

**-' INTERVIEW WITH
PROFESSOR NORMAN BLAKE,
CO-EDITOR OF THE *CAMBRIDGE HISTORY
OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE***

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CAMBRIDGE University Press is publishing the most extraordinary team-work text so far done on the history of English. The publication has brought together the most outstanding experts on each particular subject and the result is an amazing body of knowledge gathered in six volumes. Professor Blake is the editor of the second volume.

—The main questions will be about the publication of the Cambridge History of the English Language, as you are more popular now because of that big volume. Thus the first question will be, why did you think of writing a book like this ?

BLAKE: Well, I think the first answer to that is that there is no comprehensive history of the English language. Most of the books about the history of the English language are actually student text-books, which are one-volume and which cover quite a lot of ground. Many of them actually spend, perhaps, most of their time on the Old and Middle English period and not enough on the more modern periods, particularly on the development of English abroad; so that to have a comprehensive history of the English language would bring a lot of the writings that other people have done together in a complete set of volumes so that people would be able to have access to an authoritative and also fairly complete history of the language. The second thing, perhaps, is that the history of the language is a subject that

needs to be improved from the attitude of teachers of English, both in universities and in schools, and producing a large edition with six volumes in itself tends to alter people's attitudes. They tend to think that the history of the language must be important because there is such a heavy set of volumes which show how important the history of the language is.

—*Was this publication also meant to fill a gap in the bibliography on the history of the English language?*

BLAKE: Yes. There are a lot of people working on particular aspects of the language; but if you wanted to know something, say, about place names in the 17th century in England you might find it difficult to know precisely where to go to. By having the consolidated history of the English language in six volumes, it should, in the future, give you the first place to go, so that you can read the chapter, or the part of the chapter about what you may be interested in. And then, there is, of course, an extensive bibliography in each of the volumes. In the bibliography of Middle English that I worked on, I think the bibliography runs to 70 pages; that gives a lot of information. Naturally the volumes will become out of date and there are no plans as yet to produce a second edition because the first edition is not even complete. But the possibility always exists that even if we did not produce a second edition that was completely revised, we might produce a second edition which had a new bibliography.

—*What people did you think of when you decided to write the book: specialists, teachers, general people..?*

BLAKE: All those people. I think it would be difficult to write for the general public entirely because you have to have a general understanding of linguistics but there are chapters within the volumes which could readily be used by the general public and we do have to remember that there are a lot of general people who are interested in the history of their own language, and perhaps people in other countries who might be interested in the history of the English language. But the main audience was intended to be students and scholars rather than the general public. However, in so far as the volumes that have been produced until now have sold extremely well, and Cambridge University Press is delighted with the number of copies that they have sold, I imagine it is found in a lot of university and other libraries throughout the world.

—*Professor Hogg is the General editor. Where and what does he teach? Does he teach the history of the English language?*

BLAKE: He is professor of the English Language at Manchester University. He teaches the History of the English Language and Historical

Linguistics. But I think he probably teaches Anglo-Saxon as well. He has written a book on the phonology of English which has been published recently. He is more interested in Anglo-Saxon than in other periods, but like all people who teach the History of English, they are interested in all the periods as well, but Anglo-Saxon is what you may call his first love.

—To what extent is he responsible for the distribution of the whole subject matter into the different volumes? Did he decide? Did you all decide?

BLAKE: Well, he is the general editor and at the meeting in Sheffield, when the concept of the Cambridge History was decided, we agreed that he would edit the first volume and I would edit the second volume, and we had certain proposals for who would edit the other volumes, but we also agreed that the editors of the six volumes would form an editorial team, and we discussed from time to time who might write particular chapters and how the volumes would be distributed. But because it is the first time something like this has been done, we tended to follow what is the traditional division. So we had a volume on Old English, we had a volume on Middle English, we had a volume on early Modern English, and so on.

