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Historical linguistics in the Netherlands

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Historical linguistics in the past

In the 19th and early 20th centuries historical linguistics was central to linguistic research both nationally and internationally. This changed drastically in the second half of the 20th century, when interest in historical approaches to language declined dramatically. As a result of new theoretical approaches such as structuralism and generative linguistics (see, for example, Bakker & Dobbins 1977), research interest at that time centred on modern language. Other factors that contributed to this change were the arrival of new disciplines such as sociolinguistics, discourse studies, language acquisition and computational linguistics. This trend was not only visible in linguistic research but also in the university education curricula. For example, Gothic was abolished as part of the study of Dutch and other Germanic languages, and subsequently vanished almost completely as an academic subject in most universities, while all Humanities Faculties severely curtailed the teaching of historical linguistic topics, which were, in addition, often only offered as optional extras. Historical linguistic research was carried out by an ever shrinking group of scholars.

Historical linguistics now

The 21st century shows a clear change of direction: there is an increasing interest in questions related to historical linguistics. This revival of interest is an international phenomenon and a variety of factors can be shown to have contributed to it. In the second half of the 20th century the new methods and disciplines such as generative linguistics, discourse studies, language acquisition, sociolinguistics and computational linguistics led to a fresh understanding of grammar, language use, language variation and the social role of language and its norms. Moreover, the realization dawned that knowledge of earlier stages of a language is a prerequisite for explaining present-day language phenomena, language rules and language variation, since many phenomena have their roots in history and can only

be understood properly if we take earlier stages in the development of a language into consideration (see, for example, Van de Velde 2017). That is why in the 1990s scholars such as Cor van Bree, Jack Hoeksema, Gertjan Postma, Fred Weerman began to apply the new generative linguistic and sociolinguistic approach to these earlier stages.

Historical linguistics itself also underwent important methodological innovations. We are becoming more and more aware of the factors that play a role in language change. The importance of language contact has been known for some time (Hickey 2013; Thomason & Kaufman 1988). What is also increasingly becoming clear is the part played by various sociolinguistic factors, such as the impact of a socially dominant group, leading to ‘changes from above’, or the degree to which a speaker has mastered a second language (Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre (eds) 2012; Thomason 2001; Van Coetsem 2000). A new field of inquiry are ‘changes from below’, which take place below the level of awareness or start in the lower social classes (Elspaß 2005, Elspaß et al. 2007). Finally, it has become clear that language use, language variation and language change are not only influenced by sociolinguistic factors but also by genre and register (Biber & Conrad 2009; Whitt 2018).

Recent research has shown the existence of certain patterns. It has, for example, become clear that the degree to which a language has contact with other languages affects the complexity of that language (Roberts & Winters 2012): languages with a small number of speakers, a limited geographical spread and few contacts with neighbouring language communities, turn out to possess more complex inflectional and conjugational systems than languages with a large number of speakers, a large geographical spread and a lot of language contact (Kusters 2003; Trudgill 2012).

As a result of the increasing availability of more and larger digitized text corpora that can be subjected to quantitative research, historical linguistic research has received a significant impulse in the 21st century. Corpus research into specific Dutch language developments has resulted in a number of interesting doctoral theses, such as – the list is certainly not a complete one – Hüning (1999), Schooneboom (2000), Evers-Vermeul (2005), Coussé (2008), Van de Velde (2009), Coupé (2014). Historical sociolinguistic research and research into the ‘language history from below’ also yield promising results (e.g. Rutten & Van der Wal 2014; Rutten, Vosters & Vandenbussche 2014). In addition, Dutch linguists such as Anne Breitbarth, Olga Fischer, Ans van Kemenade, Bettelou Los, Ingrid Tieken, Arjen Versloot and Wim van der Wurff are playing an important role in historical research into other languages.

Yet, compared to other branches of linguistics, “quantitative corpus methods are still underused and often misused in historical linguistics” (Jenset &

McGillivray 2017: 2). To help remedy this Jensen and McGillivray (2017: 189–190) designed a theoretical framework for quantitative historical linguistics, covering all aspects from preparatory work, via data collection and quantitative modelling to interpretation. For the Dutch research situation, all aspects of digital texts – data, metadata, and annotation and analysis tools – exhibit impediments (Van der Sijs, to appear), though a lot of work is being done to improve the situation. What specifically are these impediments?

