English in a historical perspective – a neglected inheritance?

PAUL RASTALL assesses current issues and possibilities in studying the history of English

> "…often…in words contemplated singly, there are boundless stores of moral and historic truth, and no less of passion and imagination are laid up – that from these lessons of infinite worth may be derived…"
>
> (Richard C. Trench, 1851, 1)

WHEN we think of "English today", a range of issues naturally springs to mind. Principally, they are "synchronic" issues. They can be matters "internal" to linguistic systems, or viewpoints "external" to English considered as a communication system. Externally, we might consider, for example, the diversity of geographical, generational or sociolinguistic varieties, teaching and learning conditions and problems, the political and economic issues arising from the enormous spread of English worldwide. Internally, there are the many questions of phonology, grammar, lexicon, usage and textual practices, which are more directly "linguistic" in the narrow sense. A little less obviously, we can consider issues of the future of English both from the "external" point of view, looking at – for example - the selection of varieties for teaching or international communication purposes, and from the "internal" viewpoint, the "synchronic dynamics" of English, looking at the ways in which English is currently changing or tending to change. All of those matters and others are well covered in *English Today*.

Another viewpoint on English today, however, comes with questions about how we have reached the current state. This involves a diachronic point of view. That point of view involves the "external" consideration of how and why English has spread around the world as well as the traditional historical study of the origins, periods and development of the language in phonology, grammar and lexicon. The former has been clearly and well addressed in numerous publications over the last fifteen years or so (Crystal, 1990: Cheshire, 1991: McArthur, 1998). The latter focus on "the history of English" has also been very adequately dealt with by, for example, Barber (1999). Fennell (2001) has added a welcome, and useful, sociolinguistic perspective on historical change. Works such as those add to a long tradition of scholarly and "popular-scholarly" books on the history of English going back through Baugh (1978), Strang (1970), Wrenn (1949), Potter (1969), Weekley (1952), Jespersen (1922), Pearsall-Smith (1912), Bradley (1904), Skeat (1887) and Trench (1855, 1851) among many others. Those works generally take as their principle a progression through time from the earliest periods to the present day.

It is possible, however, to look at Present Day English retrospectively in order to account for features of current spelling, phonology, grammar, lexicon, personal names, place

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names, fixed expressions and texts in relation to historical origins and development. In other words, one can identify the characteristics and unusual features of Present Day English and Modern English in general, and attempt explanations of how those characteristics and features developed. I call that "(Modern) English in a Historical Perspective". It is, of course, not a new idea, but I think it is a neglected one.

Some of the earlier histories of English consider contemporary vocabulary items and relate them to their origins and cognate expressions. Usually, there is a classification by semantic field (political, legal, geographical, animal, flower names, religious expressions, etc.) and often a mistaken insistence on the "true" or etymological meaning, but the works are valuable and instructive. Such studies as those of Trench (1851)1, Weekley (1912), Pearsall-Smith (1912), Jespersen (1922), and Potter (1969) contain such an approach and are useful in relating contemporary vocabulary and idioms to the cultural life of speakers, as Trench indicates in the epigraph. More recently, some of the exercises in Freeborn's book (1992) imply a similar perspective by encouraging students to relate older texts to their contemporary experience of English through the identification of cognates, intralingual translation into Present Day English and the observation of differences between older texts and modern usage. I am making a plea for a more general awareness, teaching and discussion of the characteristics of English in a historical perspective. Such a viewpoint is not identical with the traditional diachronic study of English, but draws on it for a historical view of how Present Day English, seen from a contemporary stance, came to be as it is. The distinction between "synchronic" and "diachronic" is necessary but can be pernicious if it prevents the historical understanding of the present state of English as well as its description as a synchronic communication system.

All historical viewpoints involve comparison. There are at least three possibilities for English in a Historical Perspective.

1 Comparing older texts with newer ones

One of the facts of modern English is that texts from a long historical period are concurrent. *The Authorized Version of the Bible*, the works of Jane Austen, the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and today's newspapers are all "modern English" and "current" in the sense that they are all read today, and later works contain inter-textual references to earlier ones. A special case of that is the quoting or paraphrasing of well-known pieces of text in fixed phrases. It is possible, therefore, to study