It would have been possible for us to think of other divisions. The main debate that we had really, was whether we would do a history of the English language where the language was divided up into periods or whether the language was divided up into topics, so there might be a history of English syntax, a history of English phonology, and so on. But these books would be quite independent and therefore you would not get the sense of a continuous, chronological development and a lot of the information that you might have about the Anglo-Saxon period would have to be repeated in each period because, if you want to take aspects like sociolinguistics and other modern attitudes towards language into account, you have to provide a certain amount of historical, cultural background, and that might have to be repeated in every volume if we had decided to do it by topic rather than by period. So, essentially, right at the very beginning, it was decided that we would discuss it by period, and at one or two of the meetings of the International Conference on English Historical Linguistics, the one at Sheffield, and then the one at Amsterdam, and the one at Cambridge, there were meetings of the various editors and some times we met separately in London or Oxford or Cambridge and we had various editorial meetings. Once we had allocated the volumes to the general editors and the individual chapters to the specific scholars, there was less reason for us to meet, because what happens now is that when somebody completes a chapter, say, for the sake of the argument,

somebody completes a chapter on the syntax in Early Modern English, he would send that chapter to Cambridge University Press, Cambridge University Press would then photocopy the chapter and send it to each of the editors. We would then, as editors, read the chapter, make comments, and send comments both to the editor of the volume as well as to the original author, and they would decide what changes they needed to make in the light of the various comments they have received from the different editors. Thus, although there is an editor to each volume, there is a level of, what I might call, co-operative aspect about the work in general.

—*So you did a lot of reading...*

BLAKE: I did and I am doing. Not all the chapters have been written yet. It is only if you are the editor of the volume that you would see the revised version: We see the original version and then make comments, but the revisions we leave to the editor of that volume and the author of the chapter. So as editors we read each chapter two or three times as it goes backwards and forwards between the editor and the author.

—*From the point of view of teaching. Do you think it is better to teach the history of the English language taking into account the different periods, Old English, Middle English, etc., or rather the different fields, morphology, syntax, phonology, etc.?*

BLAKE: Well, I think that depends upon how English is taught within the University in question. If you were doing a course which was mainly linguistic and you had courses in syntax, phonology or whatever, you might want to teach the history of the English syntax, the history of the English phonology, in part because you were teaching the theoretical aspects of syntax or phonology. But, if, as is generally true in England, people study the literature in a historical way, so they study Old English literature, they study Middle English literature, they study Shakespeare and early Modern English literature, and so on, then it makes more sense in a way to tie the history of English to the period because people can then use the literature they are reading as a support for the history of language and the history of language as a support for the literature, and it makes perhaps more sense to them to look at it in that way. I do not think there is any right way to do it. I think the matter is very much a practical matter, depending on what the ethos in the university is like. We have more of a problem in England than you possibly do in Spain, in so far as we have only three years as undergraduates, and therefore the amount of material you can cover in three years is naturally much less than that you could cover in five years in Spain, or, unless you are

going to reduce to four or whatever, you have more time to develop it in this way.

—*At the same time, the English students are more familiarised with the language than the Spanish students...*

BLAKE: Well, they are more familiarised with the modern language, they are not necessarily more familiar with the older language.

—*But it is easier for them to understand the language of older periods. Don't you think so?*

BLAKE: I do not know.

—*Especially based on English patterns?*

BLAKE: Well, no. They have a problem which may or may not be true of your students that they think that they can understand it because they often make an assumption that a word or a syntactic expression, because there is an equivalent one in Modern English, therefore it is the same in Middle English and so they very easily mistranslate or misunderstand and they do not necessarily perceive the nuances in the development of the language which are taking place. So, obviously they have some advantages, but generally speaking, many of our students in England who are studying English may not know any other language or they may not know any other language very well. Most of them do not know Latin any longer and they certainly do not know Greek, and therefore, looking at the historical development of a language is more difficult for them. Equally, they don't often have the same grammatical background as students in Spain have because grammar is not taught very much in English schools anymore, so they have no [basis] . . . in order to understand the history of language, so it is not just studying the history that they are looking at, they are trying to look at how to study language generally, so I do think they have certain disadvantages.

