Historical Linguistics

R. L. Trask

ARNOLD

Contents

To the reader

The book in your hand is an introductory textbook of historical linguistics. It deals with the study of the histories and prehistories of languages, with the discovery of ancient connections between languages, and with the study of language change. Historical linguistics has existed as a scholarly discipline for over 200 years, and it was the first branch of linguistics to be placed on a firm scholarly footing; none the less, it is at present one of the liveliest and most engaging areas of linguistics. The subject has recently been revolutionized by the sociolinguistic examination of variation and change, and today, unlike our predecessors, we can watch a language changing in front of our eyes, or perhaps better hear it changing in front of our ears. Progress in other areas of linguistics, such as the study of typology and universals and the study of syntax, has had a profound effect on our discipline, by opening up new avenues for exploration. Our traditional links with archaeology have recently been renewed in dramatic fashion, and some of us are beginning to look at possible links with such unexpected fields as genetics and physical anthropology. In the last few years, exciting and controversial new hypotheses have turned up in the pages of our journals and attracted heated discussion. At the same time, new statistical and computational methods are being brought to bear on some of our outstanding problems. All of these developments are explained in the pages of this book.

The book is designed to be used with an instructor on a university course in the subject, but it can equally be read with pleasure and understanding by anyone interested in finding out something about how and why languages change, what the consequences of change are, and how we go about the business of uncovering the prehistories of languages and of families of languages.

To get the most out of this textbook, you will find it extremely helpful (and, if you're a student, essential) to consult certain reference books. Chief among these is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the great dictionary of English which covers the last thousand years of the language. Most libraries will possess the *OED*, either on paper or on CD-ROM, and you should become familiar with it and learn how to use it. You will also find it useful to consult one of the

etymological dictionaries of English: Onions (1966), Partridge (1966), or Klein (1971); your library will probably have at least one of these. It will not be necessary to consult etymological dictionaries of other languages, but, if you can read the relevant languages, you will find it illuminating to browse through Corominas and Pascual (1980) for Spanish (written in Spanish), Ernout and Meillet (1959) for Latin (written in French), Meyer-Lübke (1935) for the Romance languages (written in German), or Pokorny (1959) for Indo-European, the vast family to which English belongs (written in German). And, if your library has it, you should certainly become acquainted with Buck (1949), which is a treasure trove of information about the vocabularies of most of the major Indo-European languages; this book is written in English.

Every chapter in this book contains suggestions for further reading on the topics covered in that chapter, and you would be wise to chase up and read some of the books and articles suggested for those topics that particularly interest you. With just a few exceptions, all the references are to work written in English, and nearly all this work is reasonably easy to read.

1

The fact of language change

1.1 *Boris Becker's observation*

In Britain today, the most usual everyday word for 'copulate' is *bonk*. No issue of a British tabloid newspaper is complete without a headline featuring 'bonking schoolgirls' or 'bonking vicars'. The word is inescapable. But it wasn't always like that.

In 1986 a sly reporter at Wimbledon asked the tennis player Boris Becker a question about 'bonking'. Becker famously replied, 'The word "bonking" is not in my dictionary.' This was hardly surprising: in 1986, the word 'bonk' wasn't in *anybody's* dictionary – at least, not in the relevant sense.

Today, everybody who's spent half an hour in Britain knows this word, presumably including Boris Becker, and, if you consult a good recent British dictionary of English, you will find the word entered there between 'bonito' (a type of fish) and 'bonkers' (meaning, of course, 'crazy'). But, if your dictionary is older than about 1987, you probably won't find it.

What conclusions can we draw? Well, one possible conclusion is that you need to buy a new dictionary. More importantly, though, we can conclude that a new word has entered English in the last few years. The word 'bonk' came into use only around 1985 or so, and the dictionaries picked it up a couple of years later. To put it another way, English has *changed* in this small respect: a few years ago this word didn't exist, but now it does.

This example is in no way unusual or remarkable: whether we are aware of it or not, English is changing all the time. New words are constantly coming into use, and not only new words, but also new pronunciations and even new grammatical forms. At the same time, old words, old forms, and old pronunciations are gradually dropping out of use.

Moreover, this constant change is not some new and alarming development. English, as we shall be demonstrating, has been changing throughout its history in the same sorts of ways, and the same is true of every other living language. One of the fundamental things you need to understand about languages is that they are always changing.

This book is about the study of language change. The first few chapters will

discuss the different ways in which languages can and do change, and try to explain why some kinds of changes are more frequent than others. The next couple of chapters are devoted to the consequences of language change: what happens to languages after many generations of accumulated changes? After that, we turn to an examination of the methods that linguists have developed for studying change, both for uncovering changes that occurred long ago and for observing changes that are taking place now. Finally, we shall look at certain special cases and at some controversial new ideas that are currently stirring up some excited discussion in the field of historical linguistics.

