MCMAHON, APRIL M. S. 1994: *Understanding Language Change.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xi + 361 pp. (Paper £ 11. 95).

Understanding Language Change reveals itself to be such a surprisingly comprehensive book on historical linguistics and related disciplines that it undoubtedly deserves to be highly rated. It must be stated clearly from the start that McMahon's book is not exclusively on the history (=development) of languages; instead, it can be said to be a linguistics book which pays special attention to the question of language change. *Understanding Language Change* is an exhaustive and thoroughly researched study on precisely language change. According to the author, very little linguistics knowledge is reported to be required by the nonspecialists to follow the explanations of the various issues analysed in the book (p. xi).

The organization of the book is as follows: apart from an opening "Preface and acknowledgments" section, the book is divided into twelve chapters, bibliography and index. Chapter One is an introduction to the book. From Chapter Two to Chapter Seven, McMahon deals with purely grammatical features attested in language change. This block of chapters displays traditional historical linguistics practice. On the other hand, Chapters Eight to Twelve are devoted, each, to a topic associated in a way with the kind of ideas presented in the preceding chapters. A direct link with traditional historical linguistics cannot be easily traced, but the reader has the welcome opportunity to experience a new perspective of language change not always observed by other scholars.

In Chapter One (Introduction) the question is raised as to how languages resemble each other to a certain extent, thus enabling the linguist to make up groups. Examples are extracted from many languages: English, German, French, Latin, Kannada, Tamil, Tulu, Malayalam and some others. The author illustrates the relevance -and the advantage for the purpose of linguistic analysis- of arranging languages into affinity groups by rendering the same sentence into different languages and assessing how similar or how different these sentences appear to be. Languages such as Welsh, Irish Gaelic and Scots Gaelic (Celtic languages) exhibit similar features, which are in turn dif-

ferent from those of German, Old English and Swedish (Germanic languages) on the one hand, or from those of Old Church Slavonic, Russian and Polish (Balto-Slavic languages) on the other (p. 4).

From these preliminary ideas, the author sets out not to reconstruct languages but see how languages evolved from earlier into later, more modern stages. This is, perhaps, one of the most obviously diverging points from traditional historical linguistics textbooks. In her own words,

> our topic here will be (…) language change. That is, we shall concentrate on the development of earlier stages of languages into later ones, and the mechanisms involved, rather than on the reconstruction of hypothesised past language states from present or recorded ones. (p. 7)

The reader is then told to be aware of the author's stance on the question of language change. Firstly, McMahon finds it difficult to come to terms with the label "language": she rejects a purely linguistic definition in favour of recognizing that language is "rather a socio-political matter" (p. 8). Secondly, the author adheres to the idea that synchronic and diachronic linguistics are inevitably connected. She builds her idea upon the belief that,

> past events may cast light on present situations, so that we may understand current systems better by considering how they came to be. (…) [h]istorical linguistics may be able to illuminate synchrony, the study of a single language state, through diachronic work: understanding language change means understanding language better. (p. 10)

A *caveat* is in order here: the division of the book in chapters does *not* mean that the issues under consideration should be assessed in isolation. The contents of the grammar-oriented chapters (Chapters Two to Seven) need be completed with that of the topic-oriented ones (Chapters Eight to Twelve). Only in this way will the reader come to a full grasp of McMahon's purpose.

Chapters Two and Three are devoted to the study of change in phonetics and phonology. After making the reader familiar with jargon (terms such as *assimilation, dissimilation, epenthesis, loss, weakening* and *metathesis),* the author provides us with three different linguistic viewpoints on the subject of

sound change, namely: the Neogrammarians, the Structuralists, and the Generativists. Firstly, the Neogrammarians held that sound change is regular and exceptionless (the regularity hypothesis), and the motivation for it was to be found in a mixture of biological and psychological reasons. Examples of sound change in this light are Grimm's Law and Verner's Law. Secondly, the Structuralists tried to go a step further and explain -not simply describe, as was the case with the Neogrammarians- sound shifts by invoking the structure of systems and the function of language (p. 20). The Great Vowel Shift is the example provided following Neogrammarian principles. Finally, the author reviews some rule changes proposed by the Generativists within their understanding of language as a rule-governed system: rule addition, rule loss, rule reordering, and rule inversion. For McMahon, the Generativists' approach has no explanatory content: it is but an account of the matter through rules.

