

¶ Brit Mæhlum: *Mellom Skylla og Kharybdis. Forklaringsbegrepet i historiske språkvitenskap*. Oslo: Novus forlag, 1999. Pp. 229. ISBN 82-7099-309-3

We know that languages change in different ways in the course of time, but we don't know why a given change takes place in a certain speech community but not in another. The changes can be described ('how'), but hardly be explained ('why'). One has tried, though. A wide variety of theories have been put forward both by professional linguists and by lay people which all purport to explain why a given change took place (or even "had to take place"). In her important essay *Between Scylla and Charybdis* Brit Mæhlum examines the ways in which change is explained in historical linguistics, and finds fault with most of them.

Part I of the essay contains a catalogue of the various kinds of explanations that hitherto have been given of changes in the history of a specific language and of language change in general. After a short discussion of the bizarre ideas of the German romanticists who saw language as the true expression of the 'Volksgeist', Mæhlum turns to one of the key concepts of historical linguistics, viz. the idea that language change is governed by sound laws, which like the laws of Nature admit no exception. But sound laws are no real laws of nature, M writes, they do not predict changes, they rather describe some regularities in the development of a given language, *post factum*. This criticism is in my opinion somewhat off the mark, as I don't think sound laws have ever been thought of as unconditional laws that apply to every single language, without exception. The idea behind a sound law is rather: *if* a given element or sequence of elements is changed in a given language community, then it will be changed in the whole lexicon of the language spoken by that particular community. The hypothesis that every sound law affects all the items that can be affected by it ('meet the structural description of the rule') is probably untenable, but it has to be borne in mind that reconstruction (and with it historical comparative linguistics) becomes impossible as soon as we give up the principle that sound

changes are regular most of the time. The rules (sound laws) do not explain the changes nor the regularity of the changes, they only relate newer to older forms.

More to the point is Mæhllum's criticism of substratum theories and other theories that try to relate major changes in the structure of a language to major changes (migrations, invasions, epidemics etc.) in the society that uses that language. The connection between social upheaval and changes in language structure has hitherto only been postulated, but never been attested in real life. Since the categories of grammar have little to do with the ways in which society is organized, one wonders indeed by what mysterious means wars or epidemics would be able to change the inner structure of a language.

In the next chapter the author vigorously attacks the idea that language has a will of its own, or rather an Aristotelian *psyche*, which causes it to develop in a predetermined way. The idea that language change is caused by a 'drift towards consistency, towards optimal structural harmony' comes in many different forms. Structuralists for instance often suggest that languages tend to avoid 'structural gaps'. If this were true, one wonders why new gaps are created, as soon as the old ones are "filled". Others claim that there is a principle of least effort that leads to simplifications, and hence to more efficiency, in the grammar of a given language, which of course would make life easier for its speakers, who thus are able to save a lot of mental and physical energy. But what does 'simplicity' mean in this case, what is 'a simple language'? Has any language already attained this state of blessing? What is the reason why a sound or sequence of sounds is 'simplified' in one area, but in an area next to it made 'more complex'? It is clear that only wild speculation can provide answers to these questions. The assumption that there is only a limited number of language types, and that languages tend to conform as much as possible to their type, is yet another, nowadays immensely popular, incarnation of the theory that languages themselves strive towards internal consistency. Consider e.g. the following case: SVO languages tend to have prepositions, SOV languages postpositions. Does the fact that most (but far from all) languages that have either pre- or postpositions conform to this pattern explain why a given

word order calls for the presence of a given class of function words? Mæhlum answers this question by quoting Faarlund (1990) with approval: “statistical correlations do not explain anything within their own domain, *in casu* word order; they are themselves facts to be explained.”

In Part II of the essay the findings of Part I are applied to the ways in which linguists have explained some major changes in the history of the Norwegian language, viz. the creation of short *o*, the loss of unaccented vowels in the period between 500 and 700 (‘synkopetida’), and the loss of inflections at the end of the Middle Ages.

