theoretical models. I remain in awe of the data we have accumulated on vernacular varieties of English over the years but guarded about the fifty-seven varieties of theoretical models that have framed it in the process. This should not be taken to mean that I am antitheory, because all data has to be presented in some theoretical model. Let's just say I'm a little skeptical about "God's truth" approaches to theoretical modeling.

In terms of accomplishments, I am always most enthusiastic about our most recent work because I feel that it is all cumulative. For example, my more recent articles on African American English have a perspective that I didn't have when I wrote a Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech in 1969. Our recent work on remnant varieties has perspectives on Appalachian English that we didn't have when Donna Christian and I published *Appalachian Speech* in 1976. Happily, this is not a static profession, and I love the idea that there is room for growth and revision along the way.

Finally, I like program development, ranging from my time at Georgetown when we established the first sociolinguistics program within linguistics, to my tenure at the University of the District of Columbia, where we integrated sociolinguistics into speech and language pathology and became the first accredited speech pathology program at a historically Black college in the United States, to my time at North Carolina State where we have integrated the research and engagement aspects of sociolinguistics in a unique way. On one level, things have come full circle at Georgetown with your continuation of the sociolinguistics legacy that we initiated almost four decades ago. It's gratifying to start, to see programs continue to develop, and see them sustained.

NSE: *For a student who's new to sociolinguistics, what would you recommend as the most important works of yours to read?*

WW: I actually don't have most important works. The most important is the most recent one, right? I do, however, have favorite articles, because I liked writing them, or I think they're slightly different from my typical template or genre for research. Surprisingly, most of the articles that I think are favorites are not among those that people are most likely to recommend. For example I would say that my favorite article was the one I wrote with my son when he was seven years old and in second grade at Woodlin Elementary School. To this day, he's the only Woodlin Elementary School student ever to co-author a paper in a professional collection. The article is titled "How Come You Ask How Come?" (Wolfram & Wolfram 1977). It involved him as a fieldworker, since he collected data by going up to people of all ages and asking them, "How old are you?" He followed their replies with the question, "How come?" I did the same thing with a different set of subjects and we compared results, showing that the answers were age-graded and sensitive to the age of the fieldworker and participant. For example, an adult would give Todd an answer that assumed the sincerity of his question (e.g., "Because the years have been hard on me" or "Because time goes fast") whereas my questions were interpreted as a kind of joke based on asking for obvious information (e.g., laughter and a joking response). Todd even came to NWAV [New Ways of Analyzing Variation] and introduced the paper and then commented on it afterward. So it was a different kind of fieldwork experience, an alternative fieldwork genre for me (and Todd), a substantive analysis about assumed information and pragmatic adjustment—and entertaining. That's a good combination—plus Todd could brag to the other second graders that he had published a paper even though he could barely read. I'll always recall that paper with great fondness. There are other, relatively obscure articles that I like, though colleagues don't necessarily share my opinion. The article that I wrote on the [NP_i Call NP_i, V-ing] construction in African American English, as in "You call yourself dancing" (Wolfram 1994), is one that I think is slightly different in terms of how I collected data, how I examined the data, and how I analyzed these V-ing constructions as a type of "semantic camouflaging" as opposed to the type of "syntactic camouflaging" that had been described for African American English (Spears 1982). Another of my favorites is one of my earlier articles in *Language* in 1974 on the relationship of White Southern Speech to African American English in the South (Wolfram 1974), since it was a precursor to the research on Southern rural African American English that took place a couple of decades later. There wasn't much

funny about collecting that data, however, since our biracial fieldwork team in 1971 was harassed by law enforcement and ended up getting run out of rural Mississippi. It was the only time I thought I was going to be a sociolinguistic martyr, but I did live to tell about it—many times.

As I said, my most important articles are the ones that I just wrote! There's actually a reason other than my ego: I think that some of the more recent articles give perspective and build on earlier work. For example, consider the article that I wrote in *Language and Linguistic Compass* titled "Sociolinguistic Folklore in the Study of African American English" (Wolfram 2007). It profits from re-examining some of the earlier work that we did as part of the descriptive canon on African American English. It considers our previous work critically and, lo and behold, finds some myth-making by sociolinguists in the development of the descriptive canon of AAE—even as we confronted myths in popular society. I like it because it looks back and admits some of our own limitations and perspectives, a kind of deconstruction of our development of the descriptive tradition of AAE. I didn't even know what "deconstruction" was four decades ago when I wrote the original work on AAE.

We've just completed an article that will appear in *Language and Linguistics Compass* titled "Operationalizing Linguistic Gratitude: From Principle to Practice" (Wolfram, Reaser & Vaughn, forthcoming), which I think is cumulative in confronting the other side of my career—that is, the practice of giving back to the community and linguistic gratitude. This article looks at some of the different venues for dialect awareness programs and products, some of our challenges, and some of our limitations based on decades of trying to give back in the community. Again, there's a bit of reflexivity and deconstruction as we examine where we are and how dialect awareness might be done most effectively and collaboratively with the communities we have researched.

Actually, if I didn't think my most recent articles were my best, then I guess I wouldn't be a progressive scholar.

