# Selfish Sounds and Linguistic Evolution

This book takes an exciting new perspective on language change, by explaining it in terms of Darwin's evolutionary theory. Looking at a number of developments in the history of sounds and words, Nikolaus Ritt shows how the constituents of language can be regarded as mental patterns, or 'memes', which copy themselves from one brain to another when communication and language acquisition take place. Memes are both stable in that they transmit faithfully from brain to brain, and active in that their success at replicating depends upon their own properties. Ritt uses this controversial approach to challenge established models of linguistic competence, in which speakers acquire, use and shape language. In Darwinian terms, language evolution is something that happens to, rather than through, speakers, and the interests of linguistic constituents matter more than those of their human 'hosts'. This book will stimulate debate among evolutionary biologists, cognitive scientists and linguists alike.

NIKOLAUS RITT is Professor and Head of the English Department at Vienna University. He has published in many linguistics journals, and is co-editor (with Christiane Dalton-Puffer) of *Words: Structure, Meaning, Function* (2000), and author of *Quantity Adjustment: Vowel Lengthening and Shortening in Early Middle English* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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## *A Darwinian Approach to Language Change*

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# Preface

This book was intended to become a study of English historical phonology and morphology based on a generalised Darwinian model of linguistic evolution. Its basic idea, going back in my case to a summer reading of Richard Dawkins' *Selfish Gene*, is that languages represent teams or populations of replicating mental patterns, which use their human hosts, that is, speakers, for the purpose of their essentially selfish replication. As my attempts began to take some shape, I presented ideas for a few chapters at various conferences and had some of them published in journals and conference volumes. Although they were usually well received, however, nobody seemed to understand why I needed what came across as 'biological metaphors'.

As far as I was concerned, however, the concepts I employed were not metaphors at all, and the accounts I gave only made sense, I thought, within the particular perspective I had begun to take. The failure of my colleagues to understand that I was not just using exotic language to lend more hype to otherwise perfectly conventional stories caused me considerable worry, and I therefore tried to be more explicit about my approach, its theoretical foundations and its advantages over the more established view that languages represent mental tools which speakers use and modify according to their needs. As I went on with this task, it began to seem more and more likely that this book would become a plea for a theoretical perspective rather than an exercise in description, as I had originally intended. And this is indeed what it seems to have become.

Of the case studies which I originally prepared, only two have made it into the final version. One of them attempts to explain why words such as ModE *man* have retained their short vowel ever since Old English times, although they 'ought to' have lengthened if my 1994 thesis on Middle English adjustments of vowel quantity was correct. The other makes the case for a 'Trochaic Conspiracy' in the historical development of Old and Middle English word forms, in which they all attempted

to optimise their metrical structure. The rest of this book is a long attempt to argue why the stories I tell in the more empirical sections make sense.

This book questions many established assumptions about languages, speakers, and what it is that linguists are describing. Making excursions into evolutionary biology, the theory of complex adaptive systems, cognitive science and, indeed, memetics, it defends an approach to the study of language and its history which will strike many linguists as somewhat unusual. I shall argue that it is not only possible to speak, metaphorically, of languages as if they were entities with a life of their own, but that they indeed are. Although they are not made of genes, their constituents do qualify as replicators and are capable of evolution. Like the evolution of genes, however, the evolution of language constituents proceeds by the mechanism of quasi-random mutation, and subsequent automatic selection. Thus, the most appropriate framework for understanding the properties of languages and their historical development is generalised Darwinism. Since I am convinced that this does not only apply to the descent of [mæn], and the particular historical conspiracy in which English word forms evolved to become better trochees, you are invited to let yourself be convinced.

While I am personally responsible for all shortcomings of this book, it is fair to say that I owe much of what might make it a worthwhile read to others. The names of many are included in the references, of course, but there are a number to whom I owe special gratitude. Although they cannot be aware of it, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Douglas Hofstadter have opened my mind to the perspectives and ways of arguing on which most of this book is based. So has Roger Lass – only he knows, I hope. Had it not been for his encouragement and critical support, I do not think I would ever have attempted to write this book. Trying to emulate his style of thinking has been an immensely rewarding experience.

People who know Roger Lass' views on language change will perhaps find it somewhat ironical that I am almost as indebted to Wolfgang Dressler, in whose Circle of Natural Linguists I have always felt at home. In particular, I would not want to have missed any of the inspiring discussions with Katarzyna Dziubalska. Which brings me to the friends and colleagues in my own department, in particular our working paper discussion group, and most above all Herbert Schendl, Barbara Seidlhofer and Henry Widdowson. I thank them for their loyalty, and the interest, the feedback, and the time they have given me. They are also great colleagues, generally.

I thank April and Ron McMahon for their encouraging and helpful comments on the beta version of this book, and Kate Brett and Helen

Barton from Cambridge University Press, without whose support, insight and professionalism this book would not be what it is.

To Laura, who would deserve to know in great detail exactly how much I am indebted to her, I can only say that I am still at a loss for words. All I can do is dedicate this book to her.