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Realism and Historical Romance Linguistics

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Abstract: This paper discusses a number of ways in which historical linguistics is now able to offer a more reliable, and perhaps more realistic, picture of past states of languages, thanks to the use of non-literary texts, the development of electronic resources such as corpora, and the increased tendency to see languages in their social and historical context. Examples of these developments are taken from the Romance languages.

Keywords: corpus linguistics, dia-variation, sociolinguistics, Romance linguistics, Latin, multilingualism, language contact.

Rabelais's *Quart Livre* offers a useful metaphor for historical linguists, when Pantagruel hears, in the air, 'diverses parolles degelees' (Marichal, 1947: 226). The ship's pilot explains:

> Icy est le confin de la mer glaciale, sus laquelle feut, au commencement de l'hyver dernier passé, grosse et felonne bataille, entre les Arismapiens et les Nephelibates. Lors gelerent en l'air les parolles et crys des homes et femes, les chaplis des masses, les hurtys des harnoys, des bardes, les hannissemens des chevaulx et tout aultre effroy de combat. A ceste heure la rigueur de l'hyver passée, advenente la serenité et temperie du bon temps, elles fondent et sont ouyes.' (Marichal, 1947: 228)

Realism is not a term immediately associated, for the non-specialist, with historical linguistics. The discipline tends to bring to mind the same *parolles gelées* which land on the deck of the intrepid travellers' vessel in the *Quart Livre*: past states of languages are presented as though cryogenically frozen in time and space. Neither the arid paradigms of the Neo-Grammarians, with their tables of disembodied sounds which allegedly evolved in accordance with preternaturally exact laws (all seemingly bereft of human intervention), nor the algebraic formulations of generative grammar, can be said to correspond to what most speakers perceive as realism or, for that matter, reality.

In 1980, Robert Burchfield announced that 'historical linguistics is everywhere in retreat'.[1] However, despite this prediction, historical linguists, like the British Army, apparently – and perhaps fortunately – did not recognize the concept of retreat, and instead put into operation a strategic withdrawal, followed (as doctrine would require) by tactical regrouping and counter-attack. In the last thirty years historical linguistics has decisively rallied, and is advancing on all fronts. Part of this progress is through a growing realism which has been introduced into historical linguistics in three main respects:

[1] This quotation introduces an article by William Rothwell which seeks to demonstrate exactly the opposite (Rothwell 1991).

1) An increasing awareness of the importance of studying what might be loosely described as non-literary material. All too often, the history of individual languages has been the history of the literary language, a situation which in many ways the last thirty years have significantly remedied.
2) The development, largely in the wake of the evolution of personal computing and the availability of affordable desktop machines capable of carrying out complex tasks such as concordancing and indexing which a generation ago would have required the resources of the Pentagon, of very substantial corpora of written texts from the past. In the case of modern states of languages, the written corpora have been accompanied by collections of spoken language.
3) Perhaps above all, a willingness to see historical stages of languages in their historical environment, that is, to apply the methods and findings of sociolinguistics – and indeed of social history – to past states of language. This approach, not least because it reintroduces the human into the study of historical linguistics, has been transformative; it has led to the development of approaches variously called 'socio-philology', 'historical sociolinguistics', 'socio-historical linguistics', and so on.

In the course of a short article like this, I cannot survey all these achievements, even within the Romance languages. I shall instead select examples from different languages and different times, in an attempt to show how they have been productive, and how (to rejoin the theme of this special issue) they have contributed to the introduction of at least a modicum of realism into historical linguistics.