NSE: *Thinking about the article on sociolinguistic folklore, what are some of the myths that you talk about and the myths that sociolinguists perhaps have been telling ourselves over the years about African American English?*

WW: One of the things that I challenge is the notion that that African American English is more importantly a set of commonly shared features than it is a set of ethnically marked regional varieties. Though this homogeneity view is perpetuated to some extent by the public, particularly the White public, it is more strongly endorsed by linguists, including those who've had a dominant influence on our sociolinguistic understanding and perception of African American English.

What I also found out, somewhat late—because I was in denial—was that this view is not shared by many African American communities, who often think in terms of regional dialects of African American English. Early in our studies of African American English when we would give public lectures, we would be challenged by African Americans for engaging in this sort of monolithic stereotyping of African American speech. What is clear now is that this is not how the world of African American speech is viewed by African Americans. I learned that in the South. To some extent our earlier perceptions were distorted because of where we started our studies, in large urban Northern communities that were still largely transplant communities when we studied them. At the same time, we adopted the position of a

monolithic African American English as a type of strategic essentialism to demonstrate that the varieties spoken by African Americans were legitimate, ethnically distinctive linguistic entities. But our overgeneralizations were not appropriately revised over time as we uncovered the regional nature of African American speech, lapsing into a sociolinguistic homogeneity myth.

Another myth that I mention is the unilateral trajectory of change in African American English. Given the diverse rural, urban, regional, and historical contexts of African American speakers, trajectories of change in African American speech communities were—and still are—much more complex and nuanced than we present them. Again, our assumptions and beliefs got ahead of the empirical facts.

NSE: *So the development of African American English involves much more than simple convergence with or divergence from White American English, right?*

WW: Exactly, Natalie. To reduce the history and development of African American English to the Creolist vs. Anglicist positions or to convergence or divergence is, I think, a disservice to the empirical integrity of sociolinguistics (see, e.g., Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006, chapter 7 for an overview of positions on the history and development of African American English).

NSE: *You were a product of early variationism. How do you see it changing over the years and into the future?*

WW: While the assumption of systematic patterning in language variation seems to be a safe haven for the continuing tradition of variation studies, the objects, methods, and the descriptive and explanatory frameworks all need to be scrutinized to ensure that we are not sweeping important data and descriptive and interpretive perspectives under the rug. Though the quantitative methods and the number-crunching techniques have become much more sophisticated through the ever-advancing technology of past decades, there remain fundamental issues that range from the assumed discreteness of variants to the relationship between individuals and groups in the patterns we uncover, to say nothing of the post-hoc, interpretive spin that we ascribe to patterning. Even our most time-tested variables, for example syllable-coda cluster reduction, r-lessness, ng-fronting, etc., are vulnerable to critical scrutiny in terms of the nominal status of variants and the social and psychological significance of variation. For example, a syllable-coda stop in a cluster tabulated as “absent” may show some tongue movement toward the stop target, indicating a more gradient than categorical status, and type-token relationships and lexical exceptions may factor into the constraints that affect our presentation of systematic variability. Furthermore, the traditional use of aggregate data in order to achieve adequate n’s for statistical manipulation and calculation may obscure subtle but meaningful subgroup or individual variation. The questioning trend in terms of methodological, analytical, descriptive, and interpretive models and traditions in variation studies is an important one that needs to continue. And the convergence of quantitative analysis and qualitatively based ethnographic inquiry that feeds into the interpretation of systematic variability is a healthy one that needs to be encouraged. As a quantitative sociolinguist I believe in the importance of qualitative data, and as a qualitative linguist I believe in the significance of quantitative data—if that make any sense.

NSE: *Absolutely. What are the biggest changes you have viewed in sociolinguistics over the past four decades?*

WW: That's a tough question, because it's sometimes difficult to offer perspective from the inside out. In terms of infrastructure, the biggest change is simply the growth of the field and its subsequent specializations. Four decades ago, the literature was limited, and it was possible to feel comfortably informed about the range of topics that fell under the rubric of sociolinguistics. The first dedicated sociolinguistics journal, *Language in Society*, was launched in 1972 with some controversy as to whether or not we needed yet another journal in linguistics that would be devoted entirely to a subfield like sociolinguistics. Today, it is difficult to maintain currency in a field that ranges from field-based studies of distinct ethnic communities to hypothesis-driven experimental phonetic studies to investigations of language corpora that allow us to examine past and present trends of language use for national populations. The effects of the personal computer revolution have obviously been transformative, with powerful, accessible software to process and analyze data that was unimaginable four decades ago when we were color-coding file cards that we sorted by hand or punched so that they could be processed by a mainframe computer. The quantitative requisites—and demands—for professionals have been greatly enhanced, but these have not lessened the demand for the thoughtful, qualitative human element in asking the right questions about the data. As I was instructed long ago about quantitative analysis, "Garbage in, garbage out." At the same time, technological advances allow us to conduct more controlled and sophisticated experiments to tease out the variables that correlate with social factors in more precise and insightful ways. This is a pretty exciting time to be a sociolinguist, I would say.

