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History, English, Language: Studying HEL Today

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This *Companion to the History of the English Language* represents a somewhat unusual entry in the Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture series, for this is not fundamentally a book about literature. We nevertheless expect our edition will complement the study of English-based literature and culture in a productive way, especially given the tendency since the middle of the last century for students of English studies to focus on criticism of modern literature, contemporary theory, and cultural phenomena. Our aim is to offer those working with literary and cultural material a fuller perspective on language, one that enhances their interests in the light of the history of the English language (HEL) as it has been researched and studied for more than a century. To this end, the current volume reflects contemporary concerns with colonialism and post-colonialism, race and gender, imperialism and globalization, and Anglophone cultures and literatures, but approaches these contemporary issues from a historical perspective with special attention paid to the role played by language. In this introduction we will contextualize HEL studies in today's world so that we may create a framework within which to read the 58 essays that follow.

In 1712, Jonathan Swift, the satirist and author of *Gulliver's Travels*, wrote his "Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue," in which he entreated the Earl of Oxford to establish a national "Society" to arbitrate and limit changes in the English language. In his proposal, Swift condemned change as the bane of any language, insisting that linguistic change is "infallibly for the worse" and arguing that "it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than it should be perpetually changing" (Swift 1907: 15). Swift's anxiety over linguistic instability and his longing to rescue his language from decline and corruption ironically came after a thousand years of radical change to the language of the Anglo-Saxons had produced the English he recognized as his own. We, like Swift, commonly perceive our own language to have reached the pinnacle of its development, and we often resist change even if we are aware of the evolutionary history that led to its current state. But as evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould reminded us, we often imagine the

evolutionary process to be a teleological development towards some perfected end when in fact evolution is by definition an ongoing process whose perpetual state is change. HEL as a subject is the study of an evolutionary process in Gould's strict sense: it is not the story of the "perfection" of the language, but rather of its ongoing metamorphosis within changing environments. At any moment the language represents at once the culmination of past changes and the starting place for future evolution.

The environmental factors that cause change in language are also themselves affected by language in a kind of feedback loop; HEL as it is currently studied therefore concerns itself with politics, economics, culture, technology, religion – any area of human experience in which language plays a role. In next chapter, Thomas Cable traces the "history of the history of the English language," so we will not attempt here what he has already so expertly accomplished. But to underscore one point, we would emphasize that the subject of HEL now engages the environmental situatedness of language more deeply than ever before. As Cable makes clear, this was not always so: the history of HEL moves gradually from the study of language alone to the study of language in culture in general. The present collection reflects HEL's new, broader scope without abandoning its focus on language. It may therefore be useful to reconsider the three fundamental concepts that define HEL: English, Language and History.

English: Nation and Tongue

Swift was not alone in calling for an English "Society" or "Academy" of language; many late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century British political writers recognized that the language of the expanding Empire was becoming important enough to warrant an attempt to control its future. Swift saw a cautionary tale in the history of Latin: after spreading throughout the Roman Empire, Latin declined in elegance, admitted foreign words and syntactic constructions, and splintered into a number of regional dialects that would become the Romance languages. Thus the source of his claim that change is "infallibly for the worse": for Swift, this process represented the death spiral of a perfect language.

Swift seems to have thought of all languages in terms of states and their subjects. He used the phrase "the Roman Language" as often as the proper noun "Latin," and regularly wrote "our language" and "our words" when referring to English. Such usage suggests that when he wrote "the French tongue" or "the English language," Swift was defining these languages through the identities of their speakers rather than through the languages' inherent characteristics. Nevertheless, Swift recognized, through his analogy with the Roman Empire, that political expansion would lead to an increase in the number of English speakers around the world, thus complicating his notion of "our" English language. Today, in our post-colonial world, an easy equation of nationality and language is impossible. Obviously many more native English speakers live outside England and Great Britain than within, and beyond Anglophone

nations, best estimates suggest there are currently some three times as many ESL speakers and learners in the world as native speakers. The Englishes used throughout the world today – whether called dialects, creoles, or varieties of "broken" English – belie the notion that *English* can any longer imply primarily "the language of England," other than in a purely historical sense.

