

Reviews

Don Ringe and Joseph F. Eska. *Historical Linguistics: Toward a Twenty-First Century Reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, xiii + 313 pp., 11 figures, 77 tables, £ 22.99/\$ 39.99.

Don Ringe and Joseph Eska's *Historical Linguistics* is "intended for students with some prior training in linguistics" (xii), meaning the authors presuppose "an elementary knowledge of phonetics, of the principles of phonetic contrast, and of generative phonology and syntax" (1). The generative paradigm is assumed to be "the standard model of linguistic description" (1). Yet, the book also positions itself in the Neogrammarian tradition with regard to historical linguistics, and it is indebted to Labovian theories of language change in progress. The authors "have tried to adduce some of the rapidly expanding scientific research on language acquisition, since it seems increasingly clear that most language changes arise as errors in native language learning" (xii). My review will consider how successfully the authors unite these theoretical approaches and, thus, manage to reintegrate historical linguistics into an up-to-date linguistic discourse, as the book's subtitle *Toward a Twenty-First Century Reintegration* suggests (see also back cover).

The book under review consists of an Introduction (1–6), whose passages on the challenges of historical linguistics and the Uniformitarian Principle are good to read, plus 11 chapters. Contrary to the authors' suggestion, the first chapter, "The nature of human language and language variation" (7–27), should not be skipped, as it is very good "background reading" (7) on the concepts of Universal Grammar and the Principles and Parameters model, and on language acquisition, to which also the second chapter is dedicated (28–44). Chapters 3 and 4 deal with different aspects of language contact in relation to language change (45–77). The next two chapters cover the field of phonetics and phonology (78–151); chapters 7 and 8 look at morphology (152–211). Chapter 9 is concerned with the field of syntactic change (212–227), chapters 10 and 11 with comparative reconstruction (228–255, 256–280). The last chapter, titled "Appendix: Recovering the pronunciation of dead languages: types of evidence" (281–290), introduces background knowledge, showing how texts of older linguistic stages can be linguistically analysed. To my mind, this so-called Appendix would have been a very suitable first chapter. The book is rounded off with a bibliography (291–308) and two helpful indexes (291–313).

Out of personal interest, I first read chapter 9, "Syntactic change". Two causes for syntactic change are identified here, first, the "intergenerational syntactic change via acquisition" (213), and second, syntactic change via contact. The main focus lies on the first aspect. The tension between the generative under-

standing that “a syntactic parameter changes its setting from one generation to the next via imperfect learning in the acquisition process” and our evidence “that change takes place only gradually” (214) is solved by Kroch’s (1989) Grammars in Competition Hypothesis. The value of Kroch’s model is exemplified by Ann Taylor’s (1994) treatment of the development from OV to VO order in ancient Greek (214–218). At the end of the chapter, the rise of the English *do*-periphrasis with simultaneously occurring restriction of V-to-T movement to modal auxiliaries is shown to illustrate Kroch’s Constant Rate Effect (222–226). These test cases *do* convincingly show “how contemporary theoretical approaches can be applied to the study of syntactic change” and how they “can achieve meaningful results that philological analysis alone could not” (226).

However, the scope of this chapter, which consists of no more than 16 pages, seems rather restricted to me. For instance, I cannot see why Lightfoot (1979) and the criticism thereof is not summed up in the context of the English modals, at least briefly. Coming from an English department whose approach to language is far more structuralist than generativist, I think that mention should have been made of the established mechanisms of syntactic change before proceeding to the explanations given here. To highlight theoretical characteristics of the generative approach, putting it into contrast to, for instance, grammaticalisation would have been helpful in my opinion. Thus, I would recommend that students read the relevant chapters of others, e.g. of Lyle Campbell, April McMahon, or Larry Trask, prior to this chapter on syntactic change.¹

But let us turn to the beginning of *Historical Linguistics*, that is, to the second chapter, “Language replication and language change”. After having outlined the process of native language acquisition (NLA), chapter 2 gives “anecdotal evidence” (38) of restrictions to linguistic innovations and of errors in the course of the NLA process. It is stressed that “native-language learner errors must survive into adulthood” (39) to be a source for language change. However,

there is very little evidence regarding native-learners errors that persist into the latest stages of NLA, because colleagues who study NLA are interested in how children *succeed*, not in the comparatively rare instances in which they fail. Unfortunately what we who study language change need is a comprehensive study of those failures. (40)

Thus, if we do not want to rely on the anecdotal, more work is needed.

But we are much better informed in those cases when such a learner error has become or is about to become a universal in a speech community. Chapter 3, “Language change in the speech community”, gives ample evidence of this,

1 Cf. Campbell (2004), chapter 10; McMahon (1994), chapters 5 and 6; Trask (2007), chapter 6.

summarising mainly studies by Labov. What struck me as interesting are the considerations on vowel rotation (47f.) and vowel mergers (48; also in chapter 2 at 42f.),² the bringing together of the notion of *borrowing* with Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard (48f.; cf. Labov 1972), and the role assigned to women and girls as language changers (50f. and 55f.). I would, however, be very cautious to draw any parallels to earlier stages of English, or of any other language, as women have surely not always been "vigorously independent-minded" characters and as such "agents of change both because they are likely to have embraced linguistic innovations when young and because they are likely to be influential in their communities as adults" (51).

