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Introduction: Sociolinguistic perspectives on historical multilingualism in Europe

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1 The multilingual turn in historical sociolinguistics¹

Historical multilingualism and language contact effects have by no means been absent from historical-sociolinguistic research since its emergence in the 1980s. Early publications include Schendl and Wright (2011), who addressed code-switching in historical English, and who already observed and described what have come to be called multilingual practices in more recent publications (Pahta et al. 2017). Wright (2000) drew attention to the multiple origins of standard English, thus challenging the monolingual assumptions of earlier language histories. This approach eventually resulted in Wright (2020). Recent years have seen an increased interest in multilingualism and language contact (Hüning et al. 2012; Peersman et al. 2015; Rutten et al. 2017; Rutten and Vosters 2019; Bennett and Cattaneo 2022; Franceschini et al. 2023; Pavlenko 2023; see Krogull 2025 for a recent overview). As with previous paradigms in historical sociolinguistics, a major concern is the applicability of modern approaches to historical contexts. Studies such as Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2017), Elspaß (2005), and Rutten and van der Wal (2014) explored the ways in which Labovian first wave models can be applied to large, sociolinguistically stratified corpora. Work by Bax (2000) and Sairio (2009) sought to develop second-wave social networks for modelling variation and change, while studies such as Kopaczkyk and Jucker (2013) as well as Conde-Silvestre (2016, 2019) reconstructed

¹ This special issue has emerged from the thematic panel *New empirical perspectives on historical multilingualism* at the 12th Historical Sociolinguistics Network Conference (Brussels, May 31–2 June 2023), organised by the two guest editors, and authors of this introduction. We would like to thank all contributors to the panel, to this issue, or both. Special thanks go to Jeroen Darquennes for his much-appreciated input and editorial support while preparing this issue.

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third-wave communities of practice, with stylistic variation being addressed in publications such as Hernández-Campoy and García-Vidal (2018), and Schiegg (2022). In the present issue of *Sociolinguistica*, as in many of the publications mentioned here, an important focal point is the extent to which modern theories can be applied to historical contexts, or more specifically: In what sense can modern approaches to multilingualism and language contact (as e.g. displayed in Darquennes, Salmons, and Vandenbussche 2019, 2025) be adopted by historical sociolinguistics in order to work towards a unified framework in this discipline?

This issue brings together six chronologically ordered papers about underexplored cases of historical multilingualism in postmedieval western Europe, where monolingual histories have been dominant since the emergence of language history as an academic discipline against the background of nineteenth-century nation-building and nationalism (see e.g. Milroy 2000; Watts 2011; Rutten 2019). Gijsbert Rutten and Brenda Assendelft discuss the Dutch-French contact situation in the Netherlands from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In particular, they focus on loanwords from French and the extent to which crucial aspects from Poplack and Dion's (2012) theory of borrowing, dealing with the distribution and integration of borrowings, can be applied to historical textual materials. Jan Niklas Heinrich zooms in on the early modern town of Friedrichstadt in northern Germany, where protestant migrants from the Netherlands sought refuge. The town was characterised by a complex multilingual make-up, including Low and High German alongside Dutch as well Frisian and Danish. Heinrich aims to describe and analyse the language shift patterns, from Dutch to German, particularly in the religious domain. Andreas Krogull and Gijsbert Rutten are interested in the same historical context of French in the Netherlands as addressed by Rutten and Assendelft but take a different approach. They are interested in the mixing of Dutch and French in private letters, i.e. in multilingual practices, focussing specifically on letters where the two languages are interwoven in such a way that it cannot be determined which one is the dominant language of the discourse. The fourth paper, authored by John Bellamy, shifts attention to another layer of multilingual situations, viz. processes of standardisation and the concomitant metalinguistic reflections. He analyses orthographic proposals for Luxembourgish and Galician from the nineteenth century against the background of contact with the dominant languages, French and Spanish, while taking a language-ideological perspective by reconstructing historical hierarchies and hybridities. Stian Hårstad addresses the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of the Jewish minority in Norway, whose language practices can only indirectly be reconstructed on the basis of scarcely available historical data, such as ego-documents. Hårstad is particularly interested in the shift from Yiddish to Norwegian in the first half of the twentieth century. Kristine Horner, finally, focusses on Luxembourg and the historical language policy

with respect to the officialisation of Luxembourgish. From a language-ideological perspective, she specifically explores the function of strategic ambiguity in historical documents. This set of papers thus brings together work in the sociology of language, especially language shift (Heinrich, Hårstad), code-switching and multilingual practices (Krogull and Rutten), borrowing and loanword integration (Rutten and Assendelft), and language policy and language ideology (Bellamy, Horner). As such, it represents a variety of topics and approaches found in the relevant research traditions.

