The English Language as Bildungsroman Protagonist

Abstract

In this paper I explore how textbooks of the history of the English language share important structural and narrative features of the Bildungsroman (novel of development) genre, focusing particularly on Baugh & Cable's (2013) standard and widely-used text. My claim is that it is not inappropriate to describe aspects of this volume in terms of a Bildungsroman in which English itself is anthropomorphized as the protagonist. Literary genres are fluid and prototypical in structure, so rather than pursuing an essentializing strategy that ties Bildungsroman status to a handful of necessary and sufficient properties I take a broader view: my approach draws on Iversen's (2009) Bildungsroman Index, a catalogue of typical features of the genre that enables the analyst to use observable properties of the narrative to quantify the extent to which a given text approaches the prototypical Bildungsroman. The paper closes with consideration of the motives that lead textbook authors to narrate the history of English as a Bildungsroman, and of the porous boundaries between fiction and narrative historiography.

Keywords

History of English; Bildungsroman; historiography

1. Introduction

There is nothing new about the observation that writers have, on occasion, anthropomorphized English and other languages. This is the central conceit of Bragg's (2004) *The Adventure of English: The Biography of a Language*, and it is not alone: books with Biography of a Language in the title have been published on at least Spanish (Obediente Sosa 1994), German (Sanders 2012), Dutch (Willemyns 2013), and Yiddish (Shandler 2020). The

anthropomorphizing impulse also makes itself felt in the aphorism, attributed to James Nicoll on Usenet in 1990,[1] that "on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary."

It is perhaps unnecessary to clarify, as does an irate reviewer of Bragg's book on Goodreads,[2] that English is not, in fact, a human being; indeed, I would venture to suggest that Melvyn Bragg was aware of this state of affairs when composing his book. To anthropomorphize English is to avail oneself, consciously or unconsciously, of a metaphor. The interesting questions that then arise are, first, how widespread this metaphor is as a governing principle in conceptualizing and writing about English, and secondly, why this metaphor is as widespread as it is: what are the uses to which the myth of English as a person are put?

The rest of this paper is devoted to answering these two questions. Sections 2 and 3 make the case that histories of English – even those without any overt biographical conceit – in fact anthropomorphize English as a matter of course, and that they do so in a manner that mirrors one particular literary genre: the Bildungsroman, or novel of development. To make this case, I deploy an instrument – the Bildungsroman Index of Iversen (2009) – designed to quantify Bildungsromanitas empirically, along with a simple conceptual metaphor. No great leaps of logic and no particularly fanciful interpretations are needed for this demonstration, which is found in section 3. Section 4 of the paper then turns to the why-question, and advances some thoughts on the link between fiction and narrative historiography of language, following White (1980).

Before proceeding, a note is in order on the use of the term "myth". Popular writing on linguistics presents myths as simply falsehoods to be busted: see Bauer & Trudgill's (1998) collection of *Language Myths*, or Evans's (2014) *The Language Myth*. In this usage, the myth – a term with strong pejorative connotations – is implicitly understood in paradigmatic

opposition to the truth, as fiction stands in paradigmatic opposition to facts. When writing for a general audience, this strategy has much to recommend it. But things are not so simple, epistemologically, as this, and there are many things in our cognitive world other than truths and falsehoods. Theories, for instance, are neither of the above, and the same is true of historical narratives.[3] The contingent, constructed nature of much of what we call historiography is especially clear when working on reconstructed languages – see Walkden (2014:1–6) – but there is fundamentally little if any difference between reconstruction and the rest of historical linguistics in this regard (Honeybone 2011, 2022). Given this state of affairs, a broader conception of the myth and its function is in order. I cite Roger Lass (1997:4–5) in detail here because his discussion of mythmaking is particularly lucid:

> "I use the word *myth* here in a non-pejorative, or at least neutral, way … a myth in the widest sense is a story or image that structures some epistemic field (knowledge, thought, belief) in a particular culture. ... [G]iven an agreed framework, mythical 'truth' is decidable. But the function of the myth, as a structuring device giving some piece of empirical or conceptual chaos an architecture, filling a void, is in principle independent of its truth value. Its utility derives from its perceived truth or explanatory or gap-filling efficacy." (Lass 1997:4–5; emphasis original)

This broader conception of myth does not entail a dissociation from reality, or that there is no distinction to be drawn between historiography and fiction:[4] as Lass notes (1997:5), a "(non-religious) mythology ... has to meet criteria of empirical responsibility and rationality not binding on mythologies serving different purposes." The myth investigated in this chapter – English as a person – is one whose falsehood is clear to anyone who has thought about the

issue for more than two seconds. This makes the questions of the myth's prevalence (section 3) and function (section 4) all the more intriguing.