At this point the author seems impelled to justify her alignment with the view adopted by Structuralists, and to discard the other two proposals. The reason is simple: McMahon's concept of language bears similarities with the kind of motives given by the Structuralists for language change. The functions of language determine its change. Regrettably, the exposition of both the Neogrammarians', and, above all, the Generativists' views on the question of sound change is clearly biased. Worth mentioning is the author's failure to clearly explain the basic tools used by the latter in their analyses (contrary to her initial purpose: "the majority of general linguistic terms will also be defined as we go along" (p. xi)): rule notation and concepts such as "underlying representation" (called "underlier" at this point in the text, although corrected later on) have been left unexplained, features such as "obstruent" and "continuant" are dropped without further comment, processes such as "feeding" and "bleeding" call for less cryptic definitions (p. 39). A negative opinion of the Generativists' contribution to language change is put forth in these terms:

> [Generativist grammarians] wrote formal phonological rules which reflected completed changes; but these are only restatements of the effects of the change, and are essentially non-explanatory. (…) [they] omitted from consideration Structuralist explanations of change, which centred on the structure and function of the system. (p. 43)

Once sound change has been reviewed, the author addresses the question of transmission, i.e., the spread of a certain change through the speech community. She tries to balance what seem to be two opposing stances: (i) sound change is lexically abrupt but phonetically gradual (Neogrammarian view), and (ii) sound change is phonetically abrupt but lexically gradual (lexical diffusion theory). McMahon introduces Lexical Phonology (LP) as the best way to account at one time for both diverging strategies, and welcomes the idea that diachrony and synchrony should not be treated independently. Furthermore, LP conceives sound changes not to be isolated from but intimately linked to, say, the morphologic behaviour of the words affected by the change.

Closely related to the idea just mentioned, the author devotes Chapter Four to survey some cases of morphological change. Her basic tenet is that "Morphological facts cannot (…) be divorced entirely from syntactic or phonological, or indeed semantic concerns" (p. 69). To illustrate this point, McMahon resorts to the case of *foot-feet:* the change in the plural form (**foots)* is partly due to the phonology, not to the morphology. Analogy is the author's main concern as regards morphological change. She provides a definition for the term and surveys some special cases of analogy, namely: analogical extension (<-s> plural formation in ModEnglish), analogical levelling (regularization of [z] in ModEnglish *choose/chose/chosen,* or [r] in ModGerman *küren/kor-koren/ gekoren),* and sporadic analogy (cases of contamination, back-formation and folk etymology).

Analogy is analysed from the viewpoint of two linguistic schools: Generativism and Structuralism. As MacMahon says (p. 81), the former constructed a formal, rule-based theory of analogy as simplification of phonological rules. There follows an introduction to Kiparsky's (1978) view of analogy, which identifies it with rule reordering. All in all, she does not think well of this model: "the Generative attempt to formalise analogy entirely, and to locate it in the grammar as simplificatory rule change, is ultimately obscurantist" (p. 84).

However, the Structuralists' view of iconicity is in line with the author's concept of language change. For her, iconicity "seems to favour related surface elements which are similar in form as well as in meaning, and which more generally binds language to the non-linguistic world" (p. 85). McMahon once more insists on the fact that language change is such a complex phenomenon

that it should not be seen as a simplifying process (Generative view); on the contrary, extralinguistic factors exert too strong an influence to be ignored altogether. This is the reason why the author agrees with what is known as Natural Morphology (NM). Quoting Wurzel (1989), she says that "NM identifies tendencies rather than absolute universals, and its principles 'express "only" universal TENDENCIES and not completely universal PROPERTIES of natural language necessarily occurring in every language"(original emphasis, p. 106). McMahon also adds that,

> Natural Morphology represents a step forward in its acceptance of interaction between the universal and the language-specific, between morphology and other components of the grammar, and between synchronic morphology and morphological change. (p. 106)

In her following two chapters (Chapters Five and Six), the author focuses on the study of syntactic change. After informing the reader that both the Neogrammarians and the Structuralists did very little work on syntax, she goes on to present a panorama of the achievements of Generative syntax on language change. The key point to bear in mind is that syntactic change was analysed as simplificatory grammar change (p. 108).

McMahon reviews Lightfoot's (1979) theory of syntactic change and devotes four pages to the Transparency Principle (TP) (pp. 125-129). She does not fully agree with it, since the TP views syntactic change as radical reanalysis, even when there is evidence that some syntactic changes show gradual diffusion, not radical change. However, Lightfoot's later reelaboration of his hypotheses within the Government-Binding framework deserves praise on the part of the author. Lightfoot's new proposals "incorporate the idea of gradual, diffusing change rather than clashing with it as the original Transparency Principle may have done. They also stress the importance of variation (…) and links of diachronic linguistics with evolutionary biology" (pp. 136-137).

Greenberg's (mainly 1963) contribution to linguistics is also present in *Understanding Language Change.* McMahon explores the question of the typological approach as a way to establish classification of languages. Typological theory covers all areas of grammar; however, "the best-developed area of typology probably involves the syntax, and specifically word order" (p. 140). Worth highlighting is the care taken by the author in

asserting that "Greenberg frequently proposes implicational universal *tendencies"* (original emphasis, p. 141), that is, a Greenbergian universal is thus not necessarily universal in its strongest sense.

