

# The New Cambridge History of the English Language



Raymond Hickey, University of Limerick

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November 2025



# Background to the new history

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Some years ago, I was asked by Cambridge University Press would I be interested in being the general editor for a new edition of the existing *Cambridge History of the English Language*.

I 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 Cambridge University Press.

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 original *Cambridge History of the English Language*

General editor: Richard M. Hogg

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Volume I: The Beginnings to 1066 (ed. Richard M. Hogg, 1992)

Volume II: 1066-1476 (ed. Nicholas Blake, 1992)

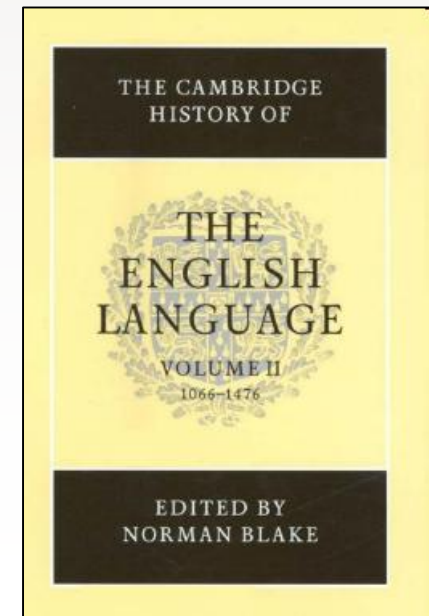
Volume III: 1476-1776 (ed. Roger Lass, 1999)

Volume IV: 1776-1997 (ed. Suzanne Romaine, 1998)

Volume V: English in Britain and Overseas – Origins and Development (ed. Robert Burchfield, 1994)

Volume VI: English in North America (ed. John Algeo, 2001)

Note. Organisation is chronological (Vols. I-IV) and then by area (Vols. V + VI).



# Contents of the new *Cambridge History of the English Language*

General editor: Raymond Hickey

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Volume I: Context, contact and development

Volume II: Documentation, data and modelling

Volume III: Transmission, change and ideology

Volume IV: Britain, Ireland and Europe

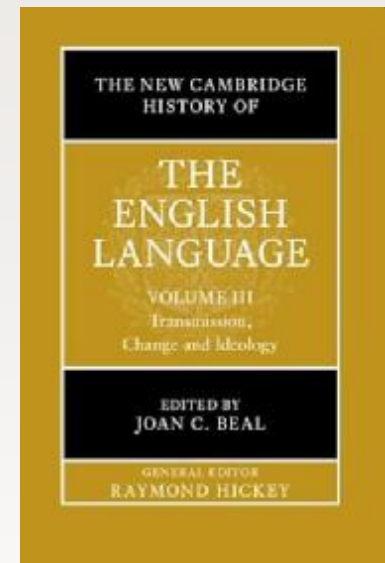
Volume V: North America and the Caribbean

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)

Note. Organisation is largely by topic (Vols. I-III) and then by area (Vols. IV-VI).



The original and the new histories complement each other in several ways: the different approaches to many topics offer contrasting perspectives on data from the history of English



## The editorial team

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Six volumes,  
Cambridge  
University Press,  
2025/6

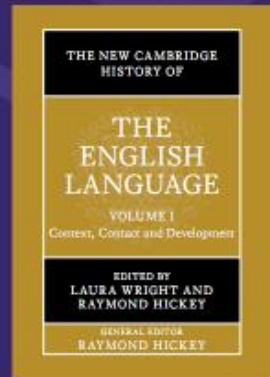
172 chapters by  
227 contributors



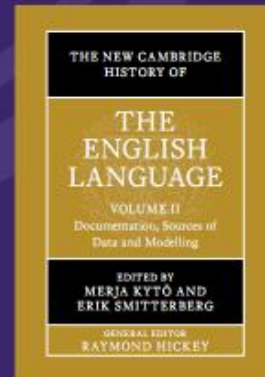
# The New Cambridge History of The English Language

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.

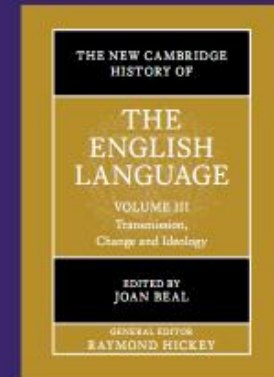
Series Editor: Raymond Hickey, *University of Limerick*



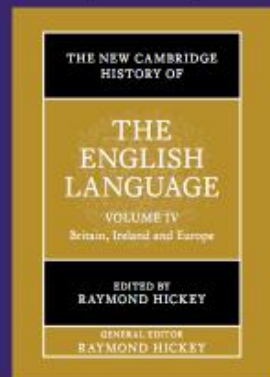
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Volume 1: Context, Contact  
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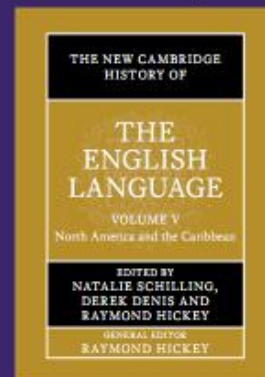
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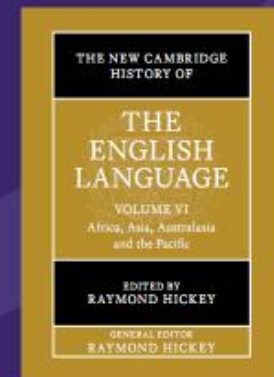
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Volume 5: North America and the Caribbean  
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Raymond Hickey



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Volume 6: Africa, Asia,  
Australasia and the Pacific  
Edited by Raymond Hickey



