

REVIEWS

Essentials of Early English. By Jeremy J. Smith. London – New York: Routledge, 1999. Pp. xiv, 251.

Reviewed by Marcin Krygier, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań.

Anybody who taught a course in history of English (HEL) knows that available printed materials display certain almost schizophrenic characteristics. On the one hand, nearly every year a new book appears which claims to be a HEL textbook, and, consequently, the choice available on any library bookshelf is seemingly rich. On the other hand, however, upon browsing any of these books one becomes very quickly aware that they are in fact anything but textbooks. Most of them are good scholarly publications, in-depth presentations of the history of English from a particular perspective (structural, sociolinguistic, etc.). Nevertheless, with few exceptions, they are completely unsuitable for classroom use. When a desperate teacher has to resort to one of them, it may have grave consequences for the students as well as for the course, especially at those universities where HEL is an optional element of the curriculum.

In view of this situation, the publication of a book which claims to be a student-oriented "practical handbook for students beginning the study of earlier stages of the English language" is a most welcome event. If it were to fulfill this promise and be a true primer for beginners, it would be a very significant achievement on the part of the author.

Essentials of Early English by Jeremy J. Smith consists of three major parts. Part I, "Descriptive material", forms the main body of the book and contains five chapters. The first of these, "Introduction" (pp. 3-16) offers a brief overview of the history of the English language, both internal and external, as well as the rationale for the book. The second chapter, "Describing language" (pp. 17-44), aims at providing most basic concepts and metalanguage necessary for the reader to follow the discussion contained in the subsequent chapters. Chapters three to five are devoted to the presentation of main linguistics features of Old English (pp. 45-90), Middle English (pp. 91-124), and Early Modern English (pp. 125-156) respectively.

Part II, "Illustrative texts" offers a wide selection of original material intended as illustration of the theoretical discussion in Part I. For Old English one can find such texts as *Cædmon's Hymn*, or selections from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *Ælfric* or *Beowulf* (pp. 159-174), for Middle English fragments of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as well as Caxton and Malory (pp. 175-198), for Early Modern English Shakespeare, Milton or Dryden (pp. 199-220). Finally, Part III contains an annotated bibliography, a glossary, and a thematic index to the book (pp. 221-251).

The first impression upon reading the book is quite favourable. Smith made a number of very important decisions which make *Essentials of Early English* different from the majority of existing textbooks. One of them is the rejection of the familiar urge to give as much information as possible to the reader. Many authors had serious problems deciding what is really crucial for the student at an early stage – Smith is not one of them. Thus, for example, the traditional, Proto-Germanic-oriented model of nominal inflections is replaced by a more synchronic-looking division into five main inflectional types: General Masculine, General Feminine, General Neuter, *-an*, and Irregular Declensions. This has the advantage of sparing the reader the frightening experience of wrestling with *a*-stems, *ō*-stems and the like, which can be quite confusing for a beginner. What is more, even these five basic declensions are illustrated by most typical paradigms of *stān*, *lār*, *scip*,

nama, and *sunu/dohtor/fōt* respectively. Variant paradigms are mentioned, but not given, making it possible for the reader to focus on what is really important. Crucial points are indicated with arrows, so that the reader always knows which information is really necessary to understand the basics about a given topic.

Another important decision of the author is to ignore variation in the material, both dialectal and temporal. Each of the three central chapters concentrates on a very specific language type; for Old English it is the normalised Early West Saxon of king Alfred and his contemporaries, while Chaucer's language represents Middle English and Shakespeare's Early Modern English. Once again, major differences are mentioned in notes and appendices, but the reader is always aware that at this early stage this knowledge is not essential. Moreover, examples in the book are drawn to a large extent from the illustrative material in Part II, which produces welcome internal consistency.

