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A twofold view ‘from below’:
New perspectives on language histories
and language historiographies

Up until the late 20th century, language historians were primarily concerned with unification and standardization processes and fostered what could be called a ‘language history from (and of) above’. This approach was deeply entrenched in 19th and early 20th century political ideologies: in Germany, for instance, which like so many European countries in the 19th century was still en route to a nation state, philologists collaborated with politicians, historians and writers in constructing a picture of a unified nation with autonomous cultural traditions. Language and literature played a central role in the idea of nationhood; literary and linguistic traditions were projected back to the Middle Ages and beyond (cf. Durrell 2000, Reichmann 2001, etc.). Generations of scholars and teachers have viewed language history as the inexorable march towards a uniform standard and, by narrowing their view on standard varieties, presented a “tunnel vision version” of language history (Trudgill and Watts 2002: 1). Language change appeared to be of interest only when it contributed to the linguistic architecture of a modern standard language. Up to the late 20th century, textbooks were clearly dominated by this teleological view, portraying ‘the best’ authors – like classical Schiller and Goethe in Germany (or rather the 19th-century editions of their works) – as role models of language norms and style, and therefore ‘true’ representatives of the national language as such. Analyses of literary texts (representing a ‘high’ variety that was only practiced by a tiny minority of the population), were used to support the orthodox belief that the German language had been standardized by the time of the ‘classics’, that is by the turn of the 18th/19th century. That this was not an isolated phenomenon particular to German can be seen, for example, in the research by James Milroy (1999, 2005) who identified similar standard language ideologies in the historiography of English.

In this ‘language history from above’ approach, the histories of non-standardized languages and language varieties were widely ignored. The whole range of texts and varieties that oscillate between formal written and informal spoken language are the other side of the coin, which has only just begun to be

looked at more closely.¹ Variation and other linguistic ‘digressions’ from a pre-supposed ‘standard’ have often been shrugged off as ‘bad’ language (cf Davies and Langer 2006) and disqualified as invalid or simply ‘wrong’ data for linguistic research. ‘Non-standard’ variation other than traditional dialect was regarded as corrupt and vulgar, so that in an act of “sanitary purism”, non-standard forms were often cleansed out from textbooks (Milroy 2005: 324). The result of this selection – or rather manipulation of linguistic data – is that modern standard languages sometimes seem not to have changed at all for 200 years.

The inevitable consequence of these practices for language historiography are incomplete language histories full of ‘blank areas’ (“witte vlekken”, as Marijke van der Wal 2006 puts it) that need not be there, as this insufficiency is not necessarily due to a lack of data. In recent decades, this has become particularly obvious for a number of national language histories of the last three or four centuries. Hand-written, rather than printed texts have always been available, but philologists took hardly any notice of them (unless they were composed by writers, artists, politicians, aristocrats or other members of the elites). The neglect of texts ‘below’ the surface of printed language, which was mostly homogenized by professional proof-readers, has led to a language historiography in which a major part of both the language community (i.e. those writers with no access to printing) and their written language production is simply not represented. It is therefore essential to look at text sources that represent informal and ‘everyday’ language in the past and to think about diverse or even new methodologies to reconstruct the full picture of our languages in the past. We are convinced that this full picture may contribute to a better understanding of both past *and* present-day linguistic changes.²

This rough outline and critique of the traditional ‘language histories from above’ may give an idea of what inspired the editors of this volume to strongly plead for an alternative and long overdue ‘language history *from below*’ approach (cf Elspaß 2005a). As in the concept of ‘history from below’, it implies a radical change of perspective from a ‘bird’s eyes’ to a ‘worm’s eyes’ view. This entails basically two aspects:

Firstly, a ‘language history from below’ focuses on the oral as well as written language use of larger sections of the population, particularly the lower and lower middle classes. In traditional language historiography, these are the

¹ Traditional dialects always formed an exception, but they were mostly considered suitable for diachronic analysis only in their oldest and purest form, which was supposedly represented by the stereotypical ‘nonmobile older rural males’ (NORMs).

