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Language and History, Linguistics and Historiography: Interdisciplinary Problems and Opportunities

For the past few years, the notion of interdisciplinarity has been a buzz-word to be found in any programmatic research outline or grant proposal, understood to be a vital break away from scholarly isolation and too narrow a focus on one's own methodology and research questions. This pertains to the humanities just as much as to the natural sciences, and it is hardly a new idea. The historian Marc Bloch stated in the 1940s that 'it is indispensable that the historian possess at least a smattering of all the principal techniques of his trade' (Bloch 1992: 57). More specifically with regard to the disciplines of linguistics and History, Bloch exclaims: 'What an absurd illogicality that men who half the time can have access to their subject only through words, are permitted, among other deficiencies, to be ignorant of the fundamental attainments of linguistics' (ibid.).[1] Yet in practice, exchange between the two fields has often remained a desideratum rather than actual achievement. The fragmentation of traditional philology into a broad subset of highly specialized branches of linguistics from the 1960s (computational linguistics, feminist linguistics, language acquisition studies, etc.), all of which tended to focus on present-day language use only, meant that the study of language structure and texts in their historical context lost the prominence it had enjoyed since its emergence as a serious scholarly discipline in the early nineteenth century. The 'linguistic turn' much discussed by historians since the 1970s has produced, despite its name,

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1   To distinguish between the two meanings of *history*, namely *History* as a scholarly discipline versus *history* to refer to the past, we use a capital letter for the former. Since no such problem arises to distinguish between *language* and *linguistics*, we do not use a capital letter for *linguistics*.

little engagement, critical or otherwise, with the discipline of linguistics as most linguists know and practise it, focusing instead on the mediate nature of access to the past, and the 'literary' treatment of that past in the present (summary in Fulbrook 2002: 18–24). Exceptions to this mutual isolation can be found on both sides of the disciplinary fence, of course, but large-scale collaboration between our two disciplines has continued to be rare, not least because scholars lack the confidence to step outside their area of expertise and into territories where basic assumptions, technical terms and methodological practices may be alien. In particular, there is a general lack of opportunity to exchange ideas and basic knowledge of core ideas. This book is an attempt to facilitate such an opportunity. It contains studies first presented at a conference at the University of Bristol in April 2009, generously supported by a Scientific Network Grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which explicitly addressed issues of interdisciplinarity, that is, to what extent there is any actual scope for collaboration, common knowledge of 'tools', or exchange of ideas between linguists and historians.[2]

First steps towards a break away from disciplinary isolation had already been accomplished within the field of historical sociolinguistics over the last ten years. The aim of key conferences in historical sociolinguistics (Sheffield 2001, Bristol 2003, Bristol 2005, and Bruges 2006), edited volumes (Linn & McLelland 2002, Deumert & Vandenbussche 2003, Langer & Davies 2005, Elspaß et al. 2007), and the thinking behind the foundation of the Historical Sociolinguistics Network (HiSoN, since 2005) has been to achieve a much greater awareness of similarities and differences in the sociological histories of related and neighbouring languages, at first mostly restricted to Germanic languages for practical reasons. Success in bringing separate linguistic traditions and languages together created the impetus for branching out further, to establish how a direct exchange between pure historians and historical sociolinguists may provide further

benefits for our understanding of human societies. Yet the task of fostering interdisciplinarity between linguists and historians is hard. There is much less understanding of what the other discipline is doing, partly because of physical limitations: there are a limited number of hours in the day, and for many academics, the pressure to publish frequently leaves little time to learn about a whole new scholarly discipline, on the off-chance that it might enrich their findings. Furthermore, we suspect, scholars feel most comfortable in the areas in which they were trained. In response to such challenges, the authors in this volume have written for a readership not necessarily expert in their discipline.

