The Logic of nonstandard English by William Labov

In his article „The Logic of nonstandard English“, William Labov wanted to show the mistakes and misunderstandings, made by the examination of NNE (negro nonstandard English). In fact, it is not a kind of degeneration of the standard English language, but a colorful variety with its own logic and background. Throughout the article, he tries to refute the results and conclusions of the language-experiments with negro-kids, made by leading psychologists. These psychologists came to the point that negro-kids have almost no language at all and are not capable to express their opinions and thoughts in a proper way. He argues that the children were put in a kind of threatening situation (just the child and an interviewer) so that it is absolutely natural that the children react in a defending and speak in a very monosyllabic way. Just in order to defend themselves against this unpleasant situation.

By changing this interviewscene to a more friendly and familiar one, the results with the same kids turned „up-side-down“. If the kids could talk about things they like, to the people they like, they changed their behavior almost completely. They demonstrated that their verbal capacity is much higher developed then the psychologists said. The children had no problems to express themselves in a proper and logic way. As the situation in school is likely the same as it was in the first type of interviews this, Labov points out the reason why these kids do bad at school.

By comparing two black speakers, with a different level of education (one well and the other less educated), Labov examines their differences in their way of expressing their thoughts and attitudes. On the one hand, the uneducated black boy who uses NNE was very quick and precise in presenting his attitudes, opinions and arguments; on the other hand the educated middle-class man often tries so show his education, and by doing this, he repeats many things just in other words and needed much more time to come to the point than the first black speaker needed. Labov’s conclusion was clear: using a nonstandard dialect does not imply that the person using it is less intelligent or has a logical deficit. Upon this results, Labov concludes it must be possible, to define what rules must be told in school to NNE-speakers in order to help them.
Labov also put a focus on the grammar used by NNE-speakers. He found out that nonstandard English speakers also have grammatical rules, but slightly different to those used in standard English. With phrases like „me got juice“ or „they mine“ negro-kids simply show their understanding of grammar and not a lack knowing how to express theirselves.

Another point in Labov`s essay is the meaning of logic in connection with NNE. Labov`s example is the double negative. Here Labov shows that „languagelogic“ is, what is habitual. NNE-speakers understand the standard, they simply transform it into their variety of language and so adopt the logical structure without adopting surface details.

Labov concludes, that the problem with NNE-speakers is not their lack of logic or intelligence, the problem lies in the verbal deprivation theory of some psychologists. These false estimations leads pedagogics to the opinion that NNE-speaker are simply „stupid“ and not capable to learn or to think at all (which it obviously not true). These attitudes lead to an alienation of these kids from school because they are failing; and the theory of parantal deficits mostly leads into racism. But modern IQ-tests refute assumption of the inferiority of NNE-kids.

What Labov wants is that the teachers in school have knowledge of this linguistical facts and use them in their lesson to help nonstandard English speakers instead of labeling them.