International Journal
of
English Studies

IJES

UNIVERSITY OF MURCIA

www.um.es/engphil/ijes

Out of the Past: A Walk with Labels and Concepts, Raiders of the Lost Evidence, and a Vindication of the Role of Writing[1]

TRINIDAD GUZMÁN-GONZÁLEZ*
University of Leon

«I'm sorry to disappoint science fiction fans, but if information is preserved there is no possibility of using black holes to travel to other universes»

(Stephen Hawking, July 21, 2004)

ABSTRACT

'Language' and 'change' have always been inextricably united in the minds of those who have paid attention to the former, for whatever purpose, from whatever perspective and from whatever discipline. The general opinion is that language cannot be understood without change. In its turn, change cannot be explained without a proper understanding of the complex, multidimensional nature of language —a task which has constantly demanded the assistance of other fields of study. Among these, sociology and recent trends in evolutionary biology have introduced new and illuminating perspectives. What I intend to do in this basically review article is (a) delimit a number of concepts and keywords which very often tend to be used interchangeably; (b) pose a number of questions which to my mind would deserve consideration (often, reconsideration), with particular reference to the role of writing as a crucial dimension of the history of, among many others, English, the language which concerns me as a researcher; and (c) frame my discussion within the current theoretical models which have developed from the incorporation of the above mentioned fields to historical linguistics.

KEYWORDS: language, change, evolution, historical/diachronic sociolinguistics, sociohistorical linguistics, social network, weak ties, writing.

* ***Address for correspondence****:* Trinidad Guzmán González, Departamento de Filología Moderna, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de León, Campus de Vegazana s/n, 24071 León, Spain. E-mail: dfmtgg@unileon.es

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

I. A WALK WITH LABELS AND CONCEPTS

Accurate meta-languages are basic requirements if science is to provide significant advance in the different fields of knowledge. Such is also the case with the various disciplines busying themselves with language. But there are words and expressions that are often employed interchangeably in the literature —thus creating controversy on points which are really not controversial (or at least, not as seriously controversial as terminological debates may sometimes have made them to appear).

Pairs like 'language *vs* linguistic change/evolution/development' and 'historical *vs* diachronic linguistics' cannot (and they generally are not) be equated, but perhaps too often it appears as if they were conveying identical meanings. I shall start with a specification of the sense of **language change**, and go on with an outline of the disciplines concerned with it. The Spanish language has two terms to distinguish (a) the human ability to speak (*lenguaje*) from (b) the particular instantiations of it in human communities (*lengua*), but this not being the case in English, 'language change' often risks to be understood (at least by the layman) as if the actor in the process of change were *the language*, which, at least insofar as the former sense of the word is concerned, is obviously not true. In order to clarify this statement we first need to explore the meanings of, precisely, the verb 'change' and contrast them with those of 'evolve' and 'develop'. According to the definitions provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED* henceforth) and the *Merriam-Webster Online* (*MWO*, henceforth), 'change' is the most general of the three meanings and basically refers to "becoming different; undergo transformation, transition, substitution" (*MWO*);[2] "undergo alteration, alter, vary; to turn *into* or *to* something else" (*OED*).

'Evolution' referred to language and languages has traditionally been borrowed from the domains of biology (but more on this later): it is worthwhile to note that current trends in evolutionary biology no longer understand it just in the sense of a movement from simpler to more complex systems (cf. *OED*, s.v.: "**6.** *Biol.* **a**. Of animal and vegetable organisms or their parts: The process of developing from a rudimentary to a mature or complete state."). The evolution of species is the crux of the theory, and consequently, agreement on what 'evolution' really means has not been reached (cf. Arsuaga, 2001). Within the frame of Dawkins' 'population theory' (a trend that has found acceptation by social scientists) evolution is defined as "a process of systematic shifts in gene frequencies in populations, together with the resulting changes in what animals and plants look like as the generations go by" (Dawkins, 1998/2000: 192-93, as quoted by Joseph & Janda, 2003b: 81). In this sense it is contrasted with 'development': "the change in form of a single object [...] the cosmos does not evolve (it develops) but technology does evolve".

From all this it follows, in my view, that while human language in sense (a) and specially according to cognitive approaches to its origin, did once evolve, it has not changed ever since: we have every reason to believe that its basic defining features (arbitrary, doubly-articulated) have been the same for every specimen of *Homo sapiens sapiens*[3] no matter whether records

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

have reached us or not.[4] I'd rather keep to the technical meaning of the term in biology —and thus make language evolution dependent on the evolution of the species (which, to the best of my knowledge, has remained the same from the start). Whether individual languages have the capacity of evolving is a question which pertains only partially to the domain of linguistics, with important (and rather abstract) theoretical issues at stake. If we just consider the biological definition of 'evolution' given above, it seems to me that an affirmative answer depends on whether we are ready to accept the metaphor of a language as a population of individuals (idiolects) —a view with equally firm supporters and opponents (cf. Harms, 1995; Lass, 1997; Joseph & Janda, 2003b). From this perspective, a language may evolve into (an)other(s) as in the case of the Romance languages. On the other hand, if we just consider the meaning 'from simple to more complex', in order to even set the question 'Do individual languages evolve?' in its right terms, we shall need to invoke the social component of language. The answer will clearly depend upon philosophical and anthropological tenets concerning the senses of the adjectives 'simple/complex' as applied to human societies. And finally, the answer will again depend on the acceptance of languages as having "inherent tendencies" in the case that we just consider entry (7) in the *OED* (s.v.):

> "The development or growth, according to its inherent tendencies, of anything that may be compared to a living organism (*e.g.* of a political constitution, science, **language,** etc.); sometimes contrasted with *revolution.* Also, the rise or origination of anything by natural development, as distinguished from its production by a specific act; 'growing' as opposed to 'being made'." [bold type mine]

