Geoffrey L e e c h, Marianne H u n d t, Christian M a i r & Nicholas S m i t h. *Change in Contemporary English. A Grammatical Study*. Studies in English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009, xxviii + 341 pp., £ 69.00.

In recent decades, corpus linguistics has become one of the mainstream paradigms in the study of languages, in particular in the study of English. All of the authors of the book under review here have played a crucial part in this development, as compilers and also as early researchers of corpora of Present-Day English (Leech: LOB; Leech/Smith: *Lancaster 1931 Corpus*; BLOB-1931; Mair/Hundt: F-LOB and Frown). Claiming to have been "more intimately engaged with these corpora than any other research group" (xix), the authors highlight the "affection" they feel for corpora (xx). And indeed, the book is a token of their affection for corpus linguistics and for the corpora analyzed.

The volume aims at giving an empirically-based account of how the English language has been changing recently, i.e. in the time-span from 1961 to 1991/2. This time-span is determined by the corpora used, namely the four corpora of the well-known "Brown quartet" or "Brown family", i.e. Brown (American English) and LOB (British English) for 1961 and Frown (American English) and F-LOB (British English) for 1991/2 (descriptions of the corpora are found in Chapter 2.2 and in Appendix II). The strength of this group of corpora lies in their comparability: they are of virtually the same size and the same selection of texts and genres (represented by 500 matching text samples of c. 2,000 words of written British or American English). All of these corpora have – individually or comparatively – been much used in recent years, but the authors nonetheless claim that the studies collected in this book present a new approach, namely a new kind of corpus-based historical research labelled "comparative corpus linguistics" or "short-term diachronic comparable corpus linguistics" (24; for a discussion of the methodology, see also Chapter 2, 24–50). The comparisons themselves are documented in many statistical tables and charts, exhaustively comparing frequencies across time, varieties and genres (fortunately, the authors decided to move many of the more complex tables and diagrams to Appendix III). Yet, even if the studies can generally be said to follow a more "rigorous methodology" than some comparable studies, presenting "comparative corpus linguistics" as a new approach here seems somewhat awkward, given that the 1991/2 corpora F-LOB and Frown were deliberately designed by the Freiburg team (among them Mair and Hundt) for allowing comparison with the earlier LOB and Brown corpora.

As its subtitle specifies, the book focuses on changes in grammar (cf. the broader design of Mair 2006, which is also based on a systematic evaluation of virtually the same corpora, but also discusses changes in the lexicon etc.). After the two introductory chapters outlining the methodology and introducing the corpora, the main parts of the book – seven chapters – concentrate on changes in the verb phrase: the subjunctive (in particular the *were*-subjunctive and the revival of the "mandative subjunctive"; Chapter 3), modal auxiliaries and so-called "semi-modals" such as *(have) got to/gotta*, *wanna* or *to be going to* (Chapters 4 and 5), the progressive (Chapter 6), the passive (*be-* and *get*-passive as well as medio-passive; Chapter 7), expanded predicates with "light verbs" plus deverbal noun such as *have/take a look* (Chapter 8), and non-finite constructions (infinitives, gerunds; Chapter 9). Chapter 10 focuses on the noun phrase, discussing a range of changes in noun-noun sequences (such as *animal rights campaign*), in genitives (*s*-genitive vs. *of*-genitive) and in relative clauses (particularly the choice of *wh*-relativizers, *that* or zero).

In these parts of the book, the methodology is the one typically applied in corpus linguistics, i.e. a "bottom-up method" from the identification and quantification of formal phenomena towards the functional interpretation of the findings. A clearly data-driven methodology is, however, essentially only applied in the analysis of the relative frequency of different word classes (which has become possible by the more recent uniform part-of-speech annotation of all four corpora). Here this "bottom-up method" leads to interesting questions, triggered by, for example, the highly significant trend of an increase in nouns (especially proper nouns) mainly at the expense of closed-class category words, which points to an overall pattern of condensation of information in the noun phrase (labelled "densification"; cf. 207–211). In most of the chapters, however, the authors base their research questions and also their choice of patterns and words examined on earlier research, often their own research (see earlier studies on passives by Hundt, on infinitives by Mair etc.), investigating well-researched areas of English known or suspected to be undergoing change. In these cases, then, the focus of the chapters is not so much on the linguistic phenomena themselves, but on describing changing frequencies across time, text types or varieties as attested in the corpora of the "Brown family".

The authors set out to "reveal, for the first time, or at least with a new sense of accuracy", how significant the changes are "that take place over even such a short timespan of thirty years", characterizing their corpora as a "precision tool for tracking the differences between written English in 1961 and 1991/2" (xx). In the individual studies themselves, however, the authors find many uncertainties and inconclusive or even contradictory evidence.