At the same time, however, the book is not without faults. One feature some readers may object to is its clear Scottish bias, especially when discussing phonetics of past stages of English. Frequent references to Scottish pronunciation may be of some help to an English student, while already for American audience this point of reference may be meaningless, not to mention readership from non-English-speaking countries. Even though on page 131 the author explicitly claims reasons for this practice are given on pages 25 and 96, no such explanation is to be found there, unless the statement "in some cases ... the present-day pronunciation is similar to that found in Modern Scots, which has not developed the (slightly) confusing (sic!) diphthongal sounds found in southern English prestigious accents" is to be taken as one.

Some other rather surprising statements can also be found. For example, throughout the book the verbal system of English is subdivided into strong, weak, and irregular verbs. While this division is perfectly acceptable for Old English, it is doubtful whether it can be maintained for Middle English, while it simply does not reflect linguistic reality in the early modern period. The choice cannot be justified by the need for terminological consistency throughout the book, as the terms "strong" and "weak" with regard to verbs are meaningless to native speakers of English without linguistic training (thus, no native speaker would be able to spot the difference between, e.g., *read* and *lead*, or *weep* and *keep*).

On page 55 there is a short section devoted to genitive phrases in Old English which to the present author is completely obscure. Smith states there that: "Since determiners inflect in OE, there are problems with expressions like *the good man's book*; does *the* modify *good man* or *book*?" As the Old English equivalent of this phrase (*þæs gōdan weres bōc*), given in the same section, shows, the problem of interpretation postulated by Smith does not exist precisely because determiners inflect in Old English.

In discussing Chaucerian pronunciation (p. 98), Smith makes a curious statement that in <wr, kn, gn> clusters initial letters were employed to signal "contemporary secondary articulation"; while this is possible in the case of <wr>, it is hard to imagine what kind of secondary articulation may be indicated by <k-> and <g->.

A very irritating feature of the book is the overuse of the cut-and-paste feature available in modern word-processing software. Whole paragraphs from Chapter 2 are copied almost word for word in Chapter 3, as, e.g., in the discussion of the category of person on pages 41 and 57 respectively.

Finally, it seems that the typesetters had a problem with Old English characters; thus on page 47 the letter *wynn* is missing, while throughout the book macrons over vowels are awkwardly placed and diphthongal graphemes have a very strange kerning.

In summary, *Essentials of Early English* is definitely an interesting publication, although theoretical assumptions underlying its structure are not fully carried out. As it stands, one cannot escape the impression that it is a draft version of a potentially good HEL textbook for students with little or no prior knowledge of linguistics. One can only hope that the second edition of the book, when it appears, will fulfill the promise shown by the book under review.

The English languages by Tom McArthur. Cambridge: CUP, 1998. Pp. 247.

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Recent years have witnessed the growing unpopularity of traditional and conservative approaches towards language study, which used to treat languages as distinct and clear-cut phenomena, with neat grammars, phonologies and vocabulary stocks. Modern linguists acknowledge, and very often appreciate, diversity within language, the variety of its functions, styles, uses or backgrounds. Language contact within different aspects of linguistic usage has become a key-concept in explaining and/or describing the form of language as we know it (and use it).

English is a recognized medium for communication worldwide, operating on all continents in various areas of human activity and coming into contact with local languages on different levels. English remains, at the same time, the vernacular language of a particular group of people. However, one should bear in mind that sometimes the people who claim to speak English may have serious problems with understanding each other or may even fail to communicate at all, although they allegedly speak "the same language".

McArthur's book, *The English languages*, presents the pluralistic character of the phenomenon called "English". He provides the reader with a detailed analysis of the variety that is characteristic of the language and makes it possible to grasp all its subtleties and complexities. The contribution of modern linguistics is widely taken into account, quoted and referred to. Moreover, the reader has an opportunity to follow the historical development of ideas on the plurality of English as the author reproduces original text samples in chronological order. Such a practice, rather unique among scholarly publications, invites the reader to interpret the sources on his or her own. The question prevailing in the book is whether English can still be considered one language or is it diversified enough to be recognized as a new family of English languages. The book does not offer an immediate answer but takes the reader through the maze of the complex system and functions of English to finally suggest a revolutionary solution.