In any case, what nobody would dream of denying —unless under very concrete philosophical frames- is that languages and societies do change. A number of branches of linguistics have aimed to give scientific embodiment to this awareness that scholars, grammarians, teachers, writers, philosophers... in fact anybody interested in the subject, have felt all throughout history. The 'senior' discipline has been variously referred to as **historical** or **diachronic linguistics** even when (cf. Joseph & Janda, 2003b: 85-89) the former is generally seen as including the latter. The overt connections with history allow us to characterize it, in very broad terms, as the discipline whose objects of study are all aspects of language for which the time dimension is essential. Historical linguistics is thus mainly concerned with research along three basic lines: (1) the history of linguistic knowledge, (2) past stages of languages, and (3) change in languages. A narrow interpretation of the Saussurean dichotomy synchrony/diachrony will keep the label 'diachronic linguistics' to just that branch of historical linguistics whose concerns are the description and explanation of (3). I have deliberately avoided the expression 'language change': as I hope the discussion above has proved, it is at best slippery. Besides, recent technical literature has chosen to distinguish between (a) (**linguistic**) **change** and (b) **innovation**. The distinction originated in sociolinguistic research (cf. Milroy, 1992a: 219-26, Shapiro, 1991: 11-13; 1995: 105n.1., as quoted in Joseph & Janda, 2003: 13);

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

in very simplified (and somewhat simplistic) terms, it refers basically to the adoption of punctual alterations ('innovations') by the speech community ('change'). I shall come back to this issue, but before, we need to consider the connections of the disciplines concerned, to a greater or lesser degree, with (linguistic) change.

That the three objectives of historical linguistics defined above cannot be pursued without at some point taking into account the relevant human societies has been clear from the very dawn of linguistic science —the ways of incorporating this social dimension having depended on (and very frequently defining) the differences between the various theoretical models which have marked its history. Linguistics (therefore, historical linguistics) has constantly profited from the ways, the findings and the expertise of many scientific disciplines all along that history. Born in the same Darwinian era, it was just a matter of time that the main concerns of sociology, and, crucially, its epistemological traits should leak into the ways of linguistics. More specifically, the natural 'spin-off' of both sciences, **sociolinguistics**, has, to my mind, provided historical linguistics (and in particular, diachronic linguistics) with most invaluable epistemology and a whole battery of illuminating views deriving from it. Broadly defined in general works as the discipline whose primary concern is "to study correlations between language use and social structure" (Coulmas, 1997: 1), the emphasis on actual language use (Saussurean *parole*) as an appropriate object of study of linguistics (whether historical or otherwise) correlates with the sociological view that social structures and processes could be amenable to and therefore should be investigated by means of quantitative methods. Some authors (cf. Moreno-Fernández, 1998: 300) have advocated a division between 'sociolinguistics' and 'sociology of language' where just the former should belong to the domain of linguistics proper, on account of their divergent focuses (but see Trudgill: 2003). As Coulmas (1997: 2) puts it, the former would "seek to understand the social aspects of language" while the latter is "primarily concerned with linguistic aspects of society".[5]

The quantitative approach has proved most fruitful for sociolinguistics, especially since computing technology started to provide sciences in general with extremely powerful tools for the handling and analysis of amounts of data hardly imaginable only fifty years ago. The kind of empirical research some natural sciences (chemistry, for example) have been able to carry out for a hundred years, above all because of the nature of their data, has started to become possible for many human sciences as well.[6] Even after the turn of theory from the abstract dimension of languages into actual usage, the huge amount of variables which affect (we should perhaps say 'afflict'?) the latter (as many other social phenomena), has for a long time prevented many global statistical research enterprises and, maybe too often, caused to use mere randomness as an explaining fact. But the new technologies have allowed "the discovery of statistically significant sociolinguistic patterns in linguistic structure and behaviour" which "has [...] also played a significant part in the development of a new 'scientific paradigm' in which external factors that determine variability in language enjoy the main role." (Conde & Hernández, 1999: viii).

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

Statistical work on language with social variables had indeed started well before the capacity of computers developed to the present degree. Classified by Trudgill (2003: 85-87) into (a) *micro-* ("face-to-face interaction, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and other areas [...] involving the study of small groups of speakers") and (b) *macro-sociolinguistics* ("secular linguistics, the sociology of language and other areas involving the study of relatively large groups of speakers"), issues like the study of change in progress, the uniformitarian principle or the social network theory brought along by sociolinguistic research like that by Labov (macro-sociolinguistics) or Lesley and James Milroy (micro-sociolinguistics) have provided a definitely better understanding of linguistic variation and change and, therefore, allowed significant advance in linguistic science. Since variation has proved to be patterned to far a greater extent than it used to be thought of, a new and better light for synchronic work and its connections with diachronic linguistics counts among the most relevant: on epistemological grounds, synchronic analysis may choose to put aside enquiries on how and why the present state of affairs came into being —but not on how and why the state of affairs *is now*... and variation has been accepted as an essential component of a language at any synchronic 'slice'.

II. RAIDERS OF THE LOST EVIDENCE

II.1. How Did It All Began?

Patterned variation does not come *ex nihilo*, though, and is not extinguished with every generation of speakers. These patterns have indeed been found to correlate with patterns of linguistic change, and this fact has placed variation as a proper concern of diachronic linguistics. Even more, those correlations could perhaps be traced as backwards as the origin of human language itself —which would certainly place the social component of language in an outstanding position in its development. The origin of human language has always been a natural target for the curiosity of diachronic linguists, although it clearly is not at all amenable through purely linguistic research. Nevertheless, what we know (or rather, assume) about it reinforces much of what is already known about the nature of language —which is as much as throwing light on linguistic change, which remains, in Trudgill's words, "one of the great unsolved mysteries of linguistic science, and the puzzle of the causation and function of language change is a challenge that generations of linguists and philologists have wrestled with."[7] A puzzle, indeed, because it has many pieces, and we have not got all of them on our table. We even lack the tale about how it all began.