The balance between quantitative and qualitative perspectives on language behavior and the relationship between the individual and the group remain issues that are hardly resolved. Furthermore, the trend to go beyond simple correlation toward sociolinguistic explication and theorizing in many current sociolinguistics studies indicates that there is still ample concern with foundational "why" and "how" questions.

NSE: *Going to back to one of your other most important recent works that you mentioned, on linguistic gratuity, you said this also involves sociolinguistic myths? Or is this article more of an overview, looking back on all the linguistic gratuity programs over the years?*

WW: Well, I think first of all it attempts to categorize the various venues for engagement. Given the advances in technology, there is just a lot more available in terms of working with communities. At the same time, the article examines more critically community relationships—decisions that we make, for example, in terms of who has input into a documentary or exhibit, what principles or interpretations are selected for public presentation, and whose interpretation is ultimately reflected in the editing. What you realize is, this is not an objective process or product at all. I think it's important to admit the ways in which our biases enter into giving back to the community.

NSE: *So it sounds like what you're saying in this article is that when it comes to linguistic awareness programs and products, it's not possible to produce an objective picture.*

WW: Right.

NSE: *But also at the same time, within sociolinguistic scholarship, we can never be completely objective.*

WW: Yes. Sociolinguistics, as quantitative and as quote "objective" as it has tended to become, is never an objective venture—whether it involves the acoustic measurement

of vowels, the impressionistic tabulation of variables, or the interpretation of results. That doesn't mean that there aren't rigorous methods, nor does it mean that some things do not have a degree of objectivity. But we just can't eliminate the subjective component in terms of what we look at, how we taxonomize, how we code, and how we ultimately analyze and interpret data. Sorry.

NSE: *Right. And I suppose also any time that you're a researcher who does research on people you're always introducing an element of subjectivity.*

WW: Yes. And we can't lose sight of the people that we work with behind the numbers that are presented in our analyses.

NSE: *Right. And speaking of people, I did want to come back to talking a bit more about your community outreach programs, because your community involvement is one of the hallmarks of your career, of the Wolfram school of sociolinguistics. You mentioned the ever-changing technology and the venues for dialect awareness programs of various sorts. I know that you've done work with everything from dialect awareness curricula in schools to video documentaries—in fact, many documentaries—to museum displays and writing for popular audiences. I'm wondering what other areas you may be planning to branch into or have branched into. Are you thinking, or are you doing work with, say, interactive Web-based materials?*

WW: Yes. One of the things that are really cool in terms of current ventures is the support that you can provide virtually. So for example one of our goals is to enhance our dialect awareness curriculum, which now consists of print material and a couple of DVDs, so that it is completely accessible at a Web site that would be interactive, and where our audiovisual vignettes are available so that all a teacher has to do is have Internet access, and they can do everything in our curriculum without the traditional print materials. By the way, our curriculum is available at <http://ncsu.edu/linguistics>, and our audiovisual products are available for review and purchase at <http://talkingnc.com>. This is not to say that print materials aren't good. In fact, for many of us who started our research in an era when personal computers were a figment of some inventive imagination, the learning curve is certainly not quite as natural as it is for young'uns who were raised to play video games at age four.

I feel that it's so essential never to stop learning, struggling, and becoming comfortable with the most recent ideas and technologies. And if there's anything that I would impart to younger scholars who feel comfortable with many of the current technologies, it's to just wait and see—(both laugh)—because your day of challenge in the virtual world will come.

NSE: *And that I know applies not simply to making dialect awareness materials but definitely to sociolinguistic scholarship as well.*

WW: The whole scholarship of the field has so dramatically changed. When we started we were counting items and filing them on cards. And now we're dealing with time-stamped transcripts and pull-down menus to tab variables on a Web site that can be automatically processed and all of those good things that used to take us days and years to do. See for example, the Sociolinguistic Archive and Analysis Project (SLAAP) Web site developed by our very talented student/colleague Tyler Kendall at <http://ncslaap.lib.ncsu.edu/>. At the same time, it's important to understand where we have come from.

Let me just illustrate one case of respecting our past. The other day, I pulled out an archival document that I think is a treasure. It was Ralph Fasold's 1967 article on Detroit vowels, which Labov himself (Labov 1994:178) has recognized as the precursor of the recognition of the Northern Cities Vowel Shift. It had never been published, and it was written as a manuscript which was literally cut and pasted with Scotch tape—the foundational working paper for what is now decades of research on the Northern Cities Vowel Shift. So when you go back into these archives you see some of the treasures and some of the methods that we have built on in the sociolinguistic enterprise. Of course, Fasold's article was based on impressionistic phonetics at that point, and it was written on a typewriter, and literally cut and pasted. For some reason I still have that draft. And someday it will be in a special collection. The North Carolina State library is going to archive my collection of manuscripts, recordings, and musings at the end of my career, and this document will be part of it.

NSE: *That's excellent. As if your career is ever going to end.*

WW: Well, my career won't end, but I will. (Both laugh.)