2. The history of English as Bildungsroman: groundwork

2.1. The Bildungsroman

To claim that a history of English shares properties with the Bildungsroman, it is first necessary to establish the sense and reference of the latter term. This, however, is the first stumbling block we face: both intensionally and extensionally the definition of the Bildungsroman has been a matter of some dispute (see, e.g., Gohlman 1990:228). As regards the extension of the set of Bildungsromane, there is some agreement. Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* ("History of Agathon"; 1766-1767) is widely viewed as the earliest exemplar of the genre (Gohlman 1990:13-14; Swales 1991:49), and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* ("Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship"; 1795-1796) is almost indisputably a Bildungsroman too.[4] Although the earliest works were written in Germany, if examples from further afield are admissible, then Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) and Charles Dickens's David Copperfield (1850) and Great Expectations (1861) might be named as British Bildungsromane, and Stendhal's (1830) *Le rouge et le noir* ("The Red and the Black") as a French one.

What do these novels have in common? Intensionally, the Bildungsroman – also known as novel of development or novel of formation – can be described as "a novel of someone's growth from childhood to maturity" (Lynch 1999). Very many novels feature a protagonist who ages over the course of the novel; hence, to capture the essence of a Bildungsroman proper, "growth" must be understood in some deeper sense than simply biological maturation. For Bakhtin (1996 [1936–1938]:20), a true Bildungsroman is characterized by "the aspect of man's [sic] essential *becoming*" (emphasis original). In a more recent

theorizing of the genre, Moretti (2000:15) suggests that what sets the Bildungsroman apart from other adjacent novel-types is the conflict – and, in most cases, ultimately the compromise – between self-determination and socialization.

It should be no surprise that the Bildungsroman as a literary genre is fluid and prototype-based rather than an Aristotelian category. Hence, rather than looking for necessary and sufficient conditions, any attempt to assess the Bildungsromanitas of a text needs some measure of how close it is to canonical exemplars of the genre. This is where the Bildungsroman Index (BRI) of Iversen (2009) comes in. In Iversen's own words, the catalogue of features she develops is "an attempt not so much to define the bildungsroman as to pinpoint and describe typical features of novels that are generally recognized as bildungsromans" (2009:51).

In the BRI, novels are assessed as to whether they possess or lack ninety-six features that Iversen judges to be more or less typical of the genre. Each feature is assigned between one and three points, according to how central it is, in Iversen's view: the most central features are worth three points. A given text can score between zero and 148 points in total. Thus, rather than providing a hard cutoff for Bildungsroman status, the BRI makes it possible to arrange novels along a continuum of prototypicality. A handful of the novels mentioned above – David Copperfield (144), Wilhelm Meister (139), Jane Eyre (139), and Great Expectations (137) – score almost full points. John Fowles's The Magus, published in 1965, scores 106 points, and hence is a borderline case; by contrast, J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (published 1951) and Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (published 1884–5) score fifty-seven and fifty-three points respectively, which shows – according to Iversen – that, although they are coming-of-age narratives and thus share some properties with the Bildungsroman, they do not belong to the Bildungsroman genre as such (2009:80).

The features are arranged into categories. One of these – secondary characters and their functions – is given in Table 1.[6]

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Feature 21, for instance, receives three points, as it is judged to be an important feature of the genre. It "emphasizes that these heroes do not pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. If a novel is to score here, the main character should develop in necessary interaction with other people rather than through solitary meditation" (Iversen 2009:58). Another feature worth the full three points is Feature 69, the turning point, or reversal. This refers to a dramatic change for the worse in the protagonist's fortunes. Iversen (2009:62) notes that "In the long run, the change will probably turn out to have been beneficial, but at first it is experienced as a crushing of dreams and ideals."

For my purposes the BRI is an ideal instrument. The point of using it is not to attain objectivity, as this is clearly a futile goal: the very construction of the index, as well as the decision to (for instance) assign three points to one feature and two to another, involves making decisions that can never be anything other than subjective, and diagnosing the features themselves involves a substantial amount of subjectivity too. Yet, by breaking the classification problem down into a series of smaller decisions, the BRI makes it clearer what is at stake and how it can be identified. Whether or not a given protagonist gets married, for instance, is a much easier question to answer on the basis of the source material than the overarching question of Bildungsromanitas.

