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Historische Sociolinguïstiek: het “Brugge-project”

Abstract

The so-called Brugge-project is concerned with language usage and linguistic behavior in 19th century Brugge. Two language domains have been thoroughly investigated so far, viz. the language use of the lower class (the “Arbeidersprache”) and that of middle class intellectuals (the “particularists”). Since this is the first major study in historical sociolinguistics in the Low Countries the article starts with a discussion of methodological problems which had to be dealt with. Subsequently the research findings, based on original data never used for (socio)linguistic analysis before, are presented.

As far as *Arbeidersprache* is concerned, the investigation of spelling, grammar and style revealed that both the apparently chaotic orthography and the deviating syntactic structures can, in fact, be linguistically described and ordered in a much more systematic way than it used to be assumed. Also, the fact that the grammatical and orthographic problems of the working class were partly shared by authors from very different social backgrounds convinced us that, as opposed to the usual class centered paradigm, the literacy centered paradigm used here allows for a more reliable comparative research.

Traditional views had to be abandoned as far as the “particularists” are concerned as well. It appears that they never strived to add a southern, Flemish flavor to the standard language but that they were opposed to the use of any supra regional variety whatsoever instead. A diglossic situation with the West-Flemish dialect for L- and French for H-functions was what they really favored and in so doing they did not fight French influence in Flanders (as it was assumed so far) but actually tried to enhance it.

Finally we were able to meet the methodological desiderata formulated by Romaine and Mattheier not only by re-examining texts and paying attention to their “location in their socio-historical context” but also by accounting for the authors’ choice from the full set of alternatives available at the time and by reconstructing who had access to which varieties.