REVIEW

English in its socio-historical context

Robert McColl Millar, *English Historical Sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 220. Paperback, £22.99, ISBN 9780748641802.

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Since Romaine's (1982) pioneering work, historical sociolinguistics has been studying the relationships between language and society in its socio-historical context by focusing on the study of language variation and change with the use of variationist methods. Work on this interdisciplinary sub-field subsisting on sociology, history and linguistics is expanding, as shown, for example, by Milroy (1992), Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (1996; 2003), Ammon, Mattheier & Nelde (1999), Jahr (1999), Kastovsky & Mettinger (2000), Bergs (2005), Conde-Silvestre (2007), Trudgill (2010), or Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre (2012). These works have been elucidating the theoretical limits of the discipline and applying the tenets and findings of contemporary sociolinguistic research to the interpretation of linguistic material from the past. Yet in the course of this development historical sociolinguistics has sometimes been criticised for lack of representativeness and its empirical validity has occasionally been questioned. Fortunately, in parallel to the development of electronic corpora, the assistance of corpus linguistics and social history has conferred 'empirical' ease and 'historical' confidence on the discipline.

This book by Robert McColl Millar specifically deals with the socio-historically contextualised linguistic description of the English language, and follows in the tradition of comparable texts such as Baugh & Cable (1951), Leith (1983), Millward (1989), Smith (1996), Knowles (1997), Culpeper (1997), Fennell (2001), Mugglestone (2006), or Hogg & Denison (2008), among others. But the author, aware of the proliferation of histories of English currently available for university introductory courses on this subject, emphasises the distinctive contribution of his textbook, which is its macro-sociolinguistic approach, evidencing the influence of the structure of society and its evolution on language use and on the linguistic structure itself.

Together with the List of Figures and Tables, the Acknowledgements, the Foreword, the References and Index sections, the book contains seven chapters. Chapter 1 locates historical sociolinguistics both theoretically and methodologically, underlining its disproportionate findings for language variation and change from micro- and macro-sociolinguistic perspectives and presenting trends and basic concepts. Chapter 2 focuses on the sociolinguistic treatment of recent (e.g. postvocalic /r/ in New York) and remote (e.g. the Great Vowel Shift and *do*-periphrasis) language changes in English. Chapter 3 explores the process of standardisation of Modern English: the development and promotion of the London variety to the status of standard with the subsequent devaluation and subordination of others, such as the dialectalisation of Scots. Chapter 4 deals with the codification of this incipient Standard English variety and different related issues such as ideology, purism, attitudes, etc. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the colonial expansion of English and the effects of its linguistic contact with different and distant languages, stressing the linguistic consequences that can follow from the social interaction in particular social contexts of different social, ethnic and language groups.

Obviously, the descriptive density, complexity and technicality of all these processes of change in the history of English is highly conditioned by the readership level required (intermediate or – unlikely – advanced students). The pedagogical purpose of the book is also illustrated with the fact that every chapter ends with a 'Discussion', 'Conclusion', 'Further reading'



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and 'Some issues to consider' section. The selection of readings, relevance and pedagogical convenience of topics and special issues in these sections is successfully achieved for general readers interested in superficially exploring the English language in its society from an historical perspective.

Millar's book is confirmation of the maturity obtained by the field after more than three decades of research. Moreover, this textbook is committed to widening the scope of the discipline beyond the foundational study of variation and change to address macro-sociolinguistic issues – such as multilingualism, language contact, attitudes to language, ideology, standardisation, etc. Consequently, a broader definition of historical sociolinguistics as the reconstruction of the history of a given language in its socio-cultural context is far more inclusive, as this book shows.

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