

1 The legitimate language

Giving a history to English

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Introduction: language histories as codifications

The word 'history' is often understood simplistically to mean an accurate account of what happened in the past; yet, the writing of history can depend on differing underlying assumptions and can lead to differing interpretations. There can therefore be *alternative* histories of the same thing, including alternative histories of language. This chapter is about what may be called the *conventional* history of the English language, as it appears in many accounts, e.g. Jespersen (1962) and Brook (1958). This is seen as a particular *version* of history, which is one of a number of potential versions, and it is assumed that this version has reasonably clear and recurrent characteristics. The most prominent of these are: (1) strong emphasis on the early history of English and its descent from Germanic and Indo-European, and (2) from 1500 onward, an almost exclusive focus on standard English. Thus, the functions of this history are primarily to provide a lineage for English and a history for the standard language (in effect, the recent history of English is defined as the history of this one variety). Plainly, if we chose to focus on varieties other than the standard and if we did not accept the validity of the *Stammbaum* model of language descent, the version of history that we would produce would be substantially different.

This conventional history, as it appears in written histories of English for the last century or more, can be viewed as a *codification* – a codification of the *diachrony* of the standard language rather than its synchrony. It has the same relationship to this diachrony as handbooks of correctness have to the synchronic standard language. It embodies the received wisdom on what the language was like in the past and how it came to have the form that it has now, and it is regarded as, broadly, definitive.

The clearest examples of codifications are histories of grammar and taxonomic accounts of successive sound changes. More discursive accounts, however, also have characteristics of codifications: they classify English as Germanic; they stipulate the dates of Old, Middle, and Modern English; they define the influence of French on English; they codify the Great Vowel Shift; and so on. As manuals of usage are believed to carry authority, so histories of language (including historical dictionaries) are also believed to carry

authority. They can give time-depth to the everyday forms of the current language and thereby seem to justify these forms and even sanctify them. They are, however, selective. They foreground and legitimise certain parts of the attested evidence from the past and give justifications for rejecting other parts of the evidence. By sifting through the evidence, they establish a *canon* for the orthodox history of English.

Virtually all popular histories before 1980 subscribed broadly to much the same model of language history – the descent from Germanic and the history of the standard – with disputes about methods and about specific points, such as the pronunciation of Early Modern English *a*, but not usually about principles. As the imposition of authority and the definition of a retrospective canon require acceptance and belief, it is at this point that we need to look more closely at how the *ideology of the standard language* (Milroy and Milroy 1999) affects historical accounts. This ideology has language-internal and language-external aspects. The language-internal aspect is a drive toward uniformity and intolerance of variability, but the characteristic that we are primarily interested in here is not language-internal: it is, broadly, social in its effects. I will consider this ideology here in so far as it affects the manner in which historical developments have been presented. The important term here is *legitimation*.

The selection of one variety as the standard variety and the diffusion of this variety through codification and prescription establish it as the canonical variety. This leads to a sense of legitimacy of this variety. The manuals of usage are effectively law codes, and using non-standard forms is analogous to disobeying the statutes enshrined in law codes. With certain exceptions, as we shall see below, non-standard varieties are seen as illegitimate, and the standard language comes to be looked upon as representative of the English language as a whole. Thus, when the term 'correct' is used in reference to a linguistic form, it has legalistic – and frequently moral – overtones.

Aside from the synchronic imposition of prescriptive grammars and social sanctions against those who do not conform (see Lippi-Green 1997; Milroy and Milroy 1999), there is, however, another aspect of legitimisation, which has the effect of giving even higher status to a language, chiefly in its standard variety. This is what we have called *historicisation*, and historicisation is what this chapter is chiefly about. The histories themselves become from this point of view part of the process of legitimisation. Historicity is an important contribution to the legitimisation of a language, because the possession of a known history strengthens the sense of lawfulness (and recall that many of the world's languages do not have written histories). Speakers can feel assured that it has not simply sprung up overnight like a mushroom (as some 'inferior' languages may be thought to have done): it has an ancestry, a lineage, even a pedigree, and it has stood the test of time. As Lodge (1993: 8) puts it:

... standard languages acquire what can be termed 'retrospective historicity', that is they are given, after the event, a glorious past which helps set them apart from less prestigious varieties ...

The more ancient the language can be shown to be, the better, and it is also desirable that, *whatever signs there may be to the contrary*, the language should be shown to be as *pure* as possible. It should not be of mixed ancestry, and it should not have been 'contaminated' – its intrinsic nature should not have been altered – by whatever influences other languages may have had on it. However, it has not been easy for scholars to legitimise English in some of these ways, because this particular language is more than averagely resistant to being forced into the desired mould. But, as we shall see, they have tried very hard to create for English the longest and the purest history possible.

Legitimation: giving the language a history

Leith (1996: 95–135) and Lass (1997) have described histories of languages as 'stories', and Lass (1997: 5) has further identified history with myth: 'the histories of languages ... are, like all histories, myths'. Although this may be overstated, language histories can certainly acquire mythic aspects – myths of origin, myths of decline and fall, and myths of progress or decay. The Indo-European hypothesis, for example, although rationally arrived at, can be used as a myth of origin and as a support for ideological positions, and, at various times in the last few centuries, many people have been convinced that the English language is in terminal decline because of serious misuse by speakers or writers (see Milroy and Milroy 1999). This view is sustained by an apocalyptic myth, which holds that evil forces are eternally conspiring to destroy the language. Mythic beliefs can be very powerful: believers know that they are simply 'true'. As the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *ideology* puts it, these 'ideas and ways of thinking' are, especially, 'maintained irrespective of events'. Ideologies, of course, can slide seamlessly into myths.

