

## Book Review

**Richard J. Watts.** 2011. *Language Myths and the History of English* (Oxford Studies in Sociolinguistics). Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780195327618 (paperback), 352 pp. £18.99

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The title of Richard Watts's *Language myths and the history of English* (*LMHE*) recalls the similarly-titled *Language myths* (Bauer and Trudgill 1998), a very accessibly written book for a general audience that sets the record straight on common linguistic misconceptions. Readers expecting a similarly light-hearted approach in *LMHE* will get a good deal more than they bargained for. This book is densely written and thoroughly academic; it is myth-busting of a higher order.

Watts's aim in *LMHE* is to show how the writing of the history of English has been coloured by ideology: what is written is the teleological story of the unavoidable victory of Standard English. Watts pinpoints the myths underlying this ideology and goes on to deconstruct them. Although this is to be understood as an analysis of the origins and application of the myths and "this will not be done in an effort to discredit them" (p. 23), the effect is in fact a debunking of the received history of English. Watts's motivation appears to be a complaint against the role accorded to Standard English in society vis-à-vis other varieties: "Socially, however, speakers will continue to construct differences between standard and nonstandard varieties, on the basis of language myths, and sociolinguists should be aware of the need to deconstruct those myths" (p. 258).

*LMHE* consists of twelve chapters: ten chapters dealing with particular historical language myths in chronological order, bookended by two theoretical chapters. The first chapter introduces myths as stories – fictive, but with elements of reality – that are continually reconstructed socially. They are the building blocks of discourses that in turn shape our language ideologies.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with a pair of myths about the Old English period: the ***ancient language myth*** and the ***unbroken tradition myth***.<sup>1</sup> According to these myths, English can trace its history straight back to fifth-century literary texts. Watts attacks these myths from two angles. First, he argues that despite a lack of evidence for a *Beowulf* manuscript before the tenth century, the dating of this epic text to the seventh century or even earlier in accordance with the ancient

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<sup>1</sup> The myths are given in bold italic type in accordance with Watts's practice.

language myth served a patriotic purpose in the nineteenth century. Second, he shows that English did not in fact have an unbroken written (standard-language) tradition. The language in the First and Second Continuations of the *Peterborough Chronicle* is in a different style from the preceding text, with more oral characteristics. Even if English has a history going back to the Anglo-Saxon settlement, it is by no means a linear development towards Standard English.

In Chapter 4, Watts tackles a recent myth about this period, the **creolisation of English myth**. The idea that Middle English was the result of creolisation was relatively short-lived in academic debate and was more or less definitively disproved by Görlach (1986), but it lives on in laypersons' discourse about language. This myth, which presupposes abrupt change, is incompatible with the previous two myths, but continues to be popular because it offers a way out of the undesirable breaking of an ancient tradition by framing this as something exceptional. The exceptionality of creoles, and of contact and change in general, can be traced back to the most central myth, the **linguistic homogeneity myth** discussed in Chapter 5.

The **linguistic homogeneity myth** can be derived directly from the basic metaphor A LANGUAGE IS A HUMAN BEING and itself gives rise to a collection of additional myths. Watts's key point here is that "if the variety of language used is judged to be morally imperfect, degenerate or faulty, then these attributes tend to be automatically transferred to the speakers themselves" (p. 129); in other words, language ideologies have social repercussions. Together with the **superiority of English myth** and the **legitimate language myth**, the linguistic homogeneity myth forms the core of a network of myths. The diagram showing how these myths are linked (p. 137), however, is rather messy.

The superiority of English myth is the subject of Chapter 6, in its guise as the **greatness myth**. Watts shows how the Great Vowel Shift has been discursively portrayed as a unitary, teleological phenomenon, conveniently dated to the two centuries between two high points in English literature, Chaucer and Shakespeare. It is a construct "towards the inevitable development of Standard English" (p. 145) and shows "a historical pedigree for the English language as the homogeneous national language of a sociohistorically homogeneous nation-state in the twentieth century" (p. 156). In few places in the book are the three core myths so clearly uncovered as in this chapter.

The four chapters that follow draft the establishment of Standard English from the eighteenth century to the present day, showing the underlying myths evolving into each other as the social and political climate changes. Chapter 7 offers a reinterpretation of Swift's *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*. It serves not so much to deconstruct a myth,

but to show that the myths underlying standard language ideology were present in Swift's text, that they were available to him for mockery. Chapter 8 deals with the *polite language myth*, and shows how polite (standard) language came to give access to certain social circles in eighteenth-century Britain. Polite language could be bought, e.g. in the form of elocution manuals, and so could social status. In the nineteenth century, this myth transformed into the *legitimate language myth* (Chapter 9). To protect the interests of the elite, Standard English was recast as the only legitimate language, "the symbol for a unified nation [...] under the political dominance of [the higher] classes" (p. 233). The tenacity of Standard English ideology is shown once more in the debate surrounding English language teaching in UK schools in the 1980s and 1990s, discussed in Chapter 10.

