

Forward from the Past: 21st century take-away from traditional Romance methods

Romance Linguistics, on account of its synchronic richness, contemporary variation, long documented history and scholarly tradition going back to Diez, Schuchardt, and Ascoli serves as a focal of practice and theory for the larger linguistic community as demonstrated in recent collaborative works (e.g. Arteaga 2019; Ayres-Bennett & Carruthers 2018; Barra Jover et al. 2012, etc.) and the recent RGCC2021 workshop on *doing romance* (proceedings in Corr & Schifano 2023) highlights a renewed interest in methodological concerns. Even so, Romance Linguistics, especially Historical Romance Linguistics, faces a unique set of problems: an immense multi-lingual bibliography, the overbearing weight of tradition, an abundance of contemporary dialectal data and a surprising typological opacity in relation to its well documented Latin ancestor. Though historical linguistics has in general become a rather *niche* subbranch of the linguistic sciences, many researchers will at one point or another turn to a venerable manual of the established historical Romance linguistic tradition to provide a baseline of how the languages of today have come to be. In practice this is also the case of most self-identified historical linguists and yet in 2023, the details of how this tradition arose or the foundations on which it rests have often been forgotten—sometimes neglected, relying on the authority of earlier scholars in order to look forward.

Building on Gallo-Romance case studies in anonymous (2022) we present the methodological challenges faced and insights gained from practicing Romance historical phonology in the 21st century, with the dual purpose of ① informing colleagues from other specialisations of the paradigmatic changes and ongoing debates in Romance historical linguistics; ② reflecting upon how these methodological concerns may affect the way we do other types of Romance and non-Romance linguistics. Employing discipline-specific case studies from Early Medieval Romance, we highlight the consequences of a changing discipline declined along four themes:

1. Interdisciplinarity:

- On account of beneficial specialisation, modern research is also more myopic than our 19th and 20th century predecessors, whence a need to collaborate with other (social) sciences. On account of social and historical research, the relationship between Latin, Vulgar Latin and Proto-Romance has undergone significant revision in the past 30 years. Likewise, on account of psycho-, socio- and laboratory phonetic linguistic studies, the nature of sound-change itself has been revised (e.g. Labov 1994; Bermúdez-Otero 2020) with important consequences for traditional descriptions of change.

2. The digital revolution:

- On account of digital technologies, the possibility (and a responsibility) to make linguistic data as accessible and verifiable as possible for transparency of the method is of increasing importance. Notwithstanding, some scholarship is less accessible. We present some gains & pitfalls of new data-access and collection methods.

3. 19th century positivism and what we learn from the philological enterprise:

- With the explosion in the quantity of data available, the necessity is equally great to qualitatively evaluate and control our dataset. This is visible in linguistic data which has erroneously been cited as keystone evidence supporting the dating of Romance diphthongisation (e.g. Straka 1953), and which is revealed to **a.** have been taken out of context, **b.** have been misinterpreted, or **c.** not exist.

4. The weight of tradition, or why things are not always as they seem.

- There is often significant distortion between what one has said and what other think one has said and thus a danger of cumulative misinterpretation, seen for example in descriptions of sound change. This can be seen for example in the reception of Richter (1934)’s description of Early Romance Vowel Reduction.
- As Lass (1997: 5–6) points out, “[i]n many important cases we may be passing on, as precious and firmly held beliefs, replicas of assertions that someone somewhere once made, transformed into Article of Faith”. And, in the case of Romance, though “[t]he path from Latin to French has been particularly well studied, and [there is an impression that] every possible explanation for each change has been offered, [...] no theoretically unified account is yet available” (Vaissière 1996: 63).
- Even within the strict domain of phonology, the role attributed to linguistic “representation” vs “computation” and the components of each leads to drastically divergent descriptions of the same problem.
- Thus, despite Morin (2003)’s call for methodological renewal over two decades ago, there is still need for a critical evaluation of the intersection of tradition and contemporary methods.

As we move forward in a rapidly changing world, the case study of Historical Romance invites linguists of all specialisations to reflect upon their own scientific practice and the relation between data, theory and accumulated consensus. For Romance diachrony, notably historical phonetics a seemingly “dormant discipline” (Ségéral & Scheer 2016: 7), the confrontation of old texts, modern techs and contexts, far from announcing this discipline’s irrelevance in the 21st century, invites instead for trans-disciplinary reflection and cautious renewal.

Bibliography

- Anonymous. 2022.
- Arteaga, Deborah L. 2019. *Contributions of Romance Languages to Current Linguistic Theory*. Springer.
- Ayres-Bennett, Wendy & Janice Carruthers. 2018. *Manual of Romance Sociolinguistics*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- Barra Jover, Mario, Guylaine Brun-Trigaud, Jean-Philippe Dalbera, Patrick Sauzet & Tobias Scheer (eds.). 2012. *Études de linguistique gallo-romane* (Sciences du langage). Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes.
- Bermúdez-Otero, Ricardo. 2020. The initiation and incrementation of sound change: Community-oriented momentum-sensitive learning. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics*. Open Library of Humanities 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.627>.
- Corr, Alice & Norma Schifano. 2023. Romance grammars in context and contact: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Isogloss. Open Journal of Romance Linguistics* 9(2). 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/isogloss.301>.
- Labov, William. 1994. *Principles of linguistic change. Volume 1. Internal factors* (Language in Society). Oxford Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Lass, Roger. 1997. *Historical Linguistics and Language Change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Morin, Yves Charles. 2003. Syncope, apocope, diphtongaison et palatalisation en galloroman: problèmes de chronologie relative. *Discursos inaugurales - Conferencias plenarias - Sección 1: Fonética y fonología - Sección 2: Morfología - Índices: Índice de autores, Índice general*. (5 May, 2020).
- Richter, Elise. 1934. *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Romanismen I Chronologische Phonetik des Französischen bis zum Ende des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie). Halle: Niemeyer.
- Ségéral, Philippe & Tobias Scheer (eds.). 2016. *La phonétique historique du gallo-roman: état des lieux et perspectives* (Diachroniques no 5). Paris: PUPS.
- Straka, Georges. 1953. Observations sur la chronologie et les dates de quelques modifications phonétiques en roman et en français pré littéraire. *Revue des langues romanes* 71. 247–307.
- Vaissière, Jacqueline. 1996. From Latin to Modern French: on diachronic changes and synchronic Variations. *AIPUK, Arbetisberichte, Institut für Phonetik und digitale Sprachverarbeitung, Universität Kiel* 31. 61–74.