Although myth and legend can certainly affect our beliefs about what happened to the language in the past (some legends are uncritically repeated in history after history), it is extremely desirable in the tradition that the historical investigations themselves should be carried out by legitimate and accountable methods of internal linguistic analysis. Many learned investigations have been carried out, and they have been most highly valued when they have analysed the internal structural properties of the language – its phonology, grammar and lexicon – rather than the sociopolitical embedding of the language. The main features of the lineage and historical development of English, as established in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, were supported by mainly internal linguistic analysis and argumentation. It is important to emphasise this because, if the analysis is language internal, it is felt that social value judgements are not involved, and the analysis can therefore be viewed as objective, non-ideological, and reliable. This evaluation was crystallised by Saussure, but was believed in by many who had no knowledge of Saussure: 'My definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its organisation or system – in a word of everything known as external linguistics' (Saussure 1983: 20).

Although this internal analysis is in principle non-evaluative, it is in practice virtually impossible in a history to avoid evaluative judgements. Some of the ideologies involved are very obvious. Others are more subtle, and they often concern principles of selection from the data available. The choice of the standard variety as the lawful variety, with the sidelining of other varieties, is driven by considerations that are not internal to language, but are plainly affected by belief systems. Similarly, the cleansing of the data by expunging 'vulgar', 'provincial' or 'dialectal' forms from the analysis has been very common, and similarly motivated. It is inconvenient if too many variants are recognised, invariance is felt to be desirable, and certain attested forms are excluded from the historical account as they are thought not to be valid for various reasons. The desire to establish invariant states of language in the past provides an excuse for biased selectivity. In reality, of course, these language states were not invariant.

The Saussurean internal/external dichotomy is relevant here, as it requires the exclusion of social and geographical variation and sociopolitical information of all kinds. This leads to a focus on an invariant standard form of languages such as English, and this, paradoxically, smuggles into the enterprise a host of judgements of a sociopolitical kind, as the standard form is always defined by mainly language-external argumentation. There is no objective language-internal reason why we should believe that the focus on standard and uniform states will give us better insights into the history of English or the nature of language change than will the study of non-standard or variable states. However, it is difficult to prevent ideological factors from intruding into our 'objective' analysis.

Sometimes, these ideological intrusions are openly admitted. Many scholars have been influenced by ideologies of race, class and nationhood, and notions of linguistic prestige. Very influential scholars have explicitly stated that the history of standard English is the legitimate history of English, and the authority of these scholars has ensured that their views have survived into succeeding generations. At the same time these scholars have usually believed that internal analysis is primary and that it is carried out objectively. Among those who have explicitly stated that historical description of English must be based on standard English are historians of very high prestige, including Henry Sweet, H. C. Wyld, Otto Jespersen and, later in the twentieth century, E. J. Dobson – and since much of what I say about these scholars may seem rather negative, I should perhaps add that their writings are still among the indispensable classics of the subject. I have discussed this matter quite fully elsewhere (J. Milroy 1999), and I will confine my comments here to the underlying distinction that drives much of this work: the alleged difference between *legitimate* linguistic changes and *corruptions*.

Legitimate and illegitimate change

Writing in 1899, Sweet stated that traditional dialects were subject to

'disintegrating influences' and were 'less conservative than' the standard 'dialect'. The historical development of English should therefore be accessed through 'literary documents' and evidence from 'educated colloquial speech' (Sweet 1971: 12). A generation later, Wyld (1927: 16–17) and Jespersen (1922: 68) uttered very similar views. We need to appreciate how strong was the literary influence on these scholars. For Wyld, 'the main objects of our solicitude' must be 'the Language of Literature and Received Standard Spoken English'. Jespersen stated that the importance of dialects had been 'greatly exaggerated', and that they are 'further developed' than standard languages 'with their stronger tradition and literary reminiscences'. These scholars were reacting against the Victorian enthusiasm for investigating rural dialects and, at the same time, they were attaching the canon of language history to the canon of literary history, of which it was (for them) a branch. This had the effect of conferring high status and respectability on English, for it is, after all, the language of Shakespeare. But Wyld also had a great deal to say about 'vulgar' and 'provincial' forms of language (e.g. Wyld 1927: 56).

In Wyld's very influential model of the distribution of language varieties, rural dialects are viewed as lawful varieties, and the forms found in them are 'provincial', not 'vulgar'. Although they are not of much importance (as they contribute little to literary history), they, with the standard, are regarded as possessing histories, and it is this historicity that legitimises them. But there is a third type: the 'Modified Standard', and this type (effectively urban English) is liable to be 'vulgar'. Many of its features are seen as uneducated and incorrect attempts to imitate the 'Received Standard', not as legitimate forms. Wyld's classification clearly implies that, unlike rural dialects, modified standards *do not possess historicity*: their forms are illegitimate forms of *standard* English; therefore, they cannot contribute to valid synchronic or diachronic descriptions of the language. By implication, differences that might be detected in these varieties would not represent legitimate linguistic changes, but illegitimate 'vulgarisms' or 'corruptions'. In the next generation, this selectivity and rejection of non-standard forms is particularly clear in E. J. Dobson's account of English pronunciation from 1500 to 1700.

