

JOAN BYBEE, *LANGUAGE CHANGE*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

How many times has one picked up a book, in preparation for a class, that purported to cater for specialists and students *alike* only to find out that such a hybrid though generally practised motivation is a practical impossibility? In her most recent monograph, Joan Bybee has wisely resisted the temptation to address fellow linguists and has instead produced a book that will be hailed as a significant contribution to the Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics series. Her compact text amply illustrates that linguists never waste their talents and time when they set about getting their subject across to the less experienced (but still fairly advanced, let us say M.A. students of linguistics or philology) in a user-friendly way, with a sharp eye for priority and a clear sense of structure.

Even so, Bybee's project is ambitious, as her subject is a vast and complex one, and this makes the adopted approach all the more needed and the resulting explicatory framework all the more admirable.

Arranged in 11 chapters, the book starts from an introduction to the study of language change, proceeds by way of a survey of diverse workings of change at various language levels and in interaction between them, and brings the survey to a close by two summarising chapters that look into the methods of studying language change in comparative and typological perspectives and at the interface of the internal and external factors, with important implications for a number of theoretical issues traditionally associated with the study of language change.

The nuclear central chapters, analysing various types of change at all levels of linguistic structure (sound change, analogical change, syntactic change, lexical and semantic change) and their interplay (interaction of sound change with grammar; grammaticalisation), identify and draw together common processual paths in terms of shared or similar mechanisms and patterns (such as exist, for example, between grammaticalisation and syntactic change or between grammaticalisation and semantic change). The shared mechanisms and patterns of change serve as pivots of the argument and structure of the book, mapped cross-linguistically, on rich and well-described material from a number of language families, and grounded in cognitive processes and usage factors.

Bybee's explications are crucially centred around cognition, usage and (syntactic, pragmatic or other) context whose interplay in communicative events determines the directionality and causation of language change. In her treatment, language is seen as a complex adaptive system in which dynamic factors inherent in the speaker, listener and context produce change. Among the mechanisms of change on the cognitive level, the author emphasizes the tendency in language users to associate meaning directly with form, determined by the pragmatic context (with linguistic structures from morphemes to constructions seen as form-meaning mappings), and semantic (or broadly functional) generalisation due to wider contextual uses, often through inference and metaphor. Of the mechanisms of change on the level of usage, highlighted are automation of production, frequency and chunking. Exhibiting, and dependent on, automation of production, language is subject to reduction and re-



timing that highly practiced behaviour of self-organizing systems achieves through repetition. Frequency is presented principally as operative in the replacement of minor patterns in language structure and use with major ones, and in resistance to change by items with high token frequency. Automation and frequent use bring about chunking, i.e. formation of chunks at the level of words, phrases and constructions in cognitive representation by repetition, with meaning based on the contexts of use.

Characterised by these mechanisms, language is seen as fundamentally related to other areas of human processing and cognition, but that is not the only important theoretical implication that users of this textbook will become aware of. Joan Bybee convincingly demonstrates that directionality and causation in language change are to be conceived broadly, as mere tendencies depending on the frequency of occurrence, and that language change is essentially gradual and anti-teleological. No less importantly, she reaffirms the role of the principal mechanisms in relation to some of the recent theoretical issues, such as the generative accounts, Naturalness Theory, language acquisition or language contact. Thus, for example, the author argues, on strong and consistent data evidence presented earlier in the book, against the autonomy and abruptness of syntactic change in the generative framework. Like some other recent theorists of language change, Bybee emphasizes the role of frequency in understanding what is linguistically “natural” or “unmarked” in the Naturalness Theory. By pointing out significant similarities reflected in data on language use by children and adults, respectively, the author aims to redress the weight of importance attached to language acquisition in favour of adult usage when explaining language change. In discussing links between the causation of language change and language contact, Joan Bybee underlines the selective agency of contact-induced language change that does not appear sufficiently systemic to bring about structural convergence.

