
Conference Report

Conference Report: The Future of Historical Sociolinguistics Bruges, December 2006

Wim Vandebussche, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

On December 2, 2006, the Centre of Linguistics of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Historical Sociolinguistics Network organized a colloquium in Bruges (Belgium) on “The Future of Historical Sociolinguistics”. Twenty-five years after Suzanne Romaine’s seminal work ‘Socio-historical linguistics, its status and methodology’ (OUP, 1982), the organizers wanted to bring together the “founding fathers and mothers” of historical sociolinguistics and junior/senior researchers currently involved in the discipline.

The aim of the meeting was to present an overview of the most important developments in the domain over the past 25 years, through plenary talks by 8 leading scholars. The link with present-day research was assured through a special poster session during which a dozen young European researchers presented their work in progress. Klaus J. Mattheier (Universität Heidelberg) provided a general introduction to the colloquium in which theoretical challenges and potential future research topics for the study of social language history were outlined.

In “The future of historical sociolinguistics: Its status and methodology”, Suzanne Romaine (University of Oxford) looked back on lines of evolution in socio-historical linguistics in the past 25 years, stressing the ongoing multidisciplinary nature of the discipline. Using the examples of “grammaticalization” and the spread of the “is like to –V” construction in English, she stressed the ongoing need for statistical analyses and for the development of reliable corpora for historical linguistic research, all the while illustrating that certain periods and genres (e.g., speech-related genres) remain underrepresented in the currently available corpora.

Terttu Nevalainen’s contribution (University of Helsinki) “Historical sociolinguistics as a cross-disciplinary enterprise” complemented these desiderata with actual examples from the so-called “Helsinki corpora”, based on the expertise of the VARIENG-research group. Among other issues, Nevalainen discussed the gender imbalance and the low representation of non-U texts in the available archives. She also referred to sources that may be overlooked by linguists but still contain an enormous amount of highly usable data (e.g., the *Proceedings* of the Old Bailey) to analyze, for example, the influence of an evolving standard language on the text material at hand. She also touched upon the *nomenclature* of the discipline, an issue that would return in later talks throughout the day: whereas historical sociolinguistics /sociohistorical linguistics was an umbrella term back in the early 1980s, the field has seen a diversification involving subfields like historical sociopragmatics, sociodialectology, etc.

Rosita Rindler Schjerve (Universität Wien) focused on the opportunities offered to sociohistorical linguistic analyses by new methodological and theoretical orientations. Drawing, among other things, on the experiences of a large-scale project aimed at “Reconstructing language policy and multilingual practices in the 19th century Habsburg Empire”, she outlined the potential benefits of applying Critical Discourse Analysis to historical text data, especially where historical language contact and language planning is concerned (involving issues of societal multilingualism and interethnic power).

In his plenary talk on “The contribution of historical sociolinguistics to the understanding of the Norwegian language struggle”, Ernst Håkon Jahr (Agder University College, Kristiansand) illustrated the crucial importance of a socially oriented approach to standardization history. Both the conflict between Bokmål and Nynorsk as well as the late medieval contact between Low German and Scandinavian served as case studies in which the integration of present day sociolinguistic methodology into the study of historical variety selection and codification was discussed.

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (Universiteit Leiden) addressed the topic of “Historical sociolinguistics and the language of the individual” and launched a plea for historical micro-studies (complementing large-scale corpus research) focusing on the individual language user, using single-author corpora that are made up of original letters and that include draft letters. She also illustrated how social network analyses of these micro-corpora can contribute to a better understanding of the stylistic development of individual letter writers.

Peter Burke (University of Cambridge) gave a panoramic overview of a selection of language-related projects that have been developed by social historians over the past century in his talk on “The social history of language: past, present and future”. Although historical sociolinguistics is fundamentally “a topic located at a cross-roads between disciplines”, many sociolinguists continue to ignore (or be unaware of) research of historians working along similar lines (and vice versa). Burke’s *tour d’horizon* of contributions from diverse languages (including Russian, Portuguese, French, German, Dutch and others) constituted a very strong plea for the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration between all ‘social historians of language’ across academic fields.

Finally, Richard Watts (Universität Bern) connected Weinreich, Herzog and Labov’s (1968) foundations for a theory of language change with “Foucault’s concept of the ‘archive’ in historical sociolinguistics”. Taking various distinct interpretations of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles as an example, he stressed the need for (and the potential risk of) reconstructing socio-communicative practices in retrospect, taking into account the totality of discursive practices at a specific moment in time.

In his closing address, Roland Willemyns (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) rephrased the repeatedly articulated need for international networking in the field of historical sociolinguistics across linguistic and scholarly borders. In this respect he announced that in preliminary meetings leading up to the present conference, a “Standing committee on historical sociolinguistics” has been established (involving all plenary speakers mentioned above and representatives from HiSoN). One of the first actions of this committee is to explore the opportunities and possibilities of a professional membership organization for historical sociolinguistics. In addition to this, the publication of a new printed journal for historical sociolinguistics is being pursued.

The main sponsors of this colloquium were the Research Foundation-Flanders, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Town of Bruges. An official reception in the Bruges Town Hall offered by the latter drew this highly successful conference to a close.