

THE STARS OF A CONSTELLATION: *A HISTORY OF ENGLISH WORDS**

The author of *Words in Time* (1988) and *Swearing* (1991), both undertitled as *social histories*, continues his line of study with a new work which intends to be a history of the English language from a lexical perspective. Geoffrey Hughes' *A History of English Words* is not an etymological analysis but a study of English through the units that enclose its history.

Murray's *OED* lexical configuration or “plan of the constellation” (3) constitutes the starting point from which Hughes comes down to well illustrated lexical varieties, namely, loan words, neologisms, archaisms, eponyms, toponyms and compounds. He also defines word-categories such as taboo, malapropism, dysphemism and euphemism. This is not only a way of clarifying the nomenclature, it also shows how the diversity and richness of the vocabulary is going to be an evidence of the history of English.

The historical events that correspond to the Anglo-Saxon period will conform what Murray calls the “core” of the language. The Britons were superseded by the Anglo-Saxons who subsequently underwent the Scandinavian raids and settlements. It is the Germanic language the one that will constitute the central stock of the English vocabulary with modifications that can be explained now by means of phonetics, the reduction of inflexions and the work of compounding that may concentrate elements of different origin. The author is rather copious in tables and maps (quoted from other sources and original) completed with extracts from Old English texts. All of them help him conclude with Murray that the language presents a “nucleous or central mass of many thousand words whose ‘Anglicity’ is unquestioned” (107).

Still under discussion is the “Middle English Creolization Hypothesis,” Milroy handles it briefly and carefully in *The Cambridge History of the English Language* (1992) where he states that:

The most extreme solution to the Middle English simplification question is that of Bailey and Maroldt (1977) who argue that Middle English was a French-based creole —a view that few have accepted as it stands. Yet, it seems likely that language-contact phenomena may be implicated in a more general way: the advanced inflectional loss in twelfth- to thirteenth-century east midland dialects, for example, may be in some way associated with heavy Danish settlement in this areas —even if the language varieties that resulted from this were not creoles. (204)

Unlike the authors who are in favour of such hypothesis, Hughes does not claim here for a process of pidginization in the history of English. He does not underesti-

mate “the new language of power” after the Norman Conquest, but all his references point to the maintenance of an Anglo-Saxon core; nevertheless, this cannot prevent a clear separation of registers. Differences are noticeable not only in the traditional areas of war, religion, art or fashion, the sociology of food is present in well known doublets like sheep/mutton, ox/beef, pig/pork; moreover, “this distinction, not found in other languages, is carried down to the finer poits of butchery, the choicest cuts like *haunch, joint, cutlet* being French, while the humbler portions, such as *brains, tongue, shank* were Saxon” (117). Thus, the Norman invasion had as one of its effects an hybrid vocabulary to which Scandinavian also contributed. Lexical misunderstandings appear together with a diversity of spellings. Hughes underlines the figure of Chaucer, if clearly not as the father of English literature, as the first compiler of the “whole gamut of registers” (125) an assertion illustrated with several extracts of his works.

Even after the re-establishment of English as the official language, those French terms that came to fill “semantic vacuums” or substitute archaic words will maintain their pre-eminence. In the case of Latin, it will allow for three level synonyms such as *foe/enemy/adversary*, and many of its words constituted the rarefied “aureate diction.” With the inkhorn controversy, Hughes starts his analysis of the lexical expansion of the Renaissance, dealing basically with the classical element and neologisms. The central part of his study is devoted to Shakespeare: his originality, oversea language, Latin, diction of common life, dialects, and the underworld bawdy and profanity. The author uncovers hidden meanings in Shakespeare’s single words, his diversity, disapproved by Johnson’s notions of decorum, was essential for the success and longevity of the works written by a non academic man. This contraposed Shakespeare to Milton, in his case, “possibly his learning inhibited his creativity” (213). Again the number of examples is prolific but the main approach is for three major tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare’s use of neologisms and all the registers is highly emphasized here. Nevertheless, the expansion of the lexicon was not only due to literature, science and law also contributed with classical and foreign locutions.

