Review Article

Language Variation Studies Across Continents: An Empirical Review

PraiseGod Aminu[1], Uduak-Abasi Uyah[1*], Oluwatomi Kayode[1], Rosemary Ugonma Babatunde[1]

[1]Covenant University, Nigeria

*Corresponding author: Uduak-Abasi Uyah
Covenant University, Nigeria

Abstract

This study presents a systematic empirical review of the two language variation studies. This review presents a comparison between a recent African study and a study that serves as a leading light in sociolinguistics. Employing phonological variation studies as the methodology with the data purposively selected, this study discusses the variation studied by (Labov, 1966), (Cyril *et al,* 2014). The study reveals the results of studies conducted in similar ways but yields varying results. This is premised on the fact that while one was conducted in North America, the other was conducted in Africa.

Keywords: Language variation and change, Africa, North America, empirical review.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of sociolinguistics began as a pursuit to understand language variation and its relationship with the social life of language users. Hence, for some decades, there have been scholarly contributions toward the development of variation studies. Indeed, the development of sociolinguistics has reached such a proportion that themes, methodologies, theories, and implications need to be identified, documented, and proliferated for better appreciation of the discipline across the globe. This is the aim of the study. By doing this, it is essential to make a comparison between a recent African study and a study, which serves as one of the most potent researches in sociolinguistics. This will not just assist budding sociolinguistic researchers in highlighting the methodologies of conducting viable and *holy* research, but inform readers, scholars, and researchers about the implication(s) of using the same linguistic variable (phonology) in different times and spaces. In this light, this study will discuss the variation studied by (Labov, 1966), (Cyril *et al,* 2014).

2. METHODOLOGY

Although Variation studies can be viewed from all linguistic levels like phonology, lexis, morphology syntax, semantics, and pragmatics; this review is focused on two phonological variation studies, which were purposively selected from two different parts of the world: North America and Africa.

Also, many social variables motivate a variation study such as age, gender, social stratification, social context, occupation, time, ethnicity, social context, and many others; however, the selected studies are based on the social stratification, age, ethnicity and gender. The selected studies used the Variationist approach.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

3.1. Labov's (1966) Sociolinguistic Study

Labov's famous sociolinguistic researches include a study on the social motivation of the /ai/ sound change among language users in Martha's Vineyard in 1963 and a study of the social stratification of English in New York City (1966). However, for this review, the latter work will be reviewed.

A. Thematic Derivation

Labov suspected that the situation of an individual determines, to an extent, the form of language that he or she uses. Hence, this served as a motivation for him to undertake his 1966 sociolinguistic study. Although a sociolinguistic study can be undertaken from any linguistic level (phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax, semantics and pragmatics); this study focuses on phonology as a linguistic variable. Labov selected three department stores in New York City: Saks, Macy's and S. Klien, which were clearly demarcated by social class and served as an index of the upper class, middle class and lower class respectively. Labov analysed, for this research, five variables

orthographically distinguished from phonemes as (r), (æh), (oh), (th) and (dh) variables, which he explored along with social class, gender, age and ethnicity as social variables. Before he embarked on this study, he hypothesised that the r-pronunciation after a vowel sound was mostly used by the upper-class members of the society, was used by younger language users than their older counterparts, and was likely to be used more in formal settings or situations than informal situations and would be more pronounced in the word 'floor' than in 'fourth'. These hypotheses turned out to be true. This research theme enabled the methodology of Labov's study.

B. Methodological Derivation

Labov (1966) made an extensive series of preliminary research. This included 70 individual interviews and anonymous observations in public places. These led to the definition of the major phonological variables, which were to be studied including the presence or absence of the postvocalic /r/ sound. He selected phonological variables [(r), (æh), (oh), (th) and (dh)], which appeared to be extraordinarily sensitive to any measure of social stratification in New York. Particularly, the social class variable was tested based on three department stores in New York by examining the prices of the same item. For instance, according to Labov, while women's coats in Saks sold for $90; Macy's sold for $79.95 and S. Klein sold them for $23.

