

Anita Auer\*, Catharina Peersman, Simon Pickl, Gijsbert Rutten  
and Rik Vosters

## Historical sociolinguistics: the field and its future

**Abstract:** This article introduces the new *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* by situating it in the developing field of historical sociolinguistics. The landmark paper of Weinreich et al. (1968), which paid increased attention to extralinguistic factors in the explanation of language variation and change, served as an important basis for the gradual development and expansion of historical sociolinguistics as a separate (sub)field of inquiry, notably since the influential work of Romaine (1982). This article traces the development of the field of historical sociolinguistics and considers some of its basic principles and assumptions, including the uniformitarian principle and the so-called bad data problem. Also, an overview is provided of some of the directions recent research has taken, both in terms of the different types of data used, and in terms of important approaches, themes and topics that are relevant to many studies within the field. The article concludes with considerations of the necessarily multidisciplinary nature of historical sociolinguistics, and invites authors from various research traditions to submit original research articles to the journal, and thus help to further the development of the fascinating field of historical sociolinguistics.

**Keywords:** historical sociolinguistics, socio-historical linguistics, language history from below, norms and usage, interdisciplinarity

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**\*Corresponding author: Anita Auer**, Université de Lausanne, Section d'anglais, Bâtiment Anthropole, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland, E-mail: Anita.Auer@unil.ch

**Catharina Peersman**, University of Sheffield, Department of French, School of Languages and Cultures, Jessop West - 1 Upper Hanover Street, Sheffield S3 7RA, United Kingdom, E-mail: catharina.peersman@gmail.com

**Simon Pickl**, Universität Salzburg, Fachbereich Germanistik, Erzabt-Klotz-Str. 1, 5020 Salzburg, Austria, E-mail: simon.pickl@sbg.ac.at

**Gijsbert Rutten**, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics (LUCL), P.N. van Eyckhof 1, 2311 BV Leiden, Netherlands, E-mail: g.j.rutten@hum.leidenuniv.nl

**Rik Vosters**, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Vakgroep Taal- en Letterkunde, Center for Linguistic Research (CLIN), Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussel, Belgium, E-mail: Rik.Vosters@vub.ac.be

# 1 Mapping the field

The *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* is a new academic journal specifically devoted to the relatively recent field of *historical sociolinguistics*, which is sometimes also referred to as *sociohistorical linguistics*. What is *relatively recent*? The study that is usually considered the first to include the term *sociohistorical* in its title is Romaine's (1982) book on relative clauses in Middle Scots: *Socio-historical linguistics: Its status and methodology*. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (1987) used the same epitheton *sociohistorical* in her study of auxiliary *do* in eighteenth-century English. Milroy (1992) used the alternative term *historical sociolinguistics* (cf. Nevalainen 2011), which has become the most common term internationally, and which will therefore be used in this journal as well. While many of the historical sociolinguistic studies of the past three decades deal with the history of English, it should be noted at the outset that similar developments occurred in many other language areas; see, for example, Mattheier (1988) for German, and Branca-Rosoff and Schneider (1994) for French. It is noteworthy that the Spanish linguist Gimeno Menéndez argued for a *sociolingüística histórica* in 1983 already. As with any emerging subfield of linguistics, it should be acknowledged that many scholars had already published contributions that would nowadays be classified under the heading of historical sociolinguistics, without using that specific term.

Whereas the terms *sociohistorical linguistics* and *historical sociolinguistics* have been in use for approximately three decades, the question of the inter-relatedness of linguistic and social factors is of course much older. As Romaine (2005: 1696) noted in a handbook chapter on historical sociolinguistics, the famous paper by Weinreich et al. (1968) "might conveniently be cited as the birth of sociohistorical linguistics or historical sociolinguistics although the authors do not use either term". With their emphasis on the need to incorporate external factors into a theory of language change and to transcend the old dichotomy of synchrony and diachrony, Weinreich et al. (1968) laid the foundations for an approach to language that was inherently historical and social. As such, this paper marked the emergence of a new field of inquiry, viz. sociolinguistics, which has been expanding ever since. In the same vein, we want to argue that Romaine (1982) marked the initiation of historical sociolinguistics, which has since developed into a well-established linguistic (sub)discipline, the institutionalization of which is confirmed by the present journal.

