SMITH, Jeremy 2007. *Sound Change and the History of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. xvi + 196. ISBN: 978-0-19-929195-3.

In the seminal article "Empirical foundations for a theory of language change" (1968) Uriel Weinreich, William Labov and Marvin I. Herzog advanced five problematic aspects of linguistic change which any reliable theory had to consider: *constraints*, *transition*, *embedding*, *evaluation* and *actuation* (183–187). Over the last forty years, research in historical linguistics and sociolinguistics has sanctioned the proposal, and progress has been made in interpreting some of the implications related to each of them. The concept of *actuation*, however, has remained a puzzle for many linguists: covering the sporadic nature of changes, it attempts to explain why they affect a structural feature in a particular language at a given time, but they do not take place in other languages with the same feature or in the same language at other times. This is a formidable task indeed; not the least because it necessarily involves paying heed to all possible circumstances which enter into the progress of change and, accordingly, requires considering all conditioning factors, whether linguistic or social ones. Another side to the coin of *actuation*, in traditional accounts, is predictability, in so far as disclosing the conditions triggering changes in some communities and systems could ideally help to establish general principles, thus helping theories meet scientific requirements (see: Labov 1982: 26–29; 1994: 158; Milroy 1992: 13–18; Guzmán González 2005: 20; Conde Silvestre 2007: 76–78).

Among other relevant contributions, it is worth mentioning James and Lesley Milroy's proposal to approach *actuation* by looking at use, rather than system, and, accordingly, to distinguish the following three components: (a) speakers' innovative verbal behaviour; (b) the diffusion of innovations, through interpersonal contact, from one group and community to another, whereby the former acquire social significance, and (c) the effects upon the system, when innovations finally become changes. The sensible proposal that *actuation* can only be practically grasped by tracing the origin of linguistic innovations as far back as possible and that this must be accomplished both by analysing natural language and by observing speakers' verbally interacting in their respective social networks, has as an inevitable counterpart an inherent difficulty to

actually reconstruct many of the conditions established at the initiation of the process. It goes without saying that the further back in time the researcher goes, the more arduous his/her enterprise becomes (J. Milroy and L. Milroy 1985: 345; J. Milroy 1992: 201–202; 1998; Conde-Silvestre 2007: 164–176).

Jeremy Smith is not afraid of this burdensome task. In fact, from the very beginning it is clear that his last book intends to transcend the mere description of sound changes in the history of English and aims to reconstruct their *actuation* by "identify[ing], examin[ing] and explain[ing] the processes whereby speaker innovations develop into [...] changes in the language system" (p. 1). With the purpose of clarifying the different facets of *actuation* a first complete and solid chapter on theoretical tenets is offered ("On explaining sound change", pp. 1–28). Most of it touches on accepted assumptions, such as the above-mentioned methodological distinctions between system and use, innovation and change, or the likely role in the process of interpersonal contact, accommodation theory and social networks, as well as, finally, the necessity of diffusion for changes to occur and the related differentiation of the latter from 'potential (for change)' and 'implementation (of change)', which Smith had already discussed before (1996: 78). Still, other aspects are related to the systemic regulation also necessary for changes to *actuate*. Joint consideration of these mechanisms —variation, contact and systemic regulation— leads to the following working definition of sound change, which is repeated like a motto throughout the book, illuminating many of the practical issues analysed: "a sound change has taken place when a variant form, mechanically produced, is imitated by a second person and that process of imitation causes the system of the imitating individual to change" (p. 27).

