

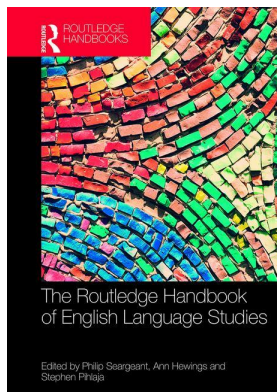
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### The historical study of English

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# The historical study of English

Simon Horobin

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## Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief summary of what we know about the origins of the English language and then turns to how this history has been pieced together. The principal researchers and projects, the methods used and the debates that have arisen illustrate the development of historical linguistic approaches over the last 200 years. Recent cross-fertilisation from other branches of language study, including pragmatics, sociolinguistics and corpus studies, exemplify contemporary approaches to understanding the forces that have shaped and continue to shape English. From the early stages in the historical study of English, in which linguistic changes were identified and described, we witness a shift towards a methodology that attempts to explain *why* and *how* these changes occurred.

## The history of English: origins

The origins of the English language can be traced back to the Germanic dialects brought to England by the Angles, Saxons and Jutes in the fifth century AD. The earliest written documents, dating from the sixth and seventh centuries, show many connections with other members of the Germanic language family, which are the origin of German, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic and Danish. The Germanic language family forms part of the much larger Indo-European group, but is distinguished from other branches in several important ways. One major difference concerns a shift in the pronunciation of certain consonants, by which voiceless stops became voiceless fricatives, voiced stops became voiceless stops, and voiced aspirated stops became voiced stops (for further discussion see the account in McMahon 1994: 22–24; for a more detailed account and an attempt to explain the causes behind the change see Smith 2007: 75–87). The results of this change can be observed by comparing equivalent words, such as the following: Latin *pes, tres, collis, quod* and Old English *fo̥t* ‘foot’, *þreo* ‘three’, *hyll* ‘hill’, *hwæt* ‘what’.

Since this shift was first formulated by the German philologist and folklorist Jakob Grimm, it has come to be known as ‘Grimm’s law’ (Grimm 1819). Although he was working on the German language, Grimm’s findings had considerable importance for the historical study of

the English language. Grimm was working within a continental philological tradition that could trace its roots back to a lecture delivered by Sir William Jones to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1786, in which he noted similarities between the Sanskrit, Latin and Greek languages, prompting him to propose that these languages had their origins in a common source. Although he observed that Gothic, Celtic and old Persian differed in important ways owing to subsequent influences, he noted that the origins of these languages could also be traced to this common ancestor:

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps no longer exists.

(Quoted in McMahon 1994: 4)

The Angles, Saxons and Jutes settled in different parts of the British Isles, leading to certain marked dialectal differences attested in the written records. There is evidence of four dialects of Old English: Northumbrian (in the North), Mercian (the Midlands), West Saxon (in the South-West) and Kentish (in Kent). Despite these differences, it is clear that these groups came to consider themselves part of a single country, speaking a single language known as *Englisc*.

Old English shows a number of developments that set it apart from the other members of the Germanic language family. Where other languages preserved the Proto-Germanic *ai* diphthong, Old English adopted the monophthong *a*; the results of this can be seen if we compare the Old English word *stan* with the Gothic (an East Germanic language) *stains*. Old English also shows the effects of a sound change known as *i*-mutation, in which back vowels were fronted when there was an *i* or *j* in the following syllable. This shift is the reason why the plural of the Old English noun *ƿot* ‘foot’ is *ƿet* ‘feet’; a distinction preserved in Modern English. Like other Germanic languages, Old English made use of inflexional endings to carry grammatical information. However, compared to Proto-Germanic, Old English noun declensions show considerable simplification. There are fewer distinctive inflexional endings – the result of the weakening of unstressed syllables in speech. Old English resembled other Germanic languages in its reliance upon internal methods of word formation rather than on borrowing from other languages for the coining of new words. These methods include the addition of prefixes, such as the intensifying *for-* prefix, and suffixes, such as the *-had* suffix that created abstract nouns like *cildhad* ‘childhood’. Another method, known as compounding, involved the joining of two distinct words, as in the compound *sciprap* (*scip* ‘ship’ + *rap* ‘rope’) ‘cable’. However, the process of Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons – which brought with it the Latin alphabet used for writing Old English – also resulted in the adoption of a number of Latin words, such as *munuc* ‘monk’ and *mynster* ‘monastery’.

