The New Cambridge History of the English Language

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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
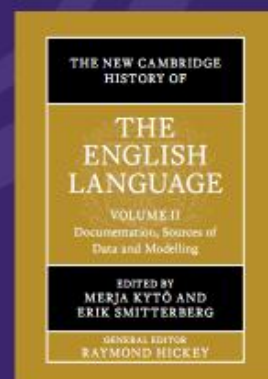
Volume II: Documentation, data and modelling

Volume III: Transmission, change and ideology
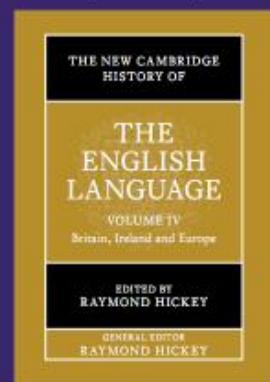
Volume IV: Britain, Ireland and Europe
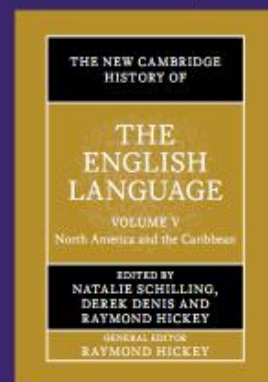
Volume V: North America and the Caribbean
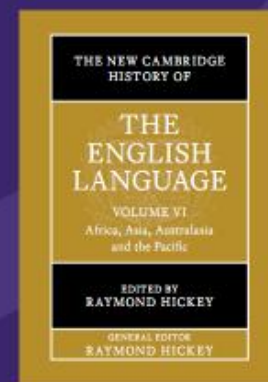
Volume VI: Africa, Asia, Australasia and the Pacific (2 books)

  Part I: English in Africa and the South Atlantic (book 1)
  Part II: English in Asia, Australasia and the Pacific (book 2)

The editorial team

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Joan Beal   Volume III (Sheffield)

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THANK YOU!

Six volumes, Cambridge University Press, 2025/6

172 chapters by 227 contributors

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THANK YOU!

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.

Old English ⟶ Received Pronunciation
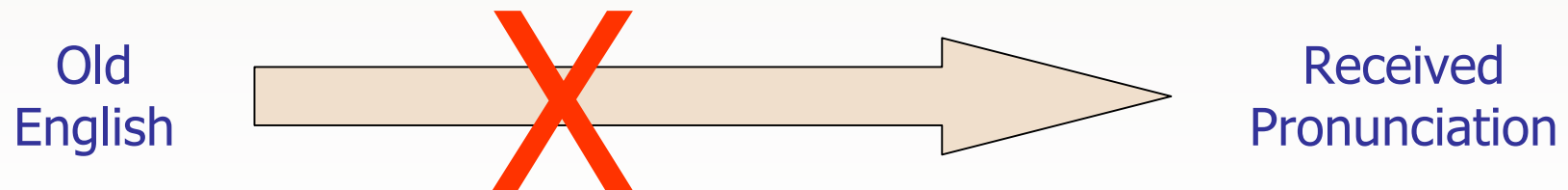
A more inclusive
view of the
history of English

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
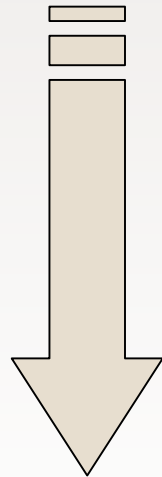
Modern
English

