

## CHAPTER I

*Setting the scene: letters, standards and  
 historical sociolinguistics*

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**I. Fishing for the ‘standard’ language?**

I open this introductory chapter with a well-worn simile, one used frequently, but in most cases without the user thinking of its more tangible implications: Deciding to focus on letter corpora as data sources for plotting the history of a language is *like opening up a can of worms*. We are confronted with a squirming mass of problems. An angler, of course, is used to this, and s/he simply chooses one fat worm for her/his hook to catch the plump fish lurking in the shallows.

The simile of the can of worms can easily be converted into a cognitive metaphor that projects the field of angling onto the field of historical linguists plotting the history of language A. In this case, the worms take on a dual function. On the one hand, just one worm can be used to catch the plump fish of the history of language A, but on the other hand, there are so many other worms that they could potentially catch a whole shoal of histories, thus presenting problems for the historical linguist. Linguists who are only interested in catching one fish might be well advised to push all the worms back into the can except for the one chosen and then be satisfied with the fish thrashing at the end of the line. Metaphorically speaking, this is what has happened in plotting the histories of most languages; the plump fish lurking in the shallows a moment ago is in effect the standard variety of the language concerned. As Mattheier (2010: 353–4) non-metaphorically maintains,

[t]he concept of a ‘national language history’ has dominated the view of what historical linguistics should be concerned with in relation to virtually all European languages, and continues to do so today. The theoretical starting point of this view – which at the very least needs to be seriously questioned – is that the ‘standard’ language is the genuine teleological goal of any historical language development. And the path trodden by a speech community in developing a standard language, a unifying language, a literary language, at the same time represents the central content of language history. Most German language histories, but also the histories of other languages, are constructed along these lines.

So it might be easier and much less of a mess to close the lid on the can and ignore all the other worms squirming inside, since those worms potentially attract other fish, or, in terms of the metaphor, other alternative histories of language A.

However, the metaphor falters at precisely this point. Typical anglers are not satisfied with just one fish, but seem perfectly happy to sit by the bank of a river or a reservoir or a disused canal to see how many fish they can bag in a day's angling. They might release some of the fish into the water and carry the rest back home, or they might even release them all. The can of worms will be reopened several times, and other worms will be extracted from the squirming mass and put onto the hook. The contributors to the present volume, for which the editors have chosen the title *Letter Writing and Language Change*, are not simply historical linguists; they are also sociolinguists, and as such they resemble typical anglers in that they are prepared to reopen the can again and again to take a closer look at the 'problems' and to avoid 'the catastrophic implications for the following period of history of such formulae as "one people, hence one language" or even "one language, hence one state"' (Mattheier 2010: 354).

The particular can of worms with which we are concerned in this book is letter corpora illuminating 'language history from below and from above', terms that will need some explanation in Section 3. And although the collection is devoted to English letter corpora, in the spirit of Klaus Mattheier, we have included a chapter that justifies his allusion to the fact that 'the histories of other languages' – in this instance German – consist of the same very restrictive use of the can of worms.

## 2. Sorting out the worms: three fundamental problems

Before we open the sluice-gates into the weir for our historical sociolinguists to fish for other histories of English (or, in the case of Chapter 3, German), we need to discuss the nature of the worms in their cans. To do this I will temporarily leave the extended metaphor, while asking the reader to bear it in mind when reading. Three major problems confront historical sociolinguists: (1) the tendency to transfer their attention from the nature of human language in general to the linguistic constructions and sociolinguistic functions of individual languages; (2) the implication underlying the assumption that 'the "standard" language is the genuine teleological goal of any historical language development' (an assumption rejected by Mattheier), i.e. that a language can be looked at as a homogeneous system; and (3) the nature of the sparse data available to all historical linguists, whether sociolinguistically inclined or not. I shall look briefly in the remainder of this section at each of these large 'worms' in turn before looking at other smaller but no less significant worms waiting in the epistological data corpora to be examined.