## A history of the history of English

A key methodological development associated with the continental philologists who made these discoveries about the early history of the Germanic languages was the adoption of a comparative approach: by comparing forms recorded in the earliest surviving written remains, it became possible to reconstruct forms of the language that pre-date historical records. These

methodological developments represented a major scientific advancement from the approaches to the historical study of English of the eighteenth century. Although Dr Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) included an essay on the history of the English language, it was little more than a collection of representative texts from different chronological periods. Johnson made little attempt to analyse the texts themselves, or to offer any overview of the linguistic developments to which they attest; the little discussion he did include focuses more on literary and stylistic qualities than linguistic features. A large proportion of the etymologies he included in the dictionary itself were taken from earlier authorities, or based upon his own intuitions – many of which turned out to be mistaken. His approach is well summarised by his conclusion:

Thus have I deduced the *English* language from the age of *Alfred* to that of *Elizabeth*; in some parts imperfectly for want of materials; but I hope, at least, in such a manner that its progress may be easily traced, and the gradations observed, by which it advanced from its first rudeness to its present elegance.

(Hitchings 2005: 88–93)

The study of philology and the comparative method were formally institutionalised in Britain with the foundation of the Philological Society in 1842. The most significant outcome of the establishment of this society was its role in the instigation of a project to produce a new dictionary of the English language on historical principles, adopting a method established by Jakob Grimm and his brother Wilhelm for their work on their historical dictionary of German, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Grimm and Grimm 1854–1961), begun in 1838. It was a lecture by Richard Chenevix Trench, presented to the Philological Society in November 1857, and entitled 'On some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries' that sparked the beginning of the project. While drawing out some of the defects he found in earlier dictionaries of English, Trench also drew direct comparisons with the 'new German Dictionary' under preparation by the Grimm brothers, and its 'frequent and laborious discussion on synonymous words, with illustrative quotations separating them off and discerning them from one another' (Trench 1857: 47). This lecture inspired the establishment of a project to produce a new dictionary of English based upon historical principles; the resulting work was published in instalments or fascicles from 1884 to 1928 as the *New English Dictionary* (later *Oxford English Dictionary*).

Another important development in the historical study of English associated with the Victorian period was the decision to divide the English language into sub-periods; the divisions they instituted remain today in the traditional period boundaries observed by nearly all histories of English. Today these periods are known as: Old English (650–1100); Middle English (1100–1500); Early Modern English (1500–1800); and Late Modern English (1800–present day). However, in the earliest accounts of English, both the subdivisions and the names they were given vary in ways that reflect different attitudes towards the English language's ancestry. Lounsbury (1879) divided the early periods of the language into: Anglo-Saxon (450–1150); Early English (1150–1350); and Middle English (1350–1550). The term 'Anglo-Saxon' was used by Lounsbury to emphasise the extent to which the pre-Conquest period was perceived to mark the language's close connection with its ancestral Germanic cognates. The English language proper was considered to begin after the Conquest; the period from 1550 to the present day was termed Modern English. Lounsbury subdivided his Early English period further – postulating Semi-Saxon (1150–1250) and Old English (1250–1350) sub-periods. Emerson (1894) differed from Lounsbury in referring to the pre-Conquest language as Old English – a term that was deliberately intended to emphasise the continuity

between pre- and post-Conquest usages, and that sought to foreground the native over the foreign components of the language. Although both Old English and Anglo-Saxon have survived into modern usage, it was the latter term that dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thanks to the huge popularity of two textbooks, *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (1876) and *Anglo-Saxon Primer* (Sweet 1882), edited by Henry Sweet; both of these works remain in print today in revised editions.

Research into the history of English continued to be influenced by German scholarship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Henry Sweet, best known today as a phonetician – he is often identified as the model for Henry Higgins in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* – began his career editing Old English texts. His connection with German philologists was a link with the Neogrammarian school, which was making important advances in the comparative method and the historical study of sound change. Another important link between the German Neogrammarian school and English philology was Joseph Wright (1855–1930). Although born into an impoverished weaving family in Yorkshire, Wright taught himself to read and studied foreign languages. He later went on to read mathematics at the University of Heidelberg, transferring to the study of comparative philology at Leipzig University. In 1901, the same year in which Sweet was appointed to a readership in Phonetics at Oxford University, Wright succeeded to the chair of Comparative Philology at Oxford.