1.2 *English then and now*

The language we now call English was introduced into Britain about 1500 years ago by invaders from the North Sea coast of the Continent. These invaders, commonly known as the *Anglo-Saxons*, were at first illiterate, but, within several centuries of settling in England, they had acquired the use of writing, and they began writing down all sorts of things in their English language: administrative records, historical chronicles, religious texts, and literary works. Very many of these texts survive today. Let's have a look at a passage from one of them. Here is a brief passage from the entry for the year 878 in the great historical document called the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*:

> Her . . . Ælfred cyning . . . gefeaht wið ealne here, and hine geflymde, and him æfter rad oð þet geweorc, and þær sæt XIIII niht, and þa sealde se here him gislas and myccle aðas, þet hi of his rice woldon, and him eac geheton þet heora cyng fulwihte onfon wolde, and hi þæt gelaston . . .

If you have never seen this kind of English before, you may be dumbfounded to be told that it is in fact English, and not Norwegian or Icelandic or something more exotic. But English it most certainly is, even though it is spectacularly different from the English we use now. We call this type of English **Old English**, and we can't read it without special study. Nevertheless, the people who spoke this language taught it to their children, who taught it to *their* children, who taught it to THEIR children, who . . . until it finally reached us, some eleven centuries later. But it has reached us in a very different state. So what happened?

Well, there was no one thing that happened. Like all languages that are spoken by people, English has been changing throughout its history. Eleven centuries is hardly more than forty generations, but all during those forty generations the language has been changing: a new word here, a new pronunciation there, a new grammatical form somewhere else, and . . . well, you see the result.

Let's look again at that passage, this time with a rough translation, or **gloss**, provided for each word:

Her . . . Ælfred cyning . . . gefeaht wiþ ealne here, and hine
Here Alfred king fought against whole army and it

geflymde, and him æfter rad oð þet geweorc, and þær sæt
put to flight and it after rode to the fortress and there camped

XIIII niht, and þa sealde se here him gislas and myccle
fourteen nights and then gave the army him hostages and great

aðas, þet hi of his rice woldon, and him eac geheton
oaths that they from his kingdom would [go] and him also promised

þet heora cyng fulwihte onfon wolde, and hi þæt gelaston . . .
that their king baptism receive would and they that did

And here is a translation into modern English:

> Here King Alfred fought against the whole army, and put it to flight, and rode after it to the fortress, and there he camped for fourteen nights. And then the army gave him hostages and great oaths that they would depart from his kingdom, and they also promised that their king would receive baptism. And they did these things.

With this assistance, now let's see how much of the passage we can recognize as English. First, note that there are three unfamiliar letters in it. These letters were used by the Anglo-Saxon scribes but later dropped out of use. The two letters *thorn* (þ) and *eth* (ð) were used to write the sounds we now spell *th*, as in *think* and *then*, while *ash* (æ) was used to spell the vowel sound of *cat*. If you mentally replace these letters with *th* and with *a*, you may find that some words look a bit more familiar.

A few words are easy, especially the little grammatical ones: *her* is 'here', *and* is 'and', *æfter* is 'after', *þær* is 'there', *his* is 'his', *þæt* is 'that', and *him* is 'him' – at least sometimes! Only slightly harder are *cyning* and its contracted form *cyng* 'king', *rad* 'rode', *niht* 'nights', and *wolde*, *woldon* 'would'. And you have probably spotted that *sæt* is just our word 'sat'. Barely recognizable is *aðas* 'oaths', but, if you ignore the prefix *ge-*, you can see that *gefeaht* is the same word as our 'fought'. You may be startled to learn that the mysterious-looking *ealne* is just our word 'all' with a grammatical ending attached. Finally, that word *wið* is just our word 'with', but note that the word meant 'against' in Old English. The Old English word for 'with' was *mid*, which has completely disappeared except in the compound 'midwife' (literally, 'with-woman'); its job has been taken over by *wið*, which in turn has handed over its original meaning to yet another word, 'against'.

The rest of the passage, however, is very probably so much Martian as far as you're concerned. Part of the reason for that is that many of the other words in the passage have completely disappeared from the language and been replaced by other words which did not exist in Old English. The words used for 'army', 'kingdom', 'put to flight', 'fortress', 'baptism', and even 'they' have all disappeared in this way. The word *eac* 'also' has vanished too,

but a trace of it remains in the name of what used to be *an eke-name* but is now *a nickname*.