The most plausible hypotheses could be framed within a combination of *Gestalt* theory, 'emergentism' (cf. Arsuaga, 2001: 299) and the theory of systems. Very briefly, the process could be envisaged as a joint evolution of anatomy, neurobiology and neuropsychology and the social nature of the species. Thus, the incorporation of animal protein into food habits and the erect position would have had important consequences for both the development of the brain (there seems to be interesting connections, not yet fully explored or understood, between the new possibilities for the use of hands, the position of the thumb, and changes in the brain conductive

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

somehow to language) and changes in the morphology of the audio/vocal tract allowing for the articulation of wider ranges of sounds. Furthermore, the appearing of the neocortex and the new synaptic connections established among neurones as the relevant organs and abilities (hands, fingers, fine psychomotricity, etc) were put to new uses would have brought along an extremely peculiar plastic cognitive ability (abstract thought, symbolic abilities... language). Our social nature would have provided a most appropriate 'testing field' where new, more efficient social organizations could be built advantageously in order to survive a terribly hostile medium; and language ranged among the most efficient tools for that.[8]

In the light of these theories (and in fact well before they appeared) few linguists, I think, could claim not to have felt the temptation to extend the truism that language is a defining feature of the human species into "it is *the* defining feature". Be as it may, the nature of language is both physical, psychological, and social, and the explanations for linguistic change must therefore be sought along all these three lines, with variation as a basic key for its understanding. Thus, humans produce and perceive language with specific parts of the body (which certainly set limits to possible incomes/outcomes); more importantly, it seems to me that more than a *tabula rasa*[9] each individual *intellectus* resembles a clockwork mechanism made of an extremely peculiarly malleable material, able to build and rebuild itself to purpose and need. The amount of pieces whose function and shape are hardly altered once settled remains a mystery —but it seems as if those involved with a reduced number of traits of each individual language, closely dependent on our uniquely structured ability to learn, might count among them. Once natively acquired, a language will be eliminated from an individual only either by certain types of severe brain damage[10] or, hypothetically, by their moving into a society with a different language and never using or getting in touch with it again —a process which I very much doubt can ever be completed in adults.

The social aspect of language is evidenced by the fact that the human cub acquires it without formal training if in the appropriate ecologic niche —this being the organised group. Here, language is used as the fundamental instrument of society building, though perhaps we would do better to speak of 'joint interactive building': after all, one of the features that make language uniquely peculiar among other systems of animal communication is the multiplicity of outcomes (individual languages) from a common bio-programme with very few general specifications.[11] These, and similarly, the above mentioned very few traits of every individual language which tend to be less altered than the rest could be understood in a very loose sense as 'flexible ways of doing things';[12] consequently we could quite appropriately place variation at the very roots of both linguistic ability and the individual languages and thus gain new insights into the truism that 'variation is the natural state of languages'.

Variation has been widely described and investigated in the relevant literature, though not always (not even often) from a global perspective. It takes place each and every time we use our language, even on those occasions when we have not the least intention to establish any kind of communication. Today, when the quantitative methodology has so significantly reduced the

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

area of variation ascribed to randomness, I would go as far as to say that even accidental mistakes, slips of the tongue, etc., never go beyond certain limits, with again the exception of serious illness. That is why they have always been so highly informative,[13] although not all of them provide valid data for research.

As far as patterned variation is concerned, it could make sense to distinguish the factors affecting it as *internal* (or 'intra-linguistic') and *external* (or 'extra-linguistic'), since the aforesaid 'patterns' are organised into a linguistic structure. The first will have to do mainly with the interaction between phonology, morphosyntax, and the lexicon, one of the cruces in synchronic linguistic theory (see Anttila, 2002: 212): explanations in terms of the theory of chaos and the theory of games for the intrinsic behaviour of linguistic systems have been proposed by Lass (1997: 277-318), not without controversy. The second kind of factors has to do with everything else which is not that specific interaction, with a further subdivision between a *macro-level* of variation with two aces (*time* and *space*) marking the borders where variation acquires (at least) two *micro-level* dimensions: a *social* and a *situational* one (cf. Moreno-Fernández, 1998: 127-129). In general, internal factors seem to be easier to predict and account for; but, apart from the desirability of "a plausible scenario of where such [i.e. external] factors fit" (Anttila 2002: 212), a characterization of language and society as outcomes of *joint development*, as proposed above, prevents any categorical division between both types of factors.

The distinction may be useful epistemologically, though, especially in connection with a re-elaboration of the concept of 'a language' which may be one of the major outcomes of the turning point in linguistic thought to which sociolinguistics has contributed, mainly by placing the social component of language in the forefront of linguistic research. From my point of view this is an endeavour to which sociolinguistics has much to offer, but an endeavour which is far from being even half completed: the characterization of 'a language' as numerous and structured groups of varieties, with multiplex connections and interactions among them, corresponding, of course, with connections and interactions among speakers, has many serious implications and not all of them have been explored in depth (see, though, Watts & Trudgill: 2002). The task of a new characterization of the concept 'a language', though, falls beyond the scope and objectives of this article.

