REVIEW

A history of English. By Míša Hejná & George Walkden. Language Science Press, 2022. Pp. xvi, 439.

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In the last decade a number of more general histories of the English language have been published, the two most recent of them being Seth Lehrer's *Introducing the History of the English Language* (2024) and the highly anticipated *New Cambridge history of the English language* (forthc.) in six volumes. The volume under review, while firmly embedded in this tradition, stands out of the crowd on two counts.

First, the authors take a bold step of rejecting the traditional organisation of the material along the temporal axis, from Germanic beginnings of the language all the way to its modern complexity. Instead, they start with a general overview of the linguistic field, followed by six chapters arranged chronologically from Present Day English to its Germanic and Indo-European origins. This reverse arrangement was used by Barbara Strang in her *A history of English* (1970) and, to the best of my knowledge, no one else. Her argument for this approach was that as we step back in time, both complexity of language change and fullness of documentation decrease (Strang 1970: xv), thus we should begin with the periods that offer fewest problems.

Hejná & Walkden share Strang's approach (and title!), if not motivation. For them, it serves four purposes: (i) to connect Present Day English variation with the past; (ii) to match the organisation of most university courses in the history of English; (iii) to match the timeline of English literature courses, where Beowulf and Chaucer rarely play a prominent role; and (iv) to emphasise that "the history of the English language is still being written" (Hejná & Walkden viii).

This brings us to the second fresh perspective this book adopts; it is not primarily intended for scholars, but for university students as their first coursebook in the history of English. The pedagogy of English historical linguistics has been widely discussed in recent years, but in another first, has until now not taken the shape of a usable textbook. *A history of English* is clearly written with student audience in mind – and with little formal linguistic training at that. This is reflected in its informal style, marked with pragmatic particles

such as *well* and *hmmm*, numerous direct questions, and occasional tongue-in-cheek comments, like the Biblical (or Montypythonesque) triple denial that letters are not sounds (Hejn& Walkden 4). In places it somewhat resembles Ælfric's Latin grammar, and it studiously avoids detailed linguistic explanations that could discourage its intended readers.

The contents are organised into seven chapters. Chapter 1, "Introduction to language variation and change and history of the English language" (pp. 1–27) eases its readers into the central concept of the book, language variation, both synchronically and diachronically. Chapter 2, "Change in English today" (pp. 31–58), revolves around questions about the nature of concepts such as "today", "English", and "language", real eye-openers to students accustomed to treating textbooks as sources of God-given, ultimate lore. Chapter 3, "Late Modern English (1700–1945)" (pp. 59–120), links language development in the period with cotemporary social and technological changes. Chapter 4, "Early Modern English (1500—1700)" (pp. 121–173) is constructed around the notion of standardisation. Chapters 5, "Middle English (1150—1500)" (pp.175–237), and 6, "Old English (600—1150)" (pp. 239–305), are in a more traditional fashion heavier on linguistic content, while Chapters 7, "The prehistory of English" (pp. 307–347), and 8, "Wrapping up" (pp. 349—360) provide respectively a deeper temporal perspective on English and a summary of sorts.

The discussion in each chapter tries to avoid linguistic complexity; technical terms are emphasised in small caps, referring the reader to a short glossary at the end of the book. Wherever necessary, suggestions for further study are included; these are not only books and journal articles, but YouTube videos, podcasts, on–line lectures and the like. The pedagogical purpose of the book is served by exercise sets accompanying every chapter as well as selections of authentic texts; the latter are not your usual suspects, bringing a pleasant whiff of freshness into the discourse.

An interesting consequence of the adopted approach is that the authors do not try to present the big picture, either of the history of the language as such, or of individual periods. Thus, for example, Chapter 3 (59–120), introduces the following issues: prescriptivism, AAVE, h-dropping, rhoticity, negative contraction, subjunctive, progressive, semi-modals, amelioration and pejoration, and Americanisms. This is a novelty, one that should appeal to students, if not to historical linguists, who might wonder whether students would be able to connect all the dots spilled on the table in front of them.

This textbook deserves accolade for trying to do things differently from its predecessors. Starting with the familiar, talking to the audience at their level of linguistic knowledge while providing tools for further study, and framing linguistic developments in their socio-cultural context is how it should be done. Especially in a one semester course I can see the book working as intended.

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And yet, borrowing from Hejná & Walkden's informal style, there is no rose without fire. At times the book falls prey to its own approach, as the following two examples will illustrate.

The rationale for adopting the reverse temporal arrangement of periods is clear. Whether it is successful is debatable. Ordered this way, segments of the history of English lose any sense of continuity; connections between Old and Middle English, Middle and Early Modern English etc. are hard to see. Even worse, the authors are sometimes forced to make a U-turn and "retrodict" developments they have not discussed yet. This leads them to discussing the loss of inflectional endings in the chapter of Old English, as in the Middle English section the inflectional complexity has not been introduced yet. There, on the other hand, some forms appear seemingly out of thin air, connected to their descendants but not to their as yet unknown ancestors.

You may also wonder if the decision to target students with little or no prior linguistic knowledge is that successfully performed. Hejná and Walkden are both linguists and in numerous places you can almost see them trying very hard not to say too much – and failing. This is because theoretical linguistic concepts remain in the book, but they are boiled down to bare bones, only hinting at the complexity of issues presented in the book. This applies in particular to syntax, where complex theoretical issues are reduced to one-liners, yet terminology and formalisms that require a more detailed discussion are still used. Thus Exercise E.3 (Ch.1, pp 22–23), calls for the identification of such structures as head, complement, and specifier, while they are merely introduced as notions in the chapter. Likewise, the assumption that students could handle Exercise E.4 (Ch. 3, p.98), asking them to translate PDE sentences into their LModE equivalents, on the strength of Chapter 3 alone seems to me overoptimistic.

Hejná and Walkden's book is built on a very interesting proposition, and I will definitely try it out in the classroom. Without seeing it in action though, I feel that it is either too radical or not radical enough in stripping the history of English of traditional linguistic context. With that in mind, I would still recommend it as a course textbook, but on the assumption that your students need to have some basic knowledge of theoretical linguistics as the entry requirement.

REFERENCES

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