Abstract: This contribution presents the basic rationale and principles of a new hybrid discipline of historical sociolinguistic philology, or the sociolinguistically informed study of ancient texts, as showcased in the current special issue. It is shown how an interactional model of communication validates and scaffolds the application of synchronic sociocultural linguistic theory and findings to the analysis of ancient texts in order to achieve a more fully contextualized account and interpretation of their meaning from a perspective contemporary to their origination. In fact, it is argued that any study of ancient texts should take the perspective of its producer(s) and addressee(s) into consideration, and that written language use cannot be satisfactorily accounted for without reference to the immediate, on-the-ground-level social context and situation within which it arose.

Keywords: Historical sociolinguistics, sociocultural linguistics, interaction, language variation, theory, contextualization

In 1972, William Labov wrote, “I have resisted the term sociolinguistics for many years, since it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social”, adding, more explicitly, “But linguistic theory can no more ignore the social behavior of speakers of a language than chemical theory can ignore the observed properties of elements” (Labov 1972: xiii; 269). In the study of language change over time, for one, this view that the linguistic and the social are – and indeed always have been – fundamentally intertwined has recently led to the rise of historical sociolinguistics as a research discipline (see e.g. Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre 2012; Nevalainen 2015). If a diachronic analysis of language is to be satisfactorily comprehensive, it must also take into account the on-the-ground, contemporary social realities in which the relevant linguistic production originated.

But while sociolinguistic thinking has thus become increasingly well established in the historical investigation of language change, it still has to make any significant inroads in historical language studies undertaken within the so-called ‘philologies’, where the focus is on the recovery, assessment, analysis, and interpretation of texts in ancient languages that have ceased to exist as such today. Yet here, too, just as in any other realm of language-focused inquiry, neglecting the ways in which every speaking community shapes and is shaped by the language(s) it uses – from its contemporary perspective and under its momentary, locally emergent concerns – is to run the risk of missing fundamental layers of communicative meaning that were of great immediate relevance to those whose writings happen to have survived to the present.

In order to redress the arguably unsatisfactory status quo in historical philology, the special issue at hand showcases the ongoing endeavors of the Austrian Academy of Science’s ‘Sociolinguistic Forum’ research...
group, which unites historical philologists and present-day synchronic sociolinguists in an innovative trans-disciplinary dialogue. The lofty goal is to add more depth to our understanding of human linguistic practice across vast divides of time and space, for the benefit of broadening horizons in both disciplines. Our group’s most immediate interest, as incarnated here, lies in finding ways to unravel and study more (and more subtle) dimensions of the “layered simultaneity” (Nevalainen 2015) of discourses and contexts present in texts than have hitherto been the staple of historical philologies. This involves especially and notably such on-the-ground, everyday dimensions and realities of human experience as have been attested to impact on language use by present-day sociolinguistic studies, where data are available in more abundance, diversity, and detail. In this line, contributions to our issue explore how present-day sociolinguistic approaches and insights regarding the following central points may be transposed to the study of texts in ancient languages:

(1) Language use is inevitably variable; and this variability exhibits patterns of “orderly heterogeneity” (Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968: 100) that arise from and can be analyzed via the manifold ways in which linguistic variation is (originally, indexically, and constitutively) connected to social variation and multiculturalism. This concerns intra-linguistic variation as well as the juxtaposition of different languages, and individual repertoires as well as societal multilingualism.

(2) The intrinsic connection between linguistic and social variation and its epiphenomenon, the co-presence of multiple linguistic systems within one community or individual, are typically concomitant with practices of switching between systems (code-switching, style-shifting). Also coupled are constellations of differentiated language attitudes and ideologies. Together, these phenomena commonly give rise to agentive (pro-active, rhetorical) usages of linguistic switching as a contextualization strategy (‘speaker design’ – Schilling 2013; for the theoretical basis see Gumperz 1982), serving to generate communicative effects in interaction (see further discussion below).