NSE: *So here we have all these wonderful new technologies that seemingly make our work easier and that we seize on so readily. Is there a downside to this? Do we ever lose sight of some important basics with all our excitement over all our new toys and shortcuts?*

WW: I think it's important to keep the quantitative paradigm in perspective. For example, some quantities don't lend themselves initially or very readily to statistical applications. And I think the new breed of student is a little hesitant to draw any preliminary conclusions on that basis. My view is that we had patterns before we had rigorous statistical applications to determine levels of "significance." Let's not lose sight of that.

I am concerned also about a divide, in terms of the quantitative paradigm, which is becoming more and more mathematically informed and rigorous, and the qualitative paradigm, because ultimately I feel that it's these two perspectives together that really give us understanding and help us interpret our data. I think there's a bit of a divide between ethnographically oriented qualitative research and number crunching in its most fashionable and current incarnation. But I think it's important to keep things in perspective. What does it say when you tell a student, "Keep working with the statistics until you get a test that works," as opposed to eyeballing the data and saying, "Hmm. That seems to indicate a pattern," even though it doesn't quite meet the .05 probability threshold for statistical significance for one reason or another.

NSE: *And maybe even more importantly than eyeballing the data is remembering to listen to it and not just plug it into your acoustic analysis programs. I always remember you telling me about the value of doing acoustic analysis vs. so-called impressionistic analysis, or, to use Milroy and Gordon's term, "auditory analysis" (2003:143–47), and why it's important to remember to still use our ears.*

WW: Machines can't do all the work, you know? The fact of the matter is, as laudatory and as quote "rigorous" as the acoustic measurement of vowels is, it's the perception of vowels in everyday conversation and their interpretation that really becomes the significance behind the differences or similarities. I've had this friendly debate

with some of my best acoustician friends who think that there's a distinctive level of objectivity in terms of these measurements. To some degree that's true, but by the same token, the way we use visual and perceptual cues for establishing the boundaries of segments to measure can be highly subjective. Sure, you end up with something that appears objective, but the path to that end was paved with a number of subjective decisions along the way as to where and how you're going to measure these segments.

NSE: *Right. And so it's also important that more and more researchers in sociolinguistics are doing studies of people's perceptions of variability and not just saying the acoustic analysis is the final word.*

WW: Yes. And fortunately given the technology, including speech synthesis, we can do much more rigorous studies, where we can just cut and paste sound segments and hold everything else constant. So the age of using matched guises from real speakers can actually be succeeded by more constant, rigorous experimental controls.

NSE: *You had said earlier that you think your most important works are your newer works. I would also argue that some of your earliest work was extremely important foundational work, for example, your work on Detroit English in 1969, as well as your groundbreaking works that followed, continuing throughout your career, in African American English. What do you think are some of the most important contributions that you've made to the study of African American English?*

WW: I think we've helped—I don't say "I"—but I think we've helped establish the primary descriptive base of the variety. Four decades after we started this description we can say, in terms of structural descriptive work, we know as much about African American English as we do about just about any vernacular variety in the United States. And so that's gratifying. Because the fact of the matter is little was known in the 1960s about what the features of this variety were, or what the features of these varieties were. There I slipped into my own stereotypes about a monolithic AAE variety. Sorry.

And since then, you know, there's been a robust scrutiny of the historical derivation of African American English. This has been highly enlightening but, of course, is still also somewhat controversial, and I suspect that the origins controversy will never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. But we certainly know a lot more, have more expansive sources of data. Back in the 60s when this debate began, we rarely looked at literary data, including letters and other archival written records that were available. And what we looked at was highly anecdotal. Then, of course, there's the ex-slave data, and we keep turning up more and more audio files that represent earlier African American English. And we also have located Southern African American communities in outlying areas that certainly rival the kinds of communities that have been found in Canada, in Nova Scotia, and in Samaná.

So I feel that we have a much more expansive database on AAE. And in retrospect, as I said earlier, the biggest contribution one can make in historical perspective is a contribution of data.

NSE: *That's true. Our theories and explanations—*

WW: Our theories, our descriptions, and explanations will always be vulnerable, but the data will be there, so people can go back. People can go back to the Detroit data of the 1960s.

NSE: *And have done.*

WW: And have done. I'm very gratified by the recent work that Lesley Milroy, Bridget Anderson, and Jennifer Nguyen have done with our 1960s Detroit data (e.g., Nguyen 2006; Anderson 2008). And I think that's a really important contribution. I would like to say that the biggest legacy that I would like to leave behind is a database that laid part of the foundation that can then be built upon. So the fact that people are doing bigger and better studies of nonmainstream varieties we studied earlier is a compliment. And the fact that some of our earlier analyses didn't hold up to the scrutiny of later investigations, or have since been refined in ways that are much more detailed and systematic, is not a problem. When we hold on to our analyses as "God's truth," I think that's a dangerous personal perspective. The fact that I sometimes have to say "Oh, I was wrong back then!" doesn't bother me too much. (Both laugh.) Just a little. (Both laugh.)