While a study of HEL must, of course, trace English's beginnings to that small island off the northwest corner of the European mainland, the term *English* has ranged far away from its ancestral home. To continue Swift's analogy with Latin, since at some point Gallic Latin became Old French, we might ask when the English of, say, Jamaica will have earned its own moniker, and should no longer be called "English" at all. But such a question reinscribes Swift's equation of language and sovereign state – Jamaican English is not English only to the extent that it is not the English of England. We may soon find we need a terminology similar to "Romance Languages" to accommodate the Englishes born in the wake of British expansion: the "English language *family*" perhaps, as David Crystal among others has suggested. With such a formulation, Swift's fear of language decay and death becomes a celebration of generation and proliferation; as one language spreads and evolves to become many, it lives on more abundantly than it could have otherwise. In such a case, change might be seen as "infallibly for the better."

Language: Monolingualism, Register, and Genre

As Cable's chapter demonstrates, the history of the English language is an academic subject that has regularly been taught at the university level for more than one hundred years. HEL has customarily been offered in English programs. This seems like a logical choice at first, because most English departments confer degrees in English "language" and "literature." For students who engage in English studies at English-speaking institutions, however, the "language" part of the degree they work towards may seem somewhat redundant. After all, don't they know English already? Indeed, English programs today probably attract students who hope to apply their competence in their native language to the study of literature. This invisibility of language in literary studies is a relatively recent phenomenon, however. Historically speaking, the practice of coupling "language" and "literature" for an academic study of English goes back to the nineteenth century when the discipline of modern-language studies was developed within the paradigm of the new philology, which placed emphasis on the historicity of the vernaculars. Prior to modern philology, the literary education of the West had long concerned the study of Latin (and Greek), for which the mastering of grammar was a prerequisite for the study of rhetoric. In the long history of liberal arts education, therefore, monolingualism is more an exception than the norm.

Today HEL provides students of English with an opportunity to develop a new perspective on the language. When given a text written in pre-Chaucerian Middle

English or Gullah, for instance, we must approach the language not as an instrument for study but as an object of study itself. Texts written in either of these varieties of English require careful analysis, because the language, though called English, is distant and unfamiliar. Moreover, the scale of linguistic unfamiliarity is not necessarily in proportion to the historical or geographical distance of the texts. In reading Shakespeare, for instance, we often find poetic passages more accessible than some of the prose passages, even though the average English speaker in Shakespeare's time would have found it the other way around. This discrepancy derives in part from our privileging of the elevated style of Shakespearean sonnets or soliloquies over the plainer style of his prose which often represented the informal or colloquial speech of lower classes. But the discrepancy also derives from the conservative nature of literary language itself. In comparison, spoken language is so mutable that the colloquialism of one generation is often incomprehensible to the next.

Just as playwrights and novelists would choose different registers for different characters, ordinary people are likely to speak more than one "language" in their daily life even if they belong to a small or secluded community. This important point is made by M. M. Bakhtin with an example of a rural laborer in Russia:

> Thus an illiterate peasant, miles away from any urban center, naively immersed in an unmoving and for him unshakable everyday world, nevertheless lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language (Church Slavonic), sang songs in another, spoke to his family in a third and, when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities through a scribe, he tried speaking yet a fourth language (the official-literate language, "paper" language). All these are *different languages*, even from the point of view of abstract socio-dialectological markers. (Bakhtin 1981: 295–6)

The key to understanding Bakhtin's claim that one's existence in society is fundamentally multilingual lies in the multivalence of language itself. When used as an uncountable noun, the word *language* refers to verbal communication in general. As a countable noun, a language comprises a specific variety of speech used in one or more countries, regions, or communities of people with a distinct group identity. Strictly speaking, *language* in the second sense is not a linguistic entity, because a language as such is formally indistinguishable from a dialect, and one can be separated from the other only through socio-political factors. The word *language* has yet another meaning in a phrase like "paper language," or "literary language." The word *language* used in this sense constitutes a cultural entity that functions at the level of discourse, register, or genre.