Despite his grounding in Germanic scholarship, Wright focused his academic energies largely on the study of the English dialects; his *English Dialect Dictionary* (Wright 1898–1905) and *English Dialect Grammar* (Wright 1905) remain invaluable resources for the study of English dialects. Wright’s Neogrammarian credentials meant that these works are organised on historical principles, drawing heavily upon the evidence of the earliest forms of the English, Scandinavian and French languages. This diachronic approach, also evident in Wright’s *Old English Grammar* (Wright and Wright 1908), co-edited with his wife Elizabeth, differed from the synchronic approach found in other works, such as Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Primer*, which discusses the Old English language without any reference to its earlier history. Although implicit from these differing methodologies, the distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches was not made explicit until the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), whose lectures setting out this distinction were posthumously published – based on notes taken by students during his lectures – as *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), published in English as *Course in General Linguistics* (see Harris 2013).

Sweet’s influence can be seen in the later work of one of the twentieth century’s most important practitioners of the historical study of English: Henry Cecil Wyld (1870–1945). Wyld read philology at Oxford, where he was taught by Sweet. On his graduation in 1899, Wyld was appointed lecturer and subsequently professor in English Language and Philology at University College, Liverpool; eventually he was elected to the Merton chair of English Language at Oxford. Wyld’s most important book was *A History of Modern Colloquial English*, published in 1920; further editions appeared in 1921 and 1936 and continued to be reprinted into the 1950s. As the standard textbook, Wyld’s work defined the historical study of English throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century.

But where Wright had set out to describe the English dialects, including – in his *Grammar of the Dialect of Windhill, in the West Riding of Yorkshire* (Wright 1892) – that of his native county, Wyld’s account of the history of English focused exclusively on the development of the standard form of the language. Although he devoted considerable attention to his treatment of the dialects of the Middle English period, Wyld was dismissive of later dialects, frequently characterising regional forms as errors and corruptions. Although Wyld set out as a disinterested observer, for whom one variety of English was just as valuable as another – a key axiom of modern

descriptive linguistics – this stance of scientific objectivity came under pressure when it came to describing the distinction between regional dialect and Standard English. Wyld began by refusing to recognise standards of usage: ‘We approach the subject merely as students and observers of linguistic facts, which happen to be closely related to social phenomena. We neither blame nor praise; we are indifferent to what this or that authority may censure or approve.’ Yet, despite this, Wyld proceeded to define Standard English in unambiguously approbatory terms: ‘It may be called Good English, Well-bred English, Upper-class English.’ Dialect use, by contrast, is characterised by grammatical and lexical ‘mistakes’, uttered by ‘uncouth’ speakers, and lacking the expressive subtlety of standard forms (Wyld 1920: 2–3). Rather than recognising that Standard English was simply one among the many dialects of English, albeit one that has been accorded an enhanced role as the variety employed for a range of prestigious functions, Wyld considered Standard English to be linguistically superior. Regional dialects that have not been granted such a role were judged to be inferior varieties. Rather than viewing dialect usages, such as ‘I was sat’ or ‘them people’, as alternatives to Standard English ‘I was sitting’ and ‘those people’, these were categorised as mistakes. Although couched as linguistic arguments, such judgements were based more on the association of Standard English with the elite classes than on the acceptability of such alternative constructions.

The historical approach characterised by Wyld’s work continued to influence the work of later philologists, such as E.J. Dobson’s *English Pronunciation 1500–1700* (Dobson 1957; 2nd edition 1968) and Alistair Campbell’s *Old English Grammar* (Campbell 1959). Wyld’s tendency to view the standard as the ideal form of the language was similarly influential; Dobson’s (1955) article on the emergence of a standard form of spoken English is heavily indebted to the account and the associated assumptions set out by Wyld. Wyld’s focus on spellings and sounds, at the expense of grammar, syntax and lexis, also guided the interests of later scholars. A tendency to focus on a single linguistic level characterises much of the early work on the history of English; Bradley (1904), for instance, takes a very different approach, choosing to exclude phonology and to focus mostly on the lexicon. Early attempts to write the history of English also struggled to find the appropriate distribution between extra-linguistic and intra-linguistic details; a happy balance was struck by Baugh (1935) and a subsequent co-edited volume with Cable (Baugh and Cable 1978–2012) now in a sixth edition, has served as one of the most important university textbooks, especially in American universities, throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Baugh and Cable (1978–2012) adopted a chronological approach, starting with Indo-European and devoting chapters to each of the linguistic periods up to the present day, with a final chapter focusing on the English language in America. This format has been extremely durable and has been adopted by most single-volume histories. It is only recently that we have seen attempts to provide histories of English that take greater account of regional varieties, and of the English language used in the various parts of the globe where it is spoken. An important step in this direction was the single-volume account of the history of Englishes provided by Crystal (2004); a major reference work is now available in the multi-volume *Cambridge History of the English Language* (Hogg 1992–2001), with separate volumes covering English in North America and English in Britain and overseas – covering British varieties as well as English in Australia, the Caribbean, New Zealand, South Africa, and South Asia.

