Examining 'Bad Data': Ego Documents in the History of English

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The data sources and text types that historians of the English language have at their disposal for investigations depend on the literacy rates, and the text production, of the English-speaking population in different time periods. As education opportunities and therefore literacy acquisition were socially stratified until 1870 (Elementary Education Act), written language use before 1870 will have varied greatly, i.e. if people were able to write at all (cf. Moore 2000: 58). A text category that can be found across the entire social spectrum of those who could write are so-called ego-documents. These include "sources like autobiographies, diaries, or letters", which contest the distinction between 'objective' administrative sources and 'subjective' self-referential texts (narratives in the 1st person) (Depkat 2019: 263; see also Elspaß 2014; Nevalainen & Tanskanen eds. 2007; Auer et al. eds. 2015).

The current lecture will consider ego documents as a data source for historians of the English language. First, the term ego documents will be defined and its merits for historical sociolinguistic research will be outlined. Second, the use of ego documents will be traced from the later Middle Ages (cf. Bergs 2005) to the Modern English period (cf. Fitzmaurice 2002; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003; Dossena & Fitzmaurice eds. 2006; Dossena & Tieken-Boon van Ostade eds. 2008). As ego-documents from the lower social orders in the Late Modern English period survived in the form of pauper petitions and personal letters (Auer & Fairman 2013), our approach in discussing the data sources will be two-fold, notably (1) comparisons of linguistic findings in ego documents across social layers and (2) comparisons of linguistic findings in ego documents to other contemporary text types. This allows us to illustrate the sometimes more speech-like and informal nature of ego documents and to highlight the value of the text category for historical linguistics.

A further use of ego-documents is as data for varieties of English for which there is no other contemporary documentation. This is the case with emigrant letters, for instance (Hickey ed., 2019). Bearing all the necessary caveats in mind, one can nonetheless mine this data source for evidence of linguistic features of varieties not attested elsewhere at the same time (Hickey 2019). The analysis of emigrant letters thus represents a typical case of using 'bad data' to gain some insights into a language / variety enabling one to build up at least a partial profile, thus adding time depth to our knowledge.

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