

A Biography of the English Language. 2d ed. By C. M. Millward. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1996. xvi + 441. ISBN: 01-550-1645-8.

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Millward's *A Biography of the English Language*, the most recent addition to the history of the English language (HEL) textbook repertoire, is one of the most balanced HEL texts available. She does a fine job in her coverage of Old English (OE), Middle English (ME), Early Modern English (EMnE), and Present-Day English (PDE). The parallel structure of each chapter is very useful. Each chapter begins with external history and ends with internal history. Internal history is presented in the same order for each chapter covering the historical periods of HEL: phonology, graphics, morphology, syntax, lexicon, semantics, dialects (except PDE, but Chapter 9 covers this area), and literature (except EMnE and PDE). This parallel structure provides a convenient way to compare linguistic components across the periods. Also, the parallel texts of translations of an excerpt from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* by King Alfred, Chaucer, Queen Elizabeth I, and Richard Green are invaluable for ascertaining the linguistic changes and continuities over the course of the development of the English language.

A Biography of the English Language also has a workbook with a wider range of exercises than most HEL workbooks, quite appealing in combination with the textbook. Millward includes workbook exercises for OE, ME, and EMnE on the same inner historical segments she covers in the textbook, including exercises for ME and EMnE dialects. In addition to providing balanced coverage of the internal and external components of HEL, she also provides excerpts from several HEL manuscript texts to work with in various ways (e.g., graphically and dialectally). Moreover, her graphics exercises in the workbook are like no others. She includes a copy from a manuscript page to be transliterated for OE (*Beowulf*), ME (*Man-deville's Travels*), and EMnE (a 1650-51 letter by Roger Williams)—a most enjoyable and educational opportunity for students to work with such texts.

Although most textbooks—regardless of the subject matter—do not and cannot cover every aspect about an area of study in depth, Millward usually provides enough information about various topics to allow students room to explore, analyze, clarify, and scrutinize what we know about HEL and what students do not know

but should know about HEL. For example, in Chapter 4, "Language Families and Indo-European," Millward's discussion of Grimm's Law and Verner's Law is inadequate, but then that could be said for several HEL textbooks. Still, Millward provides enough information about Grimm's Law and Verner's Law to whet the appetites of those interested in phonology and sound changes. However, supplementing the text and the workbook with material and exercises from other HEL texts (e.g., Baugh and Cable's [1993] *History of the English Language* or Pyles and Algeo's [1993] *Origins and Development of the English Language*) that can fill in the gaps and present the information more clearly could certainly alleviate the situation.

A secondary characteristic of Millward's text that is less likely to escape the sensibilities of students and teachers alike is the way Millward addresses some important issues in language and linguistics. Certain chapters in the text, particularly Chapters 1 ("Introduction," on language in general) and 3 ("Writing") should ignite some interest on the part of students. For example, for those who are familiar with Steven Pinker's (1994) *Language Instinct* and adhere to his perspective of language, and for those with a more holistic view of what language is and is not, Millward's definition of language in Chapter 1 is problematic: "we shall define language for our purposes as a systematic and conventional means of human communication by way of vocal sounds" (2). Despite her attempt to avoid controversy by trying to restrict her definition of language to the subject and purpose at hand (i.e., HEL), she is not successful. At the very least, her definition does not include expression and identity. Such an exclusion is difficult to ignore since expression and identity are integral parts of language that are not easily dismissed, given the writings of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), Lesley Milroy (1987), Bakhtin (1986), and others.

That Millward also chooses to define language without including context is not only puzzling but also contradictory, given an earlier statement she makes in the preface: "I emphasize throughout the book the themes that (1) languages and language change are systematic, (2) the inner history of a language is profoundly affected by its outer history of political and cultural events, and (3) the English of the past has everywhere left its traces on present-day English" (xv). Her remark certainly implies the importance of sociocultural and historical context when discussing not only HEL but language in general, yet she chooses not to make such a connection in her definition of the very subject of her text. Furthermore, she excludes as language forms of communication that are not vocalized in some way. That would mean that sign language is not really language because it does not include communication by vocal sounds. In essence, she reverts to equating language and speech.

A polemical segment of Millward's text that might prompt class discussions is her treatment of writing in Chapter 3. She clearly privileges the alphabet over any other form of writing, despite research by those such as Scribner and Cole (1981), who empirically demonstrate that alphabetic writing is not superior to other forms of writing. Writing systems fit the needs of those who use them. If an alphabet fits one's needs, then an alphabet it is. If a syllabary fits one's needs, then a syllabary it is. One is not better than the other—each is just different.

As a way to show the evolutionary emergence of the English language from a fledgling with no status to a powerhouse with no apparent bounds in the global community, Millward ends her book with a discussion of English as a world language. Her coverage of English as a world language has breadth but not always sufficient depth. It is less consistently informative than the previous chapters on the historical periods of HEL. Although the section on regional variation in the United States is fairly representative of our knowledge to date, the same cannot so easily be said about her treatment of language use in the African American community. She calls such language "Black English" and defines it as "nonstandard English used by some blacks in the United States" (360). She follows that definition with a derisive account of the seemingly circular difference between the languages used by "whites" and "blacks": "When blacks use standard English, it has no distinguishing label. When whites use nonstandard English, it is called simply nonstandard English, not *White* English" (360, emphasis added). Although Millward's accounts of the phonological and grammatical characteristics of language use in African American communities are somewhat patchy, her description of what the language is and its history is of concern. She does go on to give a very brief account of other conceptions of what language use in the African American community is or has been believed to be. She mentions the Creole hypothesis and its incorporation of a West African genesis as well as the connection to Scots Irish, but she essentially conflates them with the dialect perspective by saying, "probably all of these facts have contributed to the formation of Black English" (360). She privileges the dialect view over the Creolist view of "Black English" and never alludes to the very controversial and incompatible aspects of the two positions.

Overall, there is certainly enough to recommend Millward's *A Biography of the English Language* for use in either an undergraduate- or graduate-level HEL class if one is looking for a balanced textbook and a variety of opportunities to explore several linguistic categories of the internal history of the English language and if one is willing to supplement the textbook and workbook with one's own materials or those from other HEL sources. Millward's book is a member of the same traditional, philological school as the popular Pyles/Algeo and Baugh/Cable textbooks. If one keeps in mind that there is no HEL textbook perfect in its coverage, clarity, interest level, intensity, and usability, then it is easier to accept Millward for the good things she does in her text that other HEL textbooks do not do or do not

do as well. Some texts are better than others for the particular purposes they can serve. While I would not use *A Biography of the English Language* to inform students about what language is, what writing is, or about language use in the African American community, it certainly holds its ground with other HEL texts on information about the inner history of OE, ME, and EMnE. I suggest supplementing the text on its problematic aspects with more current and informative texts that can be used to point out the differences and problems.

References

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