2.2. Source material

Many texts on the history of English could be analysed in this way, but I have chosen to focus on Baugh & Cable (2013; henceforth B&C). This is by virtue of its ubiquity: it is the workhorse of History of English classrooms worldwide. The 2013 edition used here is the book's sixth, a reworking (one of several) by Thomas Cable of a volume originally written by Albert C. Baugh and published in 1935. This 2013 edition preserves the narrative structure of the original, and the introductory material already provides clues that approaching it from the perspective of anthropomorphizing English is likely to be fruitful:

> "English, like all other languages, is subject to that constant growth and decay that characterize all forms of life. It is a convenient figure of speech to speak of languages as living or dead. Although we rarely think of language as something that possesses life apart from the people who speak it, as we might think of plants or animals, we can observe in speech something like the process of change that characterizes the life of living things." (B&C 2013:2)

Here, the comparison between languages and living beings is drawn explicitly; it is not far from here to languages as people. On the same page they write that "The English language of today reflects many centuries of development". Development is a word commonly associated with the Bildungsroman tradition (see, e.g., Hill 2024 and references cited there). It can be understood as simply a synonym for change, but – to me at least – that is not the word's most natural reading. Like "maturation" or, in colloquial usage, "evolution" (as it applies to Pokémon, for instance), while it does not express a pure value judgement, it does imply that the change proceeds (if not monotonically) towards a more complete end state. At the very least, development as a process is not commutative in the mathematical sense: that is, it is not reversible. If *a* develops into *b*, then it is odd to speak of *b* developing

into *a* at a later time. Thus, development in language history, perhaps, is Bakhtin's "becoming".

2.3. Methods and metaphors

If it is to be a useful exercise, reading the history of English as a Bildungsroman requires rules. I will place a simple restriction on interpretation: only the following conceptual metaphor (in the sense of Lakoff & Johnson 1980) is applicable.

LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE

By this token, languages may have whatever people have by virtue of being people, and do what people do by virtue of being people, but nothing else. To illustrate, consider the fact that, in a prototypical Bildungsroman of the German tradition, inheritance of wealth from a previous generation often plays a role (Minden 1997). Iversen (2009) devotes two features to this in the BRI: feature 47 "Gets inheritance at the end" and feature 48 "Loses prospective inheritance at the end", each of which is worth a maximum of two points (obviously mutually exclusive). Wilhelm Meister inherits, indirectly, his grandfather's art collection, while David Copperfield loses out on the inheritance he would otherwise have received because of Aunt Betsey's financial troubles. It is a commonplace in historical linguistics to talk of languages inheriting words and structures: for instance, B&C (2013:66) describe present-day English compounding as "an inheritance of the Old English tradition". But the applicability of LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor is limited. For one thing, what humans may inherit is money and physical property, and this is the sense in which Minden and Iversen use the term. Strictly speaking, to treat English's inheritance of West Germanic lexical items as the same as

Wilhelm's inheritance of his grandfather's art collection requires an additional conceptual metaphor, WORDS ARE MONEY (or similar). While not unreasonable – a historian of English may recall Beowulf's prodigious *wordhord* – this would be an ad hoc addition to the basic rules of the game, and hence is inadmissible.

Similarly, a language is not male by virtue of being a person, and is not female by virtue of being a person, so without further specification the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor does not allow us to make inferences about the sex or gender of a language. Ruling out the use of additional metaphors helps to present the exercise of reading B&C as a Bildungsroman from becoming too fanciful.

3. The English language as Bildungsroman protagonist in B&C: analysis

The full quantitative analysis of B&C according to the BRI can be found in the Appendix. In this section I discuss and justify decisions taken for a selection of features of interest.

3.1. Generic signals and narrative perspective

A minor, but still potentially telling, category of features is Iversen's "generic signals" (a term she adopts from Fowler 2002): formal features that cluster at the start of a work and guide the reader in adopting the appropriate mindset. One such feature (number 78) is that the book title includes the name of the protagonist, as in the cases of Agathon, David Copperfield, Jane Eyre or Wilhelm Meister. Another (79) is that the book title includes "years", "life", "adventures" or "history", as in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* ("years"), or David Copperfield, the full original title of which is "The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery".

B&C bears the title "A history of the English language", and thus straightforwardly qualifies for both features, since the English language is the protagonist.

A further typical feature of the Bildungsroman (81) is that it is indicated from very early on that we are dealing with a life story. The extensive discussion of the life of languages, found in the preface of B&C (2013:2), provided in section 2.2 above, already bears this out. Thus B&C scores the maximum one point on three of the four features in this section of the BRI.

Narrative perspective and mode is another section of the BRI. Here, too, B&C scores well (eight of fifteen possible points). For instance, according to feature 3, the narrative in a Bildungsroman is typically retrospective, and presented either in the first person (as in *Wilhelm Meister*) or by means of a third-person omniscient narrator (as in Jane Eyre, David Copperfield and Great Expectations). B&C's history of English is written in the past tense almost throughout, and – like the British Bildungsroman tradition – adopts an omniscient third person narrative voice. Moreover, feature 7 of the BRI emphasizes that the work has a high degree of verisimilitude: that is, it is set in the real world, or at least a world with a basic metaphysical and causal structure identical to our own, unlike, for instance, the medieval romance, or works of fantasy or science fiction. In this respect, B&C is more Bildungsroman-like than any Bildungsroman, aiming to narrate the history of English *wie es eigentlich gewesen* ("as it actually happened"), and hence receives the full two points for feature 7.

For other features, however, we do not observe what the metaphor would predict in the context of a Bildungsroman. In particular, interiority – access to the protagonist's cognitive state – is systematically absent from B&C's portrayal of English; that is, we never really see the events of the history of English from the perspective of English itself as protagonist. As unsurprising as this may be on the basis of common sense, given the centrality of interiority and of the psychological to the Bildungsroman in general (Bakhtin 1996; Moretti 2000: 4-5),

its absence in B&C is notable, and so B&C scores zero of three points on feature 1 – "focalization shifts between narrator and protagonist" – and zero of two points on feature 2, "access to protagonist's consciousness".

3.2. The protagonist: dynamics and development

By the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor, the English language is, as noted, the protagonist of B&C. Many of the features of the BRI are in effect features of the protagonist, either in terms of their characterization (section 2 of the BRI), the topical story elements that affect the protagonist (section 4), or aspects of the subject matter involving the protagonist (in section 9). Feature 10 states that the protagonist of a Bildungsroman is dynamic, and changes during the course of the work. This is a property of the protagonists of virtually all contemporary fiction; however, as Iversen (2009:137-138) notes, it is by no means a trivial property of the Bildungsroman genre, since it sets apart late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing from the more "ready-made and unchanging" (Bakhtin 1996: 21) protagonists of earlier narratives (e.g., those of antiquity). For B&C, though, like the Bildungsroman protagonist, English is inherently dynamic: "language as long as it lives and is in actual use is in a constant state of change" (B&C 2013:18).

Although, as the previous subsection made clear, we do not experience English as a thinking or feeling agent in B&C, there are nevertheless aspects of development in the work. Feature 10 of the BRI, worth three points, is the psychological and moral development of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. Here, B&C draw upon the metaphor abundantly. For instance, the youthful inexperience of English pre-standardization is foregrounded:

> "Beside the classical languages, which seemingly had attained perfection, the vulgar tongues seemed immature, unpolished, and limited in resource." (B&C 2013:204)

The language of moral and social inadequacy is striking here, and becomes all the more striking a few pages later:

> "[T]he deficiencies of English were … revealed. English was undoubtedly inadequate, as compared with the classical languages, to express the thought that those languages embodied and that in England was now becoming part of a rapidly expanding civilization." (B&C 2013:216)

Indeed, the whole discussion of standardization in B&C (chapter 8) is framed in terms of problems for the youthful English language to solve via interaction with its environment and its contemporaries: "the cosmopolitan tendency, the spirit of exploration and adventure, and the interest in the New World that was being opened up … contributed along with the more intellectual forms of activity to the enrichment of the English language" (2013:229). This positive, organic, agentive attitude to standardization could not contrast more strikingly with the stance taken by the great theorist of linguistic standardization, Einar Haugen, for whom standardization is something done *to* a linguistic variety by nation-planners, and for reasons of political expediency rather than functional inadequacy (1966:927-930).

3.3. A turning point: the Norman Conquest

An important feature of the Bildungsroman genre is the reversal, or turning point, in which something goes seriously wrong, and the protagonist experiences a significant setback. In the case of Wilhelm Meister, one such turning point is the realization that his theatrical aspirations were a mistake. For Jane Eyre, the discovery that Rochester is a married man constitutes a dramatic setback. The story of David Copperfield features several setbacks, one

such being the financial ruin of Aunt Betsey and the consequent loss of his inheritance. Iversen (2009:62) assigns this feature (69) the maximum three points, and clarifies that "[i]n the long run, the change will probably turn out to have been beneficial, but at first it is experienced as a crushing of dreams and ideals." Ultimately the setback contributes positively to the protagonist's development.