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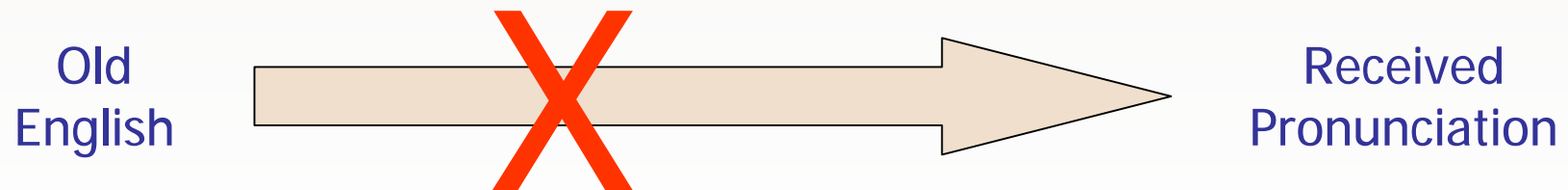


# A view of history

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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

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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 new *Cambridge History of the English Language*

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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.

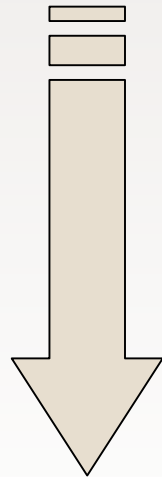
So the decision was made to have chapters of about 20-25 pages in the new history. These could then be used as reading material, say for a particular week, within courses dedicated to various historical topics.



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

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Old English



Modern  
English

Phonology

Morphology

Syntax

Semantics

Pragmatics

Sociolinguistics

Onomastics



# The language of major works / authors

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Open page of *Beowulf*  
manuscript



Geoffrey Chaucer  
(1340-1399)

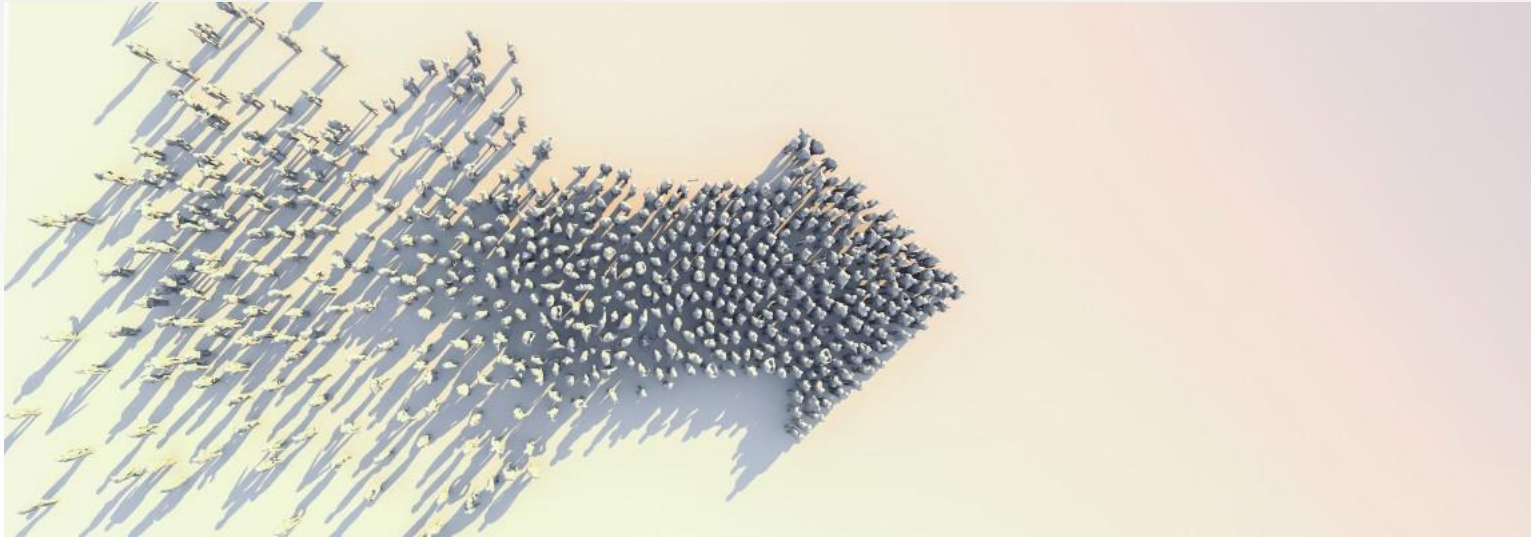


William  
Shakespeare  
(1564-1616)