Dobson (1968) argued strongly that there was such a thing as early modern standard English, but at virtually every point in his work, it is plain that what he was describing is an elite variety – defined by social status of *speakers* rather than standardness of language, i.e. despite his focus on internal structure, his criterion was speaker-based and external to language. Evidence for early pronunciation that can be described as 'vulgar' or 'dialectal' was simply rejected. For example, Dobson (1968 II: 151) noted that one source (Pery) 'shows the vulgar raising of M[iddle] E[nglish] *a* to [e]'. This, according to Dobson, is not surprising because Pery's speech 'was clearly Cockney ... The evidence of such a writer does not relate to educated St[andard] E[nglish]'. So into the wastebasket it goes, along with many other 'vulgarisms', even though it attests to early raising of /a/ – a feature that subsequently affected mainstream varieties of English. It is as though uneducated speakers are not allowed to be involved in language history.

This narrowness seems to arise from a single-minded search to discover and describe the *single* variety that can be authoritatively stated to be the direct ancestor of present-day standard English. It must have single parentage and direct descent: these will make it legitimate, theoretically invariant, and largely pure. The idea of single parentage is itself derived from comparative reconstruction methodology and so appears to be non-ideological, but ideological factors do enter in. Dobson's search is, apparently, driven much more by an ideology of social prestige than by internal linguistic reasoning. I will not speculate here as to whether the genetic model of language descent is itself inherently ideological.

Aside from their concern to historicise the standard language, these scholars had inherited from the past the idea that some changes are legitimate whereas other apparent changes are merely 'corruptions'. The clearest statement of the distinction – a generation before Sweet – is in the work of a distinguished American scholar, George Perkins Marsh:

In studying the history of successive changes in a language, it is by no means easy to discriminate ... between positive corruptions, which tend to the deterioration of a tongue ... and changes which belong to the character of speech, as a living semi-organism connatural with man or constitutive of him, and so participating in his mutations ... Mere corruptions ... which arise from extraneous or accidental causes, may be detected ... and prevented from spreading beyond their source and affecting a whole nation. To pillory such offences ... to detect the moral obliquity which too often lurks beneath them, is the sacred duty of every scholar.

(Marsh 1865: 458)

Some of the Victorian 'corruptions' (including 'Americanisms') complained of by Marsh and others have long since become linguistic changes, and there is no known way in which an 'incipient lawful' change in progress can be objectively distinguished from a 'corruption'. However, the belief that some forms of language (such as urban dialects) are not valid forms, and that changes observed in them are not legitimate changes, has persisted until very recently and may still be current in some quarters. Some people, it seems, should not be allowed to participate in language change.

The intrusion of social, and even moral, judgements into a subject that is alleged to possess a scientific and objective methodology could not be clearer than it is here. In interpreting the past, this conviction has often blinded scholars to facts that are staring them in the face. For example, although there is ample evidence in Middle English spellings that initial [h]-dropping was variably present in the thirteenth century, this evidence could not be taken seriously by them, as [h]-dropping is a modern 'vulgarism'. It was inconceivable to them that some sturdy Anglo-Saxon yeoman could have dropped his [h]s; even if he had, this could not be a valid part of the history of

the language anyway. It was preferable to explain it away purely speculatively as invalid evidence arising from Anglo-Norman unfamiliarity with written English (Skeat 1897), and to exclude it from the canonical history (see Milroy 1983), even though it is a completed sound change in many dialects.

The recent history of English as it has been handed down to us is, almost exclusively, the history of what is claimed to be *standard* English. Yet, as I have implied above, what has been described as sixteenth century standard pronunciation would be more correctly labelled: *the pronunciation of gentlemen and persons of rank including members of the Royal Court*. 'Standard' in this use is identified with 'high status', but it is the high status of *speakers* that is involved, not of language, since language in its internal properties is indifferent to status. Thus, when these scholars refer to standard English they do not mean 'the most uniform variety' – defined by its internal properties. They mean 'English as used by high-ranking persons'. This implies that the language does not belong to all its speakers – only to a select few.

Elite pronunciation, however, is not necessarily standard pronunciation. It is quite unlikely that there was a general consciousness of a *standard* pronunciation in 1600: what people did know about were socially marked pronunciations that were indexical of social status, regional origin and belongingness. A particular standard pronunciation may also happen to be a high-status pronunciation, but it is not the status of speakers that defines a variety as a standard. It is internal uniformity, wide acceptance in society, and wide adaptability in different functions that are the important factors in standardisation. If the prestige of speakers and writers becomes involved, this is secondary. These scholars seem to have created between them something amounting to a myth, which is that *the history of English pronunciation since 1500 is a unilinear and exclusive history of 'polite' or 'elite' English*. Other varieties did not exist, or were unacceptable English, or were not important. Unsurprisingly, there have been discernible effects of their views on scholars of later generations, who have been influential in their turn. I have space here for one example.

