

Historical sociolinguistics: An alternative to the analysis of linguistic change

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Abstract

This article situates historical sociolinguistics as a part of variationism and an integral part of micro-sociolinguistics. It goes on to describe the theoretical principles which provide its basis for the analysis of language change in progress. It constitutes a double alternative: firstly, within historical linguistics as a tool for the study of linguistic change and, secondly, within variationism, as a way of submitting written documents to diachronic analysis. It also reviews the social factors have been investigated by this branch of sociolinguistics, within the small amount of research work that has been published in this area to date.

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1. Sociolinguistics

The interrelatedness of language and society has been evident throughout the history of the different disciplines of linguistics. But it was not until around the middle of the 20th century that sociolinguistics accepted this relationship as axiomatic to its approach and established the analysis of these two elements as intrinsically involved in a systematic way. There are more than a few examples in linguistics which ratify this link between language and social environment. Witness to this, for example, are the studies carried out by Ancient Greeks, by the German philosophers of language Herder and Humboldt, or indeed all the historical grammatical works of the 19th and 20th centuries –which necessarily had to make reference to factors external to language. And lastly, there are the notions put forward by Saussure to differentiate internal and external linguistics, and the works of the semiologists Sapir and Whorf, the authors of the theory of linguistic relativity. Nor should we forget the work done in dialectology, the majority of which include a reference to the socio-historical framework of the geographical area in question.

Nonetheless, however, other disciplines within linguistics have sought to remain aloof from this interrelation, and this is true for example of structuralism and transformational generative linguistics. These disciplines approached language as a homogenous and invariant system, thus achieving a totally abstract notion of language, disconnected from its environment. In opposition to this idea, sociolinguistics came into being, a multidisciplinary field of study that looked at the use made of language in a specific community.

Undoubtedly, sociolinguistics has emerged with the support of other disciplines, the ethnography of communication, which analyses language as an element inseparable from its cultural context, and of course sociology. And this same viewpoint enabled William Labov to regard the discipline as divided into two different facets: sociolinguistics in the broader sense and sociolinguistics strictly defined. In line with this approach, and within this referential framework, we can also distinguish macro-sociolinguistics and microsociolinguistics. In the first we would include sociolinguistics and areas of the above-mentioned broader sociolinguistics, and remark that it is concerned with analysis of the language as a projection of the social sciences, sociology, anthropology, etc. The second would include sociolinguistics strictly defined, together with the ethnography of communication, and be concerned with the study of the linguistic fact.

2. Variation sociolinguistics

Within microsociolinguistics we include variation sociolinguistics which studies the correlation between linguistic variation and social variation. The great contribution of variationism was to turn the point of interest around to focus on speech and external linguistics, safe in the knowledge that what was being analysed here was not the ideal, utopian speaker-listener, proposed by generativism. Instead, it sought to see within language the system that was shaped by society. Variation exists from the moment that one accepts the influence of the social context –which, obviously, is also variable– upon language. This is sufficiently ductile to accept modifications induced by the social context. From this new theoretical perspective, therefore, language is defined as an orderly, heterogeneous and dynamic system (Weinreich, Labov and Herzog, 1968).

We know for sure that free variation, as proposed by generativists, does not exist. Rather, variation responds to correlative social patterns conditioned in turn by such external factors as geography, which produces diatopic variation; by temporal factors, responsible for diachronic variation; by social factors, which generate diastratic (stratified) variation, and lastly contextual factors, producing diaphasic variation. Having accepted this variation, therefore, we must necessarily take it that variation cannot ever be considered random, but rather operates in a totally systematic way.

On the other hand, the study of heterogeneity of language is not only done on the basis of qualitative analysis but is complemented by quantitative analysis. For that reason, this discipline has provided an empirical model, adopting the same approach as other social sciences. This analytical model which adheres to that of the surveys questionnaires of sociology and of statistical mathematics, is based on the analysing and processing of linguistic and social factors by means of a computer package known as VARBRUL. The latter provides the indices of probability of different variants occurring in a context, by means of logarithmic calculation.

