# History and historical linguistics: independence and connections

Patrick Honeybone, University of Edinburgh
patrick.honeybone@ed.ac.uk

## Basic assumptions and controversial connections

(1)   What are linguists interested in and what are historians interested in?
- some simple (and controversial?) answers:
o   linguistics studies languages (and/or *language*)
o   history studies people

(2)   So... isn't linguistics interested in people...?
- hmmmm: how about the distinction between *linguistics* and *sociolinguistics*
o   is such a distinction reasonable? (isn't sociolinguistics part of linguistics?)
o   is it the same as the distinction between *competence* and *performance*?
   o   ... between *language* and the *use of language*?
o   so... is there a difference between *historical linguistics* and *historical sociolinguistics*...?

(3)   Some connections between history and historical linguistics are obvious:
- languages live in people, so if people's lives or thoughts change this might affect their language
o   *obvious*...?! this depends on your definition of 'language'
o   'language' = the knowledge in a native speaker's mind
o   'language' = the set of utterances that are produced by a speech community
- most historical evidence comes from records that people wrote using their languages

---

(4)   An argument *could* be made that history and historical linguistics are very closely linked in their methodologies, and so should be seriously linked in discussion of how they should proceed, or of how they should conceive of themselves
- this would rely on us accepting a controversial set of assumptions concerning the philosophy of linguistics and the philosophy of history

(4a) linguistics: the cognitive orientation (eg, Chomsky, 1965)
- language exists in the minds of speakers

(4b) history: the idealist position (eg, Collingwood, 1946)
- the aim of history is to rethink the thoughts of people from the past

**Connection**: uniformitarianism – the human mind has been the same throughout history, so the nature of language and the nature of thought have always been the same

**Difference**: 'language' is part of the subconscious mind; 'thoughts' are part of the conscious mind

**Methodological connection**: both history and historical linguistics have to work with written records, which are imperfect reflections of language and of thought, in order to reconstruct the **true subject matter** of the two disciplines: (a) previous states of knowledge, and (b) previous thoughts

But historical sociolinguists would probably disagree, as would non-idealist historians...
- and this assumes that historical linguistics is interested in synchronics, not diachronics...
o   I probably disagree, too: most of what I discuss below focuses on explaining **change** between previous (linguistic) states of knowledge

---

## Point 1: independence

There are some aspects of language change where the study of general history is **irrelevant**. Endogenous changes, arising from within linguistic systems themselves, are not tied to the sociohistorical context of the people who innovate them.

(5)  Example: 'Grimm's Law' / 'the Germanic Consonant Shift'

| A. Greek | Latin | Sanskrit | Gothic | OE | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *pater* | *pater* | *pita* | *fadar* | *fæder* | 'father' |
| *treis* | *tres* | *trayas* | *þreis* | *þri* | 'three' |
| *(he-)katon* | *centum* | *satam* | *hund* | *hund* | 'hundred' |
| *deka* | *decem* | *dasa* | *taihun* | *teon* | 'ten' |
| *genuomi* | *gutus* | *jos-* | *kiusan* | *ceosan* | 'taste, test, choose' |
| *phero* | *fero* | *bharami* | *baira* | *beoru* | 'I carry' |
| *(e-)theka* | *feci* | *(a-)dham* | *(ga-)deþs* | *dæd* | 'put/do; deed' |
| *kheuo* | *fundo* | *hotar* | *giutan* | *geotan* | 'pour' |

(6)  'Grimm's Law' is often interpreted as follows:

| GL$_1$ | GL$_2$ | GL$_3$ |
|---|---|---|
| p > f | b > p | bh > b |
| t > θ | d > t | dh > d |
| k > x | g > k | gh > g |

(7)  We can be sure that some change of this sort occurred (although the precise details are still subject to dispute), and the only *reasons* for the changes are phonology-internal: aspiration, 'gap-filling', loss of structure, *etc*.
- similar changes have happened spontaneously in other languages
o  **GL$_1$**: Somali, Liverpool English, Tiberian Hebrew, Tuscan Italian, Spanish
- such changes are some of the set of possible endogenous changes, which may be innovated by speakers of a language if their phonology (or, more widely, language) has the right prerequisites

(8)  The task of the historical linguist here is to try and pin down and explain what are possible endogenous changes, and what are "impossible changes"
- eg, p > f but f ≯ p
- the lives and thoughts of the speakers involved are irrelevant

---

## Point 2: a connection where historical (socio)linguistics can benefit

There are some aspects of language change which can **only** be explained if we understand the context of the people who spoke the languages that changed. Exogenous changes, due to various types of contact been speakers of different linguistic systems, need general history to explain the lives of the speakers involved.

