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**Tim William Machan. What is English? And Why Should We Care?
Reviews**

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Reviews

Tim William Machan. *What is English? And Why Should We Care?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, viii + 404 pp., £ 20.00.

With the monograph *What is English?* – subtitled *And Why Should We Care?* – Tim William Machan has presented a difficult book. The dust jacket already prepares the prospective reader by stating that “Finding an account that fits the constantly changing varieties of English is, Tim Machan finds, anything but simple”. And this text continues: “But he [i.e. Machan] rises to the challenge, grappling with its elusive essence through episodes in its history.” It is the combination of a tremendous amount of information and the ‘episodic’ form of this monograph that makes this book quite challenging.

The book is structured in four “Parts”. Part One, “The Consequences of Definition” (3–31) unfolds a wide range of aspects pertinent to the overall question of the main title. Above all it introduces and comments on the Heraclitian ‘river’ metaphor as an apt image for conceptualizing the history of ‘a’ language. Moreover this chapter offers two heuristic distinctions for the following analyses: *grammar* vs. *pragmatics* and *history* vs. *heritage*. The first works as the methodical differentiation between Part Two, “English by the Books” (35–131), in which Machan treats historical aspects roughly subsumable under the heading ‘grammar’, and Part Three, “English in Action” (135–305), which contains six ‘pragmatic’ subchapters. In contrast, the second distinction – *history* (= the ‘what’) vs. *heritage* (= the ‘why’) – serves as an interpretative dichotomy reemerging at various places in the book.

Without taking explicit recourse to the commonplace refutation of historical construction, Machan takes the reader of Part Two (“English by the Books”) through what seems a quite demanding *tour de force*. Chapter 2, “Words in the Shape of English” (35–56), outlines the varying historical ways and means of dictionary writing, while chapter 3, “When Words Die” (57–84), conjures up – among other things – historical scenarios of linguistic contact that might even lead to “Lexicide” (74–84). To the reader familiar with the historical *whats* of English lexis these chapters do not really offer many surprises, including the results of ‘language policing’ (78). Yet in reading chapters 2 and 3 I increasingly wondered how anybody not familiar with this host of ‘facts’ up front would get any closer to answering the question “What is English?”. In the following chapter 4 “Space and Time” (85–108), in which he deals with “change and variation” (90), Machan suggests the nice simile of the historical construction of English – and, in fact, of any other language – as a “connect-the-dots” procedure (88). Connecting the ‘factual’ dots is also what the reader of these chapters will

attempt. However, I am afraid that for “everyone interested in English” (i.e. the book’s potential audience named on the dust-jacket) this will result in a tangle.

Part One culminates in chapter 5, “The Genius of our Tongue” (109–131), which is announced to discuss “descriptions of the grammar of English” (90). As a matter of fact, this chapter contains Machan’s two core ideas, namely the shaping of a concept of a standard manifesting itself in linguistic codification that boomed in the 16th to 18th centuries and, closely linked to this, the “paradigm of identity-through-language” (120). Codification, Machan rightly observes, “arranges varieties of English along a continuum of better and worse usage, and binds [...] that continuum to issues of morality, geography, and social identity, with Standard English at the top and regional dialects at the bottom” (ibid.). And again: “[...] as the codification of Standard English expanded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it became possible, even necessary, for speakers to slot varieties into a qualitative hierarchy” (ibid.). Indeed, that’s exactly what those grammars were written for, yet the qualitative judgement had a very practical side to it, namely concrete guidance in the use of English in particular in writing, a ‘fact’ Machan addresses at no point in this chapter. Only in the book’s concluding chapter 12, “Defining Moments” (309–330), does he implicitly touch upon this by remarking that “[...] what codification did was not so much revolutionize the repertoire as transfer to English the qualities and practices that had sustained Latin’s privileged status in the Middle Ages” (314). In terms of ‘historical facts’ Machan relates here to the increasing use of English for discourse traditions previously harbored by Latin, or rather to the ideological upholstering of this ‘fact’. It is hard to understand why Machan defers the observation that those grammars accompanied – and served – the new diglossia until the end of the book.

Again: codification and its link to “identity-through-language” as a template for all kinds of ‘othering’ figures as *the* critical tenor of the book. By the end of Part Two Machan’s critical heuristic frame is set – at least for those who are able to see the solid lines that might emerge from the huge amount of argumentative strands. My problem with Part Two is that – more often than not – Machan here fuses reference to ‘historical facts’ with the ideological dismantling of their accompanying rhetoric. Moreover, as all of this should bring us towards an answer to the question “What is English?”, the plethora of information-cum-interpretation appears to be an ‘English specificity’. Thus, if I am not completely mistaken, Machan nowhere discusses a possible link between identity and language outside his own heuristic frame. However, phenomena like ‘in-group’ language would be hardly conceivable unless there was such a primordial tie between language and identity which might be instrumentalized for all kinds of ideological purposes such as nationalism and xenophobia. Yet how does a culture