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
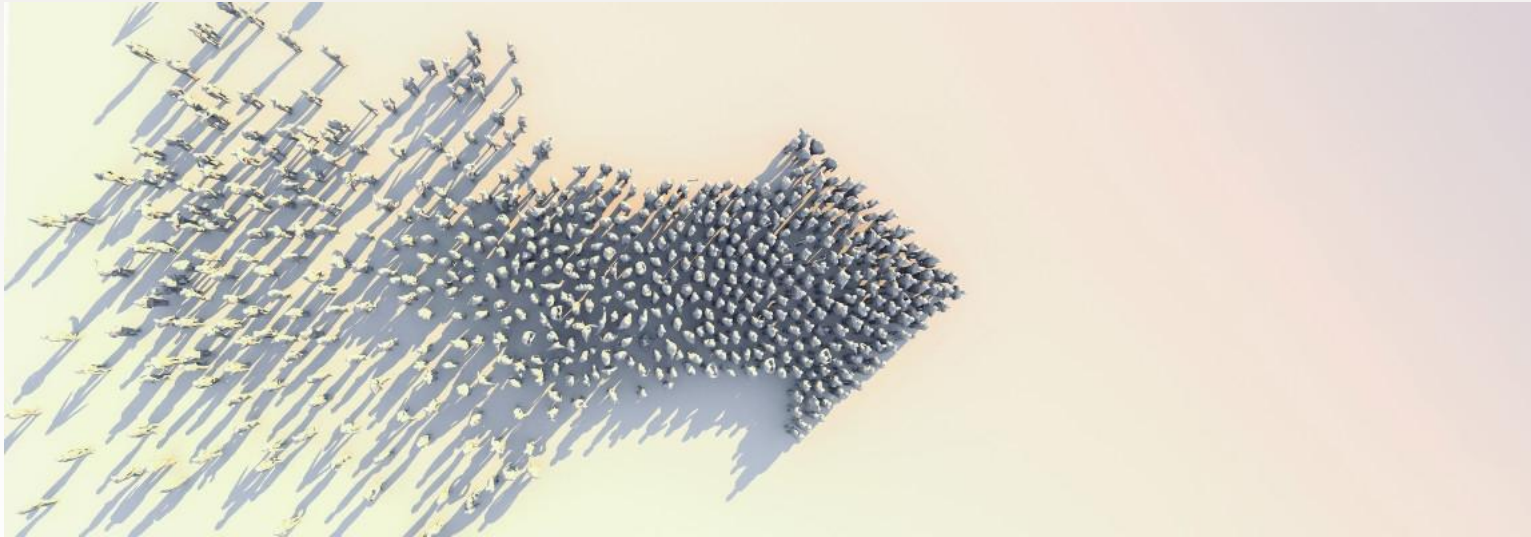
Language Variation and Change

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.

Methodologies

With the advent of powerful computers in the late 1980s and 1990s linguists began collecting large amount of data – known technically as text corpora – and began using these increasing in their research. This research avenue has been greatly expanded in the present century.

Corpus Linguistics and the Description of English
2nd edition

Hans Lindquist and Magnus Levin

EDINBURGH TEXTBOOKS ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE – ADVANCED

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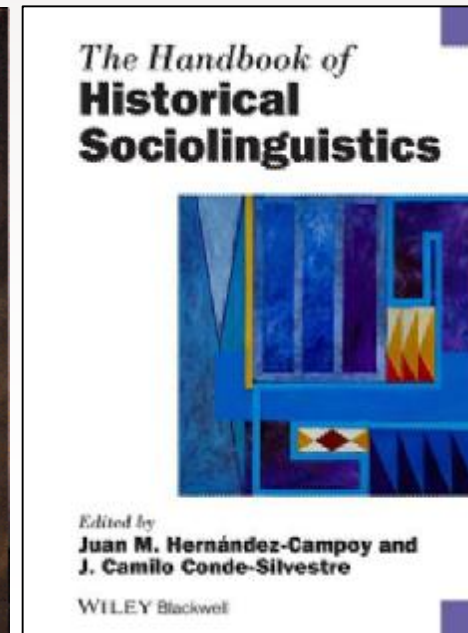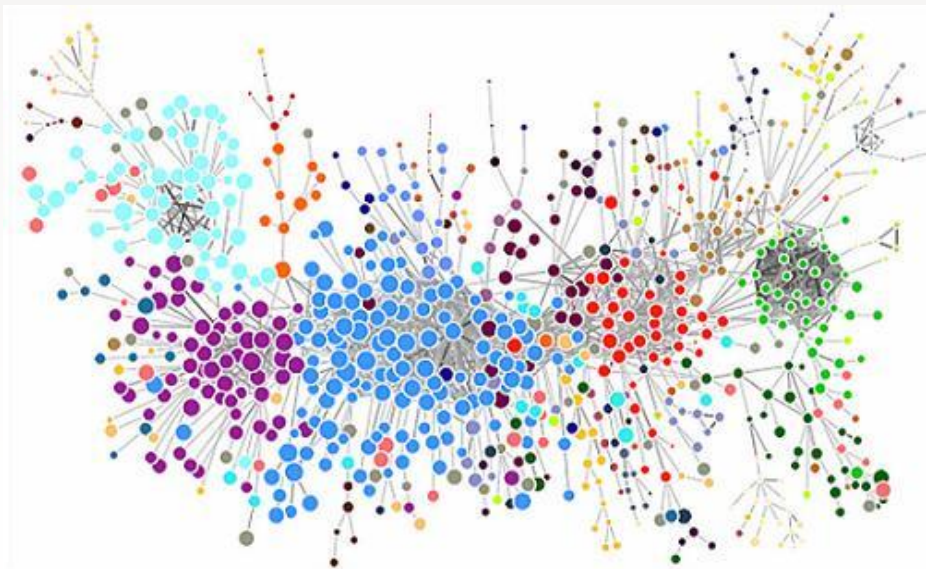
New approaches: Women's voices in the history of English