Language is a primary means of access to the past, and the historian's primary means of expression. The centrality of language as a research tool is most acutely clear to historians who work on countries other than their own. Most countries require their History students to have a good understanding of two foreign languages at least. In the United Kingdom, where this is not the case, Richard Evans, a historian of Germany, warned, upon taking up the Regius Chair of Modern History at Cambridge, that: 'The rapid and continuing decline of language-learning in British schools is in many ways the most important single factor threatening the continuation of the long tradition of British historians' engagement with the European Continent' (Evans 2009: 201). But 'domestic' historians, too, can ill afford to neglect foreign languages. Significant aspects of the history of the British Isles, too – requiring knowledge of Latin, Middle English, French, or the Celtic languages – will remain a closed book to the monoglot reader of modern English; the historian of modern East-Central Europe will sooner rather than later encounter sources in German or Russian. The growth of immigrant communities in twentieth-century Europe may require the historians of the future to learn a new set of foreign languages.

Historians need to master languages, but, as Robert Evans argued in his inaugural lecture to a Regius Chair of Modern History, this time at Oxford (Evans 1998), they also need an appreciation of language that goes well beyond what simple words mean. In order to interpret their sources, historians need to understand discourse analytic methods, the impossibility of reading a text without context, and the sociolinguistic dynamics involved when writers use particular linguistic varieties and variants.

Such a list may, of course, sound like yesterday's news. E.H. Carr's *What is History?*, a staple of first-year university courses on historical method, pointed out a good half-century ago that historical facts 'are always refracted through the mind of the recorder', and noted: 'The very words which [the historian] uses – words like democracy, empire, war, revolution – have current connotations from which he cannot divorce them' (Carr 1964: 22, 24–25). Thus an interpretation of historical sources requires a sophisticated understanding of how language works socially – be this in terms of lexical semantics, historical pragmatics, or text linguistics. Providing the source with context is a fundamental, natural historical task (Evans 1997: 103–107). This volume, however, argues for more profound and explicit engagement on the historian's part with the methods and findings of linguistics, and demonstrates the potential results of such work. On a pragmatic level, such engagement adds detail and guards against errors. Simple fluency in a living or dead language is arguably insufficient to unearth and interpret correctly the linguistic thrusts and nuances contained in a historical text. Where texts are written in a non-standard variety, an understanding of sociolinguistics is crucial for their correct contextualization, since not all non-standard variants are used by the prototypical uneducated speaker. Spelling variation in the seventeenth century carried a different social association in periods before the existence of a standard language than today; Macha (2004) shows how particular spelling conventions demarcated Catholics and Protestants in a corpus of war correspondence from the sixteenth century, whilst no *social* stigma was attached to the use of non-standard spelling then. Analysing sixteenth-century spelling variation enables us, following Macha, to say something about the author's or printer's deliberate or conventional positioning during the time of the confessional wars. Without understanding the sociological significance of such linguistic markers, historical textual interpretation would arguably be naïve at best, and skewed or simply wrong at worst. Not only language, but also linguistics, belongs in the historian's toolbag, even if it is rarely treated thus: History students in Germany are instructed that heraldry, palaeography, numismatics and sigillography are among History's 'ancillary sciences' (*die historischen Hilfswissenschaften*), but there is no mention of linguistics (e.g. Opgenoorth and Schulz 2001).

For some areas of History, language and linguistics plays a still more fundamental role. One such area is the ongoing interest in national and ethnic identities and their origins: identities that emerged, as Robert Evans points out, in 'intimate conjunction with language' (Evans 1998: 24; for a survey, Joseph 2006). Comparing linguistic evidence from the oldest languages on the British Isles, Trudgill (2009) draws a new and provocative picture of the extent and nature of language contact before the Norman Conquest. Given the particular social settings and types of interaction required for significant language-contact phenomena to emerge, Trudgill is able to present historians and archaeologists with a linguistically motivated account of living conditions in Great Britain before 1066. Another example is Ingham (this volume) who uses statistical evidence and language-contact examples to enhance our understanding of immigration and integration in medieval Anglo-Norman England.