II.2. The Quest for a New Paradigm

Sociolinguistics (diachronic sociolinguistics) has shown that variation can be understood as indeed the 'primordial soup' where linguistic change originates and, crucially, develops. As stated above, *linguistic change* is defined by James Milroy (1992: 17) as "broadly [...] changes in consensus on norms of usage in a speech community. During the process there will be some disagreement or conflict on norms at some levels in the community, but if a change is ever 'completed', then it will be possible to say that some community of speakers agrees that what was formerly A is now B". On the other hand, Milroy (1992a: 169) defines *speaker innovation* as "an act of the speaker which is capable of influencing linguistic structure". Very rarely do

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

speakers innovate completely *ex nihilo* —what they generally do is profiting from items and patterns already in existence via all sorts of procedures (phonetic alterations, but also analogy, exaptation, borrowing, etc.). In any case, Milroy speaks of successful linguistic change only if the innovation enters the linguistic system (something which does not always happens); but what so far remains to be explained is the mechanisms by means of which 'innovation' becomes 'change'. One may feel that it has to do with recurrences of alterations which thus become amenable to certain patterning on the part of the speaker/writer, or the hearer/reader, and/or both (cf. Guzmán-González 2003).

The criteria underlying that patterning and the reason why it should happen at all is part of what, after Weinrich, Labov and Herzog's seminal paper (1968), is known as the *actuation* problem: so far it remains unsolved. The following step, known as the *implementation* process (cf. McMahon 1994: 11) is the transmission of that change through the linguistic community —with various degrees of success. Sociolinguistics again has provided with major contributions to the understanding of implementation: the variationist approaches (whose concern for linguistic change allows us to term them as **diachronic sociolinguistics**), especially the work by James and Lesley Milroy, have provided insights into the actuation problem, by the study of linguistic maintenance, that is to say, "why incipient changes are resisted, or even not so incipient ones reversed, why some items and patterns survive almost unaltered" (Milroy 1992a: 169). Other related issues are "why do different dialects remain divergent from 'mainstream' norms of language despite the low status usually accorded to them (why do they all not become 'standardized'?) and why do many of these divergent forms and varieties persist for generations and even for centuries?" (Milroy, 1992a: ix). These can also be studied by the applications of sociolinguistic approaches to past stages of language, which have come to be known as **sociohistorical linguistics** or **historical sociolinguistics.** Although both labels are generally employed interchangeably, and especially by the relevant literature in English, some authors like Mas i Miralles have attempted to draw a distinction between them. The former would be concerned with "historical and sociolinguistic connections between [...] varieties of English" (Trudgill, 2002:8). The latter would refer to "the variationist analysis of **written** documents in diachronic terms". For sure it is much more than "a subdivision of variationism, one might almost say an appendix" (Mas i Miralles 2003).[14]

The bold type in the first quotation above is mine and points at an absolutely crucial fact in this respect. As it is the case with Trudgill, Labov or James Milroy for sociolinguistics, historical sociolinguistics was first undertaken by (historical) linguists, and/or, most importantly, by philologists: Terttu Nevalainen, Helena Raumolin-Brunberg, Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, among others —as such, the theoretical and methodological difficulties they have faced could not have taken them by surprise.[15] These difficulties are of the same kind conveyed by the application of any model of (present) language use analysis to a good amount of past stages of a language, especially if focused on oral performance: they consist, basically, not only in gaps in the evidence but also in the lack of native informants.

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

As many linguists (historical or otherwise) have long known, the only direct source at our disposal to investigate language and languages are performances, texts, in the broad sense of speech/writing acts. Not a single speech/writing act could not have been uttered or written in a good number of different ways —they are tokens, and in evolutionary theory it is types which are subjects to variation, and populations which evolve.[16] For the simple reason that language 'producers' happen to be alive, secular linguistics, among other disciplines, can have access to as many tokens as it can handle. Modern computer technology has furnished it with tools to handle vast amounts of them indeed, including the mapping of native speakers' judgements on usage. Inference statistics would not see this as any particular advantage, since, provided that the relevant experiments are well designed in terms of representativeness, relevant variables, etc., inferences and extrapolations can be acceptably accurate (cf. Moreno-Fernández, 1998: 311). Although it can't be denied that the new possibilities have confirmed many of these inferences, it is also true that they have shown regularities in domains that, before them, had been described as subjects to randomness.

This possibility is not open to historical (socio)linguistics —which of course has not stopped scholars from undertaking the task. As far as statistics is concerned, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg's proposal (2003) that what they call "phenomena frequencies" pattern in ways similar to variable (i.e. relative) frequencies, is of considerable help in the cases (so frequent for many past periods of languages) when evidence is scarce or coming from few informants (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2003). Types out of the closed number of tokens that have reached us can very often be defined, however partially. On the other hand, historical phonology has already been able to devise a whole epistemological body to tackle with the lack of 'the real thing' for the description of any stage prior to the invention of voice-registering technology. This is what Edgar W. Schneider (2002: 68) calls the *Principle of Filter Removal*, and many efforts have been devoted to it.

III. A VINDICATION OF THE ROLE OF WRITING

Writing, however, has very often been overshadowed (cf. for instance, Moreno-Cabrera, 2001) by the insistence on the oral nature of language, which of course nobody can deny. But again, language cannot be cut off from human society, which is as much as saying that it cannot be cut off from culture. I take **culture** as the (transmitted) way a human community has to face the surrounding world: the systems of knowledge by means of which its members organise their perception of that world and their behaviour towards the demands that world makes of them and the needs they have. In sum, the way a human society has to operate upon the world. Undoubtedly, language, as a specifically human feature in the terms explained at length in this article, has much (has everything, I daresay) to do in this process: there are oral cultures, there are writing cultures —but there are not aphasic cultures. In both kinds, language "is used by speakers to communicate with one another in social and cultural contexts in which the language system (narrowly defined as a 'grammar') is not the sole means of communication and personal

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

interaction" (Milroy, 1992a: 4). In both, therefore, language changes, but it is my belief that they do it in absolutely different ways, a clear consequence of the psychological dimension (cognition) of the members of the (speaking) human species as constituting societies.

