

TEACHING HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS IN THE NEW CURRICULUM

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Abstract

Based on recent research on the teaching of Historical Linguistics (HL) –and of the teaching of History of English in particular–, in Departments of English in Spain, the aim of this article is to provide some insights into the role of HL in the university curriculum. HL is central to current linguistics research, as shown by the number and quality of recent publications in the field. However, we feel that there has not been much discussion on the teaching of HL in the academic milieu. Few studies have been conducted in this respect, and in this article we would like to follow up the ideas presented and discussed at the Seminar Applying Historical Linguistics, at the ESSSE/4 Conference held in Debrecen (Hungary) in 1997.¹

1. Introduction

Since the 70's, the teaching of HL within English Studies has been progressively abandoned in many European universities. As Schousboe (1997) states, "We may be the last generation who has the chance to teach the subject". It has been argued that the subjects within this area are difficult and useless to the extent that there are many (among our

¹ Other recent works on this topic are Belda (2000) and Guzmán & Verdaguer (2000).

students and also our colleagues) who wonder why subjects such as *History of the English Language* (HEL) should still be taught.²

In an attempt to *defend* the place of HL in the university curriculum, some teachers are putting a lot of effort in trying to make the discipline more attractive and easier to the students, while others emphasize the pedagogical implications and the general applications of HL. Fabiszak (1997), for example, applies HL at Teacher Training Colleges in Poland with apparently quite good results.

As regards making the subject easier and more attractive, it is perhaps true that the old manuals –Sievers (1882), Luick (1914-40), Campbell (1959)– and the way in which the subject has been taught in many places, has not particularly contributed to its popularity. However, as Ritt (1997) rightly states, it is doubtful whether *HEL* will be made easier by teaching our students the new results of modern research in the field:

In any case, the type of Historical Linguistics that might achieve the kind of breakthrough in our understanding of linguistics variation and its function [...], would, I'm afraid, be difficult to teach in our typical English Courses. If anything, I suspect, it would turn out to be more complex and even less easily accessible than the notorious neogrammarian theory of regular sound change that our students have come to hate so much over the years.

On the other hand, in trying to make things easy for the students we may run the risk of oversimplifying and of passing on out-dated theories and ideas. Stein (1997) and Schousboe (1997), for example, recommend the use of text-books like *The Story of English* (McCrum, Cram & McNeil, 1986), although this book contains some inaccuracies and errors which make it less than ideal for future language teachers and university students.

We believe that all these efforts to find the practical or applied side

² See Tejada (1998:2).

of *HEL* should be seen as an indication of our current social context. In modern technological society there is not a great demand for people with a degree in Philology (as our discipline is still called), and this should be perhaps regarded as a sign of the times. It is in this context that we should see all these attempts to make the subject more practical. Part of what is being done is, in fact, to try to justify the teaching of *HEL*, so that it does not share the fate of other disciplines within the humanities, such as Latin, Greek or Philosophy.

Although we believe that all these efforts to find the *practical* side of the subject are worthy, we think that they are unlikely to solve the existing problems. What should be looked into rather is why HL is put aside in favour not only of *applied* but also of other theoretical subjects like *Morphosyntax*, or even *Chomskian Minimalism*, which are as abstract and complex as *HEL*, and the reasons for the lack of popularity that our subjects have had for some decades in most European universities.

Two aspects –at least– should be taken into consideration. First of all, the wide range of topics covered by some subjects within the area. At our own university, for example, in the old syllabus, a one-year course in *History of English* aimed to present a survey of the major phonetic, morphological, lexical and syntactic changes in the history of the language from Old English (OE) to modern times. In addition, the students were expected to learn the grammar of OE to the extent of being able to translate prose texts (in the first semester), and to know enough Middle English to be able to date and locate dialectal texts (in the second one).

