Horace Walpole and his correspondents : social network analysis in a historical context
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Chapter 7. Conclusion

On the face of it, Horace Walpole's language presents a good case for historical sociolinguistic analysis: his extensive correspondence is by far the largest collection of eighteenth-century letters that is available in published form. What is more, the collection includes the in-letters alongside the out-letters, which, though highly desirable from a historial sociolinguistic perspective, is by no means standard practice. This allows for the study of the language use of the people Walpole corresponded with, who, in other words were part of his social network at various stages of his life, in addition to studying his own usage. Historical sociolinguists are inevitably faced with the fact that they cannot influence or monitor the amount of data they have available for analysis but have to make do with whatever has come down to us. In the light of this so-called *bad data* problem, the Walpole correspondence with its scope and size therefore showed a lot of promise. It would enable us, for instance, to study the possibility of linguistic influence occurring within this particular social network, one of the central research questions in the present study, as well as to study the question of what determines the kind of patterned variation that is expected to surface, and that did surface in the language use of the network, similar to any modern sociolinguistic study carried out today.

Actual practice, however, proved different. Even what could be considered high-frequency morpho-syntactic data showed up in, at times, disppointingly small numbers. The occurrence of *you was* vs. *you were* which only temporarily showed up in the history of the developing standard language as part of the process of the ongoing development of *you* as a singular pronoun provided very few tokens; the variation in the occurrence of *be* and *have* with mutative intransitive verbs that was evidence of another ongoing change in

progress and the effects of the normative grammarians' attempts to prevent the levelling of strong verb forms, which that would have given us *write*, *wrote*, *wrote* rather than *write*, *wrote*, *written* showed only a little more promise in the case studies that were undertaken. Another problem that presented itself was the amount of background data available that was needed to be able to interpret usage patterns that evolved from the analysis in as informed a way as possible. As in all sociolinguistic analysis, modern as well as historical, social embedding of the data encountered is essential in order to be able to interpret it adequately.

These were issues I came up with in the course of the present study, and I have tried to deal with them by incorporating them into a single methodological approach in order to make the best use of the data I found. With this approach I sought to remedy the realities of working with large gaps in available material, caused by dealing with specific subcorpora, and the concomittant problems of (over)rigorous interpretation. The problem of small numbers and bad data is a reality of research in historical sociolinguistics which cannot be ignored, but I would like to propose that the more precise our models for mapping background knowledge to a network analysis are, the less likely it becomes that misinterpretation of whatever sparse facts we have will cloud the predictions and results. As I have argued in the above chapters, this may be accomplished, for instance, through combining current sociolinguistic methods such as the classical network strength model that have been adapted for historical research with linguistically based methods such as involvement analysis: as was demonstrated in chapter 6, predictions largely overlap between the models. Furthermore, the network analyses presented in this study (see chapter 4) may be taken as examples of oversimplification of complex material for the sake of brevity and clarity of the argument, which is

sometimes unavoidable, though not without consequences. Since *good* historical language data unfortunately cannot be created anew, the only way to avoid methodological and interpretational hazards is to keep working on methods better suited to the type of data we have available to us. With my study, I have aimed to present a significant contribution to this.

In chapter 3 I dealt with the language of two highly educated members of the upper classes and the question of to what extent normative grammar rules, in particular those presented in the most authoritative grammar of the period, Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), were reflected by upper-class usage. The methodological problem confronted with here was the fact that even a very big corpus produced relatively small amounts of data of a high-frequency linguistic feature. This calls for particular caution in using earlier studies that have dealt with the same feature on the basis of much smaller corpora. As for the feature in question as well as the two informants studied, it turned out that the two men different significantly in their usage, which could be accounted for by the interesting phenomenon that Horace Mann, who was in effect an expat during most of his life, had not kept abreast of the changes the language had undergone during his absence. Contrary to Horace Walpole, Mann was simply not part of the current linguistic climate of increasing prescriptivism. The analysis, moreover, confirmed that upper-class usage may very well have informed the linguistic model presented in Lowth's grammar.

To be able to study more complicated network clusters and test the functionality of SNA in a historical context, I first provided in chapter 4 a detailed account of how historical social network analysis has evolved over the past twenty years. This comprehensive overview showed that past studies, though offering important contributions to a new and developing field in their

own right, tended to be primarily descriptive in nature. My analyses presented in the subsequent chapters heavily drew on this earlier work, though they were aimed to offer a more rigorous methodological approach, which at the same time brought to light the problems involved in taking such an approach. For the linguistic analyses presented in chapters 5 and 6, I focused on different sections of the Walpole correspondence: the Walpole Family Network, consisting of Walpole and some of his Family members in chapter 5; and the Eton Network Cluster, consisting of Thomas Ashton, Richard West and Thomas Gray, in chapter 6.