The evolution of words continues and the Restoration opposes lexicographical order to the previous diversity. However, “decorum” was not everything: “The Restoration saw a descent into licentiousness and decadence as extreme as the Puritan restraint to which it was a reaction” (224). Rochester, Cleland, Faquhar and the scatological Swift are good examples of bawdy language.

The distinction of social classes would be established by means of language register, sociolinguistic distinctions that will be mastered in the 19th century by Dickens. The desire for normalization prevails and takes form in the emergence of dictionaries. Works on *cant*, even if not all dictionaries *per se*, because they included anecdotes, songs, etc., were the prelude of those who first intended to explain classical and hard words: Coote, Cawdrey, Bullokar,... More comprehensive dictionaries are those which intended to have a more technical character like Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721/1728) and *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730), and the most relevant and prescriptive: Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). His work was to substitute the unsuccessful academia so claimed for. But the dictionary that has remained as the referent and from which many others

derive, is the *OED* compiled between 1884-1928 and whose first editor was J.H. Murray. Though it has been acknowledged to be the “monumental achievement of comprehensive lexicography on historical principles” (266) it has limits. The initial exclusion of obscene words (a legal offence in the 19th century) has tried to be mended in supplements and successive editions; the most important limit for historians is the omission (for practical reasons) of words that were only used before 1250.

Without forgetting Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, Hughes goes further than traditional chapters in manuals of English language history by commenting on new dictionaries in the 20th century market, some well known for specialists, others very recent. Partridge’s works on slang (1933-1947), Jonathan Green’s *Neologisms* (1991), Jane Roberts and Christian Kay’s *Thesaurus of Old English* (1995), the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995), or *The Oxford Dictionary of New Zealand English* (1998) and new CD “reprints” could be quoted; it must also be said there is a first section in the final bibliography where sixty-two dictionaries appear arranged chronologically.

The growth of new English-speaking communities will not only be the source of new varieties of the language, namely: American, Black, Australian, Indian and South-African Englishes. These, together with other languages, have contributed, and still continue their transfers, to the core of English. But “Modern English now exists not only on world varieties but in functional varieties of mediated English, such as journalism, advertising and promotional language” (318). The analysis of this mediated English can be completed, as the author suggests in a note, with the chapter entitled “The Fourth Estate: Journalism” included in *Words in Time* (1989). We would actually recommend the whole second part of this book which is devoted to “Advertising: Linguistic Capitalism and Wordsmithing,” “Words and Power: Democracy and Language,” and “Ideology and Propaganda,” as well as the conclusion “Verbicide and Semantic Engineering.”

The originality of Modernist literature, the censored works of D.H. Lawrence and the birth of the “Orwellian insights” are also worth mentioning for their more or less successful contribution to the lexicon, whether with new words or changing the sociological value of some of them. Related to this and also excluded from most manuals is the part devoted to lexical change where trials for changing the “inclusive masculine,” a new second person plural *you/yours*, can be found. New lexical items such as *Billspeak* (after Orwell’s *Newspeak*), “evasions, weasel words, prevarications and ambiguities employed by President Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal” (348), are also dealt with. All lead to changes in lexical structure and the need for a redefinition of the core.

Hughes writes a history of the English language which is not a manual, though quite frequently addressed to students. His is a work that reconstructs the life of English since its beginnings, since its words. It does not stop too much on internal phonetic changes and major external events, those matter as far as they explain the history of a word and this in its turn conforms a valuable part in the history of the language. It is this approach what makes this work different. It is an inside-out history, penetrating in words, the history, the culture enclosed in language is laid open for the reader. The four hundred and thirty pages of this book may be of interest to anyone working on lexicon, history, or sociolinguistics but it will also be of help for

literature or even translation students since it points to special uses of words that might be unknown. It offers a very complete bibliography as well as suggestions for further reading on each topic, not to mention again the number of tables, figures and illustrating excerpts. Using one of his quotes from Seamus Heaney we could say Hughes has opened the “bone-house” of English: “In the coffered/ riches of grammar /and declensions/ I found *ban-hus...* “ (332).

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Note

- * Hughes, Geoffrey. *A History of English Words*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 430 pp. ISBN:0-631-18855-X

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