3. Historic sociolinguistics

3.1 Analysis of linguistic change

The historical perspective within linguistic research becomes especially notable from the mid 19th century onward. Using the comparison of languages to work out genetic relationships and the subsequent formulation of language families led on to a historicist perspective and the development of historical grammars. From then onwards, the principle of the evolution of languages become a clear axiom informing much historical language research. What's more, this epistemological agreement within linguistics led F. de Saussure to set up the famous dichotomy between the synchronic and the diachronic. In principle the fact that one could now differentiate studies with synchronic paradigms from those with diachronic ones was in itself an important step above all toward recognising the dynamic nature of linguistic systems. Nonetheless, structuralism and generativism were to develop solely the synchronic facet, and indeed were not able to overcome the Saussurian dichotomy. This was because they were not able to handle the temporal correlation of discrete linguistic states without ignoring the intermediate states in their entirety. It was within this conceptual approach that the American structuralist Bloomfield affirmed in 1933 that it was not possible to study language change except by analysing related languages or comparing different states of a language.

And it is here that the theoretical corpus of historical sociolinguistics offers a more convincing alternative for the analysis of language change. As we stated earlier, sociolinguistic theory sets out from the premise that language is an ordered system which is heterogeneous and variable. This premise, which accepts the coexistence of heterogeneity and variability in a language, on the synchronic level, constituted a new way of looking at historical linguistics, thus enabling us to obtain a diachronic perspective from within a synchronic study.

Work by Labov (1966), and later by Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968), demonstrated it was possible to carry out diachronic research within a synchronic framework. By looking at intergenerational differences among a given sample it would be possible to see, on the one hand, the existence of variability –and thus of language change– and, on the other, the direction of this change based on the variability produced by the oldest generation compared

to the youngest. These new theories have given rise to the concepts, on the one hand, of apparent time, which involves the synchronic approach but combined with the use of data from different social strata and age groups. Here, we first have to take into account the fact that the linguistic system learned in adolescence remains more or less stable for the rest of one's life. Were this not so, we could not usefully study the differing use of variables made by people aged 60, 40 or 20, for example, to be able to determine the variation that was used, is used and (probably) will be used. On the other hand, the other possibility is to study change in real time, that is, the diachronic study of language change by means of analysis of the speech of individuals at different times in history.

In this way, variation and language change become two parallel phenomena, since one and the other concept constitute two sides of the same linguistic process. Even so, it is important to note that where we see variation we cannot always assume that this is linguistic change, given that within synchronic variation we have to distinguish between stable and unstable variables. On the other hand, whenever we find language change it is because we have language variation. It is only in this second instance, then, that we can argue that variation – in this case unstable variation– means linguistic change is in progress.

Basing itself on these principles of language change, historical sociolinguistics is able to approach the language of the past from two perspectives. If it assumes a synchronic perspective, it will observe variation as a possible model of language change, previously checking on whether the variables are stable or not. If, on the other hand, it approaches the variation from a diachronic point of view, both variation and change can be investigated thanks to the unstable variables recorded in the different synchronic sections. Developing this line of thinking, Labov concluded that the analysis of the current linguistic situation could serve to explain what was the situation in the past –and vice versa, the linguistic situation in the past could help us to understand the current one.

3.2 Analysis of the written code

The majority of studies on the sociolinguistics of variation use oral speech data. With this limitation, linguistic analysis has always to be synchronic (even taking advantage of apparent-time data), since if we wish to go back in time, we cannot go further back than the 19th century, when we start to get phonetic recording. Thus, another possibility is the methodology offered by historical sociolinguistics, which offers the alternative of working with historical documentation, that is, with written texts. This option involves the inconvenience of having to vary some of the analytical co-ordinates as compared to oral texts but, on the other hand, we will enjoy the advantage of being able to shift our gaze to any stage in the history of the language.

Within this dichotomy, between oral and written language, we have to state, as an essential axiom, that language is basically oral production. Once this principle is accepted, therefore, we have to recognise the inconvenience of studying language at this level alone, since (as we have said) oral language can only be studied by means of synchronic studies of more or less contemporary language. Conscious, then, of this disjunction between the two codes, we also have to bear in mind the nature of written language. As Martí (1989: 21) puts it: "I do not think it is right not to accept that written production, irrespective of its type, simply by virtue of being written, involves a special tension, out of which comes production which may be more or less close to oral expression".