HEL has traditionally dealt with diverse genres, many of which are excluded from the narrow definition of literature: governmental documents, familial letters, religious or scientific treatises, conduct books, advertisements, to name a few. By becoming familiar with genetically diverse texts, we realize that each genre has a history of its own. Some, like advertisements, change their form and format as fast as material culture and media technology, whereas others, like the epistle and the homily, have

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sustained a certain formality that cuts across the boundaries of periods or states. Cookbooks comprise yet another case. The following passage comes from a fifteenth-century recipe for *sauce galentyne*:

> Take faire crustez of broun brede, stepe þem in vinegre, and put þer-to poudre canel [i.e. cinnamon powder], and let it stepe þer-wyþ til it be broun; and þanne drawe it þurwe a straynour .ij. tymes or .iij., and þanne put þerto poudre piper and salte: and let it be sumwhat stondynge, and not to þynne, and serue forth. (Austin 1964: 108–9)

This culinary instruction has a tone and a contour that are familiar to anyone who has used modern cookbooks: it consists of a series of imperatives followed by the names of ingredients, methods of preparation, and desired outcomes including how the product should be consumed. We recognize a similar pattern in the following passage, this time taken from an Old English medical book:

> Wið hwostan: nim huniges tear and merces sæd and diles sæd; cnuca þa sæd smale, mæng ðicce wið ðone tear, and pipera swiðe; nim ðry sticcan fulle on nihtnihstig.
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> [For cough: Take honey droppings and marche seed and dill seed. Pound the seeds small, mix into the droppings to thickness, and pepper well. Take three spoonfuls after the night's fast.] (Grattan & Singer 1952: 100–1)

The examples from Old and Middle English demonstrate that the genre of recipe writing has not undergone major change at the discourse level. They are also the reminder that some of the linguistic characteristics of English have remained unchanged for more than a thousand years.

History: Two Models

What does "history" mean when applied to a language? One commonly invoked model distinguishes an "internal" or linguistic history of English from an "external" or cultural history. As Cable makes clear, the study of language in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was almost exclusively philological. Sound shifts, developments in vocabulary, and syntactic changes were of primary interest, while historical events were at best secondary. Throughout the twentieth century, scholars became more interested in the relationship between language and history. In 1935, the first edition of Albert Baugh's famous textbook promised "a proper balance" between internal and external history (Baugh & Cable 2002: v). Still, as the term "external" implies, cultural and political history remained outside language itself. The latter part of the twentieth century saw the publication of new textbooks (e.g., Gerry Knowles' *A Cultural History of the English Language* in 1979, and Dick Leith's *A Social History of English* in 1983) that foregrounded what had been called the external history. In such books, external history was transformed into a "sociolinguistic profile" of a

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language (Leith 1997: 8), with emphasis on the social function of language rather than on its grammar, phonology, syntax, etc.

Today, the usefulness of "internal" and "external" as defining conceptions within HEL may have run its course. Above we referred to a "feedback loop" running between language and its "environment"; these terms seem salient to us because they acknowledge that a language makes up part of the environment it inhabits. Language is recognized simultaneously as an agent of history and as a product. For example, the rate of linguistic change did slow following the time of Swift and other prescriptivists. But can we really identify a simple cause-and-effect relationship? Their efforts would likely have been impossible without the earlier invention of print media and would have been unnecessary if England had not entered the nascent global economy. The argument can be made that the printing press itself created the prescriptivists' attitude. In fact, the language may well have regularized even without their efforts, because the market forces were driving the use of the press. Ironically, the printing technology that made the "fixing" of English necessary and possible would later facilitate its global spread, which has, in turn, led to the current period of radical linguistic change. The history of the English language abounds with such cyclical developments, effects becoming causes.

While the division between internal and external history is being blurred, a second model of history, the chronological development of language, still holds sway. The tripartite history of Old, Middle, and Modern English defines two historical moments as central to English's development: the Norman Invasion of 1066, and the rise of the Tudor Dynasty and the Protestant Reformation. These events are traditional dividing lines for good reason – they do in fact represent moments when language, politics, religion, and economics underwent radical transformations. But the model defined by these terms is linear, tracing a straight-line trajectory for a well-defined, unitary language, thus denying a full history to the offshoots, the non-standard dialects, the conservative backwaters, or the avant-garde neologisms of a given historical period. But even if we grant that the "standard" language has until recently had enough momentum to pull along most variants in its wake, such a single straight-line trajectory is insufficient to capture the current global spread and multidimensional changes in the world's Englishes. It may be time to consider the "Old–Middle–Modern" triptych as complete, and to seek new models for representing English in the world today as well as for the processes that led to it.

