Historical Sociolinguistics: from the Wave Model to the "Third Wave" and Beyond

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Historical sociolinguistics may be a relative newcomer to the field of sociolinguistics but many of the issues it addresses are not. In my talk I will argue for both continuity and innovation. In her pioneering work, Socio-historical linguistics (1982), Romaine discusses the variationist paradigm and Bailey’s wave model based on implicational scales. Since the 19th century the wave model has been contrasted with the tree model. Both of them continue to inform discussions of the diffusion and transmission of linguistic change (e.g. Labov 2007).

Focusing on the wave metaphor, I will examine the extent to which we can produce real-time empirical support for linguistic changes in contact situations that took place hundreds of years ago. To connect linguistic change to patterns of migration in the distant past I will follow the principle of informational maximalism, and use various resources "to gain a maximum of information from a maximum of potential sources: different times and different places – and of different regional and social dialects, different contexts, different styles, different topics, and so on” (Janda & Joseph 2003: 37; Nevalainen 2011). My case studies come from late medieval and early modern English and Scots with points of comparison provided by work on 20th-century Helsinki Finnish and 21st-century London English.

In maximizing potential sources, the perspective shifts from the diachronic macro-level to regions and communities that assign different meanings to linguistic choices, ending up with individuals and their meaning making in communicative interaction. At this finer level of granularity, historical sociolinguists are riding on the "third wave" of variationist sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012).

Although this use of complementary methods and perspectives may not solve the "actuation problem" famously outlined in Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968), it highlights the contact-based circumstances instrumental in the perpetual unfolding of language change in time and space. Informational maximalism also makes for richer diachronic comparisons across languages and language varieties, thus contributing to the foundations, empirical and theoretical, of comparative historical sociolinguistics.

References


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Keywords: