

Titles that don't quite fit

Sidney Greenbaum (ed.), *The English Language Today*, Pergamon Press (Oxford), 1985, pp.xviii + 345. £12.50, \$17.50.

Randolph Quirk & H.G. Widdowson (eds.), *English in the World*, Cambridge University Press, in association with the British Council, 1985, pp.xi + 275. £12.50 HB, £5.95 PB.

Review by David Crystal

Soon after the invention of printing, Albrecht Dürer drew a sequence of pictures ironically commenting on the mass production of printed matter. On the left we see wordsmiths frantically churning out documents; in the centre we see them being quickly printed, and on the right we see them being promptly burned as waste. There has been such a flood of book-length publications on the English language in recent months that such naughty thoughts too readily come to mind. The books under review keep such thoughts at bay – well, nearly.

I have no qualms about the first, for it is a first. Not that you'd guess from the *déjà vu* title, *The English Language Today*. In fact, the book isn't a general account of the language at all, but a fascinating dossier of information about the linguistic feelings and opinions of those who speak and write it. Us, in other words. It should have been called something like *English Language Attitudes*.

Sidney Greenbaum has done a good job, putting together 31 papers, all but one specially written for the book, which document popular and scholarly attitudes towards changing uses and usages. He gives us a general introduction, then five papers on the attitudes to the language in earlier periods, 14 on attitudes and usage in three mother-tongue countries (USA, Britain and Canada), five on the same topic in parts of the world where English is not a mother-tongue, and a set of seven 'personal and professional reactions' from such worlds as creative writing, literary criticism, and language education. There are references accompanying each chapter, and there is a short index.

The book was the result of a meeting of a Commission on the English Language of the American National Council of Teachers of English of the USA (you must forgive that, but the chance to do a *6-of* phrase doesn't come up very often), and it has a marked bias towards US opinions and practices. Most of the contributors are American. A few other views are represented, but for this topic there

should have been more. For instance, we get an interesting chapter on the plain English movement in the USA; but no reference to the British equivalent or to similar movements in other countries. We get a lot on American school practice, but little on the corresponding issues in Britain and elsewhere. Also, I felt we could have done with more, far more, on the crucial period in attitude development: the 18th and 19th centuries. This is dealt with in one chapter, the same size as all the others. But it is during this period that all the fuss really started, and it deserves a much more detailed documentation and analysis.

Still, the book provides an admirable collection of material – a mine of illustrations about usage and attitudes, from dictionaries, grammars, the press, usage gurus, and much more. All the main US views are represented and analysed. There are some excellent summaries of contemporary academic thinking on the matter, which is trying to understand the *reasons* for our deeply held attitudes to language.

The British get their own back in the second volume under review, which is the proceedings of an international conference on progress in English studies, held in London in 1984 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of The British Council. Over 70 scholars from all over the world gathered to discuss several major themes: the English language in a global context; English literature in a global context; information and educational technology; teacher preparation; learner-centred methodology; literature teaching; and English for specific purposes. Key issues are identified in a final section. It is one of the most wide-ranging and profound attempts to relate the many factors and techniques involved in the English-teaching world that I have ever read. Some of the world's top English language scholars were at the conference. The ideas are weighty, the argumentation impressive.

I was able to attend part of this conference, and recall some lively and enthusiastic discussion. This doesn't come across in the book, which is – well, the only word I can think of – terribly dry. I think the lack of examples has something to do with it. John Sinclair, in an acute summary, puts his finger on it, when he points out that the conference was not so much about the English language, but about the ways and means of teaching it. 'It is as if we now take for granted the facts of the language,' he complains (p.250), and I share his complaint, for it is certainly difficult to see the language through the widely differing metalanguages of the various contributors. Once again, we have a mistitled book. It is not *English in the world* at all. The subtitle is more accurate (albeit less elegant): *teaching and learning the language and literatures*. And, I can't deny it, as I worked my way through, I fell prey to Dürer's naughty thoughts again. □