According to Gimson (1970), the 'Received Pronunciation' ('RP') that developed, probably in the 'public' boarding school system, in the nineteenth century is a direct descendant of the language of the Elizabethan Court (approximately what Dobson described) three centuries before, and Honey (1997) seems to have a similar view. This gives an ancestry to RP that makes it respectable, but it assumes rigid unilinearity and smuggles class distinction into a description that is supposed to be objective and language internal. It is apparently unthinkable that RP could have had more humble origins or that socially inferior varieties could have contributed to it; therefore, it is a history of one elite accent developing in a straight line without regard for the massive variability that necessarily existed in successive speech communities in the course of three centuries. RP in this account has a single parent, just as the modern standard language in general is believed to have single parentage: the elite accent of the Elizabethan Court is projected forward to the

nineteenth century in a sociolinguistic vacuum in which the upper classes are totally insulated from the effects of other orders of society. The fact that this is all intrinsically unlikely is, it seems, irrelevant. The speech of the Court could even have been recessive, as upper-class language often seems to be, and might well have had little effect on the future. Furthermore, it is arguable that Victorian RP was strongly influenced by *middle* class speech, as the Victorian expansion of the public school system affected chiefly the middle class. However this may be, the main generalisation here is that RP is given an approved history and a respectable, legitimate ancestry which is narrowly unilinear and pure. But language change does not proceed in straight lines: speech communities are complex networks of relationships, and language is always variable. These general facts about language in society are largely neglected in conventional historical accounts of English.

Legitimation: dialects and Germanic purism

It is well known that a strong interest in English rural dialects developed in the nineteenth century, its great monument being Alexander Ellis's five-volume *Early English Pronunciation* (1869–89). In some ways, this research interest was felt to be in opposition to the interests of historical linguists (Wyld disapproved of it and considered it to be irrelevant after the medieval period), but in other ways it was complementary, and it could potentially support certain ideological claims – about the richness and diversity of English, for example. It was strongly antiquarian and continued thus into the late twentieth century. The effect was to historicise the rural dialects of English – to give them histories side by side with the standard language and, in some cases, to codify them. That is to say that they became in the later nineteenth century *academically* legitimate: if this had not been so, it would not have been necessary for Sweet, Jespersen and Wyld to play down their importance. In that century, following the Industrial Revolution, the population of urban areas was rising rapidly: to the antiquarian mind it was important to describe the rural dialects before they died out, much as scholars now hurry to describe endangered languages. They were treasure troves to be plundered for the precious information that they preserved about the past states of the English language, and the language of the peasantry was often thought to be purer – i.e. more Anglo-Saxon – than the standard language. The early volumes of the *Transactions of the Philological Society* contain articles on English rural speech, many of which are purist in tone and hostile to French and classical influences on English (see J. Milroy 1977).

The strong Germanic purist movement that developed in the later nineteenth century was bound up with dialectological interests. There was a prominent train of thought that we can describe as 'anti-standard', which held that as rural dialects were 'purer' than the standard language they were of greater value in historical researches. If there was evidence that a rural dialect had been influenced by the standard, this was described as *contamination*

or some similar term. An important ideological aim behind this movement was to support the view that English has a legitimate Germanic ancestry (mainly Anglo-Saxon, but also Norse), and the French element was quite often considered to be illegitimate. The most extreme Anglo-Saxon purist, the Rev. William Barnes, not only wrote poetry and translated the Song of Solomon into his native Dorset dialect (1859), he also wrote a grammar of the English language (1878) using a pure Germanic vocabulary. 'Grammar' was *speechcraft*; 'consonant' was *breathpenning*; 'degrees of comparison' were *pitchess of suchness*. What is important here is that, by these means, rural dialects were legitimised and the Germanic ancestry of English further validated. Urban dialects, as we have noticed, were emphatically *not* believed to be of antiquarian value and were *not* legitimised. Until the late 1960s, no British scholar who hoped for career advancement would have undertaken a study of an urban variety.

The nineteenth century, however, was also a century of empire, and the standard variety had become an important world language. The rise of dialect studies is, paradoxically, related to this, in that it is the whole glorious language that now has to be given a history, and this happens when the language, primarily in what is believed to be its standard, literary variety, is felt to be important enough for this to be appropriate – typically when it has achieved the status of the chief language of a nation-state, and in some cases a great empire. As the status of the standard variety is at this point rather secure, it becomes acceptable, in certain cultural and intellectual climates of opinion (notably those that followed the Romantic movement), to inquire into the histories of other varieties (such as rural dialects) and give them histories also. These thus become legitimate parts of the history of the language as a whole, and, although they are given a subsidiary place, they can be seen as enriching that history.

There is probably an additional ideological reason why rural, but not urban, dialects were acceptable. As rural dialects are known to be recessive, spoken only by peasants in remote places, they are unthreatening to the status of the standard. Thus, it is ideologically safe to view them as legitimate forms. Those aspects of the history that are not inquired into do not, however, become legitimate parts of the canon, and, as it happens, the widely used urban varieties that have been traditionally excluded from study are the ones that actually pose the greater potential threat to the continuation of the standard. They have an unfortunate habit of intruding themselves into it: the urban 'vulgarisms' of one period can become the mainstream forms of another, and this cycle has probably been in operation for centuries. Urban varieties, from medieval London English onward, are a vital constituent part of the real history of English. In a purely scientific world of objective language scholarship, these developing varieties would have been valued as crucially important in the study of language change, but this ideal world is one that has never existed.