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
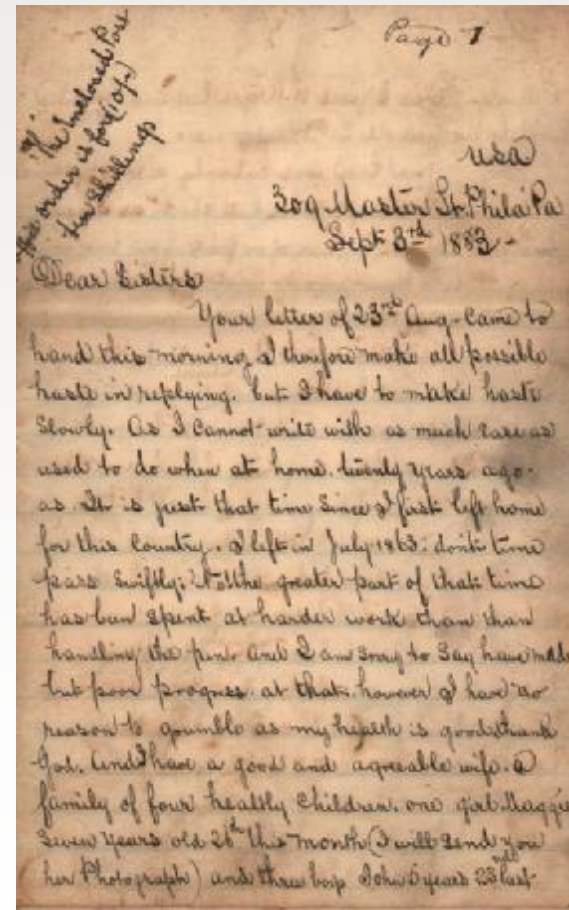
Emigrant letters

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.
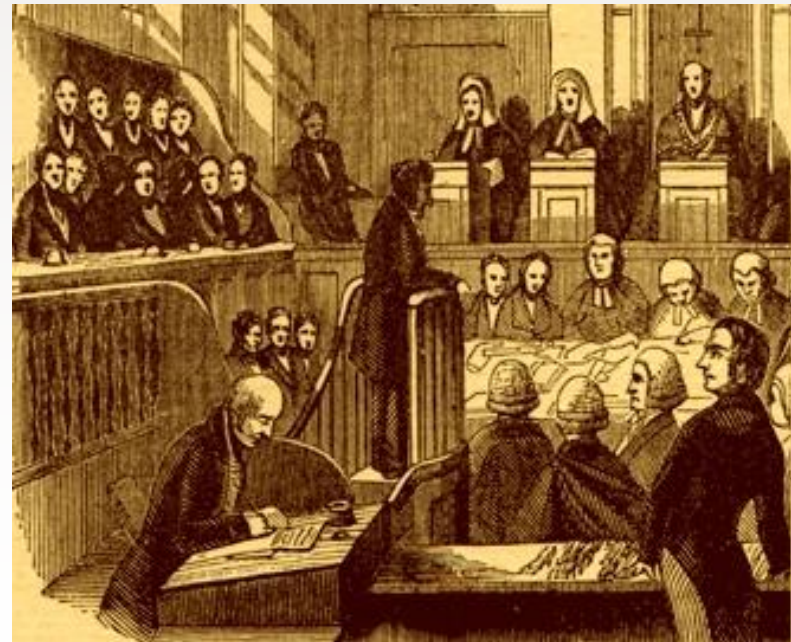
Functional, usage-based and pyscholinguistic approaches to language change
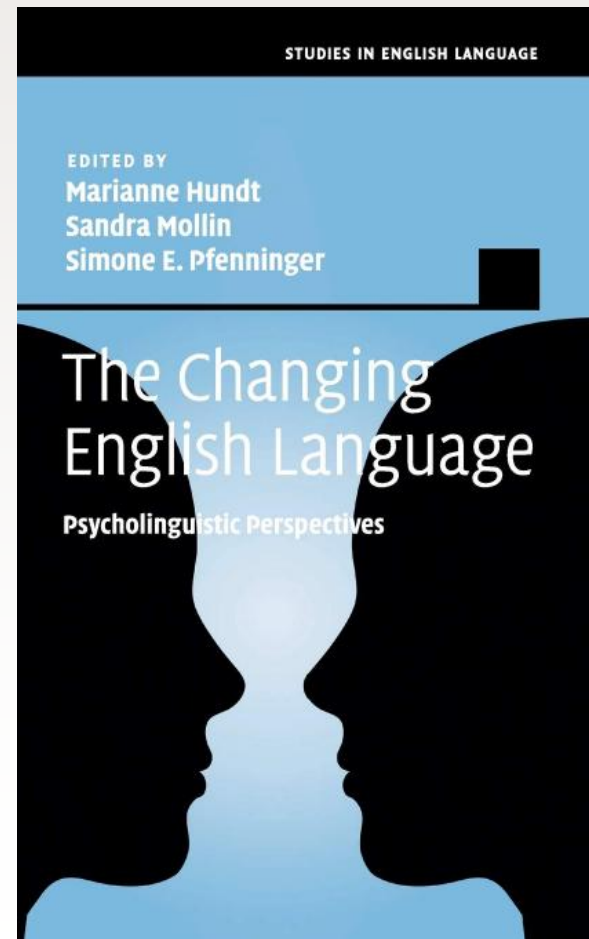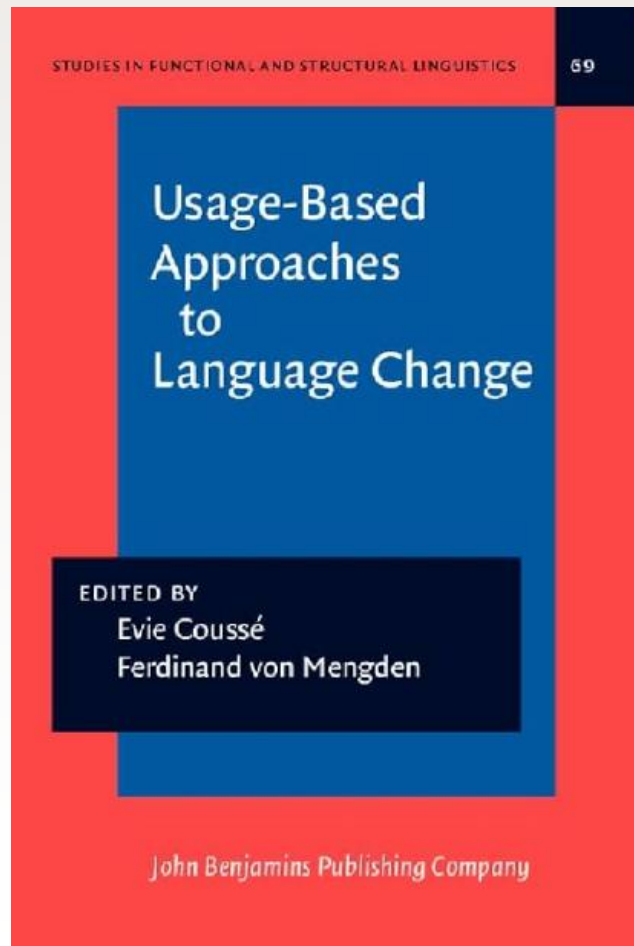
Grammaticalisation and Construction Grammar