# The history of English in the twenty-first century:

## Present research trends





# Language Variation and Change

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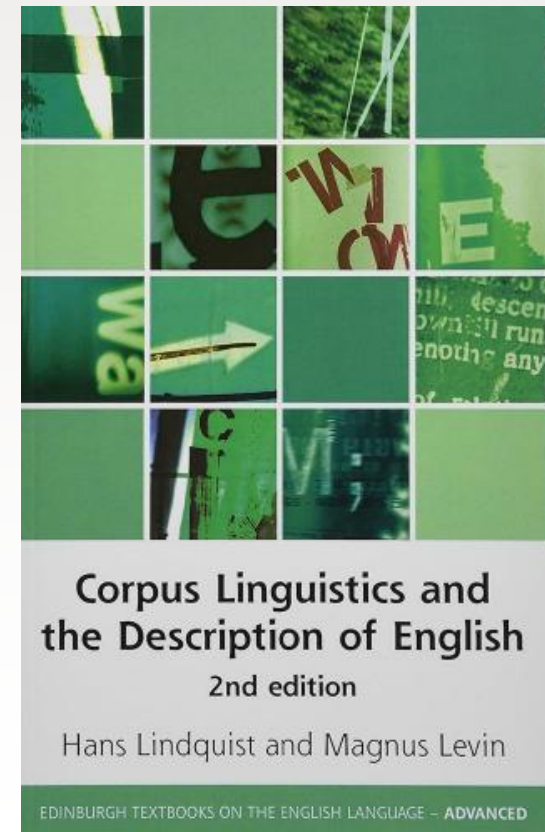
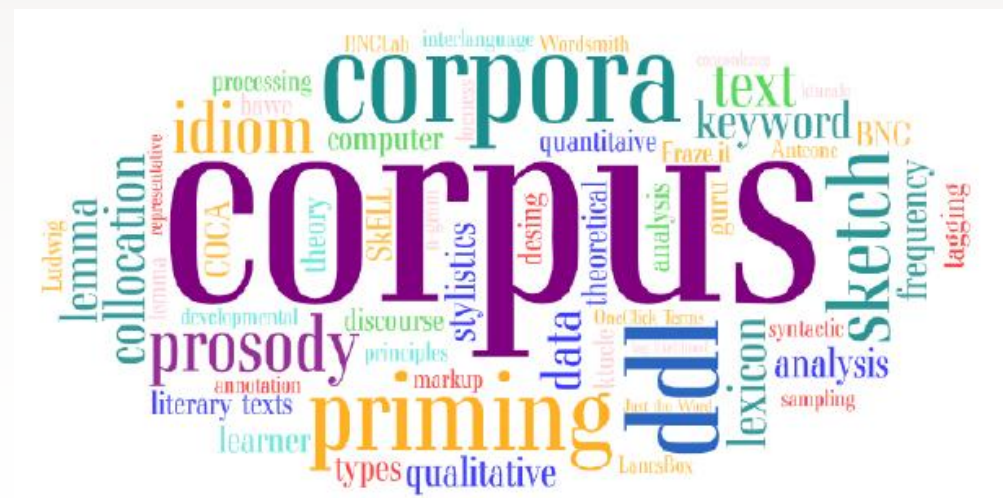
The research paradigm  
'Language Variation  
and Change' has  
informed much recent  
research into the  
history of English.

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



# Methodologies

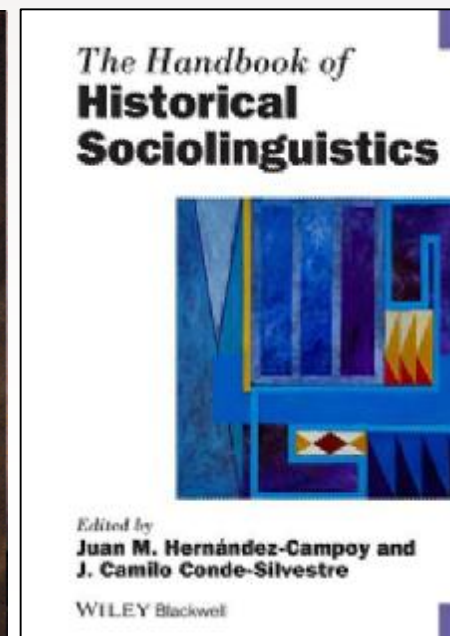
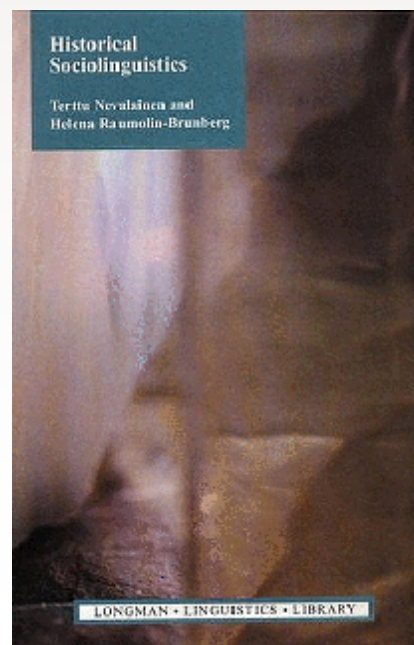
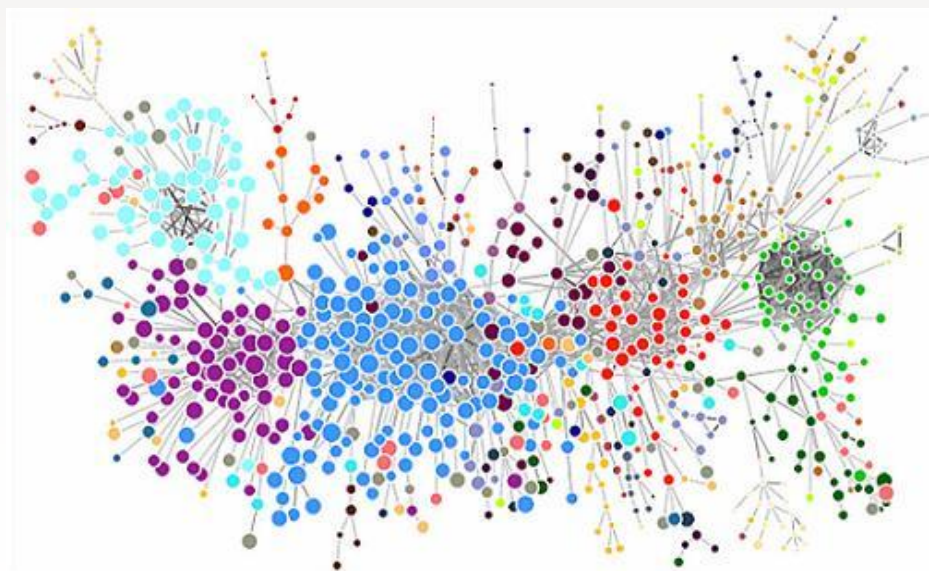
With the advent of powerful computers in the late 1980s and 1990s linguists began collecting large amount of data – known technically as text corpora – and began using these increasing in their research. This research avenue has been greatly expanded in the present century.