Historicity: the ancient language

All languages must have histories in so far as all languages have had some form of existence through time, but only a few languages have attested histories. When a language has no recorded history, the main way in which some information about its history can be recovered is by the comparative method, and this is in principle free of social evaluations. Languages with recorded histories are also subject to comparative method, but these also necessarily have social histories, as records of them were all produced in some form of sociopolitical context, and more information about the past states of such languages is accessible. The problem of determining the true 'history' of these historically attested languages becomes one of how the accidentally preserved records of the past are to be interpreted and expounded for those periods of time in which such records are available. English is one of these languages.

It is in this interpretative activity that ideological positions intrude. English as the language, first of one powerful nation-state and subsequently of others (pre-eminently the USA), and also the language of a great empire, must be given a glorious history, which, as we have noticed, should be a very long history, preferably unbroken and continuous and – as far as possible – pure. Change within the language should preferably be endogenous, and not triggered by external influences such as language contact. But the problem with English as a language – one that makes ideological positions almost impossible to avoid – is that at first sight *it does not fit very easily into the desired pattern*. As a Germanic language, it is in many respects the 'odd man out': it has characteristics that look more like Romance than Germanic; Old English ('Anglo-Saxon', up to AD1100) is very different from Middle and Modern English. Modern German is more similar to Old High German and Italian is arguably more similar to Classical Latin than English is to Anglo-Saxon. Middle English (1100–1500) seems, on the surface, to have appeared quite suddenly as a language rather distinct from the Old English that preceded it. It is therefore quite possible to argue plausibly that the development of English has *not* been continuous, but has been interrupted at some points, and that it is *not* pure: this is, broadly, the position of C.-J. N. Bailey (1996). The efforts of language historians over the past 150 years, however, have been rather single-mindedly devoted to demonstrating that *despite appearances to the contrary*:

- 1 English is a very ancient language;
- 2 English is *directly descended from the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages*;
- 3 English dates from the *fifth century settlement of Germanic tribes in the island of Britain*;
- 4 English has an unbroken and continuous history since that time and is *the same language now as it was then*;

- 5 English is *not a mixed language*: changes in its structure have come about for mainly language-internal reasons and have not been sufficient to alter its essential character.

The fact that these propositions do not all appear to be self-evidently correct has made it particularly desirable that they should be strongly affirmed, ingeniously argued for, and stoutly defended. The ideology requires that English should be ancient and pure with a continuous history.

The answers we are able to give to the above propositions, however, are largely ideological. In the historical dimension, we cannot define what is 'English' and what is not 'English' by internal analysis *alone*. We cannot demonstrate by internal analysis alone when 'English' began, or when one stage of English gave way to another. Nor can we demonstrate by internal analysis alone that Anglo-Saxon is the same language as modern English, or a different language which is its direct ancestor, or a related language which is not a direct ancestor. To answer these questions, we have to appeal to ideological positions.

Some commentators have given English a very long history, and its ancient lineage has been seen as a matter of great pride. In this vein, one writer (Claiborne 1983, cited by Bailey 1991) claims that English is 8,000 years old. Competent historians of English have wisely contented themselves with rather lesser claims, but they are tendentious nonetheless, and they have been expressed in this way since the later nineteenth century. Here is Walter Skeat – a very distinguished medievalist:

... eyes should be opened to the Unity of English, that in English literature there is an unbroken succession of authors, from the reign of Alfred to that of Victoria, and that the English which we speak now is absolutely one in its essence, with the language that was spoken in the days when the English first invaded the island and defeated and overwhelmed its British inhabitants.

(Skeat 1873: xii, cited in Crowley 1990)

This is a common Victorian theme, and it is often expressed as being about nationhood and race as well as language. More immediately, it is associated with literary and cultural history, and it remained a familiar claim well into the later twentieth century. If the fifth century is when the English language began, it becomes possible to assert (more or less as a 'fact') that 'English' has one of the oldest literatures in Europe. If it is asserted that Anglo-Saxon literature is actually English literature, it can also be argued that this literature must be included in any university English literature syllabus. At the Universities of Oxford and London and others that were influenced by them, it most certainly was. Yet, we can easily – possibly more easily – demonstrate on internal linguistic grounds that Anglo-Saxon is *not* English and that the literature is *not* part of the history of 'English' literature. It is

also an Old Germanic language and an Old Germanic literature, like Old Norse and Old High German. The question cannot be decided by internal analysis alone, because it is not wholly a linguistic (or even a literary) question: it is ideological. Utterances like those of Skeat are statements of sentiment, not of fact.