The gradual development and expansion of the field and its basic assumptions were outlined some 10 years ago in two handbook chapters (Romaine 2005; Roberge 2006) and in a paper in the yearbook *Sociolinguistica*, which also drew attention to historical sociolinguistic research of German and Dutch, apart from

English (Willemyns and Vandenbussche 2006). In the same period, scholars from Belgium (Wim Vandenbussche), Germany (Stephan Elspaß, Joachim Scharloth) and the United Kingdom (Nils Langer) founded the Historical Sociolinguistics Network (HiSoN, see [hison.sbg.ac.at](http://hison.sbg.ac.at)). Although an informal network without a formal executive committee, it boasts some 350 members and runs a number of regular international conferences and workshops as well as annual summer schools. The conferences and workshops have resulted in a number of edited volumes with case studies of a variety of languages (e.g. Elspaß et al. 2007; Vandenbussche and Elspaß 2007; Langer et al. 2012; van der Wal and Rutten 2013a; Rjeoutski et al. 2014; Havinga and Langer forthcoming). The same period also saw the publication of two books that can easily be read as introductions to the field, offering both basic explanations of sociolinguistic concepts and detailed case studies demonstrating the applicability of these concepts to language history (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003; Conde-Silvestre 2007).

The second decade of the twenty-first century is marked by further advances in the institutionalization of historical sociolinguistics. A landmark publication is without any doubt the Blackwell *Handbook of Historical Sociolinguistics* (2012), edited by Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre. With 35 chapters by 43 contributors, it presents a thorough and varied overview of the field, and while a majority of the chapters deal with the history of English – reflecting in a way the development of historical sociolinguistics as a discipline – the issues raised are of general interest and importance for scholars working on any language. What is more, in the same year, a course book in English historical sociolinguistics, written by Robert McColl Millar (2012), came out, testifying to the increasing presence of historical sociolinguistics in academic curricula.

Finally, the establishment of a research area as an independent academic discipline is also marked by the existence of dedicated publication channels for scholars working in the field in question. In recent years, two academic publishers have started a book series in historical sociolinguistics. John Benjamins Publishing Company (Amsterdam & Philadelphia) publishes the series *Advances in Historical Sociolinguistics*, edited by Terttu Nevalainen and Marijke van der Wal. The first volume came out in 2013. Peter Lang (Oxford) has the series *Historical Sociolinguistics. Studies on Language and Society in the Past*, the first volume of which came out in 2014. The series editors are Nils Langer, Stephan Elspaß, Joseph Salmons and Wim Vandenbussche. The twenty-first century also witnessed the development of two electronic publication platforms. From 2000 to 2011, the online journal *Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics*, maintained at Leiden University and edited by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, published original research articles and book reviews ([www.hum2.leidenuniv.nl/hsl\\_shl/index.html](http://www.hum2.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/index.html)). From 2007 onward, the

Research Unit for the Study of Variation, Contacts and Change in English (VARIENG) at the University of Helsinki has been publishing its electronic series *Studies in Variation, Contacts and Change in English*, which is an online publication featuring thematic volumes ([www.helsinki.fi/varieng/journal/index.html](http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/journal/index.html)). The editor-in-chief of the latter series is Terttu Nevalainen. Historical sociolinguists have of course always published their work in journals on historical linguistics and sociolinguistics, or in journals devoted to particular languages or specific linguistic approaches. With the *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics*, a dedicated journal is for the first time on hand, specifically focused on the study of language in its social and historical context.

## 2 Basic principles

The important role of Weinreich et al.'s (1968) seminal paper has already been pointed out. Interested in a more profound understanding of language change, the paper is centered around five central problems to be solved: (i) identifying the (crosslinguistic) constraints on linguistic change; (ii) studying the transition of features from one speaker to another; (iii) uncovering the embedding of changes, both in the linguistic and in the social structure; (iv) taking into account speakers' evaluations of linguistic forms; and (v) delving into the actuation of language change, with causes for change originating from "stimuli and constraints both from society and from the structure of the language" (Weinreich et al. 1968: 186). As the interrelation of linguistic and social factors in language change is central in each of these areas, finding answers to these five questions is often seen as a key task for historical sociolinguists (cf. Tuten and Tejedó Herrero 2011: 286–287). Especially the problems of transition, embedding and evaluation have gained most attention within the discipline: how and when changes are transmitted from one speaker to another, how new forms become established in speech communities, across age groups, professions or social strata, and how prestige, norms of correctness and speakers' attitudes toward specific forms may affect changes, are central issues in historical sociolinguistics.

To answer these questions, historical sociolinguists can draw on insights and principles from modern-day sociolinguistics, on the working assumption that the fundamental principles and mechanisms of language variation and change are valid across time. This *uniformitarian principle* finds its origin in the premise of uniformitarianism in natural sciences such as geology and is described by Labov (1972: 275) as the idea that "the forces operating to produce linguistic change today are of the same kind and order of magnitude as those which operated five or ten thousand years ago" (cf. also Joseph 2011 for further discussion). This principle

