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Intra-speaker variation and descending into the real world of epistolary interaction

Unlike traditional macroscopic historical sociolinguistic studies typically focusing on the speech community as a macrocosm, the treatment of language variation and change privileging the microcosm of individuals is complementarily enriching research through within-speaker designs both at theoretical and methodological levels. Descending into the real world of epistolary interaction and immersing into intra-speaker variation is currently representing a shift in focus from the collectivity of the speech community to the individuality of specific speakers. Until recently, intra-speaker variation has not been given the same relevance as inter-speaker variation in Historical Sociolinguistics, especially when style constitutes an essential component for the non-referential indexicality of speakers' sociolinguistic behaviour in interpersonal communication. Linguistic variation and change inevitably interact with patterns of stylistic variation in complex ways, since the diaphasic range within a given language is one of the most sensitive sociolinguistic symptoms of social change and differentiation. In addition to tracing sociolinguistic patterns and tendencies of language development longitudinally across the lifespan of individuals in past speech communities, with the study of their interactional communication in letters, informants (addressers) are put under the lens of the microscope atomistically and their sociolinguistic behaviour is observed on the basis of the social (a)symmetries between addressers and addressees as well as context types.

The present session illustrates this approach through the observation of the use of the orthographic variable (TH) by male members of the Paston family longitudinally throughout their lifespan and cross-sectionally, exploring their intra-speaker variation when addressing recipients from different social ranks. The corpus used as linguistic material is the *Paston Letters*, a collection of 422 authored documents (246,353 words) written from 1425 to 1503 by different generations of this minor gentry Norfolk family. The reconstruction of the sociolinguistic diffusion of change over time, as well as of the individual (microscopic) and community (macroscopic) behaviours through the observation of their intra-speaker variation may shed light onto the resources and driving forces for sociolinguistic variability and stylistic choice by individuals. Admittedly, the most important disadvantage in using datasets of historical documents for variationist analysis is often their lack of *representativeness* and *validity*, mostly due to the fragmentary or corrupted condition of these materials.

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