Up to chapter 4, most of the examples are taken from the recent past, though the attentive reader will be able to infer relations and connections with earlier stages of a language. Chapter 4, "Language contact as a source of change", addresses contact between different languages, i.e. mutually unintelligible speech-forms, and works with case studies that relate to older linguistic stages (69–76). For students of English, the information on Norsified English given on pages 74–76 will be interesting.

With the fifth chapter, the authors enter the oldest and best researched field of historical linguistics: sound change. The beginning of the chapter (78–83) convincingly relates sound change to the Labovian theories outlined in chapter 3. As a preliminary we must again accept that "every sound change must begin as an acquisition error which survives and is copied" (78). Once the error is copied by other native speakers, it is no longer an idiosyncratic error but a "variable" sound change.

But if an incipient variable sound change is adopted as a marker of social identity [...], it will both spread through the community and apply more and more frequently in the speech of successive generations until it becomes categorical rather than variable. (79)

Relying on Labov (1994, esp. Part D: "The Regularity Controversy"), Ringe and Eska show that shifts in pronunciation spread gradually and exhibit no lexical irregularities, and that lexical diffusion of sound changes only occurs under certain borrowing conditions.³ The regularity hypothesis is tested by a "crude experiment", as the authors call it:

² On pages 90–93, quite worthwhile considerations on vowel rotation are brought into a historical perspective as the Great Vowel Shift is explained by means of generative and, to a larger extent, NLA theory.

³ For a different interpretation of Labov and the Neogrammarians, cf. Hock (2003: 453f.).

The first 200 words of the glossary in an Old English textbook, Moore and Knott 1955, which survive in Modern English, were compared to their contemporary reflexes. The shapes of at least 88 percent of the modern words inspected can be derived from those of the OE words entirely by regular sound changes and known morphological changes. (80)

This leads to the stunning result that “irregularity is not more than about 3 percent per millennium” (80).

The student reader is not introduced to the different types of sound change in this chapter (e.g. to assimilation, umlaut) but advised to consult other books (83), which, as a method, is comparable to the ninth chapter that also leaves out the typical categories relevant to its topic.⁴ Instead, the phonetic motivations of sound change are illustrated by means of lenition (83ff.), and it is shown that persisting learners’ errors “are usually phonetically ‘reasonable’ mistakes; that is why most of the sound changes are ‘natural’, and why a large proportion of the phonological rules to which they give rise likewise seem natural” (89).

Chapter 7, “Morphology”, starts with rejecting analogy as a valid theory for analyzing morphological change, and dismisses supposedly “disappointing” (153) work on it, such as Kuryłowicz’s laws and Mańczak’s tendencies.⁵ Again, the authors state that “the most serious shortcoming of the traditional approach is that it does not take native language acquisition (NLA) into account” (153), only to find, one page later, that more work has to be done on this. Subsequently, a “coherent theory of morphology” (154) is sketched out, that is Distributed Morphology (DM) of the generative tradition (155–165), which also serves as the underlying theory of chapter 8, titled “Morphological change”. It is rather problematic to resort to DM alone. For readers not familiar with the generative conceptions, it will be difficult to see from this very brief discussion of analogy why “discussion of morphological change in a modern theoretical framework has barely begun” (209).⁶

From the perspective of English historical linguistics, illustrative examples are given in chapter 8 (e.g. the re-analysis of OE *-dom* as a lexical suffix (167) or of OE *-lic* as an adverb-forming suffix (170)).⁷ Yet, astonishing interpretations are reached at times. For example: being strongly opposed to the idea that ModE ‘s,

⁴ The notable exception is chapter 10, where the authors start off by defining terms of language genealogy, like *relatedness*, *families* or *cognate* (228f.).

⁵ For a short summary of these, see McMahon (1994: 77 f. and 79 f.), Trask (2007: 142ff.).

⁶ For a theoretically sound and “modern” discussion of morphology see, for instance, the contributions in Joseph and Janda (2003), Part IV.

⁷ Ringe and Eska use DM’s terminology, of course, which I will not.

marking the possessive case, developed from constructions like *for Jesus his sake*, Ringe and Eska comment on authentic examples, as for instance *The wif of Bathe hir tale*, as follows:

Some scribes took the spelling *his* seriously and generalized from it, creating such **monstrosities** as the quoted heading [...]; but medieval scribes were not necessarily competent linguists, and what they wrote was not always **linguistically real**. (177; my emphases)

Of course, medieval scribes did not know of the directionality in the development of clitics (cf. 177). But if we are to take learners' errors to be "linguistically real", why not a medieval scribe's competence? Another reason given for the implausibility of this construction developing into the clitic 's is that, in the 13th century, it could only be constructed, in the authors' opinion, when the noun (*Jesus, the wif of Bathe*) was a dative object (176). Thus, they accept *I smæt of Mordred is hafd* as a construction where *is* is *his* (cf. 176). But in the case of *playe wiþ a child hys brouch, child hys* is taken to be a spelling variant of *chilides* because *wiþ* does not govern the case of *child* but that of *brouch* (cf. 177).⁸