Pursuing these lines of investigation is particularly challenging for analysts of historical texts, due to an ever-lingooming shortage of surviving language material. But, as we aim to show, rising to this challenge becomes easier when scaffolded by cross-culturally validated findings from synchronic sociolinguistics that have already described and explicated the phenomena and processes involved – in particular, within the comprehensive synchronic sociolinguistics that has been dubbed ‘sociocultural linguistics’ by Bucholtz and Hall (2008) (in that it integrates sociolinguistic and anthropological agendas).

A particularly helpful starting point for such scaffolding is to specify how exactly we may conceptualize the mutually constitutive relationship between language use and social life in the first place. A contemporary interactional model of communication serves this purpose well, because it is on this level of immediate exchange between interactants – a level of analysis incrementally situated between the ‘individual’ and the ‘social group’ – that social life in its smallest identifiable, but ultimately compounding, unit of activity takes place and to which its contingencies can thus be traced (following sociologist Erving Goffman, e.g. 1983).

Under an interactional model, human communicative meaning-making is regarded as a dialogic process of mutual anticipation, interpretation, and negotiation between addressee and addressee (Bakhtin 1986 [1952–53]; Goffman 1959; Gumperz 1982; Gumperz 2001; Erickson 1986; Tannen 1986; Tannen 1989; Tannen 2004; Schiffrin 1994). In other words, in a communicative exchange both speaker and listener are equally implicated as active participants who jointly make sense of what is going on. Their relationship is dialogical in that it is of a two-way nature: where speakers design their utterances in expectation of listeners’ responses, trying to influence these responses (i.e. trying to relate certain communicative messages), listeners in turn are not merely passively influenced by speakers’ utterances but also actively shape these utterances through their responsive stance. The following classic quote by Mikhail Bakhtin explains this process in detail:

When constructing my utterance, I try to actively determine [the listener’s] response. Moreover, I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance […] When speaking I always take into account the apperceptive background of the addressee’s perception of my speech: the extent to which he [sic!] is familiar with the situation, whether he has special knowledge of the given cultural area of communication, his views and convictions, his prejudices (from my viewpoint), his sympathies and antipathies – because all this will determine his active responsive understanding of my utterance. These considerations also determine my choice of a genre for my utterance, my choice of compositional devices, and, finally, my choice of language vehicles, that is, the style of my utterance. (Bakhtin 1986 [1952–53]: 95–96)
Erickson (1986: 316) very effectively captures the same argument in his observation that “talking with another person [...] is like climbing a tree that climbs back.”

Interaction is thus not conceptualized simply as the activity of packaging and passing messages back and forth, but rather as an emergent, ongoing process of creation, negotiation, and interpretation in which both speaker and listener have a meaning-constitutive role to play. The nature of this process is cast as ‘inference’ by Gumperz (1982), who postulates that it is an activity of concocting meaning by relating communicative (including verbal) signals to interactional context so as to arrive at fully ‘contextualized’ messages. ‘Context’ here is not restricted to any particular order level; rather, it may draw on anything from micro to macro, from past to present to future projections, from immediate physical surroundings to global or even imagined settings, from short turns to whole speech events, from local personae to generalized identity categories, and so on (see e.g. Erickson 1982 for illustration). In fact, Hymes (1972) provides a helpful inventory of parameters that configure the context of interactional situations, in the form of a heuristic that he mnemonically dubs the SPEAKING grid: Settings (time and place, physical circumstances, but also ‘psychological’ setting), Participants (and their knowledge), Ends (outcomes as well as goals), Act sequences (relating to activities and speech acts), Keys (tone, mood), Instrumentalities (including modes/media of communication), Norms (expectations regarding behavior and its interpretation), and Genre (the type of event). In interaction, a particular set-up of these parameters (which necessarily overlap and intertwine) provides a framework on which participants draw for their fully contextualized linguistic production and its interpretation – in short, for making meaning.