### 2.1 *Human language vs. a language*

The first problem (or worm) that historical sociolinguists need to grapple with is the perennial one of defining the countable term 'language' itself, since it is only when we have an adequate way of conceptualising *a* language rather than human language in general that we can even begin to talk about 'a history' or 'histories' of

English (or, in Chapter 3, of German). In Watts (2011: 119–20) I attempt to provide a socio-cognitive account of why linguists prefer to talk about ‘languages’ rather than human language. Human language as such can be understood as a cognitive ability ‘to acquire, store and . . . use a set of abstract constructions’ (p. 118) in social interaction with others. The set is systematic and human beings can ‘manipulate [it] as and when the need arises’. I equate this ability with what Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968) refer to as ‘orderly differentiation’. The ability is social as well as cognitive because it ‘enables us to use the variety of language we have acquired to mediate our physical, social and mental worlds, and the worlds of others’, and ‘to enlarge and expand our own individual mental worlds in infinite ways’ (Watts 2011: 118). For the purposes to which we put our own individual varieties of human language, i.e. dealing with the everyday contingencies of social life with others, we do not need to give a name to the variety that each of us shares within a community. Why, then, do we still do this?

From a cognitive point of view, the shift from human language to *a* language is a perfectly natural move to make, and again it is a social move. This shift is defined in Watts (2011: 120) as follows:

It is clear that we all need to function as ‘ratified’ members of a social group, and to be ratified we are constrained to acquire the linguistic constructions that others use. In point of fact, we cannot do otherwise. The step from language to *a* language involves the projection of a blend from one mental space to another, in which the constructions we use are mapped onto a cognitive frame that then becomes embedded in our long-term memory (see chap. 1 and Fauconnier and Turner 2002). The frame is then projected as ‘the property’ of the group: its ‘language’. So the shift from human language to *a* language is essentially the construction of a metaphorical blend in the minds of the members participating in the group’s activities.

If individuals refuse to make this blend, they will find it hard to become members. So it is hardly surprising that we accept the validity of the existence of ‘English’ or ‘German’ or ‘Tzeltal’ or whatever. The problem enters when the social group or groups begin to develop communal stories (or what I call ‘myths’) to ‘explain, justify and ratify’ the existence of those languages.

### *2.2 The myth of the homogeneous language*

This brings us to the second general problem (or worm): the homogeneity myth. Having socio-cognitively constructed *a* language, the next move is an effort to define the variety of language that is legitimate for a community as large as, say, the nation-state, i.e. to construct *the* language. As we are by now well aware (see, e.g., Milroy and Milroy 2012; Joseph 1987; Grillo 1989; Crowley [1989] 2003; Bex and Watts 1999), this step is the ideological construction of a discourse archive in which the variability, changeability and creativity of a language – its heterogeneity – is not only challenged but even openly denied.

When people complain that dialect X is no longer spoken *purely*, or when they excuse themselves for not being able to speak language Y *perfectly*, or when they bemoan the fact that younger speakers are constantly introducing strange words and constructions into language Z, they are driven by a belief in the homogeneity myth. The belief is in ‘a language of total uniformity in both written and oral form, a language of stasis’, ‘the cultural carrier of history, education, religion, politics, law and literature’ (Watts 2011: 116). It is a universal myth, not one that is just applicable to English (see Mattheier 2010), and it has a very long history indeed. But despite its long history, it only came truly into its own in Europe from the early eighteenth century on, and flourished throughout the long nineteenth century as one of the major driving forces in discursively constructing the concept of the nation-state. Its effects are still with us today, and one of the aims of historical sociolinguistics has been to deconstruct that myth and the ideologies that it has spawned.

Foremost among those ideologies is that of the ‘standard language’, which discursively constructs a specific variety of a language as the sole acceptable, legitimate and, above all, written form of language for the nation-state. The nineteenth-century use of the term ‘standard language’ is interchangeable with terms such as ‘the national language’, ‘the language of the educated’, ‘the language of refinement’, the *Kultursprache*, and so on (cf. Crowley 2003; Grillo 1989; Mugglestone 1995; Watts 2011; Hackert 2012). For the purposes of social interaction, it was meant to be a *horizontal* unifying factor in the state across geographical regions and a *vertical* unifying factor through social strata. As such, it was conceptualised as unchanging (even though it was perfectly clear to nineteenth-century linguists that language did change through time) and invariable (even though it became clear throughout the twentieth century that there were wide variations in style, register and contextual use).

