



**2nd International Workshop on
Social Networks and English Sociohistorical
Linguistics**

**Palacio de Valdeparaíso, Almagro (Spain)
24 April 2008**

**Historicity in English Historical Linguistics Research: the case of social
networks and communities of practice in eighteenth-century London**

Susan Fitzmaurice
The University of Sheffield

Social networks analysis has become a popular and effective tool for the social description of speech communities in earlier periods and considerable attention has been paid to the variables most appropriate for grounding the description of the community's members in their social networks (e.g. Bergs 2005, Sairio, 2006, Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006). Recently, the construct of communities of practice has been recruited as an interpretive instrument in studying the sociolinguistic behaviour of groups of speakers, notably of adolescent groups in American and British high schools respectively (Eckert, 2000; Moore, 2006). In recent work, I have experimented with the use of the constructs of 'social network' and 'community of practice' in order to explore the extent to which they complement social networks analysis in adequately describing a specific social milieu in early eighteenth-century London, namely, the discourse community of periodical essay writers associated with the *Spectator* (Fitzmaurice, 2007; forthc.).

In this paper, I discuss the extent to which these constructs need to be historicized in order to ensure that the inferences we draw about linguistic practice are adequately supported by the material nature of the period under investigation. Specifically, I scrutinize how the *Spectator* coalition functions as a community of practice in a particular historical moment: between March 1711 (the launch of the periodical) and December 1712 (the conclusion of the first series). Historians have debated the social meaning and functions of the *Spectator* project (e.g. Cowan, 2004; Pollock, 2007) for the public sphere. I will contribute to the debate by discussing how the historical situation defines the project's identity, shapes their political and social interests, and sets their shared linguistic practices and preoccupations. The outcome is a complex picture of a coalition within a community of practice participating in a broader discourse community.

References

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Fitzmaurice, S (2007) The World of the Periodical Essay: Social networks and discourse communities in eighteenth-century London. *Historical Sociolinguistics /Sociohistorical Linguistics* 7. http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/periodical%20essay.htm

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Moore, E. (2006) Communities of Practice: what are they and how do they differ from social networks? Paper read at 'Social Networks Analysis'. The second workshop organized by the VICI research project. University of Leiden, 29 May 2006.

Pollock, A. (2007) Neutering Addison and Steele: Aesthetic Failure and the Spectatorial Public Sphere. *English Literary History (ELH)* 74:3. 707-34.

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Session 2 (10:30-12:00)

Salón del Conde de Valdeparaíso (2nd floor)