What could constitute a turning point in the history of English? Perhaps the strongest candidate in B&C's portrayal is the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the subsequent years. B&C devote an entire chapter – chapter 5 "The Norman Conquest and the Subjection of English" – to these dramatic happenings, which they describe as "an event … that had a greater effect on the English language than any other in the course of its history" (2013:108), triggering "changes more extensive and fundamental than those that have taken place at any time before or since" (2013:158). As a consequence of the social reversal that followed the Conquest, "English was now an uncultivated tongue, the language of a socially inferior class" (2013:117). The events clearly drastically change the course of English's life: B&C suggest that had the Conquest not occurred, English "would probably have pursued much the same course as the other Germanic languages", its family (2013:108).

Like any good turning point, the setback occasioned by the Conquest was only temporary. Over the following centuries "the sting of defeat and the hardships incident to so great a political and social disturbance were gradually forgotten" (2013:119). Chapter 6 – "The Reestablishment of English, 1200-1500" – deals with this subsequent period, in which "English made steady advances" (2013:135), and "had risen in the social scale" (2013:137), recovering its former prestige. In general, the lexical borrowing that English undergoes as a consequence of contact with French is discussed in positive terms, but also in terms of English owing a debt to French (e.g., 2013:172-173).

3.4. Secondary characters: languages in contact with English

Despite the protagonist's unquestioned centrality, no Bildungsroman involves only a single character: all involve interaction with others. Our LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor allows us to view other languages as secondary characters in the life story of English, and we have seen an example of the role of one such character – French – in the previous subsection. Iversen (2009) views the role of other characters in making the protagonist change and grow (feature 21) as essential, once again assigning it the maximum three points. B&C very explicitly emphasize this aspect of the history of English when they state that contact with a variety of languages has "caused [English] to change and become enriched" (2013:2). French borrowings are one obvious example, but there are many more. These other characters are, of course, more important in their relationship to the protagonist than in their own right (feature 22; two points): B&C mention that French in England also borrowed words from English, but add that "[w]e are naturally less interested in them here, because they concern rather the history of the Anglo-Norman language" (2013:168). Iversen (2009) devotes two whole categories of features to secondary characters in the BRI.[7]

These secondary characters, or other languages, occupy a variety of social statuses. The upper-class character of French is repeatedly mentioned by B&C, e.g., when they state that it "remained the language of ordinary intercourse among the upper classes" in the centuries immediately following the Conquest (2013:114). At the other end of the social scale are the Celtic languages, described as representing "a submerged culture" (2013:77). Norse, meanwhile, is discussed as approximately equal in status to English. Social class is a central concern of the Bildungsroman too (Iversen 2009:100), such that the typical Bildungsroman contains at least one important character from lower, middle, and higher social classes (feature 28; three points).

These characters also assume a variety of roles vis-à-vis the protagonist. One important role is that of the educator (feature 23; three points), a character providing advice and mentorship to the protagonist, such as Lothario in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, who is both mentor and companion, or Dr. Strong and Aunt Betsey in David Copperfield. In B&C, this role is plausibly filled by Latin, an older "language of a highly regarded civilization, one from which the Anglo-Saxons wanted to learn" (2013:77).

A role not singled out in the BRI is that of business partner. In Great Expectations, Pip travels abroad to go into business in Egypt with Herbert; in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Wilhelm ends up partnering with his old friend Werner. In light of the clear role played by business, and business partners, in the Bildungsroman, the following paragraph from B&C – drawing on a lively economic metaphor of its own – is telling:

> "[W]hat we have in the influence of the Norman Conquest is a merging of the resources of two languages, a merger in which thousands of words in common use in each language become partners in a reorganized concern. English retains a controlling interest, but French as a large minority stockholder supplements and rounds out the major organization in almost every department." (B&C 2013:174)

I close this subsection with perhaps the most substantial stretching of the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor thus far. Feature 25 of the BRI (three points) is that a lover is important in their relationship to the protagonist. B&C of course do not go as far as to state as much explicitly; that would be absurd. Still, the wording they use in their discussion of Anglo-Norse relations is highly suggestive: "in the Scandinavian influence on the English language we have to do with the intimate mingling of two tongues" (2013:102). Combined with the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor, the invocation of intimacy, along with the striking

deployment of the ambiguous word “tongues”, invites a very concrete interpretation of this mingling, especially when we also read that the Norse introduced the English “to many things, physical as well as spiritual, that they had not known before” (2013:100).