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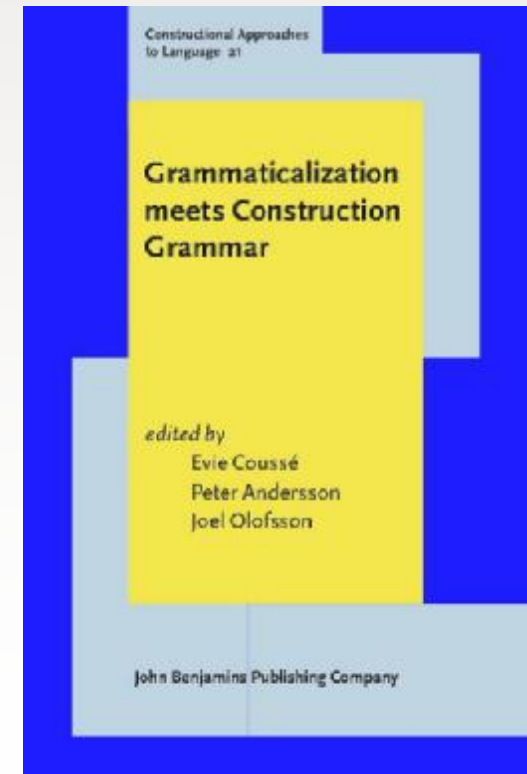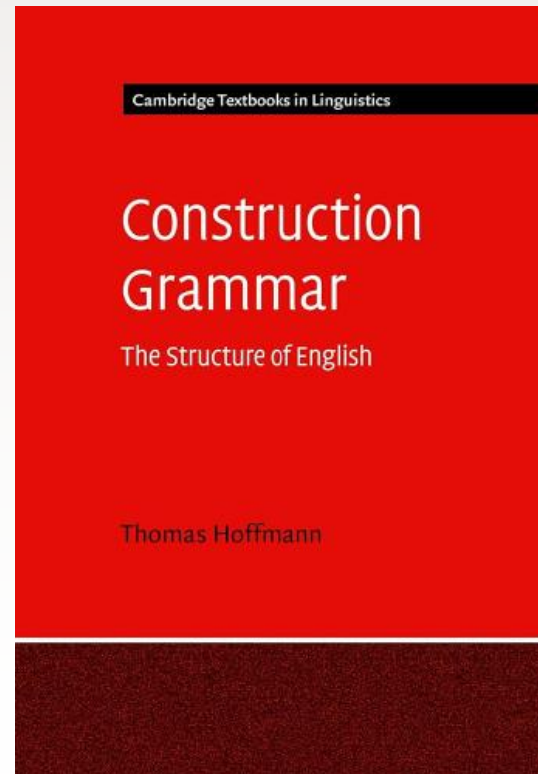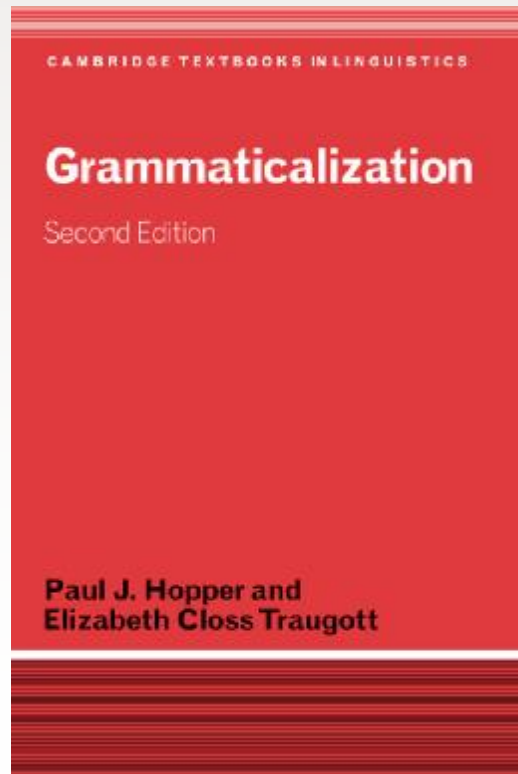
Historical Pragmatics