In the new syllabus, we have decided to confine ourselves to presenting some of the main phonetic, morphosyntactic and lexical developments in the English language (the Great Vowel Shift, the development of verbal aspect in English, etc.), and to offer explanations from different perspectives. The idea is to avoid giving students minute details about the grammar and phonology of the different periods of the language, which most of them are not capable of learning, let alone assimilating. In the new programme of the subject there is no OE grammar and translation (there is an obligatory course on OE in the 5th year,

though), and since OE took up about one third of the course, two more topics have been added (*Language Change in the 19th c. and 20th c.* and *Overseas Varieties of English. English in America.*) Finally, the new syllabus tries to focus more on external history with special emphasis on the sociolinguistic aspect of linguistic change.

From our own experience, we can say that another reason for the lack of popularity of this subject is that it has traditionally involved learning enough Old and Middle English to be able to read authentic texts. First of all, our students are no longer used to working with a grammar and a dictionary, as most of us did when we had to translate Latin and Greek at secondary school, so they find it difficult and time-consuming. They are also confused when notions like *ablaut*, *paradigm levelling*, *umlaut*, *declension*, etc. are introduced or even taken for granted. On the other hand, *HEL* presupposes a solid cultural, philological and linguistic background that many of our undergraduates simply lack. Another problem is that they fail to see that *HEL* is related to other courses.³

Besides all this, another important issue to be discussed is the lack of connection between teaching and modern linguistic research. The field of HL has benefited much from the developments of such theoretical linguists: Cognitive Sciences and Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, etc. The problem is that teaching has not usually incorporated the results of linguistic research. In many places, it is still conducted in an old-fashioned way, and text-books used contain outdated terminology and poor methodology, as examination of some the standard text-books clearly shows.

We could give some examples. Schousboe (1997) mentions his wonder at the terminology used in some classes of *HEL*: instead of talking of *phonemes* and *allophones*, the teachers just talked about *letters*

³This may be due to the traditional emphasis on the phonological aspect. Today, as Schosboe (1997) states, "[the] discipline no longer presents itself as being almost *sui generis*, but is openly related to other disciplines as sociolinguistics or syntax ... In the 60's or 70's many historical linguists were too slow to recognize the potential importance of work done in other branches of linguistics, and the apparent or real isolation of the discipline make it an easy target when new subjects demanded their share in the curriculum".

or confused the terms *letters* and *phonemes* (spelling and pronunciation), as Pyles & Algeo (1982); see Appendix 1. In this article, we have decided to give just one example in the field of dialectology. When dealing with the dialects of the past periods of English, in most text-books OE is still divided into four main varieties: Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon. The same holds for Middle English, which is, in turn, divided into five: Northern, West and East Midlands, South-eastern and South-western. These divisions ignore the reality of modern dialectology and the results of the last decades of research in the field: the idea of dialect as a continuum, the arbitrary nature of the lines drawn on the maps, etc.; see Appendix 2.

Instead of teaching the distinctive characteristics of five dialects, it would be much more honest to try to make students aware of the great variation that existed in written Middle English by showing them texts from different areas. We could then explain that this variation was the result of the absence of a standard. In this way, students would realize that standards are a relatively new invention and serve a purpose, they are not the best type of language by definition, and therefore should not necessarily be followed.⁴ By proceeding in this way, students can also relate what they learn in class about dialects of the past to other fields like Sociolinguistics, and to what they know themselves about their own personal experience with dialects (in our case, Andalusian dialects). A careful selection of text-books is very important. Burrow & Turville-Petre (1996) is a good example; see Appendix 3.

2. Survey

In an attempt to confirm our intuitions about the shortcomings of the teaching of HL we have found it necessary to ask our students two questions. On the one hand, what they think about the teaching of *HEL* within the University Curricula, and on the other hand what criteria they follow when choosing the optional subjects. To this effect, we

⁴ Based on the Norwegian Western dialects, Ivan Aasen devised the standard *Nynorsk* (New Norwegian) only last century, in order to create a national standard against the Dano-Norwegian *Bokmål*.

compiled a questionnaire which was handed out to 5th year students enrolled at the University of Seville in the academic year 2000-2001. Some of them were taking *Morphosyntax* (compulsory subject), while others were taking *Old English* (optional subject). The total number of participants was 132. The students were asked a number of questions in order to elicit some information on their criteria for choosing either *Old English* (in the case of those taking it as optional subject) or other optional subjects for the students of *Morphosyntax*; see Appendix 4.

