

Background to the new history

Some years ago, Andrew Winnard from CUP asked me would I be interested in being the general editor for a new edition of the existing Cambridge History of the English Language.

I was naturally flattered, and considered the offer seriously, aware of how much work it would involve. Two aspects, which I felt had to be centre-stage, motivated me to say 'yes' to CUP.

A new history of the English language had to:

- 1) Take account of the new data sources, methodologies and analytical approaches visible in the field during the past few decades
- 2) Afford full recognition to varieties of English world-wide without prioritising any one or any small number of these.

Contents of the volumes

Volume I: Context, contact and development

Volume II: Documentation, data and modelling

Volume III: Transmission, change and ideology

Volume IV: Britain, Ireland and Europe

Volume V: North America and the Caribbean

Volume VI: Africa, Asia, Australasia and the Pacific (2 books)

Part I: English in Africa and the South Atlantic (book 1)

Part II: English in Asia, Australasia and the Pacific (book 2)



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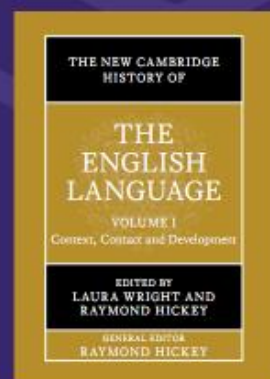
The New Cambridge History of The English Language

With contributions from the leading scholars in the field, this landmark series provides insights into current research and methodology on the history of the English language. It is organised in a user-friendly way to enable both scholars and students to access a whole range of topics quickly and easily.

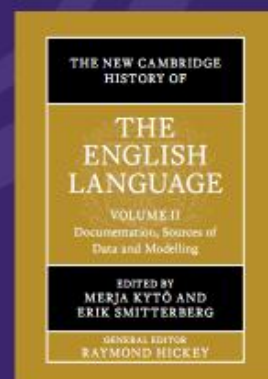
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Six volumes,
Cambridge
University Press,
2025/6

172 chapters by
227 contributors



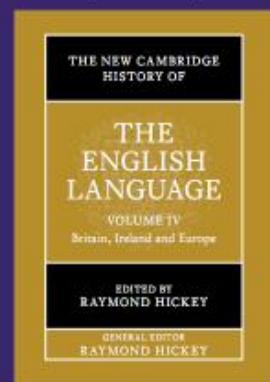
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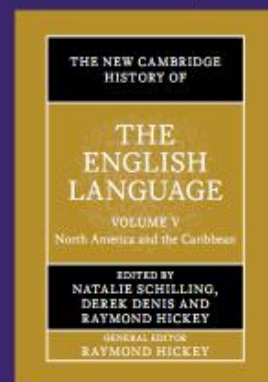
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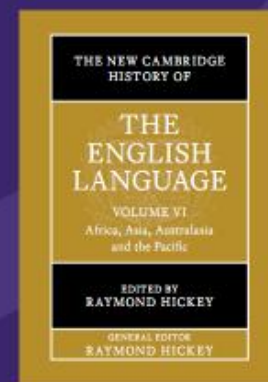
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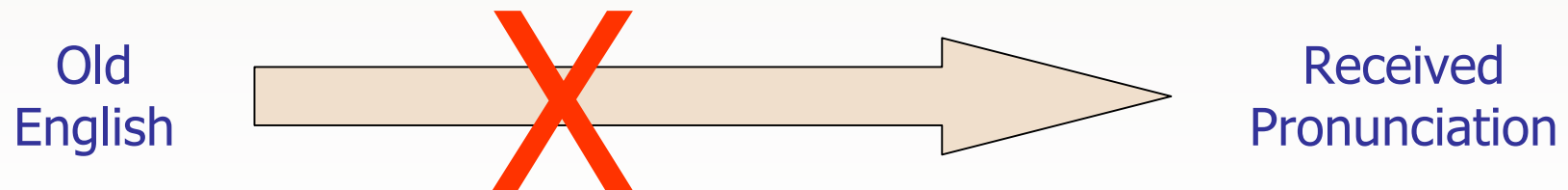
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A view of history

So the first question is: what does one understand by history? For the current new work, history is understood as a dynamic process; it is continuously evolving, beginning deep in the past and reaching down to and including the present.

Importantly, the history of English is not a straight line from the early documents in English to the present-day standard of British English.



A more inclusive
view of the
history of English

A braided river,
several streams
which come
together, move
apart and come
together again.



Traditional approaches to the History of English

Old English (450-1100)

Middle English (1100-1500)

Early Modern English (1500-present)

- or -

Early Modern English (1500-1800)

Late Modern English (1800- present)



Organisation of the History of English

After checking university syllabuses for the history of English across the world, it became clear that practically no universities offered full-term courses on Old, Middle or Early Modern English.

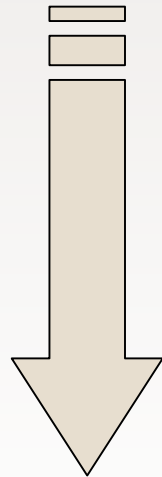
Rather the universities had topic-oriented courses, e.g. historical pragmatics, historical corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics and the history of English, etc.

So the decision was made to have chapters of about 20-25 pages in the new history. These could then be used as reading material, say for a particular week, within courses dedicated to various historical topics.



