



Language Change: Progress or Decay?

Jean Aitchison

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This book gives a lucid and up-to-date overview of language change, discussing where our evidence about language change comes from, how and why changes happen, and how languages begin and end. It considers both changes that occurred long ago, and those currently in progress. This substantially revised third edition includes two new chapters on change of meaning and grammaticalization. New sections have been added to other chapters, as well as over 150 new references. The work remains nontechnical in style and accessible to the reader with no previous knowledge of linguistics.

Language Change: Progress or Decay? Details

Date : Published December 11th 2000 by Cambridge University Press (first published November 30th 1980)

ISBN : 9780521795357

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Format : Paperback 312 pages

Genre : Humanities, Linguistics, Nonfiction, Language, Academic, School

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Yana Cools says

the most fun textbook i've ever read

Nina says

A highly accessible, well-organized overview of language change processes. An enjoyable read!

Raphael Paulian says

extremely well documented, insightful. chapter 13 "chain reaction changes" was news to me : I had never heard about it before. her chapters about creoles run a tad long though.

Christopher says

While its title might make the book seem a collection of papers taking sides in a debate, *Language Change: Progress or Decay* is a textbook written by Jean Aitchison introducing contemporary study of language change to beginning students of linguistics. The book has proven quite popular for its gentle tone and its clear summarization of important work in the field, and has now gone through several editions.

I read this as a graduate student of historical linguistics, and I had several years of experience in the field. For all its simplicity, however, Aitchison's book was revelatory. Those with training in the Indo-European or Uralic language families tend to think of language change as some abstract sequence of events that are cleanly reconstructed with the comparative method. Our traditional handbooks are rather divorced from contemporary research and don't consider the "why" and "how" of language change. Aitchison remedies this by considering language as a product of human beings, with all of their social pressures and insecurities. She first presents the work of William Labov, who viewed language change in progress in 20th-century New York. His work tells us about how varying standards of pronunciation in a given population spread or die depending on social prestige.

Another matter this student of historical linguistics was unclear about is exactly why sounds tend to change along the same lines in all language families. Everyone knows that final consonants tend to be lost, labiovelar stops may become /p/ or /b/, and /l/ often shifts to /w/. Aitchison explains the physical causes for these common phonetic and ultimately phonological changes. By far the most rigorous and useful chapter for me was "The Mad-Hatter's Tea Party", an admirably easy-to-grasp explanation of push chains and drag chains with plenty of examples.

As for the question in the subtitle, Aitchison ceaselessly stresses that language change is natural and unavoidable. She quotes from a long line of English-language purists, from Jonathan Swift to William Safire

to show the absurdity of seeking to freeze language at a given moment. At the same time, she emphasises that languages do not evolve towards some ideal, but rather endlessly wheel about from one configuration to another.

I highly recommend this book to any student of historical linguistics. Even if you have some training in the field, you're bound to find something new and exciting in Aitchison's text.

Dibya_jana says

A very nice introduction to the subject of language change, as the title indicates. Consequently, the other focus area of historical linguistics, namely linguistic reconstruction, is only briefly touched upon. The only weakness in my view is the chapter on language death. It has a very emotional tone to it. I understand the sentiment, but it is in stark contrast to the scholarly tone of the rest of the book.

Aline says

As far as text books go, this one is definitely a winner!

Emma Lindhagen says

An actually pocket sized linguistics textbook? Amazing!

I quite enjoyed this book. It's fairly theory-light but still gets the broad points across well while drawing on a range of easily comprehensible examples.

Lauren says

Ended up just skimming the rest because I got so bored. Repeats herself repeatedly (haha). Quite a good introduction to language change though, may read it properly some day.

Crystal says

Required reading for my college Introduction to Linguistics course. Clear, fluid writing.

Ruby says

Aitchinson presents her subject in a clear manner that is easy to follow and pleasant to read. However, her insane metaphors and comparisons did threw me off course regularly and they made it hard, sometimes, to

take her serious.

Sowmya says

Good introduction to the the topic of language change!

I would have of course loved to read more on the topics in the final part, esp. that of language death, both murder and suicide. But, the books is very well written nevertheless.

Roberta says

As always, Jean Aitchison's description of language is succinct, full of examples, and entertaining. She covers all bases in an organised manner that is easy to read for specialists and non-specialists alike.

However, after having read her 'Seeds of Speech' I found some serious overlapping which was a bit of a disappointment - there were 1 or 2 examples that seemed to be verbatim, which is unneeded repetition considering world languages are chock-full of examples for each and every situation one can imagine.

Jennifer Deegan says

Very accessible and fascinating linguistic text.

Hans Henrik says

linguistics