1. Exploitation of non-literary material

It would be absurd to suggest that this is an innovation which only goes back to 1980 or so. Clearly, from the outset of the history of the Romance languages, use has been made of non-literary materials, not least because in many cases these are our earliest documentary sources. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the starting-point of much historical linguistic work was an analysis of what would become the standard (and that means literary) language. In large measure, this is a direct result of the emergence of historical linguistics as a form of national philology in the later part of the nineteenth century. To the extent that philology was at least in part intended to be an adjunct to literary study, it was also logical that its practitioners should particularly concern themselves with that form of the language. But this is not to say that less elevated documents were not also collected, edited, and studied. What may be questioned, however, is whether and to what extent they really intruded on the mainstream history of major languages, and indeed, very often, they are collected and studied precisely because they *diverge* and because they offer not evidence of the standard language (as it was perceived to be emerging in the early years) but the byways into which regional dialects wandered. If Eduard Schwan and Dietrich Behrens collected examples of old French charters (Schwan & Behrens, 1931), it was in order to demonstrate dialectal diversity, and thus, in a sense, to reinforce the mainstream view of the history of the emergence of French from its ancestor, the so called *francien.* Moreover, the study of such documents was in some respects vitiated by what we would now regard as a simplistic and even 'hyper-realistic' approach. Where literary texts were recognized by everyone as belonging to a higher order of writing (and were thus by definition at several removes from spoken language, and desirably so removed), non-literary and everyday documents were rather naively assumed to reflect very closely the realities of speech. Thus, until the middle of the twentieth century, and on

occasions beyond,[2] it was widely assumed that such texts, conveniently localized and dated as they were, represented real spoken dialect, conveniently preserved for us in written form. For all sorts of reasons, of course, this is simply not true: in many cases, these are documents which are closely calqued on Latin, in lexis and style (Marcotte, 1998; Trotter, 2003); they were written by an unusually literate elite; and we now understand much better the extent to which written traditions dictate form in written documents at every level (Glessgen, 2008).

The proper exploitation of non-literary materials, therefore, depends not merely on collecting more of them and looking at them more often, but on looking at them more *intelligently*, and with a better understanding of the underlying relationship between writing and speech which makes them at best seriously unreliable witnesses. Key developments in this regard include Coseriu's development (Coseriu, 1970) of Flydal's conception of dia-variation (Flydal, 1952; cf. Weinreich, 1954), and its application to historical linguistics. This terminology and its underlying conceptions are now widely accepted in historical linguistics. Indeed, in general terms, historical linguistics (and not merely in respect of non-literary documents) owes a good deal to the findings and to the approaches of variationist linguistics. Latterly, the opposition, or better: the continuum, between speech and writing, including non-literary documents as a particular written register, has been reinterpreted by Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher in terms of a 'nearness-distance continuum' ('Nähe-Distanz-Kontinuum': e.g. Koch, 2005; Gleßgen, 2005). This approach has the compelling advantage from a historical point of view that it reintroduces into the discussion a salient reality of the difference between speech and writing, particularly (and that is what historical linguistics deals with) in pre-literate communities. Speech *is* axiomatically to do with proximity, or at least it was, until it could be recorded and transmitted. Writing, on the other hand, is nearly always designed for wider transmission, both geographically, and in terms of the number of people to whom it is likely to be addressed. That immediately injects into the writing process an intrinsic tendency towards standardization, at least at the level of some type of regional written norm or *scripta* (to adopt the term popularized by Remacle and Gossen).[3] Within this continuum, and adopting Coseriu's terminology, non-literary documents are likely to be diamesically distinct from speech, but diaphasically, diastratically, and possibly diatopically distinct from more literary texts. By this is simply meant that they are in a different medium from speech, and thus inescapably have different conventions. At the same time, they are more likely to be local, less likely to conform to emerging norms of language, and apt to discuss different subjects, as compared to literary texts. Thus, correctly (which means 'very circumspectly') interpreted, non-literary documents are able to provide insights into areas of the history of language which a study exclusively based on literary texts is unlikely to be able to unearth.

A striking case of the productivity of non-literary texts is that furnished by Gerhard Ernst's collection of 'textes privés' from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ernst & Wolf, 2001-2005).[4] This, the traditional histories tell us, is the era of centralization, and standardization; when the Académie Française had begun to legislate for the French language,

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[2] Cf. the surprisingly naive statement by Jean Lanher – himself a distinguished dialectologist who should have known better – regarding the more 'local' of the Lorraine charters which he edited: 'un scribe sans grande culture, ou même sans connaissance autre que celle d'une graphie très élémentaire, et *transcrivant de façon plus phonétique*, sans référence aucune à un étymon latin sous-jacent' (Lanher, 1975: XXXVI-XXXVII; my emphasis).

[3] Remacle (1948); Gossen (1967). The emergence of the concept of a *scripta* is discussed in detail in Völker, 2003: 9-79.

