

Christian Mair, *Twentieth-Century English: History, Variation, and Standardization*. Studies in English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006 (2009), xvi + 244 pp., hb. £ 50.00 (2006)/pb. £ 19.99 (2009).

The study of linguistic developments in the more recent past and, in particular, of ongoing language change is commonly regarded as a very delicate subject among linguists, not only for methodological reasons (how, for example can robust, tenable data be gathered by historians of recent and contemporary English, when they do not suffer from a poverty of evidence, but are deluged with data?). More importantly, it is difficult to know if certain attested features are indicators of a more permanent language change affecting structural properties of the English core grammar, or merely cases of linguistic experiment or fashion (mainly in the lexicon) or variants used ephemerally by groups of speakers of a certain age, in a certain region, or in a certain register. Mair, of course, is fully aware of these problems, as is attested by his recurrent discussions of methodological issues and the title of the book, which explicitly refers to “history” and “variation”. This title might be somewhat misleading, however, because Mair reasonably narrows his analyses to the highly codified varieties of British and American English, i.e. the written standard(s) with minor differences in spelling, lexicon and grammar and their oral correlates, i.e. the spoken usage of educated speakers in formal situations.

Since the publication of Laurie Bauer’s *Watching English Change*, a book very similar in spirit, the methods and means of corpus analysis have been very much refined and Mair accordingly sets out to “exploit the full potential of the corpus-linguistic working environment” (2). Drawing on a broad variety of authentic corpus data, the central aim of the book is a corpus-based examination of a large number of individual features and also more general trends which have been suggested as examples of ongoing language change by earlier studies or “anecdotal observation” – individual features such as shifting accents in polysyllabic words of Latin or Greek origins, the fast growing number of acronyms or the use of *different than* instead of *different from*, but also general observations such as the alleged “Americanization of British English” (193–195). And indeed, almost every claim made about lexical and grammatical language change (the section on phonologi-

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cal changes in British and American English essentially summarizes and discusses earlier research, mainly by Wells; 156–180) is backed up with authentic data from a variety of well-known corpora, such as the “Brown quartet” (Brown/LOB for 1961 and Frown/F-LOB for 1991/92), from newspaper databases, but also from corpora especially compiled for the study of more recent changes (for the principles of the “OED Baseline Corpora” for 1700, 1800 and 1900, see Appendix 2). In addition, Mair also uses data collected from the World Wide Web and discusses their explanatory value.

Rather than being a comprehensive survey of changes in twentieth-century English, the book collects corpus observations on selected lexical, grammatical and phonological innovations or changes which are discernible in the two main standardized forms of English in the twentieth century. This means that many subjects or individual features are only given one or two pages (subjunctive 108, voice 117–119, subject-verb concord 150–152, singular *they* 152–154, etc.), a design which, of course, does not allow detailed discussions of the respective phenomena. Since so many different features are addressed, the reader has to be informed about the main developments of the history of English to fully understand the often very condensed accounts.

Chapter 1 sets the scene, introducing social and cultural changes from 1900 (where this history begins) to 2000 and discussing the relevance of English becoming more and more unchallenged as a world language and an international *lingua franca*. Laying the methodological basis, chapter 2 discusses the potential and the pitfalls of anecdotal or impressionistic observation and “apparent-time” studies. The advantages and limitations of a corpus-based real-time approach – the approach mainly employed in the book – are demonstrated, for example, by accounts of the uses of *different to*, *different from* and *different than* in Present Day standard British and American English (25–29).

Chapter 3 (“Lexical change in twentieth-century English”, 36–81) starts with the kind of ongoing linguistic changes which are most obvious to the lay observer, but which are most difficult to study systematically. Similar to other studies on the topic, the chapter initially presents a number of selected “Case studies” (40–53), discussing the socio-cultural background of the coinage and frequency (mainly in WWW-attestations) of some lexical items which were coined in the twentieth century (*information superhighway*, *(to) google*, *maquiladora*, *nine-eleven*) or which have undergone an extension or change of meaning (such as *over the top*, *wicked*, or *massive*). More general trends in contemporary lexical creativity and word formation are addressed in Chapter 3.3, which in a first step seeks to analyse the overall statistical growth of the vocabulary of Standard English. This, however, proves to be difficult, since even new analytical means, such as the constantly updated *OED* online, do clearly not provide the kind of data needed. A search for the effects of language contact with Yiddish and Spanish in the U.S., for example, only yielded tenable results in the case of borrowings from Yiddish from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. The implausible results for Spanish borrowings (62) would suggest that there are – in spite of the growing community of Spanish speakers in the U.S. – only few borrowings today (only five are attested in the *OED* from 1981 to 2000, in contrast to 103 attested for the period from 1921 to 1940). These findings may thus be due to a problem of documentation of ongoing language change in the

OED, and not to actual language use. The same is probably true for the attempt at measuring the total growth of vocabulary between 1901 and 2000, as attested in the *OED*. This search yielded a total of only 28,317 in contrast to 68,073 for the period from 1801 to 1900, with the smallest number for the last period tested (475 for the period 1981 to 1985 in contrast to 2,485 for the period 1901 to 1905 or 1,708 for the period 1961 to 1965). It is, however, unlikely that these frequencies should reflect an actual decrease in lexical creativity in the twentieth century (see 57–58).