3.5. Other domains and interim conclusion

These examples could be multiplied. For instance, feature 61 of the BRI (three points) states that the setting of the work beyond a certain point is a national capital or large city. London is very central in B&C’s narration of the history of English from the middle of chapter 7 (“Middle English”) onwards: “By far the most influential factor in the rise of Standard English was the importance of London as the capital of England” (2013:194), to the point that “[t]he history of Standard English is almost a history of London English” (2013:194).

More fanciful interpretations would certainly be available too, if more metaphors were permitted. Without availing myself of these, my evaluation of B&C in terms of the BRI is summarized in the Appendix. In some sections of the BRI, most notably sections 4 (“Topical story elements affecting protagonist”) and 5 (“Topical story elements affecting secondary characters”), B&C does not score highly. English does not go to boarding school (feature 31), does not nurse a sick person (or language) back to health (feature 42), and does not repent of an immoral or insensitive action (feature 45). None of Norse, French, Latin or Celtic is involved in a disastrous or dangerous fire (feature 52), becomes seriously ill or an invalid (features 53 and 54), or has a funeral (feature 57). In these sections, my reading of B&C scores well under half of the available points.

Overall, of the 148 points available, my reading of B&C in which LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE scores eighty. This places it well below the canonical exemplars of Bildungsromanitas discussed in subsection 2.1, all of which scored 130 or more. On the other

hand, it scores substantially higher than Huckleberry Finn and The Catcher in the Rye, both of which have been suggested at least to share commonalities with the Bildungsroman in the past. Of the novels considered by Iversen (2009), my reading of B&C comes closest to John Fowles's The Magus (106 points), which she describes as "strongly related to the bildungsroman tradition" and "a modern bildungsroman with some very unusual aspects" (2009:246). I thus conclude that, while B&C is of course not a Bildungsroman in the literal sense, its narrative of the history of English shares enough commonalities with the genre that the comparison is not a futile one. I also suggest that these commonalities are not accidental, and this is the topic of section 4.

4. Why anthropomorphize? Why Bildungsroman?

4.1. The Zeitgeist

As an initial hypothesis, one might suggest that it is not an accident that both the Bildungsroman and the first true histories of English arise when they do. The long nineteenth century is the century of history, both in terms of its literary output and its dominant scientific paradigms (Buckley 1966; Morpurgo Davies 1998:36; Moretti 2000:6; Huber 2023:17-19). In the aftermath of seismic events such as the French Revolution, and with the writings of thinkers like Lyell, Marx, Darwin and Max Müller, the reversibility (or otherwise) of time exerted a powerful fascination during this period (Gould 1987). At the same time, organicism – the tendency to treat anything and everything as a living organism – was a dominant motif in the historical sciences of the period: Morpurgo Davies (1998:86-88) outlines its role in linguistics, especially in Germany with first Herder and then the Schlegels, Humboldt and Bopp. The ubiquitous image of the family tree in linguistics, due to Schleicher, with its mothers and daughters, owes its origins to this period. Perhaps, then, the rise of the

anthropomorphizing approach to language history is simply the inevitable result of a particular historical moment.

This view finds support when we look at G. P. Marsh's *Origin and History of the English Language, and of the Early Literature it Embodies*. First published in 1862, this work consciously and full-bloodedly draws upon the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor from the very start, for instance when we read that "The language had passed the stages of infancy and youth, attained to the ripe perfection of manhood, and thus completed its physiological history, before the existing period of its literature began" (1862: 2), and that there is a progression – development, becoming – "from the impotent utterance and feeble conceptions of the thirteenth century, to the divine power of expression displayed ... in the sixteenth" (1862: 3). Here we see an invocation of the metaphor that is unabashedly embodied, physical. A full treatment of this fascinating book as a Bildungsroman must be left to future work.

Yet the zeitgeist as explanatory factor has its limitations. At least one explicit invocation of the metaphor, familiar from histories of English, predates the long nineteenth century by more than two hundred years. This is Sir John Cheke's famous 1561 letter to Thomas Hoby, which I quote here following Cooper Ballentine (2018:6).

> I am of the opinion that our own tung shold be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borrowing of other tunges, wherein if we take not heed by tijm, ever borrowing and never paying, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt. For then doth our tung naturallie and praisablie utter her meaning, when she bouroweth no counterfeitness of other tunges to attire her self withal … and if she want at ani tijm (as being unperfight she must) yet let her boro with suche bashfulness, that it mai appeer, that if either the mould of our own tung could serve us to fascion a word of our own … we wold not boldly venture of unknown words.

