

Two interesting new books on language change.
(review for the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology)

Auer, Peter, Frans Hinskens, and Paul Kerswill, eds. 2005. *Dialect Change: Convergence and Divergence in European Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xiv + 415 pp.

Lightfoot, David. 2006. *How New Languages Emerge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ix + 199 pp.

INTRODUCTION.

When asked by an interviewer what he thought of sociolinguistics, Noam Chomsky responded that, whereas such work might have value for dispelling misconceptions and prejudice about non-standard language varieties, the study of the relation between social class and linguistic variables has no more scientific interest than butterfly collecting. “If you like butterflies, that’s fine, but such work must not be confounded with research, which is concerned to discover explanatory principles of some depth” (Chomsky 1979: 57). The two books under review would appear to afford a vantage point for assessing the relation between sociolinguistics and formal grammatical theory three decades later. On the one hand, according to its editors, the collection *Dialect Change*, will demonstrate that there is more science to sociolinguistic lepidoptery than Chomsky thought: “The overall aim is to proceed from the *idiographic* level, i.e. the level of the description of unique, particular, situation-specific findings regarding single dialect features, to the *nomothetic* level, the level of general, preferably universal, principles” (48). David Lightfoot, for his part, intends his *How New Languages Emerge* to show butterfly-collectors how science is really done.

I. AUER, HINSKENS AND KERSWILL.

Dialect Change comprises thirteen chapters by seventeen researchers, many of them participants in an international research network on “The Convergence and Divergence of Dialects in a Changing Europe”. The four papers in the first section of the volume examine dialect convergence and/or divergence from the standpoint of linguistic structure. It is here that the interest of dialect studies for formal theories of language is made explicit, although for the most part the studies carried out by the authors only serve to point out the limitations of these frameworks in accounting for the outcomes of dialect-contact and dialect-change phenomena. According to Jeffrey Kallen’s discussion of mutations undergone by /t/ in dialects of English (51-80), Optimality Theory — which represents phonological processes in terms of hierarchies of output constraints — can account for the range of attested pronunciations, but in each speech community the actual trajectory of change depends on the “social embedding of norms” (54-55, 79-80). Gaetano Berruto’s study of the interaction between local dialects, and regional and national standard varieties of Italian (81-95), reveals that the influence is not always unidirectional. Alongside the “Italianisation of dialect”, Berruto notes that the “dialectisation of Italian” can also occur, giving rise to regional varieties of the national language (*italiano popolare*, 83). He also critiques linguistic models of code-switching and code-mixing phenomena, since his data call into question the concept of a “matrix language” which governs the morphosyntactic frame into which elements from the second code are inserted (87-93). Leonie Cornips & Karen Corrigan’s chapter (96-134) aims to reconcile the “Internalist” linguistic theories of formalists with the “Externalist” models used by variationist sociolinguists. The

authors' data on "middle" constructions (the equivalents of *This shirt washes easily* and similar sentence types) in Dutch dialects reveals evidence for an Aspect parameter of the type postulated by Lightfoot for the internal grammar ("I-language") of the individual speaker, which provides an elegant account for the distribution of superficially dissimilar syntactic constructions in the dialects under investigation (127). The claim has been made that the formalists base their representation of language principally upon the evidence of syntactic phenomena, whereas sociolinguists construct their models of the correlation between linguistic behavior and socioeconomic factors almost entirely on phonetic data — rather like the blind men and the elephant. Jenny Cheshire, Paul Kerswill, and Ann Williams ask the question whether "generalisations concerning the spread of sound change apply equally well to other types of language change", such as syntax (135-167). Their study of speech recorded in British urban centers uncovers some intriguing instances of syntactic variation, such as the use of pronominal tags (e.g. *I don't like it me*, 159), but these give rise to more questions than answers for the analysts.

The five chapters in the second section are concerned with "macrosociolinguistic motivations" such as language standardization (Inge Lise Pedersen, 171-195), migration and urbanism. Paul Kerswill & Peter Trudgill (196-220) examine the results of intensive studies of the birth of dialects, when speakers of diverse varieties of the same language settle a new area, such as New Zealand or the newly-founded British city of Milton Keynes. Of particular interest is the extreme variability found among the first native-born speakers (the children of the migrants), as individual speakers draw linguistic features from more than one ambient dialect ("shopping-basket effect", 210). This is followed in subsequent generations by increasing levelling, "koinisation" and the reallocation of regional variants as social and stylistic markers. The authors note similarities between dialect birth and language birth, i.e. creolization (201, 220). The remaining chapters in this section look at dialect convergence in German linguistic islands in Russia (Peter Rosenberg, 221-235), attitudes to local Belarusian dialects and national languages on both sides of the Poland-Belarus frontier (Curt Woolhiser, 236-262), and the innovative or conservative "insularity" of Flemish urban dialects vis-à-vis the surrounding rural areas (Johan Taeldeman, 263-283). These studies show that religious affiliation can influence dialect convergence (226-227) or language attitudes (258-260), and that a structurally more remote standard language favors dialect conservatism (261).