The idea of the standard language acting as a unifying factor across social classes, however, was no more than a cynical justification for promoting the standard and delegitimising dialectal varieties and reducing their use (if not actually stamping them out). It thus became a perfect means for socially discriminating between the ‘refined’ or ‘polite’ sector of society and the ‘vulgar’ rest (see Chapter 4 by Fairman). In addition, it was used as a perfect argument to support the conviction that all other varieties of English were not English at all, but merely ‘debased’, ‘corrupt’ versions of English, or not even exemplars of human language. ‘The English language’ is best conceptualised as a set of linguistic varieties clustered around a number of prototypical linguistic constructions that could, for want of a better term, be labelled ‘English’, some more closely than others, such that there is considerable doubt in linguists’ minds as to where the boundaries lie. In fact, the boundaries turn out to be very fuzzy. For example, is Tok Pisin a variety of English? Is Old English really English? When does a variety of English become ‘not-English’?

As sociolinguists, the contributors to this collection of chapters on letter corpora agree with the need to consider heterogeneity and variability seriously and to resist the temptations of the homogeneity myth and the ideology of the standard. But

caution is needed at this point! This does not mean that standard English, however we define it and to whichever region of the world in which English is acquired as a first language we assign it, is not also a bona fide variety of English. Of course it is, and as such it has its own kinds of heterogeneity and variability (see Trudgill 1999). From the point of view of historical linguists, and in particular historical sociolinguists, the contributors also agree, as Trudgill and Watts (2002) argue, that it is time to consider alternative histories of 'English', to vary our perspectives in order to avoid the danger of the 'funnel view' of the history of English in which the end point is the standard (see Watts 2011: ch. 12).<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3 *The problem of the data*

Problem number 3 is a major stumbling block for both historical linguists and historical sociolinguists. Before the end of the last decade of the nineteenth century, our only source of data was written, either in the form of manuscripts, handwritten notes, protocols and memos, glosses inserted into longer manuscripts, and so on, or from the end of the fifteenth century on in the form of printed texts. Data sources providing evidence of how people used language in everyday social interaction are thus scarce to non-existent (see Schreier, Chapter 14; Schneider 2002). If we are interested in unearthing written material from which we can piece together alternative histories of English, i.e. histories of non-standard varieties of English and ways in which the vast majority of the population, rather than a small 'educated' and socially privileged elite, used those varieties, our sources are very restricted indeed. Speakers of non-standard varieties of English were almost inevitably to be found among the social classes below the gentry, and even though a considerable number of the gentry and a few among the aristocracy are known to have used non-standard varieties in everyday social interaction, their written communication from the middle of the eighteenth century on was almost invariably modelled on the emerging standard variety.

We therefore need to gain access to written sources which can be shown to emanate from the lower sectors of the social spectrum. Two such sources are diaries and letter collections, genres which one might reasonably expect to yield traces of non-standard varieties of English or, before the beginnings of the standardisation process at the end of the sixteenth century, at least some indication of how other sectors of society than the privileged gentry and aristocracy used their own varieties of English. We are fortunate in having a number of excellent corpora of personal correspondence to work from (see the reference section), so we are not short of letters to examine. What we discover, however, is not always what we expected to find, as I shall discuss in Section 4. Before opening that specific can of worms,

<sup>1</sup> In Watts and Trudgill (2002) we use the term 'tunnel view' rather than 'funnel view'. The differences are minimal, but I now prefer the term 'funnel view', which can be used much more easily as a metaphor to illustrate the wrongheadedness of focusing the history of English (and by extension of other languages) uniquely on the standard language (see Watts 2011, 2012b, 2012c).

however, I need to outline some of the general principles on which this collection of chapters on letter writing has been compiled.

### 3. Sociolinguistics and historical linguistics

Sociolinguistic approaches to the historical study of languages appear to offer a natural extension of two early forms of sociolinguistics, *interactional sociolinguistics* and *variationist sociolinguistics*, both of which date back to the 1960s. It is thus all the more surprising that, apart from Romaine's pioneering work (Romaine 1982; cf. the discussion in Chapter 2 by Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre), historical sociolinguistics only really began in earnest in the 1990s, heralded in by Jim Milroy's *Linguistic Variation and Change: On the Historical Sociolinguistics of English* (1992).

