

Title: A new methodology for reconstructing sociolinguistic variation and language contact
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Abstract:

The goal for a socially anchored approach to historical linguistics is to reconstruct not only which features actually existed in a language when it was robustly spoken, but which subsets of the population used it, and its role in social interaction. How do we reconstruct the rich variation of multilingual settings from records that do not explicitly document it?

Our proposal is to incorporate literary texts containing literary dialect, which can serve as documentation of speech, alongside any existing primary sources and demographic information, which can inform our understanding of a community's disparate social spheres and their degree of overlap.

The challenges and possibilities are illustrated by Odessan Russian (OdR), a contact variety of Russian. Viewed as substandard, OdR lacks solid linguistic documentation and is now moribund. It emerged from intensive language contact and exhibits substrate influences from Yiddish, Ukrainian, and Polish, and lexical borrowing from other languages. Robustly spoken in Odessa, Ukraine in the early 20th century, it has been in steady decline since WWII. Currently it is spoken only in pockets of émigré communities, primarily in Brighton Beach, NY.

Our analysis of OdR relies on historical accounts of population dynamics in Odessa (Zipperstein 1985), a dictionary documenting Odessan "errors" in spoken Russian (Dolopchev 1909), fiction written by Jewish writers in Odessa whose writings (attempt to) mimic speech, and fieldwork with the remaining speakers. We reconstruct a system of social networks based on the different settings and interlocutors with whom characters invoke the dialect, and which features they use. We identify a cline of linguistic change first described by Labov: the shift of an innovation from serving as a regional marker, to an identity marker, and finally, to a stereotype (Labov 1972, Irvine & Gal 2000).