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.
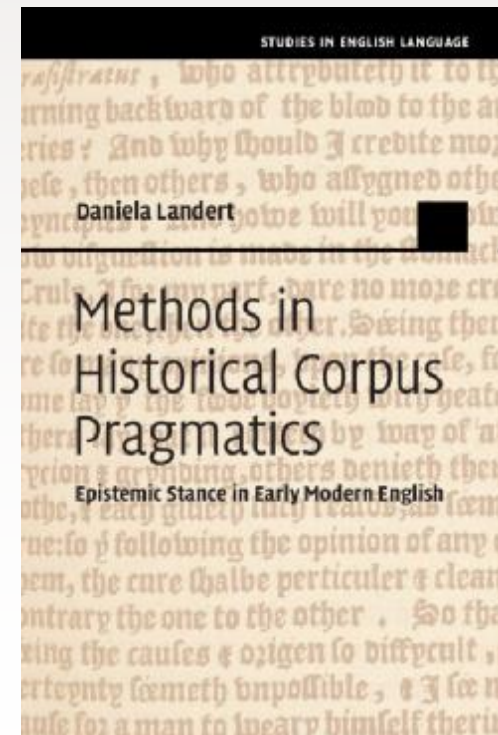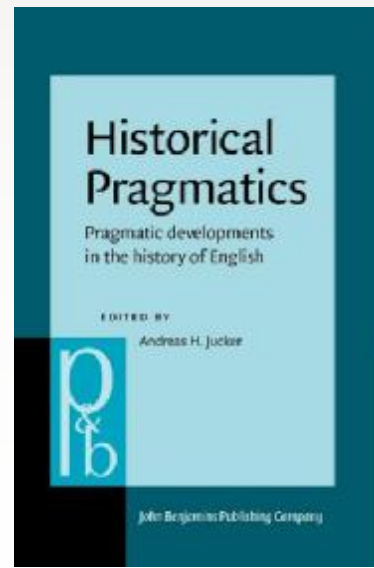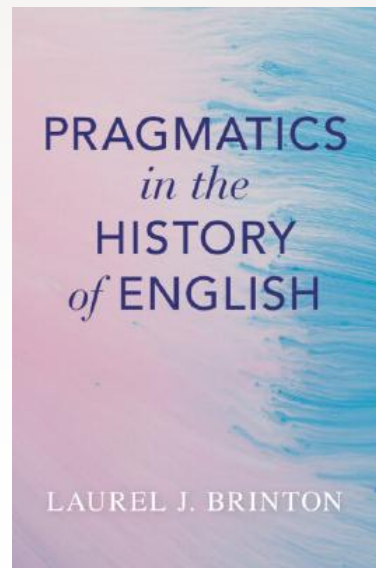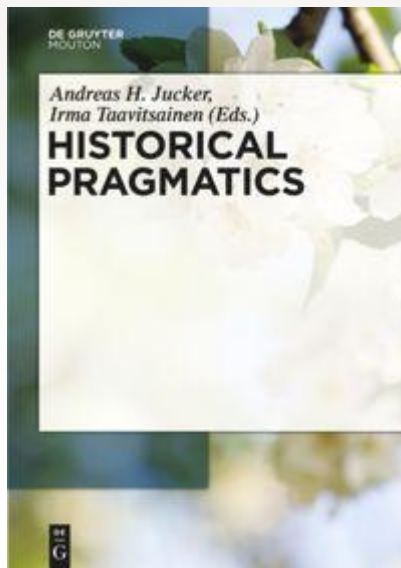
Reassessments:
The rise of standard English