NSE: *And thinking back again to your early work in Detroit, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you to this day one of the few sociolinguists who has done systematic study of social class variation in African American English?*

WW: That turns out to be true, with the caveat that I was using an SES [socioeconomic status] model that should probably be reworked at this stage. One of the interesting—and unfortunate—things about the development of the study of African American English is that it has been so exclusively vernacular-focused. I think that valorizing the vernacular is problematic for the communities from which we get our data, and I also think it's problematic in terms of our description of the varieties of AAE, because one of the myths that we have constructed is the idealized dichotomy that working-class African Americans use vernacular English and middle-class African Americans don't. As Tracey Weldon (2004) has observed and as we're finding out, it's much more complex than that. It's not simply social status that differentiates primary vernacular from standard users. For example, Tyler Kendall and I have conducted some research on leaders in localized African American communities (forthcoming) in which we demonstrate that a variety of community, social, contextual, and personal factors have to be taken into account in understanding the speech of community leaders in the rural African American South—and probably everywhere for that matter. The relative autonomy of a community, the different social affiliations and divisions within the community, speakers' personal background and history, and the socialized demands and expectations for public presentation all seem to be factors in understanding the use of local vernacular and mainstream standard variants by these speakers. Imagined dichotomies, unilateral explanations, and simplistic assumptions just don't work as we strive to understand why community leaders speak the way they do in public and in private. But in order to examine the question of diversity within African American communities, we have to overcome the myopic obsession with the vernacular.

NSE: *Right. And you're still to this day looking at, or you've recently revisited the question of social class variation in African American English, is that correct?*

WW: Yes. We've looked at it on a case-study basis, and now I think is probably the time to look at it more extensively in a way that is more critical of our notions of class, that is more informed by our understandings of individual agency, of using language

for self-presentation, and so forth. I think there's a lot to be done in African American English studies.

NSE: *So looking at social class variation more rigorously and in new ways that are informed by what we've learned about social class over the decades.*

WW: Yes, and looking at more recent patterns of migration. So the trend in African American communities is there's a lot of back migration, back to the South. For example, in North Carolina we now have African Americans who have moved back from the North. They tend to live in urban areas of the South, not in rural areas of North Carolina. How does the back migration affect the urban–rural divide in terms of African American English? We can't remain comfortable in our past descriptions, because the dynamics of migration, cultural status, and even the symbolic role of African American English as a way of speaking shift. For example, older African Americans in the rural South, though ethnically distinctive in their speech, seem to ascribe much less of a symbolic role to an ethnically marked variety. For younger speakers socialized toward oppositional identity, it's a different ballgame. We need to follow African American English in terms of its current paths of symbolic significance.

NSE: *You've also been heavily involved in work on endangered, and what have seemed to be endangered, varieties of English. Why has this work been so important to you and what are some of your main findings and contributions in this area?*

WW: Well, as you well know, because you were a colleague in this endeavor, I think that what we refer to as endangered dialects are every bit as important to study as endangered languages for a variety of reasons, including purely linguistic concerns—for example, how languages and varieties recede—and also in terms of social significance, because in many respects distinctive dialects are every bit as symbolically significant as different languages. And who knows where the language/dialect boundary is anyhow. Linguists don't claim to know it. So for a lot of reasons, I think it's linguistically and sociolinguistically important, to say nothing of the archival reason, to study these receding varieties of English.

My frustration, however, as you well know as a colleague in this endeavor, is that I feel that the endangerment canon excludes these kinds of studies. So rarely are people who work on endangered dialects of English invited to any of the conferences, workshops, or symposia on endangered languages. I think that's unfortunate; I think it's exclusive, and also somewhat elitist in terms of this exclusion.

NSE: *So English isn't exotic enough so we don't—*

WW: Right. English isn't exotic enough, but a variety of French when surrounded by English is sufficiently exotic. So why is English not sufficient unto itself? I find that frustrating and intellectually unjustifiable, but political reality. Academics have their own set of prejudices, I'm afraid. The response of the endangerment community to endangered dialects was summed up well by an incident at one of the conferences on endangerment where you and I actually gave a paper on endangered dialects. Of course, all of the other papers were about endangered quote "languages," presuming we can define that difference between language and dialect (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998). I thought it was a pretty persuasive paper, but when I sat down, the person next to me leaned over and whispered to me and said, "Walt, do you think anybody takes you seriously about endangered dialects of English?" My response was, "Well, I do!" (Both laugh.)

NSE: *I obviously would agree that studying endangered varieties of “safe” languages like English is every bit as important as studying endangered languages. We need to study as much variation within languages as we can in addition to variation across languages. Also I think we’ve learned some things in our studies of endangered dialects about the language endangerment process more generally, and also about language change.*

WW: Oh, we’ve learned great amounts about language change, and quite frankly I think the change that you documented on Smith Island in terms of the intensification of a dialect as its population declines is a really instructive, insightful case, even if it is the exception rather than the rule. In fact, that’s what makes it so important. It’s a paradigm example of how studies of endangered dialects sometimes tell us things about the endangerment process that we might not discover if we focus only on language death (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1999; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1995). There are a few corollaries in language death, assuming again that we can define “language.” But I think this is a classic example of the social conditions, the physical context, and the symbolic role of language that might lead to the intensification of a dialect as it dies rather than the usual course of death by dissipation. And I think it would be unfortunate if these findings weren’t considered to be an important contribution to our understanding of language change and recession.