The results showed that the most common choice (out of 270 choices) was "having a look at the syllabus" (34.4%), followed by "the interest in the area of study" (25.18%), "the advice from a friend" (24.8%), "the title" (8.1%), "the fact that there was no other choice" (4.4%), "the advice from a teacher" (2.2%), "other criteria" (1.8%), and finally "none of the criteria previously mentioned" (0.7%).

Then the students were asked whether their *expectations* about *HEL* were met or not and to give the reasons why; see Appendix 5. After analysing the results, it can be concluded that they corroborate the ideas we have expressed in the present article, since the students find the subject *useless* and *time-consuming*. Besides, they believe that the terminology used is taken for granted and they cannot relate the subject to others within the curriculum.

3. Conclusions

The main conclusions that can be drawn are the following. First of all, the problem lies not so much in the apparent lack of applicability of the subject, but rather in the old-fashioned way in which it is still taught in many of our universities. Secondly, and as a result of reducing the number of subjects in this area, teachers have felt obliged to condense the contents of *HEL* (the development of language at the different grammar levels) in one year, making the syllabus too dense and difficult for the students.

Ideally the best solution to these problems would be to have an introductory course in language change in the first years, in which the basic concepts about linguistic evolution should be presented. If it were

only possible to have one course in the 4th year, then it would be necessary either to reduce the subject contents in that year, or to offer optional courses in the last two years. Universities such as those of Salamanca and Granada include in their curricula subjects like *Lexicography and Lexicology*, *Introduction to Historical Linguistics*, and *Varieties of English*; see Belda (2000).

With regard to the applicability of *HEL*, we consider that the place of this subject in the university curriculum should not be only dependent on or subordinated to its instrumental value, which has already been rightly stressed. In our opinion, students should be made aware of the fact that the main aim of *HEL* is to understand and have a deeper knowledge of the factors involved in the development of a language and the direction of language change.

Appendix 1

Pyles & Algeo (1982:172-173) can mislead the reader by giving the sound sometimes in-between brackets and at other times simply in italics, as in the following example:

As has been pointed out, the latter changed only slightly in Middle English: [a], in Old English written *a*, as in *stan*, was rounded except in the Northern dialect to [o], in Middle English written *o* (*oo*), as in *stoon*. By the early Modern English period, all the long vowels had shifted: Middle English *e*, as in *sweete* "sweet", had already acquired the value [i] that it currently has, and the others were well on their way to acquiring the values that they have in current English.

Appendix 2

Baugh & Cable (1993:185) shows the already outdated way of presenting the Middle English dialects by insisting on dividing the country into five dialectal areas:

[...] it is rather difficult to decide how many dialectal divisions should be recognized and to mark off with any exactness their respective boundaries. In a rough way, however, it is customary to distinguish four principal dialects of Middle English: Northern, East Midland, West Midland, and Southern. Generally speaking, the Northern dialect extends as far south as the Humber; East Midland and West Midland together cover the area between the Humber and the Thames; and Southern occupies the district south of the Thames, together with Gloucestershire and parts of the counties of Worcester and Hereford, thus taking in the West Saxon and Kentish districts of Old English.

Appendix 3

Trudgill (1990:6) and McIntosh *et al.* (1986:4), by contrast, are two examples of cautiousness when talking about different dialectal boundaries:

People often ask: how many dialects are there in England? This question is impossible to answer. After all, how many places are there to be from? If you travel from one part of the country to another, you will most often find that the dialects change gradually as you go. The further you travel, the more different the dialects will become from the one in the place you started, but the different dialects will seem to merge into one another, without any abrupt transitions. (Trudgill, 1990:6)