The 'Long View' perspective: Seven detailed chapters in Volume I

Old English



Modern
English

Phonology

Morphology

Syntax

Semantics

Pragmatics

Sociolinguistics

Onomastics

The language of major works / authors

Open page of *Beowulf*
manuscript



Geoffrey Chaucer
(1340-1399)

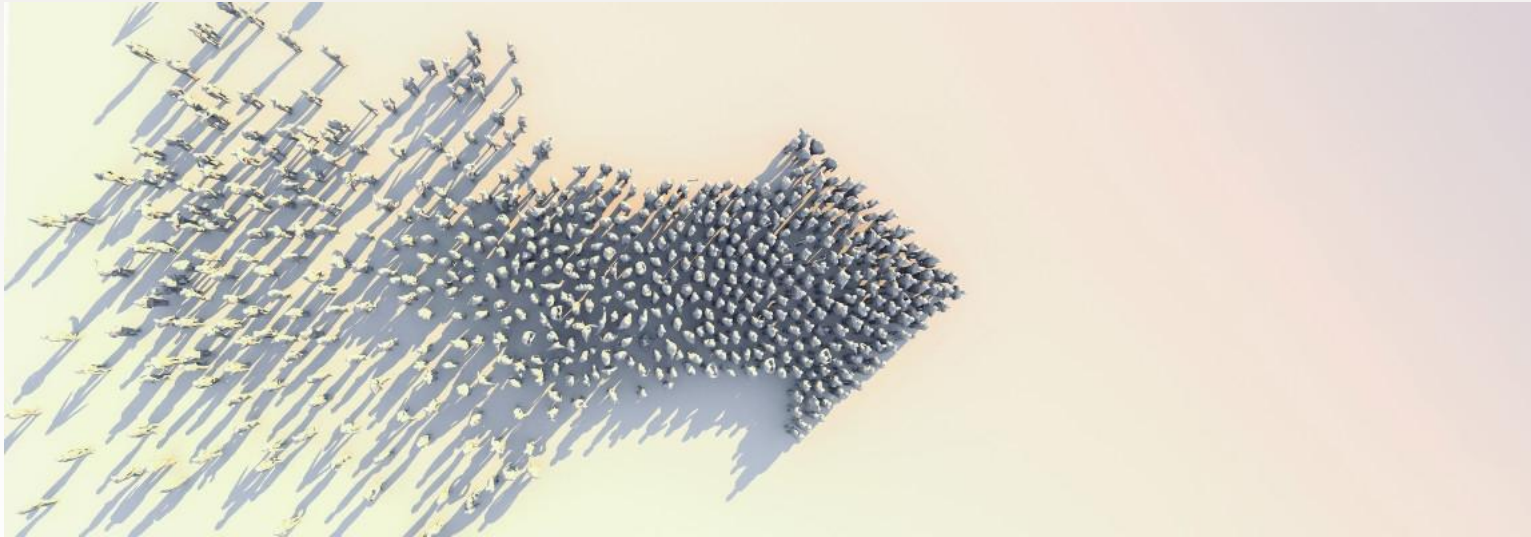


William
Shakespeare
(1564-1616)



The history of English in the twenty-first century:

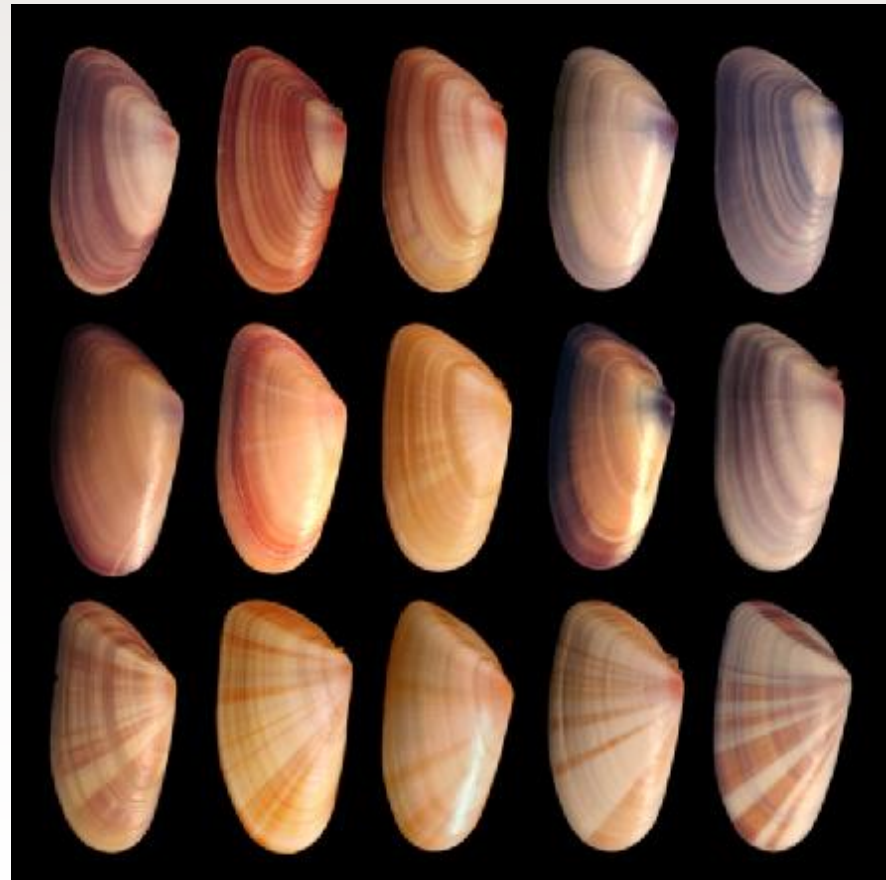
Present research trends



Language Variation and Change

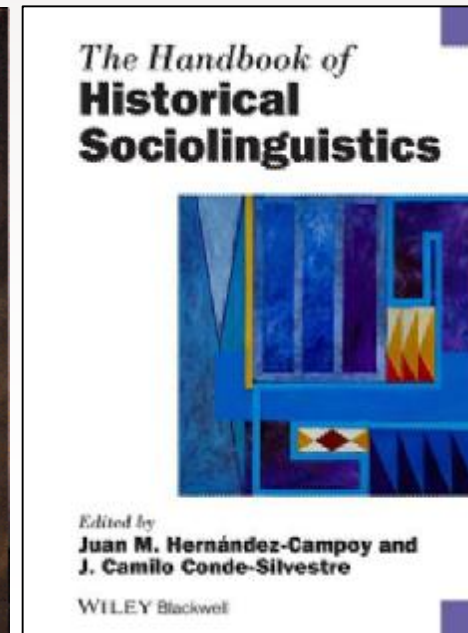
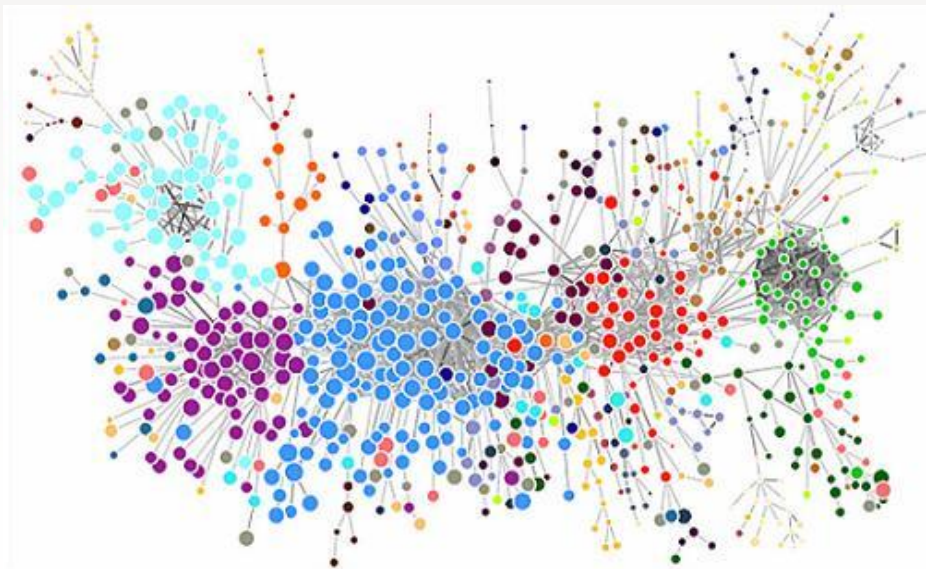
The research paradigm 'Language Variation and Change' has informed much recent research into the history of English.

This approach examines minute instances of variation to discern trajectories of language change.



Sociolinguistics: Networks and communities of practice

The role of networks and communities of practice in social organisation and also in language maintenance and change has been increasingly recognised and its insights have been applied to the history of English.



New approaches: Women's voices in the history of English

Women authors have been active in many spheres of society over the centuries and have contributed to the textual record of English. There are early religious works by female writers and towards the modern period we find women dramatists and novelists with distinct voices and unique styles of language. Women have also left behind many collections of letters and works criticising practices of their time, notably slavery and colonialism.

Jane Austen (1775-1817)



Aphra Behn (1640?–1689)



New approaches: Orality in historical documents

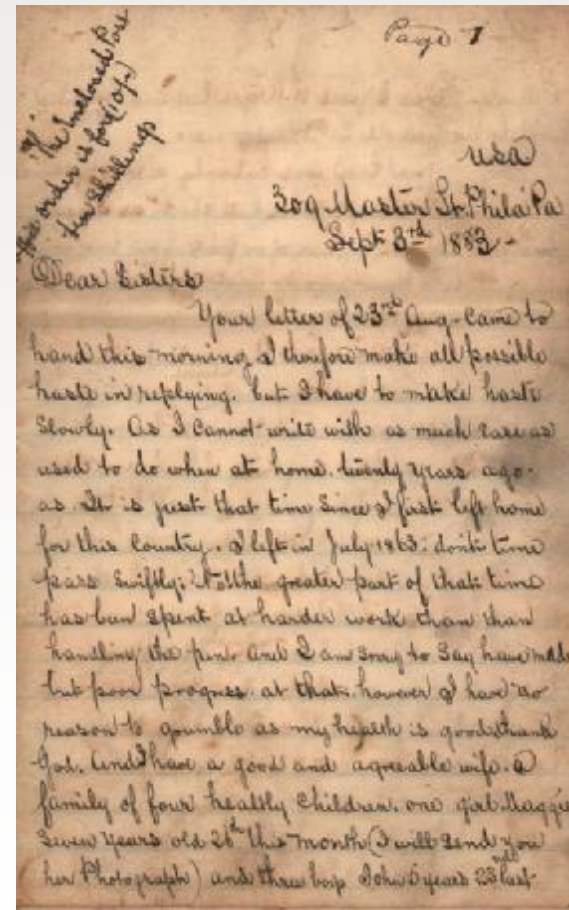
Scholars began discovering new paths to explore in the history of English. One of these was examining the relationship of colloquial spoken language (shown in texts) to formal written language.



New sources of data: Different genres (text types)