² Cf. Elspaß (2005b: 27 ff) for an illustration with some examples from German grammar.

people who – if at all – mainly appear as speakers of rural dialects, but hardly ever as people whose *texts* contributed to the history of our modern languages. From early modern times, however, reading and writing was no longer a privilege of the upper and upper middle classes, who never constituted more than 5% of the population anywhere in Western and Central Europe. Large parts of the ‘ordinary’ population (like farmers, artisans, soldiers, housemaids etc.), and not only members of the social elite, were able to put pen (or pencil) to paper, particularly as a result of massive literacy drives in the 18th and 19th century. Although they had rarely reason or opportunity to do so, the sheer mass of people produced a wealth of private letters, diaries, inventories, cooking books, petition letters, lay theatre plays, and so on.

‘Language history from below’, however, is not only a plea for a long overdue emancipation of more than 95% of the population in language historiography. Secondly and more importantly, the concept of ‘from below’ pleads for a different starting point of the description and explanation of language history. In linguistics, the shift of perspectives involves an acknowledgment of language registers which are basic to human interaction and which are prototypically represented by speech in face-to-face-interaction. I refer to Peter Koch’s and Wulf Oesterreicher’s (1985) well-known concept of ‘language of proximity’ or ‘conceptual orality’ (as opposed to ‘language of distance’ or ‘conceptual written language’). A ‘language history from below’ would thus set off with the analysis of “material as close to actual speech as possible, only in written form“ (Sević 1999: 340; cf also Schneider 2002). Such material is maybe best represented in ego-documents, be they written by paupers (cf. Tony Fairman in this volume) or by members of the nobility (cf. Steffen Arzberger in this volume). Thus, a historical grammar of the (early) modern period ‘from below’, i.e. from the beginning of standardisation efforts, would not start from the language of literature, but from texts representing everyday language (cf. Ágel and Hennig 2006).

In his paper on ‘lower order’ letters in this volume, Tony Fairman rightly cautions that a view from below may be as one-sided as a view from above and he proposes “a panorama of all forces, formal and informal”. In general, language historiography should certainly aim at getting the full picture, including as many text genres and as many linguistic and metalinguistic data – on indigenous and contact languages – as possible. However, as textbooks on language history have mainly presented formal (or fictitious informal) language and concentrated on writer elites in the past, it appears to be justified to focus on a view from below for some time – at least until it can be assured that a significantly high number of formerly unknown or forgotten data ‘from below’ will a) be made available and b) actually be considered in language historiography.

Whether it may be disputed that a ‘language history from below’ is feasible for each individual language and language period, the contributors to this book may all agree that it is necessary to work on a change of perspective and some sort of ‘alternative histories’ of our languages (Watts and Trudgill 2002). The volume contains 30 papers on histories from ten ‘big’ as well as ‘small’ Germanic languages and varieties in the last 300 years.³ Nearly all papers are deeply rooted within the concepts of Historical Sociolinguistics⁴ and Historical Pragmatics.⁵ The topics covered in this book accordingly include language variation and change and the politics of language contact and choice, seen against the background of standardization processes, of written and oral text genres and from the viewpoint of larger sections of the population. Methodologically, the contributions range from grapheme analysis (Anja Voeste) to discourse analysis (Nicola McLelland) and the reconstruction of communicative genres (Angelika Linke).

The five chapters of this volume outline major topics and research fields of an alternative ‘language history from below’.

An alternative approach requires new sets of data, i.e. primary data, not textbook data, representing so-called ‘non-standard’ varieties as the starting point of linguistic analyses – or rather: varieties and variants other than what is traditionally considered as ‘standard’. A lot of hand-written data which could be relevant in this field, have not even been unearthed from the archives yet, let alone been transcribed and digitalised. The five papers in the first section concentrate on the analysis of language variation in 18th and 19th texts written by members of the lower and lower middle classes, mainly consisting of private correspondence, but also of lay theatre plays (Reershemius). Contributions to some of the following chapters use spoken data of recent non-standard varieties of Germanic standard languages.

Likewise, it is justified to move away from formal written registers and text types, which represent the most ‘static’ part of modern language histories, and focus on orality and informal everyday language instead: everyday language comes more ‘natural’ to the speaker and to the writer. It represents the

³ The volume contains two papers which, strictly speaking, study language variation and change before 1700, i.e. Anja Voeste’s investigation of spelling in Early New High German and Richard Dury’s paper on the address system in Early Modern English.

