

Richard Hogg and David Denison, eds. 2008: *A History of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. xiii + 495 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-71799-1 (Paperback)

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It has been reckoned that the first step in the acquisition of wisdom is silence. So perhaps this review should never come to light as a tribute to the book's distinguished editors, authors and reviewers (Traugott 2007; Moore 2007; Pons-Sanz 2007; Görlach 2008; Hayes 2008; Saidat 2008; Haerberli, 2009; Minkova 2009).¹ At this difficult juncture, I will give a brief overview of this significant volume (*H&D*) and add some thoughts on the future of English historical textbooks, as suggested by its structure and contents.

Jointly edited by two renowned Manchester colleagues, Richard Hogg, the late Almodóvar-admirer and enthusiastic scholar, and David Denison, this updated synthesis of the *Cambridge History of the English Language* comes to light in a welcome reduced-price edition. "Informally known as Baby-Chel" (Minkova 2009: 893), the book adds to the rich array of recent publications providing general or specialized outlooks of the history of the English language (authored or edited by Schneider and Kortmann 2004; Burrige 2005; Singh 2005; Brinton and Arnovick 2006; Christian 2006; Freeborn 2006; Gelderen 2006; Kemenade and Bettelou 2006; Mugglestone 2006; Ringe 2006; Cain and Russom 2007; Lerer 2007; Fitzmaurice and Minkova 2008; Mcwhorter 2008; Momma and Matto 2008; Rodríguez-Alvarez 2009), and proves valuable reading for those keen on English language and linguistics.

Unlike other more pedagogically-oriented volumes intended for undergraduates, students of literature or the general public, *H&D* addresses advanced students, senior graduates and teachers, who may adapt the book to actual courses. Most chapters, all authored by celebrated international names in the subfields, focus on core linguistic areas and structures covering the entire chronological span of the English language.

H&D is implicitly divided into two main parts, distributed over nine chapter-length essays. A longer and less accessible part 1 deals with the fundamental diachronic aspects of English linguistic structures, whereas a second section is devoted to functions and varieties of the language. Most chapters offer empirical data and all contribute new interpretative angles which point up the complexity of the field.

More particularly, Hogg and Denison open the volume with a reader-friendly 'Overview' of the history of English from the period before the Anglo-Saxon migration to the culmination of the British Empire, summarizing the different stages of English immigration, invasion or migration. Different theories, causes and mechanisms of linguistic change are briefly discussed, as well as various types of historical evidence. In Chapter 2, 'Phonology and Morphology', Roger Lass offers a detailed account of phonological and morphological structures, peppered with honest observations on the

¹ A first, hardback edition appeared in 2006; hence the date of the earliest reviews.

limitations of historical linguistics as an “intellectually respectable undertaking” (108). Olga Fischer and Wim van der Wurff succeed in re-examining grammatical categories and syntactic units with extreme succinctness in Chapter 3, ‘Syntax’. Special attention is devoted to the noun and verb phrases, various clausal constituents and word order. At the beginning of the chapter, a helpful and highly praised summary of the most significant changes under discussion is offered. The chapter on ‘Vocabulary’ by Dieter Kastovsky singularly highlights the close interaction between word formation and borrowing throughout the different key-stages of the history of English (HEL). In Chapter 5, ‘Standardisation’, Terttu Nevalainen and Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, after mentioning the normalising trends observable in Old English, build on the development of the standard variety, stressing the supralocalisation and focussing processes which have shaped its norms. A brief discussion on factors preventing full standardisation is given at the end. Richard Coates’s unconventional chapter on ‘Names’ proves well grounded, informative and inviting. The distribution of English personal names, surnames and place-names is historically considered, if only to prove that onomastics is a useful tool to raise new hypotheses on situations of linguistic and cultural contact.

The remaining three chapters focus on functional varieties and the diversity of Englishes. In his ‘English in Britain’ Richard Hogg gives prominence to issues concerning nineteenth- and twentieth-century dialects, discusses dialectal evidence available for the different periods of history and elaborates briefly on the interaction between dialectal variation and standardisation. Edward Finegan, in turn, expands on the spread of ‘English in North America’, according to chronological stages (the colonial, the national and the modern periods), geographical and social varieties. His reference to Canadian, African American English and especially to Chicano English is to be mentioned. Last in the volume, chapter 9 puts the accent on the nature of ‘English Worldwide’. David Crystal analyses the current and future status of English as a global language and the political, economic and educational factors triggering its use. He puts forward the possibility of English being halted or of dissolving into a “family of languages” (435). His observations will likely foster student debates, though a more extensive exposition, such as that in Mugglestone (2006), would have been welcome.

This summary may not do justice to this well edited book, in which authors strive to fit relevant scholarship and shifts in linguistics into one volume, particularly the social turn of the humanities and the challenge to traditional findings on the basis of digitally processed empirical evidence. The book provides an extensive bibliography and a concise further-reading section, some useful maps and an index, controversially arranged in its headings and subheadings. A chronology of English, a glossary and a more descriptive title are missed by some readers.

