

Jean Aitchison, Language Change: Progress or Decay? Fontana Books, UK, 1981. 266pp. £2.95.

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Language Change: Progress or Decay? is one of a series produced by Fontana under the general editorship of Jean Aitchison. Other titles in the series include Language, Meaning and context (John Lyons) and Language and Society (William Downes). Aitchison is to be warmly commended, for this series sets out to present current thinking on sociolinguistic topics in a non-technical way, stripped of the linguistic jargon which is often, to say the least, off-putting to all but professional linguists. This style of presentation makes sociolinguistics accessible to a wide audience in a wide range of related fields. Aitchison states that the object of the series is twofold: first, to outline the 'state of play', concentrating on what is happening now, and second, to show how linguistics links up with other disciplines.

"We shall be looking at how and why language change occurs, with the ultimate aim of finding out the direction, if any, in which human languages are moving." (p.18)

The chapters are organised into four main sections: Part 1, 'Preliminaries', deals with the ways in which historical linguists obtain their evidence. Part 2, 'Implementation', explains how language change occurs and Part 3, 'Causation', discusses possible reasons why change takes place. Part 4, 'Beginnings and Endings', looks at the role of child language and language disorders in relation to change, and examines how languages begin and end.

Part 1 deals with the inevitability of language change and contrasts this with the natural tendency in man towards nostalgia and resistance to change in language. The points made are attractively illustrated with some often amusing linguistic anecdotes drawn from such diverse language observers as Chaucer and Ogden Nash. Aitchison goes on to discuss methods of collecting clues to pronunciation centuries ago, leading to an account of the basic purpose and techniques of three methods of linguistic reconstruction, namely comparative historical, typological, and internal reconstruction,

pointing to the need to study sound changes in progress and methods of charting such changes. The first part of the book ends with a discussion of language variation, both social and geographical and illustrates this with an account of the strategies and techniques employed by William Labov in his study of New York English pronunciation.

The second part of the book describes how changes in pronunciation spread from person to person, as well as conscious versus unconscious sound change. Aitchison illustrates her discussion with further examples taken from Labov's study of post-vocalic /r/ and that of the variety of English spoken on Martha's Vineyard. Aitchison concludes that the developments described are not really new developments as such, but rather phonological features which have been present in the speech of a minority of speakers for some time, but gradually reactivated throughout the whole speech community for some sociological reason. The remainder of the second section of the book deals with opposing social pressures within a phonological change, illustrating with examples of the speech of men versus women in Norwich. Having discussed how changes spread from person to person and the circumstances under which they are likely to take hold, Aitchison moves on to consider why they spread.

Part 3 looks at the question of causation in depth. Four chapters are devoted to this important sociolinguistic topic. Aitchison concludes that language change is likely to be triggered off by social factors such as fashion, foreign influence and social need. It simply makes use of inherent tendencies residing in the physical and mental make-up of human beings. So the immediate trigger must be considered alongside the underlying propensities of the language concerned. Above all, Aitchison insists, one must be aware that the causes of language change are always multiple, as language is both a social and a mental phenomenon in which sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors are inextricably entwined.

The final section of the book consists of four chapters broadly encapsulated in the term 'Beginnings and Endings'. Aitchison first considers the role of child language and concludes that although there is a critical age for the acquisition of language, between two and adolescence, this critical period is not necessarily relevant to language change. The same may be said of speech errors and language disorders, both disappointingly unrevealing for the study of historical change. The author then moves to a consideration of how a new language develops, making considerable use of data from Tok Pisin to make the point that a simplified language or pidgin develops when people with no common

language need to communicate about essential issues, the language being ultimately based on an already existing language. After a number of generations during which the pidgin has been used as the first language of a community, it will be indistinguishable from any other language. In pidgin languages, therefore, Aitchison sees the primary steps in a general language development sequence. Finally she moves on to consider language death, which happens, she claims, because a language no longer fulfills the social needs of the community which speaks it. In a brief concluding chapter, Aitchison concludes that after consideration of the evidence continual language change it is natural and inevitable and that there is no real evidence that language is either progressing or decaying, as disruption and therapy seem to balance each other in a permanent stalemate.

Language Change: Progress or Decay? raises most of the key issues for an understanding of the processes of language change. It does so in simple language stripped of technical terms which would inhibit students of language coming to grips with the subject for the first time. It will certainly do much to popularise sociolinguistics and will make a major contribution especially in countries where English is not the first language of students. Ironically, however, the choice of examples, with the exception of the Tok Pisin material mentioned above, almost presumes some familiarity with American and British varieties of English, especially on the phonological level. This could hamper the benefit which African, Asian and Oceanic students might derive from this otherwise excellent expos'e.