⁴ Cf. Willems and Vandenbussche (2006) for a critical overview of current developments in Historical Sociolinguistics; cf. also the European Historical Sociolinguistics Network (HiSoN; <http://www.philhist.uni-augsburg.de/hison/>) which was established at the Bristol conference.

⁵ For a state-of-the-art overview on Historical Pragmatics cf. Taavitsainen and Fitzmaurice (2007).

unmarked end of the varieties scale, while formal registers such as written standard varieties clearly stand for markedness in sociolinguistic terms. Unmarked communication, as represented in informal everyday language in recent history, is at the core of *change from below*. Most of the papers in section II explicitly refer to William Labov's concept of 'language change from below'. Labov characterized this as "systematic changes that appear first in the vernacular and represent the operation of internal, linguistic factors"; in Labov's terms, they refer primarily to changes "below the level of social awareness", and he stresses that they "may be introduced by any social class, although no cases have been recorded in which the highest-status social group acts as the innovating group" (Labov 1994: 78). Here again, it becomes apparent that much of language variation and changes past and present will go unnoticed if one does not acknowledge language material that is close to 'vernacular' language.

The emphasis on contact between different varieties and registers, also between different language communities, makes clear – and this is essential for a sociolinguistic approach – that 'external' factors in language variation and change play a central role in an alternative language historiography. Following Labov's axiom that 'there are no single style speakers' it may be safely assumed that none of the speakers of the Germanic language varieties between 1700 and 2000 had a competence that was limited to one variety only. In this respect, not only the use and choice of more prestigious ('high') and less prestigious ('low') varieties and variants according to situation and interaction partners must be addressed, but also the more fundamental question in how far the cultural history of a society is reflected in its language history: how come that a specific variant or variety has gained prestige? Prestige in what context? Where do language norms come from? Where did prescriptive norms come from? How did or do they get into people's heads? And why do people still make 'mistakes'? What effect does professionalism and routine in writing have? Such issues on language norms in view of standardization processes are addressed in section III of this volume.

The papers in section IV focus on questions of language choice and language planning. In the tradition of 19th century language historiography, particularly as part of the "Neogrammarian legacy", as Ernst Håkon Jahr (1999: 119) put it, scholars have followed a monocentric, single-language path in the account of language histories. An alternative language history 'from below' is more interested in the linguistic interaction of individuals or groups of speakers/writers from different varieties or languages. This may not only reveal cross-linguistic similarities in communicative patterns of discourse or even similarities in 'internal' language change, but also language change which is induced by language contact. A further aspect of the co-existence of different languages in multilingual societies is the language choice of

individuals or distinct populations and the language policy in these societies, which could even lead to language conflict.

The two final papers of this book by Angelika Linke and Richard Watts reflect on the wider issue as to how traditional 'language history from above' and an alternative 'language history from below' may be integrated in a more general concept of a cultural history of language and discourse (section V).

Finally, two other issues of an alternative language historiography, which are not confined to special sections of this volume, deserve special attention. Firstly, it is both desirable and necessary not only to tell the histories of the 'big' languages, like traditional historical linguistics tends to, but also of smaller languages and language varieties, e.g. Yiddish, Luxembourgish, or Creoles (cf. Reershemius, Homer and de Kleine in this volume). Secondly, traditional language history has mostly told the history of male language. Women have been greatly underrepresented in accounts of language history, often (but not solely) due to a lack of original sources. It may not be possible to correct the gender disparity in language historiography, but it is feasible and also high time to study whether and how men and women in the past differed in their discursive use of language (cf. Nevalainen 2002, and Nicola McLelland in this volume).

For practical reasons, the present volume remains confined to the histories of Germanic language varieties. However, the topics raised here are not purely 'Germanic' problems and can most certainly be matched with the methodological defeats and challenges of scholars of other language histories. Therefore it is hoped that this book will give a new impetus for a true social and pragmatic history of all European languages, across national and linguistic borders.

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