NSE: *I also think that language variation study more generally has a lot to contribute to the study of language endangerment. For example, people sometimes believe that just because a language shows lots of internal variability, then it must be endangered. And of course we variationists know that variability is an inherent part of all languages and language varieties, even the “healthiest.”*

WW: Exactly. Language death is not an abrupt process in most cases—unless you kill the population of speakers. And variationists should have a lot to contribute to our understanding of the variable dimensions of the recession process both in terms of models of recession and methods for examining data.

NSE: *Let’s shift gears and talk about you. What got you started in your career in linguistics and sociolinguistics?*

WW: Well, as most people know, I wanted to be a missionary Bible translator, and so the study of language and language structure was a part of the preparation for doing a grammar of an undocumented language. So it was fairly utilitarian, but then again, no one wants to grow up to be a linguist! (Both laugh.) As a child growing up in North Philadelphia, I never even knew anyone in my local neighborhood who had ever gone to college, let alone become an academic. That life was not within any imaginable fantasy I ever had about a career. I really wanted to be a professional athlete or coach. That’s why I say that I really was an accidental sociolinguist who started out motivated by religious fervor. As my religious fervor took a different course, I found that I loved language variation for its own sake. At the same time, my religious fervor was transformed into social activism and I was intrigued by the notion that linguistic knowledge could be applied to fundamental social and educational issues. As a child of the 60s who had strong convictions about social justice, I could be a “sociolinguist with a cause” as I satisfied a fundamental intellectual curiosity about language. Four decades later, these twin compulsions still inspire me. When I grow up, I would like to be a “public intellectual” who makes sense to

both colleagues and to popular audiences. I'll always be grateful to Roger Shuy, my first linguistics teacher and long-term mentor, who strongly nudged me toward an academic career. I became a sociolinguist in the 1960s because (a) I needed a job to tide me over when I became a missionary dissident; (b) the job, working as a team with my friend, Ralph Fasold, my college mentor, Roger Shuy, and other wonderful colleagues at the Center for Applied Linguistics, was challenging intellectually and fun socially; and (c) no one told me to leave. I don't want to be simplistic or reductionist about my career, but it was simply a series of small steps that led to more than four decades of commitment. Was I ever lucky!

NSE: *Which scholars and/or which works have been some of your biggest influences in shaping your thoughts, your research, and your career?*

WW: While all of us in variationist sociolinguistics have fallen under the influence of the Labovian paradigm and the cast of characters active in the early tradition of variation studies, I have found that the strongest influences on my career really came from the first-hand, data-oriented research I conducted with students. To be honest, their observations, engagement, and energy have challenged me in my thinking more than the canonical works that have developed within the field over the past several decades. As a creature fond of mixing both habit and adventure, I think that it is particularly important to question entrenched traditions that include how we collect, categorize, analyze, and interpret our data even as we use the paradigm routinely. Creative students without those ingrained traditions and vested interests sometimes can open our eyes to view our data from different perspectives that allow us to challenge our assumptions, practices, and interpretive models. Too many times in my career, I have made assumptions that needed to be revised, and lots of times it has been students who unwittingly asked the question that set me thinking about what I was doing and why. For example, Natalie, you were the one who pointed out to me that the regularization of past be to weren't (e.g., *I/you/(s)he/we/you/they weren't there*) was common in areas of the Delmarva Peninsula, even though I insisted that this construction wasn't productive in the United States (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994). Your observations about the form—that I initially resisted—led to a decade of studies on the re-morphologization of the were-stem as a marker of negativity rather than subject person and number that have contributed to our descriptive and theoretical understanding of language change in remnant communities. Thanks, kid! (Both laugh.) Of course, lots of other students have contributed greatly to my knowledge as well, but they aren't interviewing me.

NSE: *And so your first work in linguistics was within the structuralist paradigm.*

WW: Yes. It was basically structural linguistics of the early 60s, descriptive linguistics of the early 60s, before the Chomskian revolution. Then of course I've endured a number of linguistic revolutions and paradigm shifts since then. (Both laugh.)

NSE: *And so you started out as a descriptive linguist and then—*

WW: Became a generative linguist. And my feeling is that it's important for sociolinguists to be conversant with formal linguistic theories. First of all, I'm not sure there is a sociolinguistic theory, and linguistic data has to be described in some theoretical format explicitly or implicitly, so I think it's important to understand what the alternatives are and what models are available. Furthermore, if sociolinguists want formal linguists to integrate variation into their models, then we have to be as

knowledgeable of their models as we would like them to be knowledgeable of language variation. So there is a kind of synergy, and I would like to see us capitalize on this more often in the profession. At the same time because of the extensive development of both sociolinguistics and formal linguistics, there is a divide that people are too comfortable with. Let's face it, in the modern era of specialization, one can barely keep up with a specialization within sociolinguistics, just like it's impossible for a formal linguist to keep up with everything that's happening in the core areas of phonology and syntax. And so when we're challenged by the expansive literature in sociolinguistics and formal linguistics, we have to pick and choose. Nonetheless, I think it's important for sociolinguists to pick some domain of formal linguistics in which they're conversant.

