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Broadening the base of historical sociolinguistics

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Broadening the base of Historical Sociolinguistics

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Abstract

This issue of *Cadernos de Linguística* has an unusual but important origin story. When the COVID pandemic hit the world in March 2020, we were all suddenly confronted with a situation where we could not hold in-person conferences or even presentations, and we were left struggling to learn how to meet virtually. As readers will already know, Abralin did huge work for our field worldwide by launching an online presentation series that many of us found to be a lifeline intellectually and even socially. Our gratitude brought with it a sense of debt to Abralin, the Brazilian Linguistics Society, and its journal, *Cadernos*. In thinking about topics that might be valuable in this forum, we quickly thought of the relatively new field of historical sociolinguistics, with developments led in large part by the Historical Sociolinguistics Network, HiSoN (hison.org), and then, inspired by HiSoN, the North American Research Network in Historical Sociolinguistics, NARNiHS (narnihs.org). While the empirical scope and time depth of studies have steadily diversified, we saw an opportunity to expand the range in both respects. We hoped that a collection of papers focused on broadening the base would showcase how vibrant the research tradition now is beyond Europe in the early modern and modern periods. It also provided us as editors with a chance to stretch beyond the world of Germanic linguistics where we have all done most of our work. Another motivation for choosing this topic is that historical sociolinguistics is drawing work from a lot of early career scholars, offering a chance to bring some new voices to a broader audience.

Keywords

historical sociolinguistics; multilingualism

1. Introduction

This issue of *Cadernos de Linguística* has an unusual but important origin story. When the COVID pandemic hit the world in March 2020, we were all suddenly confronted with a situation where we could not hold in-person conferences or even presentations, and we were left struggling to learn how to meet virtually. As readers will already know, Abralin did huge work for our field worldwide by launching an online presentation series that many of us found to be a lifeline intellectually and even socially. Two of the co-editors of this project, Natvig and Salmons, were honored to have the chance to do an early presentation and then to submit to *Cadernos*. Our gratitude brought with it a sense of debt to Abralin, the Brazilian Linguistics Society, and its journal, *Cadernos*. So, when we were approached by Miguel Oliveira in April 2022 about editing a special issue, we had no real choice but to agree and were delighted to get started. We asked our friend and colleague Josh Brown to join in the fun and broaden our perspective.

In thinking about topics that might be valuable in this forum, we quickly thought of the relatively new field of historical sociolinguistics, with developments led in large part by the Historical Sociolinguistics Network, HiSoN (hison.org), and then, inspired by HiSoN, the North American Research Network in Historical Sociolinguistics, NARNiHS (narnihs.org). Following the definition of NARNiHS, historical sociolinguistics is:

the application/development of sociolinguistic theories, models, and methods for the study of historical language variation and change over time, or more broadly, the study of the interaction of language and society in historical periods and from historical perspectives.

There are various other definitions out there, but as Bergs (2005) and Lauersdorf (2021) both rightly stress, historical sociolinguistics research involves bringing together the linguistic, the historical, and the social so that such projects are inherently multidisciplinary. This mindset helps us make the necessary “move beyond a socially informed historical linguistics or a historically informed sociolinguistics” (Auer et al. 2015: 9).

Given that historical sociolinguistics is still relatively new as a field with a name, journals and handbooks, people often think of this enterprise itself as new.

Lauersdorf & Salmons (2024) document, though, how widely social considerations were brought into historical linguistic research in the 19th century and the incorporation of the historical and diachronic dynamic into pre-Labovian sociolinguistics. But like so much of contemporary linguistics, historical sociolinguistics is indebted to Weinreich et al. (1968), a work fundamentally focused on social factors and with a running header of ‘A theory of language change’, treating not just American English vowels, but Yiddish historical phonology, Czech nominal inflection and much more.

By 2022, there was already a remarkably large and rapidly growing body of historical sociolinguistics, especially on a set of European languages — specifically English, French, Spanish, German, Dutch and mostly since the Early Modern period into the 19th century. Not long after the influential work of Elspaß (2005) which created a focus on ego-documents, we saw an early handbook by Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre (2012) and a journal, the *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics*, first published in 2015.

While the empirical scope and time depth of studies have steadily diversified, we saw an opportunity to expand the range in both respects. We hoped that a collection of papers focused on broadening the base would showcase how vibrant the research tradition now is beyond Europe in the early modern and modern periods. It also provided us as editors with a chance to stretch beyond the world of Germanic linguistics where we have all done most of our work. Another motivation for choosing this topic is that historical sociolinguistics is drawing work from a lot of early career scholars, offering a chance to bring some new voices to a broader audience. While the authors all speak clearly for themselves, we might add the briefest overview of their contributions.

2. The papers

Hernández explores deep historical variation between s and z signs in Old Babylonian with data that stretched back approximately 4,000 years. The goal of the study is to test foundational assumptions within variationist perspectives on linguistic variation, particularly those that rest on uniformitarianism. Drawing on robust documentation of varieties in earlier and later time frames, (s, z) distributions are found to be dependent on both the phonological context and the geographical origin of the writer, i.e., ‘sender’. The patterns of variation found provide depth to the linguistic and sociolinguistic picture at this time depth, reaching beyond what is possible with the comparative method and reconstruction alone. The success of

this work should help us refocus beyond the ‘making the best of bad data’ perspective we still hear about so often. If Hernáiz can draw such insights from Old Babylonian data, most other settings should now look less daunting.

