

Cambridge University Press

0521791553 - Language Change: Progress or Decay?, Third Edition

Jean Aitchison

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This book gives a lucid and up-to-date overview of language change. It discusses where our evidence about language change comes from, how and why changes happen, and how languages begin and end. It considers both changes which occurred long ago, and those currently in progress. It does this within the framework of one central question – is language change a symptom of progress or decay? It concludes that language is neither progressing nor decaying, but that an understanding of the factors surrounding change is essential for anyone concerned about language alteration.

For this substantially revised third edition, Jean Aitchison has included two new chapters, one on change of meaning, the other on grammaticalization. Sections on new methods of reconstruction and ongoing chain shifts in Britain and America have also been added as well as over 150 new references. The work remains non-technical in style and accessible to readers with no previous knowledge of linguistics.

JEAN AITCHISON is the Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication at the University of Oxford. She is the author of *The articulate mammal: An introduction to psycholinguistics* (4th edition, 1998), *Words in the mind: An introduction to the mental lexicon* (2nd edition, 1994), *Linguistics* (5th edition, 1999; also published as *Linguistics: An introduction*, 2nd edition, 1999), *The seeds of speech: Language origin and evolution* (Cambridge, 1996) and *The language web: The power and problem of words. The 1996 BBC Reith lectures* (Cambridge, 1997).

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Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics

General editor: Jean Aitchison, *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.

The series will give readers an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of language, and its central position in human affairs, as well as equipping those who wish to find out more about linguistics with a basis from which to read some of the more technical literature in textbooks and journals.

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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 and psycholinguistic 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.

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The flow of new books and articles on historical linguistics has become a flood since the previous (second) edition of this book was published (1991). This third edition tries to reflect the torrent of new work: two new chapters have been added, on grammaticalization (Chapter 8), and on change of meaning (Chapter 9). Substantial additions have been made to a number of other chapters, and over 150 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 at the end 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 (Cambridge), Professor O. Szemerényi (Freiburg), Professor R. Jakobson and Professor C. Watkins (Harvard).

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!

In this third edition, I would like to thank particularly Richard Janda and Brian Joseph, editors of the *Handbook of historical linguistics* (Blackwell). They, and the publishers, Basil Blackwell, kindly allowed me to consult this treasure-trove book before publication. Others who have been particularly helpful are (in alphabetical order) John Ayto, Guy Bailey, Bill Croft, David Denison, Olga Fischer, Bernd Heine, Paul Kerswill, Roger Lass, April McMahon, Peter Mühlhäusler, Mieko Ogura, Geoff Smith, Dieter Stein, Elizabeth Traugott, Wim van der Wurff. I apologize to those I may have inadvertently omitted from this selective list. My thanks also go to my research assistant, Diana Lewis, who was (as usual) brilliant at the task of tracking down wanted articles and books, and at bashing the references into a neat list.

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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.

Oxford, January 2000

Jean Aitchison