Statements like this often imply, or assert, the identity of language with nation, and this underlies the traditional view on the origins of English as a distinct language. It is usual to state that 'English' dates from the fifth century settlement in Great Britain of a set of Germanic-speaking peoples – the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. As the spoken dialects of these peoples had presumably been much the same before they settled in Britain, this date is arbitrary in linguistic terms and is determined by geography and politics rather than by any known linguistic factor. The language during this period was a West Germanic dialect or series of dialects, very similar to Old Frisian, Old Saxon and Old Low Franconian. It differed from Old Frisian chiefly in the fact that it happened to be spoken on the island of Britain, and only negligibly in linguistic form. There are no texts from that period, and there is no reason to suppose that in the fifth century there were substantial differences among these West Germanic dialects. Even written Old Frisian, if we allow for different spelling conventions, looks very similar to some dialect of Old English. The language of the following thirteenth century Frisian extract is similar to the much earlier Old English of the tenth century:

Thet was thet fiarde bod: Thu skalt erian thinne feder and thine moder,
thet tu thaes-to laenger libbe

[That was the fourth commandment: Thou shalt honour thy father and
thy mother, that thou mayest live the longer]

(Robinson 1992: 184)

If it were possible to assemble a set of similar contemporary early texts from Old Frisian and the four major dialects of Old English and we had no further information about these varieties, it would almost certainly be difficult to say on language-internal grounds alone whether they represented one language or more than one, or where to draw the line between them. A Middle English text, on the other hand, would display obvious differences.

From the nineteenth century onwards there has been a huge mass of detailed scholarship on the relations between Germanic languages. Hans Frede Nielsen has reviewed much of this, and for the purpose of tracing ideological influences, certain main features stand out. First, it appears to have been Henry Sweet (an Englishman) who first postulated (1877: 562) the prior existence of a pre-English 'Anglo-Frisian' stage, and later H. M. Chadwick (also British) who commented (1907: 60) that there can be no doubt that Frisian is 'by far the [language] most nearly related to English'. Nielsen's conclusion (1981: 256–7) is that Old English is indeed most similar

to Old Frisian. The ideological effect here is that Anglo-Frisian supplies the immediate pre-history of English and extends its pedigree backwards. It becomes possible in principle for someone like Claiborne to state that 'English' was actually spoken on the continent before the invasion of Britain, and, indeed, there is no purely linguistic reason why, if we recognize Old English as 'English', this should not be accepted – in language-internal terms it is a seamless continuum. From this point of view, the English language as a language does not have a beginning.

But this is not what most scholars have wanted to believe, as there has also been a strong tendency, again traceable to Sweet, but supported by others, to claim that the Anglo-Saxon dialects (Kentish, West Saxon, Mercian, Northumbrian) were not differentiated at the time of the settlements: they underwent differentiation after the invasion of Britain (Nielsen 1981). As the settlers came from different places and settled at different times, this is hardly plausible: its purpose appears to be ideological. This putative unity suggests a beginning for the English language within Britain, as the undifferentiated variety is then identifiable as the beginning of English as a single separate language. There is no direct empirical evidence to demonstrate this, but there is good reason to believe that, on the contrary, the dialects *were* differentiated. But internal analysis of linguistic forms is not in itself capable of settling this kind of question: it is ideological.

Anglo-Saxon has to be a unity that is distinct from these other languages, but at the same time closely related to them and descended from the same ancestor. In this way, it is given both a distinct beginning and a lawful ancestry. It is legitimised.

Historicity: the continuity and purity of English

The standard view of the transition from Old to Middle English is that, although it appears in the texts to be abrupt, it was actually gradual, and this of course backs up the idea of the ancient language and unbroken transmission. Old English, however, is structurally very unlike Modern English or most of Middle English in a number of ways. To show that it is the 'same' language on purely internal grounds actually requires some ingenuity. It is much easier to show that it is different. There are, for example, several case distinctions, three grammatical genders, a predominantly Germanic vocabulary, many noun declensions and verb conjugations, and word-order conventions which, although variable, resemble other Germanic languages more than they resemble modern English and later Middle English. As C.-J. N. Bailey (1996: 351) points out, although Middle English can be rapidly acquired by the modern reader, 'it takes a long while for the same individual to learn Anglo-Saxon inflections and grammar, and that person cannot read it (even with a lexicon) with any ease after several months of working at it'. Generations of English literature students in Britain have, often reluctantly, been required to read Old English in the original on the grounds that Old

English literature is 'English' literature, and they have frequently opined that it resembles Dutch or German more than it resembles English. It is not self-evident *from its internal form alone* that it is the same language as modern English, or even that it is the direct forebear of modern English.

To conventional historians of English, this difficulty has merely constituted a challenge. English *has* to have ancient origins, it *has* to have a clearly defined lineage, it *has* to be a Germanic language, and the transition from Anglo-Saxon to Middle English *has* to be seamless. Scholars have had to find as many reasons as possible to argue for continuity. For them, this Anglo-Saxon language was definitely English, and to emphasise the point they preferred to call it Old English, rather than Anglo-Saxon. Jespersen (1962: 17–54), writing about Old English (the first edition of this book was published in 1938), repeatedly called the language and the people simply 'English', rather than 'Anglo-Saxon'. Let us look, however, at a brief passage from King Alfred's writings:

Ælfred kyning hateð gretan Wærfærð biscep his wordum luflice and freondlice; ond ðe cyðan hate ðæt me com swiðe oft on gemynd, hwelce wiotan iu wæron geond Angelcynn ...

[King Alfred bids to greet his bishop Wærfærth in affectionate and friendly words; and (I) bid to inform you that it came very often into (my) mind, what learned men there used to be throughout the English people (or nation) ...]