—*Going back to the History of the English Language, in which way can it be considered innovative?*

BLAKE: I think it will be innovative in the way that a lot of histories of the language have tended to be rather technical in the sense that they have shown that this sound has changed to this sound and this sound has changed to that sound, or this syntactic feature has been replaced by that syntactic feature. Now, because we have a much bigger book, or series, it is possible for us to try to put these changes within a historical and sociocultural context so that people will not just think of, for example, the Great Vowel Shift and certain vowels being changed into some other vowels. The whole question of why and how it happened and various stages at which it happened, there is more time in which this can be developed and so we hope it will sort of make

people more attuned to studying language as a cultural and historical phenomenon and not just a series of linguistic changes, as it were, in isolation. It is not innovative in the sense that other people have not looked at this, because clearly this has been looked at by individual scholars and things have been written about this or that, but it has not been put in a whole framework and I think it will alter the overall teaching of the English language or the history of the English language in the universities because it will tend to make people sort of.... pay more attention to this. Perhaps in some ways it may have gone too far in that way if you think of a History of the English Language like Baugh's that tends to be much more about attitudes to English rather than about sociology of English. It may be for example that we have tended to neglect too much attitudes towards English and the attitudes of people who are writing about the language as distinct from people who are using the language, and it may be that we have not quite attained that balance quite correctly, but that remains to be seen.

—*Would you say that this history is the voice of experience? I have that feeling.*

BLAKE: You could just as easily call it the voice of prejudice, I suppose, couldn't you? Because clearly you can only write a history in the way in which you want to write it. The fact that professor Hogg and others are interested in seeing the history of the language within the sociological context perhaps makes us want to produce a history in that sort of context; it reflects I think our views. No doubt, this will change views about what the history of the language should be about, and so it could be that in twenty years' time *The Cambridge History* will be regarded as old fashioned; but I think at the moment it is very much in the forefront of producing a new attitude towards the teaching of the language.

—*It is a fact that we have emphasized the study of the Old English and the Middle English language as the language in those periods is more difficult. But, what about early Modern English and late Modern English? The teaching of those periods has been more neglected. Do you think we should emphasize the teaching of those periods as well?*

BLAKE: Yes. I think the problem is that people who are interested in English are often medievalist and they have therefore studied Old and Middle English. Therefore there is a lot that has been written about Old and Middle English. People who study literature are often not interested in the language and therefore they have not studied, for example, the language of the 18th century. If you write about Dr Johnson or something of this sort you are often not very interested in the background; and the medievalists who are often

teaching the history of the language are often more interested in the medieval period and they encourage their students to do historical topics which are concerned with Old and Middle English, and so one does need to think about making people or encouraging students to take topics in Early Modern or later Modern English and this, I think, has not been done because people who study Modern English are often sociolinguists who are interested in the language synchronically as it were in the last twenty or thirty years. We are not very interested in 19th-century English or 18th-century English, so there is a big gap and certainly we hope that the Cambridge History will encourage people to fill that gap because there is a volume on early Modern English, and that will certainly cover the period up to about 1700. But the Modern English volume tends to be written by people who are perhaps more interested in twentieth century English than in 19th or 18th century English. So I do not think that we will necessarily give full coverage to those centuries as far as the history is concerned.

—Professor Algeo said in the Valencia Conference that British English exists because American English came into existence. He is American and he is proud of his language. You are English and I suppose you are proud of your language too. As Europeans we pay a lot of attention to English English and to its history. How much attention should we pay to the history of the American language? Are we not neglecting the history of the American language? or even the importance of the American Language? — as Europeans, I mean.

BLAKE: Well, I think that different people have different interests, and up to a point it may depend on how much time you have. But I think it is probably true to say that the American language has been neglected, but that is probably because the development of American English falls into the 18th and 19th centuries, which are almost equally neglected in British English. So it is not necessarily that American English has been neglected in favour of British English. It is perhaps because American English does not have an Old and Middle English variety other than the English variety and therefore people have not studied it as much. And I think the same would be true of Australian English or New Zealand English. There has been a lot of work on those languages as it were for the last twenty or thirty years. Not so much Australian English in the 18th or 19th centuries because there is such a strong influence of British English on these countries that the differences are not very noticeable quite so early, because with English officials, English newspapers, English books and everything else it is some times difficult to

see. But as we have a volume on North American English it could be said that we are giving full attention to North American English.

—*What do you think is the interest of studying the history of languages, say the history of English, now that people are more worried about more materialistic, chrematistic problems?*

BLAKE: Well, that is a long and difficult question to answer. I suppose it has to do with the whole question of culture and attitudes, doesn't it? If you are interested about knowing something about your country, your language and everything else, then you will think that language is as important as anything else, and there is an immense amount of interest on historical aspects of all kinds of English culture and the language is one of those and I do not think the material interest some people have is necessarily going to alter that in any case. The so-called material development is something that is as much a newspaper fiction as a reality.