[4] Reviewed by A. Lodge in *Romanische Forschungen*, 2002: 72-74; G. Roques in *Revue de Linguistique romane*, 2002: 310-312.

and when that language had (in the words of the preface of the Academy dictionary) attained perfection. The Ernst & Wolf collection comprises a series of documents composed by people aptly categorized as ‘peu lettrés’. Self-evidently, the writers are not illiterate, or they could not have kept journals, written private correspondence, and so on. Equally clearly, however, their written French, whilst perfectly comprehensible to the modern reader, does not follow the standards and the rules which the Académie was promoting and attempting freeze cryogenically. In many regards what these documents reveal is the predictable influence of speech forms; which is not, of course, to say that they represent speech. What they do represent is continuing variation, regional but also sociolectal, at a time when most conventional histories of French regard such phenomena as exclusively oral.

A second example of the developing interest in non-literary material concerns the explosion in the production of editions of medical texts in Occitan and (to a lesser extent) in Catalan and French (Corradini, 1997; Tittel, 2004; Trotter, 2005; Corradini & Periñán, 2004), and in medieval Latin (Martín Ferreira, 2010).[5] This is a rather different phenomenon. Here, what the newly-published (and in some cases newly-discovered) documents show is the capacity of the vernacular to handle science at times earlier than that which are normally understood to be applicable. They provide evidence of a wealth of technical vocabulary, and in sociolinguistic terms, they demonstrate the extent to which the vernacular was deployed in registers and for purposes outside the narrow canon of the troubadour lyric. Making available these documents thus paves the way for a rewriting of not only linguistic, but also cultural and social history.

2. Development of computerized corpora

Computerized databases and concordances are not, of course, something which has merely emerged in the last thirty years. As early as the 1950s, dictionaries such as the Trésor de la langue française were based on computers, and indeed the cover of the print version of the dictionary bears silent testimony to the punch cards on which the data was stored. In this era, however, access to computing was difficult, manipulation of the machinery required skills and time which few humanities researchers would have had, and manipulation of any database thus created would normally have to be fitted in amongst ostensibly more pressing demands on university computing facilities’ time. It was not until the advent of affordable desktop publishing, in the mid 1980s, that the full potential of the new technology could be realized (in both senses of the word). Progress since then has been rapid. Most major languages now have sizeable corpora, many freely available, the majority able to be interrogated at a distance. To take the example of Spanish: in addition to the Real Academía Española’s two major databases, the CORDE and the CREA,[6] Hispanists can benefit from the work of Mark Davies, in the form of his *Corpus del Español* and *Corpus do Português*.[7] In addition to its own databases, the Real Academía Española has digitized a whole array of dictionaries all of which can be simultaneously searched by the remote user. The Italian Istituto Opera del Vocabolario Italiano (OVI) is working not only on a full digital dictionary (*Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini*, TLIO), but there is also a database which is publicly available,[8] and from which the dictionary is drawn. The success of many of these ventures is bound up

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[5] See also the special issue of *Minerva: Revista de Filología Clásica*: articles by Nicoud (2010) and Ventura (2010).

[6] CORDE = Corpus Diacrónico del Español, available at <http://corpus rae.es/cordenet. htm>; CREA = Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual, available at: <http://corpus. rae. es/creanet. html>.

[7] Corpus del Español, available at <http://www.corpusdelespanol.org> and Corpus do Português, available at <http://www. corpusdoportugues.org>.

[8] Available at <http://www. ovi. cnr. it>.

with the emergence of the Internet, and thus the possibility of remote access from any networked computer: and in some ways it is this, rather than the creation of the corpora themselves, which is most strikingly the achievement of the last thirty years.[9]