Fortunately, books like this one prove an “invitation to rethink various aspects of the HEL” (Mugglestone 2006: 6), in case “there is not very much really new in the arguments”, as Görlach (2008: 408) contends, and other stories may be found more appropriate for widespread release, a common claim among scholars since at least the turn of the century (Watts and Trudgill 2002).

A mere passing reference has been made to the fact that 2006 was “a bumper-crop year” (Minkova 2009: 893), an “annus mirabilis” (Görlach 2008: 404) for general

books on the HEL. So much so that even Hogg and Denison observed that their volume "might at first sight seem otiose, redundant and unnecessary" (xi). For those of us devoted to this area of research it might prove gratifying to see that English historical studies remain important within the larger domain of language instruction. But this is precisely the point. Is the development of English "a subject of major importance to linguists and historians", as claimed in the blurb of our volume? Are so many language history courses required as part of the core-curriculum for university degrees? Figures and colleagues' appreciations suggest the need for change.

According to Minkova (2009: 896), "[m]ost English majors enrol in a history of the language class because they want to develop skills that will make Chaucer or Shakespeare more accessible". In turn, (under-)graduate students, self-labelled as the "emerging voices of English Studies in the 21st century",² are engaged or may have completed degrees in Modern Languages, English Language and Literature, Cultural Studies, Cultural and Social Anthropology, Sociolinguistics, Migration or Postcolonial Studies, International Relations, Globalisation Studies, Hispanic and Latin American studies or European studies. Thus, it is likely that the history of the English language will have to accept its role as "a catalyst for learning in a variety of academic areas", as Dressman (2007: 107) suggests. In our postcolonial world, the emphasis lies on (inter)cultural research, on cross-cultural contacts, on new categories of individual and social consciousness/identity, and on even-handed understandings of diversity.³ So, as Southgate claims, perhaps "the continuation into the future of history in the form that it has been previously assumed" is rendered "quite impossible" (2005: xii). The time is ripe to consider "what, in our changed world, a changed history (of English) might actually be and be *for*", leaving aside timid pragmatic adjustments, institutional inertias or market shares. Admittedly, there are many voices calling – once more – for a new direction, but more strength should be gathered to avoid the unjust impression that scholars are defending the field, presenting the subject as a self-indulgent entertainment (Risager 2006) or, what is worse, as a vehicle for profit-making skills. (Southgate 2005; Görlach 2008; Haerberli 2009).

The issue at stake is probably not one of knowing what to do next, but the ability to carry it out, letting go of epistemological slogans and standard narratives. In mainstream accounts of the HEL some unwanted leanings may be appreciated, whereas few issues which are not part of the established history are introduced or amply discussed. Despite the many efforts and achievements to overcome them, the structure and contents of most HEL overviews seem to reproduce well-known nineteenth-century (British or Western) myths, mutually reinforcing and worth pondering in the light of today's values.

² At www.english.vt.edu/graduate/documents/cfp.doc.

³ See Academy for Intercultural Research <http://www.interculturalacademy.org>; Institute for Intercultural Studies: <http://interculturalstudies.org/main.html>, Centre for Transnational Studies: <http://www.transnational.soton.ac.uk/>, <http://centers.law.nyu.edu/jeanmonnet/papers/09/091301.pdf>, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/maalouf/report_en.pdf, etc.

Even in such excellent works as *H&D*, the idea of teleological progress is maintained to some extent. History still reveals an ascending cumulative path to a highflying present and the outdated idea that “out of crude beginnings emerged the glorious present of the English nation”, as Kemble phrased it in 1849 (Aström 2002: 62), seems to be unconsciously alive even in apparently guileless, humorous and well-intended comments.⁴

Furthermore, given the important political function always assigned to language in Europe, the perspective in general HEL books seems to be still constrained by geographical and first-language criteria, two explicitly rejected biases for current descriptions of English(es) (438; Risager 2006: x). From this preferred ‘inside view’, Britain’s entrenched image of singularity and isolation is obstinately projected. Though twenty-first-century scholars feel notionally free from an obsolete prescriptive tradition (412), books such as *H&D* tend to minimize pressure from other languages: the unusual ability of English to adapt foreign words is emphasized to the extent that influences are mostly restricted to lexical additions; linguistic creolizations and mixes are best described before Elizabethan triumphalism and there is little detail in the account of foreign trends, flows and inputs experienced in different contexts and stages.

Last on our list, standard HEL books often favour the idea of language as a communicative instrument to the detriment of its symbolic functions, equally important in the prevailing context of international understanding. Information on images of identity, social meanings and attitudes, on institutions acting as “magnets of prestige” (289), on negotiations and challenges to cultures and linguistic selves are barely hinted at in short and loose observations.⁵

Despite the profound challenge it may imply for promoters of HEL knowledge, a strategic planning in which priorities customized for new readers are set seems very much to the point. To my view, the common in-group style of self-presentation should be downplayed and replaced by a broader, trans-national and trans-historical stance, socially and symbolically focussed. That would be more in line with actual lines of research and announced codes of belief.