NSE: *And your domain has been . . .*

WW: Well, it has traditionally been phonology, but there have been so many shifts in that paradigm that it's difficult to keep up with it all.

NSE: *True. And of course, while moving from structuralist to generative linguistics and beyond, you've always been first and foremost a sociolinguist, even if an "accidental" one. Tell me more about the job with Roger Shuy that got you into sociolinguistics.*

WW: Basically, our job was to do the Detroit dialect study (Shuy, Wolfram & Riley 1967). I was still a graduate student at the time. . . . I conducted interviews, I did phonetic transcription of various types, and did a lot of the grunt work. I was one of eleven fieldworkers in the Detroit dialect study. . . . [W]e collected over seven hundred interviews, thinking that this would be a nice linguistic analogue of a sociological survey. Of course we didn't realize that if we actually analyzed all that data, we would still be doing analyses of Detroit to this day.

NSE: *And researchers still are, thanks to you and Roger and the research team!*

WW: That's true.

NSE: *And how many interviews a day was that? I seem to recall your saying that it was quite a lot.*

WW: We generally did three or four interviews a day, and then transcribed the word lists we elicited phonetically. We had a full-time field coordinator who basically said, "You're going to these three sites today, and one of you will interview a parent, and one of you will interview a child, and that's where you'll be doing your interviews."

NSE: *Some things never change. You still make your fieldwork teams work hard!*

WW: Well, actually I'm not sure much has changed in terms of entering communities. There's still a lot of personality involved, still a lot of social networking and selling the study. Sometimes I still feel like a traveling salesperson.

NSE: *And sometimes there are feelings of rejection when people don't want to talk to you! (Laughs.)*

WW: Yes. But for me, since I'm essentially an extrovert, I like people, and I assume they'll like me unless demonstrated otherwise. I've always viewed fieldwork as kind of a challenge. So it's scary. It's always scary, because you can feel rejected, you can feel irrelevant, and you can also feel like a beggar and a poser. But by the same token, to be able to persuade somebody to do an interview and to collect data is still one of the most exhilarating experiences that I can think of. And I'm saying that more than forty-five years after my first sociolinguistic interview. I don't feel that old—as long as I don't look in the mirror.

I can still recall my first practice interview for the Detroit dialect study in 1964. We were sent out to knock on doors and ask people to do a sociolinguistic interview. We were in East Lansing, Michigan, training for fieldwork at Michigan State University. And I can remember that line. I'd knock on the door and somebody'd answer the door and I'd say, "Yeah, we're doing some interviews. I ain't no schoolteacher or nothin,' but we're just sort of interested in talking to people." (Laughs.) I can remember my line: "I ain't no schoolteacher or nothin'!" I think I'm still saying that! (Both laugh.) It's a great sociolinguistic interview pick-up line.

NSE: *Was your first interview successful?*

WW: Uh, it was pretty stilted, awkward, because we had to use the questionnaire, and the transitions between modules are not always very smooth. So you'd be asking somebody, "If you had all the money in the world, what would you do?" because we were interested in hypothetical situations and conditionals. And then to follow up that with the infamous danger of death question: "Okay, if I had all the money in the world. Hmm . . ."—"Have you ever felt like you were gonna die?" (Both laugh.) I mean, when you put yourself in the place of an interviewee, some of the questions and the transitions from question to question seem utterly inane.

NSE: *Do you still teach students to compose their interviews ahead of time with sets of question modules, or do you encourage maybe more of a free style?*

WW: We tend to encourage a free style. As you well know, for a number of our early studies in North Carolina, we developed fairly extensive modules of questions that we would use, but now we simply use them as guides in case you can't think of what to ask next. You know, there's still something to be said for a questionnaire format because you can ensure some representation of particular language forms—for example, you can ask about past tense events or habitual events that might encourage the use of habitual be if a person uses this form. And we still sometimes directly elicit forms to test particular hypotheses or to get data on rare forms that might not occur in the course of natural conversation. For example, the direct elicitation of perfective I'm forms (Wolfram 1996) in questions, tag forms, and so forth provided critical data for the analysis of the status of perfective I'm in Lumbee English.

NSE: *To change directions again, I'd like to hear a bit more about your changes of direction and venue in the course of your career. You've already mentioned some of the value of moving from more Northern contexts to more Southern, for example, how you've discovered more about African American English in the context of the South, where you now are, than you might have ever imagined when you were studying African American English in the North.*

WW: Yes, I've had several phases in the study of African American English. And the driving force of my inquiry has been vernacular speech, I have to admit. In part, that's because I'm comfortable as a working-class kid, historically, with relating to people like that.