If we did not know the provenance of this text and had no other Old English (OE) texts, we would be unlikely to classify it as 'English' or even relate it closely to *Middle English*. It is defined as English because it is known to have been a language related to modern English that was spoken on the soil of England by a famous king who is credited with uniting the country as one nation (*Angelcynn*), and who called the language *englisc*, even though he was a *Saxon*. So it is English for reasons that are historical, political, geographical, and ideological. What is important here is that to define it as the same language as the modern one is to justify the extension of the history of English back to the fifth century.

Strong continuity from OE through Middle English (ME) to Present-day English (PresE) has been generally favoured, and there has been a tendency to explain the many changes in terms of internal developments within the language, rather than, for example, by adducing the possible effects of other languages or the possible structural effects of language contact situations in general. It is common to come across the argument that many of the apparent phonological differences between OE and Early Middle English (EarlyME) are purely scribal (a result of the displacement of the OE writing system by one influenced by Norman French), and it is possible to single out two influential papers in the 1930s that were viewed as further consolidating the

continuity of English. The first, by Malone (1930), argues that many of those features that are thought to characterise ME had already made an appearance in OE. The second is a famous essay by Chambers (1932) 'On the continuity of English prose from Ælfred to Thomas More and his school'. This is focused on the Norman Conquest and plays down its importance, attempting to correct the pro-Norman (or anti-Germanic) bias of historians and literary critics. In a careful analysis, the Anglo-Saxon prose-writing tradition is shown to have survived in many of its characteristics throughout the transitional period and well into Early Modern English (EModE). In fact, this essay was aimed at the literary critics who rejected Anglo-Saxon literature as not 'English', and not primarily at linguists. Nonetheless, it was most certainly used as part of the argument for the continuity of the language, in times when the historical study of language was an appendage to the study of literature, and when the vast differences between speech and prose were not well understood. Subsequently, a great deal of industry was expended on backing up the continuity argument. It is clearly stated by, for example, Bennett and Smithers (1966: xlviii–xlix), with reference to ME, that: '... the impact of an alien language spoken by a new ruling class did not substantially affect or modify the structure of English'; the same view has been expressed by many others.

Written documents still appear in a later version of Alfred's dialect (West Saxon) until around 1100. Shortly after this there is a sudden apparent change, and the language begins to look more like PresE, especially in eastern parts of the country (the mid-twelfth century Peterborough Chronicle continuations have lost grammatical gender and many inflectional distinctions); yet, until the mid-thirteenth century, most ME dialects are not particularly easy for the modern reader. The early Victorian scholars who planned the *New (Oxford) English Dictionary* seem to have been quite clear on what constituted the beginning of English. With great precision they dated it at 1258, not the fifth century (Crowley 1989a: 113). This decision was not only practical, but reasonable in terms of internal linguistic structure, and we can look at the language of a well-known thirteenth century lyric to see why it was:

Blow, northerne wynd,
Sent þou me my swetyng!
Blow, norþerne wynd,
Blou, blou, blou!

(Bennett and Smithers 1966: 121)

This is plainly English and is dissimilar to the language of Alfred, and the same applies to other contemporary texts. The scholars who insisted on continuity and identity of OE with PresE (such as Skeat, cited above) also knew this, but they were to varying degrees ideologically committed to proving that what appeared to be so was not actually so. What looks different is – really – similar, and, conversely, what looks similar is – really – different. Varieties that look similar in more modern times (e.g. Shakespeare's English

and ours) are often said to have been in reality much more divergent from each other than they appear, whereas OE is argued to be much more similar to later ME than it appears. The vigour with which the argument is pursued is in inverse proportion to the plausibility of the claim. It depends on the obvious fact that OE does not seem to the uninitiated to be 'English', so it has to be proved that it really is English.

Although it is known that OE was in some counties in intimate contact with Old Norse and that the language was subsequently strongly influenced by Norman French, this gradualist unilinear view of the history of English is still the preferred view. It has been part of the conventional discourse of English language history for well over a century. Recently, it has been suggested that English has changed as much in the last four centuries (since Shakespeare) as it did in the four centuries between King Alfred and 1300. If this were true, we might have to accept that the development from OE to ME is a seamless continuum and that OE is therefore the same language as modern English. But it is not true.

Roger Lass subscribes to part of this claim – at least with reference to phonetic history. He states (Lass 1997: 205n) that 'the likelihood that Shakespeare ... would have been auditorily intelligible to a modern English speaker is vanishingly small'. It is of course true that there have been many internal changes in English since 1600 (in the conventional history almost nothing happened after 1600), but it is quite likely that Elizabethan English, if it survived today, would sound like a somewhat archaic dialect of English and would be largely intelligible – more intelligible to mainstream speakers than an unadulterated rural dialect of present-day Lowland Scots, for example. There is no method precise enough to calculate probabilities either way, but having listened to and understood the recording of Dobson's rather archaic reconstruction of Shakespeare's pronunciation, I find it strange that this claim can be made so confidently. Shakespeare wrote in a variety of modern English.