# Sociolinguistics: Networks and communities of practice

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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

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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 individual styles of language. In addition, many women wrote grammars in the eighteenth century offering unique perspectives on the structure of the contemporary 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)



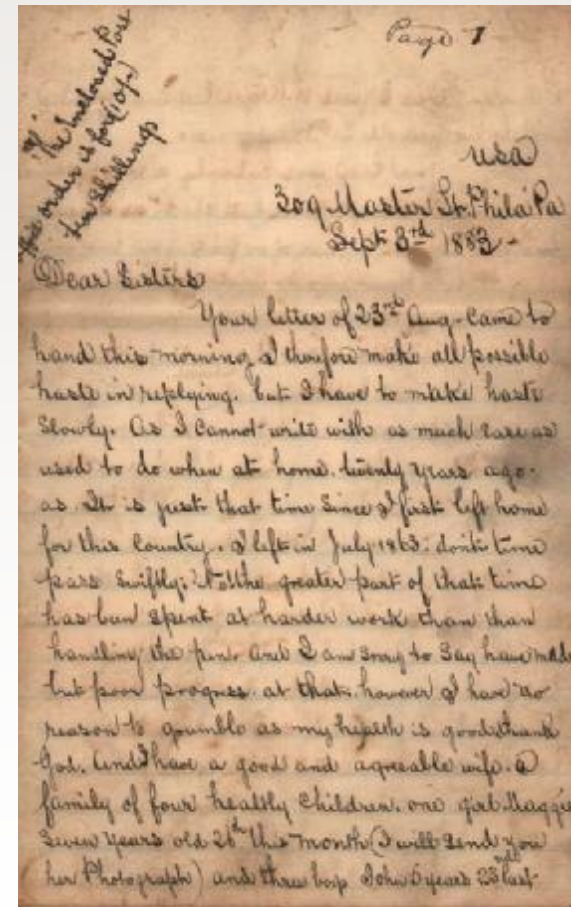
# New approaches: Orality in historical documents

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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



# Emigrant letters as sources of data

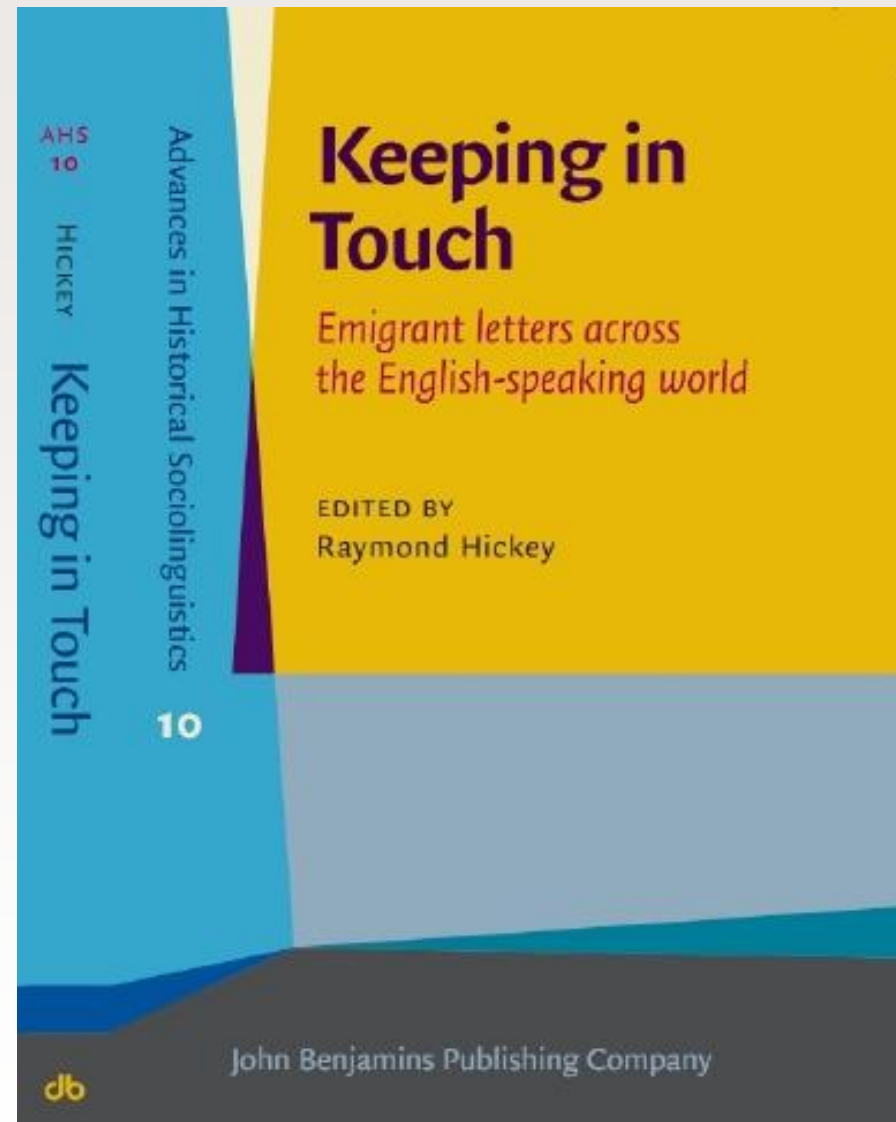
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Emigrants to overseas locations during the colonial period wrote back home recounting their experiences in their new environment and trying to get news of the family members in the home country and to convince potential emigrants to make the move and leave.





Hickey, Raymond (ed)  
2019. *Keeping in Touch.  
Emigrant Letters across  
the English-speaking  
World*. Amsterdam: John  
Benjamins.