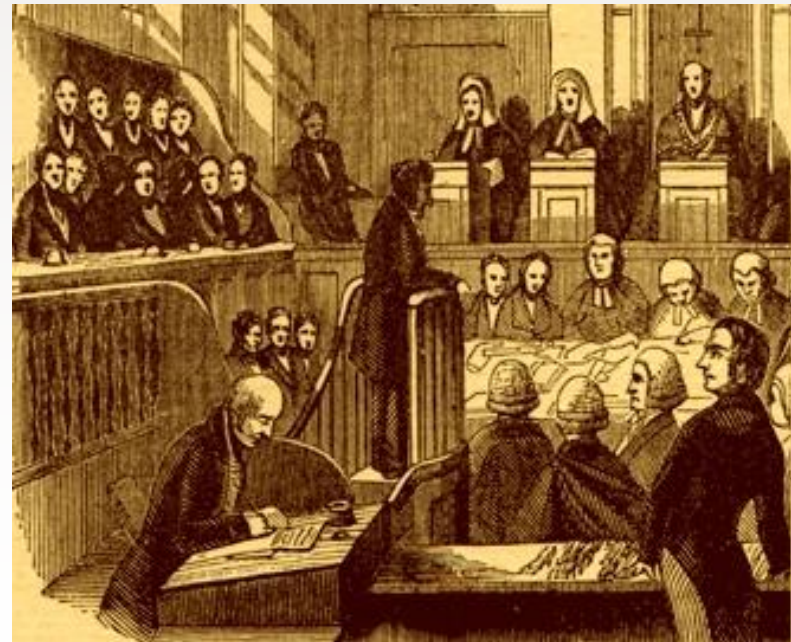
Historical newspapers



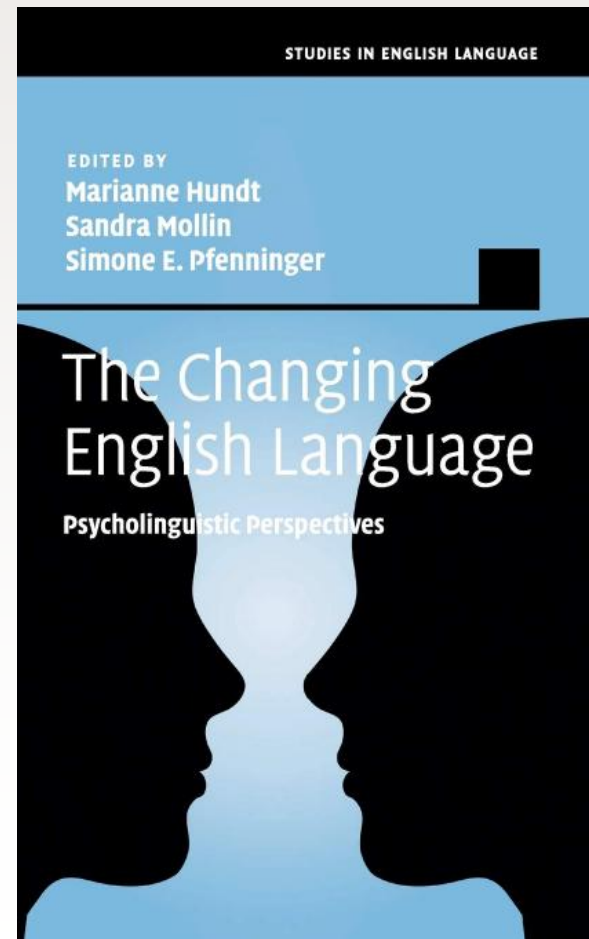
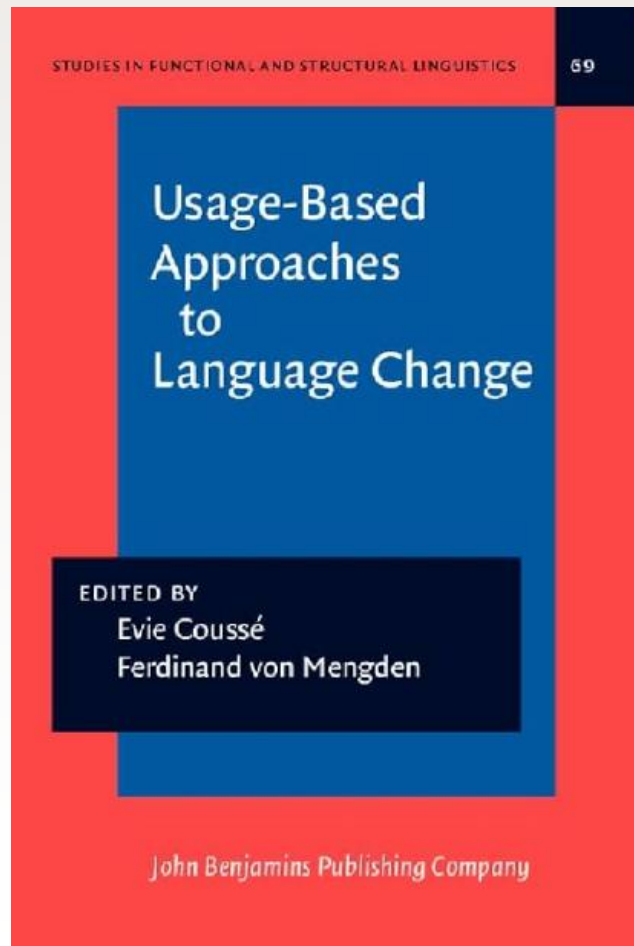
Emigrant letters

New sources of data: Court depositions

Court depositions, such as those of defendants at the Old Bailey in London over a considerable time span (1740-1913), offer unique insights into vernacular English at various periods.

