

Hans Sauer and Monika Kirner-Ludwig. *Evolution of English: Studying the Past, Understanding the Present.* Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2021. ISBN 978-3-86057-280-1. 541 pp.

In the last couple of decades, the pressures of academic life have led many academics to focus extensively on quantifiable research, with the unfortunate result that the writing of textbooks and applied texts has come to be seen as somehow less relevant. Scholars thus tend to opt to gradually build up their professional careers by growing their portfolios of individual research studies that tend to focus on highly specific issues. Although it does not bring a measurable ‘outcome’ that is subject to the positive evaluation of modern bibliometric science, the writing of textbooks is often a far more complicated and daunting task than producing a series of piecemeal texts on the narrow topic of one’s own specialization.

It is thus plaudable when academics go against the trends and decide to produce book-length materials for students in which they sum up the existing scholarship on a given topic. A textbook, then, is not merely a teaching aid but a compendium of knowledge, particularly if someone decides to write a book on such a vast and complicated subject matter as the history of a specific language that extends over 1500 years. In *Evolution of English: Studying the Past, Understanding the Present*, this task has been undertaken by Hans Sauer, the late professor of English linguistics at Ludwig-Maximilian’s University in Munich, Germany, and Monika Kirner-Ludwig, a student of Sauer’s currently working at Leopold-Franzens-Universität in Innsbruck, Austria. One could hardly think of a team of authors who would be better qualified for this task: Sauer himself was a renowned expert on Early Middle English, with a very prolific academic career, and Monika Kirner-Ludwig is a gifted young scholar in the field of English philology, with an interest in discourse analysis and pragmatics.

The book, which fits well among several other recent textbook-style publications on the history of English (e.g. Van Gelderen 2014; Kohnen 2014, McIntyre 2020), is organized into 11 chapters and several additional sections containing appendices and a glossary of terms. The first two chapters provide a general introduction into the study of language change, outlining the fundamental principles of language change and giving an overview of basic linguistic concepts. Chapter 1, thus, introduces the readers into mechanisms of language change on various language levels and reasons for such changes, which are both internal (e.g., systemic regulation, including analogy, re-analysis, system repair and grammaticalization) and external (e.g., language contact, social reasons). Language typology is explained, as are the sources and methods of reconstruction of older forms, and a history of scholarship and research is presented. The latter starts

with the beginnings of comparative linguistics, and continues with the Neogrammarians and dialectologists, eventually to conclude with sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics and historical pragmatics. The general linguistic introduction is continued in Chapter 2, which elaborates on synchrony vs. diachrony, and on the concepts and terms necessary for a scholarly analysis of language on the various language levels, namely phonology, orthography, and morphology.

It is with Chapter 3 that the actual account of the historical development of English begins. From among the two traditional approaches to presenting historical data, i.e. the chronological and the systematic, the authors wisely adopt a mixed approach. Thus, Chapter 3 – titled “The periods of English” – proceeds chronologically in mapping, among other things, the effect of the external history of the language, and all subsequent chapters are organized according to the systematic approach, which is characterized by the separate treatment of linguistic levels. The chronological chapter traces the development of English from Indo-European, providing the family trees of the different branches, and meticulously details all the relevant phenomena, such as the familiar laws of sound change and the features shared by the different Germanic languages. The periodization of English includes many maps and the social and cultural influences on Old, Middle, Early Modern and Modern English. While very informative, that section is not extremely technical and also makes for some exciting reading.

Chapter 4 is exclusively devoted to writing and orthography, starting with the relation between spoken and written language, then the logographic writing systems, runic scripts, Carolingian miniscule and Gothic script. A section is included on the standardization of orthography, spelling pronunciation, punctuation and proposals for spelling reforms.

The traditionally tough philological content begins in Chapter 5 on phonology, which provides a discussion of the changes in pronunciation and sound-systems. The account takes into consideration the regional diversity of Old and Middle English, and contains a very readable presentation of how loan words from various languages (particularly Scandinavian in OE and French in ME) became integrated into the phonological system of English.