During the main study, Labov used participant observation, where he asked language users for a direction to a part of the mall that is found on the fourth floor in each of the stores to elicit their pronunciation of /r/ in the *fourth* and *floor*. The research technique employed by Labov is "the casual anonymous data gathering technique", which is also known as the random sampling technique. In this case, he selected samples (employees) from specific stores he intended to survey, which would serve as case studies representing each of the socio-economic classes, age levels and ethnic groups. A total of 264 interviews were conducted: 68 in Saks, 125 in Macy's and 71 in S. Klein. Of informants, 70% of this population were women and 30% were men. Also, 45% were aged 25-35, 40% were aged 35-55 and the remaining 15% were aged 56-70. In addition, 42% were Whites, 36% were African American, 12% were Hispanic, 5% were Asian and the other 5% were *other* or undetermined. To have a concrete copy of their responses, Labov recorded their answers, but not their age or ethnic identity; because he used a rapid anonymous survey (Labov, 1966) for his study.

Labov employed the use of careful speech, casual speech, reading style, word list and near minimal pairs as contextual styles to get succinct data.

Randomly, Labov requests the pronunciation of *fourth* and *floor*. By doing this, he involved the application of casual speech to grade the scale of his respondents' self-consciousness. To have a minimal margin of error, Labov requested a repetition of the words. This repetition denoted a careful speech contextual style. The use of *fourth* and *floor*, in the first place, depicts the use of near minimal pairs as a contextual style to make them conscious or aware of their pronunciation. However, the style of reading aloud created what Labov calls the observer's paradox. The observer's paradox refers to a situation whereby the respondents alter their style of speech because of the realisation that the researcher is recording their speech.

The use of graphs, bar charts and histogram illustrates the fact that Labov adopted the quantitative research approach in this study. He looked for a variable and its variants by engaging in variable rule analysis. He looked at both the interspeaker and intraspeaker variations.

C. Theoretical Perspective

Labov adopted the Variationist Theory or approach. He observed there is more than one way of saying the same thing. Thus, became interested in actual language use and how it varied among different groups. This served as a motivation for him as he aimed to show that language use is highly structured and presented in various forms among different language users. Hence, after a series of research, he introduced the Variationist theory in 1963. Over the years, this theory has posed as one of the most significant theories in sociolinguistics. This theory posits that language is used by different people according to certain social practices (Holmes *et al,* 2017). It was based on this methodology and theory that Labov generated implications for his study.

D. Implications of his Study on Social Stratification

Labov analysed, for this research, five variables orthographically distinguished from phonemes as (r), (æh), (oh), (th) and (dh), which he explored along with the social class, gender, age and ethnicity social variables. However, for this study, emphasis will be placed on the variable /r/ sound and how it varied in social stratification as a social variable of New York language users.

Labov's findings show a clear stratification in rhoticity. Generally, there were more occurrences of [r] in the upper-class store, Saks, than in the lower class store, S. Klein. Notwithstanding, the most interesting finding was that, in the middle-class store, Macy's, the emphasis on the *fourth* and *floor* exhibited much stronger stress at almost the same frequency with the upper class than the lower class as seen below:
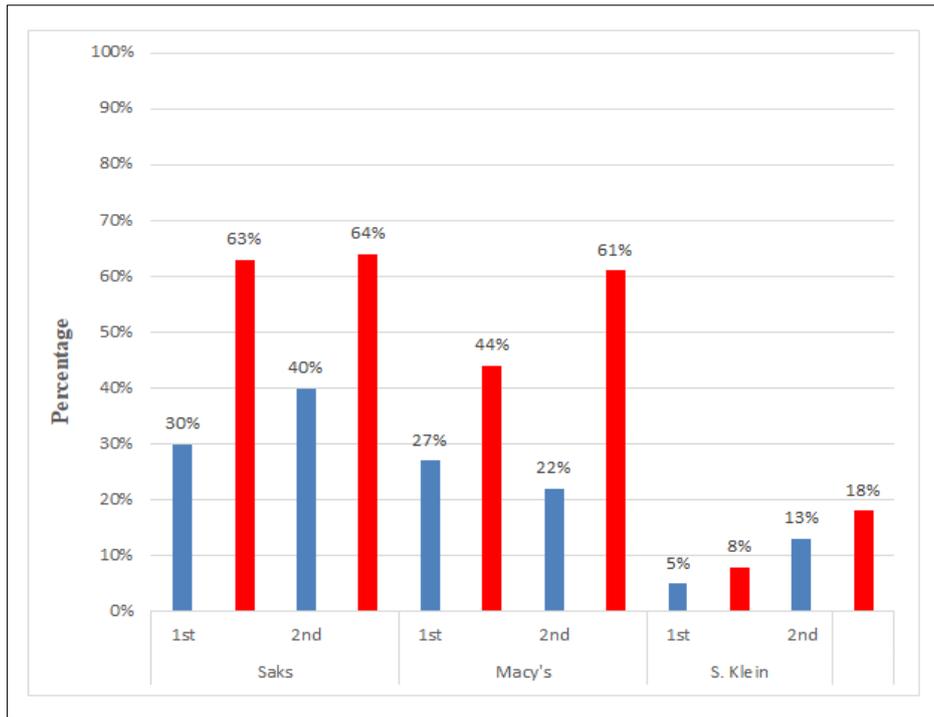
Labov's (1966) Finding on Social Stratification in New York City
This diagram represents the percentage of respondents that pronounced [r] in each store in the first (1st) and second (2nd) utterances of *fourth* (blue) and *floor* (red).