The final myth Watts discusses, in Chapter 11, is the *global language myth*. With reference to letters to the editor about English in Swiss newspapers, he shows that the same myths – notably the legitimate language and pure language myths – recur in this debate. In native-speaker discourse, the use of English as a Lingua Franca is often discussed in triumphalist tones (the *superiority of English myth*), but this ignores the fact that the English spoken as a Lingua Franca is extremely heterogeneous (cf. Seidlhofer 2011) and as such is in contrast with the homogeneity myth.

In the final chapter, Watts offers his conclusion: Standard English was a project of the upper classes, and the myths used to support the project were constantly updated and reworked in response to threats to the power of these classes. *LMHE* ends with a call for more alternative histories of English, histories that take into account the heterogeneity that is inherent in (a) language. This call will be welcomed by the readership of *JHSL*, but of course is preaching to the choir.

Reading *LMHE* alongside teaching a course on the history of English drives home the reality of Watts's argument: standard course books as Baugh and Cable's *A history of the English language* (2013) and Freeborn's *From Old English to Standard English* (2006) have a clear focus on the development of Standard English and disregard variation. The Freeborn text even acknowledges this in the title. Admittedly, variation in Middle English does receive discussion (at some length in Freeborn), but this variation is rendered innocent by virtue of being in Middle rather than Modern English. Baugh and Cable (2013: §152) end their discussion with a section titled "Complete Uniformity Still Unattained"; clear evidence of both the *homogeneity myth* and of telicity in the genre.

Although Watts claims he did not want to write "yet another history of English" (p. 287), his undermining of the dominant story results in exactly that. We should then consider what alternative myths and discourses are central to

the new story. If Watts prefers the term “Anglo-Saxon” over “Old English” because the latter term hides the break in tradition between pre- and post-Conquest language (p. 29 and *passim*; the **unbroken tradition myth**), does the former term not ignore the cross-generational language transmission that continued despite the Norman Conquest? We may posit a **wilful usurping elite myth** underlying Watts’s narrative, especially from the seventeenth century onwards. Without an overt acknowledgment of this, the exasperated tone of statements as “The government, therefore, decided what was ‘correct standard English’ and not a trained applied linguist!” (p. 247, note the exclamation point) and Watts’s self-styling as someone who tackles controversial topics (e.g. p. 215) opens the text up for criticism of being quixotic.

The pervasiveness of language myths is shown by the fact that even the person identifying and deconstructing them cannot fully escape them. A footnote in the chapter on the Great Vowel Shift (p. 142, note 4) claims that “It seems that speakers of English, wherever they are, whichever variety they speak, are simply inveterate vowel shifters.” Here Watts collapses different varieties into one “language”, and falls into the trap of the **homogeneity myth** he himself had uncovered.

The value of *LMHE* lies not so much in what it says about the history of the language – the discussions of Beowulf, the Great Vowel Shift or politeness are not new and only Watts’s reinterpretation of Swift’s *Proposal* is a truly novel contribution at that level – but in what it contributes to the history of the history. An awareness of the myths, discourses and ideologies underlying the received history of English is vital to understanding that history. It is unfortunate that *LMHE* is by no means light reading that can be set on top of standard course books, and that the chapters are too interlinked to be read individually. The motivation for the book may come from undergraduate teaching (p. vii) but it may not be entirely suitable for teaching at that level. For postgraduate study and research into the history of English and historical (socio)linguistics more generally, however, where an awareness of our own ideologies is crucial, *LMHE* is highly recommended reading.

It seems customary to end a review by pointing out petty inconsistencies in minor details and typographical errors. After Watts’s exposure of the **polite and legitimate language myths**, this becomes a more self-conscious endeavour. There are quite a few typographical errors, in particular missing spaces around text in italics or boldface. The reworking for this book of material published earlier does not always result in a smoothly flowing narrative and some material may have been better placed elsewhere in the book. Furthermore, Watts’s use of *she* as a gender-neutral pronoun (alternating with *he*, but never singular *they*) is highly marked and not entirely free of ideology. But if a book of more than 300

pages shows some blemishes, Watts's argument is compelling and should not be dismissed because it is not entirely polished.

## References

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