I feel that the written dimension must always be considered as an essential component of the changes of particular languages, and that the accounts on their histories cannot consider it as just subsidiary to speech. Apart from phenomena pointing at changes in speech influenced by writing (to which I shall come back below), the need to do so has been shown by diachronic sociolinguistic theory, as developed, to a certain extent, by Milroy's three general principles for the social modelling of change (1992a: 5-10), and, especially, by the third one:

> *Principle 1*: As language use (outside literary nodes and laboratory experiments) cannot take place *except* in social and situational contexts and, when observed, is *always* observed in these contexts, our analysis —it is to be adequate- must take into account society, situation and the speaker/listener […]
> *Principle 2*: A full description of the structure of a variety (whether it is 'standard' English, or a dialect, or a style or register) can only be successfully made if quite substantial decisions, or judgements, of a social kind are taken into account in the description […]
> *Principle 3*: In order to account for differential patterns of change at particular times and places, we need first take account of those factors that tend to maintain language states and resist change.

In my opinion, writing is one of those factors —and certainly not a minor one. Writing is the artefact that has allowed societies with a high level of technological development, multiplex political bodies, etc., to reach their present state. It is writing which has made possible macro-sociolinguistic phenomena (diglossia, etc.) to be analysed at a level impossible to think ever before, including the most dramatic change a language may undergo, namely being completely lost. This is the doom many languages, mostly without any kind of writing traditions, have been and are suffering —and the controversy on whether writing systems should be implemented in order to somehow save them and how this implementation can alter their primeval features are revealing of how writing can change a language.

Important related issues are the macro-sociolinguistic process of *language planning* and the rise of standard varieties. According to definitions such as Trudgill's (2003: 77), although in principle writing need not be involved, the official support by governmental bodies implies a number of decisions (as to dubbing in media, teaching, publication subsidized…), which are difficult to carry out without it. On the other hand, language planning has obvious connections with standardization, although Enrique Bernárdez (2004: 37) has pointed out at standardization processes that can take place in oral languages, and writing is not indispensable in the definition of standardization by Trudgill (2003: 128). But no linguist conversant with the history of the English language would ever dream of denying the role of literacy in the processes of standardization undergone by a number of its varieties. Social network analysis has proved a most valuable tool in the understanding of the spread of the features of overt prestige varieties, which played such a crucial role in the rise of the British standard (see Conde-Silvestre &

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

Hernández-Campoy, 2004). As it happens, those linguistic innovators and those prestigious groups could write and read, though their private writings variously differed from standard orthography.

The degree in which literacy (and hence, writing) affects speech production is a highly controversial issue, which, perhaps, would undermine the received wisdom that almost universal literacy slows down change processes, at least in certain linguistic varieties. But, in any case, the history of the pronunciation of initial [h-] in stressed syllables in the English language illustrates how writing can be involved in linguistic change: in this case, involved in part of the implementation process which led to an almost complete diffusion of [h-] in standard English. The traditional view was that [h-] loss in the context defined above is a relatively recent phenomenon dating from not earlier than the eighteenth century. However, authors like Milroy (1992b: 197-201; 1983: 37-54) and Bravo, García & Fernández-Corugedo (1991) have found evidence for what can be interpreted as [h-] loss for as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (see also Markus: 2002, for assessment and interpretation), heavily suggesting that:

> (h) has been a *variable* in English for many centuries: [h-] loss may have gone to completion in some varieties at particular times and places, but in general speech communities have used the variation over these centuries as a stylistic and social marker. In other words, whatever the origin of the phenomenon may be (in phonotactic constraints, in rapid speech processes or in language contact, for example), it has probably had a social and stylistic function in the language for centuries.
>
> James Milroy (1992b: 200)

It seems likely, then, that the present pronunciation in standard accents may be due to what might be interpreted as a late restoration, and/or perhaps as insistence on pronunciations with [h-] as more correct, especially by school practice (the symbol was never lost in writing) (cf. Blake, 1996: 216). This would explain not only the present-day pronunciations of Romance loans (where [h-] was never restored) like *honour*, *heir*, *honest*, but also, and more important, the familiar stigmatised feature of most mainland vernaculars of 'dropping aitches' as uneducated.

The school (and educational institutions in general) have proved to be essential tools in the kind of standardization processes like those undergone by the English language. The integration of writing and scholarship in general has served to the recent proposal of a notion stemming from the social network theory, which has been termed 'scholarly network'. Still very much under construction a very preliminary approach can be found in Guzmán-González (1999), it tentatively expands the nodes of a social network by considering as well the connections established among the members (in addition to, but in principle independently of, personal acquaintance) via comment, controversy, and, possibly, quotations, traceable influences in later authors, textbooks used in school, etc: a recent case study with eighteenth-century grammar writing appears in Guzmán-González & González (forthcoming).