- the ways in which the English of earlier Modern English texts differs from that of Present Day English and how Present Day English has developed. Among many other things to be noted, for example, *the Authorized Version* regularly uses the 2nd person singular present indicative in *–(e)st/t*, distinct from the plural *ye*, and the third person singular present indicative in *–(e)th*. There is a subjunctive, variable use of the *do* form in questions and no use of the progressive aspect. The remnants of verbal agreement and the subjunctive, the differences in personal pronouns, and the development of the *do* forms can be considered in the light of the text. Early Modern English is, of course, an intermediate stage towards the development of Present Day English and such differences reflect social relations and differing varieties at the time. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen uses *verb + not* for negation rather than the *do* form in many verbs and overwhelmingly prefers *verb + not* for negating the verb, *know*, (*know not*, *knew not* at least 36 times in the text) possibly under biblical influence (but also frequently with *believe*, *care*, *think*). She is inconsistent in, but frequently uses, *be* as the auxiliary with verbs of motion (especially *come*, *go*, *return*, whereas the *Authorized Version* is consistent in this matter (and we still find it, for example, in the hymn, *Christ, the Lord, is risen today*). Conan Doyle tells us that "the police station was in charge of Sergeant Wilson" (*Hound of the Baskervilles*) and he frequently uses *in behalf of* (still standard in America) where we would now expect *on behalf of* (an example of the considerable fluctuation in prepositional usage through time – see Rastall, 1994). In phonology, it is easy to spot older poems which do not rhyme in present day pronunciation (famously, in Blake's *Tiger*, "What immortal hand or eye / could frame thy fearful symmetry" or Sir Edward Dyer's "Though much I want which most would have,/ Yet still my

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mind forbids to crave" in *My Mind to me a Kingdom Is*) and they show pronunciation differences and changes. The effects of the Great vowel shift can be, to a certain extent, detected in spelling, and other sound changes (such as the shortening of long vowels and loss of central syllables in compounds) can be seen, for example, in place (and personal) names (Whitchurch < [hvi:t], "white"; Fulford < [fu:l] "foul", Tow(ce)ster, etc.). As is well-known, place names can also be used to trace the influence of different peoples.

- the origins of well-known fixed phrases (e.g. *Bob's your uncle* – a reference to the nepotism of Lord Salisbury –, *to fall on stony ground* (Matthew 13.5), *a wolf in sheep's clothing* (Matthew 7.15), *a voice crying in the wilderness* (Isaiah 40.3), *winter of discontent*, *a truth universally acknowledged*, *a far better thing*, *fight on the beaches*, *never had it so good,* etc., which the reader will recognise (but can the same be said for your students?).
- the ways in which older forms of English are retained through concurrent earlier texts (e.g. the subjunctives and 2nd person singular forms in the Lord's Prayer ("Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done…" or the sense of *without* in "There is a green hill far away without a city wall").

Different layers of present day English

A second approach comes from the fact that different layers of the history of English retained in present day usage can be perceived outside of inter-textual references or quotes. Examples can be found in:

- inter-generational differences in speech (e.g. calling someone a "Herbert" for an earlier generation was similar to the present use of "Wally", differences in the meaning of *cute*, variation in pronunciation (RP as opposed to SSBE), differences in accepted forms of address, "youthspeak" usages such as *wicked*, *random*, *pants*, etc.)
- variations in the range of contemporary meaning such as *deliver* in *deliver the post*, *deliver a woman of a child* (*cf.* "deliver us from evil"..); *will* in planned/decided future actions and in *will something to happen*; *want* (as "desire" or "need"). Variations of that sort are often highlighted by (sometimes opaque) proverbs or clich(s. For example, the earlier senses of *prove/proof* emerge from *the exception proves the rule / the proof of the pudding is in the eating* and continues in *fool-proof* or *degrees proof*. Similarly, the earlier meaning of *ill* is found in *take something ill*, *ill-founded*, *ill-advised* and is highlighted by *it's an ill wind…* and older proverbs such as *'tis an ill horse that will not carry its own provender*.
- Features of phonological, grammatical and lexical structure revealing earlier developments and patterns. Examples include the stress patterns of words of Germanic and Romance origin; the identification of the origin of affixes (productive/unproductive, Romance/Greek/Germanic, and unsuspected historical affixes e.g. in *answer* or *cleanse*); the register and connotational differences related to the hybridisation of English vocabulary (*help/assistance*, *worsen/deteriorate*, *star – stellar*, *town – urban*, etc.).