John Walker (1732-1807)   Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788)   Robert Lowth (1710-1787)   Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)
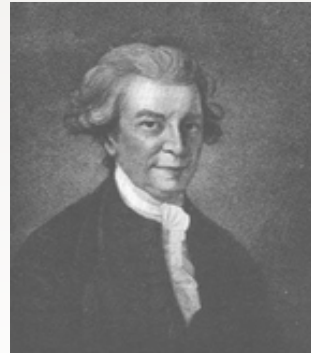
The Late Modern English Period: 1800 –

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.

An Introduction to Late Modern English
Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade

STUDIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE
Edited by Raymond Hickey
Eighteenth-Century English
Ideology and Change
CAMBRIDGE
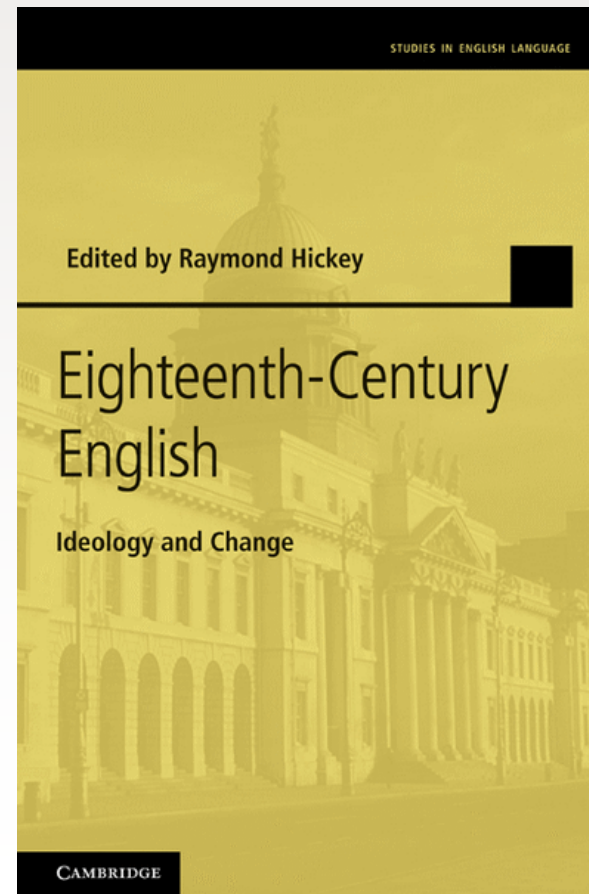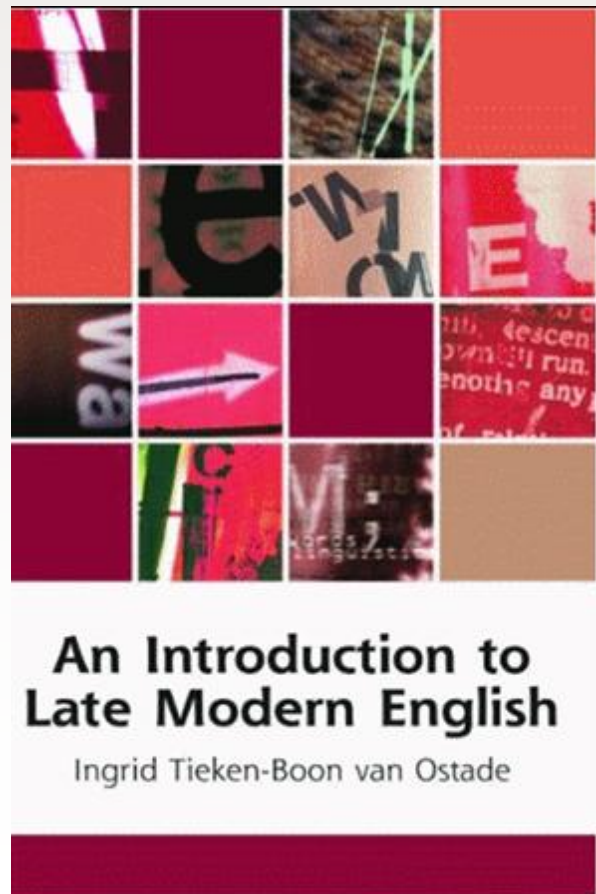
Prescriptivism in England

