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Review of "Language Change: Progress or Decay" by Jean Aitchison

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"Language Change : Progress or Decay"

Aitchison, Jean (2001). *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* (3rd ed.) Cambridge: CUP. Hardback, xi, 312pp.

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for [The Linguist List](#)

Aitchison has become one of the most well-known writers for explaining linguistics to lay people - it was in this context that she was invited to give the 1996 BBC Reith lectures on Language, a very prestigious task in Britain.

This book, easy to read and comprehensive, is perfectly suited as an undergraduate text for linguistics students, and a good read for interested laypeople. Little previous knowledge is assumed.

Chapter 1 accounts for the inevitability of change, and the permanency of prejudices against change. Aitchison sees class elitism and the seemingly inevitably jaded regard of one generation on the habits of the previous one as responsible for prejudices against ongoing forms of language change. She explains the linguist's scientific approach to language variation, and debunks a series of myths about non-standard forms of language.

Chapter 2 explains the job of a historical linguist and their research methods.

Chapter 3 describes language variation, using classic studies as examples. It also explains how judgements about correct language are often not clear-cut - many many sentences are judged by native speakers to be 'a little strange' or 'probably incorrect'.

Chapter 4 looks at how changes in language spread across a speech community, and examines such phenomena as "hyper-correction".

Chapter 5 looks at the social attitudes that help engender and spread changes in a language, and particularly the importance of gender differences . Both conscious efforts to speak in a prestigious way, and unconscious forms of imitation of speech styles are looked at.

Chapter 6 examines lexical diffusion and the "S curve" pace of change spread within a community.

Chapter 7 deals with syntactic change.

Chapter 8 - a new chapter for this edition takes on the question of grammaticalization - lexical innovation leading to grammatical innovation, while chapter 9 handles semantic change

Chapter 10 covers sociolinguistic mechanisms that cause change - "Fashion, foreign influence and social Need" .

In Chapter 11 other prerequisites of change are looked at, and the position is defended that the sociolinguistic forces trigger change, but that natural forces within the language account for the precise form of the changes.

Chapter 12 is entitled "Repairing the patterns" and looks at how languages "recover" from "disruptive changes", often by moving other elements into holes left in a structure.

Chapter 13 covers chain reactions and knock-on effects in language change, and the ingenuity with which a language system will recycle an element that has lost its original use.

Chapter 14 takes on the question of whether we can learn about the mechanisms of language change as a social communication system by studying individual language disorders (due to brain damage, drunkenness or other conditions). Then it looks at Child language acquisition and considers whether its mechanisms can teach us something about the nature of language change. The author concludes that these phenomena are of a completely different nature to the historical developments of language, and therefore are largely irrelevant.

Chapter 15 covers language birth, pidgins and creoles, explaining in detail how a pidgin is born, and how it can become a Creole once there is a generation of native speakers, who have the pidgin as their first language.

Chapter 16 looks at language death, comparing language suicide (in particular the processes by which a creole can gradually rejoin and merge with its mother language) with language murder (the social domination mechanisms by which one language is replaced by a more prestigious one.)

Chapter 17 concludes, as one might expect, that language change is neither a process of decay (despite the eternal moaners about how the language "is going down the drain", nor is it in itself progress (there is no sign that languages thousands of years ago were in any way "primitive"). We are faced more with processes of natural change, accommodation and adaptation, as language strives to meet the social needs of its speakers.

The book is a very good and readable introduction to the discipline of historical linguistics and covers a very large number of questions. It is written in an upbeat style, littered with quotations (from Pirsig's and Steinbeck' novels, Browning's poetry, rock songs or Spike Milligan films) which will amuse the lecturer (and probably intrigue our younger students). The chapter titles (from "the

ever -whirling wheel" to "the mad hatter's tea party") show the intention is to entertain as well as instruct.

I did feel that, in the chapters dealing with "changes in progress", and in the introduction on prejudice against language change, this third edition was insufficiently refreshed with new examples from research or from public debate about language change. Such examples might have made sections of the book feel less dated. Nine tenths of the examples are the same as in the first (1981) edition. Given the long time between research and publication, this gave some of the examples of "changes in progress" a distinctly dated look, particularly since Aitchison emphasises the breakneck speed of linguistics research in recent decades. The vast majority of quotations condemning language change, for example, are from the 1970s. And the chapter on "changes in progress" includes this gem : "In Reading, a moderately big town about fifty miles west of London, England, it is not uncommon to hear sentences such as 'I knows how to handle teddy boys'." Similarly, the recent public debate in Britain about the rise of "Estuary English" - widely seen as a form of language decay - does not get a mention, and the chapter on sound changes invites the reader to compare their pronunciation of the noun "recess" with the 1982 edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary. Some sections of the book, in my view leave the reader not quite sure where the discussion is leading. In particular the section on the decreolization of Tok Pisin (a Pidgin which Aitchison has studied in depth) seemed unconvincing - the creole did not seem so likely to die out and be replaced by English.

In a book that covers such a wide range of issues - from phonological change to semantic change - and such a wide range of languages, it is probably inevitable that some errors have crept in, whether the source be the authors work or her references. Thus the information given on page 107 on the omission of "ne" in spoken French is quite misleading (elision takes place and has done for many decades before imperative forms). And I have never seen any evidence given for an increasing frequency in recent years of present continuous forms with verbs of state in English (p107)

Finally, there are at times rather astounding statements - in particular "the Irish reputation for illogicality could well have arisen out of English attempts to understand an Irish accent", where it seems that the question under analysis is not part of a linguist's domain, but rather the political historian's! Despite these small faults, the book is a very successful introduction and deserves its status as a standard.

John Mullen