(9)  Example: the introduction of the voicing contrast in English fricatives

With some simplification...
- there was **only one underlying series** of fricatives in Old English
- there were **two underlying series** of fricatives in Middle English

2

(10) This means that, for example:

| | | | | | | | | + ModE | *fan* : *van* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| OE *fisc* | /fiʃ/ | ..... | ME *fish* | /fiʃ/ | 'fish' | | | | |
| OE *lufu* | /lufu/ | > | ME *loue* | /luvə/ | 'love' | | | | /fan/ : /van/ |

OE /f/      >      ME /f : v/

OE /s/      >      ME /s : z/

OE /θ/      >      ME /θ : ð/

(11) Part of the development of the contrast required voiced fricatives to appear word-initially
- this was introduced in part thanks to the impact on English of **Norman French**, imported in 1066
  o many words with initial [z] and, especially, [v] were **borrowed**
    - **v**eal, **v**ictory, **v**ery
    - **z**eal, **z**odiac

We can only understand such exogenously-caused events if we understand the lives of the people involved, the types of relationships that existed between the speakers of the languages involved and the types of bilingualism that developed.

> It is not clear to me that vast amounts of new work is needed in this area, as it is generally well understood by linguists (and historians?)

## Point 3: a connection where historical (socio)linguistics can benefit

New Dialect Formation, thanks to speakers of 'old dialects' mixing in areas where no established dialect exists, can only be understood if we know the demographics of the speakers, requiring substantial collaboration between linguists and historians.

(12) Example: New Zealand English is (according to, eg, Trudgill 2004) not the plantation of a single pre-existing dialect of English, nor is it much influenced by Maori; rather:
- speakers of a number of dialects came together in an area where there was not a well established dialect and there was no clear prestige relation between these dialects
  o the **numbers of speakers of the different dialects** involved is one crucial feature of the model
- the effect of later generations of speakers in creating the new dialect is also crucial: they effect a type of change which involves dialect mixture
- Trudgill (and others) argue for of a process of **koineisation**, where a **new** 'compromise' mixed dialect, or koine, is created thanks to the levelling out of the variation found in the original dialects, and the selection of particular variants to form a stable new dialect by settlers' children

(13) a central claim of this work is that the direction of new-dialect formation is essentially predictable, given enough information about the **demographics** of the speakers involved
- the number of speakers of different dialects determines how frequently the later generations will hear particular features

(14) *h*-retention: it is perhaps surprising that NZE does not feature *h*-dropping, as it was the norm in vernacular dialects of 19th-century in London and SE England, the areas where the largest single groups of NZ settlers came from
- Trudgill (2004, 116) claims, however, that this can be understood because "the Irish, Scottish, Northumbrian, West Country, East Anglian and other English dialects with H retention were in the majority in the original dialect mixture..., and therefore this feature has won out in modern New Zealand English at the expense of the minority south-eastern form"

(15) Another example: Liverpool English formed in a New Dialect Formation situation during the 19th century, thanks to the inmigration of vast numbers of people to Liverpool, due to a number of causes (employment, famine, travel opportunities)

- the origins of many of the features of Liverpool English (eg, TH-stopping, the SQUARE/NURSE merger) can only be understood if we know the proportions of the dialects spoken in Liverpool in the relevant period, for this, we need historical data

(16) several 'ethnic' groups were represented in Liverpool at this time, as recorded in census returns
- the remainder of the population came principally from parts of England

| Year | population | % Irish-born | % Welsh-born | % Scots-born | |
|------|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---|
| **1841** | 286,656 | 17.3 | ?? | ?? | total in-migrants = 44.9% |
| **1851** | 375,955 | 22.3 | 4.9 | 3.6 | |
| **1861** | 443,938 | 18.9 | 4.7 | 4.0 | total in-migrants = 49% |
| **1871** | 493,405 | 15.6 | 4.3 | 4.1 | |
| **1881** | 552,508 | 12.8 | 3.9 | 3.7 | |
| **1891** | 517,980 | 9.1 | 3.4 | 2.9 | |

from (Munro & Sim 2001), Neal (1988), Knowles (1973); see Honeybone (2007)

> More work is certainly needed in this area: there is still much to be done on interpreting the relationships that existed between speakers of different dialects in New Dialect Formation situations
> - as Joe Salmons pointed out at the workshop, the knowledge of social relations gained through the linguistic study of New-Dialect Formation can/should be of interest to historians in helping to understand the societies involved, so this is also a connection where history can benefit

## Point 4: a connection where history can benefit

As languages change, so the documents written in earlier stages of languages become uninterpretable. History needs historical linguistics to understand what was really meant in the records that it works with.