There was no short /*o*/ in Primitive Germanic, since every short *o* had become short /*a*/. Later, new short *o*’s were created by *a*-umlaut of short *u*, e.g. *borna* < **burna*. By probably the majority of the linguists that have published their views on this matter the creation of this new short *o* is seen as a kind of self-healing on the part of the language: by filling the ‘structural gap’ created by the change of short *o* to *a* Germanic restored harmony in its short vowel system. Rejecting any theory that ascribes language a will of its own, Mæhlum wants to explain the appearance in writing of the products of *a*-umlaut (*e* < *i* and *o* < *u*) as caused by the structure of the runic writing system itself: the products of *a*-umlaut could be represented in runic writing by already existing symbols (the *e*- and *o*-runes), whereas this was not possible in the case of the products of other umlauts, such as *y* < *u*, *ø* < *o*, *æ* < *a* (by *i*-umlaut) or *ǣ* < *a* (by *u*-umlaut). Germanic may hence never have had a ‘harmonic’ short vowel system that contained exactly five vowels.

The dramatic changes in the phonological make-up of North Germanic in the period of, say, 500 to 700, are often thought to be connected with even more dramatic events in the lives of the people(s) that spoke the language: in Europe it was the time of the migrations, which according to some historians might have had some repercussions on the life of the Nordic peoples as well. Others think that bubonic plagues and other epidemics led to a disintegration of society, so that parents had too little time to converse with their children, who thus were unable to learn to speak properly. Leaving aside that there is no shred of evidence for the assumption that Scandinavia suffered from social unrest or high mortality in this period, we still wonder with Brit Mæhlum how

the alleged disasters could affect the phonological make-up of the language. Voodoo seems here as good an explanation as the theory of incomplete learning.

Mæhlum's discussion of the various theories that relate the changes in the grammar of Norwegian in the late Middle Ages (1375-1525) to the devastating effects the Black Death had in Norway, is in my opinion the finest part of the book. She makes it abundantly clear that the idea that outside forces brought down both the Norwegian state and the Old Norwegian language – which severely bruised found a refuge in the remote valleys of rural Norway – is a product of 19th century romantic nationalist thinking, which unfortunately still prevails in Norwegian linguistic circles. There was no sudden change in the language in the aftermath of the Black Death, the loss of inflections for instance was a process that had started much earlier (in Denmark already in the eleventh century), and that has not yet come to an end in some of the Norwegian and Swedish dialects. There is no evidence whatsoever that children could not learn the ins and outs of their mother tongue after the devastation caused by the Black Death, as recently was suggested again in a curious dissertation (Christer Johansson. 1997. *A View from Language – growth of language in individuals and populations*. Lund). How come the poor orphans did in fact learn all the other peculiarities of the various dialects (otherwise these would have disappeared from the dialects), but not the case system, or other inflections? I agree with Brit Mæhlum that it is high time historical linguistics freed itself from the kind of speculative reasoning that tries to relate changes in the structure of a language to (often undocumented, and hence probably made up) upheavals in the society that uses that language.

In Part III of her essay Mæhlum sketches the outlines of a new theory of linguistic change. Addressing the question what kind of object language is, she stresses what might be called the dual nature of language, or in the words of Henning Andersen (1989:8): “any language is the joint product of nurture and nature.” Here I disagree. What is ‘natural’ or ‘innate’ in language does not belong to language alone (pace Chomsky). Language as such, not only language change, is a ‘phenomenon of the third kind’ (Keller 1990), i.e. neither a natural object nor an

artefact intentionally created by Man. It is rather the unintended product of collective human action.

Since language is both human behaviour ('parole') and the result of human behaviour ('langue') the causes for language change have to be sought in the ways people interact with one another in a given speech community or group. New ways of speaking (innovations at the level of the individual) are, like any other form of behaviour, either ignored, rejected or accepted as norms for future behaviour by that community. By looking at linguistic change in this way Mæhlum is able to explain how an innovation can spread from one individual to another in a given group, and become the new norm for all members of the group (become part of the 'langue').

In this last part of her fascinating essay the author fails to make a clear distinction between a theory of language change in general and explaining particular changes in a given language. In my opinion it should be possible to come up with a general theory of language change that does not differ too much from theories of change in other domains, e.g. in biology or sociology. After reading Brit Mæhlum's book, however, it will be clear that such a theory will never be able to predict or to explain any specific change in any language. But this is exactly what was to be expected: evolution theory does not predict specific changes either.

References

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