Recently studies on Historical Linguistics seem to have fortunately revived. Blake, Research Professor at the University of Sheffield, benefits from his experience as editor of the Cambridge History of the English Language and from his work mostly concerned with Caxton, Shakespeare and Chaucer, to write this volume.

In this successful attempt in eleven chapters at revising both the internal and external history of English, the author deliberately abandons the traditional division into Old, Middle, Early Modern and Late Modern English to make a completely new subdivision. Nevertheless, he uses these concepts in his work so that the target reader (undergraduates and public in general) can follow it more easily.

First two chapters serve as an introduction to clarify what is understood by history of English and which have been the major changes in the language. In this way, the book is conceived as a discussion of the most relevant phenomena that took place in the uprising and development of Standard English, as in Blake’s words: ‘it was better to focus on the development of standard English in order to give the volume cohesion’ (p. vi). And he certainly holds his original aim throughout the work. In this respect, he distinguishes between a ‘standard’ language and a ‘standardised’ language. By ‘standardised’ he means ‘a language which has achieved a reasonable measure of regularity in its written form’ (p. 7). A standard language will be regularised and become a standardised language eventually, but the opposite is not always true, as a standardised language might be geographically restricted.

The subsequent chapters are devoted to travel through the history of English from the very beginning up to the current year. Next three chapters are concerned with the period known as OE. First, in chapter 3, after presenting the laws posited by Grimm and Verner, Blake sketches the differences between North and West Germanic and proceeds to narrate the historical circumstances in which the Germanic tribes colonised Britain and the phonological and morphological system developed by the Anglo-Saxons on the island. In chapter 4, he concentrates on King Alfred and his task as translator and regenerator of learning, and comments on some of his works, such as the translation of the Cena Pastoralis, the Solutoloques or the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. After that, Blake uses a passage from Catholic Homilies by Aelfric to comment on some additional phonological, morphological and syntactic features. This constitutes an innovative element within the handbooks of the History of the English Language, since some other manuals include texts from different writers of the period they are dealing with, but the excerpts are usually just an appendix or a quotation to illustrate a particular point raised by the author. However, Blake presents these texts to represent the language of the period and to address some linguistic matters, in the way he does in chapter 5, where he uses an passage from the Peterborough Chronicle to refer to the gradual decline of the first English Standard as well as the historical events that preceded the Norman Conquest and the influence exerted by French on English. That is a recurrent device he makes use of throughout his work, which prevents the narrative style from becoming dense and monotonous.

Next four chapters can be grouped together, for they comprise the ME and EME periods. Chapter 6 deals with the demise of the influence of standard OE until a standard began
to emerge by the middle of the thirteenth century when Henry III accepted the Provisions of Oxford, which were issued in English and French. Much of the chapter is devoted to The Canterbury Tales, a work Blake is an expert at, as apart from editing it from the Hengwrt manuscript, he has varied publications on it and is now working on the edition of The Canterbury Tales on CD-ROM. The following two chapters comprise the period between 1400 and 1600: The first one will deal with the concepts and attitudes present at the time, while the second one with the linguistic features of English. The author considers this is a crucial period, as one of the varieties, London speak, will be adopted as as the most refined and prestigious one and will be essential for future reference. That it why he is interested in clarifying which reasons explain the acceptance of Chancery English as a standard and discusses about the relevant role played by the Lancastrian monarchy in it. To conclude the establishment and settlement of the standard Blake devotes chapter 9 to present an extensive section on dictionaries and to emphasize lexicographers contribution to the study of language.

Last two chapters bring us to more modern times. Chapter 10 is concerned with the rise of historical linguistics thanks to Sir William Jones’s discovery of the relationship between Sanskrit and English, which led other scholars to map out the growth and extent of Germanic languages. The contents of chapter 11 accomplish from 1914 to the present day and highlight the role played by the revolution in travel and communications in spreading English as lingua franca around the world. Blake concludes this section by stating that the different varieties of English have been achieving greater status and it will be difficult to control the development of English within Britain, let alone in the rest of the world.

In my opinion, the only shortcomings of the work are:

1) The author does not systematically describe the morphological paradigms belonging to the different periods. I am sure the author wanted it to be that way, as he tries to write an unconventional History of the English Language.

2) There is a total lack of subheadings inside each chapter, which makes difficult the task of spotting a particular point, when one has doubts and wants to check that aspect. That makes the work not so pedagogical as it should be expected, for the author states the book is aimed at undergraduates and public in general.

All in all, however, this is definitely a highly commendable book. It reads very easily and is written in a clear and lively style. We can only be glad that N. Blake has decided to take up the study of the History of the English Language in writing.

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