Greater interest in groups excluded from traditional narratives, and especially in day-to-day lives and horizons, has expanded still further the range of research techniques on which the social historian relies. As John Tosh remarks: 'There is probably no other field whose primary sources are so varied, so widely dispersed, and so uneven in quality' (Tosh 2006: 136). Broad and sparse evidence demands a diversity of method: Bloch, the advocate of teaching linguistics to historians, co-founded the influential journal *Annales d'histoire sociale et économique* in 1929 calling for the closer integration of History with other disciplines, notably the social sciences. 'Linguistics' in Bloch's lifetime meant almost exclusively systemic linguistics: sociolinguistics was yet to be born and has trailed behind the historians' turn to studying 'history from below'. Elspaß (2005), however, has cemented linguists' interest in the field, and with Elspaß et al. (2007), there is now a collection of studies focused on unearthing 'language histories from below'. Linguistics techniques function here not only as a guardian against misapprehension, but in developing historical analysis: comparing common spelling conventions and grammatical phenomena in seventeenth-century Dutch letters is just as useful as handwriting in the identification of scribes (cf. Nobels and van der Wal, this volume). The 'social history of language' is a final area in which the two disciplines are closely intermeshed: in calling for such a history, Peter Burke remarked in the late 1980s that 'a

number of historians have recently come to recognize the need to study language as a social institution', and posited 'a gap between linguistics, sociology (including social anthropology) and history [...] which can and should be filled by the social history of language' (Burke and Porter, 1987: 1). Burke's own work, and projects such as the multi-volume *Hanes Cymdeithasol yr Iaith Gymraeg / A Social History of the Welsh Language* (e.g. Jenkins 1997–2000) have responded to the challenge.

Similarly, linguists need History. The concentration of many linguistics curricula in European universities on present-day language study (and of sociolinguistics on contemporary language use) has regrettably implied a disregard for historical development, even though the principles and developments in language change are often most insightful for our understanding of how language 'works' as such. As Robert Evans points out, the sociolinguist's interest in language change is essentially an interest in the past (Evans 1998: 11). Honeybone (this volume) reduces the principal differences between the two disciplines to the following, provocative, core definition: linguistics studies languages, and History studies people. But, he argues, these things are not unconnected: languages live in people, and much historical evidence comes from records that people wrote using their languages. Honeybone identifies areas of historical linguistics where an understanding of social processes (historical or otherwise) are irrelevant, such as individual sound changes from one set of sounds to another (e.g. the Second Sound Shift in High German, shifting /p,t,k/ to /pf,ts,kx/ and /f,s,x/). Endogenous changes, arising from within linguistic systems themselves, may not be attributable to the social context of the people who innovate them, though as the products of past social activity, they are no less 'historical' for it. Exogenous changes, however, can only be explained if we understand the lives of the speakers involved: one such case is the formation of new dialects or languages where speakers of 'old dialects' mix in areas where no established dialect exists. The emerging new forms and varieties can only be understood, Honeybone claims, if we know the demographics of the speakers, requiring substantial collaboration between linguists and historians. For example, Knooihuizen (this volume) provides one such example of how a detailed demographic examination of marriage registers can inform our understanding of language contact and language loss in seventeenth-century Dunkirk. Linguists writing social histories of

language use need information from historians as to when a particular text was written, who the likely author was, at what occasions texts were produced, and, very importantly, which texts were not written or did not survive. In multilingual scenarios, different languages were used but not all were written down; the availability of material resources may have had an effect on education, which in turn affected literacy. The general lack of texts written in Frisian, Low German, or Sønderjysk in eighteenth- and nineteenth- century Denmark gives a distorted view of the thriving actual use of these languages in the southern part of the country. Seen this time from the linguist's perspective, the relationship again functions on three levels: an essential affinity (the common study of past activity), areas of study in which the two disciplines work side by side (such as the social history of language), and with History functioning as a linguists' 'tool', where historical findings incidental to linguistics bear a direct relevance in informing its work.

Two final examples show that the research methods and core wisdoms of both disciplines are embedded in a historico-linguistic minefield. Key terms such as 'Germany' and 'German' are known to historians as slippery concepts: the political and cultural entities known as 'German' have shifted over centuries, and even at the founding of the *Kaiserreich* in 1871, there was a deeply-felt mismatch between German ethnic and national identity and the geographical boundaries of the new state. Indeed, the need for historians to learn multiple languages indicates in itself that the concept of the nation, often defined by linguistic community, is shaky. When it comes to the names for languages, however, scholars are much more ready to assume continuity across centuries, even though it is by no means clear where the boundaries between, say, Standard German and Moselle-Franconian were on the one hand, and Luxembourgish and German on the other. The assumption that we can talk about 'the history of German' rests on the identification of German as a separate language – yet the beginnings of any language are always murky and the 'birth' of a language can be dated as either the day when a variety was significantly different from its neighbouring varieties, or the day when the speakers 'felt' that their linguistic variety was sufficiently distinct to be seen as a separate language. The difference between 'fact' and perception is never clear: even key terms such as 'language' or 'German' are mired in significant confusion. This confusion cannot be resolved without