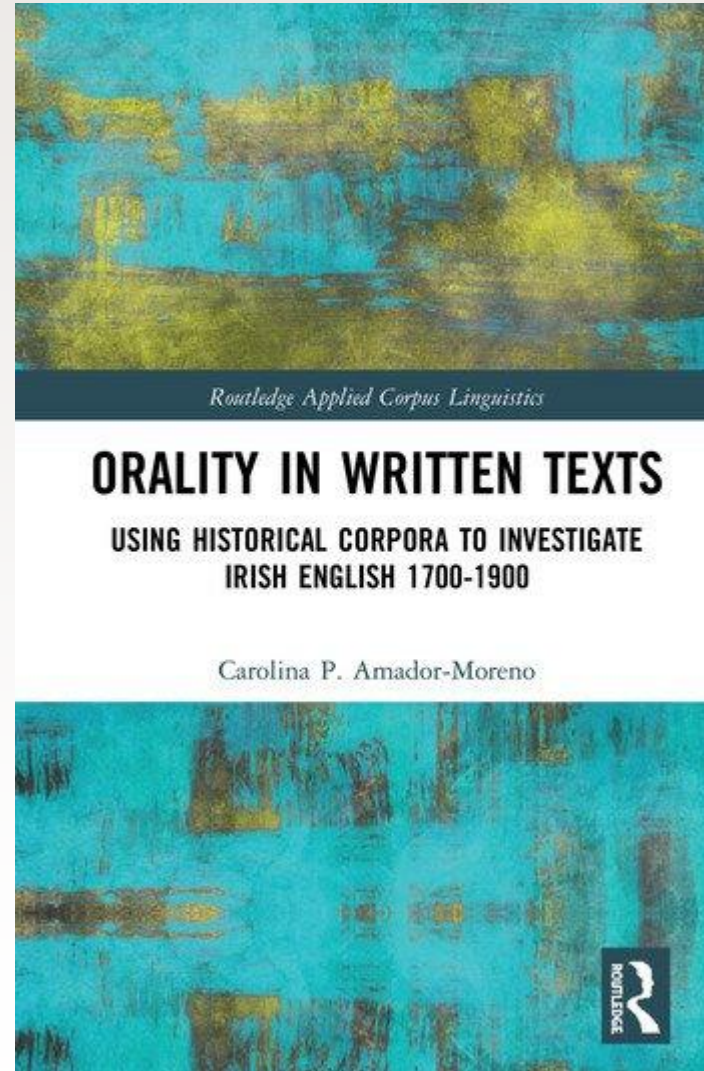
## Some other relevant literature

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### The Language of Discovery, Exploration and Settlement

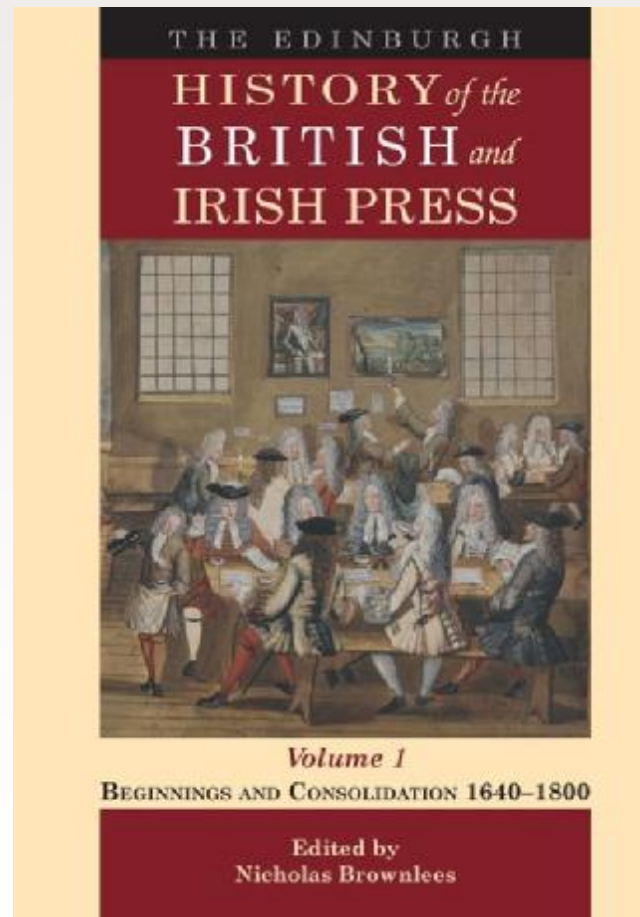


*Edited by*  
*Nicholas Brownlees*



# The history of newspapers in the English-speaking world

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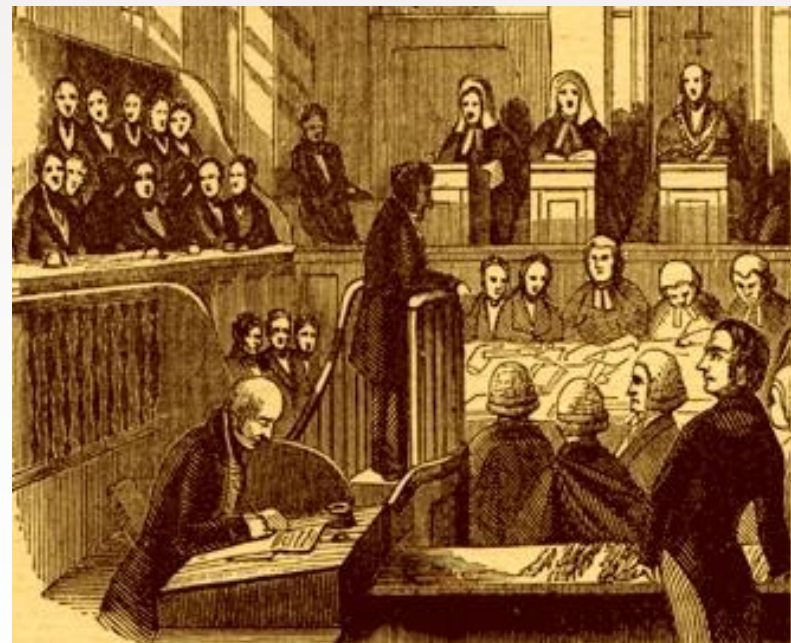