Although Jeremy Smith does not really need much introduction to the readership of this journal, this reviewer wishes to emphasize that he is currently Professor of English Philology at Glasgow University. The reference to 'philology' in his professional title is not without grounds, since Prof. Smith has never lost sight of the real, textual materials on which historical linguistic theories should rely. In accordance with his philological interests and expertise a chapter "On evidence" (Chapter 2, pp. 29–50) is included. Here the author describes and exemplifies the different tools useful to reconstruct pronunciation by philologically examining the

historical evidence —the structure of writing systems, verse practices, contemporary comments, etc.— with the caveat that they may allow us to answer the question what, but for many historians of the language answers to this question are not sufficient (p. 50). Philological training and experience may also be one of the reasons why after a presentation of different phonological models (Chapter 3, "Phonological approaches and processes", pp. 51–87) Smith remains discontent and attempts to reach a compromise position. His standpoint leans on "the terminology of taxonomic phonology [...] but notes the usefulness of the notion of the abstract underlying representation as presented in [...] lexical phonology" (p. 74), supplemented by some tenets from natural and evolutionary phonology. Most prominent within this approach is the recourse to the cognitive concept of prototypical phonological spaces within variation, which, bound with contact and sociolinguistic pressure (overt or covert), may unchain the processes of hyperadaptation and hypoadaptation (over- and under-articulation) eventually leading to sound change. Although these concepts are not really new —in fact Michael Samuels, one of Smith's acknowledged masters, had proposed a similar explanatory model in *Linguistic Evolution with Special Reference to English* (1972)— our author updates them in connection with prototypicality and makes them central components of his proposal, in very direct, clear terms, like the following:

> If Community A comes into contact with Community B, and Community A wishes to respond to the social dominance of Community B expressed in speech, then speakers within Community A will begin to favour realizations closer to Community B's prototypical usage within the items in question. And if Community B's prototypical usage is outside the phonological space with which Community A started, then [...] hyper-/hypoadaptations can be expected to occur (p. 79).

Unlike previous general approaches to the history of English sound changes (Prins 1972; Plotkin 1972; Jones 1989) or attempts at reconstructing the phonology of its periods (Dobson 1957; Campbell 1959; Jordan 1974; Hogg 1992; Lass 1994, among others), Smith's is not a comprehensive historical approach. Favouring the explanatory over the descriptive dimension, it aligns itself with proposals like Anderson and Jones (1977), Lass (1976) or Lass and Anderson (1975), where only selected phonological processes were discussed. This doesn't mean that thoroughness is not pursued and

attained. On the contrary, the scrutiny of *actuation* means that the sound changes singled out for discussion are contextualized within the general characteristics of the period and that novel hypotheses are raised after consideration of the variationist, sociolinguistic and systemic implications. Within these parameters, the following processes are analysed: vowel breaking in the transition from Pre-English to Old English (Chapter 4, pp. 88–106), quantitative changes, like compensatory, homorganic and open syllable lengthening, between Old and Middle English (Chapter 5, pp. 107–126), and the vowel shifts shaping southern and northern varieties in the period between Middle and Early Modern English (Chapter 6, pp. 127–153).

To close this review, I'd like to highlight two other novelties in Smith's approach to *actuation* in English historical phonology. The first pertains to predictability. As stated above, the mystery surrounding early definitions of *actuation* was often compensated by endowing it with an aura of prognosis: unveiling the conditions for the initiation and progress of changes in certain systems and groups, it was believed, could help predict the outcome or direction of changes in other contexts. Research experience and knowledge of the history of English sounds leads Jeremy Smith to temper this possibility: "the interaction between the factors and processes involved in a particular language change at a particular time is so complex and so various that exact predictability is not to be had. The precise nature of the interaction of these factors and processes can only be distinguished after the event" (p. 17). The second novelty in Smith's approach is the desire to rid the concept of *actuation* of an excessive explanatory power (Chapter 7: "On the historiography of sound change", pp. 154–160). An inquiring look at some of the relativistic approaches of modern historiography allows the author to offer again his own moderate view in this respect: "[e]xplanations of sound change are successful if they meet certain criteria of plausibility in the same way that all historical explanations are successful" (p. 159).

All in all, this is a significant, updated contribution to the theory of phonological change, illustrated with selected examples, which, being thoroughly dissected and analysed, become suitable reconstructions of all circumstances contributing to the *actuation* of sound changes in different periods of the history of English. The book also includes two appendices

—firstly on "The principal sound changes from proto-Germanic to early Modern English" (pp. 161–173) and, secondly, on etymological notes regarding ME open syllable lengthening (pp. 174–176)— as well as a complete, updated bibliography.

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