Let me exemplify this by some of the findings for the modals and the progressive. The observation that the core modals have been significantly declining in use, for example, is unquestionable (10.6% for the class as a whole). A closer look at the data shows, however, that there is much difference between the individual modals: The four most common modals *would*, *will*, *can* and *could* (which still account for 71.9% of all core modals in the later corpora for 1991) have only lost 4,4% of their usage. There is also much variance, namely a 43.5% decline for *shall*, but only a 2.2% decline for *could* and even a tiny rise in frequency of 1.3% for *can* (73). This, however, seriously distorts the overall picture of ongoing changes in "core modals", since *shall* is not unambiguously modal in its use in future *I/we shall*. A similarly inconclusive picture emerges for the often cited thesis of a replacement of core modals by semi-modals: first, the increase of semi-modals is more than proportionate to the loss of core modals and this finding also has to be relativized in view of the fact that core modals are still much more frequent (nearly 5.4 times) than semi-modals in the 1991/2 corpora. There can thus "be no argument" that the semi-modals wholly account for the decline of certain core modals (78).

Similar uncertainties emerge in the very well-designed chapter on the progressive: there is a significant expansion of the progressive in British and American English in the late twentieth century, but this expansion is highly variable across genres and across the paradigm (the most conspicuous changes are in the present progressive in both British and American English). The exhaustive investigation of the data failed to identify any one or several outstanding factors contributing to the overall increase, but the study can at least show that, especially in British English, stative verb use seems to have played a minor part only, contrary to what some scholars have supposed (142).

Even if we accept that syntactic change often appears to be "statistical in nature" when given constructions become more or less generally attested in particular

registers (8), the studies in the book reveal that the limitations of the corpora of the "Brown-family" are probably too many to allow even a sketch of ongoing grammatical change, mainly because the corpora are too small (cf. the very low absolute number of a phrase such as *by whom*, which is only attested 9 times in the corpora of the Brown family; 13) or because the material collected in the corpora of the "Brown family" consists of edited, written texts only, which are prone to be more conservative than spontaneous spoken language. In spite of their "affection" for this family of corpora, the authors of this book are well aware of this drawback and supplement their evidence by, for instance, material from the *British National Corpus* (BNC), the *Longman Corpus of Spoken American English* (LCSAE), etc. This use of many other corpora has a sad ring to it, though: One would have sincerely hoped for the compilers of the corpora, some of whom are the authors of the present book, that the evidence of a comparison of "their" corpora had yielded more conclusive evidence. In the present form, the authors have to acknowledge that there is no way to see whether some of the changing frequencies reflect changes in syntax or style or stylistic variation. Since a thirty years' time-span thus appears to be too short for differentiating directed diachronic developments from random fluctuation or stylistic variance, Leech and Smith have started work on compiling material for two new members of the "Brown family", extending the time-spans by 30 and 60 years (on the BLOB, i.e. "Before LOB", corpora, see p. 10; on the now published BLOB-1931, see <http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/BLOB-1931/index.html>).

In Chapter 11, which is called a "synthesis" but which actually offers much new data (cf. the sections on negation and topics outside the field of grammar, namely the use of contracted negatives and verb forms in 11.3.1 or punctuation in 11.3.5), the perspective of the earlier chapters is reversed: functional explanations are now put in the centre. Surprisingly, however, for a book focussing on language change, there is no discussion nor any reference to research on any of the general principles and mechanisms of language change (apart from grammaticalization, which, however, is very broadly defined here; for the different notions of grammaticalization, see Brinton & Traugott 2005). Further, the overarching labels used – "colloquialization", "densification", "Americanization" and "democratization" – do not predominantly refer to grammar (change), but to textlinguistic and sociolinguistic parameters, and thus denote changes in stylistic preferences ("colloquialization") or discourse styles ("densification"). While the tendencies attested by changing frequencies are certainly most interesting, "colloquialization" in particular emerges as a very complicated concept. It is defined as "tendency for written norms to become more informal and move closer to speech" (20 etc.), but one wonders whether this is not a circular approach in studies on language change, since we would expect most new features and innovative forms to appear in the spoken medium first and then to spread to written language. It is particularly in issues like these that the studies could have profited from research on language change.

Overall, though, the studies collected in this volume are very valuable for the analysis of ongoing language change. The observations of these very detailed descriptions of language use and variation in the second half of the twentieth century across the two major written varieties of English will – together with, for example, the quantitative data and qualitative analyses of the *Longman Grammar* (Biber *et al.* 1999) – certainly be a highly welcome basis for further investigations into ongoing grammar change in English.

Works Cited

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