# New sources of data: Court depositions

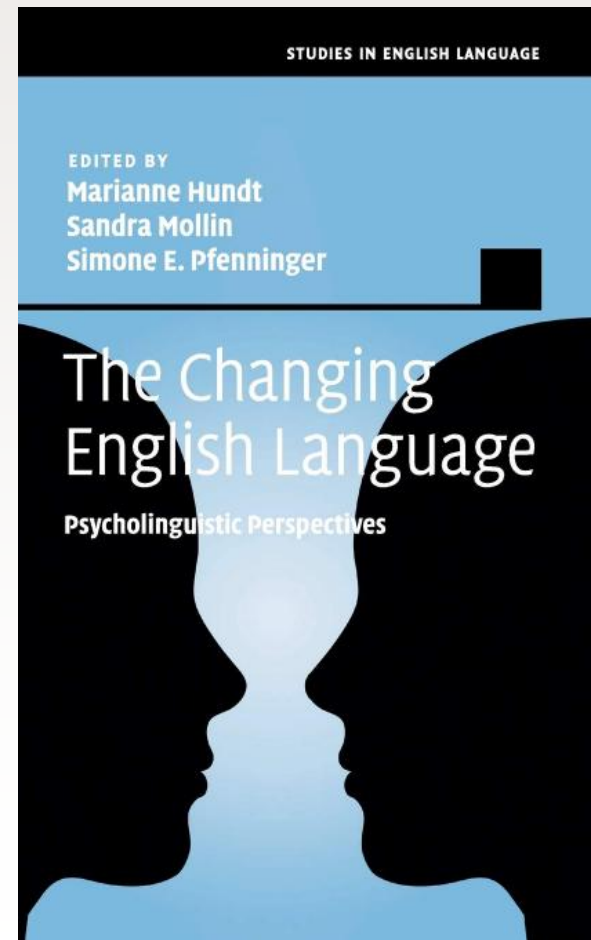
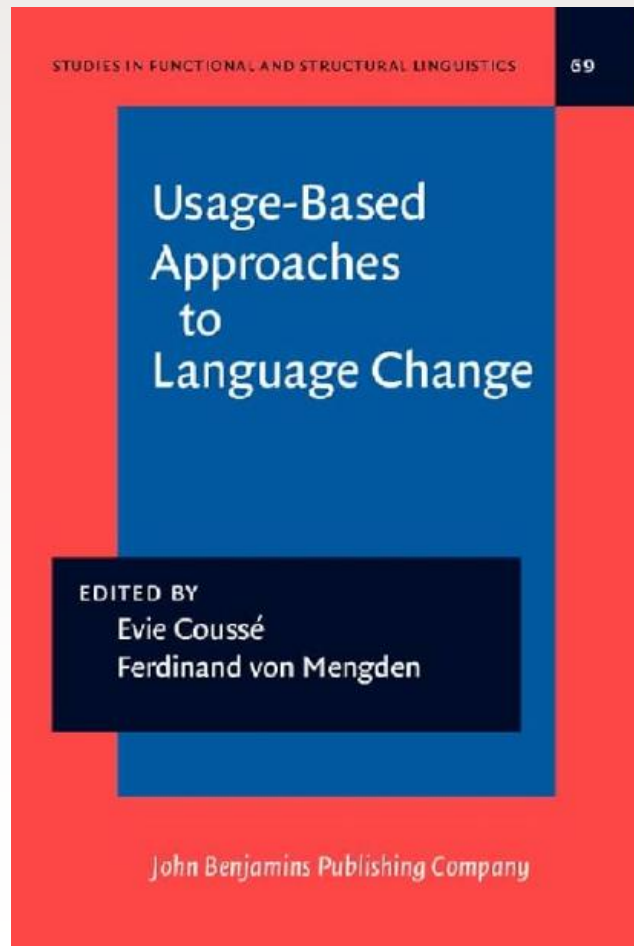
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Court depositions, such as those of defendants at the Old Bailey in London over a considerable time span (1740-1913), offer unique insights into vernacular English at various periods.