Each of these analyses highlighted a different problem in applying the traditional model of social network analysis to the material selected. Thus, chapter 5 demonstrated that analysing a family network is particularly problematical given the approach taken, since emotional relationships prove more difficult to describe in the light of the available background information about the informants than functional relationships. Interestingly, it was found that even coalition formation could occur within a family network, which had its expected effect on the correspondents' language use during the time this situation was in process. The analysis presented in this chapter showed specific ways in which social network analysis needed to be adapted for historical sociolinguistic analysis: asymmetrical relationships, as discussed in the theoretical framework in chapter 4 and the case study in chapter 6, should also be reckoned with as existing in relation to age, generation as well as gender: linguistic influence may occur in such relationships, but primarily in a single direction. Such factors are of particular importance when dealing with family members in a network, and will have to be taken into account whenever such networks are studied.

The methodological problem that emerged from the analysis presented in chapter 6 concerned the bad data problem in its fullest form. The subcorpora identified to be able to take different snapshots of the network cluster analysed across time both underrepresented and overrepresented particular informants as far as their usage was concerned. As a result, the specific problem to be addressed was having to deal with unbalanced subsections of the corpus, a common phenomenon in this type of historical research. Other problems were the risk of overinterpreting results in the light of the data available, and the question of the stylistic and linguistic homogeneity of letters as a text type. The latter point became clear when I argued for adopting a linguistic involvement model of analysis alongside that of social network analysis. Letters serve different purposes, ranging from merely keeping a relationship alive to providing narrative accounts of the author's travels. The resulting language use can be very different indeed. In chapter 6 I also suggested a refined model for the historical application of SNA, combining contextual and linguistic data into one model.

The language of the upper classes is not usually considered to be of interest by modern sociolinguists. My study of the language of Sir Horace Walpole has proved the contrary, despite the paucity of data that emerged. In corresponding with many members of his social network throughout his long life Walpole has left us with a huge amount of material, which, thanks to the editorial efforts of W.S. Lewis and his fellow editors (see chapter 2), could be analysed in as much detail and against as much biographical background as the material itself allowed. In doing so I have made use of research models that have been exploited in earlier studies within the field, but that proved defective in not being geared enough to the demands of rigorous interpretative analysis. This type of analysis is required to deal with the kind of

methodological problems that came to light when I encountered sometimes disappointingly small amounts of data that emerged even from such as large collection of letters as the Horace Walpole correspondence. My contribution to the field of historical sociolinguistics consists in combining different analytic models in such a way as to try and confront the amounts of data in a consistently methodological way, and also in pointing the way to the treasure-trove of data that is now digitally available in the digital edition of HWC.

To return to the research questions that were posed at the outset of this study (see chapter 1), conclusions may be presented to the following questions:

1. *Can the claim that upper-class language usage is uniformly standard be maintained?*

Neither Horace Walpole's own usage nor that of the people he corresponded with was uniform as such nor uniformly standard (see chapter 3, 4 and 6). It might be argued that variation was the rule rather than the exception even though for some of the features concerned fewer variable forms were found than was expected. This is after all only to be expected given the fact that the standard language was as yet still in the process of developing. It turned out that some of the informants whose language I analysed, notably Walpole's namesake Horace Mann, were outside the developing linguistic climate, which was acquiring a more prescriptive outlook on usage at the time. Being in this case a peripheral member of the current linguistic society as such precluded any form of linguistic influence taking place from one man on the other and vice versa. The two Horaces clearly each represent a very different case, the one being, as an expat, typically conservative in his usage while the other, given his position in the social network to which he belonged, being more typically at the forefront of linguistic change.

2. *How can variation between the language use of the correspondents in the Walpole collection be explained in a social network context?*

3. *How useful is social network analysis as a model for historical research, and how can the model be improved?*

Within the language use of members of Walpole's social network we find important differences in usage, the majority of which could be accounted for by taking a micro-level approach and focusing on each informant from the perspective of their place in the network cluster analysed vis-à-vis that of the cluster's central network member, Horace Walpole himself. The downside of a micro-level analysis is that the number of tokens in the linguistic analysis generally is much lower than when a larger language sample is taken from a larger group of correspondents. I identified this as a mismatch between models and data in chapter 6.

As for the ultimate question of the usefulness of social network analysis as a model for historical analysis, I would argue that it certainly is, given the specific improvements I have suggested above, based on methodological shortcomings of earlier work in the field, along with the application of it along other more linguistically oriented models such as that which analyses a writer's linguistic involvement. The linguistic involvement model can never be used in isolation though, because of the linguistic and extra-linguistic influences which complicate interpretation of the results, such as: language changes in progress; the influence of genre and text-type on the register and its linguistic make-up; as well as the possibility of circular reasoning. When using a classic NSS in a historical perspective, it was argued that sociological parameters such as gender, age and rank may also have an influence, either consciously or unconsciously. In the suggestions for further

research in chapter 6 I have therefore argued for a combination model in which sociometric data are combined with cognitive data and linguistic data to the best possible effect. While ultimately deriving from Milroy (1987), the idea for such a combined model originated with a suggestion made by Fitzmaurice (2000a), and furthermore owes much to Bax (2000) and Sairio (2005). Applying the combination model as rigorously as possible in the light of the available data, what is often claimed to be *bad data* from a modern sociolinguistic perspective need not be so bad after all.