Source: Labov (1972: 52)

The above diagram shows that the r-pronunciation was favoured in Saks to a greater extent than in Macy's, but much less so in S. Klein. Also, based on this graph, respondents were more conscious of the r-pronunciation in careful repetition (2nd utterance) than in the casual speech (1st utterance). This is also to say that in Macy's, the norm is to pronounce /r/, but they do not often use it. Hence, Saks employees, according to Labov, have more "linguistic security".

Although Labov submits that social class and formality of style increase the use of the /r/ sound; there is a noticeable exception – the "lower middle class" outperforms the "upper middle class" on word list and minimal pairs as shown below. In this context, Labov categorises social class into the Upper Middle Class, Lower Middle Class, Working Class and the Lower Class.
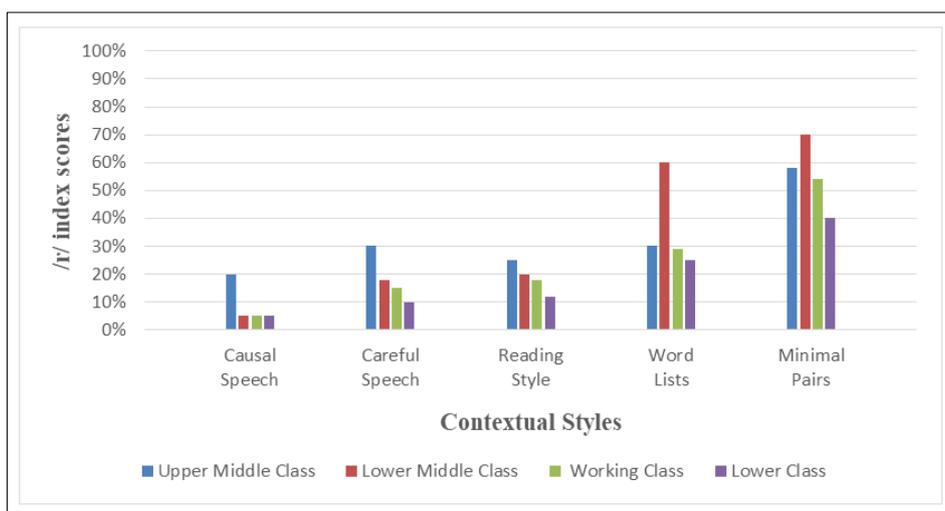
Labov calls the fact that the "lower middle class" outperforms the "upper middle class" on word lists and minimal pairs a cross-over and explains it as

an instance of "hypercorrection". According to Holmes & Wilson (2017), hypercorrection is a situation whereby language users consciously try to speak like

people they regard as socially superior but actually go too far in mimicking the linguistic behaviours they attempt to match. In this case, the lower middle-class language users know how prestigious the use of /r/ pronunciation is and when conscious, they are placed in situations which require them to monitor their speeches closely and they, in turn, outperform the reference group. He also introduces the idea of covert prestige.

By and large, Labov's study illustrates the fact that, in every context, members of the speech community are differentiated by social variables, which can be studied through any linguistic variable. Notwithstanding, what makes a group a speech community is its ability to behave in the same linguistic manner.

3.2. Cyril & Gyasi's (2014) Sociolinguistic Study

Research into linguistic change among speech communities characterised by language contact yields a lot of important results about variations within language users. As languages come in contact, modifications are made by speakers to accommodate the language. This is the situation in Ghana, and (Cyril *et al*, 2014) made sociolinguistic research in this regard.

A. Thematic Derivation

The sample of this research is made up of students of the Department of English, University of Ghana. Although a sociolinguistic study can be undertaken from any linguistic level (phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax, semantics and pragmatics); this study focuses on phonology as a linguistic variable. This research aims to study the different ways the velar nasal sound /ŋ/ was said by students according to their gender, social class and ethnicity. The researchers hypothesised that females use a higher frequency of standard forms than their male counterparts; because of their attitude towards the use of the prestigious variant. Part of their hypotheses was that although the higher class members use the prestigious variant in casual speech, the lower class tend to respond to linguistic change faster and higher to show overt prestige, especially when being observed, and ethnicity largely influences the use of a prestigious code to assert their superiority above others in Africa. These hypotheses turned out to be true.