Complete with questions for discussion, suggested readings, and a useful glossary of terms, this book will indeed help students to gain a general understanding of language as an ever-changing system. The presentation of argument, proceeding strictly from data in richly illustrated and cross-linguistically conceived mini-studies, has an unwavering thematic and methodological focus and is free from terminological clogging. This is true even of the treatments of some notoriously difficult topics, such as the development of tone and tone changes (p. 63f.), abduction (pp. 241–242) or the rise of ergative, presented as a case of reorganisation within a clause (pp. 165–169). The chapter on syntactic change — a demanding theme that in comparable treatments not infrequently suffers from limited space, poor structuring and insufficient exemplification — is presented here in both a succinct and lucid manner as a life cycle of constructions: they are followed as stepping from the paratactic to the syntactic domain (topics into subjects, two clauses into one); as being affected by reorganisation within a clause; as rising and expanding; as undergoing subsequent layering, competition and loss; and as acting in (typologically and pragmatically conceived) word-order correlations.

In addition, Bybee is always prepared to take time with her readers. Sound change, traditionally the least attractive type of language change to students, has suffered much in explanations that tend to divorce phonetics from phonology. To



be able to bridge the two domains, the author presents a variety of sound change issues in a generous scope of three successive chapters. She starts by highlighting first phonetic bearings of diverse types of sound change (mainly in terms of retiming, increase and reduction of articulatory gestures), goes on to consider the impact of sound changes on the phonological system and ends up by considering cross-linguistic and systemically relevant interactions of sound change with grammar, where she, once again, stresses the importance of (phonetic) contexts for the process of change.

Problems in the text are neither serious nor numerous. In most cases, they have to do with the (necessarily) limited scope of the book seen against the breadth of its thematic coverage and its vastly rich language material. Thus, one might complain that there are some noticeable gaps in the bibliography (with its focus on the literature of the 1980s and 1990s)¹ but, apart from the simple fact that bibliographies are bound to be incomplete, it can be argued that the overall argument of this textbook is not affected by this insufficiently recent referencing. Reliance on such sources may also, though very occasionally, lead to imprecisions in the ways material is collected and described. This concerns e.g. the account of strong verbs in the history of English discussed in Chapter 5.7. (p. 107) to exemplify analogical extension: the presentation of data is not accurate, perhaps because it relies on Jespersen 1942,² with forms such as **stung* or **struck* wrongly assumed non-existent as strong verb forms in Old English.

For the same reasons of limited scope and thematic breadth, specific histories of the analysed themes and languages cannot be presented as fine-grained enough: thus, a discussion of zero-creation by sound change should have been included in the subchapter 5.5.2. on under-analysis and the creation of zeroes, which would have established a link to Chapter 4 on the interaction between sound change and grammar. Likewise, the discussion in Chapter 11.2.1 on the phonologisation of fricatives in Middle English should have mentioned, along with the phonological influences due to language contact, the native sources of the process. Occasionally, language material presented in the case studies suffers from insufficient precision in describing and glossing: for example, *gyfeþe* in *Beowulf* 818–819, quoted as example 253 on p. 184, is not a “main verb” but an adjective (and a noun elsewhere in the poem); *eke* in *ekename* is not ‘real’ but ‘additional’ (p. 79); the form of the numeral ‘one’ in Old English was not *āne* (p. 79) but *ān*; the translation of example 217 on p. 171 should read “Now I will go wend my way with bitter song and wellaway” instead of “...and well away”.

Drawbacks such as these do not, however, detract in any significant way from the many merits of this readable, data-based and methodologically novel textbook intro-

1 For example, one might have wished for McMahon 1994 (McMahon, A. M. S.: *Understanding Language Change*. Cambridge University Press 1994) to be included, or for the important theoretical issue of zero creation and marking to be covered by reference to more recent sources than Greenberg 1966 (Greenberg, J.: *Language Universals: with special reference to feature hierarchies*. The Hague: Mouton 1966) (p. 102ff).

2 Jespersen, O.: *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles, Part VI: Morphology*. London: George Allen and Unwin 1942.



duction into language change, a ripe product of Joan Bybee's illustrious career as an "empirical theorist" of her most central subject of interest. It is only to be hoped that the volume will soon be complemented by an exercise book.

Jan Čermák (Prague)

Department of English Language and ELT Methodology,
Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague
nám. J. Palacha 2, 116 38 Praha 1, Czech Republic
jan.cermak@ff.cuni.cz