The author, a Scot educated at Edinburgh and Glasgow, admits his personal involvement in the matter of language contact and the linguistic status of varieties of English and of English itself. In the introduction, McArthur advocates a range of Englishes with their own history and subvarieties instead of a monolithic construct called "English". The introductory chapter contains a brief presentation of useful but very often problematic terminology to be used in the book (language, dialect, acrolect, basilect, mesolect, creole, etc.). *The English languages* is the outcome of several years of scholarly involvement and discussion. Therefore, in the introduction the author provides a detailed list of his publications, conference papers and lectures on this issue.

The book under review is organized into nine chapters, each beginning with dictionary definitions of crucial terms, approached from various angles. This practice makes the reader aware of the complexity of a particular problem. Direct quotations, vocabulary lists and samples, graphs, charts, lists of territories and linguistic varieties as well as selected bibliography to some chapters, have been compiled in panels closing each chapter. Quotations appear in the body of the text as well, in order to introduce or illustrate the author's point. There is, however, no reference list (detailed nor selected) of the sources used for chapters and there is no bibliography at the end of the book.

Chapter One draws a parallel between the biblical metaphor of the Tower of Babel and contemporary English usage. In support of his point, the author discusses normative standards of the language versus basi-, meso- and acrolects. He also notices that an equation mark cannot be put between the chronological stages of the language (Anglo-Saxon is markedly different from Chaucerian English – still it is considered to be the same language). The chapter ends with an illustration of how English is employed to enhance feelings of modernity and internationality (*gairaigo* and "decorative English" in Japan).

In the next chapter, the author pursues the idea of English being a universal resource for other languages. He focuses on speakers' need to continue their own varieties and vernaculars, and at the same time to be able to speak some kind of a world language – usually English. The growth of English in such power and stability has been stimulated by British institutions of linguistic, educational and normative character (dictionaries, the BBC, the British Council, etc.) McArthur justly notices that there must be much linguistic tension between the metropoly and new large speaker-groups outside it, as well as some degree of influence going both ways. The author continues with a presentation of a tri-partite division of functions and usages of English into ENL, ESL and EFL (all the territories are listed in panels). The picture of English triumphant is undermined in Chapter Three. As the mid-80s have brought about a state of creative ferment in the perceptions of the language and witnessed the birth of the journal *World Englishes*, McArthur considers the plural term “Englishes”, its semantics and history in publications. The final panel of this chapter gives direct quotations and perceptions of the term “English languages” since 1858 (sic!).

The well-known truism has it that it is impossible to describe or collect all the usages and registers of English. Only models of this diversity can be attempted, which constitutes the topic of the subsequent chapter. First, the author considers various chronological models, discounting the implication that languages possess qualities such as growth, progress/decline, evolution or drift. These are just useful metaphors and not phenomena inherent in language. McArthur goes on to undermine the biological model-making (the classical tree- and the Darwinian family-metaphor). The third, more modern model-making is based on the geo-political situation of English, presented, for instance, in Crystal's *Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language* (1995). Other possible models rendered by current linguistics are drawn in panels.

Chapter Five deals extensively with the question of standardness. The etymology of the word “standard” is thoroughly explained, along with its semantic changes in history. In this chapter the reader can learn what led to the emergence and prominence of “high” varieties of Western languages: politics, communication, vernacular literature and genres, religion, technology and industrialization. Standard English has been described and encoded by scholars in grammar books and even now, in an era of a recognized plurality of the English language, non-standard varieties are spoken of in the standard, because it is generally understood and useful for writing and print. The author draws our attention to traditional versus progressive perceptions of Standard English (accompanied by original quotations of the word “standard” with reference to language, since 1709). The question of Standard English and American English is presented in the closing panel.