B. Methodological Derivation

Using a random sampling technique, twenty samples were selected for investigation from the Department of English, University of Ghana. These samples consist of ten males and ten females whose ethnic backgrounds vary across Ewe, Ga and Akan. The samples were selected based on the fact that they exhibited better competence in English speech sound production and articulation than other students of the university.

Casual speech, reading style, word list, careful speech and "very careful reading" were used as contextual styles to grade the scale of their respondents' self-consciousness. In addition, a research questionnaire was employed to gather data from the students. Minimal pairs such as *song* and *sing*, *ring* and *king*, which have nasal velar sound /ŋ/ were adopted by the researchers. Each of these tasks was designed to elicit a different level of attention given to speech. Interviews were conducted to seek clarifications to some findings in the study. Their research establishes its findings and conclusions on quantitative analyses.

C. Theoretical Perspective

The researchers adopted the Variationist Theory in their research. This theory postulates that linguistic variations exist in the language and these variations are interrelated with social variables (Cyril *et al*, 2014). Going by this theory, it was assumed that linguistic variations among the students would be greatly influenced by sex or gender, age, socio-economic status, ethnicity and situational context.

D. Implications of their Study

The implications of (Cyril *et al*, 2014) research will be analysed below according to the social variables present in that speech community.

i. Gender

Their study illustrated that in terms of **casual reading**, females use the /ŋ/ sound more than males. Below is the frequency of gender and the use of nasal velar in casual reading:

	Gender	High	Low	Total
	Male	3	7	10
	Female	5	5	10
Total		8	12	20

The frequency of gender and the nasal velar in **careful speech** is presented below:

	Gender	High	Low	Total
	Male	4	6	10
	Female	7	3	10
Total		11	9	20

The frequency of gender and the nasal velar in **very careful (wordlist) reading** is presented below:

	Gender	High	Low	Total
	Male	6	4	10
	Female	9	1	10
Total		15	5	20

The total result of males and females with respect to the use of the nasal velar sound is represented below.
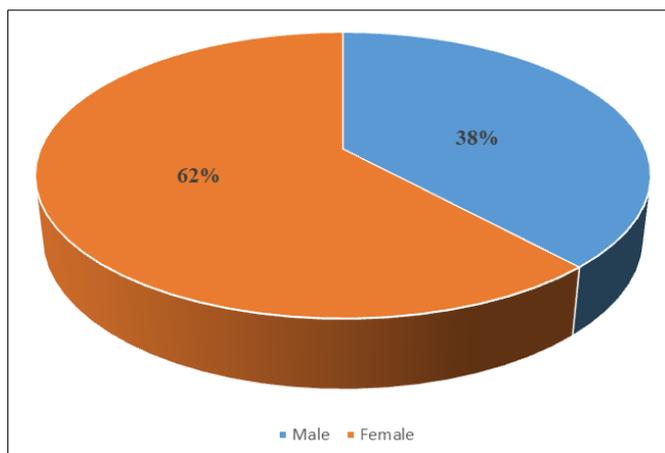
Total Percentage of Male & Female Students According to their Use of /ŋ/ Sound

This proves that at all levels of attention, female respondents realise the velar nasal more in speech than the male respondents. The results presented in the first table show that the tendency for a female to use a velar nasal in their casual speech during a linguistic change process is higher than in males. The same is realised in both the second and third tables. They disagree with Labov and earlier scholars that this phenomenon is not *linguistic insecurity*; rather, the follow-up interviews reveal that female users of the language readily adopt and make efforts to use the prestigious or targeted variant simply because it is the 'right one'. The male users, on the other hand, are slow and reluctant to adopt the prestigious or targeted variant with the view that since they can communicate, there is no need to change to the prestigious language unless they are observed. Another observation made by them is that linguistic change occurs when increasing attention is given to the use of the velar nasal sound. Hence, participants produced the sound with an

exaggerated consciousness as the level of attention increased.

ii.   Social Status
Although most sociolinguistic research works have proven that social status is a force to reckon with in language variation; Cyril & Gyasi stress the significance of education, in this present day, in determining the factor of the social status of language users. In this aspect of the research, they classify the respondents into Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3, which represent the upper class, middle class and lower class respectively. These classifications were made by the Ghana Education Service ranking of the senior high schools each student attended before the university.