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
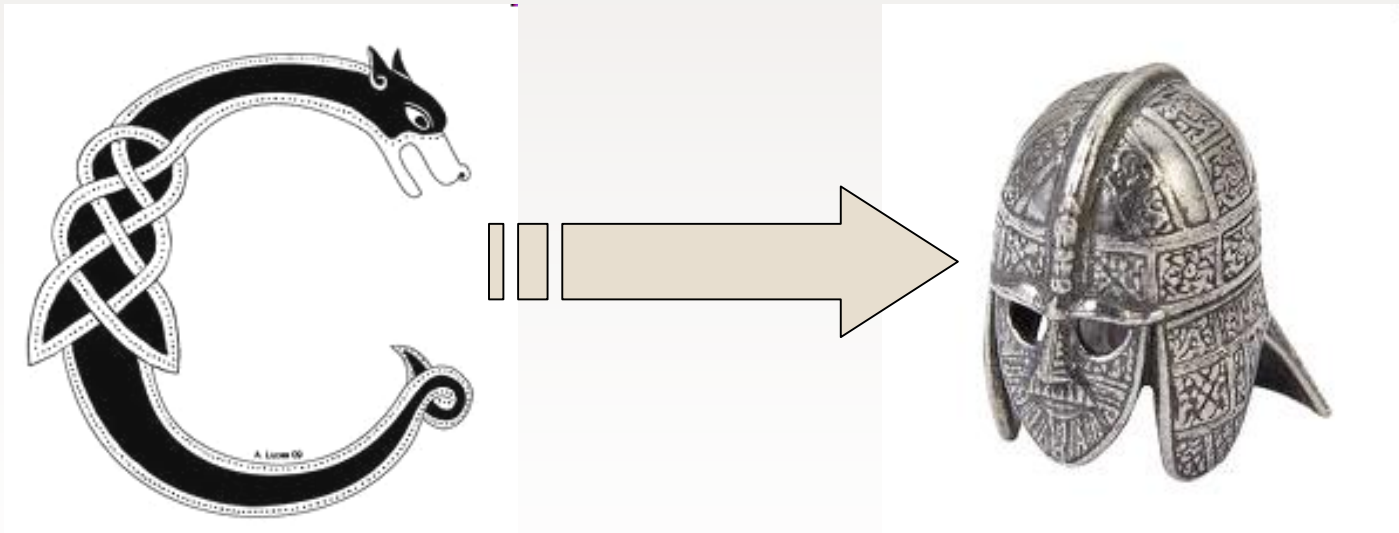
Varieties of English in the twenty-first century
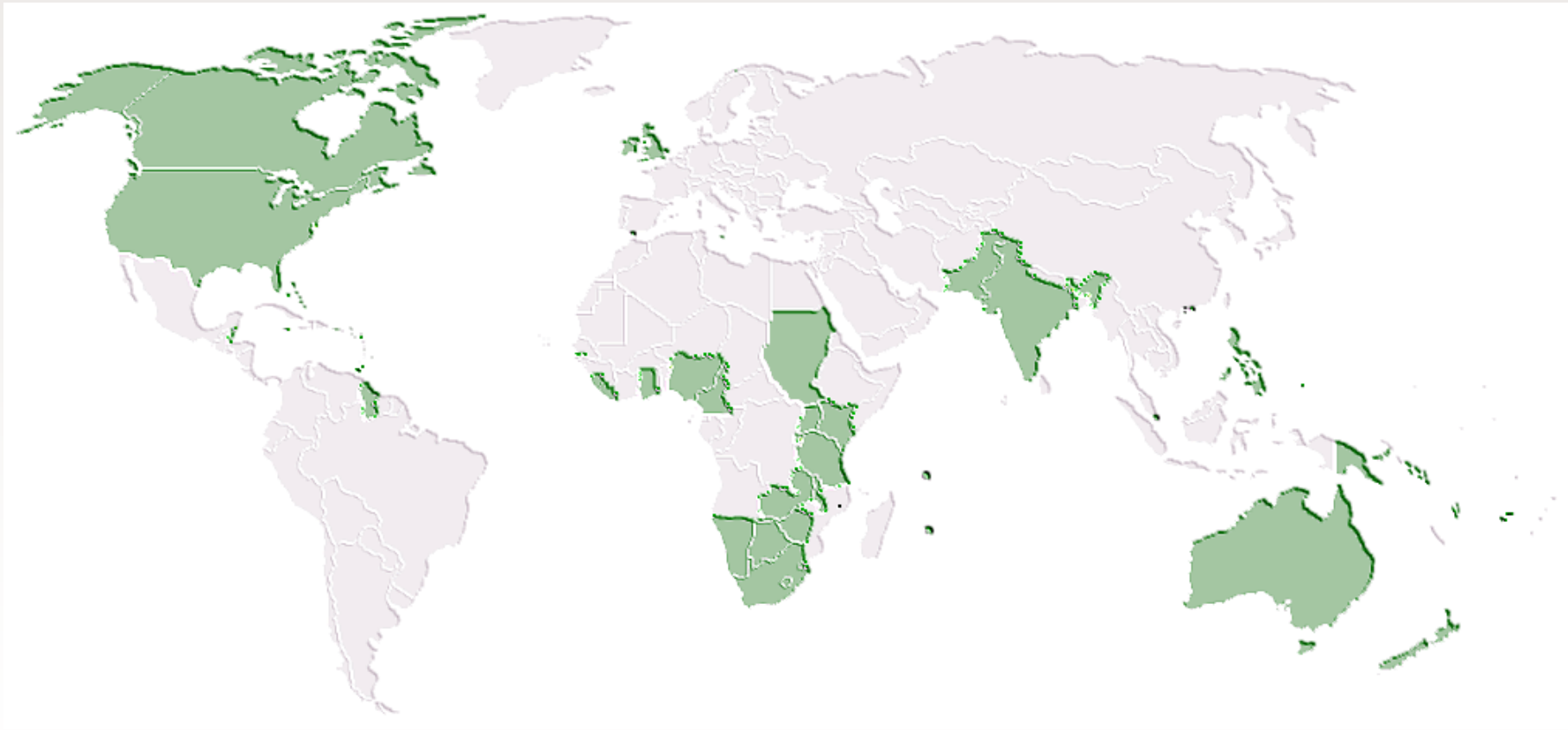
Varieties of English around the World

