

## REVIEWS

Pyles, T.: *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 2nd edition revised, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1971. 413 pp.

This work is a rewritten and expanded version of the first *Origins* which appeared in 1964 and which, together with Pyles and J. Algeo's *Workbook on the Origins...* has since been used fairly extensively as a teaching text at American universities.

Treatment of the topic proceeds along traditional descriptive lines and the author does not take issue with any modern linguistic theories ('This is not a book about current linguistic theories, and it employs no polemics') although he begins his book with a cautionary chapter entitled *Facts, assumptions, and misconceptions about language*.

This chapter, something of a potpourri, deals with such problems as the layman's supposed confusion of writing with speech, theories of the origin of language, the misguided belief that animals also use 'language' and the idea that languages can 'decay'. We are shown that no human community uses a 'primitive' language, for even Pidgin English has a complex grammar, and all languages are sufficiently expressive to meet the demands of their speakers. The Eskimo, for example 'feels no need to discuss Zen Buddhism, the quantum theory, or campus unrest' just as the Englishman is content with only one word for *snow*. The arbitrariness of the relationship between the sound of a word and its meaning is borne out even by so-called 'onomatopoeic' words, such that the sound made by a dog is designated by *bow-wow* in English, *gnaf-gnaf* in French and *wung-wung* in Japanese. Similarly, 'Norwegian hens very sensibly say *klukk-klukk*, though doubtless with a heavy Norwegian accent'!

Whether the average reader of a book such as this really is like 'the oft-quoted little girl who, upon first seeing a pig, remarked that it

was certainly rightly named, for it was a very dirty animal' is to be doubted, but it is perhaps as well that Pyles subjects some notorious misconceptions and prejudices regarding language to scrutiny.

The relationship between speech and writing is investigated in some detail and that old bogey, the English spelling system, is discussed from both a synchronic and a diachronic point of view. Treatment of this topic is fuller than in most books of similar scope, and justifiably so.

The 'genealogy' of our native tongue is examined in some detail in a chapter which carries interesting information on related languages and language groups and one must concede that the section on Non-Indo-European does function to show which of the world's languages are *not* relative of English.

Having thus set the scene, Pyles goes on to give a descriptive account of the four major stages in the history of the language, i.e. Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English and 'Recent English'. The external history is discussed briefly in the chapters on Old English and Middle English but the description is essentially internal, dealing with the phonology, spelling system, morphology and syntax at each stage of the development of the language. Early Modern English, so often neglected because it stands so close to today's language, is given satisfyingly adequate treatment.

The chapter on differences between American and British English should be of interest even to those who do not live on the 'wrong' side of the Atlantic. One is inclined to agree with Pyles when he admits that 'most cultured Europeans have no great admiration for American speech' but his claim that 'the British Standard' is still taught in continental schools is open to doubt. It may be true that 'few Continental Europeans have any desire or inclination to speak any other variety' but a visit to Europe at any time will confirm that the French, German, Swedish and Danish shopkeepers speak a brand of English which most closely approximates that of their best foreign customers, the Americans.

The last three chapters of the book deal with the lexicon. *Coinages and adaptations* covers the 'etymology' of trade names (e.g. German *Wasser* plus Greek *elaion* for *Vaseline*), 'echoic words' (*bang*, *splash*, *tinkle*, etc.), the relative productivity of various affixes, the

formation of compounds, back formations (as *burgle* from *burglar*), and folk etymology. In the next chapter we are treated to a survey of English borrowings from various languages throughout the historical English period and finally, in *Words and Meanings*, types of semantic change are mentioned and euphemism and taboo words are discussed. Amusing is the British Captain Marryat's account of the American taboo on the word *leg* in Victorian times. After being told that this word was never used in the presence of ladies he visited a school for young ladies where he saw, according to his own testimony, 'a square pianoforte with four limbs', dressed, moreover, in little frilled pantalettes!

When all is said and done, this book makes interesting enough reading and the index of words, affixes and phrases which is appended enables one to refer to information on words both new and not-so-new. The maps of the Old English and Middle English dialect areas, new in this edition, help to impress the divisions more readily in the reader's memory. Pyles writes lucidly, easily, sometimes with his tongue in his cheek. It is a pity though that his approach is precisely the same as that encountered in most books on the history of English, that is to say, strictly traditional. There is no shortage of such works and one feels that a definite focus on the dynamics of syntactic, semantic and phonological change, rather than a concentration on collecting word lists for each period, would lead to a better understanding on the part of the reader of the *process* of linguistic change in English, thereby enhancing the value of this work as a university text.

E.H. Hubbard  
*University of South Africa*

The Public Service Commission, *Talking About English*, Volume 1,  
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The editor of this publication disclaims any intention of 'cover[ing] ground which has already been so expertly and entertainingly covered by the ... greats', such as H.W. Fowler, Sir Ernest Gowers and others. For whereas the 'greats' examined English usage and abuse in a purely English-speaking society, this monthly 'newsletter' is designed to assist