Culturalist and constructionist approaches on the way to explaining synchronic and diachronic aspects of language change

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The bulk of studies of language variation and change in the history of linguistics have concentrated on reasons, conditions and mechanisms of linguistic drifts in the traditionally acknowledged language systems. Despite early calls of language anthropologists for the need to propagate a holistic approach to language phenomena, within language itself and in socio-cultural space (e.g., Boas 1887a, 1887b, 1911; Kroeber 1948, 1952, etc.), not many scholars have gone in their investigations of language variation beyond the level of the sentence. In recent decades, the newly developed (and fully-fledged as of today) linguistic disciplines of text linguistics, discourse studies, sociolinguistics and pragmatics have more strongly than ever before articulated the imperative to observe language phenomena in the discourse layer of human expression, encompassing broader (viz. socio-cultural) as well as more immediate (viz. communicative) contexts as variation factors in human speech. The present paper investigates the process of language change in English institutional correspondence from the 15-17th centuries. The case in point are two epistolary genres of the Late Middle and Early Modern English times: the narrative report letter and the directive letter (Okulska 2006, 2008), which underwent major reconfigurations, and were themselves a product of the social conditions in the periods studied. They functioned as primary textual mediators in the development of early English public institutions, including the crown, government, state administration, church or defence.

From the traditional culturalist perspective, the letters analysed represent 'speech genres' (Bakhtin 1981), defined as recognisable communicative behaviours carrying patterns of historically rooted, culturally transmitted and socially acknowledged interactive conventions. A long-term diachronic approach to the corpus material unveils the genres' recurrent compositional units and parallel symbolic functions that developed in them as discursive consequences of similar rhetorical goals and context-stimulated intentions encoded in the diversity of individual text-types forming the two generic groups. From the historical point of view, such recurrent and identifiable codes of interactive behaviour equate the genres with socially ritualised 'language games' (Wittgenstein 1953), or 'cultural scripts' (Wierzbicka 1999, 2003, etc.), which have acquired their fairly stable 'cultural elements/traits' (cf., Boas 1891, 1896a, 1896b, 1898; Kroeber 1966) in the constant process of their cultivation, reinforcement and grounding through communicative activities in everyday life. On the synchronic plane, however, the textual variation observed in the particular text-types, as the genres' here-and-now instalments, can be viewed (in Labovian terms) as a corollary of the natural tendency in language users to express themselves dynamically by formulating their ideas differently each time (Labov 1973), relative to current interactive conditions. Such a dialectic between the social reality and discourse is tackled by the social constructionist approach (e.g., Berger – Luckman 1967; Burr 1995), in view of which the processual nature of the socio-cultural world is reflected in and constituted by discourse, which is itself a socially constituted and socially constitutive force. In this light, discourse functions as a carrier, motivator and consequence of live interactive practices in socio-cultural space (e.g., Fairclough 1992, 1995; van Dijk ed. 1997), and this is where the onset, locus and stimuli of language change should be sought. It follows that the two seemingly opposing standpoints of the culturalist and constructionist traditions, the former being diachronically oriented and pattern-focused (hence more static), and the latter – synchronically targeted and fragmentation/fluctuation-focused (hence more dynamic), emerge as complementary and

mutually compatible analytical frameworks in explorations of synchronic and diachronic mechanisms of language change.

556 words

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