The distribution of the use of the /ŋ/ velar sound in a **casual speech** with respect to their social class as determined by their education is presented in the table below.

	Frequency of Velar Sound	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Total
	High	4	2	1	7
	Low	2	5	6	13
Total		6	7	7	20

As expected, students of Class 1 (Upper Class) status tend to frequently use the velar nasal sound in their casual speeches than those of the other classes. Perhaps, it signals that they might have adopted it into their language; hence, a lot of them could make casual use of the sound. A clear discovery is that there is an obvious difference between the number of people and

the frequency of the use of the velar nasal sound by the students in Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3 in their casual reading. This supports Labov's claim that for a prestigious marker (in this case, the nasal velar sound), the higher the speaker's social status, the higher the frequency of use.

|	Frequency of Velar Sound	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Total
	High	5	6	4	15
	Low	1	1	3	3
Total		6	7	7	20

The distribution of the use of the /ŋ/ velar sound in a **careful speech** with respect to their social

class as determined by their education is presented in the table below.

The above result illustrates the fact that Labov's *hypercorrection* is at play here. The Class 2 (Middle Class) and Class 3 (Lower Class) respondents consciously try to speak like people they regard as socially superior; however, Class 2 respondents went too far in mimicking the linguistic behaviours they attempted to match. On the other hand, Cyril and Gyasi concluded that the Class 3 respondents were also equal with the Class 1 and Class 2; because they want to 'fit in'. This also supports Labov's assertion that the need for recognition and the show of overt prestige necessitates language users of the lower class to adopt a prestigious variety especially when they are being carefully observed.

The total result of Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3 with respect to the use of the nasal velar sound is represented below.
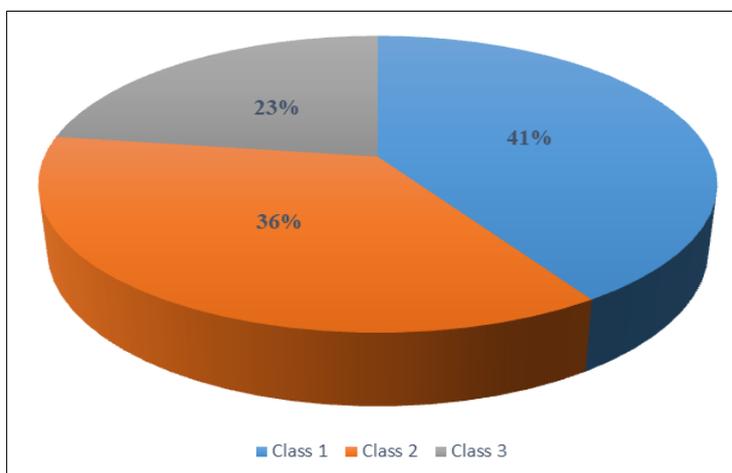
Total Percentage of Class 1, Class 2 & Class 3 Respondents according To Their Use of /ŋ/ Sound

iii. Ethnicity

Another variable that was of interest to Cyril & Gyasi was the ethnicity of language users. The ethnicities of participants involved in the research are Ewe, Akan and Ga. These three ethnic groups, according to the Ghana Statistical Service (2012), form 68.8% of the entire population of Ghana and belong to the four largest ethnic groups in Ghana with Akan as the largest with 47.5%. However, despite the population of the Akan ethnic group; Ga, for a long time, enjoyed an elevation role as the language of the elite.

The following table provides a distribution of the influence of ethnicity on the prestigious or targeted velar nasal in the pattern of linguistic change among the respondents with respect to casual speech.

	Frequency of Velar Sound	Ga	Ewe	Akan	Total
	High	3	2	3	8
	Low	3	5	4	12
Total		6	7	7	20

The following table provide a distribution of the influence of ethnicity on the prestigious or targeted velar nasal in the pattern of linguistic change among the respondents with respect to careful speech.

	Frequency of Velar Sound	Ga	Ewe	Akan	Total
	High	4	3	4	8
	Low	2	4	3	12
Total		6	7	7	20

The following table provides a distribution of the influence of ethnicity on the prestigious or targeted velar nasal in the pattern of linguistic change among the respondents regarding very careful speech.