### Contemporary approaches and debates

Having sketched out the origins of the study of the earlier history of English, this section introduces six of the most important approaches and methodologies that have characterised

the modern period: socio-historical (also known as historical sociolinguistics), dialectology, corpora, historical lexicology, correspondence studies and pragma-philology. In each of these approaches we witness major advances in the transition from a methodology that traces historical changes to ones that enable researchers to better understand why such changes occurred, and to trace the process by which these changes were implemented and adopted by the wider community of English speakers. The introduction of the socio-historical approach was a major development in the historical study of English. Where Neogrammarians sought to emphasise the regularity of the sound changes they described (terming them *laws*: ‘Lautgesetz’), insights derived from modern sociolinguistic methods focused on the gradual processes by which changes were disseminated, seeking to understand why they were adopted, and why, in certain cases, they were not. This new approach argued that sociolinguistic methods of studying contemporary linguistic change could be applied to the investigation of historical change – using the present to explain the past, as well as using the past to inform the present (Weinreich et al. 1968). This development also marks a decisive shift from the earlier Saussurean model that sought to make a strict distinction between the synchronic and diachronic methods. The socio-historical model further breaks with the past in its rejection of the earlier view that dismissed variation as random and inexplicable. Earlier scholars had sought only to chart and describe linguistic changes; they made no attempt to account for the differences they observed. By contrast, modern historical sociolinguists set out to explain why the language had changed, and why such changes had taken place at particular points in history. Where earlier scholars saw linguistic variation as random, modern historical sociolinguists, drawing upon the insights generated by sociolinguistic studies of contemporary usage, adopted the principle that linguistic variation is orderly and structured, according to a series of internal and external dimensions of language.

Sociolinguistic studies focusing on contemporary urban varieties, for instance, had discovered that variation patterned according to a number of factors, including the age, sex, education and social class of the speaker. Applying the Uniformitarian principle (for a discussion see Machan 2003, 2009), socio-historical linguists assume that those factors that condition language variation today will similarly apply in the past. Another important difference heralded by the socio-historical approach was the greater importance it placed on different linguistic varieties. Where previous approaches had focused their enquiries on the development of a standard form of the language, the socio-historical method gave greater prominence to the non-standard forms of English.

A good example of the possibilities opened up by such approaches is Smith’s (1996) explanation of the causes of the Great Vowel Shift – the major change in the lexical distribution of the English long vowels that took place between 1400 and 1660 – by focusing on the interaction of key extra- and intra-linguistic factors. Drawing upon insights derived from social network theory, developed by the sociolinguists James and Lesley Milroy (see for instance Milroy 1992), Smith argues that the large number of immigrants who moved to London in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries consciously emulated more prestigious modes of speech. These mobile speakers, who, in the terms employed by the Milroys, are ‘weakly-tied’ to their social and geographical origins, are likely to be early adopters of linguistic changes. In the case of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century London immigrants, when confronted by the spoken systems of the more socially-elevated native Londoners, they responded by attempting to adopt these more prestigious spoken systems. A consequence of this is that the incomers were prone to hypercorrection – a term that describes the way that non-standard speakers over-generalise a linguistic rule that they perceive to be prestigious. Smith’s account differed further from previous treatments of the Great Vowel Shift in its

inclusion of regional variants of the shift. Where most previous studies tackled the problem purely from the perspective of its impact upon the standard language, Smith considered regional variants as separate phenomena. When considering the set of changes that Northern dialects underwent, Smith suggested that their cause and implementation may be due to different factors to those triggering the Southern shift. The Northern dialect situation is especially important for an understanding of the Southern shift since the diphthongisation of /u:/ did not take place in some of these accents. Smith's explanation of the distinct pattern taken by the Northern shift has implications for an understanding of the triggering of the Southern shift, demonstrating the importance of taking account of all the evidence, not just that pertaining to the standard variety.