(17) Example: the meaning of words can change in seemingly capricious ways
- *nice* has changed its meaning substantially through the history of English (OED, 2008)

- 'foolish, silly, simple; ignorant'
- o 1375 *William of Palerne* "Ich am vn-wis & wonderliche nyce"

- 'Shy, coy, (affectedly) modest; reserved'
- o 1400 *Bevis of Hampton* "Maydens at her first weddyng, Wel nyse al þe first nyht."

- 'wanton, dissolute, lascivious'
- o 1587 *Sidney & Golding* "Ouercome with nyce pleasures and fond vanities"

- 'finely dressed, elegant'
- o 1532-4 *Mylner of Abynton* "The wenche she was full proper and nyce"

- 'scrupulous, punctilious'
- o 1785 *Cowper* "Men too were nice in honor in those days, And judg'd offenders well."

- 'Fastidious, fussy, difficult to please, esp. with regard to food or cleanliness'
- o 1836 *Shaw* "I can eat anything, and am not very nice about the cleanliness."

- 'refined, cultured; associated with polite society'
- o 1918 *Cather* "Heavy field work'll spoil that girl. She'll lose all her nice ways and get rough ones."

- 'agreeable, pleasant, satisfactory; attractive'
- o 1985 *N.Y. Times* "He was impeccably dressed in a suit and a very nice tie."

(18) Another example: the meaning of words can change subtly but importantly...
- From Honeybone, D. & Honeybone, M. (to appear) *The Correspondence of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society 1710-1761*.
o Dr Th. Rutherforth of Cambridge c. 1740 "... I suppose that *natural philosophy* and <u>polite literature</u> are the branches of **science** that you chiefly <u>improve</u>..."
o = "I assume that the fields of **knowledge** that you <u>work in</u> are chiefly *science* and <u>philology</u>"

| It may be that more work is needed here, although the issues are well known. |
| --- |

## Point 5: a connection where (pre)history can benefit

Historical reconstructive linguistics can help to fill in the blanks in our understanding of the (pre)history of peoples. Even where no records exist, we can still reconstruct languages and language splits with some degree of certainty. Such evidence can help us understand the people and population splits involved.

(19) Example: the Baltic and Slavic families of languages share many phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic similarities and correspondences
- most agree that this demonstrates the existence of a Balto-Slavic branch of Indo-European, and this shows that the groups of people who were the ancestors of the Baltic and Slavic peoples were once one people

(20) A controversial example: Vennemann (eg, 2003) has argued that a large proportion of the previously unexplained etymologies of Germanic words can be explained as deriving from Semitic, as can other features of Germanic
- he argues from this that the Carthaginians (who spoke Punic, a Semitic language), colonised the North Sea region, where the Germanic peoples were living, between the 6th and 3rd centuries BC

| It seems that more work could be needed in this area... |
| --- |

## References

Chomsky, N. (1965) *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Collingwood, R.G. (1946) *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Honeybone, D. & Honeybone, M. (to appear) *The Correspondence of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society 1710-1761*. Lincoln: Lincoln Record Society.

Honeybone, P. (2007) 'New-dialect formation in nineteenth century Liverpool: a brief history of Scouse.' In Grant, A. & Grey, C. (eds) *The Mersey Sound: Liverpool's Language, People and Places*. Liverpool: Open House Press, 106-140.

Knowles, G. (1973) *Scouse, the Urban Dialect of Liverpool*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Leeds.

Munro, A & Sim, D. (2001) *The Merseyside Scots: a Study of an Expatriate Community*. Birkenhead: Liver Press.

Neal, F. (1988) *Sectarian Violence: the Liverpool Experience, 1819-1914, an Aspect of Anglo-Irish History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Oxford English Dictionary (2008) http://www.oed.com/. Accessed August 2008.

Trudgill, P. (2004) *New-Dialect Formation: the Inevitability of Colonial Englishes*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Vennemann, T. (2003) *Europa Vasconica - Europa Semitica*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.