get from such a fundamental social connection between identity and language to making the ‘correct’ use of language a matter of morality? In Germany for instance, there is a much greater tolerance towards geography-based linguistic variation, and the default explanation for this is the historically deeply rooted cultural decentralization. Does this geographical tolerance also account for the fact that, compared to Britain, sociolinguistic differentiation in Germany is much more moderate? I am not saying that Machan should have taken a comparative stance, yet to somebody just “interested in English” it could be profitable to get some help in sorting out what is and what isn’t exclusively ‘English’ or ‘Anglo-phone’. – In sum, if Part Two – the ‘grammar’ part with a lot of things other than ‘grammar’ in it – is conceived to provide a heuristic basis for the ‘pragmatic’ Part Three, it does so in a quite idiosyncratic way.

The expository stance and pace of Part Three, “English in Action”, differ dramatically from those of Part Two. The first chapter (ch. 6) is headed “English for the English” (135–153) and starts out with a ‘narrative relief’, as it were, by sketching the ‘history of English’ until 1500 along the lines of the notion *English*. However, this relief is instantly suspended in chapter 7, “Beyond Britain” (154–182). Historically we are taken into the time of early American colonization and the time of incipient codification (183). One topic here is the description of indigenous American languages as cacophonous and harsh (159), and the description of the language of the ‘natives’ – with the more or less explicit aim to debase these languages (cf. 192) – is resumed in chapter 8, “English in the South Seas” (183–211). Machan also chooses chapter 8 to explain the “diglossia model” (209f.) in general terms and to identify the ‘low varieties’ as a historical sequence of “regional varieties” – “national Englishes” – “post-colonial [Englishes]” (209).

With the subsequent chapters 9 “English in the Classroom, I: American Indian Boarding Schools” (212–239) and 10 “English in the Classroom, II: Industrial English” (240–268), Machan narrows his focus on North America. In chapter 9 he presents the ways in which English was taught to native Americans in special boarding schools and combines this with remarks about Webster’s concept of the language of the new nation. Chapter 10 carries us into the early 20th century and presents us with extensive and well-documented numbers and information on the provenance of immigrants. While it is certainly interesting to learn that Henry Ford introduced language classes, in fact a whole Educational Department, for his workers – with the very practical aim to prevent work-accidents –, Machan only mentions as a side remark the well-known American “three-generation path” (263). The latter works for immigrants “with or without educational programs or legal mandates”, for the simple reason that “we are social creatures with innate linguistic capacities who by nature have the urge and ability to acquire the means to speak with those around us” (ibid.). True enough,

but again one might wonder whether the detailed observations about Ford's educational program (graduation ceremonies included) contributes much to this insight.

With chapter 11, "The English-speaking Peoples" (269–305), a concept proffered by Winston Churchill, Machan takes his readers to the period of World War II. The presentational procedure is largely the same as in the preceding chapters and here culminates in the statement: "Given a historical background of British antipathy to American speech, followed by the American fostering of its English as a nation-defining feature, it's difficult to see how shared language ever could attain the heritage and significance in the United States that Churchill understood it to have" (296f.). Bad luck for the eminent British politician? And at the end of this chapter Machan widens his scope once more to take also those speakers into account who are not 'English-speaking' in the Churchillian sense. In case some of his readers have lost sight of Machan's basic claim, he repeats here that "all definitions of English, not just Churchill's, are identity-driven" (305). That large community – "perhaps 1.5 billion people" – using today "some form" of English shares "little conceptual common ground with English as it was defined during the War". However, says Machan: "Pragmatically, in the fact that they define the language discursively as well as grammatically, and link a social heritage to their definitions, they share everything" (ibid.).

In the concluding Part Four, "Beyond English" (309–330), Machan resumes his tactics of interweaving a series of superficially unconnected historical observations with general conclusions. Having taken us in some 170 pages from the early American colonies to Hawaii and from Henry Ford's classrooms for newly immigrated workers to the radio stations that aired the 'Axis' Anglophone propaganda programs of a female known as Tokyo Rose, Machan dashes back and forth in time and space to tie up his episodic observations with the insight that "any definition of English depends significantly, even primarily, on non-structural criteria rooted in specific arenas of use" (315). Obviously Machan does not want to tell us anything new, but is simply determined to make us assume an innovative perspective. As a consequence he takes no pains to *develop* an argument – his book is the argument. To the language historians Part Three is hard to take because while reading through these chapters one cannot help feeling to be led astray. For amateurs of English these chapters may offer interesting glimpses into some unknown fields of socio-political history loosely related in various ways to language, so that – as a bottom line – they will probably share the professionals' sentiments.

Tim Machan's inclination to go against the grain has accelerated in the last five years or so. After this book one may well wonder whom he expects further to accompany him in this effort. I hesitate that his peers will do so in flocks and I

should think that at least with the present book he loses those just “interested in English” at the latest at the end of Part One. What a pity.

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