As to the data, the first problem is that finding texts on the internet is not straightforward, because they are located in many different places. To remedy this, some large infrastructures or portals have been constructed, such as DBNL, Delpher and Nederlab, in which a number of different text collections can be searched together. The second problem is the poor quality of the data, which makes them unreliable for research. The majority of texts (as in Delpher) are read by optical character recognition and contain a large number of recognition errors. Though correction programmes are being developed, this seems to be putting the cart before the horse. The third problem is an imbalance in the distribution of digital texts over time and over genres. DBNL, for example, mainly contains literary texts and much less non-fiction. Delpher principally contains books from the period between 1780 and 1880, and newspapers. Obviously, the number of texts that have been preserved from different periods also plays a role; the earlier the period, the fewer texts were produced or printed. In any case, many texts have not survived, and ironically enough, it is precisely the texts that were printed and read most frequently, which were most readily discarded. The imbalance has, however, been increased by digitization instead of being reduced.

The metadata, too, exhibit shortcomings. Historical linguistic research requires at least accurate information on where and when a text was produced, on its author and on the genre to which it belongs, but often only part of these metadata is available. Though many texts with accurate information on when and where they originated, can be found on heritage sites and in archives, the data is scattered over the internet and cannot be accessed via a single central portal. The last problem concerns the tools. To be able to carry out a proper analysis of a text, linguistic enrichment is essential. Lemmatization solves the problem of spelling variation, while part of speech and syntactic annotation enable precise queries. The only infrastructure which contains linguistically enriched texts is Nederlab, but the enrichment was carried out by an automated process and its quality is, for older texts, unfortunately still poor, because the tools cannot deal with spelling variation and older forms. Besides, syntactic annotation is lacking.

The digitization of older texts, in other words, leaves a lot to be desired, but the first – promising – results show that computer-aided research in historical linguistics has the future. Meanwhile we have also learned our first lessons. The most

important of these is that language changes are best investigated by a combination of qualitative and quantitative research. Explorative qualitative research as in Van der Horst (2008) or Van der Sijs (2004) shows the general outline and tendencies of language changes. This enables scholars to select relevant data and metadata for further large-scale quantitative research. This quantitative research will show the underlying patterns in large text corpora and lay bare the subtleties of language changes. It will, for example, demonstrate in which social group, linguistic context or genre a particular change began and how it subsequently spread. Not until we have a precise picture of these details, can we find a plausible explanation for the change in question.

Historical linguistics in the future

What will historical linguistics look like in the future and what insights will it bring us? To start with, there are still a large number of language changes that have only barely been looked into, let alone been investigated longitudinally; those gaps must be filled in. The next stage will be really exciting, viz. a metastudy of the different ways longitudinal changes affect each other in Dutch: how do phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic changes in the course of historical Dutch interlock? How did modern Dutch in all its facets arise from the variety of medieval dialects? What linguistic, sociolinguistic or extralinguistic factors cause changes to speed up or slow down?

These are still the old questions, to which, however, we are getting ever better and ever more detailed answers. Real innovation in historical linguistics is to be expected from cooperation with other disciplines. This has been shown by research into prehistoric language: since linguists started collaborating with archeologists and geneticists, more and more riddles about, for example, the spread of Indo-European languages have been solved (see Damgaard et al. 2018). Similar interdisciplinary work could be initiated between historical linguists and social economists, social historians and cultural historians; if we could combine knowledge about language changes with detailed information about large-scale migrations and the background of individual migrants from inside and outside the Low Countries, and add to this information data about social, cultural, religious, political, technological, economic, geographical, climatological and ecological changes, we would certainly gain new insights into the historical impact of language contact and external influences on language change.

Concluding remarks

I anticipate a prosperous future for historical linguistic research. This research is not only intellectually satisfying, but it has also important practical applications. The greater our knowledge of language change and language contact, the better we will be able to solve some modern problems, such as the best way of helping minorities integrate into our society and the role that language teaching can play in it. However, – and it is a big ‘however’, while historical linguistics has regained its old respected position in linguistic research, the same cannot yet be said about the academic curriculum. It is to be hoped that the Humanities Faculties of our universities will take urgent steps to reintroduce historical subjects into their curricula, so that students can be trained to carry out research in historical linguistics.

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