A further source of strangeness is the unfamiliar word order: the passage has 'and it put to flight' instead of 'and put it to flight', 'it after rode' instead of 'rode after it', 'then gave the army him hostages' instead of 'then the army gave him hostages', and 'promised that their king baptism receive would' instead of 'promised that their king would receive baptism', among other curiosities. (If you have ever learned modern German or Dutch, some of these odd orders may look suspiciously familiar, for a reason to be explained in Chapters 7 and 8.)

Little words are sometimes unrecognizable: the passage has *him* or *hine* where modern English would have 'it'; the word for 'the' turns up as *þet* or *se*; *of* is used for 'from'. In one case (the phrase meaning 'fought against the whole army') the word for 'the' is missing altogether: clearly the rules for using this word were different in Old English. Other words have mysterious endings: 'would' is variously *wolde* or *woldon*, and the other verbs show these same endings; the words *mycel* 'great' and *ric* 'kingdom' appear as *myccle* and *rice*; *eall* 'all' appears as *ealne*. On the other hand, the word *niht* 'nights' has no ending at all.

Finally, though this is not so easy to see from a written text, the pronunciation of English has changed drastically. All those aitches in words like *gefeahte* 'fought', *niht* 'nights', and *fulwihte* 'baptism' were actually pronounced with a velar fricative, the loud, scrapy sound found in Scottish *loch* and German *ach*, and *niht* was pronounced with the vowel of *hit*. Indeed, the Old English *niht* sounded just about the same as modern German *nicht* 'not'. And almost all the vowel sounds were different from what you would guess from knowing modern English.

In short, then, English has changed beyond recognition in the space of forty generations or so. Since we are lucky enough to possess substantial written records in English from almost all periods since the English learned to write, we can see the changes showing up in our texts century by century and sometimes even decade by decade.

By the late Middle Ages, English had already undergone about five centuries of change from the time of the passage we've just examined, and it was beginning to look quite a bit more like modern English. Here is a passage from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, published in the fourteenth century; unlike most of these tales, this one is in prose. The letter thorn is still in use here, though only for abbreviations. I have deliberately selected a passage which happens to be much easier than most passages from this period:

> A yong man whilom called Melibeus myghty and riche bigat vp on his wif, þ^{t} called was Prudence a doghter, which þ^{t} called was Sophie. Vpon a day bifel þ^{t} he for his desport is went into the feeldes hym to pleye. His wif & eek his doghter, hath he laft inwith his hous, of which the dores weren faste yshette. Thre of his olde foos, han it espied, & setten laddres to the walles of his hous, and by wyndowes ben entred, &

> betten his wif, & wounded his doghter with fyue mortal woundes in fyue sondry places. This is to seyn, in hir feet, in hir handes, in hir erys, in hir nose, and in hir mouth, and leften hir for deed & wenten awey.

This is much easier to understand than the Old English passage, but still very strange; we call the English of this period **Middle English**. You can probably cope with such unfamiliar spellings as *yong*, *riche*, *feeldes*, *pleye*, *thre*, *dores*, and *deed*, but you might have been troubled by *fyue* for 'five' or *erys* for 'ears'. There are not so many endings here as in the earlier passage, but there are still some: *weren* 'were', *yshette* 'shut', *han* 'have', *setten* 'set', *seyn* 'say', *wenten* 'went'. Only a few of Chaucer's words are now unfamiliar to us: *whilom* 'formerly' (or here, perhaps, 'once upon a time'), *inwith* 'inside', and of course *eek* 'also' (this is the same word as the *eac* of the earlier passage), while *desport* is now simply *sport*. The verbs *bigat* 'begat' and *bifel* 'befell' are now rather archaic, especially the first, though you might recall this one from the King James Bible.

The grammar and the word order are conspicuously more familiar than in Old English, but there are still surprises: 'his wife, that called was Prudence', 'a daughter, which that called was Sophie', 'he is went into the fields', '[they] have it espied', and others. And again, Chaucer's pronunciation, if we could hear it, would be largely unintelligible to us: the word *myghty* 'mighty' would sound rather like 'misty' spoken by someone with no teeth, and *feeldes* 'fields' rather like 'failed us', while Chaucer's *hous* 'house' would rhyme with our 'goose' and his *fyue* 'five' with our 'sleeve'.