But there are, of course, a number of limitations in the extent to which this kind of methodology can be applied to the historical study of English. For instance, where modern sociolinguists seek to map variation onto its social context, such contexts can be less confidently reconstructed for past periods in the history of English. Where modern sociolinguists seek to explain variation in terms of a speaker's age, sex, education, social class and so on, historical linguists have much less access to contextual information of this kind. Smith's explanation of the Great Vowel Shift, for instance, must deal in larger generalisations about age and class, and has little to say about distinctions between education and sex.

These are not the only problems that beset the socio-historical method. In their analysis of contemporary variation, modern sociolinguists focus their analysis upon the most naturally occurring linguistic forms – preferring spoken over written forms for their greater spontaneity, and preferring everyday informal speech, since that is likely to reveal language use in its most natural form. By contrast, the materials that form the basis of historical sociolinguistics are restricted to written forms of the language, much of which represents carefully crafted linguistic domains – literary writings, historical documents and official records, rather than the spontaneous and unstudied usage favoured by modern sociolinguists. Where sociolinguists can select their informants in sociologically- and statistically-informed ways, socio-historical linguists are restricted to the corpus as it survives – the result of the workings of chance and the hazards of history, rather than a process of principled selection. To some extent, the response to this situation has been to make the best of 'bad data' (Labov 1972), although in other cases certain adjustments in methodology – such as the introduction of corpus approaches (discussed below) – have enabled more structured analysis of historical data.

Another way in which the application of modern linguistic methods has revolutionised the historical study of English is in the field of dialectology. As we saw above, the historical study of English had previously focused heavily on the evolution of the standard language, ignoring the rich evidence for the history of English dialects. This evidence is particularly plentiful in the Middle English period, since there was no standard variety of the written language. For this reason, changes in the methods of historical dialectology in the light of modern approaches are best illustrated by a consideration of the work of the Middle English Dialect Project. This project was instigated by M.L. Samuels and A.I. McIntosh of the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh respectively, in the 1950s. Drawing on methodological insights from the linguistic survey of the Modern Scots dialects, they set out to produce an atlas of the dialects represented by the Middle English written record. Despite being restricted to exclusively written materials, the Middle English Dialect project proceeded on the assumption that written variation could be subject to dialect mapping in precisely the same manner as had been achieved with spoken differences in the Modern Scots dialect survey. In seeking to apply modern dialectological techniques to the Middle English dialects, the project encountered a number of challenges. An obvious limitation imposed by the sources concerned



the lack of access to the spoken language: a problem that affects all historical studies that pre-date the invention of audio recording technology. As well as lacking direct access to the spoken language, the Middle English dialect survey was limited by the lack of localised documents – most Middle English manuscripts were written by anonymous scribes and do not preserve important information about the date or location of their copying. The survey overcame this limitation by developing the ‘fit-technique’; manuscripts were ‘fitted’ on the dialect map by comparing their linguistic forms with those recorded in manuscripts where the location of copying was known (‘localised’ or ‘anchor’ texts) (Benskin 1991). The result of this was the localisation of around 1,000 manuscripts copied in the period between 1350 and 1450, accompanied by extensive linguistic profiles of representative data and schematic maps indicating the distribution of representative linguistic items (McIntosh et al. 1986).

This project resulted in the publication of the four-volume *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (1986) [*LALME*]. The data assembled by *LALME*, although based mostly on written variables such as orthographic variants (e.g. the difference between *shal*, *schal*, *sal* and *xal*), has been used to attempt to recover changes in the spoken language. For example, James Milroy has shown how the survey’s findings can be used to reconstruct the history of h-dropping – that is, the deletion of initial /h/ before vowels. By tracing the spellings of words where initial <h> has been omitted, as well as those instances where an unhistorical <h> has been added, Milroy is able to trace the beginnings of this change to the East Anglian dialects of the fifteenth century, where it may have functioned as a marker of prestigious speech (Milroy 1983). While the later account of the stigmatisation of h-dropping in the extensive literature of prescriptivism produced in the eighteenth century has been extensively scrutinised (Mugglestone 2003), its earlier origins and subsequent developments were much less well-known.