Here we see a cluster of metaphors in play. The central metaphor, and the one that is the focus of Cooper Ballentine (2018), is that of a household economy. But Cheke deploys the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor from the first sentence onwards, where the pronoun "she" in the final finite clause refers to English. Cheke goes beyond the metaphor by explicitly gendering English as female, "urging that if she must borrow, she do so with 'bashfulness' – an invocation of classical femininity that, in the midst of implications of purity and violence, also suggests rape and miscegenation" (Cooper Ballentine 2018:6). The same metaphor, with the same implications of purity and violence, is also found four hundred years later in the quotation from James Nicoll mentioned in section 1 (see footnote 1), though the emphasis is a different one: "The problem with defending the purity of the English language is that English is about as pure as a cribhouse whore." Clearly, then, the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor – a necessary condition for any such gendering – is not something that is specific to the long nineteenth century. Although the Bildungsroman has a better claim to being specifically associated with this period, the enduring popularity of the literary genre, and the fact that the 2013 sixth edition of Baugh & Cable's textbook still contains the raw material to be read as a Bildungsroman, both suggest that the historicizing impulses of the long nineteenth century are only part of the explanation.

4.2. Narrative as common core

I propose that a further part of the explanation involves the role of the narrative, and the historical narrative in particular, in both the Bildungsroman and historical science generally. Here I draw on the work of historian Hayden White (e.g., 1973, 1980). White is concerned with the question of why faithful representations of history are today widely considered incomplete, or not fully historical, when they do not adopt a narrative form. Merely listing

events in a chronological sequence, as found in annals and chronicles, is not generally seen as sufficient for good historiography (see White 1980:9-10). The answer he puts forward is that narrative is a general, perhaps even universal, solution to the human search for meaning, "the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human" (1980:5). To narrativize reality is to convert that experience into an explanatory account in the form of a story (1980:6).[8] If so, narratives are an essential part of any historical discipline, and plausibly of science in general.[9]

The relevance of this to our concerns should be clear. Metaphor is, if not inherent to the way humans conceptualize the world (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1993), then at the very least a crucial tool for narrativizing both truth and fiction. Thus, anthropomorphizing English along the lines of the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor is one response to the search for meaning via the construction of narratives.

White goes further than this, however:

> "[E]very historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats … narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine." (1980: 18; emphasis original)

The role of the social system helps us to make sense of the historical moment discussed in section 4.1: changes in the social system in which such narratives arose will lead to changes in the form and purpose of the narratives themselves. As for the moralizing force of specific invocations of the LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE metaphor, in many cases this is clear. Both the anthropomorphizing metaphor and the economic metaphor in Cheke's letter to Hoby

are explicitly in service of an exhortation to maintain the purity and stability of the language. In the quotation from Nicoll, the moral is almost the opposite: attempting to maintain the purity of the language is futile, though the gendered associations that Nicoll drew upon to make this moral point are the same as in Cheke's letter.

What about the Bildungsroman? Much has been written about the moral force of the genre (see, e.g., Moretti 2000:71-73), for instance the drive to reconcile an individual's interior and social worlds by negating any tension that might be thought to exist between them. For our purposes it is perhaps enough to state that whatever moralizing impulse is behind the Bildungsroman as a whole is also likely to be at work in histories of English in the B&C mould. This warrants further study, of course, and for authors and users of histories of English the only practical advice I have to offer is to examine one's metaphors carefully. If Lakoff (1993:227-228) is right that the deployment of metaphors, when conventionalized, may be below the level of conscious awareness, then not all metaphors have been thought through as judiciously as they might be. LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE, as a governing principle for the writing of language histories, is neither necessary nor inevitable; other metaphors are available, such as A LANGUAGE IS A RIVER (Smith & Kim 2017) or LANGUAGE HISTORY IS A JOURNEY (Hejná & Walkden 2022). Historians of language have a responsibility to choose their metaphors deliberately and thus to be in at least partial control of the moralizing force of their historical narratives.

5. Summary and Conclusion

I opened this paper by pointing out that languages in general, and English in particular, are frequently treated as human protagonists (section 1). The bulk of the paper was devoted to a demonstration that, given certain ground rules for interpretation (section 2), a popular history of English textbook – Baugh & Cable (2013) – shares many points of structure. Plot

and characterization with the Bildungsroman genre of novels (section 3). Section 4 then went on to suggest, building on work by White (1980), that these commonalities arise from a shared set of strategies for the construction of both fictional and historical narratives. I further suggested that the choice of LANGUAGES ARE PEOPLE as a metaphorical narrative strategy plays a moralizing role, although I do not commit myself to what, precisely, the moral of the story is.