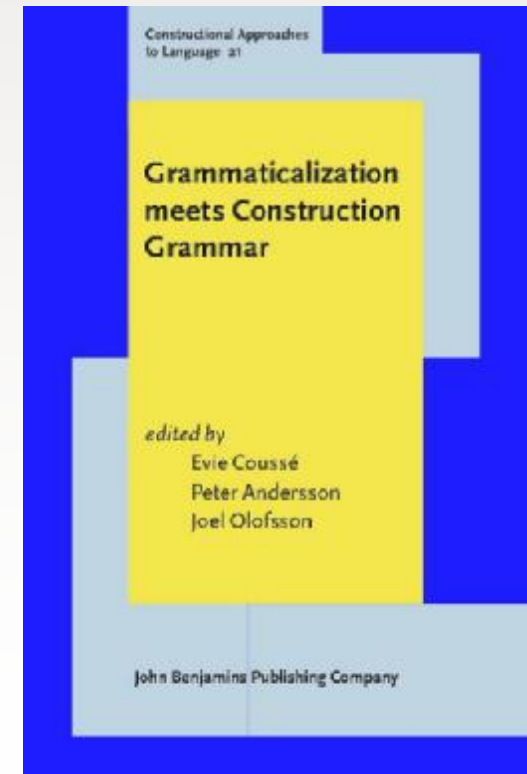
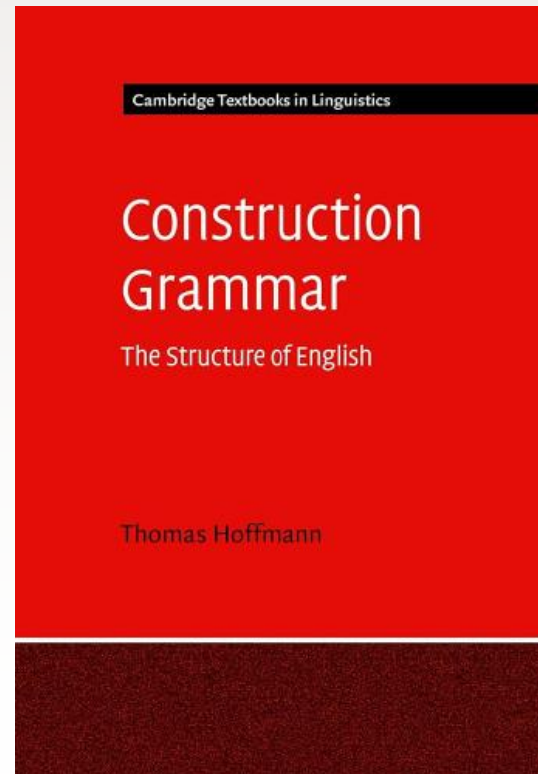
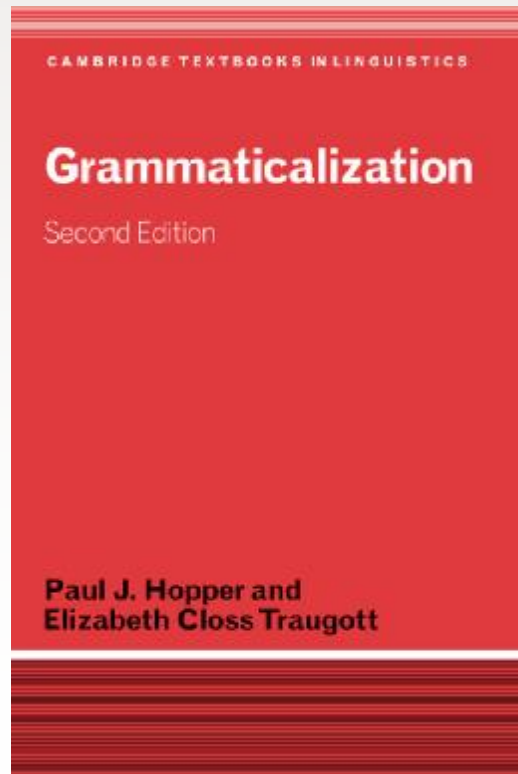


Functional, usage-based and psycholinguistic approaches to language change



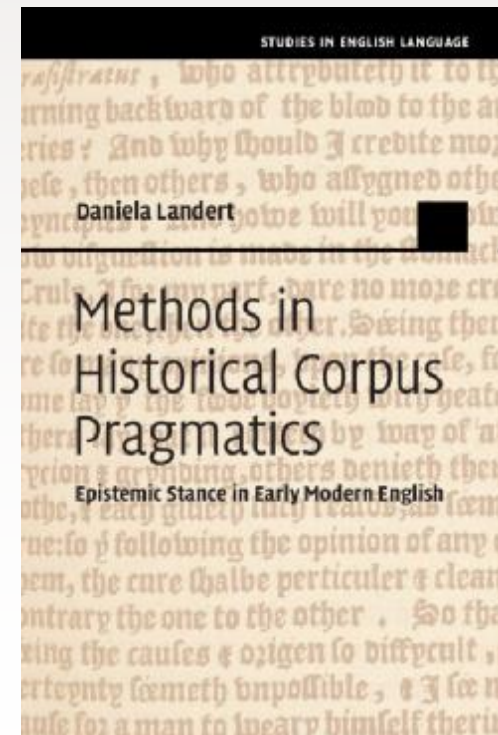
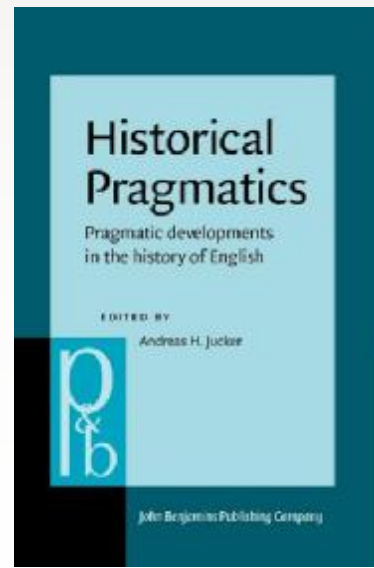
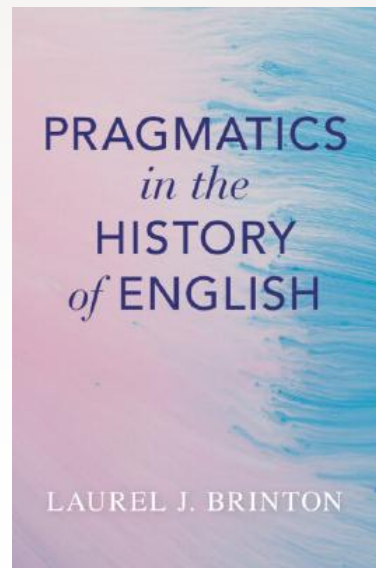
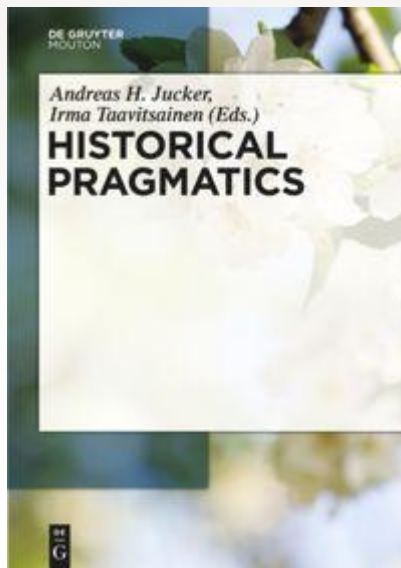
Grammaticalisation and Construction Grammar

New models of grammar have arisen as alternatives to the established approaches of generative grammar.