A half world away and millennia later, Brandão investigates variation in morphosyntactic constructions that express conditionality in Brazilian Portuguese, as represented in plays from multiple socio-political periods in Brazilian history. Specifically, the forms are analyzed within the span of time between the 1830s and 1960s, marked by various social and political trends. Changes in verbal morphology are particularly understood in the context of large-scale political and social changes beginning in the 1930s. The characters’ distinct social standings are likewise taken into account in the regression analysis of variables, reflecting a perceived relationship of a given variable and social class by the playwrights at the time. The results indicate that social class was the strongest predictor of the linguistic variables, with innovative forms more likely to be associated with the speech of lower-class characters, illustrating how language change in literary works can be socially structured and traced over time.

Finbow’s contribution to this special issue examines the emergence of South American lingua francas in the 16th and 17th centuries. Previous work posited that both forms of *Língua Geral* – Paulista and Amazônica – developed from the Tupi and Tupinambá languages as spoken by Luso-Amerindian mestizos, known as Mamluks. Finbow challenges prevailing ideas about the development of *Língua Geral* through a sociophilological analysis. Building a diachronic analysis of metalinguistic historical sources, Finbow shows that Mamluks did not have a central role in the development of *Língua Geral*. The historical source material demonstrates that contemporary writers about the language situation did not differentiate between *Língua Brasileira* and *Língua Geral*. Moreover, additional contemporary sources did not differentiate Tupi and *Língua Geral Paulista* from Tupinambá and *Língua Geral Amazônica*. Finbow contends that modern classifications of languages obscure the actual descriptions of the language from a historical perspective.

Stolberg and Dück investigate language attitudes and identity from a historical perspective. They present data from a settler variety of German spoken in the South Caucasus region and analyze contact phenomenon in a regional newspaper that was published in German in Tbilisi, Georgia in the first two decades of the 20th century. By looking especially at advertisements in the newspaper, they show how Russian lexical items are linked to language identity and attitudes, which in turn

influence multilingualism and language use among Caucasian Germans. In all, Stolberg and Dück find that the use of lexical elements from Russian in the German language newspaper do not carry heavy semantic weight. They conclude that the contact between Russian and German in these advertisements places the Caucasian Germans sociolinguistically within their historical, social, and political contexts. In short, they show how the writers of these newspaper advertisements position themselves as Caucasian Germans.

Returning to ancient writing and the Western Hemisphere, in his contribution to the issue, Mora-Marín traces the development of the generic preposition *tā* ~ *ti* in Mayan languages across time and space. Using data from Epigraphic Mayan texts and analyzing them based on social factors using statistical modeling suggests that more conservative form *tā* correlates with large residential sites based on population and non-diplomatic text-types. On the other hand, innovative *ti* corresponds more strongly to diplomatic text strategies and village-sized communities. Linguistic properties likewise affect the spread of *ti*, such that it appears to have been consolidated earlier as a complementizer compared to other functions. Finally, the temporal and geographical distribution of *ti* is argued to have uncovered the migration and political influence of Ch'olan scribes throughout the region. With this contribution and the particular use of proxies for social patterns, Mora-Marín provides new testing grounds for future research on sociohistorical variation in Mayan, and elsewhere.

In our second contribution on lingua francas, Nolan focuses on the influence that individual actors had on the development and adoption of pidgins in North Africa. Concretely, the contributions of Louis Faidherbe on Français Tirailleur are put in context of William Hodgson's work on Lingua Franca and analyzed using written documentation and letters that attest to Faidherbe's linguistic knowledge, his reflections on the properties of the language, and his understanding of it as a tool for communication between French occupiers and the indigenous population of Senegal. In sum, Nolan's article provides contextual detail that enhances our knowledge and understanding of the development of North African pidgins under French occupation.

The history of signed languages generally is rapidly developing, as shown by Supalla and Clark (2015) for American Sign Language and Power (2022) for signed languages more generally. Power and Meier present data on the formation of the early American Deaf community and the emergent American Sign Language. They draw

data from attendance registries of two events for Deaf individuals in Hartford, Connecticut in 1850 and 1854. Through their analysis of demographic information – schooling, marital status, birthplace, age, etc. – contained in these registries, they find how community building among early American Deaf individuals affected the historical development of American Sign Language. The establishment of schools for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut and New York City influenced the movement of Deaf community members to more urban areas. While geography has been shown to affect regional variation, Power and Meier show that inter-regional connections among Deaf individuals converging in urban areas inhibited regional linguistic variation. Through historical records, they convincingly show how even signed languages can be studied from a historical sociolinguistic vantage point.

3. Conclusion

This has been a slow journey, but we're happy with where it ends. Through various personal connections and with much help from Miguel and other Abralin colleagues, we built a network of contacts with people doing relevant research and have worked with them since to develop papers — sometimes from projects they already had underway but sometimes almost starting *ex nihilo*. We're grateful to them and to the many reviewers who have shaped the publication before you. Thank you all, especially Miguel and Abralin colleagues. We've learned a lot from this project and hope that you will too.

Onward!

Authors contribution

All authors were involved in the preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision – including pre- or post-publication stages.

Conflicts of interest

The authors certify that there are no conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement

The research data is contained in the manuscript.

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