

By JEAN AITCHISON. **Language change: progress or decay?** 3rd ed. (Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1991, 2001. Pp. xi, 312.

In this, the 3rd edition, Aitchison certainly makes good the promise on the back cover to provide a lucid, up-to-date overview of language change that “remains non-technical in style”. Whether the material is accessible to those with no knowledge of linguistics, though, is a question we will discuss at the end of this review. The “non-technical” style includes periphrastic Ch. titles, e.g., Ch. 1, “The ever-whirling wheel”, Ch. 2, “Collecting up clues”, Ch. 13, “The Mad Hatter’s tea party”, which are then explained in more technical-sounding subtitles (“The inevitability of change”, “Piecing together the evidence”, and “Chain reaction changes”, respectively). New for this edition are Chs. 8 and 9; we will focus first on these, and then discuss other new elements.

Ch. 8, “The wheels of language” presents the topic of grammaticalization. The author employs numerous examples from OE, ME, Modern English, and Greek to demonstrate the process in various forms and to argue, in connection with the overtly descriptive theory informing her discussion, that this form of language change is a “natural process” (113). Just how these changes represent “natural” processes is not made clear (to me, at least) until the discussion of anatomical factors in phonological change presented in Ch. 11. Examples extend from the development of (-ful), e.g., in ‘spoonful’ from *full*, as in “a basket full of apples” (112) (this sort of example is popular with my introductory students), to the development of Grk. *tha* ‘Future’ from *thelo*: *an* ‘I want that’ (113) (which lies well beyond the grasp of those students).

The author’s “non-technical” approach is sometimes humorously effected, as A. begins her chapter on change in meaning, Ch. 9, “Spinning away”, with a well known quotation from Lewis Carroll, *Through the looking glass*, “When I use a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less”. Again, she couches her discussion in a descriptive approach to meaning change. Examples come from English. She discusses numerous historical theories of semantics and semantic change, disdaining all but the most recent, that semantic items result from humans “start[ing] out from the human body” and “moving outward to other parts of the physical universe”

to create the vocabulary, as in “the foot of the mountain”(130). Metaphorical extension in general has long been recognized — at least since Hugh Blair (1783) — as a primary means of word formation. That the body-centric theory will continue to enjoy popular support is an open question, but it is not the last impression I would wish to leave with basic students.

Ch. 1 opens with a thoroughly documented and exemplified discussion of the all-pervasive and continuous nature of language change that leads into A’s running argument for a descriptive approach to understanding language (14). She actually uses the term here, although elsewhere she prefers other terms to convey such attitudes. Numerous examples in Ch. 2 well exemplify the detective work a researcher in comparative linguistics must undertake and give readers at least an initial idea of what it is that comparative linguistics does.

In Ch. 4, “Spreading the word”, Ch. 5, “Conflicting Loyalties”, Ch. 6, “Catching on and taking off”, and Ch. 7, “Caught in the web”, the social dimensions of language change and variation are discussed, with a particularly appealing discussion of “spatial diffusion”, diverse patterns indexed demographically (82 ff.). The discussion is richly exemplified, and full justice is done to the complex nature of the processes by which sound changes take root and spread through forms in a language. In this section the author provides a discussion of how language change in progress may be recognized.

A cautionary note is in order for Ch. 4, which discusses sound changes “occurring above the level of conscious awareness” (66), in re the situation of *r* in New York City (Labov 1972). We need to distinguish between stylistic variation resulting from a consciously undertaken imitation of a language feature in another variety — I know of no one who does not speak differently at work and at home — and a change in one’s acquired mother tongue throughout the speech community that uses it. We have no evidence of the home dialects of the sales clerks at S. Klein who used *r*,

but we have abundant anecdotal evidence of New Yorkers who are unable to change features of their home dialects, despite their attempts at imitating various features from more prestige varieties and the best efforts of their speech therapists.

The four chapters in Part 3 that take up sociolinguistic causes of language change provide thoroughly documented and richly exemplified discussions. Readers are sure to acquire a good understanding of the factors in question. Again, however, I would inject a cautionary note, as, appealing though arguments and evidence may be to elect a cause of a particular change or of a particular kind of change, one must distinguish between the process through which a change occurs and its cause. Throughout the section numerous processes associated with attested changes are discussed; each is rejected as the singular cause of the changes used to exemplify them, but we are left with the impression that each is a cause, at least in part. If natural tendencies owing to the structure of the human vocal apparatus caused, for example, the loss of final *n* in French, how is it that the same apparatus permitted the *formation* of forms ending in *n* in the parent language of French, and for that matter, the persistence of forms ending in *n* in other languages, and in French up to the time of their loss?

Part 4 contains such a wealth of data on pidgins and creoles, much of it collected by the author herself, that it could well be expanded to another volume focusing on the topic. Pidginistics and creolistics are generally relegated to one component of a semester's work in sociolinguistics, but recent work in these fields has resulted in a heightening of attention and what processes observed teach us about language. I look forward to the day when a graduate of a linguistics program is expected to have as thorough a knowledge of creolization processes as of Grimm's Law. A's thoroughly exemplified discussions of this process in themselves make the volume rewarding reading.

The effort to render a “non-technical” text comes with a price, however. Certainly, reducing a subject to its nomenclature reflects a senseless pedantry, yet one does expect students at a certain level to be conversant with the terms used in linguistics; like any other professional discipline, it has its register. Reducing the complexity of transcription is also part of this effort, but in some spots I found myself confused. While we see IPA [ʃ] and [ʒ] (172), we also see “[e] as in *pet*” and “[i] as in *pit*” (173). And we see “a → i Ann → Ian” and “o → a socks → sacks” (194). As these are offered to exemplify the U.S. Northern Cities Vowel Shift, I am left unclear as to what pronunciation is indicated. Many of the discussions do not involve linguistics nomenclature, but a good deal of nomenclature is necessarily introduced and defined, e.g., *velar nasal* (70), *voiceless stop* (88), *voiced stop* (93), *analogy*, (177), but also *intransitive verb* (150), *suffix*, and *prefix* (139). With regards to the latter, I am not aware of the state of public education in Great Britain, but in the U.S. we are not enjoying the zenith of the art, yet even my least prepared students know these items; for those who do not know the rest, I doubt that the brief glosses offered would be adequate.

Also, I should point out that ‘run’, ‘come’, and ‘work’ may be “ordinary verbs” as A’s analysis indicates, but in Guayana Creole *Jan wok tu mek moni* ‘John works to make money’ (237), the usage is *purposive*, a relevant distinction in the context that *tu* is shown to have progressed first to use with such verbs, then to desiderative, and finally to inceptive verbs. As stated in the text, the sequence runs, “ordinary” to desiderative, to inceptive.

This volume begins and ends with the argument, “everything in the universe is perpetually in a state of change” (3), and language change is “natural and inevitable” (259). Between these bookends, readers are given a thorough discussion of relevant topics in comparative linguistics and language change, her sister, language variation, and pidginistics and creolistics. Otherwise uninformed readers may gain a good amount of knowledge about human language from this work,

which would serve well as a core text for students with some preparation in phonetics and phonology, morphology, and syntax who are engaged in an introductory course in comparative-historical linguistics. I heartily recommend it to instructors who, like me, are constantly looking for intriguing material with which to spice their lectures and whet the appetites of students.

Robert D. Angus
California State University, Fullerton

References

Blair, Hugh. (1783) 1965. *Lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres*. 2 Vol. Ed. Harold F. Harding. Carbondale, Il: Southern Illinois U P.

Labov, William. 1972. *Sociolinguistic patterns*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.