The principal focus of *interactional sociolinguistics*, initiated by the work of Gumperz and Hymes (see, e.g., Gumperz and Hymes 1964, 1972; Gumperz 1982; Hymes 1964, 1974), was the nature of the language used by individuals in their social interactions with others, i.e. in their attempts to become ratified members of social and cultural groups. The genesis of interest here was located, on the one hand, in new forms of sociological theorising that emerged from around the end of the 1950s on inspired by Garfinkel (1967) and Goffman (1959) as a reaction to the top-down theorising of Talcott-Parsons, and on the other hand, in a revival of anthropological interest in the significance of language in cultural systems (Hymes 1974). Major foci of interactional sociolinguistics were the various ways in which individuals negotiated meanings through contextualising language in interaction, cross-cultural differences in language use and the conceptualisation of language use in social interactions as a form of performance.<sup>2</sup>

*Variationist sociolinguistics* positions itself as the study of language use in variable forms of social structure. It stresses the fact that variation in the use of linguistic constructions can be correlated with social factors such as social class, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, life-style, demographic development, etc., and it looks for a set of objective methodologies to make statements about language variability within different speech communities. Like interactional sociolinguistics, it can also be seen as a reaction against the generative linguistic focus on the nature of linguistic competence and the exclusion of social factors from the study of language constructions. Since variationist sociolinguistics has also concerned itself with plotting ongoing changes in the linguistic behaviour of speech communities, one would have expected a much greater involvement by sociolinguists in the issues of language history at an earlier stage in its development, particularly since one of the seminal texts in present-day historical linguistics, 'Empirical foundations for a theory of language change' by Uriel Weinreich, William Labov and Marvin Herzog

<sup>2</sup> The term 'performance', which is currently enjoying a revival of interest in present-day sociolinguistic research, should not be understood in a Chomskyan sense, i.e. as the realisation of linguistic competence in the actual use of language, but rather as a presentation of the self and a construction of community identity using language and other semiotic systems.



(1968), specifically maps out possible new approaches to the historical study of language based on notions such as variation, heterogeneity and change.

There are significant possible reasons why sociolinguistic approaches to language histories took so long to catch on. In variationist sociolinguistics, sophisticated quantitative methods have been developed to test the significance of the results of wide-scale research projects, the interconnections between the variations noted and the reliability and representativity of the data themselves. To apply quantitative methods, it is necessary to have a large enough database, which only controlled research methodologies have so far been able to provide. It is difficult, though not impossible, to apply such methodologies to the relative paucity of data available from earlier periods in the history of a language, particularly since earlier than the last decade of the nineteenth century only written data were available. However, even here new corpora,<sup>3</sup> painstakingly assembled and tagged, have begun to open up opportunities for using the familiar methods of variationist sociolinguistics. The difficulty in using interactional sociolinguistics on historical data is that the sociolinguist needs to observe performance and social interaction as it emerges,<sup>4</sup> which is clearly not possible with written data from the past. However, close observation of ethnographic material in the recent past and the present offers possibilities for projecting this knowledge back into the past in interpreting the data available.

By the 1990s it had become clear that language varieties change for a complex network of reasons, some internal, i.e. as a result of the possibilities for variation in social practice offered by all linguistic systems (Labov 1994), some external, i.e. as a result of changing interconnections between forms of speaking and social and cultural factors (Labov 2001), and some cognitive, i.e. as a result of the individual and small group needs to use language to perform acts of identity and to exercise influence over others in emergent ongoing social interaction (see Labov 2010).

In 1992 Jim Milroy used the insights of extensive research carried out with Lesley Milroy on language variation in and around Belfast to argue for the significance of social network theory in tracing out what had become known as the *actuation problem*, i.e. the problem of how innovative variation is taken up and diffused within and between speech communities. Since Milroy's ground-breaking book, it has become abundantly clear that both interactional sociolinguistics and variationist sociolinguistics have exerted an influence on the use of sociolinguistic theory and methodology in investigations into the histories of languages and language varieties.