The focus of section 3.3.2 (61–68) is on acronyms and prefixed verbs and examines whether there is – beneath the confusing variety of individual new words – stability in the underlying inventory of productive word-formation mechanisms. Acronyms (including initialisms) show an impressive overall increase of more than 400 per cent; this, however, is mainly due to their drastic increase in academic writing and fiction (they had already been fairly common in press registers in the 1960s). Word formation by prefixation of verbal stems (cf. *to upset* or *to overthrow*) was very common in Old English, while the “phrasal verb type” has become more common since Middle English (cf. *to set up* vs. *to throw over*). The study concentrates on the increase in prefixed verbs in *up-* and *down-* (such as *upchat*, *update*, *upgrade* or *downgrade*, *download*, *downplay*), which is seen as a “revival” of an only apparently moribund morphological process. More impressionistically, Mair ends the chapter by relating some of the ongoing changes in the lexicon to a more general trend, namely the “popularization, semantic bleaching, and trivialization of scholarly terminology” (79).

Chapter 4 on “Grammatical changes in twentieth-century English” (82–155) is the methodologically most consistent part of the book, with a focus less on current linguistic experimentation than on the spread of innovations which have been attested from the eighteenth or nineteenth century and which have been generalized since. As a starting point, Mair takes the developments in English grammar since 1776 (as summarized in Denison 1998) and examines various changes in verbal categories, such as aspect (changes in the structures and use of the progressive, 88–95), tense (*going-to*-future, 95–100) or modality (the decline of *must* and *shall* and their possible replacements by *have (got) to* or modal idioms such as *had better*, 100–108). In addition, some developments in the field of clausal complementation are analysed in two more detailed studies: one on infinitival clauses with notional subjects introduced by *for* (as in *they arranged for their guests to be met at the station*, 119–126), the second on the spread of non-finite clauses with a number of individual matrix verbs such as *remember (his/him) doing (begin, prevent, stop, help, etc., 126–140)*. Chapter 4.9 (140–154) summarizes the essentials of a number of developments in the noun phrase, such as the alleged demise of *whom*, the use of case-marked personal pronouns, the revival of the *s*-genitive, the synthetic and analytical comparison for disyllabic adjectives, subject-verb concord and singular *they*. Pulling together the isolated observations on individual lexical and grammatical changes described in chapters 3 and 4, Mair finds that apparently disparate phenomena such as the increasing frequency of contractions (in written English), of the progressive, of some modal idioms and the *going-to*-future, all point to one and the same direction: “written English has become more informal and, possi-

bly, also more oral” (“The colloquialization of written English in the twentieth century”; see also 183–193).

In pronunciation (156–180), we see a number of sound changes in British as well as American English, which have led to a greater divergence of these varieties in the spoken mode. In Mair’s view, the major development of the past century was the emergence of rather similar “educated standard accents” in Britain and the U.S., i.e. fairly homogeneous functional standards mainly propagated in the public sphere. In the United States, where there was no single national pronunciation standard in 1900, dialect levelling and koinéization have led to the homogenization of American educated speech around a bundle of inland (i.e. “non-Southern” and “non-New-England”) accents, which share features such as rhoticity, the flat *a*, or the flapping of /t/ (173–178). In Britain, on the other hand, the weakening of ideological pressures and the recently acquired autonomy of Scotland, Ireland and also Wales resulted in the dilution of *RP* as a predominantly class-based national prestige accent. *RP* (if this term can still be used today) is now a standard accent for all kinds of educated speakers and remains the most important norm for foreign learners of British English.

In sum, the book is essential reading for anyone interested in language change in progress, and in particular for all those interested in the methodological issues of tracking ongoing language change. Mair, who designed the by now indispensable Frown and F-LOB corpora as follow-ups of Brown and LOB, introduces the *OED* baseline corpora (assembling all the *OED* quotations from, e.g., 1896 to 1905 for the “Baseline1900” corpus) as new tools for more recent language change and – in many places – prudently discusses the advantages and pitfalls of corpus analyses based on newspaper databases or “risky web-derived data” for the study of ongoing language change. The book is interesting for advanced students (who are able to integrate the often very condensed accounts into their understanding of English grammar or the history of the English language), particularly because of its interdisciplinary observations, discussing socio-cultural or media-related influences on language change. For linguists interested in the development of English, it is a treasure trove: many of Mair’s corpus findings and particularly his astute and often very innovative comments on individual features open up new fields for further research, not only into ongoing changes, but also into the history of English.

Works Cited

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EICHSTÄTT

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