Chapter Six is devoted to Scots, its history, status and relation to English and Gaelic. There are three basic views on what Scots is: a dialect of English, a separate language, or an area of linguistic confusion. McArthur clarifies the picture of Scots by finding parallels in other parts of the world. For instance, he calls forth the Spanish analogy: English and Gaelic resemble Spanish and Basque, while English and Scots are similar to Spanish and Catalan. Such treatment of the topic allows a fresh perspective. Price in his book *Languages of Britain* (1984) frankly admits a general uncertainty about Scots but decides to give it a separate chapter in his book. McArthur calls it a “Price compromise” and agrees that this is perhaps the best solution to the problem. Panels included at the end of this chapter present brief lists of publications on Scots and quotations of linguistic approaches towards Scots since Noah Webster in 1789. These lists could not have been meant to be comprehensive because they ignore such important and recent works on Scots as Jones's *Edinburgh history of the Scots language* (1997).

The next chapter takes on the discussion of pidgins, creoles and hybrids, and their relation to superstratum languages. It comprises attempts to define problematic terms and establish their etymologies. The task is difficult mostly because there is no unified theory of the subject, and the varieties discussed carry the stigma of a low prestige. The author presents stages of a pidgin/creole's development. He agrees that these varieties form a continuum and what may be a pidgin on one territory may be at the same time a creole or an independent language in some other place.

McArthur goes on to analyse historical aspects of language contact and the possibilities of hybridizing. As far as English is concerned, there have been three main sources of great foreign influence on the language: contact with Old Norse, later with Norman French, and massive absorption of Latin and Greek lexicon, either directly or through French. Therefore, English could have produced hybrids in its history as well.

In the following chapter, English with its status and diversity is compared to Classical Latin. Standard English resembles Latin because it is also a global means of education, research and commerce. Educated and professional English in writing and speaking is mutually intelligible around the world (unlike other Englishes and, for that matter, Romance languages stemming from Latin). Since the mid-80s the linguistic circles have witnessed suggestions that varieties of English can develop into new languages, while Standard English will remain a world-wide *lingua franca* (e.g., Quirk 1985). McArthur agrees with these assumptions. This chapter also presents the history of Latin (which never really was or is dead), its variety of forms and impact on English. Latin served to “elevate” the vernacular (compare the modern English usage in Japan, presented in Chapter One), which one can easily see in different semantics of lexical sets, such as freedom-liberty, depth-profundity, etc. McArthur proposes a new term – bisociation – to call this paradox of near-synonymous lexical pairs being so much apart morphologically, stylistically, and collocationally. English vocabulary stock is abundant in such pairs, or even tri-sets if the Greek heritage is considered too. Examples of those sets are given in the final panel of this chapter.

Chapter Nine completes the book by referring to the plurality of English studied in the first and subsequent chapters. To show that the problem of non-standard English-based varieties and their status is not purely scientific, McArthur discusses the commotion in the USA concerning Ebonics – a black English variety recognized as a second language of black pupils at schools in Oakland, California. That situation demonstrates how the status of language is dependant on social and economic policies. McArthur postulates a new family of English languages: standards, dialects, creoles, nativized varieties, hybrids, etc. He draws arguments from parallels in Arabic or Romance languages and points to the unequalled vastness of English influence in the world.

The English languages by Tom McArthur is worth recommending to all interested in language contact as well as in current and historical developments in English. All the important approaches towards linguistic diversity are gathered in one book, not only for the sake of mere presentation, but mostly for genuine scholarly insight. The phenomena and terminology are traced back to their sources and supported with original quotations. By means of reference to previous stages of language the author stresses the fact that modern phenomena are not restricted to the twentieth century, but similar situations must have existed throughout history. The lack of a comprehensive (or at least selected) bibliography of the subject is perhaps one major shortcoming of this work. Some information on references can obviously be found in the body of the text, but this is not as helpful as a neat list at the end could be. Instead there is an index of topics discussed and names appearing in the book. Nevertheless, McArthur's ideas on how English functions today and what led to its modern diversity (comparison with Latin, the idea of a new family of languages) are valuable for contemporary linguistics. The wide scope of perception yields worthwhile information not only about English but also other languages and language contact in general.

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