<sup>3</sup> For a list of data corpora in English which includes the major significant corpora in English historical linguistics, see the VARIENG homepage at the University of Helsinki ([www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/corpusfinder/index.html](http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/corpusfinder/index.html)). Of particular significance here are the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC)* from 1403 to 1681 and the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Extension (CEECE)* from 1653 to 1800.

<sup>4</sup> This, of course, is hardly ever possible in dealing with modern data, since the database is almost always a recording of what occurred, thus presenting further difficulties of transcription, interpretation and the ever-present observer's paradox (see Labov 1972: 209; 'The aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation').

Eckert's work (Eckert 1989, 2000; Eckert and Rickford 2001; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003) introduces the important concept of *communities of practice* into both variationist and interactional sociolinguistics, thus paving the way for a possible convergence of these two approaches. For example, Eckert now uses the term 'Third Wave Variation Studies', which she defines on her website ([www.stanford.edu/~eckert/thirdwave.html](http://www.stanford.edu/~eckert/thirdwave.html)) as a 'focus on the social meaning of variables'. She goes on to state the following:

[The Third Wave of Variation Studies] views styles, rather than variables, as directly associated with identity categories, and explores the contributions of variables to styles. In so doing, it departs from the dialect-based approach of the first two waves, and views variables as located in layered communities. Since it takes social meaning as primary, it examines not just variables that are of prior interest to linguists (e.g. changes in progress) but any linguistic material that serves a social/stylistic purpose. And in shifting the focus from dialects to styles, it shifts the focus from speaker categories to the construction of personae.

'Styles', as a means of constructing identities, are determined by sociolinguistic variables in the construction of personae and identities. As Eckert points out, this shifts the focus in sociolinguistics away from dialects (or linguistic varieties) to the means used by individual speakers in emergent interaction (and performance) to stylise themselves in different ways. In addition, the comment that 'variables [are] located in layered communities' makes another focus-shift from speech communities to communities of practice.

The chapters in this volume make use of insights from all three 'Waves of Variation Studies', and many of them, either implicitly or explicitly, look at specific aspects of the language of the letter writers in an effort to discover how those writers position themselves and how they attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to construct social identities. The letters are largely from people in the lower strata of social structure, either to addressees of the same social status or of a higher status. In this sense the question of the use of 'standard' and/or 'non-standard' varieties of English is in the forefront of our interest. I also wish to make it clear that, while some chapters make use of Labov's categories of 'change from above' and 'change from below', others refer to 'language histories from below'. Labov meant his terms to be understood as change that occurs in a speech community unconsciously ('from below' the level of consciousness) or consciously ('from above' the level of consciousness). The term 'language histories from below' emanates from the work associated with the Historical Sociolinguistics Network (HiSoN), first formed in 2005. The guiding principle behind the concept is incorporated in Mattheier's words of caution that the 'standard' language should not be 'the genuine teleological goal of any historical language development', and that a focus on the language varieties of the underprivileged sections of society, which for centuries has constituted the vast mass of the overall population in virtually all European states, would lead to 'other' potential histories. Independent of HiSoN, this was also the guiding



principle behind the collection of essays published in Watts and Trudgill (2002), as it is the guiding principle behind the present collection.

Looking at ‘letters from below’, however, does not preclude looking at letters written before the movement to standardise English got really underway in the eighteenth century, and two of the chapters (Chapter 2 by Hernandez-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre and Chapter 7 by Bergs) deal with what is probably the most well-known letter collection of all in English, the Paston letters (1422–1509). Similarly, it does not preclude a quick look at ‘language history from above’, which is the focus of Chapter 9 by Fitzmaurice, who focuses her attention on letters written by aristocratic members of the Kit-Cat Club in the early eighteenth century. But looking at letters from below and above the social surface of what was termed ‘refined’ society at the turn of the nineteenth century, or letters that preceded the movement toward standard English, reveals rather more worms in the can than might have been anticipated, and it is those worms which form the focus of the following section.