The publication of *LALME* represented a major breakthrough in historical dialectology; before its publication the study of Middle English dialects had relied upon the handful of manuscripts that contained internal localisations – that is, explicit statements in the manuscript as to where it was copied. The localisations offered by *LALME* enabled scholars to draw upon a vastly increased pool of regional data in order to construct a much more nuanced account of the Middle English dialects. It laid the foundation for significant advances in a range of related areas. One example is the field of Middle English Word geography. Prior to the publication of *LALME*, little was known about the regional distribution of Middle English lexis beyond early attempts to distinguish between words found predominantly in the North and those more commonly found in the South.

*LALME* covered the period 1350–1500 and focused on the dialects of England; its publication in 1986 marked the inauguration of two daughter projects, the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* [*LAEME*] (edited by Margaret Laing) and the *Linguistic Atlas of Older Scots* [*LAOS*] (Williamson 2008), which were designed to extend the *LALME* approach to the early Middle English and Older Scots varieties. Both the daughter projects faced similar problems to those faced by the *LALME* project in dealing with written materials, the majority of which were similarly unlocalised. For the early Middle English atlas these problems were exacerbated by the fact that many of the legal documents that had formed the bulk of the localised documents used for *LALME* were written in French or Latin during this period. Another limitation was the relative paucity of material written in English during this period, combined with the tendency for surviving texts to cluster in particular dialect areas (such as the south-west Midlands), leaving large swathes of the country unrepresented (Laing 2000). The lack of data was, however, in some ways an advantage, since it meant that it became possible to analyse the entirety of the textual record in a way that would have been

impossible for the *LALME* project, which instead relied upon sampling. The complete textual coverage was further aided by advances in computer technology; where the *LALME* survey was carried out by noting down relevant forms using paper questionnaires, *LAEME* was able to dispense with the questionnaire method entirely by transcribing the complete text into electronic form. A major advantage of this approach was that it no longer required researchers to prejudge which forms were likely to be important for localisation; electronic publication of the complete corpus of texts – with lexico-grammatical tagging – means that it is now possible for researchers to carry out their own analysis of the early Middle English materials in a way that was not possible with *LALME* (Laing 2013). A subsequent project has made the *LALME* materials available online, albeit with more limited functionality than for *LAEME* and without the complete corpus of texts (Benskin et al. 2013).

Another related project, based at the universities of Glasgow and Stavanger, is drawing upon the *LALME* localisations in order to assemble a corpus of later Middle English dialect texts. The Middle English Scribal Texts project set out in 1998 to produce a reference grammar of Middle English based upon the materials assembled by *LALME*. However, it has subsequently modified both its methods and its aims; its objective is now to analyse texts according to their ‘textual communities’, drawing upon a greater range of defining criteria – genre, text type, domain – as well as geography, to explain a text’s linguistic forms. The Middle English Scribal Texts programme [*MEST*], therefore, draws upon recent developments in sociolinguistics, literacy studies and pragmatics, as well as historical dialectology.

The Early Middle English Atlas and Scribal Texts Project exemplify a further important development in the historical study of English in the past twenty-five years: the use of an electronic corpus. Where previous studies had to rely upon the manual analysis of sources, historical corpus studies were able to draw upon large quantities of data. A leading centre for studies of this kind is the Research Unit for the Study of Variation, Contacts and Change in English, based at the University of Helsinki. The Helsinki research unit has pioneered the production of corpora whose constituent texts have been carefully selected in order to represent particular linguistic varieties. The earliest corpus to be produced in this way is the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts: Diachronic and Dialectal, a multi-genre corpus which included samples of texts across the Old, Middle and Early Modern English periods, first issued in 1991. As with the *LAEME* and *MEST* projects, the Helsinki corpus enables searching across dialects, but unlike these synchronic corpora, it also allows researchers to carry out longitudinal surveys. Since it was based upon edited texts rather than original manuscripts, however, the Helsinki corpus is less useful for studying features such as spelling, punctuation and morphology, since these are aspects of a text that may be normalised or modernised by modern editors. However, given that it includes more than one and a half million words, the Helsinki corpus is a useful means of gleaning general information about occurrences of forms, structures and lexemes across the history of English, which may then be supplemented with recourse to other more specialised corpora.

