

Language History ‘from Below’ – a Critical Account

Stephan Elspaß (Salzburg)

The approach of a language history ‘from below’ was inspired by various strands of historical research that had turned to social history, the ‘history of private life’ or everyday history and, particularly, to a history ‘from below’ as early as the 1970s. At the beginning of the millennium, these strands have been taken up again under the heading ‘New History from Below’ (Hitchcock 2004). At the same time, there has been a growing interest in ego-documents from common writers in history, who had so far been largely neglected by historiography (Lyons 2023). In this sense, a history of language ‘from below’ is a rather belated response of language historians to a groundbreaking trend in the social sciences in recent decades.

The extent to which this approach has been taken up in the last 20 years shows that a view ‘from below’ constituted a real desideratum for historical linguistics. An approach ‘from below’ has been taken up in numerous research articles and volumes and also a number of national and international research projects (cf. Elspaß submitted). The establishment of historical sociolinguistics as an independent branch of historical linguistics in the late 1990s has proved to be particularly beneficial for the dissemination of the language history ‘from below’ approach.

In my talk, I will attempt to give a critical interim assessment after 20 years. The extensive research on language histories ‘from below’ has undoubtedly enriched the linguistic historiography of various languages with new sources, new data, new analytical approaches and also new interpretations of language change phenomena. However, the ‘from below’ approach seems to have had relatively little influence so far on the dominant narratives of historical linguistics, which – often with little regard for text sources – either adhere to ‘grand theories’ or follow conservative models of (re)presenting national language histories. I will therefore argue that researchers adapting the ‘from below’ approach may present their results with more confidence and focus even more strongly on the consequences of their findings for explaining language change and for modelling sociolinguistic processes such as standardisation.

References

- Elspaß, Stephan. Submitted. Language History ‘from Below’. In Bridget Drinka, Terttu Nevalainen & Gijsbert Rutten (eds.), *Handbook of Historical Sociolinguistics*. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter.
- Hitchcock, Tim. 2004. A New History from Below. [Review of Thomas Sokoll, ed., *Essex Pauper Letters 1731–1837*, Oxford University Press for the British Academy, Oxford, 2001; xli + 727 pp.; £50; ISBN 0-19-72642-2.] *History Workshop Journal* 57, 294–298.
- Lyons, Martyn (Ed.). 2023. *The common writer in modern history*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.