The linguistic biography of Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800): aims, methods, and approaches

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In a linguistic biography I explore the diverse functions of identity, social networks, print and manuscript practices, and the developments in 18th-century English in an individual’s language practices over her lifespan. Drawing from a corpus of Elizabeth Montagu's (1718-1800) personal correspondence and published essays I analyse her written idiolect in private and public interaction between the 1730s and the 1780s, from her youth to her accomplishments as a literary hostess and a Shakespeare critic. The linguistic analysis can be divided into the partly overlapping categories of stance, orthography, and syntax: I am particularly interested in linguistics constructions of identity by means of intertextuality and verbal irony, the social aspects of spelling variation, and the influence of the normative tradition. In this paper I discuss the linguistic analysis that serves as the basis of this work and the concept of a linguistic biography especially in relation to historical sociolinguistics, and consider themes that biographical research and sociohistorical study of idiolect share (see Johnstone 2009, Tieken 2011, Evans 2013 for present-day and historical studies of idiolect, Bucholtz & Hall 2005 for language and identity, Merrill & West 2009 for biographical research).


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