Electronic corpora have transformed our ability to correlate linguistic variation with a range of conditioning factors – such as geography, register, gender, age, social network and so on. Studies of this kind may be carried out using specialised corpora based upon Old English, Middle English and Older Scots; more recent corpora have focused on particular genres and text types: the Corpus of Early English Correspondence and the Corpus of Early English Medical Writing, both parts of the Helsinki corpus.

Other developments in historical English corpora have been associated with developments in historical lexicography. In the 1950s work began on the production of a dictionary of Middle English: a synchronic account of Middle English vocabulary that would draw upon

the methods and publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary [OED]*, but which would offer a much more detailed account of the lexis of the period from 1100–1500. The *Middle English Dictionary [MED]* (Kurath et al. 1952–2001) began life as a Chaucer dictionary, but was subsequently extended to encompass the entirety of the Middle English corpus (for an account of the history of the *MED* see Blake 2002). The completed dictionary comprises some 15,000 pages of detailed lexical information, published in 115 print fascicles, based upon the analysis of more than three million citation slips.

The *MED* was completed in 2001; at the same time, an electronic version was mounted on the World Wide Web, accompanied by a suite of resources and known by the collective term *Middle English Compendium* (for an account of the production of this resource see McSparran 2002). The electronic version of the dictionary differs from its paper equivalent in a number of important ways, enabling searching of the *MED* entries not just by headword, but also by etymology, definition, cited work or author and so on. In addition to the electronic version of the dictionary, the *Middle English Compendium* includes a hyperbibliography: a comprehensive listing of bibliographical references relating to all of the sources cited in the dictionary.

A further feature incorporated within the *Middle English Compendium* is the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse. This corpus differs from that compiled for the related project to produce a *Dictionary of Old English (DOE)* in that it is a post-hoc assembly of relevant materials, rather than a resource assembled specifically for the purpose of producing the dictionary like that assembled for *DOE*. It also differs from other Middle English corpora discussed so far in its lack of explicit design. Rather than being constructed upon a set of explicit principles intended to represent a particular group of text types, dialects or genres, the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse is an assembly of almost 150 texts that are represented within the pages of the dictionary. Since many of the major Middle English authors and texts are represented, this corpus is most useful for carrying out linguistic analysis of major works, such as Layamon's *Brut* – both of the surviving manuscripts of this work are included in the corpus – or of canonical writers such as Chaucer, Langland and Gower. Since the texts are mostly based upon out-of-print editions, such as editions produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is often a degree of editorial intervention that makes them unreliable for analysis of spelling, morphology and punctuation.

The modern period has also witnessed major developments in the content and accessibility of the *OED*. Following the publication of the final fascicle of the dictionary, quotations began to be collected for an updated supplement of the work – including new instances of words included, as well as words that were omitted from the original edition. This process resulted in the publication of a Supplementary volume in 1933; alongside this, the complete dictionary was reissued in twelve volumes with the modern title *The Oxford English Dictionary*. A subsequent programme to keep the dictionary up to date was established in 1957, with the appointment of R.W. Burchfield as its editor. This project aimed to ensure better coverage of twentieth-century usage, and to spread the dictionary's net wider to include words associated with global varieties of English: US, Australian, South African and South Asian Englishes. The final version of this additional supplement was issued in four volumes published between 1972 and 1986. A further revision of this version of the dictionary appeared in 1989, under the editorship of J.A. Simpson and E. Weiner. As well as integrating the supplements into the main dictionary, the 1989 edition added some 5000 new words and numerous additional senses to existing words. But perhaps the most significant change to come with this edition was the transfer of the complete dictionary to electronic form, making it searchable in whole new ways, and laying the foundation for the dictionary's next incarnation.

The appearance of the *OED* in electronic form marked the beginning of a new lease of life for the historical study of English vocabulary, as well as for analysis of the dictionary itself. The CD-ROM format was subsequently replaced by release of the dictionary over the World Wide Web, a move that was accompanied by the instigation of a new phase in the dictionary's life: a complete revision of the entire dictionary. As well as making available the fruits of its extensive researches into the history and documentation of English words, the online dictionary enables researchers to carry out research upon the dictionary itself. Recent work by scholars such as Mugglestone (2012) and Brewer (2012) has drawn upon the search facilities of the online version to assess the dictionary's representation of particular periods or specific authors.