interdisciplinarity since it does not rest on misunderstanding the processes involved, but rather on the complexities and range of situations to which these terms are applied. The danger does not lie in these 'wobbly' foundations but rather in the fact that the terms (*language*, *German*) are used as real and hard notions in the scholarly discourse without always realizing that terms are historical creations. Kamusella (this volume) presents a similar discussion with regard to the politics of classifying Slavic languages, which in recent years have seen the politically motivated emergence of Czech and Slovak, as well as Serbian and Croatian, as distinct languages, even though their respective linguistic difference is no greater than that between major dialects in English or Italian.

The same applies to terms which are much more clearly 'technical' as used by various disciplines but where the dangers – and the possibilities – lie in their different understanding by, say, linguists, historians, and literary scholars. The key notion of 'politeness' in the eighteenth century will be understood differently by historians and linguists. For historians, politeness concerns sociability and is a mode of social coordination; literary historians with an interest in the periodical essay genre use the concept as a discursive medium for the development of sociability. In historical sociolinguistics, on the other hand, politeness is identified as a set of attributes that are commercialized and commodified via the identification of good grammar as the way to 'polite' conversation and the operationalization of politeness through the medium of humiliative discourse (Fitzmaurice 2010). In turn, both interpretations are different from the notion of linguistic politeness as a key concept in modern sociolinguistics, which talks about way speakers use the concept of 'face' (after Brown & Levinson 1987) to position their status as speakers in a particular discourse. Dictionary entries on *politeness* will provide neither the historian nor the linguist with a sufficiently refined differentiation of the changes in the word's meaning and usage over the centuries. Appreciating its range guards us from an over-simplified understanding of the term, and allows us to overcome the anachronism pointed out by Carr. Reinhart Koselleck's work demonstrates how profitably an appreciation of semantics could be turned to an elucidation of historical concepts (Koselleck 2004; also Brunner et al. 1972–1997).

There is thus considerable scope for benefits from a better mutual understanding of our conceptual premises, research methods and scholarly outcomes. In particular, the papers in this volume address these general areas of potential common interest:

Language History from Below, with a new focus on informal sources such as pauper letters or emigrants' diaries, which had been largely ignored in linguistics until recently yet which inform, and are informed by, research programmes working on 'history from below';

Political Language, which investigates discourses relating to political debates and ideas and which demonstrate the importance of linguistic analyses of political discourse in order to understand how particular terms are used and political 'realities' are created and transmitted in a particular community;

Language Contact, which focuses on multilingual communities to identify how a particular language is used or suppressed in order to create individual and group identities. Language contact is an important field for understanding the genesis of communities and their feeling of distinctiveness, since language is often one of the key components that separates a community from others;

Historical Semantics, which examines how the meaning of words changes over time, partly, but not exclusively, due to a change in the social environment that require or permit a refocusing of how words are used;

Attitudes to Language, which investigates what people think about language and how this relates to their evaluation of particular varieties as good languages, e.g. standard languages, and bad languages, e.g. particular sociolects and regional languages;

Historiography, which – in this context – is concerned in particular with two areas, namely on the one hand, how the description of linguistic phenomena has changed during the last four centuries and, on the other hand, how editorial practices have changed over the years. Practices completely acceptable and sensible for historians can obscure vital information for a linguist wishing to interpret the same source.

The volume thus contains an outline of the possibilities of contact between the two disciplines, using both case studies from cutting-edge research and more general, theoretical discussions on interdisciplinary exchange between language / linguistics on the one hand and History / historiography on the

other. This volume is intended to serve both as a platform to show where we are, and as a starting point of instruction as to how research in the 'other' discipline is conducted and what principal questions and problems concern them. The chapters of this volume demonstrate how wide-ranging such issues are and how, nonetheless, a common thread in the advancement of our understanding of human societies in the past and humans – as actors and speakers – can be discerned.

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Interdisciplinary Approaches