The next part of the book, Chapter 6 on morphology, spans an impressive 120 pages and could easily appear as a separate textbook. The reason for this formidable extent is that the chapter provides a comprehensive account of all the word classes; the concept of morphology thus serves, rather, as an umbrella term for this broad area of grammar. Not surprisingly, attention is paid to inflectional categories and related historical issues, with all the declensions of nouns, the development of the genitive, the loss of inflectional endings, the generalization of the *s*-plural, loss of grammatical gender, etc. Two important subchapters which will be of particular interest to all Anglicists include the development of pronouns, determiners and articles (Section 6.6) and verbs (Section 6.7). The latter is a daunting 70-page account of verb classes, verbal inflectional endings, tense and aspect, i.e. the areas which have been a most challenging test of patience for several generations of central European English philology students who have had to undergo the ordeal of getting through this topic in order to pass the compulsory exam in the subject, and thus, hopefully, achieve the ultimate epiphany of

understanding the inevitable historical logic behind the complexities and intricacies of the verb system in Modern English. Still, the chapter has many interesting points even for those who have gone through this subject matter years ago in their undergraduate/graduate studies, such as the modality cycle that traces the semantic changes of the modal auxiliaries from Old English onwards.

Chapter 7 deals with syntax. It details the major syntactic changes, such as the loss of inflectional endings causing the typological change of English from a synthetic to an analytical language, the loss of impersonal constructions, the formation of question and negations and the auxiliary *to do*, etc. The individual structures and constructions are illustrated with ample examples and are presented in a clear and comprehensive way. Chapter 8 then turns attention to semantics, probing various aspects of meaning relations and change of meaning, and Chapter 9 to vocabulary, with a focus on borrowing and word-formation. The chapter includes a discussion of such classics as etymological doublets and the complexity of the different influences on English lexis – Latin, Greek, Scandinavian, French, and other. The section on word-formation, while explaining the historical trends and influences, is essential reading for any student of modern English because it will help them to understand the characteristic peculiarities of Modern English word-formation processes, i.e. compounding, conversion, back-formation, clipping etc. The discussion does not omit at least a brief mention of personal and place names.

While that is where standard textbooks might end their historical overview of the development of the English language, this book is complemented with two additional chapters. The first of these, Chapter 10, provides a much very welcome introduction into the fields of historical text linguistics and pragmatics. It is definitely very positive that this area is included, in view of the growing scope of recent research and, even, the establishment of the new discipline of historical pragmatics (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2013). It can be expected that in subsequent editions of the book, this chapter will be further expanded, e.g. in order to show the gradual development of various genres, the emergence of text conventions and the establishment of such interpersonal elements as politeness and face. Finally, Chapter 11 offers a more sociolinguistically-oriented account of the standard language and of the diverse varieties of English, regional, social and professional. The chapter does not fail to mention the modern dialect areas in England and devotes special subsections to Cockney, Scots and Irish English (collectively labelled “The Celtic Englishes”), American English, and even pidgin and creole languages. Quite understandably, the book does not fail to include at least a brief mention of the spread of English as a world language and its current dominant status as the global lingua franca.

All in all, the authors of the book demonstrate their ability to mediate the technical knowledge; they do not compromise on the level of detail, which is needed for the academic audience, yet they manage to explain even traditionally complicated issues in a clear and transparent way, also thanks to the many examples and illustrations they provide. The textbook, aptly subtitled “Studying the past, understanding the present”, is likely to become a very comprehensive, one dares to say a definitive overview of knowledge that traditional continental

programmes in English philology require from their students in order to achieve an understanding of the forms and structures of the English language. It is one of those books that any Anglicist should have in their bookcase, as a form of indispensable reference to consult on any historical aspect of the English language.

References

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