Gumperz (1982) calls signals used to index and activate certain aspects of context in interaction ‘contextualization cues’. Their set includes prosody (intonation and stress), rhythm, tempo, gesture/pose, gaze, and backchannels, but specifically also the use of linguistic varieties: styles, dialects, languages, which index the social meanings (attitudes, ideologies) associated with them as relevant for the process of inference (contextualized meaning-making). This latter aspect is the basis on which language shifts can be deployed strategically (rhetorically) in interaction, to convey certain communicative effects that arise from such a contraposition of social associations – a strategy that has been called ‘speaker design’ (see Schilling 2013; for a contemporary illustration see e.g. Soukup 2009, featuring an interactional analysis of strategic style-shifting between standard and dialectal Austrian German in TV discussions for purposes of embodying antagonistic ‘footings’/participant relationships).

It follows from this model of interaction that all communicative meaning is context-bound, -sensitive, and -relative. This, notably, includes a bounded-ness to the locally situated, immediate, emergent interactional situation. A sociocultural linguist’s comprehensive interpretation of meaning must therefore likewise take into account the concrete, locally, culturally, temporally, and spatially situated frame, perspective, and reality within which the participants are (or were) interacting.

While the model as just outlined was conceived with spoken interaction in mind, it arguably also applies to the realm of written language, in the sense that there, too, an interaction is taking place, namely between an author on the one hand, and a reader (addressee) on the other – whether the latter be real or imagined, close by or distant (by time and/or space). (For a pertinent review of literature on the interactional and cognitive processes involved in reading written language, see Reichl 2009.) And if writing is an interaction, then its meaning, too, emerges from a context that includes the locally situated reality of the author and addressee. It is this point in particular we wish to firmly establish in the historical philologies by means of our current joint, trans-disciplinary endeavor: written language use also cannot be satisfactorily analyzed without reference to the immediate, on-the-ground-level social context and situation within which it arose.

As intimated earlier, the model of communication as interaction is helpful for our undertaking because it provides an account for how exactly various sorts of social parameters factor into the kinds of linguistic behavior we find precipitated in, among other things, written texts. In other words, it is able to explain how and why texts feature a ‘layered simultaneity’ or “co-occurrence [...] of multiple interlocking meaning elements of varying time scales” (Nevalainen 2015: 265), and why attention to this fact is desirable in analysis: because interactants themselves continually negotiate at least some such ‘meaning elements’ on various levels of context in the process of their language production and reception. And to miss out on their perspective is therefore virtually to miss out on the ‘elephant in the room’ regarding text interpretation.
As already intimated, the outlined account, of how language shapes interaction and thus, by and large, society (in its function as a tool to jointly create, negotiate, develop, adapt, and transmit meanings), and how language use is in turn shaped by social factors (being driven by its relationship and reference to context), is able to explain the existence of such pan-globally and pan-chronologically attested sociolinguistic phenomena as the appearance and deployment of, and shifting within, multilingual repertoires, featuring multiple languages, dialects, styles – in short: linguistic variation and varieties. If interaction can be defined as “the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence” (Goffman 1959: 15), surely this influence operates also on the level of the encounter of these individuals’ linguistic repertoires, and their interactive adaptation, alteration, and development in its course and wake. Potential effects beyond ad hoc behaviors of style-shifting/code-switching, and borrowing, e.g. for accommodational or agentive purposes, are, over time, repertoire change, expansion, or even entire repertoire shift; all in step with non-negligible forces of language ideology that push or pull in certain directions. By the logic outlined above, all of these phenomena can and should be brought into relation with the contextual circumstances obtaining in concrete instances of interaction (e.g., texts), when the latter are subjected to interpretation. In other words, and again, the study of texts ideally takes into account the perspective of producer and addressee, within the full range of the contextual (and thus also contemporaneous) realm of the text’s origination.