Recent schematic models of English in today's world include Braj Kachru's "Concentric Circles" model which emphasizes the larger and ever-growing number of non-native speakers over time (see WORLD ENGLISH IN WORLD CONTEXTS). Somewhat different is Tom McArthur's "Circle of World English" with a hypothetical World Standard English at its hub, and increasingly local variants, including those in Anglophone countries, radiating outward. McArthur's arrangement radically decentralizes British and American Standard English, projecting a future of English in the world uncontrolled by British or American hegemony. We cannot offer here a unified image that captures all aspects of the history of English; the result would of necessity be a

schematic chimera of chronological lines, branching trees, holistic circles, interactive networks, and evolutionary processes. Such a chimera cannot be easily imagined, but we anticipate that the essays in this collection will illuminate individually for students the many possible approaches to the study of HEL that, taken together, provide more than a single model or historical emphasis might do.

How to Use this Book

The current collection is intended as a *Companion* to the history of the English language rather than a comprehensive textbook. The chapters are written to stand alone so that readers may dip into them at will. Readers might also use the extensive cross-referencing among the chapters as well as the recommended further reading to develop a fuller picture of a given topic. We have provided below a list of available HEL textbooks with brief annotations. Some of the textbooks, including Pyles/Algeo and Baugh/Cable, have accompanying workbooks.

HEL Textbooks

Baugh, A. C. & Cable, T. (2002). *A History of the English Language*. 5th edn. London: Routledge. [Offers a narrative explanation of linguistic evolution in relation to social and political changes in Britain and America]

Crystal, D. (2003). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Arranges historical and contemporary material by theme; offers abundant visual aids]

Culpepper, J. (2005). *History of English*. 2nd edn. Routledge Language Workbooks Series. New York: Routledge. [Focuses on student-friendly linguistic analyses of language change; includes exercises and "discussion points"]

Fennell, B. A. (2001). *A History of English: A Sociolinguistic Approach*. Oxford: Blackwell. [Provides a linguistic history informed by issues like multilingualism and creolization]

Gelderen, E. van. (2006). *A History of the English Language*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins. [Gives a detailed introduction to linguistic topics and historical principles]

Knowles, G. (1997). *A Cultural History of the English Language*. London: Arnold. [Introduces the development of English from socio-cultural perspectives; offers a useful bibliography]

Lass, R. (1987). *The Shape of English: Structure and History.* London: Dent. [Provides a linguistic approach; plus a detailed chapter on dialects]

Leith, D. (1997). *A Social History of English*. 2nd edn. New York: Routledge. [Narrates linguistic history through socio-political issues like standardization and language imposition]

McCrum, R., MacNeil, R., & Cran, W. (2002). *The Story of English*. 3rd. edn. London: Faber. [Emphasizes cultural varieties of English; originally compiled as a companion to a BBC television series]

Millward, C. M. (1996). *A Biography of the English Language*. 2nd. edn. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace. [Gives a succinct, all-around treatment from Indo-European to creoles]

Pyles, T. & Algeo, J. (2005). *The Origins and Development of the English Language*. 5th edn. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace. [Offers a user-friendly introduction to linguistic history; with additional chapters on word studies]

Schmitt, N. & Marsden, R. (2006). *Why is English Like That? Historical Answers to Hard ELT Questions*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. [Summarizes HEL topics for English language teachers; comes with "Classroom Activities"]

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Strang, B. M. H. (1989). *A History of English*. New York: Routledge. [Details the facts of linguistic history; arranged backwards chronologically]

Svartvik, J. & Leech, G. (2006). *English: One Tongue,*

Many Voices. New York: Palgrave. [Emphasizes the "global" period and modern language issues, with a shorter overview of Old, Middle, and Early Modern periods]

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Crystal, D. (1998). Moving towards an English family of languages? In *Folia Anglistica* (Festschrift for Olga S. Akhmanova) (pp. 84–95). Moscow: Moscow State University Press.

Gould, S. J. (1996). *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*. New York: Harmony.

Grattan, J. H. G. & Singer, C. (1952). *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine: Illustrated Specially from the Semi-Pagan Text 'Lacnunga'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Knowles, G. (1979). *A Cultural History of the English Language*. London: Arnold.

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McArthur, T. (1998). *The English Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swift, J. (1907). Proposal for correcting, improving, and ascertaining the English tongue. In T. Scott (ed.), *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, Vol. 11 (pp. 1–21). London: George Bell.