Although the long-term time dimension they may include conveys substantial differences

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

(besides posing theoretical problems), 'scholarly networks' have in a way to do with the 'small world' network models "large communities in which networks may be strongly clustered" (White, 2003: 1) investigated by Rappaport, Milgram, Granovetter and Watts, among others. Granovetter's hypothesis (first formulated in 1973 and revised in Granovetter, 1983) on the 'strength of weak ties', in particular, has been most helpful for historical sociolinguists, who have long devised the notion of the 'linguistic innovator' individuals with weak ties to various networks (see Milroy & Milroy, 1985; Milroy, 1987; Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 1991, 1996, 2000) as a crucial figure in the process of linguistic change. On the other hand, recent applications of Granovetter's theory of weak ties to such different worlds as job finding, scientific communities (White, 2003), industrial organization,[17] etc… have highlighted, as it could not have been otherwise, the role of the World Wide Web (i.e. the written word), not only in what concerns how it modifies communication media (e-mail, for instance) and subsequently personal relationships, but also in the relationships specifically established via the Web (chats, newsgroups…) and even in that the Internet itself has become the object of study from this perspective (Barabási, 2003). From my point of view, all this is opening new exciting paths for research in linguistic change, especially for particular languages (such as English or Spanish) where the written word has always been an important tool for personal relationship and network building —but for which the new information technologies have brought about new possibilities, with sometimes disconcertingly peculiar (as parents of teenagers know) language outcomes: *SMSese*, *chatelese,* etc. These usages are too new to allow the researchers to do little more than remain attentive and collect data —but they are promising indeed (cf., for example, Morala, 2001). On the other hand, in spite of the theoretical and epistemological difficulties the task may convey, I can see no reason why a number of linguistic features (lexical usages, spelling practices, etc.) could not be mapped and studied by the social network analysis of the Internet, along with other issues like those mentioned so far.

In my very personal view, then, however recent writing may be, when compared with other cultural facts, it cannot be regarded as a mere unimportant accident in the long history of speaking primates. It was indeed first speech and then writing: certainly, every specimen of *Homo sapiens sapiens* is *Homo loquens,* while only a small percentage of individuals in the species has been/is *Homo scribens*. But unless it is irrefutably proved that (a) the changes undergone by a good number of living languages have nothing to do at all with writing, and (b) that these languages would have changed along exactly the same lines, had they been exclusively oral languages,[18] we would be impoverishing our theoretical models of linguistic change if we looked at writing as if its only role was to be the only 'eye' witness we have for many languages and many past stages of languages.

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

IV. CONCLUSION

The famous Labovian statement that "historical linguistics can […] be thought of as the art of making the best use of bad data" (Labov, 1994: 11) remains generally unsurpassed as one of the best characterizations of our task. But it must also be acknowledged that the quality of those data has improved dramatically in the course of the past fifty years or so —and with them, the ways of the art itself have been notably altered. This has been possible, above all, thanks to technological advances —namely in computing technology. It was not in the power of computers to bring along spectacular archaeological findings, but they furnished linguistic sciences with new tools in the handling and the analysis of data, which gave solid grounds to the work already begun by theoretical quantitative approaches, such as the variationist studies in sociolinguistics. The emphasis on usage and the social dimension of language have had important consequences in the understanding of such crucial issues for the study of linguistic change as patterned variation and it was but a matter of time that this methodology should be extended from the study of present-day varieties to past stages of languages. For historical sociolinguistics this implied not just a change in the amount of evidence at its disposal, but most crucially, a change in the nature of such evidence, being writing, and not speech, the only direct witness for most of the past stages of languages. It is precisely the idea of language and society (and subsequently culture) as outcomes of joint development in the history of mankind which allows to vindicate the fundamental role of writing in the change of a good number of languages, and hence, in the study of linguistic change. The findings here may affect a general understanding of linguistic change in many, and for sure, better ways.

NOTES:

[1] Part of my research for the present article was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology, within the frame of the project, FEDER ref. PB2001-2988.

[2] *MWO* (s.v.) also offers information regarding synonymous verbs, which is interesting for the purposes of this article: "synonyms CHANGE, ALTER, VARY, MODIFY mean to make or become different. CHANGE implies making either an essential difference often amounting to a loss of original identity or a substitution of one thing for another [...] ALTER implies a difference in some particular respect without suggesting loss of identity [...]. VARY stresses a breaking away from sameness, duplication, or exact repetition [...] MODIFY suggests a difference that limits, restricts or adapts to a new purpose."

[3] Whether other human species may have spoken is another story: the family tree for the *Homo* genus is far from being clearly outlined, especially near the bottom, although it is generally acknowledged that "we are the only remnant of a clade which includes perhaps eight species" (Ravenscroft, 2004: 148). Recent trends in paleoanthropology think that this may have been the case, on the basis of morphology of vocal tract, skeleton, etc. but of course, physical evidence of the characteristics of such languages is unrecoverable and whether they may be comparable to the present ability we possess in the terms defined by linguists is not known (cf. Arsuaga, 2001: 155-

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

260; 295-308; Martínez & Arsuaga, 2004: 62-65). By 'human language', therefore, I mean "the language of the *Homo sapiens sapiens*", though paleoanthropology may soon advise to rephrase this definition.

[4] Cf. for instance, Joseph & Janda (2003: 83): "Clearly, anything about language that is truly universal should remain invariant across time, but our knowledge of truly absolute and inviolable universals of human language —'design features', as it were — is rather circumscribed, at best."

[5] Cf., in this respect Moreno-Fernández (1998: 312): "El sociolingüista no es un sociólogo, ni un matemático: debe pensar como lingüista y actuar con los patrones derivados de su formación. De igual modo, los resultados que aporten los análisis también han de ser interpretados desde y para la lingüística." In this sense, 'sociolinguistics' would have more to do with diachronic linguistics and even with descriptions of past stages of languages, whereas the 'sociology of language' would be more closely connected with the history of linguistics (notably, with everything having to do with linguistic attitudes, standardization, etc.).

[6] Naturally conveying significant theoretical advance; but see Lightfoot (1999: x): "The study of language is still in its infancy, and many of our ideas are quite crude. Yet, certain things are now understood well, better than in the nineteenth century. Other things are within range of being understood, and we can gain more insight, and other intriguing things cannot be thought about very usefully at present and are now beyond our reach."

[7] From the "Preface" (p. vii) to one of the foundational texts of historical sociolinguistics: James Milroy's *Linguistic variation and change* (1992a).

