Introduction: Lower class language use in the 19th century

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> 'In looking back upon the history of ordinary people, we are not merely trying to give it a retrospective political significance which it did not always have, we are trying more generally to explore an unknown dimension of the past.' (Hobsbawm 1998: 270)

The historiography of modern Western languages has traditionally concentrated on unification and standardization processes. This approach was deeply rooted in 19th and early 20th century (language) ideologies and (language) politics. The language discourse in many Western countries displayed a remarkable collaboration of linguists with politicians, historians and writers in constructing a picture of unified nations with autonomous cultural, especially literary and linguistic, traditions that were sometimes projected backwards to the Middle Ages and beyond. Hence, generations of scholars and teachers have presented language history as a long march toward a uniform standard. Variation and other linguistic digressions were usually either ignored or stigmatised as corrupted language and not considered as suitable data for linguistic research. Up to the end of the 20th century, many textbooks on national language histories were dominated by this teleological view, portraying 'classical' authors as role models for language norms and style. As such, language history was largely reduced to the study of literary language, often coinciding with the high variety employed and received by only a tiny minority of the population. 'Non-standard' variation – let alone language use from the *non-elite* – was usually regarded as corrupt and vulgar and, in an act of 'sanitary purism' (Milroy 2005, 324–326) or 'verbal hygiene' (Cameron 1995), simply cleansed from textbooks.

What the editors like to call the 'German sociohistorical tradition' in linguistics was an exception to this rule. Since the late 1970s an impressive series of publications from German scholars (an overview is given in Vandenbussche 2006) has focused on what was then still labelled as 'Arbeitersprache': the written language of those at the very bottom of the social ladder in 19th century Germany, as found in original handwritten archive documents. Apart from establishing one of the core research topics in European historical sociolinguistics, this pioneer work pre-

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sented one of the first systematic attempts to look beyond an upper class dominated historiography of language – very much in the way that the approach of *Alltagsgeschichte* and 'history from below' (Hobsbawm 1998) fundamentally changed both the focus and the foundations of social history proper.

In recent years, scholars have continued to call traditional views of language historiography into question and presented alternative perspectives on the histories of Western languages (e. g. Watts and Trudgill 2002; Elspaß 2005; van der Wal 2006). The impact of modern pragmatic and sociolinguistic theory has led to different methodological approaches, but also for a search for texts beyond the textbook canon. Historical sociolinguists, in particular (or linguists with a certain interest in or leaning towards social history) – many of them inspired by the aforementioned German research – started to unearth a wealth of documents belonging to text types and written by people who had hardly been noticed in the historiography of languages so far: private letters, chronicles and personal diaries written by farmers, soldiers, artisans, or housemaids; 'pauper letters' in which poor people pleaded with the authorities for material relief; meeting reports/minutes from workers' organizations, etc. In a traditional bird's eye view 'from above', measured against professional writers of their times, such texts may be considered as the dregs of a culture of writing. Historians (and the odd ethnologist), however, have long recognized the importance of such sources for a social/sociocultural history and a historical anthropology of our nations or our hemisphere (e. g. Burke 2004), whereas – with a few exceptions (e. g. Spitzer 1921) – they remained virtually unnoticed by the linguistic profession.

In a 'view from below', such texts are not only of interest to the historical sociolinguist. In fact, they constitute the only authentic trace of people who did not form part of our cultural memory via literary texts, pamphlets, treatises, printed speeches and other documents. Up to the 19th century, these people have been a 'silent majority', insofar as most of them were not able to read and write and their texts certainly made up only a minority of texts that were actually written. With the mass literacy drives of the 19th century, this situation changed rapidly. Even people from the lower middle and lower classes learnt to write, and the amounts of texts which have been brought to light testify that these people actually produced masses of texts. Such texts provide not only a 'worm's eye view' of everyday life, but also give a valuable insight into variants and varieties of written language of their time. Language historians can no longer ignore these texts, as they do, in fact, constitute a part of our language histories and sometimes even contain the germ of linguistic change.

In this special issue, we present six studies into lower class writing of the 19th century from six different languages (Danish, Dutch, English, French, German and Finnish). What induced us to assemble studies from these languages (and other languages from the Western world) is the observation that essential features and developments of the linguistic developments in the history of the Western languages of the 'long 19th century' are very similar, if not basically the same.

The Industrial Revolution and the making of the middle class, to name but two examples, were 19th century socio-economic transformations that affected the lives and identities of individuals all over Europe, across national borders. At about the same time, the aftermath of the Enlightenment ideals on popular education and 'lifting up the masses' met the demands of the rising workers' movement for, eventually, the right to upward social mobility. One of the many factors involved in those turbulent times was the spread of literacy among the lower walks of society, giving a voice to that huge majority of the population that had hardly ever left a trace in writing before. At a time when language planners were still actively forging standards and norms for a number of prestige languages all over Europe, a huge mass of paupers and 'small people' started to write their real everyday language according to their own need and competence, far away from academic and official considerations. That language and those documents are the central focus of this edition.

Several years ago, when first comparing the data and the results of our own research on 19th century lower class language (on Dutch and German) the editors were not only struck by the remarkable parallels in the outcome of our analyses, but perhaps even more by the common methodological and practical problems of both 'isolated' projects. Whether it concerned language-related issues of norm description and the boundaries of orthographic variation, or 'external factors' such the social categorization of lower class members and the nature of 19th century language teaching methods, it was manifestly clear that the gains to be expected from international collaboration in our field were worth the effort to try and bridge both linguistic and academic boundaries.

In this respect, we think that it is high time to not only offer alternative views on national language histories but also to overcome a view that is firmly fixed on single languages – yet another legacy of 19th century language ideologies – and to look at cross-linguistic and contact-induced developments in the languages of our hemisphere. This special issue is, therefore, very much intended as a trigger for similar comparative research on lower class writing from other languages.

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