certainly holds true for basic assertions, such as “the fact that language must always have been variable, that different social groups and genders had different ways of speaking, and that people have always been aware of these differences” (Bergs 2012: 96). However, applying the idea of uniformitarianism beyond such basic assumptions holds the danger of “ideational anachronism” (Bergs 2012), whereby we transpose modern concepts such as *social class*, *gender* or *prestige* to historical settings, the applicability and validity of which is largely constricted to modern Western societies. To avoid the pitfalls of anachronism, it is the task of historical sociolinguists to reconstruct a broad picture of the social context in which the language varieties under investigation were used, drawing on the inductive method to identify the social conditions of language variation and change, ensuring empirical, social and historical validity (cf. Nevalainen 2006). In fact, this challenge lies at the heart of the so-called historical paradox: we know that the past was different, but what we do not know exactly is *how different* it was (Labov 1994: 11; cf. Nevalainen 2010). For this reason, historical sociolinguistics needs to transcend the mere application of modern-day sociolinguistic methods and questions to historical settings: part of the endeavor lies exactly in finding out how different the past was, and thus “every language period and every linguistic community must be investigated independently and in its own right” (Bergs 2012: 96).

Related to the above problems of validity and diachronic universality is the *bad data problem* (cf. e.g. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003; Cantos 2012: 102–103). While Labov (1994: 11) has already remarked that “[h]istorical linguistics can then be thought of as the art of making the best use of bad data”, the challenges related to this problem are even more significant in historical sociolinguistics. Not only is historical background information such as scribes’ age, gender, education or role in society often hard to unravel, the written record available is also strongly biased toward formal writings of highly educated men from the upper ranks of society. Studying the use of vernacular forms, for instance, or learning about basic literacy and writing practices from male and female members of lower social ranks, is more challenging. It requires historical sociolinguists to be creative in terms of the material they study, following the suggestion by Romaine (1982: 12) that “if linguistics is to be conceived of as sociolinguistic in nature, then sociolinguistics must be ‘tested’ on new and different kinds of data”.

### 3 Data, themes and approaches

Considering that the field of historical sociolinguistics largely bases its findings on empirical data, the collection of data has always played a major role and also determined some of the methods that have been and are being applied in the

field. In line with present-day sociolinguists, researchers working with historical data similarly distinguish between *quantitative* and *qualitative* approaches, which are frequently combined in the studies. Since the advent of corpus linguistics in the 1980s, a number of data collections and text corpora that are suitable for historical sociolinguistic research have been compiled. The *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003) deserves special mention because it may be considered the first historical corpus that was tagged with fairly elaborate social information. Another type of data that serves as the basis of historical sociolinguistic investigations, notably when taking a view *from below*, are letters from the laboring poor and emigrants (cf. the 2007 special issue of *Multilingua*, edited by Vandebussche and Elspaß, on lower-class writing in the nineteenth century). The data collections and corpora are in the first instance used for the quantitative approach (increasingly combined with statistical models), but then also in most cases combined with a qualitative approach, which in this particular field is often of a philological nature and entails close reading and paying attention to a great amount of detail, e.g. the study of the grammatical tradition (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008; Rutten et al. 2014). Another sociolinguistic method that has been successfully applied in the field of historical sociolinguistics is that of social network theory (Milroy 1987; Conde-Silvestre 2012), as for instance in Bergs' (2005) study of the Paston family – and more recently also the application of the concepts of *community of practice* and *discourse communities* to historical data (see for instance Watts 2008; Kopaczyk and Jucker 2013, reviewed in this issue).

One may want to argue that, compared to qualitative philological investigations, the amount of data needed in sociohistorical analyses is multiplied because of the necessity to know about the social distribution of linguistic features in the past. The requirement to come by enough data is of course aggravated by the bad data problem. As pointed out earlier, written sources – especially from times when literacy was not common – have a strong bias toward the educated classes, which excludes large parts of the population from available textual records. This makes it very hard to get a complete picture of the social distribution of any linguistic feature at a given time in the past. Since education is connected to class and gender, the literacy bias entails a social bias, which is why certain sectors of society, such as women or the lower classes, have been under-represented in conventional language histories. One of the core concerns of historical sociolinguistics, therefore, is the effort to overcome the social bias connected to class, education and literacy inherent in written sources that has afflicted language historiography. This objective has sparked the recent efforts to use increasingly sources from parts of society that have remained largely unheard in traditional historical linguistics, such as the

lower classes. Such a “language history from below” (Elspaß 2005; Elspaß et al. 2007) draws on whatever sources are available from the lower ranks of society (such as private letters, diaries, cookbooks) and uses them to establish their role in language change and, also, standardization.

