

# Variations in time and place

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ROGER LASS

*The Shape of English: Structure and history*  
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The history of a language defies easy exposition; it has too many competing dimensions. The “obvious” approach – to begin at the beginning, and plot the changes in sounds, grammar and vocabulary up to the present day – works up to a point, but it assumes that a language is a monolithic, homogeneous thing. If the sociolinguistic research of the past twenty years has taught us anything, it must be that language is not like this, and never has been. Dialect variation is built into the history of English from the beginning, brought across the Channel by waves of invaders from different Germanic-speaking areas. To cope with this fact, any historical survey needs to depart from chronology, and present the range of variation in the language that existed during its various periods.

This problem gets worse the nearer we come to our own time, when the many dialects which compete for attention evolve into varieties of the standard language. First it was Scots English, then the many transatlantic developments, with their alternative standards in sounds, vocabulary and (to a lesser extent)

grammar. Any author is faced with a painful decision here – whether to follow the British norm or the American one. And as we move towards the twentieth century, the diversity of English around the world, in which British English emerges as a minority group (56 million out of well over 300 million mother-tongue speakers), presents further norms that all need to be taken into account.

Roger Lass's *The Shape of English* faces the problem of synchronic variation fairly and squarely; it does not have the misleadingly simple chronological organization of many earlier studies. Rather, as his subtitle indicates, the processes of language structure are used to explain the sort of thing that can happen to a language, at any point in time, as a perspective for evaluating the particular changes that took place in the case of English. Thus, his chapter on phonology begins by discussing what is involved in analysing the pronunciation system of a language. He then looks at the system of a standard dialect, focusing on Southern British, but with copious references to other standards. Specific features, such as the use of *r*, or the pattern of vowels and syllables, are studied in detail. There is a lengthy discussion of the nature of stress in English, and how it relates to syllable division and the speed of speech. Only then do we get an account of the Old, Middle, and Early Modern English systems, and of the pronunciation changes which took place in them. This is the section of the book with which

those used to traditional accounts of sound change in English will feel most at home (the notes contain points of contact with most of the standard references). Lass's intention is that the traditional list of changes, which are so often presented as a set of isolated observations, should be related and better explained by being seen as reflexes of underlying phonological processes.

The book begins with an excellent discussion of language, dialect, standard, and related issues, in which the links between English and Germanic languages are explored more thoroughly than is usually the case in histories of this kind. Lass explains the relationship between structural and historical accounts, and ends his opening chapter with a summary of our sources of knowledge – how we learn about the earlier states of a language. The next gives a clear, concise and largely chronological account of the “external history” of English – the history of the speech community, and of the factors which impinge on the structure of the language (its “internal history”): the various invasions, the rise of standard English, the spread of English around the world.

What follows forms the structural core of the book, two chapters dealing respectively with phonology and morphosyntax. These are harder technically than the opening chapters, and will surely present a problem to readers lacking a basic knowledge of the relevant branches of linguistics. Not that Lass would wish to apolo-

gize for this: he considers that “a book about English must be a book about English linguistics”. I share this view, though I would not wish to juxtapose this degree of technicality the more general and conversational level of the opening chapters.

He then goes on to bring together much of the research on regional and social dialects of recent years, and apply it to the English historical situation. Here there are some extremely clear and useful comparative statements – for example, comparing the Welsh, Scots, New York, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and other vowel systems with that of RP. But there is no comparably detailed account of the place of pidgins and creoles. Finally, Lass puts English back into the context of Germanic languages, looking at the “family resemblances”, and at the way evolutionary change has affected the various dialects in the past 1,000 years, and thus placing his structural account within a historical perspective.

What emerges, is, as Lass says in his preface, a “hybrid” – a cross between a book on English and an introduction to major aspects of English linguistics. It is an eminently desirable aim, but the problem, as usual, is how to present the linguistics in such a way as not to obscure the language. Lass warns his readers at the outset that some chapters are going to be more technical than others, and aims the book at intelligent lay readers only if they are “willing to get up the necessary background”.