BOOK REVIEW

Trask, R.L. 2010. *Why do languages change?* Revised by Robert McColl Millar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Readers of a journal of the humanities might well expect a book with a title like "*Why do languages change?*" to give insight into pressing questions in humanistic studies. What of contentious links between language and many human domains: socio-economic hegemony, class, political domination, military prowess and technological innovation, for a start? These seem to connect up with more linguistic questions of when a dialect becomes an independent language and of how and when one language enlarges its spread, displacing another one.

Language is a critical player in more theoretical humanistic contests too. Historians following traditional approaches to history may assume that accounts of the past should be striving toward fact-based descriptions of real events. But more postmodern historical theorists now ask instead about the kind of linguistic story these historians are telling us. How do historians' accounts manipulate language to extrude the facts and to embed them in covert narratives? How are historians' (archaeologists', anthropologists'...) professional stories ultimately purveying present-day interests and prejudices? If a book tells us why languages change, shouldn't that show us something about how historical narratives develop and how the historians who write them have been changing as well? And similar questions could be raised about relationships between language and identity, language and gender, language and ethnicity, language and X.

In *Why do languages change?* vexing challenges in the humanities like these are confronted only in passing. Nor is much attention given to anatomical or neurological drivers of language change and constraints on it, with just a mention of the language acquisition complex. Instead, the book has a much more compact focus: most of it is a concise and engaging overview of the development of English along with a useful comparative summary of that language's two major standard varieties, British and American English. This may disappoint some readers intrigued by the title's broader question but may satisfy others concerned in one way or another with English. This reviewer is both satisfied and disappointed.

The overview is written at an elementary level assuming no previous linguistic study. No formidable phonetics. The non-technical yet professional style makes it practical for school teachers and undergraduate university students. This would include those teaching or studying English as a second/foreign language who would like to engage with the language beyond practical skill acquisition. But even just for those with strictly applied learning objectives, the many organised lists of examples in the book are a useful resource.

These brief but well-selected lists of examples are a positive feature of the book but they do give several chapters a catalogue-like feel. For studying the development of individual words such listings are useful. Unfortunately though the index is incomplete: the book would have

greater utility for reference if readers could more easily locate vocabulary items of interest.

Some infelicities in editing may follow from the untimely death of the author, R.L. Trask, who was Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sussex and a world leader in the field of historical linguistics. The manuscript was left behind to be put into final shape by the publisher with assistance from a colleague at the University of Aberdeen, R. McC. Millar. The result is a slim volume of under 200 pages – easy to read but somewhat deficient. For readers who would like to follow up various points, the book could do with more notes and a lengthier bibliography. On the other hand, an interested reader could find most missing information in another of Trask's posthumous texts edited by Millar, *Trask's historical linguistics* (2007), a longer and more technical work.

A pivotal chapter (5) summarises the development of English. This is traced clearly and entertainingly from earliest roots in Proto-Indo-European before "English" can really be applied as a designation. The Old English Germanic core is established and attention is given to early lexical enhancement from Viking Norse and Norman French, along with learned imports from Latin and Greek. Most focus is on the expansion of the English lexicon through such contact processes, but Grimm's Law and other sound shifts are sketched too. Syntactic changes are taken up mostly in other chapters. Major historical, social and other contextual factors are at least mentioned along the way. Given the same space limitation of about 20 pages, I am not aware of any better or more informative elementary-level overview of how English has developed.

Other chapters seem to be foreshadowing, or reflecting back on, this dominant historical treatment. One particularly useful chapter (6) gives a superlative account of the main differences between British and American English. Reasons for historical divergences are effectively established and illustrated. Trask was a native speaker of American English who lived and worked professionally in England. He was well-acquainted with both standard varieties and with many of their sub-varieties. In this section he has selected an entertaining but professionally cogent set of examples that clearly illuminates main differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, pragmatic usage and syntax. On the practical level, this treatment with its clear examples should be very helpful for teachers and students concerned with acquiring English as a second/foreign language. It may be especially relevant for those with qualms about the utility of whichever variety of English they are learning for understanding the other one.

Actually, there is little to worry about. In spite of Trask's useful compendium of differences, the two standard varieties are really remarkably similar and differences are usually more a matter of mirth and bemusement than any dire obstruction to communication. However, Trask's lists do exclude a couple of significant practical items: better had he let readers be aware that the "American billion" is a one followed by nine zeros, but the "British billion" has twelve; and similar mismatch for trillions. Recent financial crises have tended to report

billion- and trillion-dollar losses in American terms and these values are perhaps becoming the norm, at least monetarily. Another practical quandary is whether a date written 1/2/13 means "the first of February, 2013" (British) or "January second, 2013"(American).

One regret is that length restrictions have led to a major emphasis on British and American English. Australian English gets some attention but Irish English, Indian English, Singaporean English and other varieties get left behind. Instead, in the final two chapters, the book returns to more general themes suggested by the title. Space is given to linguistic varieties where origin and development are comparatively transparent: written languages, artificial languages, pidgins, creoles and sign languages. Treatments of these rather specialised topics are effective but one is left wondering some about the coherence of the volume as a whole.

In summary, *Why do languages change?* may not really resolve the question of its title but it does provide an impressive elementary overview of the development of English that is well worth reading.

Reviewed by
Anthony Diller
Fellow of the Australian Academy
of the Humanities