#### 4. Unanticipated worms

The first problematic worm in the can concerns the need to make a distinction between text and manuscript. As Fairman (Chapter 4) rightly points out, there is a world of difference between studying the original handwritten letter (or a facsimile thereof) and studying a printed version of it, even given the attempt in the printed version to represent false starts, unusual spellings, idiosyncratic use of punctuation, and so on.<sup>5</sup> This is not because handwriting reveals character traits. Who knows, perhaps it does? What the original handwriting reveals is whether the letter writer, given the fact that s/he did not make use of an amanuensis, had received some schooling in the art of writing. In some of the chapters, the handwriting gives strong evidence that this may indeed have been the case. In addition, as Fairman (Chapter 4) notes, ‘minutiae can be sites of special linguistic interest’, which in itself justifies the use of original handwriting. The problem, of course, is that it is less time-consuming and thus less expensive to base corpora on printed materials. As Fairman argues, we need to focus our attention as sociolinguists on manuscript material in addition to – perhaps rather than – print material, particularly in view of the fact that the basis for electronic corpora is often print material, i.e. on grammatically schooled data.

Some of the handwriting in the letters analysed in Barbara Allen’s chapter (Chapter 11) indicates a type of schooling that stressed the visual aesthetic quality of the writing itself, whether or not the writer introduces into the letter different spelling variants, influences from her/his dialect and a lack of appreciation for the conventions of letter writing as a genre. In individual cases we have almost no way

<sup>5</sup> A classic example of the kind of interpretative mistakes that can be made by focusing on the text rather than on the manuscript is provided by researchers of *Beowulf* (Kiernan 1997; Watts 2011: ch. 2).

of knowing what amount of schooling any of the letter writers may have acquired, but we do seem to have evidence that schooling of some sort or another may have been more widespread than is generally thought. At the very least – and assuming the lack of an amanuensis, of course – those who were taught to write were also taught to produce writing of an aesthetically high standard.<sup>6</sup>

In like manner, it is also striking how some of the pauper letters display evidence of an awareness of letter-writing conventions, e.g. how to address the addressee appropriately, how to finish off the letter, how to format the address at the top of the letter, and so on. Letter-writing appears to have been a self-reflexive activity, a form of performance in which the writer had an opportunity to present her/himself in a particular way. In performing a positive ‘self’, writers who were able to present themselves effectively may have increased their chances of receiving monetary relief and avoiding the dismal fate of internment in a workhouse, and there is evidence that letter writers, for this very reason, often enlisted the help of others to write for them (see Chapter 4 by Fairman and Chapter 10 by Laitinen). Certain linguistic constructions can thus be taken to index forms of stylisation in which specific social roles are enacted. One such type of stylisation involves the production of linguistic constructions that lie outside the everyday linguistic competence of the letter writer, in particular constructions that may have represented the writer’s conceptualisation of the ‘standard’ language. Frequently, such attempts to perform the standard miss the mark, but are, for this very reason, important indications for ways in which non-standard speakers perceived the social significance of a variety of English that was regularly projected by those in power in the first half of the nineteenth century as the only ‘legitimate’ form of language.

There is a difficulty here, however. If we expect letters to social institutions and persons of ‘authority’ from socially discriminated writers to contain rich evidence for non-standard varieties of the language, we are likely to be disappointed. Although non-standard constructions are relatively common in ‘letters from below’, they only give us hints with respect to those varieties and are not likely to present us with extensive examples of how people wrote in their own dialect. This is even the case in personal family letters (see Chapter 14 by Daniel Schreier) or letters by immigrants writing home to family and friends (see Chapter 12 by Lukas Pietsch and Chapter 3 by Stephan Elspaß). The constraints imposed on letter writers to use the standard are far more revealing of what non-standard speakers imagine to be the standard than of their own dialects. In post-colonial communities of English speakers, notably in North America, efforts towards homogenising ‘new standards’ may not correspond at all with what speakers write in communication with others via letters, as we can see in Stefan Dollinger’s contribution to this collection in Chapter 6. As Schreier shows (Chapter 14), even in personal letters,

<sup>6</sup> My own memories of primary school education in the England of the early 1950s confirms the significance of the ‘handwriting-must-be-conventionally-and-classically-elegant’ school of thought. Children were regularly given gold stars to stick into their exercise books if they met the strict ‘calligraphic’ levels set up by their teachers. I also remember how disappointed I was that I never received any gold stars for writing.