2 The many layers of historical multilingualism

We initially asked the contributing authors to reflect on methodological challenges in studying historical multilingualism. The authors indeed address various methodological issues, from which we aim to distil some common threads further below. Their contributions, however, also display a great diversity of approaches, theories, problems and topics and, thus, foreground the complex and multi-faceted nature of historical multilingualism as a research area. The empirical, methodological and theoretical diversity covered by the papers in this issue, as mentioned in the previous section, ranges from borrowing and code-switching, to language choice and language shift, to language policy and language ideologies. The contributors also apply a number of different approaches, from quantitative corpus work based on sizeable datasets, to qualitative discourse analysis of what is purposefully not said. The themes and topics identified in this introductory paper emerge as fundamental elements, or layers, of a more encompassing, holistic approach to historical multilingualism, for which, we believe, the time is yet to come.

One layer of historical multilingualism and historical contact situations deals with research on contact-induced variation and change. Rutten and Assendelft, in particular, investigate the influence of French on Dutch, more specifically lexical borrowing, in a large diachronic corpus. The same layer also comprises research into linguistic aspects of code-switching and multilingual practices, as demonstrated in the paper by Krogull and Rutten. Yet another aspect relates to spelling systems and orthographic standardisation in multilingual contexts, as investigated by Bellamy. Those contact-induced aspects of language variation and change, however, can often only be distinguished theoretically from the next layer, which addresses the social context of language use.

Two central phenomena associated with this second layer are language choice and language shift, commonly examined within or across social domains. Rutten and Assendelft show that the use of French loanwords is domain-specific in a mul-

lingual community. Multilingual practices in the private domain, apart from their hybrid linguistic form, may be seen as a social communicative phenomenon, as argued by Krogull and Rutten. In the tradition of the sociology of language, the papers by Heinrich and Hårstad, respectively, seek to reconstruct language shift on the basis of the preserved written record, even if it is sparse and fragmentary. In both studies, metacommentaries prove useful, which brings us to the next layer.

This third layer is concerned with language ideologies and metalinguistic reflections on (societal) multilingualism, as shown most explicitly in the papers by Bellamy and Horner on orthographic debates and language policy documents, respectively. However, language ideologies are also the backbone of the studies by Rutten and Assendelft, and by Krogull and Rutten, in this case the alleged *frenchification* in the Netherlands. In Heinrich's paper, Dutch acquired ideological significance in Friedrichstadt's religious domain of Friedrichstadt, which can partially explain the slow shift to High German.

3 Layers and the total linguistic fact

These different layers of historical multilingualism and contact situations bring to mind the *total linguistic fact* as proposed by Silverstein (1985; see also Woolard 2008, 2021). In this view, any linguistic description or theory should attend to three analytical levels, which together make up the linguistic fact as a unit of analysis: the linguistic form itself, the use of this form in specific social contexts, and human reflection on the form and its contexts of use. We argue here that a full understanding of historical multilingualism and historical contact situations depends on a similar conceptualisation of these phenomena in terms of three analytical levels: in each concrete historical context characterised by individual and societal multilingualism and thus by contact, we can distinguish the three Silversteinian levels, which correspond to the layers addressed in the previous section. Contact-induced variation and change matches the first level of the linguistic form itself. Language choice and language shift operate at a contextual, domain-specific level and parallel the social context of linguistic forms. Issues of metalanguage, language policy and language ideology resonate the level of human reflection on forms in context.