In the examples discussed above, we have seen how electronic databases have enabled researchers to interrogate linguistic data according to a wider variety of social parameters. Central to the socio-historical approach has been the study of texts that represent more spontaneous forms of writing. An important body of evidence for such studies are collections of correspondence, since letters are generally written more spontaneously than other types of text, such as literary, historical or scientific writing. Furthermore, where manuscripts were copied by scribes whose names and biographies are mostly unknown, personal letters are usually signed by their authors. An important exception to this are letters authored by women, which were often written by amanuenses (especially in the Middle English period). But even in cases such as these, scholars have found ways to distinguish between the contributions of author and scribe, enabling discussion of grammatical constructions and lexical choices (Davis 1972). Important attempts to apply the insights of social network theory to historical collections of correspondence can be found in Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2000) and Bergs (2005). Studies of correspondence collections have been central in applying sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender and occupation to the analysis of linguistic variation. As well as letters, historical sociolinguists have turned to other kinds of informal texts – plays and court depositions – for evidence of written texts that more closely resemble the spoken language.

Texts like these have been central to the emergence of the field of historical pragmatics – another approach in which insights from modern linguistics are applied to texts written in earlier periods. Early interventions in this field were focused on the application of speech act and politeness theories to historical texts; classic instances include applications of Brown and Levinson (1987) to Shakespearean play texts (Brown and Gilman 1989). This approach has been important for analysing the changing uses of the second person pronouns in the Middle and Early Modern English periods. Where Middle English inherited a system in which the distinction between *thou* and *ye* was based purely on number (singular or plural), contact with French introduced a pragmatic contrast similar to the T/V distinctions found in modern languages like French. But in the early modern period this distinction began to break down, so that *you* became the default or unmarked pronoun, while *thou* became marked – used to indicate intimacy or contempt. Eventually this distinction was also lost, so that by the eighteenth century *thou* was preserved only in certain dialects and in deliberately archaic usage, such as religious language or poetry. The process by which these changes occurred has been tracked by drawing upon the pronoun usage employed in literary texts (Burnley 1983; Calvo 1992), as well as in more authentic usage, such as court depositions (Hope 1993).

The development of this field led to the establishment of a *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* in 2000; its inaugural issue included articles on the application of speech act theory to early modern spells, and a typology of 'first moves' in courtly amorous interactions (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2000). Attempts to bring historical pragmatics into dialogue with

more traditional philological approaches has led to the introduction of a new field of study, termed pragma-philology. As this field develops scholars are seeking to integrate developments in pragmatics with research into the material text – considering how the visual layout of a text might influence the way its linguistic codes are interpreted. An example of this approach is found in Moore’s (2011) study of the pragmatic and discourse strategies used to demarcate speech in pre-modern English – before the introduction of speech marks. In the field of book history, Wakelin’s (2014) study of scribal corrections has drawn attention to the importance placed upon the visual appearance of the manuscript page in the Middle Ages, and the ways in which aesthetic factors may have influenced linguistic forms. This developing field, then, seeks to bring together these overlapping interests of book historians and historical pragmaticians in order to develop tools for analysing what has been termed ‘pragmatics on the page’ (Carroll et al. 2013).

With this latest development the historical study of English has returned to its roots in the philological analysis of texts and their material contexts. However, the methods with which these texts are being analysed have been revolutionised by developments in modern linguistic theory, and transformed by developments in digital technology. We have seen how, from its beginnings in the comparative approach, the historical study of English began with the study of texts, from which individual words were extracted in order to account for their phonological developments over time. But little attempt was made to study the contexts of such forms – the texts and manuscripts within which they survived – nor was there any effort to explain the processes by which phonological changes took place. The historical study of English today has returned to the texts and contexts armed with methodological insights drawn from modern linguistics, in order to ask questions about the mechanisms by which variants arose, and why certain variants were adopted by the wider speech community.

### Further reading

- Aitchison, J. (2013) *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* 4th edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A general discussion about how and why languages change, drawing on examples from a wide range of languages.
- Horobin, S. (2016) *How English Became English: A Short History of a Global Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. A short history of English which also engages with questions of correctness, authority and standardisation.
- Millar, R. M. (2012) *English Historical Linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh. A history of English informed by socio-historical insights.
- Smith, J. (1996) *An Historical Study of English: Function, Form and Change*. London: Routledge. A methodological survey that discusses a selection of changes in writing system, pronunciation, grammar and lexis.

### Related topics

- The grammars of English
- The phonology of English
- Standards in English
- Contact Englishes.

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- Helsinki corpora  
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