The volume concludes with three chapters on microsociolinguistic motivations, primarily in the context of social networks and face-to-face interaction. Tore Kristiansen & Jens Normann Jørgensen's study of overt and covert attitudes towards varieties of Danish points to social meaning-making and identity-construction as driving forces (287-302). Juan Andrés Villena-Ponsoda's chapter on Andalusian Spanish (303-334) is the only study in the volume which employs an ethnographic approach comparable to that used by Penelope Eckert in her well-known work on the linguistic correlates of identity construction in an American high-school (Eckert 2000). Villena-Ponsoda's research has the more modest goals of correlating convergence to or divergence from the standard language to the density and multiplexity of speakers' social networks. (Incidentally, North American readers should be advised that periods are used in the mathematical formulas on pp. 308-9 to symbolize multiplication, and not as decimal points. Hence "6.5" = 30 in this paper.) In the final chapter, Peter Auer & Frans Hinskens look at evidence of individuals adapting their speech to that of their interlocutors, and conclude that

speakers are in fact assimilating to stereotyped characteristics of the group they identify with, leading to frequent occurrences of hypercorrection and hyperdialectism (335-357).

II. LIGHTFOOT. The basic points in David Lightfoot's *How New Languages Emerge* will be familiar to anyone who has read the author's earlier work. In fact, there is very little here that Lightfoot hasn't already published elsewhere; entire sections are adapted nearly verbatim from his 1999 book and a 2002 journal article. His starting point is Chomsky's distinction between innate language capacity (or UG, universal grammar), internal languages ("I-languages") and external languages ("E-languages"). Lightfoot's conception of UG conforms to the "principles and parameters" model assumed by linguists working in the Minimalist framework, with the exception that Lightfoot replaces parameters with "cues", intensional grammatical elements, which, if not present in all languages, become "points of variation between grammars" (78-79). E-languages are what most of us call "languages", that is, fuzzily-bounded regularities of speech behavior, which Lightfoot qualifies as "amorphous and not a system" (12). I-languages "emerge in children according to the dictates of the language capacity and the demands of the external language to which they are exposed" (7). The innate cognitive infrastructure of UG guides the child to "scan the linguistic environment for cues only in simple syntactic domains" (79), in technical terms, they are "degree-0" cue-based learners. But since E-languages, as group phenomena, are in continual flux, the ambient linguistic data to which a child is exposed might motivate the resetting of a single feature of I-language, which in turn could generate a number of simultaneous changes in the individual's grammar with respect to that of the previous generation. Should similar I-languages be generated in the brains of other children in the same speech community, the E-language itself will be changed. As a consequence, "grammar change tends to be "bumpy", manifested by clusters of phenomena changing at the same time" (89).

From this standpoint, Lightfoot foresees a historical linguistics (and sociolinguistics as well, I imagine) that seeks to link observed variation and change to the parametric reconfiguration of I-languages, and explore the possibility that the speech repertoires of individuals might require the attribution to a single speaker of multiple and even "competing" grammars (93). Other linguists besides Lightfoot have been doing just such work for some time now, and the results look promising. It would seem to me that this research program could coexist with more traditional approaches, and even intersect with them, but Lightfoot does not seem keen on the idea. He repeatedly criticizes the 19th-century Neogrammarians and their present-day successors — whom he lampoons as "aging gentlemen at the end of the departmental corridor, working on etymologies and reconstructing proto-systems for all-inclusive phyla like Nostratic" (184) — for their inability to come up with explanatory principles of language change. Since, in his view, "there is little systematic or predictable about E-language as a whole beyond the general properties of I-languages and their use" (161), the enormous body of research in historical linguistics, dialectology and sociolinguistics has not contributed very much beyond what the synchronic study of I-languages (i.e., formalist linguistics) can demonstrate with greater clarity, unless one assumes that the "general properties" of language use amount to more than banal statements about communicative behavior. But few if any historical linguists or sociolinguists conceive of what they are doing as a "science" in the same sense that physicists or Chomsky-school linguists do. Skilled investigators of language variation and change operate with a diversified toolkit that includes a range of hypothesis-forming and hermeneutic tools. Coming the closest to law-like regularity are generalizations concerning the directionality of language change

which achieve an impressively high degree of predictive force (Campbell & Harris 2002). This has been demonstrated time and again by the uncovering of new data which confirm hypotheses that had been based on such generalizations. But knowledge of probable directionality of change is of limited value unless it is augmented by information and historical data from a range of sources, deep knowledge of the languages, cultures and societies under study, and the ability, refined by long experience, to see patterns and uncover diagnostic facts in a mountain of raw data.

As for the new historical and variationist researchers into I-language whom Lightfoot imagines taking their place “at the center of the linguistics department, engaging with all aspects of the field” (184), it remains unclear to me what they can learn from diachronic and sociolinguistic data that they could not find out from the synchronic investigations most formalist linguists employ, which depend crucially on native-speaker judgments of grammaticality (and ungrammaticality), language-acquisition data, and complex constructions that occur extremely seldom in spontaneous speech. Meanwhile, those researchers whose primary focus is E-language will carry on as they have for over two centuries, expanding and fine-tuning their research methods and interpretive tools. Some, as the *Dialect change* volume attests, have read up on the research of Chomsky, Lightfoot and other formalists, and are at present seeking to demonstrate how the concept of a parametrized I-language can yield useful insights into clusters of simultaneously-occurring changes or distinctive dialect features. Should further work confirm the utility of this hypothesis, it will doubtless become a component of the skill set of future investigators. A bridge may one day span the gap described by Chomsky, but it seems likely that the traffic flow will be mostly in one direction.

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