Apart from the social and literacy biases, there is also a fundamental bias that is common to all written sources: we have no direct records of oral speech in writing. Since speech is considered to be primary in many respects, it is regarded as essential for the understanding of language variation and change (cf. for instance Schneider 2013: 57). This leads to the question of how oral registers can be reconstructed from written sources, and thus to the more fundamental question of how written and oral language are interrelated. For the reconstruction of orality, certain text types that are usually close to speech and relatively unaffected by conventions of writing have proven to be useful to a large extent.<sup>1</sup> Culpeper and Kytö (2010: 17–18), for instance, name personal correspondence, trial proceedings, drama texts, sermons, proclamations, or speech presentation in prose fiction. A somewhat more recent take, which ties in well with the *language history from below* approach, is the utilization of so-called *ego-documents* such as private letters, diaries or travelogues. These provide a first-person perspective of the writer and are considered to be non-fictional texts “as close to actual speech as possible, only in written form” (Sević 1999: 340; cf. also Elspaß 2012; van der Wal and Rutten 2013b).

From a macrolinguistic perspective, historical sociolinguistics also comprises themes that touch upon how language(s) and varieties are embedded in complex societies, such as multilingualism and code-switching; migration, language contact and their consequences; the institutionalization of language as expressed in language policy and planning, or standardization and the relation between language norms and usage (cf. e.g. Deumert and Vandebussche 2003; Rutten et al. 2014). Here, the interplay between the history of society and the history of language, from a plethora of perspectives, is the primary object of investigation. Quite naturally, such an approach involves asking traditional sociolinguistic questions regarding the consequences of language contact as a result of migration or colonization, such as the emergence of pidgins and creoles. Furthermore, historical sociolinguistics is also concerned with the roles that the architecture of modern society and the institutional modern (nation) state have played in the historical development of languages and

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<sup>1</sup> Culpeper and Kytö (2010: 17) make a distinction between “speech-like”, “speech-based” and “speech-purposed” genres; these categories have in common that the respective texts exhibit features considered to be oral, but they differ in what kind of such features they exhibit, and why. Schneider (2013: 60–61), on the other hand, proposes five ways in which orality can be rendered in writing: “recorded”, “recalled”, “imagined”, “observed”, and “invented” speech.

varieties. Especially the linguistic consequences of urbanization, industrialization and the verticalization of society have been of particular interest, as they help us to understand the development of the varietal spectrum of modern speech communities (e.g. Salmons 2005a, Salmons 2005b). Moreover, historical sociolinguistics also comprises research on the interplay of language and power as reflected in language use and, more broadly, in the reproduction and representation of social inequality along linguistic lines, for example in relation to the construction of ideologies and the development of language planning and policy (del Valle and Gabriel-Stheeman 2002). Here, historical sociolinguistics ties in with the well-established tradition of the sociology of language, aiming at a “historical sociolinguistics of society” (cf. Fasold 1984, as well as the discussion in Tuten and Tejado Herrero 2011) as opposed to a historical sociolinguistics of language.

Language policy and planning are two examples of endeavors to influence the way that languages are used within a speech community. They are often the result of a conscious perception of multilingualism and language variation and of their evaluation. Stigmatization, prescriptivism and notions of language correctness, ultimately consequences of value judgments about linguistic forms associated with particular registers or speakers, lucidly illustrate the eminent relevance of language attitudes, ideologies and myths for processes such as standardization (cf. for instance, Langer and Davies 2005; Watts 2011; Milroy 2012; Langer and Nesse 2012). This shows how any language history remains incomplete unless we take into account not only the social variation of language but also the (conscious or unconscious) ascription of values to linguistic forms and registers by society or parts of it.

## 4 Final remarks

With all of the above in mind, it is clear that historical sociolinguistics is by its very nature a multidisciplinary endeavor, drawing heavily on advances in social and cultural history, philology and paleography, corpus linguistics and modern-day sociolinguistics, as well as sociology and social psychology – even more so than in more traditional approaches to historical linguistics. The collaboration with historians sharing a similar interest in the social and identificatory functions of language holds particular potential. Honeybone (2011) characterizes the difference between linguistics and history as essentially a distinction in terms of their object of study: where linguists study languages, historians study people. While this characterization may hold true for more system-oriented approaches



in linguistics, we would argue that historical sociolinguistics *par excellence* aims to study language use, as produced by individual language users, embedded in the social context in which these language users operate, and understood not only from a communicative angle but also as conscious or unconscious acts of identity and social distinction. Aiming to move beyond a socially informed historical linguistics or a historically informed sociolinguistics, the goal of many historical sociolinguists has always been to contribute to a social history of language (cf. Burke 2004, Burke 2005). As such, the field has a lot to gain from interactions with colleagues in social or cultural history, as can be seen from a number of multidisciplinary conferences, workshops and publications over the past years (e.g. Langer et al. 2012).

Over the past three decades, historical sociolinguistics has become a well-established academic field. We expect that its future will be as intriguing and inspiring as these initial years, and we hope that the *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* will significantly contribute to the ongoing growth and advancement of the field. This first issue comprises four original papers that show the different avenues taken in recent research. We look forward to future article submissions and the further development of the fascinating field of historical sociolinguistics.

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