	Frequency of Velar Sound	Ga	Ewe	Akan	Total
	High	6	4	5	15
	Low	0	3	2	12
Total		6	7	7	20

The above result suggests that Gas is more likely to adjust to linguistic change faster than any of the two local language speakers. Also, Gas makes use of the prestigious forms even in casual speech than Akan and Ewe, and most likely all other ethnic groups in Ghana. Hence, Gas is mostly likely to maintain the frequent use of a prestigious form of linguistic change than Ewes and Akans. Cyril and Gyasi believe this occurs because of linguistic insecurity.

The total result of the Ga, Ewe and Akan ethnic groups concerning the use of the nasal velar sound is represented below.
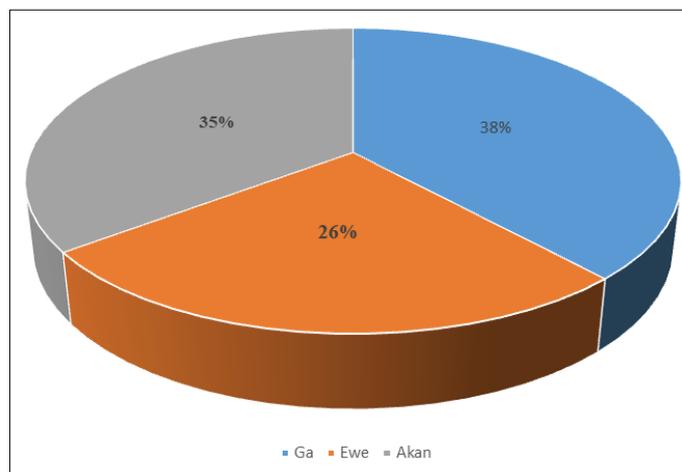
Total Percentage of Ga, Akan and Ewe Respondents according To Their Use of /ŋ/ Sound

Furthermore, Cyril & Gyasi believe that Gas readily adjusts and adopts the prestigious variant in their speech as a means to restore the once prestigious place of Ga in Ghanaian society. This presupposes those members of an ethnic group who feel challenged for their prestigious role in society may engage in a linguistic change to a prestigious code or feature of a language to assert their place in society.

4. SYNTHESIS OF THE STUDIES

The studies reviewed involved the use of the five contextual styles. Hence, one can note that casual speech, careful speech, minimal pairs, reading style, and word list are sacrosanct. Also, the use of recording devices, participant observation and questionnaires are needed in sociolinguistic research. The hypothesis appears to be vital in carrying out a sociolinguistic study. Both Labov and Cyril & Gyasi's studies suggest that language users change the use of their language to a more prestigious form when observed. In essence, a critical overview of both studies denotes that there are certain unavoidable methodologies in a sociolinguistic (variation) study.

On the other hand, Labov and Cyril & Gyasi differ in the fact that while Labov looked at five variables orthographically distinguished from phonemes as (r), (æh), (oh), (th) and (dh) through the lens of social stratification, gender, age and ethnicity; Cyril & Gyasi examined the use of the /ŋ/ velar nasal sound along with gender, social stratification and ethnicity respectively. Quite significantly, Cyril & Gyasi disagree with Labov on the concept of linguistic

insecurity as examined in their study. Also, there was a reflection of ethnicity, which portrayed the African community background in Cyril & Gyasi's study – this serves as a major distinction from Labov's research. Along with the lens of social stratification, Labov uses the Upper Class, Middle Class and Lower Class as terminologies for his classification; on the other hand, Cyril & Gyasi adopted the use of Classes 1, 2 and 3 perhaps to indicate that *upper*, *middle* or *lower* class are not necessarily appropriate terms to classify students in the university. In general, certain techniques used in both kinds of research are different yet, they yielded important similar results.

5. CONCLUSION

This review has discussed the sociolinguistic studies undertaken by (Labov, 1966), (Cyril *et al*, 2014), highlighting significant considerations to take note of in sociolinguistic research. It is noteworthy that although Cyril & Gyasi have done a remarkable study on Ghana; concerning the section of social stratification in their variation study, the assumption of the previous schools of respondents as a marker of a social class could be erroneous and may have yielded inaccurate results. Budding sociolinguistic researchers should therefore endeavour to take cognisance of and examine previous studies to identify backdrops and errors to avoid and methodologies to embrace before undertaking theirs. This would aid to highlight key notable steps to take note of in research. Also, there is a need for African sociolinguists, who will not just examine the full weight and beauty of our very own languages and their variants, but are determined to

make consistent and potent studies to create a change in the African (or Nigerian) academic space and whose research will be considered ground-breaking in the global space of sociolinguistics.

COMPETING INTERESTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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