Corpus-based linguistic study clearly allows for very different types of enquiry to those which do not make use of such resources. Above all, it becomes possible to discern in the mass of available data underlying patterns and latent changes (e.g. Núñez-Lagos, 2010). In lexical studies, all known attestations of a given word can be summoned at the click of a mouse, and realistic assessments made regarding frequency or regional or diachronic distribution. It could be argued, of course, that these are not fundamentally different approaches to those adopted before materials of this type were to hand: but it is also clear that in practice, the time which would be needed without such electronic resources would simply have been unavailable. As a result, it is now astonishingly easy to determine (for example) how common a given word was in a particular century, to what extent is was being displaced by a rival, and in what types of text the process was occurring. Naturally, none of this necessarily tells us anything about living language use, because we have no direct access to speech. And we need to be cautious, too, in making assumptions about the value of corpora of past states of the language, which can clearly never attain to the type of statistical reliability that the corpus of a modern language would exhibit. It is simply not possible to ensure, that for the past, we have a representative distribution of different types of text across time, because the accidents of survival of documents necessarily mean that the compiler of such a collection of material is at the mercy of what is available. As a result, typically, historical corpora tend simply to try to assemble everything which they can lay their hands on, without pretentions to statistical representativity. In this regard, then, we should think not so much in terms of corpora (in the sense in which a modern corpus linguist would use the term), but of databases which need, if they are to yield meaningful results, to be handled with care. In particular, and this is often forgotten, not everything which existed from (say) the Middle Ages has been digitized. It is not at all uncommon to encounter scholarly papers which make the elementary mistake of assuming that if it is not in an electronic resource, it does not exist, even when consultation of dictionaries published the better part of a hundred years ago would have revealed a very different picture. In short, the availability of electronic material does not in any way reduce the need for a certain level of philological and historical awareness. This extends, too, to the question not only of how the database itself has been put together, but of the editions on which it depends. An electronic resource is only as reliable as its constituent components. There is a significant danger that the relative ease with which studies can now be carried out will be a means not to allow us to secure a more realistic picture of the past, but one in which the mass of statistical data confers a spurious pseudo-scientificity, whilst in reality presenting only a partial view of the history of the language. If resources of this type are to add to the accuracy of linguistic history, investigators need to be realistic about what they can expect and what these new resources can deliver.

3. A more historical approach

This, the third development which I wish to discuss here, is without doubt the most important. The application of what are in essence the methods and findings of social history to historical linguistics is not of course a phenomenon which has suddenly emerged from nowhere in the last thirty years. There are abundant numbers of examples of much older linguistic studies

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[9] There is a case for arguing that the Internet as we know it may be dated to 1982, with the establishment of the *Internet Protocol Suite* (TCP/IP).

which go to considerable lengths to correlate language change with historical developments, and which attempt to place the languages being studied within the context of the societies which used them. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that, largely as a result of the emergence of the discipline of sociolinguistics, the move towards such an approach has been particularly marked in the last three decades. Curiously in some ways, this period has seen the triumph of generativist linguistics, a school of thought which sometimes seems to the uninitiated to be almost entirely divorced from historical or even social and human reality. Indeed, in its more extreme forms, generativism seems almost to take a perverse pride in abstraction, and in representing language change as a systematic and internally-driven process which owes nothing to either speakers on the society which they inhabit. The division between 'internal' and 'external' language history is an embodiment of the tension between those who would seek in social forces the motors of change, and those for whom linguistic modifications are largely self-propelled. Whilst there clearly *are* changes which (at least because they occur almost universally) are internal modifications to the system of the language (the loss of atonic syllables in the Romance languages and in Germanic being a case in point), all the evidence of sociolinguistics is that social pressures, not least amongst which are speakers' attitudes, have a major role to play in language change and substantially influence which variants survive and which do not. Central to this approach is an awareness of and an insistence upon variation, not only between speakers, but also as regards the way in which an individual speaker will handle the language at different times, with different interlocutors, and for different purposes. Such inherent variability does not always seem to be adequately treated by the generativist model.