Historical Pragmatics

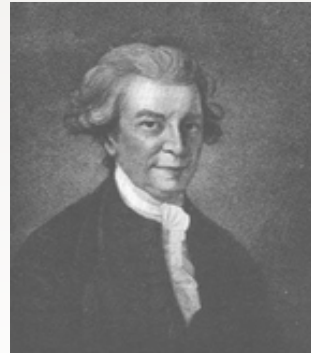
This field covers a number of topics, such as how norms of politeness (and impoliteness) changed over the centuries. It also involves the general means by which speakers organise their conversations with others.



Reassessments: The rise of standard English



John Walker (1732-1807)



Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788)



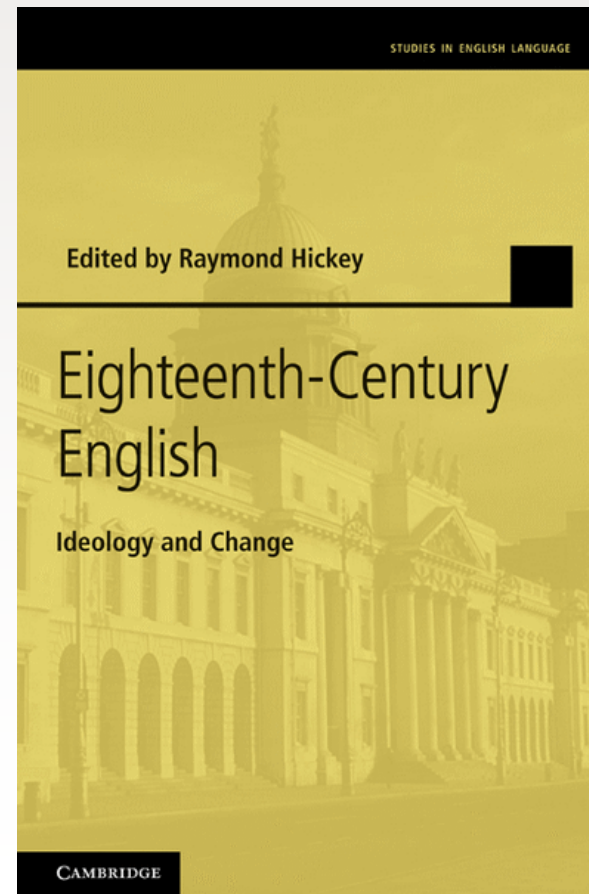
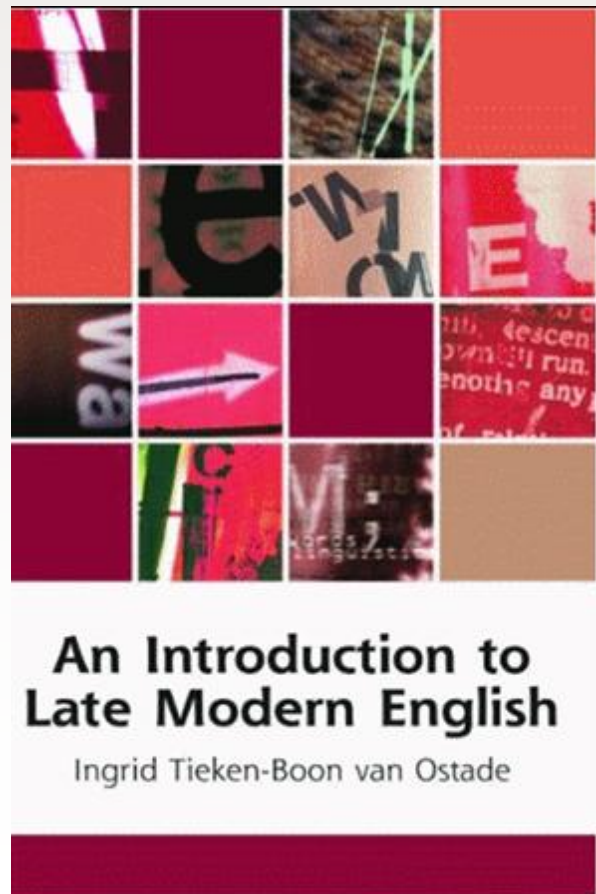
Robert Lowth (1710-1787)



Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

The Late Modern English Period: 1800 –

Quite a number of changes took place in the past 2-3 centuries and so this period has received its own label, Late Modern English. It is the time when standard English was codified and official, public usage was made explicit.



