

SMITH, Jeremy 1999: *Essentials of Early English*. London and New York: Routledge.

The release of Jeremy J. Smith's *Essentials of Early English* must be extremely welcomed. The book contains fundamental information to understand the changing patterns in the History of English, and has been designed as an elementary approach to historical English for the beginner. In that sense, the material presented here concentrates on what the student must know before proceeding with advanced work. Thus, the author avoids elaborate arguments which cannot be understood by beginners.

The work is divided into three parts, namely (1) Descriptive Material, (2) Illustrative material, and (3) Bibliography, Glossary and Thematic Index. The first part contains the following chapters: Introduction, Describing Language, Old English, Middle English, and Early Modern English. The second part includes three sections with texts from early English. The first section offers examples of Old English texts, the second section contains the Middle English texts, and finally, the third section includes the Early Modern English texts. The third part is divided into the Annotated Bibliography, an Old English Glossary, and the Thematic Index.

In the introductory chapter, the author offers a short history of English so that students can know what they are about to study. Here the author concentrates on the ancestry of English, and the relationship of English with the rest of the Germanic languages. He also comments on the concepts of external and internal histories of the language. In the external history, Smith describes the traditional periods in which the history of English is conventionally divided. He justifies his division into Prehistoric Old English, Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English and Later Modern English by linguistically external historical phenomena. In the internal history, the author broadly outlines the changes undergone by English. Finally, the traditional "Bible-examples" taken from different periods of English are given for comparison.

The second chapter deals with the linguistic concepts which count as essential information tools for the understanding of the historical phenomena described in the book. Here the author draws the distinction between speech

and writing, a distinction often misunderstood by students. The international phonetic alphabet is also described, and the conventions normally used for the distinction between sound and phoneme are offered. This second chapter closes with the description of the grammatical units and phrases which the author will use later on in his account of the linguistic changes.

The chapters Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English present a same organisation of information. The author divides this information into (a) an introduction including non-linguistic historical phenomena which characterise the period discussed in each chapter, (b) spelling and pronunciation, (c) syntax, (d) paradigms, and (e) lexicon. Each chapter is accompanied by a number of appendices.

In the sections devoted to spelling and pronunciation, the author comments on the main spelling and sound changes pertaining to each period, making clear at all times the distinction between letter and sound changes, and the relationship between them. With this information, the student not only becomes aware of the major changes in pronunciation undergone by some English words, but also, he can produce phonetic evolutions of English. In these sections, explanations are given in simple terms avoiding superfluous information which frequently is unnecessary for a beginner. That is the case of the Great Vowel Shift which the author describes briefly without mentioning the motivations and linguistic and non-linguistic forces which promoted such a tremendous vowel change.

The sections on syntax deal with the combination of words to form phrases and sentences in the periods covered here; whilst showing how English shifted from a synthetic to analytic. The sections devoted to *Paradigms* describe the word-classes in the three periods, with examples. In the case of Old English, the author also draws attention to the mutated plurals which are generally considered irregularities in Present Day English. At this point, in keeping with the spirit of simplicity which characterises this work, the author decides not to explain the concept of '*i-umlaut*', and offers examples from German instead. However, in my opinion, it would be clarifying to deal with the description of this phenomenon in a note so that the student can establish generalisations which concern both plurals and verbs. Finally, in the sections on lexicon, the author explains the origins of English words, essentially Germanic, and the later incorporations from other languages,

together with the processes used during each period for the formation of new words. Changes of meaning are also briefly explained, but the author refers the reader to address to other historical surveys such as Barber (1993), Baugh and Cable (1993), and Strang (1970) among others for more detailed explanations.

Appendices to these three chapters contain information about the dialects existing during the three periods covered in the book. This is normally shown in the form of listings of general features. In the specific case of the Middle English dialects, the author draws attention to the complex dialectal panorama resulting from the diversity of forms left over by local scribes during this period. In this sense, please see *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (1986) and Laing (1988) for further information.

In the second part of the book, Smith offers a representative selection of texts from the periods described in his work. As he points out, the texts serve the function of illustrating of what has been stated throughout *Essentials of Early English*. Section A is devoted to Old English texts, and for pedagogical reasons, the author has supplied punctuation. Many of these texts are also translated, and they come with notes. Section B presents Middle English texts which are occasionally accompanied by translations and notes. The last section includes texts from Early Modern English. In the three sections, texts are preceded by an introduction.

The last part of the book contains information relevant for the reader. In the first place, there is an annotated bibliography of *History of English* books which the author ranges from 1 to 3 on a scale of difficulty, and such information can be used by the beginner who wants to concentrate on more advanced learning. In the second place, there is also an Old English glossary, which proves helpful in the translation of texts in Part Two and examples in Part One. This part ends with a thematic index which the reader may use for finding information on a particular issue.

Essentials of Early English seems to me an extremely significant contribution to the study of the History of English, and I believe that Jeremy Smith has fulfilled his initial aim to make a book useful for beginners. There is only one thing which I would add to the book to make it even better. Such a thing is exercises either to be appended to each chapter of the book or to be included after main sections in chapters. By doing these exercises, the

student may practice what he has learnt so far before attempting the translation of texts in Part Two.

Finally, I would like to add that the book is absolutely reader friendly, and simple conventions are used to indicate information especially relevant for the beginner. The volume must be recommended to students as a companion for lectures on the history of English during their philological training at university level, as it contains the *essentials* for the complete understanding of the evolution of English through time.

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