A little surprisingly, perhaps, an area of historical Romance linguistics where there has been considerable discussion (often implicit rather than explicit) about the competing claims of 'internal' and 'external' approaches is that of the all-important, but frustratingly elusive, period which covers late Latin and the emergence of Romance. Two very substantial monographs by Adams (Adams, 2003; 2007) have shown that the Latin of the Empire was both regionally diverse, and used virtually everywhere in an environment of bilingualism.[10] Whether or not diversity and bilingualism are necessarily linked is to some extent irrelevant to the main point, which is that the starting-point of the individual Romance languages varied from place to place, and was subject (in different locations) to widely divergent linguistic influences. The spoken Latin used in Carthage had a very different substratum from the Latin of Asia Minor, or the forms of what was ostensibly the same language and which were evolving in Gaul or Hispania. The body of evidence which Adams has assembled makes it simply nonsensical to overlook historical and social factors of this type, which must inevitably have had a major influence on the evolution of the Romance languages. Other recent scholarship has also come back, productively, to this key period for Romance linguists. Thus, Banniard has repeatedly stressed the need to apply a sociolinguistic approach to the apparent hierarchy of spoken and written language forms (e.g. Banniard, 1992), as an explanation of how French (for instance) derives from spoken Latin (Banniard, 2011); and (with particular reference to the influence of Germanic) has re-introduced notions of language contact in ways which are far more subtle than in the past. His account of the morphological parallels between Germanic and Romance in the Rhine valley, published, revealingly, in a volume concerned with language, culture, and society in the centuries after the fall of the Empire, brings together 'external' and 'internal' aspects of language contact and contact-induced change (Banniard, 2004). A recent study by Carles (2011)[11] persuasively exploits

[10] See the important discussion of Adams's books in Vàrvaro (2009).
[11] See my review in *Revue de Linguistique romane*, forthcoming.

onomastic evidence from southern France to re-examine the question of the emergence of the Occitan textual record in the ninth century. The approach remains resolutely linguistic, indeed philological: but the underlying thrust of the work, and indeed its inspiration, is that textual evidence can only be interpreted in its social context. Van Acker (2007) has, similarly, focused on the relationship between spoken and written Latin in the context of Church writings, in an approach which, again, is critically dependent on a proper historical understanding of the phenomenon concerned, and of the relationship between different strata of the same society (cf. Selig, 2009). Finally, the 'socio-philology' espoused by Wright, and Lüdtke's emphasis on communication, forcefully re-introduce the social into the argument (Wright, 2003; Lüdtke, 2005).

The various approaches which have been adopted to account for and to explain the development of Romance from Latin have also been productive in later periods of language history, that is, once the Romance languages had emerged as fully-fledged vernaculars in their own right. A further dimension of the type of question raised by Adams is the abundant evidence, in particular when less literary material is looked at, of forms of multilingualism at all times and in all places in the Romance-speaking world. From the time of the Empire onwards, and probably until at least early modern times (and in many cases, beyond), multilingualism has patently been a daily reality in most of the countries where Romance languages were and are spoken. Sustained study of this phenomenon has been carried out and given rise to numerous collective volumes (e.g. Trotter, 2000; Kappler & Thiolier-Méjean; Braunmüller & Ferraresi, 2003; Kleinhenz & Busby, 2010; Tyler, 2011; Schendl & Wright, 2011), and has undoubtedly led to a heightened awareness of the extent to which such multilingualism, far from being an exceptional aberration (as previous generations tended to think), was a perfectly normal and widespread response to the multiplicity of languages in use in given places. Trade and practical requirements seem often to have been the principal reasons for such multilingualism, which, in textual terms, not infrequently translates into language-mixing. This is strikingly the case for medieval England, where it has perhaps been most extensively studied, but the pattern is replicated in Gascony (Trotter, 1997; 1998; 2003), in Flanders (Mantou, 1972), in southern France (Trotter, 2006), in the documents of the Hanse (Wright, 1997), and in Switzerland (Lüdi, 1985; Vitali, 2003). The records held in the Datini archive in Prato demonstrate an astonishing and impressive plurilingualism: there are letters in Arabic (in Hebrew characters), in Castilian, Catalan, Occitan, Latin, Venetian, and Sicilian (Melis, 1962: Tav. V-V111). Patently, multilingualism was a commercial reality and an economic necessity (Trotter, forthcoming).

The relaunch by Glessgen of the *Plus anciens documents linguistiques de la France* series initiated by Jacques Monfrin (cf. Glessgen, et al. 2011) is already bearing fruit in that a substantial corpus of Lorraine charters has made it possible to isolate particular writing habits, and the influence and role of local *scriptoria* in the development of sub-regional written norms (Glessgen, 2008). It is no accident, either, that this methodology, insofar as it is of necessity quantitative, depends also on the fact that the texts have been digitized. But at the heart of the localization process is a sophisticated understanding of what are basically social processes: the development in space of particular patterns of language use and written language reproduction. I noted above the case of Lanher, author of the linguistic atlas of Romance-speaking Lorraine, and editor of a volume in Monfrin's original series. There is, inevitably, some overlap between linguistic geography and the localization of medieval charters. Whilst its initial impetus was not historical, the dialectometrical work carried out by