—*What level of knowledge of the History of the English Language would you expect to be good for a foreign student?*

BLAKE: I would expect them to have read one of the standard text books and to know that sort of information that is contained in there. If they read Professor Fernández's book or one of the books written by English or American scholars, like Barbara Strang, that is not necessarily going to help them to speak English better but it will give them some indication about what lies behind English speech and the way in which people speak in England today.

—*What do you think about Barbara Strang's History of English?*

BLAKE: I think it is actually a very dense book and it is a very difficult book for students to read and get something out of it. I do not think it is actually a very good book for a university course. The students in our university do find it extremely difficult to read.

—*And what about Professor Mitchell's Guide to Old English?*

BLAKE: I think it is a very good book. It makes the subject much more alive for students and it gives them a wider range of information to deal with and I find it is quite a good book to teach.

—*Do you think it may be difficult for foreign students?*

BLAKE: No. Why should it be more difficult for foreign students than for British students? It is a very good book because it has texts and a glossary, so they do not need a dictionary. However not having a dictionary has a disadvantage because the glossary is obviously connected only to the texts that are being read, so they do not see the word as it might be used in other contexts because they will then just use this book.

Now obviously from a teaching point of view that is very good because the students have all the information that they need immediately. But they are not encouraged to look beyond the book, to go to dictionaries or other sources to supplement what they get from the book.

—*But perhaps that is enough for them.*

BLAKE: Oh, yes. I agree entirely. That is the book we use for our own students.

—*Really? It is the book I want to use for my students too. And do you know the one by Professor Burrow of Bristol?*

BLAKE: The Middle English one?

—*Yes. What do you think of it?*

BLAKE: I think that is very good too. It is not so detailed naturally. But I like it as well.

—*Do you also use it for your students?*

BLAKE: Well, we do not use that one. We use a variety of different books. We use the early Middle English book by Bennett and Smithers and then we use separate editions for Chaucer, Piers Plowman, Sir Gawain, etc. So we make the students buy individual editions of a variety of different texts. Our students complain that they have to buy too many books and it may well be that we have to come back to a book like Burrow's but we want to encourage the students to read all of Piers Plowman so we give them an edition of Piers Plowman; and we want them to read more Chaucer than is found in Burrow's book.

—*In your opinion, what is there left to be researched about the older periods of the language? Is there anything left?*

BLAKE: Of course there are thousands of things left, because we are only just beginning to have a dictionary of Middle English, that is not complete, and we are only just beginning to have the atlas of early Middle English as compared to the atlas of later Middle English. There are still an awful lot of books that need to be edited. We do not know how many of these texts may contain new words, new constructions that may alter our views about the language generally and as we develop new linguistic philosophies and attitudes so we have different ways of looking at things. I do not imagine for a moment there is ever going to be a shortage and you think about Ana Hornero's thesis on *Ancrene Wisse*. You might say everyone knows about *Ancrene Wisse* and has done it, but you can look at it in a different way and produce a different approach and produce different data or perhaps the same data which is being used to express a different point of view and I can foresee that it is going to be very easy to do this. And as we develop computer

technology, so it may be possible to put the various versions of *Ancrene Wisse* into computer and compare the language, vocabulary, syntax and morphology by using the computer. I do not think there is going to be a shortage for the foreseeable future of work to be done in the Old and Middle English period.

—*Are you in favour of using computers?*

BLAKE: Well, I think there is no reason why you should not use the technology available. I mean, it is a bit like saying you should not use printed books because they used to be manuscripts. There is no reason why you should not use printed books. I mean, computers is a different form of a printed book; in a way it gives you different sorts of information. We produced concordances, or used to produce concordances by hand, now we can produce concordances by computer. Why not exploit those sorts of possibilities when they exist?

—*I remember Chomsky said "Computers are good for linguistics; the problem is that linguists always ask computers the wrong question." Do you think that is true for historical linguistics as well?*

BLAKE: Well, I do not know, because I do not think they have actually been used enough so far, but I think always one has to be careful using computers. They do not provide you with answers; they provide you with data and they will answer the question you are asking. But they might not necessarily provide you with the right answer because you might not be asking the right question.