In agreement with the conventional history, Lass also advocates a general late dating of changes in the history of English and hence a relatively slow development of the modern language; thus, Shakespeare's pronunciation can be represented as relatively archaic. Whereas Minkova and Stockwell (1990), cited by Lass (1997: 289–90n), argue that the lowering and centralisation of the vowels in *bit*, *put* took place before 1300, Lass argues for the mid-seventeenth century at the earliest. There is a difference of nearly four centuries. Clearly, alternative chronologies of changes make a great deal of difference to what we think Shakespeare might have sounded like, and it will be clear from my advocacy of an early date for initial [h]-loss that I favour relatively early dating of changes when the evidence permits this (see further Milroy 1992). That is, I favour the view that, since we do not have direct access to these things, we must accept that early changes are possible or probable in variable language states. This differs from the conventional view, and suggests that even Middle English could have had 'advanced' varieties

that were quite similar to PresE. But the fact that there can be such wide disagreement demonstrates in itself how difficult it is to find reliable and consistent criteria for interpreting purely internal evidence. Opposing views can be resolutely maintained, although they can usually be neither verified nor falsified; thus, the way is open for ideological positions and special pleading to enter in.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case study (by Kaufman) in Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 325–7), in support of the view that English is not a mixed language. Using the example of Robert of Gloucester (c. 1300), they state (1988: 326): 'We doubt that from Alfred to Robert more change occurred than from Shakespeare to us'. They then list a number of differences among these, some of which (such as 'lexical attrition and simplification') are effectively meaningless in the context, while others, such as some alleged vowel changes, are idiosyncratic. They are in any case highly selective. But, most significantly, they do not print an extract either from Alfred or Robert. This is wise, because if they did they would destroy their case. Although Robert's south-west Midland variety maintained more conservative features than the above extract from the lyric (north-west Midland), it *obviously* does not resemble OE more than it resembles modern English:

In þis manere the barons began hor vrning:
A Freinss knigt was at Gloucetre, þe sserrue þoru þe king,
Sir Maci de Besile, and constable also.
þe barons it bespeke þat it nas nogt wel ido ...

[In this manner the barons began their attack (lit: 'running'): a French knight was at Gloucester, the sheriff of (lit: 'through') the king, Sir Maci de Basile – and constable also (of the king). The barons agreed that it was not well done]

To justify the claim that this is very close to Alfred's English would take a great deal more ingenuity than Kaufman shows in his discussion.

The traditional scholars who argued the same case were aware of the strong *prima facie* difficulties that faced them in pursuing their argument. This case study, however, is full of rash and sweeping generalisations – a specimen is: 'Southmarch has just eight Norsification features' (Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 291) (What?) – and there are some astonishing *ex cathedra* pronouncements about the time-depth of established standard English and its influence on dialects. The impression is given that everything is definitively known as fact. Their account of the Great Vowel Shift (GVS) (Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 327) demonstrates precisely why their main claims cannot be taken seriously. They declare that it started with the diphthongisation of /i:/ and /u:/ in or around 1420; then followed a number of raisings in a definite order – in 1430, 1475, 1500, and 1525. No one, of course, actually knows any facts about the implementation of the GVS (everything is inferential), almost

everything about the order of the changes is disputed, no specialist would dare to specify such exact dates for each individual change, and some believe that there was no such thing as the GVS anyway. But Kaufman *knows* these things and others as established facts, with no need for argument or demonstration. Furthermore, the few quotations given approvingly from Bennett and Smithers (1966) and other conventional historians do not prove that these scholars were either right or wrong.

As for 'mixed' languages – if English does not fit Thomason and Kaufman's narrow definition of 'mixed', it does not follow that it is not mixed by some other definition or that there cannot be differing degrees of mixing. C.-J. N. Bailey in his response (1996: 341) correctly observes that in their argument 'ideology wins over demonstration'. The picture they paint has a strange air of unreality about it, and the driving force behind it is the same ideology of language that has motivated the conventional historian for well over a century – defence of the pure and ancient language and the continuous, unbroken history. The case has been stated over and over again. This study demonstrates how stubbornly the conventional view on purity and continuity has persisted and how desperately it is still defended.

Conclusion

Nothing I have said in this chapter is intended to imply that conventional scholars have always been wrong, and that I know better than they did how the history of English should be presented. What I have attempted to show is something more modest, which does not determine as fact whether English is pure or impure, ancient or modern. This is that the typical history has been influenced by, and sometimes driven by, certain ideological positions. The first of these implicitly suggests that the language is not the possession of all its native speakers, but only of the elite and the highly literate, and that much of the evidence of history can be argued away as error or corruption. The effect of this is to focus on what is alleged to be the standard language, but this is actually the language of those who have prestige in society, which may not always be a standard in the full sense. Of course, it may often be the same as the standard language, but this elitism can also mislead us into believing that speech communities are far less complex than they actually are and that the history of the language is very narrowly unilinear. We need a more realistic history than this.

The second position can be briefly characterised as an ideology of nationhood and sometimes race. This ideology requires that the language should be ancient, that its development should have been continuous and uninterrupted, that important changes should have arisen internally within this language and not substantially through language contact, and that the language should therefore be a pure or unmixed language. I have tried to show that much of the history of English is traditionally presented within this broad framework of belief. The problem, I have suggested, is that, *prima*

facie, English as a language does not seem to fit in well with these requirements. For that reason, much ingenuity has been expended on proving that what does not seem to be so actually is so: Anglo-Saxon is English, the development of English has been uninterrupted and the language is not mixed. The most recent strong defence of this position – by Thomason and Kaufman (1988) – is merely the latest in a long line. It demonstrates that this system of beliefs is – for better or worse – still operative in the historical description of English.