NSE: *But as you mentioned earlier, you've become concerned that there may be too much focus on the vernacular and so have been exploring a fuller range of variation in African American English. Let's talk about some of your other current projects.*

WW: I think our current projects are really interesting: There's the re-study of Ocracoke speech, where we've had constant contact for sixteen years now, and so we're in a position to go back and study what changes have taken place. For example, we are

finding that middle-aged and older speakers haven't changed their speech much over fifteen years, but that individual younger people sometimes have shifted their speech in terms of their use of vernacular dialect features over this period, and a few even seem to have become more vernacular over time. We also are finding that there is an emerging analogue of the Poker Game Network that you and I described in our earlier studies of Ocracoke speech (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1995). There's also an ironic lexical effect from our dialect awareness curriculum that we now have taught to a generation of Ocracokers. For example, older speakers know the term *meehonkey* for the local version of hide-and-seek, middle-aged speakers do not, and the young generation again knows the term. That's because we teach it in our curriculum, which practically every Ocracoke kid under thirty has studied. For the record, that's a curvilinear trajectory related to selected lexical items, a kind of symbolical and superficial language revitalization. Our study of real-time change on Ocracoke follows a growing tradition in sociolinguistics that now complements our studies of language change in apparent time.

There's also another study which few people know about because we're just starting to publish articles about it (Renn 2007; Renn & Terry, under review; Van Hofwegen & Wolfram 2008). This is a longitudinal study of African American English, working with the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I didn't start this data collection, I just joined the project a few years after I moved to North Carolina. They've been collecting data, language samples, school data, caretaker interviews, peer interviews with a cohort of seventy African Americans from birth through age seventeen. We happened in on this incredibly rich database that had not been tapped for much analysis. And while we might have done some of the interviews differently or might have structured the sample in slightly different ways, who can turn down the opportunity to study African American English longitudinally over those critical time periods?

We have a number of hypotheses as to the optimal age for speaking the most vernacular African American English. Bill Stewart (1964) and J. L. Dillard (1972) said that it's the pre-school years, so four- and five-year-olds are the most authentic and intensive vernacular speakers. Bill Labov (1965) has said it's the adolescent and teenage years, and Craig and Washington (2006) have said it's the early elementary school years. In fact, these are speculative, and there is no other empirical data that has followed a cohort of speakers longitudinally and includes caretaker and peer interviews. With this data set, we know what their parents spoke like in the pre-school home, what their peers in sixth, eighth, and tenth grade spoke like, and what they speak like with peers and adults. All of these data are collected, so that we can actually address this question using extensive longitudinal data. And that's exciting. For me this is fortuitous data, and I think that we're going to see some important trends that we can tease out of this.

And then of course there's the study of emerging Hispanic English that is also funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF BCS-0542139), and the idea of studying the inception of a new variety as a sort of mirror image of what we've been studying in terms of the recession of dialects. That's also exciting. It's really kind of fun to look at dialects in different phases, both in terms of their past development and in terms of their current and projected change over time.

So we have at least three lines of study that could lead to many award-winning student dissertations! (Both laugh.)

NSE: *And speaking of students and communities, everyone has always admired you, not only for your brilliant and groundbreaking research, but also for your unparalleled dedication to giving back to the community and your dedication to students—to mentoring them, to intellectual engagement with them—and also for creating a sense of camaraderie and teamwork among those you work with as well as with community members. As you put it earlier in this interview, you don't say "I"; you always talk about your work in terms of "we." And this is a lot of commitment to a lot of people. Why do you have this strong sense of commitment in all these various areas surrounding your linguistic scholarship?*

WW: I like people.

NSE: *Good! Because you're around them a lot!*

WW: I like the team concept of research. I think the collaborative model of research works exceptionally well for sociolinguists. In many respects the sort of collaborative model that I use is more familiar to the "hard" sciences than it is to some of the humanities and social sciences. But I was socialized as a leader in team sports. I like hanging out with people. I'm actually energized and learn so much from bright, motivated students. And as I said, I feel that in many respects the most influential people in my life are not who we think of as the field's "great scholars" but bright, inquiring students. As a matter of fact, if I worked in the solitude of my office day after day, although I would be more productive in terms of publishing, I would retire. I stay in the profession because I love the interaction, I love the team, collaborative aspect of working, and I love the bright-eyed look of new students who learn new things, who become enthusiastic, and who teach me many, many things.

NSE: *And you commented earlier that you've also gotten insights from the communities that you work with.*

WW: I love working with responsive communities, I just get a kick out of it and think it's so important because of the lack of authentic knowledge about language variation in popular culture. And as you work with communities long-term, it's so gratifying to be recognized as a small part of that community. One of the greatest tributes that I've ever had as a sociolinguist is represented by a little framed picture and eulogy that sits in the Pony Island Motel on the island of Ocracoke. I wrote the eulogy for Dave Esham's funeral, a tribute to one of our key participants in the Ocracoke studies. The family decided to place this tribute and a photo we took as part of our study in the lobby of the motel that Dave operated for decades. Of course, it's where we always stayed and still stay when we go to Ocracoke. So everyone in that community and outsiders see the tribute to Dave. When you see tokens that you've become a friend of people in a community and are viewed as more than a fieldworker and a researcher, and you see that that friendship has endured both life and death, then you can be totally gratified as a sociolinguist and person.

NSE: *That's very inspiring.*

WW: Well, it's one of my greatest tributes.

NSE: *That's wonderful. I think this is a very positive and uplifting note to end on. Thank you, Walt. Thank you for the interview, and thank you for your decades of dedication to scholarship, to your communities of study, to your fellow sociolinguists, and to us, your students.*

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