Comparing English with other languages

Apart from internal comparisons, it is possible to arrive at some of the striking characteristics of Present Day English through a comparison with other languages. That can often reveal what is specific to English or rather unusual about it. This method is valuable for non-native speakers and for native speakers with a knowledge of foreign languages. For the former, it can help to clarify reflections on English and, for the latter, it can serve to show that the form of English is neither necessary nor natural. For both, it can lead to a comparison with earlier forms of English and the changes that have taken place and, hence, to a broadening of perspective on the state of English and the interrelations of its parts. Among many possibilities for historical discussion are:

- The identification of core vocabulary items and their comparison with French and German
- The use of the *do* forms (and the still existing uses of inversion without *do* and *verb + not* with auxiliaries and occasionally *have* as a main verb)
- How do we negate *dare* and *ought*?
- The regular and "irregular" simple past tense forms (and other more surprising vowel gradations, e.g. in *throat-throttle*)

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- The use of *you* as the sole second person pronoun of address
- The forms of comparative and superlative adjectives (including irregular ones); the remnants of case forms in the personal pronoun system
- The use of inversion (after adverbs of negative meaning or in this sentence!).

Naturally, such features can be seen in their historical development and in comparison with earlier texts (e.g. the clear distinction in the use of *you/thou* by Shakespeare and far more extensive inversions after adverbials in Shakespeare or the *Authorized Version*).

Towards courses in English in a historical perspective

Of course, it can be argued that an adequate understanding of the (progressive) history of English can account for all of the examples quoted and that such histories are needed to provide explanations. However, progressive histories of English can be daunting for the student and especially for non-native speakers. There is always a danger of progressive histories becoming too atomistic and unconnected with contemporary experience, so that the explanation of contemporary usage in a historical light is not achieved. Furthermore, the traditional course of study involving the detailed study of Old English and Middle English, perhaps with comparison of other Germanic languages, has always been possible only for the very few.

Most English-language courses, nowadays, are either concerned with developing a practical competence or with understanding the synchronic structure of English. Furthermore, units of study are lamentably short in many institutions. If a historical understanding of English beyond the simple facts of periodisation and the socio-political explanation of the global spread of English is to be achieved, teaching and learning must be more concentrated and concerned with observational, investigative and explanatory skills rather than factual memorisation or the learning of earlier stages of the language. There should be a place for English in a Historical Perspective.

Moreover, it is a sad fact that many native-speaker students struggle to understand earlier texts in Modern English. *The Authorized Version* of the Bible, Shakespeare, the Lord's Prayer, and Bunyan are difficult or incomprehensible to many students. Frequently, students lack a historical understanding of the events and timescale of the development of English. That makes it difficult for them to appreciate the factors involved in the hybridisation of English – and makes the "timelines" in Fennell's recent book (2001) a useful addition. Whatever one's religious views may be, the widespread ignorance of the landmark religious texts means that the major importance of those texts to the English language is less understood and their contribution to the mindset of earlier generations is not appreciated.
While earlier works concentrated too much on vocabulary and gave scant attention to grammar and phonology, and could be too prescriptive or concerned with judgements on usage, one can still sympathise with Trench's view that "to study a people's language will be to study them" (1855, 7). There is a great need for a linguistic understanding of earlier concurrent texts through a study which relates them to modern experience and there is a significant danger that the cultural inheritance embedded in English will be lost through neglect and left to linguistic archaeologists of the future.

Pedagogically, it is better for students of English (native speakers or not) to be encouraged to observe, research and explain (from the direct experience of texts and the use of research tools such as historical dictionaries and histories of English) than to attempt to follow progressions of facts remote from their experience, or to concentrate exclusively on synchronic issues of variety, structure and usage. My own attempts at teaching a course involving the kind of comparative and retrospective approaches outlined here have been a challenging odyssey both for the students and for me. They have been well received by students and external examiners, and (I think) they have been worthwhile and illuminating experiences for native-speaker and (advanced) non-native speakers alike.

I am sure other teachers have constructed courses around this kind of approach, but a greater awareness of the possibilities is needed along with more attention to English in a Historical Perspective in the literature. ■

1 There is a discussion of Archbishop Trench's once popular and now rather forgotten work in Rastall, P. "Richard Chenevix-Trench – more than just a populariser" in the Bulletin of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas, 2001/2.

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Love letters

Dear U,
I think UR
An alphabetic star
Your symmetry of letter
Could not be NE better

We're such a perfect pair
In *quack* and *queen* and *quare*
That's Y I want to B
Next to U, UC

In *suq* and *coq* I'm left
MT and bereft
So please don't make me Q
Far away from U

Dear Q,
I like U2
That much U know is true
And though you're not a beauty
I think you're quite a QT

But U must leave me free
To go with G 'n T
To make a mellow D
With M, S, I and C

And though U don't agree
With promise QET
At least when I'm around
We'll make a consonant sound

— Roger Berry,
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

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