[8] For an extensive treatment of this issue and its connections with the nature of language, see Bernárdez, (2004: 151-206).

[9] After the commentaries of the Aristotelian ideas by Albertus Magnus, *De anima,* 3,2,17: "Tamquam tabula rasa in qua nihil est scriptum".

[10] As it is the case of later stages of DAT (Dementia of Alzheimer's Type). Anyway, it is the ability that disappears, not a particular instantiation. (Cf. Aitchison, 2003: 40).

[11] Not to be mistaken with 'creativity': "The human ability to produce and understand the indefinite number of new sentences which they may have never heard before, also known as *open-endedness* or *productivity*" (Aitchison, 2003).

[12] With all kind of possible results —experienced cooks know what I mean.

[13] As in the case of an extremely short-sighted elderly lady who mistook a big colony of penguins by some kind of nun-gathering at the Vatican. Human cognition works along a number of paths where nuns and penguins can meet —but perhaps not penguins and volcanoes. For the study of slips of the tongue see Jaeger (2004).

[14] To be fair to the author, this is the complete quotation: "Sociolinguistics provides us with a process of tracking linguistic change in the form of historical sociolinguistics, that is to say, the variationist analysis of written documents in diachronic terms. It is true that this area of sociolinguistics lacks a theoretical basis of its own, and exists as a subdivision of variationism, one might almost say an appendix. Notwithstanding, and despite the methodological drawbacks that rightly or wrongly have been assigned to it, plus the scant attention it has received from the scientific community, the efficacy of this model is not any the less for all that. It arose as a viable alternative within historical linguistics, for the study and description of language in progress, and as an analytical process it has not been surpassed or replaced as yet by any other."

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

[15] … and they have not, indeed; see, for example, Nevalainen (2002: 178): "But the limited data sources available to us do not reveal all the changes that might have taken in Henry VIII's idiolect during his lifetime"; see also Raumolin-Brunberg and Nevalainen (1994: 333): "We have no access to the spoken idiom of past times, and our field is concerned with changes in grammar and lexis. The corpora used are heterogeneous, there are always problems in timing first instances in dictionaries, and there is no detailed evidence on individual changes, such as is available in the sociolinguistic studies of present-day English."

[16] Cf. Harms (1995): "The central concept behind this approach, then, is that of the population, and in this it follows the dominant trend in evolutionary biology. It is the population that evolves, and this evolution consists of shifts in the relative frequencies of various types within the population due (1) to the differential fitness of the types in the local environment and (2) to accident, that is, due to natural selection and 'random' variation".

[17] See, for example, the SMPeGroup web job site, which specifically uses these theories to address its goals (<http://www.softwareproductmarketing.com>). For detailed explanation, see Typaldos, 2003. The website of the Silicon Valley Network Project, currently chaired by Mark Granovetter, is also illustrative (<http://www.stanford.edu/group/esrf/siliconvalley.home.htm>). Of particular interest is, among the papers included in the site, "Social Networks in Silicon Valley", by Castilla, Hwang, Granovetter and Granovetter.

[18] Which does not seem to be very likely; cf, for example, Romaine (1994: 11): "A number of explanations have been proposed for the existence of such extreme linguistic fragmentation of New Guinea […]. However, more important in my view is that none of the pressures towards convergence found for a long time in Europe and elsewhere, such as **literacy**, standardization, centralized administrative control, schooling, media, etc., was present to any great degree in pre-colonial days." [bold type mine]

REFERENCES

Aitchison, J. (2003). *A Glossary of Language and Mind.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Anttila, A. (2002). Variation and phonological theory. In: J.K. Chambers, P. Trudgill & N. Schilling-Estes (eds.) *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 206-243.

Arsuaga, J.L. (2001). *El enigma de la especie. Las causas, el curso y el propósito de la evolución.* Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores.

Barabàsi, A.L. (2002). *Linked: The New Science of Networks.* Perseus Books.

Bernárdez, E. (2004/1999). *¿Qué son las lenguas?* Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

Blake, N. (1996). *A History of the English Language.* London: MacMillan.

Bravo, A., García, F. & Fernández-Corugedo, S. (eds.)(1991). *The Owl and the Nightingale. A Critical Text.* Oviedo: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Oviedo.

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

Castilla, E., Hwang, H., Granovetter, M. & Granovetter, E. (2000). Social Networks in Silicon Valley. In: Ch.M. Lee, W.F. Miller, M.G. Hancock and H.S. Rowen (eds.), *The Silicon Valley Edge.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 218-247.

Conde-Silvestre, J.C. & Hernández-Campoy, J.M. (1999). Introduction. In: Conde-Silvestre, J.C. & Hernández-Campoy, J.M. (eds.) *Variation and linguistic change in English: Diachronic and synchronic studies.* Monographic issue of *Cuadernos de Filología Inglesa*, 8, vi-xiv.

Conde-Silvestre, J.C. & Hernández-Campoy, J.M. (2004). A sociolinguistic approach to the diffusion of Chancery written practices in late fifteenth-century private correspondence. *Neuphilologische Mittelungen*, 105*:* 133-152.

Coulmas, F. (Ed.) (1997). *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Dawkins, R. (1998). *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Granovetter, M. (1983). The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. *Sociological Theory,* 1: 201-233.

Guzmán-González, T. (1999). Gender, grammar and poetry: Early 17th-century miscellanies in the light of historical sociolinguistics. *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference of SEDERI,* pp. 37-46.

Guzmán-González, T. (2003). On language and mythmakers: Understanding language change, telling about it, teaching historical linguistics. *Actas del 25º Congreso AEDEAN*. Granada: Universidad de Granada. CD-ROM.