The diaphasic difference, then, between written and spoken language is obvious, but we should add that in written production it is perfectly possible to distinguish greater or lesser levels of formality depending on document type, such that lesser formality will tend bring us close to the spoken language. Having said that, we should recognise that in any analysis of historical linguistics we will have to remember that written expression has certain features that we need to be aware of when drawing conclusions from a piece of research. These can be summarised succinctly under two headings:

a) Firstly, while observation of frequency of occurrence of given variants is central to the research methodology for sociolinguistic investigation of speech data, we should be aware that written data, in contrast, tends to reduce considerably the amount or frequency of

variants that occur. That is, to put a brake on their occurrence, as a result, obviously enough, of the conservative characteristics that the written medium assumes. Thus, we can conclude that written language presents a certain resistance to the variationist computation in any study.

b) Secondly, written language always poses a problem for the dating of any linguistic phenomenon, since noting the appearance of a given form in documents does not mean that it can be situated chronologically by the date of the document in question –even if we know that this is the first known occurrence– because, owing to the conservative nature of the written medium, already discussed above, any linguistic form appearing in writing can be assumed to have been in use for some time in the spoken language.

3.3 Social factors

As we stated earlier, the analytical paradigm used by variation sociolinguistics in synchronic studies of oral language is entirely applicable to historical sociolinguistic studies. Remember that the factors influencing variability have always been the same and, as such, they are available to the methodology of this discipline, too. That having been said, it is also important to note that geographic, temporal, social and contextual factors have not always been exploited to the same extent in the few diachronic sociolinguistic studies that have seen the light until now.

3.3.1 The diatopic factor

The distinctive origin of the historical document can help us to analyse this diatopic factor. In reality, what we are interested in here is the origin of the author of the document in question –since it will be a dated document from a particular place; but where the author is from outside the area, with dialectal features not typical of the place the document was produced, analysis of this factor will not be possible. By the same token, the analysis could be valid if the author were from outside the area but shared the dialect features of the place where the document was produced.

This diatopic factor is addressed in Montoya (1986), a study of the different variables recorded in the trial transcripts from the texts from three districts in the Valencian Land: the Comtat d'Elda, the Vall de Novelda and the Horta d'Oriola. These are three counties situated on a north-south axis, thus enabling Montoya to trace Spanish (language) influence spreading northwards, for example in the verbal form *ha-hi* or the lexical elements *llevar* and *sacar*. On the other hand, when the innovations come from the main trunk of development, these expand from north to south, as happened with the preposition *ab>en* and the imperfect subjunctive ending *às>ara*. We find this same factor dealt with in Mas (1994) in the variational analysis of ecclesiastic documents of the modern era in Elx (Elche) compared with the same type of documents from Barcelona –the hypothetical medieval reference point– and from Valencia– the source of linguistic influence from the 16th century onward. In this way, we can observe the way in which the monophonemic variant of the prepalatal voiceless fricative phoneme /ʃ/ –represented graphically by an "x"– occurs with a higher probability of realisation in the documentation from Barcelona, at 0.703, followed by the Elx data, at 0.674, while the Valencia material scores 0.170.

3.3.2 The diachronic factor

For obvious reasons, historical documents are the best suited for the analysis of this factor. Even so, however, we need to be clear that the conditions for analysis of this factor are determined by the diachronic nature of the documents under study –that is to say, the date of each document will only give us an analysis in real time. Put another way, the possibility of an analysis in apparent time will only be possible if we find historical documentation written by various authors from different generations.

This factor is also considered in the two publications mentioned in the previous section. Firstly, Montoya (1986) divides documentation, mainly dating from the seventeenth century, into two halves: that which predates 1650 and that which post-dates it. In this wise Montoya is able to corroborate the appearance in the second half of the century of the variant *sacar* and the increase of the variant *llevar* over time. Secondly, Mas (1994) similarly analyses this factor using church documents that go from 1565 to 1740. He divides this (longer) period into three stages: the first extends from 1565, when the documentation began on the instance of the Council of Trent, until 1609, with the expulsion of the moors and the possible influx of many Spanish clergy. The second stage extends to 1707, a fateful year in Valencian history, and the third extends to 1740, the last year in which church documentation was

written in Catalan. With the data divided into these three stages, we can see the evolution of certain variants such as the grapheme "x" for the prepalatal voiceless fricative, as it gives way over time to the competing grapheme variant "ix" as a result of the influence of Valencian, thus, it evolves from 0.934 to 0.510 and finally 0.063. A similar instance is the reinforced form of the definite article *el*, which increases on a continuum which goes from an initial 0.345, to 0.470 and finally to 0.681.