Even on the scaffold of a fundamentally sociocultural linguistic or, more precisely, interactional conceptualization of how linguistic communication works, and on the basis of existing descriptions of the related fallout processes and phenomena of multilingualism, language ideology, and variation in language use, the challenges for application to the analysis of historical texts are numerous. The contributions to this special issue constitute a first set of potential blueprints for how to tackle these, showcased in sociolinguistically-minded analyses of texts from a wide variety of ancient settings and languages.

Thus, to recap, Malzahn discusses linguistic variation and its social contingencies in the case of the two extinct Indo-European languages Tocharian A and Tocharian B, attested in the northwest of present-day China and dating to the first millennium C.E. She shows how the application of variationist principles and methods to this fragmentary corpus, taking sociolinguistic factors (dialectal and sociolectal variation) into consideration in the analysis of language use, is “not only possible [...] but it is even essential” in order to arrive at a comprehensive account of the given language material.

Eltschinger, writing in the context of Indian Buddhism in the first centuries C.E., confronts and challenges the idea that certain communities adopted Sanskrit as their main language because of its perceived ‘holiness’, with an analysis arguing that the communities’ shift from Middle Indic vernaculars to Sanskrit was more immediately sociolinguistically strategic, serving to contest “Brahmanical scriptures (first and foremost the Veda), ritual, and culture” virtually on Brahmins’ own ‘linguistic turf’, and thus most forcefully and effectively.

Gastgeber analyzes chancellory documents from 14th century Constantinople, showcasing the rhetorical deployment of sociolinguistic variation in the form of shifts from formal into vernacular Greek. He provides evidence for the notion that such shifting serves the purpose of deliberately targeting addressees in various ways; thus, he challenges the common assumption that Byzantine writing style is a mere function of a notary’s linguistic training and competence, and furnishes another clear example of strategic contextualization at work in ancient texts.

Schmidl takes us into the field of Assyriology, tackling language use in letters from the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods from a sociolinguistic perspective, in a true pioneer venture. She draws notably on politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) to identify and corroborate manifestations of stylistic variation in her materials and to show how a sociolinguistic approach can be used successfully to explore personal relationships even in data as far removed and as sparse as hers from the 7th century B.C.E.

Terribili contributes a study of the “linguistic and stylistic peculiarities” found in a central theological text of 9th/10th century Zoroastrian Pahlavi literature in Middle-Persian, the third book of the Dēnkard. He expounds how Zoroastrian theologians deployed these peculiarities not only for intra-textual stylistic purposes, but also as an instrument for identity practice, assertion of authority, and cultural resistance in the context of the Islamization of Iran and concurrent social upheavals.
Cuomo focuses on medieval textbooks used by Byzantine scholars of that time to study the high register variety of ‘Medieval’ or ‘Atticized’ Greek, an “artificial and standardized variety of Greek” that was “modelled on the language of Greek classics and Hellenistic authors.” He argues that such textbooks themselves are necessarily products of their local context and time, to the point where any successful analysis must take their contemporary social embedding into account. By the same token, the textbooks can also be used to gain access to and insight into the perspective on language use reigning in the local community that brought them forth, a perspective that was, in turn, itself shaped by these very textbooks down the line.

Finally, Houben takes us back to ancient India, expounding on the complexities involved in trying to disentangle “specific idioms and registers of language use in pre-modern South Asia,” and particularly in “the early stages of classical Sanskrit and literary Prakrit.” His discussion comes full circle to present-day sociolinguistic controversy regarding whether or not ‘languages’ as such can and should be identified and conceptualized as discrete entities at all, or rather as constellations of features in varying stages of crystallization. Addressing this issue, he insists, must also take historically coeval views and perspectives into account.

Our outlined venture may be considered a trial balloon, launched in the hope that it inspire emulation. Ideally, it will benefit from the test of further application, so that historical sociolinguistic philology as a hybrid discipline may ultimately unfold the full power of its rationale and its potential for greater insight into how humans have been practicing language use over the centuries and millennia – and we may continue to ever more fully engage with and learn from the communication of our ancestors.

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