Guzmán-González, T. & González, S. (forthcoming). 'Why the furies were made female': An approach to gender assignment in 18th-century language treatises from sociolinguistic epistemology. In: E. Borkowska, (ed.), *Linguistic Identity and European Culture.* Katowice: University of Silesia.

Harms, W. (2004/1995). Cultural evolution and the variable phenotype. Reprint from an article published in *Biology and Philosophy.* <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/ith/Models/Harms/cultural.htm>

Jaeger, J. (2004). *Kids' Slips: What Young Children's Slips of the Tongue Reveal about Language Development.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Joseph, B.D. & Janda, R.G. (eds.) (2003). *The Handbook of Historical Linguistics.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Joseph, B.D. & Janda, R.G. (2003a). Preface. In: B.D. Joseph & R.G. Janda (eds.), pp. xi-xviii.

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

Joseph, B.D. & Janda, R.G. (2003b). On language, change and language change —or, of history, linguistics and historical linguistics. In: B.D. Joseph & R.G. Janda (eds.), pp. 1-180.

Kastovsky, D. (eds.) (1994). *Studies in Early Modern English.* Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Labov, W. (1994). *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Lass, R. (1997). *Historical Linguistics and Language Change.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lenz, K. & Möhlig, R. (eds.)(2002). *Of dyuersitie & chaunge of langage: Essays Pesented to Manfred Görlach on the Ocassion of his 65th Birthday.* Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag.

Lightfoot, D. (1999). *The Development of Language: Acquisition, Change and Evolution.* Oxford: Blackwell.

McMahon, A. (1994). *Understanding Language Change.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Markus, M. (2002). The genesis of h-dropping revisited: An empirical analysis. In: K. Lenz & R. Möhlig (eds.), pp. 6-26.

Martínez, I. & Arsuaga, J.L. (2004). El asombroso caso del fósil que podía oír. *Quo,* 107: 62-65.

Mas i Miralles, A. (2003). Historical sociolinguistics: an alternative to the analysis of linguistic change. *Noves SL. Revista de Sociolingüística.* <http://cultura.gencat.net/llengcat/noves>

Milroy, J. (1992a). *Linguistic Variation and Change.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Milroy, J. (1992b). Middle English dialectology. In: N.F. Blake (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language. Vol. 2: 1066-1476*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 156-206.

Milroy, J. & Milroy, L. (1985). Linguistic change, social network and speaker innovation. *Journal of linguistics,* 21: 339-384.

Milroy, L. (1987). *Language and social networks.* Oxford: Blackwell (2nd ed.).

Morala, J.R. (2001). *Entre arrobas, eñes y emoticones.* Paper given at the Second International Conference on the Spanish Language. Valladolid, October. <http://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/congresos/valladolid/ponencias/nuevas_fronteras_del_espanol/4_lengua_y_escritura/morala_j.htm>

Moreno-Cabrera, J.C. (2001/2000). Lengua escrita y lengua hablada. *La dignidad e igualdad de las lenguas. Crítica de la discriminación lingüística.* Madrid: Alianza Editorial, pp. 161-182.

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

Moreno-Fernández, F. (1998). *Principios de sociolingüística y de sociología del lenguaje.* Barcelona: Ariel.

Nevalainen, T. (2002). What's in a royal letter? Linguistic variation in the correspondence of King Henry VIII. In: K. Lenz & R. Möhlig (eds.), pp. 169-179.

Nevalainen, T. & Ramoulin-Brunberg, H. (2003). *Historical sociolinguistics.* London: Longman/Pearson Education.

Raumolin-Brunberg, H. & Nevalainen, T. (1994). Social conditioning and diachronic language change. In: Kastovsky, D. (ed.), pp. 325-338.

Ravenscroft, I. (2004). Where angels fear to tread —the evolution of language. *Biology and Philosophy,* 19: 145-158.

Romaine, S. (1994). *Language in Society. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schneider, E.W. (2002). Investigating variation and change in written documents. In: J.K. Chambers, P. Trudgill & N. Schilling-Estes (eds.), *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 67-96.

Shapiro, M. (1991). *The Sense of Change: Language as History.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Shapiro, M. (1995). A case of distant assimilation: /str/→/ʃtr/. *American Speech,* 70: 101-7.

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, I. (1991). Samuel Richardson's role as linguistic innovator. A sociolinguistic analysis. In: I. Tieken-Boon van Ostade & J. Frankis (eds.), *Language, usage and description. Studies presented to N.E. Osselton on the occasion of his retirement.* Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, pp. 45-57.

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, I. (1996). Social network theory and eighteenth century English: The case of Boswell. In: D. Britton (ed.), *English historical linguistics 1994*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 327-337.

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, I. (2003) Review of T. Nevalainen & H. Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) *Historical sociolinguistics.* In: *Historical sociolinguistics and sociohistorical linguistics,* 3. <http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/nevraumbr.htm>

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, I., Nevalainen, T. & Caon, L. (eds.)(2000). *Social Network Analysis and the History of English,* special issue of *EJES*, 4/3.

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.

Trudgill, P. (2002). *Sociolinguistic Variation and Change.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Trudgill, P. (2003). *A Glossary of Sociolinguistics.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Typaldos, C. (2003). *SMS and the strength of weak ties.* White paper in <http://www.softwareproductmarketing.com>

Watts, R. & Trudgill, P. (eds.)(2002). *Alternative Histories of English.* London: Routledge.

Weinrich, U., Labov, W. & Herzog, M. (1968). Empirical foundations for a theory of language change. In: W.P. Lehmann & Y. Malkiel (eds.), *Directions for Historical Linguistics*. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 95-189.

White, D.R. (2003). Ties, weak and strong. In: K. Cristensen & D. Levinson (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Community*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 1-5.

© Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Murcia. All rights reserved.