

A note on *The Atlas of North American English* (LABOV, W. & ASH, S. & BOBERG, C. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006 – a fairer and more appropriate title would be *The Atlas of North-American English Stressed Vowels* [ANAESV, rather than ANAE], seeing that it only deals with these, in a word: *Labovowels*. With an enclosed CD, whose sound files are very far from high-quality, very incomplete and too noisy. Non-IPA).

Unfortunately, this eagerly awaited (and rather expensive) *Atlas* is rather disappointing, and certainly not driving people into the best of tempers, since it gives far less than promised. In fact, its approach and method suffer too heavily from a cartoon-like and special-effect policy –or, rather, obsession– which has made it widely known, in spite of its evident limits. In fact, it continues to largely ignore such important data as precise *directions* and *extensions* of both phonemic and phonetic *diphthongs*. Instead of clearly and accurately showing these real movements, it gets bogged down in a series of presumed shifts, which are hardly ever real or actual changes, but only something that –at last– is fully recognized.

The *Atlas* is explicitly and expressly devoted to the description of the vowel systems of regional ‘dialects’; but, generally, it only deals with some stressed vowels, not with whole systems; while consonants are completely ignored, not to speak of intonation, as if they were not an integral part of their pronunciation.

Reading the chapters of this *Atlas*, it seems as if the authors were three astonished small children, moving to new places, who marvel at people pronouncing words differently from what they are used to. Actually, what is wrong with this approach is that they persevere with seeing ‘changes in progress’ and ‘chain shifts’ everywhere. Their view is as if –by magic– we happened to start from a kind of ‘phonic paradise’, where everybody used to speak neutral American English, but suddenly felt the wicked need to change things, as the only aim in their life, just to create peculiar chain shifts, in order to produce ‘Labovowels’.

At the time of the Beatles, we were in favor of Sociolinguistics, because at last its *glottometric* way (especially when it treated a whole system of variables with precise phonetic values for any variants in a concrete *glottographic* way) was actually countering the ethereal unreality and unconcreteness of the *glottosophic* generative trend, which seems to consider actual reality just as an unpleasant accident.

But now, most of current Sociolinguistics has changed into a continual chase after fake scoops. In fact, we are not faced with presumed ‘linguistic changes’, but with *linguistic-usage changes*, as C. H. Grangent and J. S. Kenyon clearly attested at least as early as 1890-1920 (followed and complemented by C. K. Thomas, especially 1930-1960). There exist even precious recordings that date back to the third (or second) part of the 1800’s. Certain sociolinguists want to use them to hint at these blessed ‘changes in progress’ and ‘shift chains’; instead, those recordings clearly demonstrate that these ‘discoveries’ have been already there for a long time!

We are convinced that the only really satisfactory solution has to be found in the frame of *Natural Phonetics*, which –to be true– is always based on the objective reality of the pronunciation of actual people, although, of course, in relation to neutral pronunciation.