Goebl in Salzburg undoubtedly has (and has always had implicitly) a diachronic dimension.[12] The representation of linguistic change in time and space, and its visualization with the aid of information technology and mathematics, brings together the synchronic and the diachronic in a compelling manner. When further enhanced by the availability of sound files on an internet site which makes it possible to move (virtually) from place to place and to listen to different speech-forms, this produces a strikingly realistic representation of the patterns of language distribution and variation.

Conclusions

A recent issue of the *Transactions of the Philological Society* (2011) dealt with linguistics and philology in the twenty-first century. In the introduction, the editors quote August Schleicher, and his 1850 paper. Schleicher distinguishes between philology, which 'belongs essentially to history', and contrasts it with linguistics 'which has nothing to do with the historical life of the people who speak the languages; it forms part of the natural history of man'.[13] As the editors point out (Adamson & Ayres-Bennett, 2011, 202), this distinction between a branch of natural sciences, and a historical discipline, has been with us ever since.[14] Towards the end of their introduction, Adamson and Ayres-Bennett write:

> what we have seen, alongside the multiplication and enlargement of diachronic corpora and the burgeoning diachronic corpus linguistics, is the emergence of various forms of "rephilologisation". Their common aim is to return language historians to a close encounter with individual texts on the methodological level and to an engagement, on the theoretical level, with approaches that ground language change in localized acts of social interaction and interpretation'.

This, it seems to me, is where historical linguistics is going, and has been going over the last thirty years. Realism means exactly this: the 'close encounter with individual texts' is essential, because they are the only manifestations of *parole* which are available to historians of language. At the same time, 'social interaction and interpretation' are the context and the locus of language change, if language is conceived as above all a human and social system of communication. Neglect of either the specificities of individual texts, or the broader social setting, inescapably leads to an inaccurate view of the past. As one of the papers in the same issue of the *Transactions* puts it: 'linguistic analyses which are blindly driven by theory-internal considerations with little or no real interest in actual data such as those offered by textual corpora run the risk of presenting a largely idealized and, by definition, necessarily selective representation of the available linguistic evidence' (Ledgeway, 2011: 218).

The three significant developments in historical Romance linguistics which have been identified in this paper look set to generate an increasingly reliable historical perspective. Corpora to at least some extent overcome what Labov identified as the 'bad data problem' which confronts all historical linguists. Increased attention to the less literary register extends

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[12] See <http://www.dialectometry.com>, and Goebl (1998).

[13] 'Die Wissenschaft nämlich, welche zwar zunächst die Sprache zum Object hat, dieselbe aber doch vorzugsweise nur als Mittel betrachtet um durch sie in das geistige Wesen und Leben eines oder mehrerer Volksstämme einzudringen ist die Philologie und sie gehört wesentlich der Geschichte an. Ihr gegenüber steht die Linguistik, diese hat die Sprache als solche zum Object und sie hat direct mit dem geschichtlichen Leben der die Sprachen redenden Völker Nichts zu schaffen, sie bildet einen Theil der Naturgeschichte des Menschen' (Schleicher, 1850: 1, quoted in Adamson/Ayres-Bennett, 2011: 203).

[14] See Werner (1998), who distinguishes *Philologie* (predominantly textual), *Sprachwissenschaft* and *Linguistik* (more formalized); cf. Holtus/Sánchez Miret (2008: 200). *Philology* and its Romance and Germanic cognates tend not to mean the same in all languages, and they do not necessarily now mean what they meant in the nineteenth century.

the range of enquiry, and comes closer, in all probability, to informal varieties which may themselves approximate to speech. As we have seen, this also includes important insights into very real possibilities of multilingualism, right across Romance-speaking Europe, and over by far the greater part of the history of the Romance languages. And, finally, the application of the methodology of sociolinguistics in historical investigations places languages firmly back where they belong: as social, communicative systems, from which the human element is never absent and from which it is entirely unrealistic to exclude it. The *parolles gelées* of the past are beginning to thaw. Pantagruel would approve.

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