The authors interpret the second example incorrectly. In the German dialect I happen to be competent in, a dative construction would work in both cases: (a) *Ich schlug dem Mordred* (dative object) *seinen Kopf* (accusative object) *ab* 'I smote off Mordred his head', and: (b) *Ich spiele mit dem Kind seinem Spielzeug* (dative object) 'I play with the child [possessor] his/her/its [possessive determiner in the dative case] toy [possessum]'.⁹ They are simply two different dative constructions: (a) is ditransitive with an indirect dative object, (b) is monotransitive with a dative-possessive-construction where *mit* governs the case of *seinem Spielzeug* but not the dative of *dem Kind*. The dative-possessive construction in (b) could be replaced with a genitive construction (c) *des Kindes Spielzeug* 'the child's toy'. I cannot see why Middle English should not have had two different constructions expressing possession as well; the Ellesmere scribe obviously knew them:

(1) Heere endeth the Wyf of Bathe hir Prologe and bigynneth hir tale

(2) Heere endeth the Wyues tale of Bathe¹⁰

⁸ Note that there are no formal case markers in either *child* or *brouch*.

⁹ This construction is, of course, restricted to German colloquial speech and dialects and even here, its use is restricted; cf. Duden-*Grammatik* (2009: § 2028).

¹⁰ The manuscript is quoted from *The Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/>> [accessed 11 June 2015] and has been checked against online pictures of the relevant folios <<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/wifimg.htm>> [accessed 11 June 2015].

I take both to be grammatically acceptable constructions, which show how people spoke, and also wrote, English. If a theory makes them “implausible” (176) or incompatible with language acquisition (176), it is not very helpful.¹¹

I will have only a brief look at the last two chapters, 10 and 11, “Reconstruction” and “Beyond comparative reconstruction”, which cover the most traditional topics in this book.¹² As “linguistic reconstruction is a test of our hypotheses regarding language change, especially the regularity of sound change” (229), it is little wonder that the authors lay out sound changes and sound patterns and closely link chapter 10 with chapter 5. They show in a very comprehensive way how the comparative method works by using a list of cognates from two dialects of a language spoken in southwestern Siberia (238–253). In the eleventh chapter, so-called ‘traditional’ views are refuted as, for instance, the claim “that a *Stammbaum* is never a justifiable representation of linguistic relationships” (262), and the so-called “beech tree argument”, which is traditionally used to determine the geographical origin of Proto-Indo-European (265). In their sub-chapter “‘Long-distance’ language comparison” the limitations of comparative reconstruction are illustrated (265–279).

Historical Linguistics is not an easy read for someone not native in the generative approach. For this reason alone, an overall conclusion would have been helpful. I miss chapters on change in pragmatics and in lexical semantics (apart from the seven lines on page 254), and a passage on typology, especially word order typology, would have been worthwhile (apart from the summary of Taylor’s study in chapter 9).

I must admit that, coming from a different linguistic background, I sometimes disagree with Ringe and Eska out of sheer conviction but, as the authors neatly put it, “on some points any statement at all is controversial” (265). Yet, in view of much recent work in historical linguistics, the recurring notion in this book that there is something about historical linguistics that is a bit antiquated, “traditional”, as the authors call it, and that historical linguistics has to get rid of the

¹¹ I am well aware of the fact that Construction Grammar and generative theory do not go well together. But to assume that learners of Middle English and of some Modern German dialects learn(t) constructions like *x his y/x her y* and *dem x sein- y/der x ihr y* would definitely be more helpful than to state that “such a collocation could [not] be generalized out of context” (176).

¹² Ringe and Eska only describe comparative reconstruction and are sceptical concerning internal reconstruction, which they dismiss as “less reliable than comparative reconstruction” (253). This is acceptable. What is not acceptable, is the fact that internal reconstruction is given the attribute “traditional” as opposed to “a modern point of view”. As far as I know, even “traditional” linguists have been sceptical about internal reconstruction for a long time. Saussure seems to have seen that it was best used for isolated languages, as for instance Basque (cf. Trask 2000: s.v. *internal reconstruction*), – this was in the 19th century before the term *internal reconstruction* even existed.

old dust and come to new life with the help of modern theory, seems to be oddly out-dated itself. Apart from that, a sound traditional, i.e. philological knowledge should be historical linguistics' solid ground.

Ringe and Eska's *Historical Linguistics* succeeds in bringing modern theory to the study of language change – as many books bearing the same or a similar title have done before it. Combining theories of language acquisition and generative theory with Labov's sociolinguistic approach to language change may seem a bit awkward at times, but there are passages where it works well (esp. chapters 2–6).

I do agree with the authors that historical linguistics needs to be re-integrated or better, needs to *stay* integrated as one of linguistics' core areas. Those who still need to be convinced would be well advised to read Ringe and Eska, as would those interested in a course book for advanced students with more than *some* prior training in linguistics and some knowledge of generative theory.

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