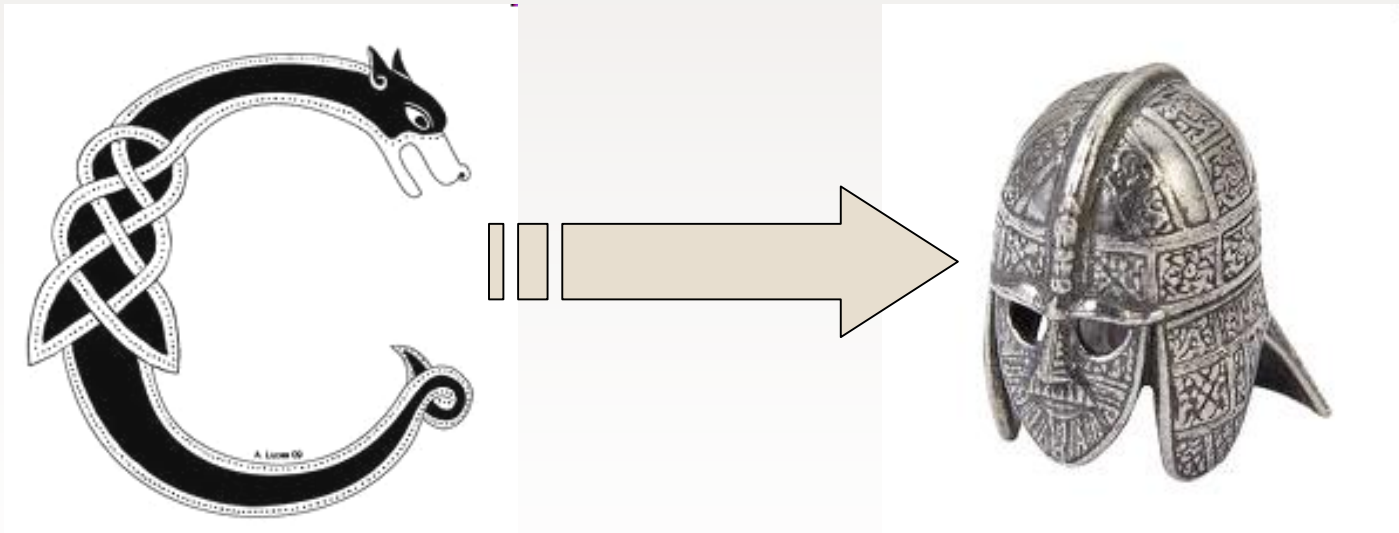
Prescriptivism in England

Prescriptivism arose as a practice whereby some people tell others how they should speak and write, all the while condemning their native mode of language. It is associated with a number key authors and with the codification of standard English in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

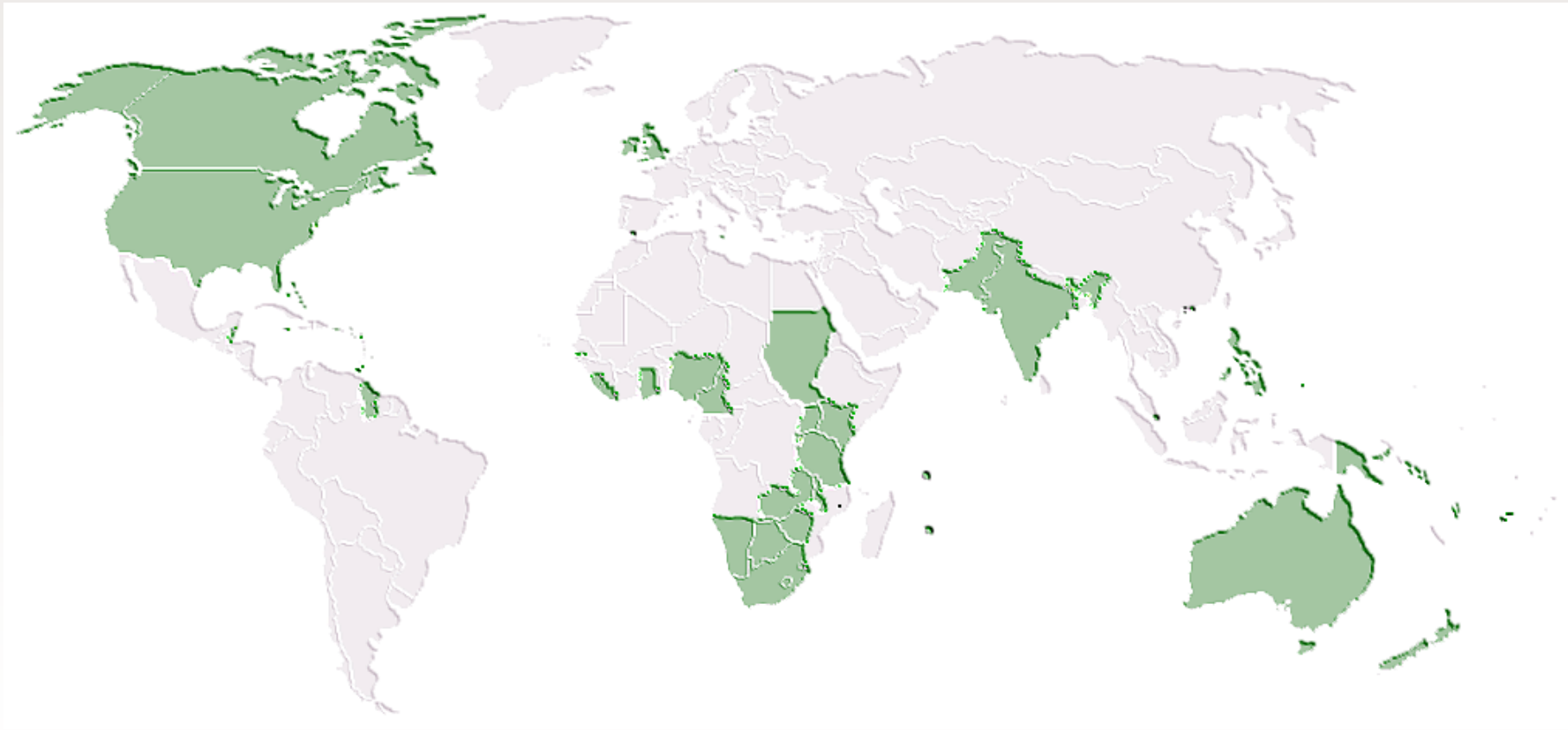


Reassessments:

