Reading guide: Labov (2007)

Labov, William. 2007. Transmission and diffusion. Language 83(2): 344-387. [Available at Project
    MUSE through a UNC connection.]

I. Important note on phonetic symbols

Some graphics in this paper use a system for transcribing AmEng vowel categories that doesn't
directly represent their phonetic values. This is partly because the point of studying these vowel
categories is that their pronunciation varies a lot between dialect areas! (We saw this same
transcription system used by Penny Eckert.)

 Some commonly encountered examples:

> /ay/ = (started out as) diphthong, low to high front unrounded (IPA [aj])
>
> /ae/ = (started out as) low front unrounded vowel (IPA [æ])
>
> /o/ = (started out as) LOW BACK vowel (IPA [ɑ])
>
> /oh/ = (started out as) MID BACK LAX rounded vowel (IPA [ɔ])
>
> /e/ = (started out as) MID FRONT LAX unrounded vowel (IPA [ɛ])
>
> /uh/ = (started out as) MID CENTRAL unrounded vowel (IPA [ʌ])

II. Questions to consider in preparation for class discussion

(1)   Read section 1 and section 5 carefully.

- Try to figure out what Labov's main points are.
- Try to relate what you're reading to our discussions of the tree model and the wave model.
- Try to get a general sense of what Labov takes to be evidence in favor of his position.

(2)   Choose one of the case studies discussed in sections 2–4, and try to understand why Labov
        brings it forward as evidence. *It's okay if you don't understand all the details of the discussion,
        especially phonetics or statistics details. Try to stay focused on what Labov wants to use the example
        to show.*

(a)   How does your chosen example relate to Labov's main points? (What specific
        argument or arguments does it support?)

(b)   Do you agree with Labov's interpretation of his findings?