It was not long after Chaucer's death in 1400 that the pronunciation of English vowels began to change to something approaching our modern vowel sounds, and many of the remaining grammatical endings began to disappear too. By the time of Shakespeare, in the late sixteenth century, the English of the day was beginning to become something that we can easily recognize as English. We call the language of this period **Early Modern English**; here is a sample taken from Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, written around 1600. Orlando is speaking to Adam:

> As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion bequeathed me by will but poor a thousand crowns; and, as thou sayest, charged my brother on his blessing, to breed me well; and there begins my sadness. My brother Jacques he keeps at school, and report speaks goldenly of his profit; for my part, he keeps me rustically at home, or, to speak more properly, stays me here at home unkept; for call you that keeping for a gentleman of my birth, that differs not from the stalling of an ox?

Even if you haven't read any Shakespeare before, you can understand almost all of this with little difficulty, but it still sounds very strange to our ears: we just don't *talk* like this. Things like 'upon this fashion', 'as thou sayest', 'report speaks goldenly of his profit', 'he . . . stays me here at home unkept', 'call you that keeping[?]', and 'that differs not' are all bizarre or impossible for us, even if they're not hard to understand.

By the eighteenth century, a hundred years or so after Shakespeare, several more generations of change had produced a form of English which scholars recognize as **Modern English** – that is, for purposes of classification, it is considered to be essentially the kind of English which we use now. But such classifications are, of course, no more than a convenience, and eighteenth-century English is still easily distinguishable from anything you will hear or read today. Here is a sample from the famous satirist Jonathan Swift; this is part of a letter he wrote in 1712 to the Earl of Oxford and Mortimer, a senior official in the British government. Swift was keenly aware of the ceaseless change in English which we have just been illustrating, and he didn't like it one bit, as you can see:

> My LORD, I do here, in the Name of all the Learned and Polite Perſons of the Nation, complain to your LORDSHIP, as *Firſt Miniſter*, that our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; that the Pretenders to poliſh and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuſes and Abſurdities; and, that in many Inſtances, it offends againſt every Part of Grammar.
>
> I ſee no abſolute Neceſſity why any Language ſhould be perpetually changing; BUT what I have moſt at Heart is, that ſome Method ſhould be thought on for *aſcertaining* and *fixing* our Language for ever, after ſuch Alterations are made in it as ſhall be thought requiſite. For I am of Opinion, that it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than that it ſhould be perpetually changing; and we muſt give over at one Time, or at length infallibly change for the worſe:
>
> BUT where I ſay, that I would have our Language, after it is duly correct, always to laſt; I do not mean that it ſhould never be enlarged: Provided, that no Word which a Society ſhall give a Sanction to, be afterwards antiquated and exploded, they may have liberty to receive whatever new ones they ſhall find occaſion for:

The orthographic peculiarities (the long *s* and the numerous capital letters) were the fashion of the day, and had nothing to do with speech; the same is true of Swift's punctuation, which to our eyes is decidedly eccentric. You can see, though, why we call this Modern English, even if the style strikes us as stuffy and pompous now. But, style aside, this is still not quite the English we use now: the words 'ascertain', 'give over', and 'explode' clearly have meanings for Swift that they don't have for us; Swift refers to certain people as 'the pretenders to polish and refine it', which is not grammatical for us; similarly, he writes 'some method should be thought on' and 'I am of opinion', which are equally impossible for us.

Swift is here complaining about the constant changes in English, which he quite explicitly regards as largely a process of 'corruption'. He is proposing that something should be done about this, and that a body of people, an 'English Academy', should be set up to fix English once and for all, like a dead butterfly in a specimen box, after which nobody would be allowed to introduce any further changes at all, apart from the acceptance of an occasional new word which might be deemed necessary and allowable by the authorities.

'Larry Trask's introduction to historical linguistics is what I've been wanting for many years: an introductory undergraduate textbook which presents the latest developments in historical research in a clear, exciting, and straightforward way.'

Dorothy Disterheft, University of South Carolina

This book is an introduction to historical linguistics – the study of language change over time. Written in an engaging style and illustrated with examples from a wide range of languages, the book covers the fundamental concepts of language change, methods for historical linguistics, linguistic reconstruction, sociolinguistic aspects of language change, language contact, the birth and death of languages, language and prehistory and the issue of very remote relations.

The book is thoroughly up to date, and covers the most recent work on the study of phonological changes in progress, on morphological and syntactic change, and on typological approaches to change. It also addresses such recent controversies as the Nostratic hypothesis and the Greenberg/Cavalli-Sforza work on language, genes and teeth.

A minimal knowledge of linguistic concepts is needed and the book is suitable for students approaching the subject for the first time. The exercises will be particularly useful to teachers and students alike. The approach is data-oriented throughout and students are encouraged to confront data, to spot patterns and to draw on their own knowledge of languages.

R. L. Trask is Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Sussex

Distributed in the United States of America
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

ARNOLD

ISBN 0-340-60758-0

9 780340 607589