[...] students of modern dialects have known since Wenker's *Deutscher Sprachatlas* (publication began in 1870) that dialect divisions are for the most part illusory. Instead of displaying the separate and clearly delineated regional dialects that investigators expected, Wenker's atlas revealed a continuum in which the forms of language made up, map by map, a complex of overlapping distributions. For

the most part, the boundaries of the ranges of occurrence for the various dialectal forms –“isoglosses” as they later came to be called– did not divide the map into a few neatly defined sectors, but formed a vast network of seemingly unrelated lines. (McIntosh *et al.*, 1986:4)

Appendix 4

Indica cuál ha sido tu criterio para elegir las asignaturas optativas que cursas en la actualidad. (Se puede elegir más de una respuesta.):

- He visto el programa y me ha parecido interesante.
- He visto el nombre y me ha parecido interesante.
- Un/a compañero/a me lo ha recomendado.
- Un/a profesor/a me lo ha recomendado.
- El área de estudio me parece interesante.
- No había otra posibilidad.
- Ninguno de los anteriores.
- Otros

Appendix 5

1. Reasons why the subject failed to meet the expectations of students enrolled in *Morphosyntax*:

- “Tenía otro concepto de la asignatura”.
- “Me ha parecido muy complicada”.
- “La materia que se impartía era demasiado difícil”.
- “Me ha resultado bastante difícil”.
- “Me pareció un poco aburrida”.
- “Porque me resulta poco útil para el uso actual de la lengua y la considero demasiado compleja”.
- “No me parece una asignatura interesante o beneficiosa”.
- “Porque no me atrae nada y pienso que hay otras asignaturas que deberán estar en lugar de ésta, mucho más provechosas”.

- “Porque no he entendido nada desde el principio”.
- “El programa era demasiado extenso y profundo para el número de horas lectivas. Esta asignatura necesitaría algunas horas de prácticas para traducir y analizar textos”.
- “Programa demasiado comprimido y organización de la asignatura un poco caótica”.
- “Me parece que el programa intenta abarcar demasiado, por lo que los contenidos no se asimilan adecuadamente”.
- “Creo que es una asignatura que se debería estudiar por lo menos en dos años”.
- “Por falta de base sobre los contenidos. Se dio por sentado que teníamos conocimientos sobre la materia, cosa que no era así”.

2. Reasons why the subject did meet the expectations of students enrolled in *Morphosyntax* too:

- “Los conceptos y temas fundamentales me quedaron muy claros”.
- “El temario era el que esperaba y la parte práctica fue bastante trabajada”.
- “Porque entendí cosas del uso del inglés que antes no comprendía o de las que no supieron darme una explicación”.
- “Porque se profundiza más en la lengua inglesa, en la historia y en su cultura”.
- “Porque me ha permitido ver la evolución seguida por la lengua que estoy estudiando”.
- “Porque me ha permitido conocer el origen de una lengua que es con la que quiero trabajar el día de mañana”.
- “Porque ayuda a explicar muchos aspectos de la lengua inglesa de hoy en día, tales como la pronunciación y las estructuras”.

3. Reasons why the subject failed to meet the expectations of students enrolled in *Old English*:

- “Porque me interesaba mucho el contenido de la asignatura y no se alcanzó”.
- “Porque creo que no se estudia con mucha profundidad”.

4. Reason why the subject did meet the expectations of students enrolled in *Old English*:

- “Porque no tenía unas expectativas de antemano, pero según avanzaba el curso, ésta me pareció una asignatura muy interesante”.
- “Porque terminé disfrutando de las lecturas en clase, me atraen las cosas del pasado y me divertía conocer lo que los hombres de esa época escribían”.
- “Me interesa mucho la evolución de las lenguas teniendo en cuenta el contexto histórico”.
- “Porque profundicé en la historia de la lengua y considero que la historia de la lengua es fundamental para entender el Inglés Moderno”.
- “Porque comprendí el porqué de muchas estructuras que ahora tenemos en Inglés Moderno, pero por otra parte, no se cumplieron porque se le dedicó muy poco tiempo”.
- “Porque se abarcaron todos los puntos que eran interesantes de la evolución del inglés desde su ‘nacimiento’”.

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