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.
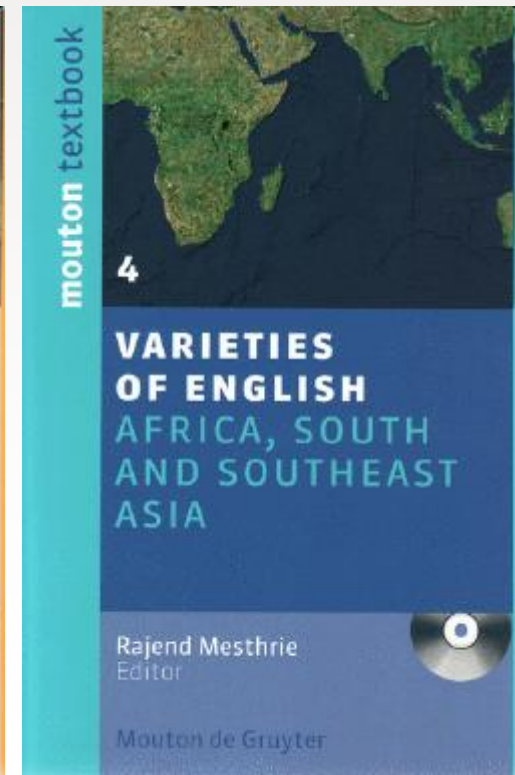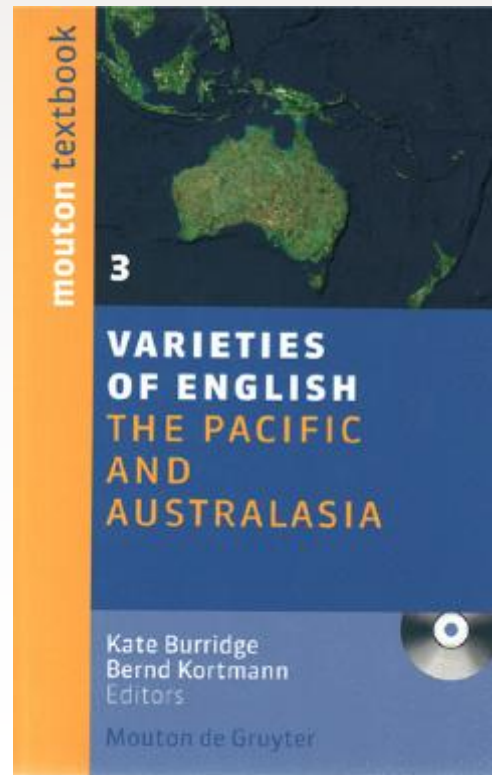
Varieties of English around the World

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

link: www.raymondhickey.com

search for: "new cambridge history of the english language"