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Language Change: Progress or Decay?

Fourth edition

How and why do languages change? Where does the evidence of language change come from? How do languages begin and end? This introduction to language change explores these and other questions, considering changes through time.

The central theme of this book is whether language change is a symptom of progress or decay. This book will show you why it is neither, and that understanding the factors surrounding how language change occurs is essential to understanding why it happens.

This updated edition remains non-technical and accessible to readers with no previous knowledge of linguistics.

After many years lecturing at the University of London, (London School of Economics), Jean Aitchison was Professor of Language and Communication at the University of Oxford (1993–2003), and is now an Emeritus Professor. She is the author of a number of books on language, including *The Language Web* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics

General editor: Jean Aitchison, *Emeritus Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication, University of Oxford*

In the past twenty-five years, linguistics – the systematic study of language – has expanded dramatically. Its findings are now of interest to psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, teachers, speech therapists and numerous others who have realized that language is of crucial importance in their life and work. But when newcomers try to discover more about the subject, a major problem faces them – the technical and often narrow nature of much writing about linguistics.

Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics is an attempt to solve this problem by presenting current findings in a lucid and non-technical way. Its object is twofold. First, it hopes to outline the 'state of play' in key areas of the subject, concentrating on what is happening now, rather than on surveying the past. Secondly, it aims to provide links between branches of linguistics that are traditionally separate.

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Preface

Language change is a topic which, perhaps more than most others, spreads itself over a wide range of areas. For this reason, the literature often seems disjointed and contradictory, since many scholars, like Jane Austen, prefer to polish their own square inch of ivory, rather than tackle the whole vast subject. This book is an attempt to pull the various strands together into a coherent whole, and to provide an overview of the phenomenon of human language change. It discusses where our evidence comes from, how changes happen, why they happen, and how and why whole languages begin and end. It does this within the framework of one central question. Is language change a symptom of either progress or decay?

The study of language change – often labelled 'historical linguistics' – has altered its character considerably in recent years. Traditionally, scholars concerned themselves with reconstructing the earliest possible stages of languages, and with describing sound changes as they unrolled through the ages. In this, they paid relatively little attention to changes currently taking place, to syntactic change, to meaning change, to pidgins and creoles, to dying languages, or to the sociolinguistic factors which underlie many alterations. In the second half of the twentieth century, these neglected topics rose one by one to the forefront of attention. This book is an attempt to draw together the old and the new into an integrated whole. In short, it tries to combine old-style historical linguistics with more recent approaches, so as to give an overview of the field as it stands at the moment.

The flow of new books and articles on historical linguistics has become a flood since the third edition of this book was published in

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2001. This fourth edition tries to reflect the torrent of new work. I have deleted one chapter (on child language and aphasia) since I, and others, have become convinced that these topics do not significantly affect language change. This has provided space for additions to other chapters (for example, new evidence on the previously maligned Bishop Lowth, and information on text messaging). Numerous books and articles have been added to the 'Notes and suggestions for further reading'. Hopefully, the book provides an up-to-date 'bird's-eye view' of what is happening in historical linguistics.

Symbols and technical terms have been kept to a minimum. Those that are essential have been explained in the text as they occur, but since several common ones crop up more than once, a brief glossary has been added for those not familiar with linguistics.

As in previous editions, I would like to remember with thanks those teachers from my past who fired my enthusiasm for the subject when I was a student, in particular Professor W. S. Allen and Dr J. Chadwick, Professor O. Szemerényi, Professor R. Jakobson and Professor C. Watkins. I would also like to thank all those colleagues, students and friends who both in discussions and by their writing have helped me to clarify my thoughts on language change. Thank you, also, to all those who have sent me books, papers and offprints. Please continue to do so!

Thanks go to the publishers at Cambridge University Press, especially Sarah Green, Editor of Language and Linguistics, who answers email queries with astonishing promptness and efficiency. Finally, I want to give particular thanks to my husband, the lexicographer John Ayto, whose loving kindness and helpful books made my task an easier one.

I have not always followed the advice and suggestions made to me by others (though I certainly considered them seriously at the time), so I alone am responsible for any oversimplifications or inaccuracies which may remain.

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Symbols and technical terms

Most symbols and technical terms are explained in the text the first time they occur, in cases where an explanation seems necessary. But since several common ones occur more than once, this glossary has been added for the benefit of those readers not familiar with them.

General

[ ] Square brackets indicate sounds. For example, the pronunciation of the English word *kissed* may be represented by the phonetic transcription [kɪst].

* An asterisk indicates a non-permitted sequence of sounds or words in the language concerned. For example, English does not permit a word with the sound sequence *[tpet], or a sentence **Augusta roses wants*.

→ An arrow means 'changed into historically', as in [e] → [i], which means [e] changed into [i].

Phonetic symbols

When a phonetic symbol is essential, this book uses IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols, which are conventionally put between square brackets. However, since phonetic symbols make a text more difficult to read, the standard written form is used whenever possible, even though the spoken form is under discussion.

Phonetic symbols which are not explained are either obvious from the context, or have a value similar to that in the standard

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written form, e.g. [m] symbolizes the sound at the beginning of the word *men*.

The following list gives some of the less obvious terms and symbols.

Consonants

[θ] The sound at the beginning of English *thick*.
[ð] The sound at the beginning of *then*.
[ʃ] The sound at the beginning of *shock*.
[ʒ] The sound at the end of *beige* or in the middle of *leisure*.
[tʃ] The sound at the beginning and end of *church*.
[ʤ] The sound at the beginning and end of *judge*.
[ŋ] The sound at the end of *bang* (**velar nasal**).
[ʔ] A **glottal stop** – see explanation below.

Stop: a consonant involving a complete stoppage of the airstream at some point in the vocal tract, as [p], [t], [k]. A glottal stop [ʔ] is a complete stoppage of the airstream in the glottis (lower part of the throat), as at the end of Cockney or Glaswegian *pit* [pɪʔ].

Fricative: a consonant in which the airstream is never completely cut off, resulting in audible friction, as in [f], [v], [s], [z].

Affricate: a combination of a stop and a fricative, as in [tʃ], [ʤ].

Sibilant: a hissing or hushing sound, as in [s], [z], [ʃ].

Voiced: a voiced sound is one whose production involves vibration of the vocal cords, as in [b], [d], [g], [v], [z].

Voiceless: a voiceless sound is one whose production does not involve the vibration of the vocal cords, as in [p], [t], [k], [f], [s]. Technically, it involves 'late voice onset', that is, some voicing, but delayed.

Vowels

: A colon added to a vowel indicates length, as in [ti:] *tea*.

~ A wavy line over a vowel indicates nasalization, as in French [bɔ̃] *bon* 'good'.

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[ə] **Schwa:** a short indeterminate vowel, like that at the beginning of *ago*, or the end of *sofa*.

[iː] a vowel somewhat like that in *meet*, *bee*.

[ɪ] a vowel like that in *hit*.

Other vowel symbols are mostly explained as they occur. Key words are less useful for vowels, since there is so much variation in accent in the English-speaking world.

Diphthong: a sequence of two vowels which glide into one another, as in *play* [pleɪ].

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