# Functional, usage-based and psycholinguistic approaches to language change

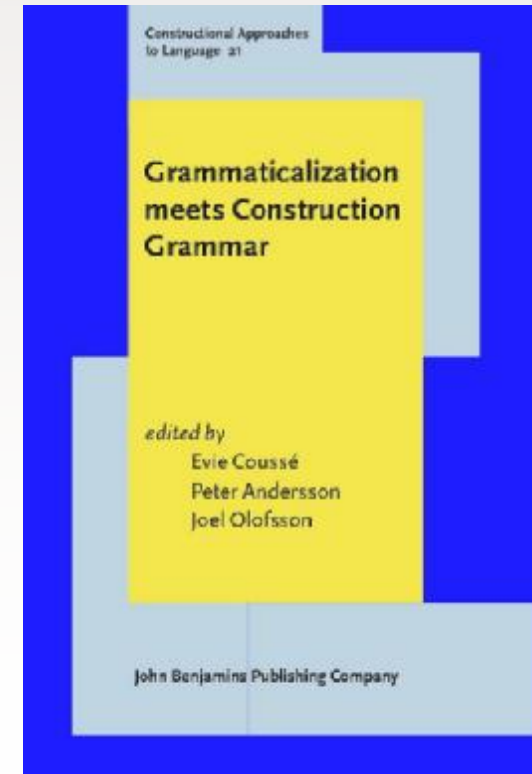
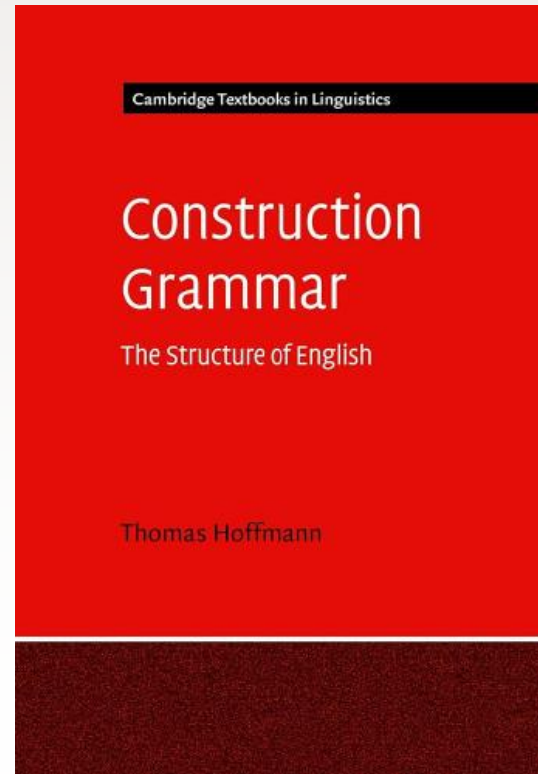
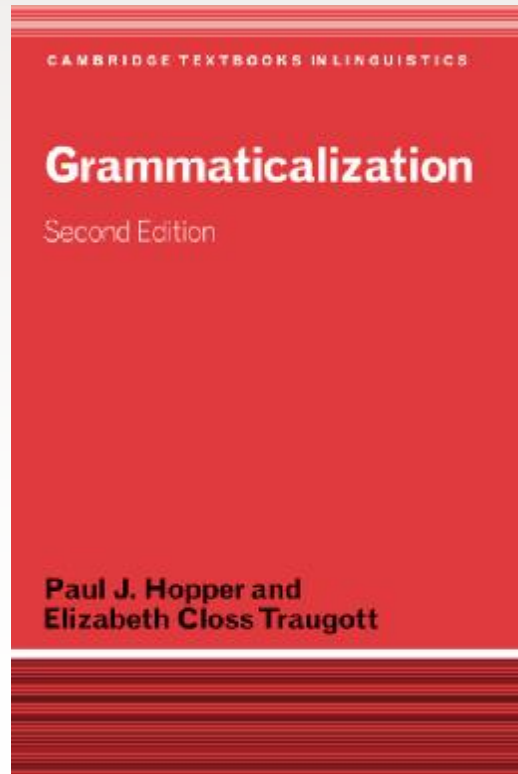
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# Grammaticalisation and Construction Grammar

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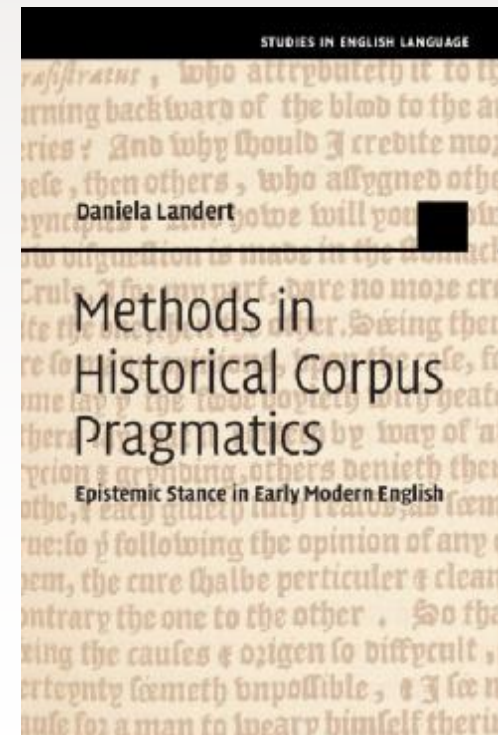
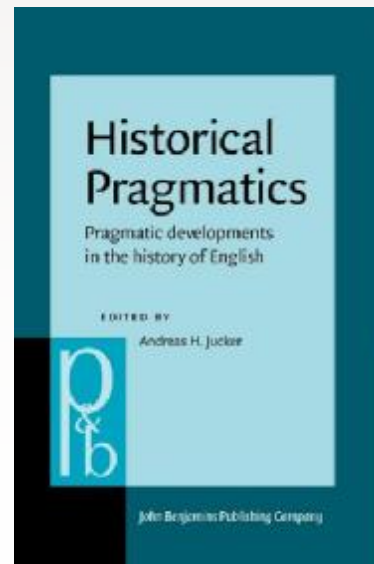
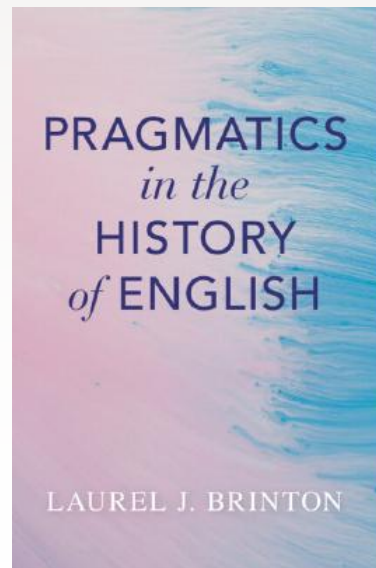
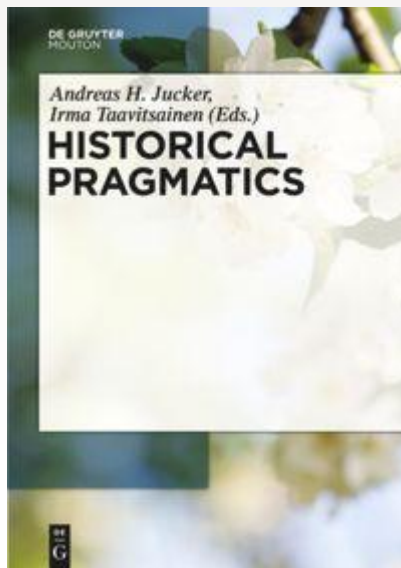
New models of grammar have arisen as alternatives to the established approaches of generative grammar.