3.3.3 *The diastratic factor*

This factor has not yet been studied in any analysis of historical sociolinguistics. The nature of the documents, on the one hand, and the few studies carried out in this conceptual area, on the other, have impeded the study of the factor in this way. Yet analysis would be perfectly possible, for example using documents written by a given writer and drawing conclusions on the basis of the specific genre in question, or by comparing the output from writers from different social classes, such as clerks, notaries (commissioners for oaths) and chancellors.

3.3.4 *The diaphasic factor*

Unlike the preceding factor, this is far and away the element that has received the most research attention in this discipline. This as a result of the ease with which different styles and registers can be distinguished in historical written data. Right at the beginnings of this branch of sociolinguistics, Romaine (1982) already distinguished verse and prose text types, and within the latter she further distinguished national legal prose, local legal prose, literary prose and letter writing. Subsequently, Gimeno (1985), working with medieval documents from an epistolary in Alacant and one in Oriola, distinguished two types of legal documents, the originals and the transferred texts, as well as two types of contextual styles: chancery and municipal. In Catalan, Miralles (1980) defined the following styles in a study of the municipal archives of Montuiri and the legal proceedings: the legal-chancery style, epistolary-chancery style, narrative style, and colloquial style. Similarly working with legal proceedings but this time in Oriola and Elda in the Modern period, Montoya (1986) distinguishes four styles: style A is found in texts which contain the written declarations of the participants, style B relates to these same declarations collected by scribes, style C relates to judges' summing up and, lastly, style D relates to the stylised parts of the document. The separating out of registers in this way is also found in Mas (1994), a study of ecclesiastic documents from Elx which are then compared with the text of the Elx Mystery play, with the Council's administrative documents and with the colloquial style recorded in court proceedings. Lastly, there is Mas (2002), a study on stylistic variation in the different versions of the *consueta* of the *Festa d'Elx* / The Elx Mystery play. These styles are: firstly, the words in verse sung during the Assumption; secondly, the text of the scenographic details and, thirdly, the text in spontaneous style that we find in the historical appendices included in certain copies of the *consueta*.

4. Conclusions

Sociolinguistics provides us with a process of tracking linguistic change in the form of historical sociolinguistics, that is to say, the variationist analysis of written documents in diachronic terms. It is true that this area of sociolinguistics lacks a theoretical basis of its own, and exists as a subdivision of variationism, one might almost say an appendix. Notwithstanding, and despite the methodological drawbacks that rightly or wrongly have been assigned to it, plus the scant attention it has received from the scientific community, the efficacy of this model is not any the less for all that. It arose as a viable alternative within historical linguistics, for the study and description of language change in progress, and as an analytical process it has not been surpassed or replaced as yet by any other.

This state of affairs, together with the lack of publication on its theory and methodology to date, and the severe criticism from some sectors in the face of the innovations involved in introducing a new empirical model in the methodology of variationism –and which at times have even come from within sociolinguistics itself (Mas and Montoya, 2003), could well be the cause behind the slight repercussion that this area has had –both in the field of linguistic endeavour generally, and that of Catalan linguistics in particular. In our case, for example, we only have a tiny group at the University of Alacant –formed by B. Montoya and present writer. Under the tutelage of Francisco Gimeno, one of the precursors of historical sociolinguistics in the Spanish state, they have undertaken the few studies that we currently have for our language.

In summary: as formulated by Labov, historical sociolinguistics, with all its drawbacks, enables to understand contemporary language through the diachronic study of the language of earlier times. Also, it enables to reconstruct earlier stages of the language by drawing on analysis of the language of today. In short, then, it provides us with one more string to our bow, an approach to linguistic research from coordinates that are still totally applicable within a theoretical and epistemological framework based on the combined analysis of linguistic and social factors.

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