The studies in this special issue demonstrate that the Silversteinian approach in terms of three analytical levels can and should be applied to each of the layers of historical multilingual contexts: an analysis of isolated forms is enriched by taking into account the social context as well as human reflection on these two, such as the broader language-ideological situation (Kristiansen and Coupland 2011; Kristiansen and Grondelaers 2013). In this issue, we see how the paper by Rutten and Assen-

delft departs from a metalinguistic angle, viz. the supposed influence of French on historical Dutch, often ideologically characterised in terms of *frenchification*, and from there shifts to an analysis of forms in context. Similarly, issues of language choice and shift are often analysed at the level of social domains and situated practices, corresponding to the level of the social context. The papers by Hårstad and Heinrich demonstrate the interaction of historical ideologies with language shift, while Krogull and Rutten discuss the continuum from contact-induced change to language choice at the textual level, zooming in on specific linguistic phenomena as well as on their gradual transition to a more social-contextual phenomenon. The papers by Bellamy and Horner are primarily situated at the metalevel of human reflection, while both situate language ideologies in specific social contexts. Bellamy also includes the level of specific linguistic phenomena in his discussion of the orthographic debates about Luxembourgish and Galician.

We believe that analyses of historical multilingualism and language contact settings ideally encompass the various layers discernible in a specific historical time and space and analyse each layer from three different angles corresponding to the levels of Silverstein (1985). Thus, a more general framework for historical-sociolinguistic research of multilingualism and language contact should tackle the various layers from these three perspectives that make up the total linguistic fact.

4 The rare and the invisible, and good data

Another common thread across most papers in this issue is a less restrictive approach to the ubiquitous ‘bad data problem’ in historical sociolinguistics (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017; see also Labov 1994). For instance, Hårstad faces the challenge of very limited written evidence by Norwegian Jews, from which direct information on their language practices could be extracted. Instead, he explores the potential of indirect information gathered from retrospective biographical accounts, or life stories. Rather than inferior or surrogate data, he treats these sources as *different* kind of data, which can help reconstruct the historical sociology of language. In a similar vein as Hårstad, Heinrich seeks to reconstruct the complex multilingual situation in Friedrichstadt, for which he draws on a variety of scattered archival sources. Focussing on metalinguistic comments in reports, minutes, but also memoirs and letters, he is able to trace language shifts across social domains, and across different subdomains of religious life.

Krogull and Rutten, on the other hand, depart from a more substantial dataset of private letters, exploiting the wealth of family correspondence kept in Dutch archives. This enables them to identify and investigate a low-frequent yet rela-

tively widespread phenomenon of hybrid, mixed-language practices that might have remained obscure in analyses of less systematic or comprehensive collections of texts. At the level of metalinguistic discourse, Horner discusses the concept of strategic ambiguity in Luxembourg's language policies. Her paper examines those aspects that were intentionally silenced or rendered vague and invisible, as well as the motivations behind such policy strategies. Although implicit at the textual level, such analyses offer a window into the ideological and discursive dimensions of historical multilingualism.

In refreshing ways, these papers turn around the bad data problem, arguing and demonstrating that it can be worked around in multiple manners. Complementing, or perhaps compensating, the scarcity of actual empirical data can be achieved, for instance, by gathering as much relevant contextual information as possible, or by comparing cases with other multilingual settings in the past. We can also explicitly ask what is not being said or written, intentionally or not, and simply try to get hold of as much data as we can, following the principle of 'informational maximalism' (Janda and Joseph 2003). Although methodological and analytical caveats have to be considered carefully, all these approaches may lead to highly insightful results and even meaningful generalisations.

5 Final remarks

The data issue referred to above may appear to be a practical issue in the first place, but it has theoretical and ideological ramifications. It is surprising how well-known, yet unknown some cases are. Examples are the role of French in the historical Netherlands, the existence of a multilingual Jewish community in Norway, and in fact in many European countries, and the Protestant exile communities in cities and towns such as Friedrichstadt. These may be well-known cases to many readers, but at the same time sociolinguistic research on these topics and communities is strikingly innovative, in that hardly any publications precede the studies reported on here, except for some, which are however often by the same authors. This only shows that after decades of important work on the monolingual history of European languages, the time has come to broaden the perspective and delve into the intriguing layers of historical multilingualism.

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