If English is said to belong to any country which uses it and all English-speakers are co-possessors of the language, a more shared perspective proves a compelling demand. Renewed efforts become necessary to give English a location *relative* to other language

⁴ “Naples and Paris were twice as big [as London]. Constantinople ... three times... By 1750 London had *overtaken* all of them” (18); “Britain was (with Spain, Portugal, France and the Netherlands) one of the European colonial powers... By the end of the nineteenth century the British Empire... accounted for *nearly a quarter of the population of the world*” (21); “English does not have to be fully understood to be influential” (35), etc. [my emphases]

⁵ In *H&D* the reader learns of French models in Middle English translations; of the fame of the university of Paris during the 12th and 13th centuries; of the seventeenth-century rising cultural prestige of France; of the unpopularity of the French Revolution (258); of images of regional French by Central French speakers (248), on local dialects being regarded as inferior (248), on French seen as the language of the enemy country (274), or of Spain as a source of suspicion (322), but all too often through sweeping statements. Notably, more detailed accounts of specific forms of social interaction render different representations of ‘alien’ languages (see Bullón 2007; Braga 2009; Sánchez Escribano 1990, among many others).

'landmarks' throughout history. For current *active audiences*, asking what English has been – relative to its co-travellers (or competitors) in history – seems as important as describing what English currently is or has become (2). English belongs to a macro-community where the significance of languages (German, Russian, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Scandinavian, Welsh, Scottish, [Vulgar] Latin and others) has notably shifted through the ages and influenced the relation of English-speakers to the cultural West. Rediscovering the community might be a conceptually new start.

Secondly, if “linguistic diversity, regional variation, and the linguistic aspects of social groups” are so much celebrated, they should be taken as a pivotal narrative axis. New HELs should foster *trans-nationalism*, hybridity and border crossing, valorize actual spaces of mixing at least from the Renaissance period onwards, and insist on transitions and margins in order to get a nuanced understanding of social and linguistic phenomena. A more coherent historical picture of local mixed contacts, consistently highlighting the description of human interactions on a smaller scale, seems binding. A number of these micro-level socio-dynamics are mentioned in *H&D*,⁶ but only a few described (mainly, Anglo-Celtic, the medieval triglossia or the foundations of the standard variety), whereas others remain unmentioned (Price 1985; Wright 1994; Watts and Trudgill 2002, etc.) or remain open to research.

And third, a *trans-historical* stance would contribute to putting an emphasis on continuities and regularities basic to language development. Being, as we are, called to a more pragmatic approach which “instills an awareness that variation and change are normal features of linguistic life, demanding recognition” (Mugglestone 2006: 410) and conscious that for many changes “there have been analogous situations earlier in the HEL... on a different scale” (439), an accent on this tenet seems appropriate.

Although it is well-known that the glorification of national identities proves unnecessary in language description, this history of hybrid spaces constitutes a daring task. For one thing, some facts and figures – on the number of speakers, cultural flows, the production and consumption of cultural texts, the impact of vernacular literatures, the presence of second and foreign languages in English contexts, foreign guidebooks to English (37), bilingual dictionaries and grammars (257, 84), etc. – should probably be added or expanded. For another, the transnational focus should reveal the idea that local-level contacts have always been not only “facts of language in their own right” (42), but triggers for change beyond the lexical level; that winding patterns and intermediate failed stages show ordinary paths in evolution against models of linear sequence and that encouraging hypotheses, such as the proposal to rewrite the medieval history of (European) languages according to Fortescue's net by Bernárdez (2008: 306), may be worth testing.

Most importantly, the new scheme should contribute to clear space for multiple voices within academia at the right time. The case of Chicano English may be illustrative of this assertion. It is only recently that *H&D* and other general HEL books have recognised it as an English variety different from an intermediate or learner language (410). However, scholars such as Santa Ana, Bailey, Peñalosa or Silva

⁶ See, for example, references to the medieval Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland (17) or the Scottish-French alliance in the modern period (20).

Corvalán, to mention just a few, have raised linguistic objections to the “dialectics of monolingualism” since the 1980s. And even today non-standard syntactic features of Chicano English individually-considered are linked to other varieties of English, overlooking the fact that a bundle of preferred constructions might be worth studying in the light of bilingual situations, such as double modals, universal relative *that* and low presence of *zero*-relative, a second person plural pronoun, invariable tagging *isn't it?*, unusual prepositional uses such as *to meet with* or a potential wider use of subjunctive forms.

It has been recurrently acknowledged that there are many HELs to be told and much research has positively been done to tell some of these alternative, social and hidden histories. But be it because of the “democratising nature of a language” (432), of intellectual climates, of the pull imposed by the need for identity, of a desire to satisfy the numbers, to give a more accurate description of language or to secure “a more egalitarian perspective in educational curricula” (434), it seems to be time to broadcast the message (Watts and Trudgill 2002: 242) and prove that history is never just history but always history for some purpose.

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