Approaches to ‘variation’ and ‘change’ in historical sociolinguistic research

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The indexical nature of the social meaning of inter- and intra-speaker variation in the sociolinguistic behaviour of speakers has been chronologically approached from three analytic perspectives, waves or generations (Eckert 2012). In this epistemological evolution since the beginning of sociolinguistics, there has clearly been a shift from deterministic and system-oriented approaches (language as a collective system: langue) to more social constructionist and speaker-oriented ones (language as individual performance: parole). During the 1960s, the mechanistically-based paradigm of the First Generation assumed that speech and intra-speaker variation are ‘determined’ by the major macrosociological categories of class, gender, age and ethnicity, providing us with general patterns in their aggregate data. In the 1980s, the ethnographic-based paradigm of the Second Generation set out that speech and the stylistic repertoire are ‘determined’ by social configurations (rather than categories) of multiplex relationships within the social networks of speakers and their mobility, providing us with a more locally-defined perspective on the dynamics of variation and sociolinguistic behaviour at large. More recently, a Third Generation of sociolinguists underlines the individuality of speakers by making use of a constructionist approach based on speaker’s agency, rhetorical stance and performativity, where variation is understood not simply as reflecting, but also as constructing social meaning. The focus has thus shifted from speaker categories and configurations to the construction and projection of personae.

In this paper we aim at contributing to the methodology of historical sociolinguistic research by reviewing some applications of each of these three methodological approaches to interpret variation and change in documents from the past. Attention will be given to the ways of coping with the ‘bad data problem’ developed by each of these three analytic perspectives. Finally, their respective tenets and proposals will be illustrated with relevant examples of results from research mainly focused on early English correspondence.

Keywords: determinism, linguistic variation, social-constructionism.