Celtic and Germanic in the Old English period: Contact and language shift

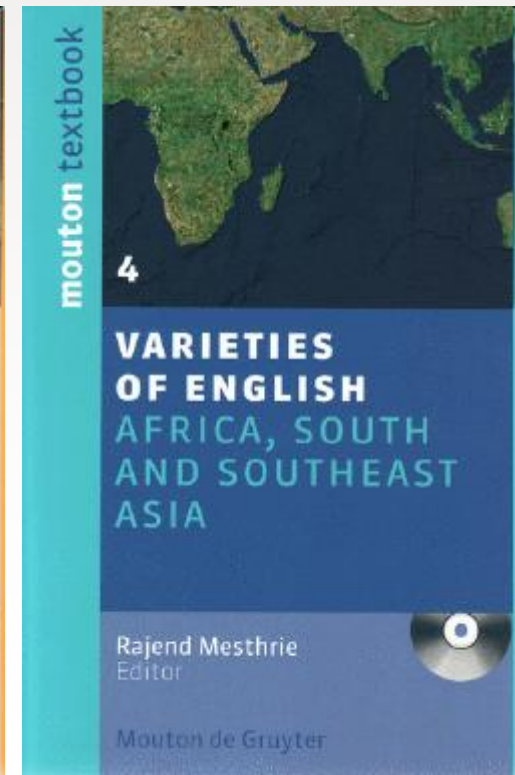
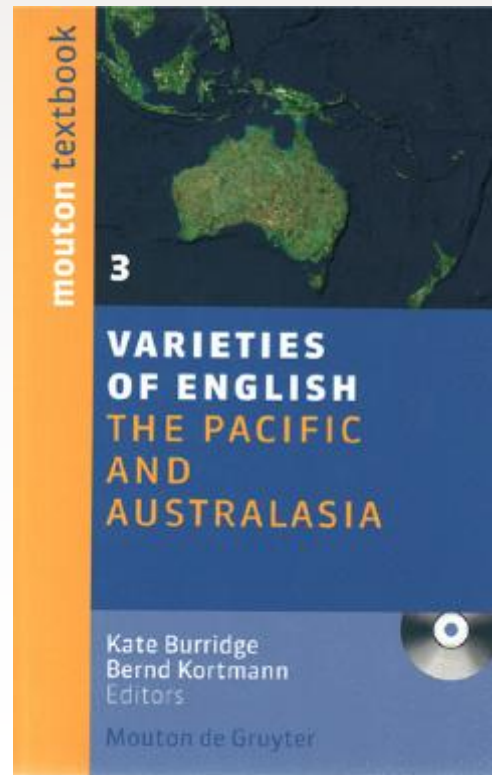


Varieties of English in the twenty-first century



Varieties of English around the World

In the colonial period (1600-1900) many forms of English (from England, Scotland and Ireland) were taken abroad and then began to develop independently at the various overseas locations.



Varieties of English around the World

Africa and Asia have the largest growth in numbers of English speakers; this is likely to increase dramatically in the course of the present century with consequences in terms of the global diversification of English and the future history of the language.



Redressing an imbalance I: the case of Canada

Chapters in original Cambridge history: 2

Chapters in new Cambridge history: 7



Redressing an imbalance II: the case of South Africa

Chapters in original Cambridge history: 1

Chapters in new Cambridge history: 4



And what about AI and historical linguistics ?

Possible uses:

Proto-language reconstruction uses large quantities of data from attested languages

Help in assessment of large quantities of dialect data as we have in Middle English

Combing though large amounts of data for lexicographical work

In such case AI would be of assistance to historical linguists. The jury is out on whether it could be creative in this field. We don't know right now.

But watch this space for updates...



Where to find out more

Introduction

Research areas, Book projects

Websites

Irish English Resource Centre

Variation and Change in Dublin English

Studying Varieties of English

Studying the History of English

English Linguistics in Essen

Discover Irish

The Sounds of Irish

This is the website of Raymond Hickey, adjunct professor at the University of Limerick, Ireland and emeritus professor at the University of Duisburg and Essen, Germany. It contains information about my research interests and current book projects along with several language websites (see items in list on the left).

Want to find out more about **Irish English**? Just click on the flag:



Interested in **Varieties of English**? Just click on the globe:



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June 2025

New Cambridge History of the English Language



New Cambridge History of the English Language

General editor: Raymond Hickey

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↑

Volume I: Context, contact and development

Editor: **Laura Wright (Cambridge) and Raymond Hickey (Limerick)**

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Introduction to Vol. I (Laura Wright and Raymond Hickey)
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1. The Indo-European framework (Donald Ringe)
2. English in its Germanic surrounding (Wayne Harbert)
3. Language development in the Old English period (Julia Fernández Cuesta)
4. The geography of English in England (Merja Steenroos)
5. Philology and the history of English (Laura Wright and Raymond Hickey)

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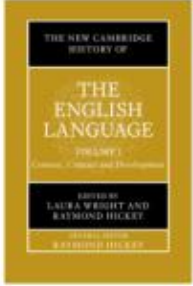
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Book description

This volume investigates the Indo-European and Germanic background to the English language, looking at how inherited elements of phonology and morphology survived into the Old English period. It then considers various kinds of contact between the first speakers of English and speakers of Celtic, Latin and Scandinavian, under different sociolinguistic circumstances. The manner in which initial standardisation of English took place, with considerable code-switching, and the structural changes which the language underwent in this early period are discussed. The various analytical methods used to examine the available data are considered in a dedicated chapter on philology. The volume also contains a set of longer chapters. These take a detailed look at various levels of language from phonology, morphology, syntax through to semantics and pragmatics, and include reviews of historical sociolinguistics and onomastics.

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