What can be concluded from all this? The empirically-minded reader may be tempted to draw the conclusion that a history of English should be austere, a mere report of what happened when, in chronological order: a kind of Chronicle of English. That, I think, would be a mistake, since even the decision of what to include in such a chronicle will be a subjective one. More importantly, if White (1980) and Lakoff (1993) are on the right track, any history of English worth the name must be narrative, and as a narrative it must draw upon metaphor. Which metaphors are chosen is something that the historian of English would do well to reflect upon, so as to avoid the accidental propagation of unwanted biases and preconceptions. The facts are the facts, to be sure, but these can be recruited and assembled into an infinitude of possible narratives. Without such a narrative, there is no history of English – and this in turn means that there is no "English", in the sense of an idealized object (or person) floating through time. In this sense, even the English language as a historical entity may justly be said to be a myth, and necessarily so.

Notes

1. For the full quotation and discussion of its provenance see https://linguistlist.org/issues/13/499/ (last accessed 20th January 2026).

2. The review can be accessed at https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/424947012 (last accessed 20th January 2026).

3. Genuine historical narratives, that is, that go beyond simply chronicling; see section 4.2.

4. The constructed nature of myth, and its fraught relationship with truth, is also central to Bierce's (1911) tongue-in-cheek definition of mythology in The Devil's Dictionary: "The body of a primitive people's beliefs concerning its origin, early history, heroes, deities and so forth, as distinguished from the true accounts which it invents later."

5. Even this is called into question by some scholars: for instance, Thomas P. Saine describes *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as "not a Bildungsroman in the sense in which the term has come to be used" (1991:139).

6. For a full list, consult Iversen (2009:377-379).

7. These are sections 3 "Secondary characters and their functions" and 5 "Topical story elements affecting secondary characters" of the BRI.

8. Compare Chomsky (2009:183): "Being reflective creatures, unlike others, we go on to seek to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena of experience. These exercises are called myth, or magic, or philosophy, or science."

9. The central role of narrative in historically-oriented academic disciplines is not specific to linguistics. See Gould (1987:97) on historical narratives in geology, and Mayr (2004:32-33) on narratives in evolutionary biology, the latter perhaps the most prestigious of the historical sciences.

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Tables

TABLE 1

BRI Features: Secondary Characters and their Functions (from Iversen 2009:58)

No.	Feature	Max points
21	Other character(s) essential in making protagonist change and grow	3
22	Other characters more important in their relationship to protagonist than in their own right	1
23	Important educator(s)	3
24	Important companion(s)	2
25	Important lover(s)	3
26	Other characters' love relationships as exemplary or as contrast to protagonist's	1
27	Other characters' marriage as exemplary or as contrast	1
28	At least one important character from lower, middle, and higher social classes	3
	Section total	**17**

Appendix: BRI scores by feature

Feature	Max	B&C
1. Narrative and mode		
1	3	0
2	2	0
3	2	2
4	2	1
5	2	2
6	2	1
7	2	2
2. Protagonist		
8	1	1
9	1	1
10	2	2
11	1	0
12	2	0
13	Or 2	0
14	Or 2	2
15	1	0
16	2	0
17	2	1
18	2	0
19	1	0
20	Or 1	0
3. Secondary characters		
21	3	3
22	1	1
23	3	3
24	2	2
25	3	3
26	1	0
27	1	0
28	3	3
4. Topic: Protagonist		
29	2	2
30	2	0
31	1	0

Feature	Max	B&C
32	2	2
33	Or 2	0
34	Or 2	0
35	1	1
36	1	1
37	1	1
38	2	0
39	1	0
40	1	1
41	1	0
42	1	0
43	2	0
44	2	0
45	1	0
46	1	1
47	2	0
48	Or 2	0
49	1	0
50	1	0
5. Topic: Secondary		
51	1	0
52	1	0
53	1	0
54	1	0
55	1	0
56	1	1
57	1	0
58	1	1
59	1	0
6. Setting		
60	2	1
61	3	3
62	Or 3	0
7. Plot and structure		
63	2	2

Feature	Max	B&C
64	3	2
65	2	2
66	1	1
67	1	1
68	2	0
69	3	3
70	1	1
71	1	0
72	2	0
73	2	0
74	3	0
75	1	1
76	2	0
77	2	2
8. Generic signals		
78	1	1
79	1	1
80	1	0
81	1	1
9. Theme and motifs		
82	3	3
83	2	2
84	2	1
85	2	0
86	2	0
87	1	0
88	1	1
89	1	1
90	1	0
91	3	1
92	3	2
93	2	2
94	2	2
95	2	2
96	2	0