The survey on syntactic change closes with a detailed examination of the process of grammaticalisation: words from major lexical categories become minor, grammatical categories which may, in turn, be further grammaticalised into affixes (pp. 160-173). The author illustrates this issue with the French negative, and adds two different approaches on grammaticalisation: that of Lehman (1985) from the point of view of syntax, and that of Traugott (1982) from the point of view of semantics and pragmatics.

The grammar-oriented part of the book finishes after Chapter Seven (Semantic and lexical change). Based on Bréal (1964), the author relates a number of types of semantic change, namely: extension, restriction, pejoration and amelioration. Semantic change may be of a linguistic, historical, social or psychological nature. McMahon pinpoints that the typology of semantic change she has been offering over the pages is not unproblematic: the categories proposed are not mutually exclusive but overlap, categories are not exhaustive, semantic change is highly unlikely to be as regular and predictable as, say, sound change. A possible way out to make headway in the study of semantic change is to be found, according to the author, in Structuralist principles and notions such as systemic equilibrium and push-and-drag chains. As far as lexical change is concerned, the author supplies examples of phonological and morphosyntactic neologisms. A distinction is made between productive vs. less productive morphosyntactic processes. Derivation (=affixation) and compounding belong to the former, whereas conversion (=zero derivation), back formation, clipping and acronyms belong to the latter. This section has very little or no critical content: it is simply expository.

The topic-oriented part of the book starts in Chapter Eight (Language contact). In this chapter, and in the following ones, Dr. McMahon sets out to make the reader aware of the necessity to include in linguistic (not just historical linguistic) research aspects of language such as: (i) the social status of those using a language; (ii) the geographical location of a certain speech community and its consequences for the language they speak; (iii) the com-

plex phenomenon of bilingualism or language contact; (iv) the reasons why languages change in a certain direction and not in others; and so on.

At this point in the book the author assesses the role of borrowing in language change. "The unifying factor underlying all borrowing is probably that of projected gain; the borrower must stand to benefit in some way from the transfer of linguistic material" (p. 201). Speakers of a language resort to borrowing for two main reasons: sheer necessity or social prestige. Convergence, not borrowing, takes place whenever we are faced with a linguistic context in which bilingualism is stable and socially equal, that is, both languages are perceived to stand on the same level (p. 213). McMahon provides an illuminating example of the complex linguistic situation in the Balkans and in the Indian linguistic area. In extreme cases a gradual approximation of the rules generating the two (or many) languages used by the natives occur in such a way that the forms generated correspondingly become more and more alike.

In a similar fashion, McMahon makes readers familiar with the surveys carried out in Germany and France concerning dialectal variation (Chapter Nine). The main aim here is to show how dialect geography should also be a (substantial) part of an overall framework of language change. Language change is studied in its social context (sociolinguistics), and actuation (=performance) is considered to be the initiator of linguistic change (pp. 248-252).

Pidgins and creoles (Chapter Ten) are special cases of languages in contact (see Romaine 1988, Trudgill 1983). A pidgin is defined to be a contact language, developed in a situation where people lacking a common language need to communicate (p. 253). A pidgin turns into a creole when it is adopted as the native language of a speech community for reasons, mainly, of social prestige and power. Pidgins and creoles are for the author the living proof that languages change. McMahon summarizes Bickerton's (1984) Language Bioprogram Hypothesis: she studies how creoles originate, how children acquire language, and how this evolved. The key to this study project is creolisation.

Chapter Ten is the introduction to the ideas presented in Chapters Eleven and Twelve respectively: Language death, and Linguistic evolution? Sociocultural reasons are said to play a significant role in language death, be it understood as language suicide or as language murder (these two labels are telling in themselves). Language change may end up in language death. This vi-

ew then fosters the idea of language decay. Other authors prefer to emphasize that languages progress. However, the common people simply perceive language change. McMahon closes her book with an assessment of the causes of language change (Teleology?, Biological evolution?) and concludes that biological linguistics is the linguistics of the near future, in the same way as psychological linguistics has been the linguistics of the immediate past (p. 340).

As the reader of this review might have noticed, McMahon's book is a very dense and controversial book, specially in some of its grammatical sections. Perhaps the greatest strength of *Understanding Language Change* lies in the author's command of so many different linguistic views supported in the bibliography. It is a pity, though, that the critical insight displayed in the grammar-oriented chapters does not extend to the second part of the book, which is mainly a presentation of the *status quo* of the issues under scope. To my thinking, exemplification deserves a similar judgement: in the first part references are mostly to earlier stages of languages, whereas the topic-oriented chapters basically include examples from modern states of languages.

In conclusion, this book supplies students with a very wide range of linguistic phenomena -mainly to be considered under the scope of traditional historical linguistics, but not only- and valuable -although questionable- critical comments. In my view, *Understanding Language Change* is a timely and thought-provoking contribution to the field of general and historical linguistics.

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