# Historical Pragmatics

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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.

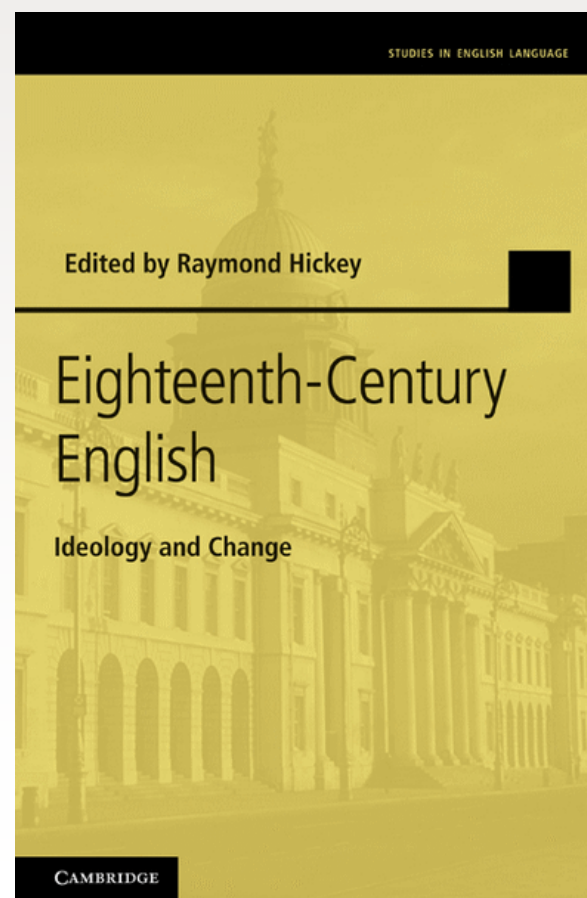
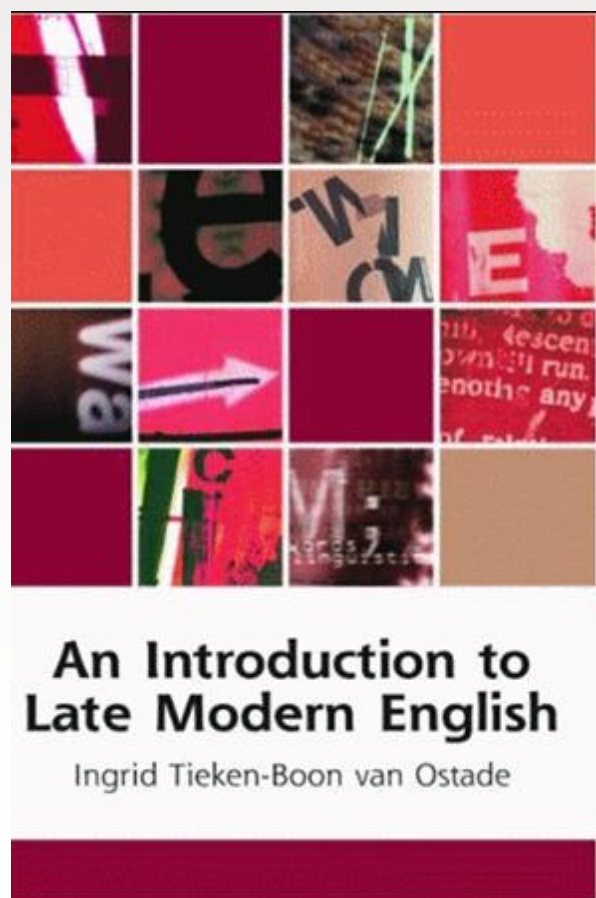




# The Late Modern English Period: 1800 –

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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.



## The speech of London as the emerging standard

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The language of the court in London came to be perceived in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a guideline for speakers from the provinces. Initially, this is a very benign type of prescriptivism without the censure of provincial forms which was to develop in the eighteenth century.

# A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue

Jonathan Swift

A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue, in a Letter to the Most Honourable Robert Earl of Oxford and Mortimer, Lord High Treasurer of Great Britain, Printed from Benjamin Tooke, at the Middle Temple Gate, Fleetstreet, 1712

To the Most Honourable Robert Earl of Oxford, &c.

My Lord,

What I had the Honour of mentioning to Your Lordship some time ago in Conversation, was not a new Thought, just then started by Accident or Occasion, but the Result of long Reflection; and I have been confirmed in my Sentiments by the Opinion of some very judicious Persons, with whom I consulted. They all agreed, That noting would be of greater Use towards the Improvement of Knowledge and Politeness, than some effectual Method for *Correcting, Enlarging, and Ascertaining our Language*; and they think it a Work very possible to be compassed, under the Protection of a Prince, the Countenance and Encouragement of a Ministry, and the Care of Proper Persons chosen for such an Undertaking. I was glad to find Your Lordship's Answer in so different a Style, from what hath been commonly made use of on the like Occasions, for some Years past, that all such Thoughts must be deferred to a Time of Peace: A Topick which some have carried so far, that they would not have us, by any means, think of preserving our Civil or Religious Constitution, because we were engaged in a War abroad. It will be among the distinguishing Marks of your Ministry, My Lord, that you had the Genius above all such Regards, and that no reasonable Proposal for the Honour, the Advantage, or the Ornament of Your Country, however foreign to Your immediate Office was ever neglected by You. I confess, the Merit of this Candor and Condescension is very much lessened, because Your Lordship hardly leaves us room to offer our good Wishes, removing all our Difficulties, and supplying all our Wants, faster than the most visionary Projector can adjust his Schemes.



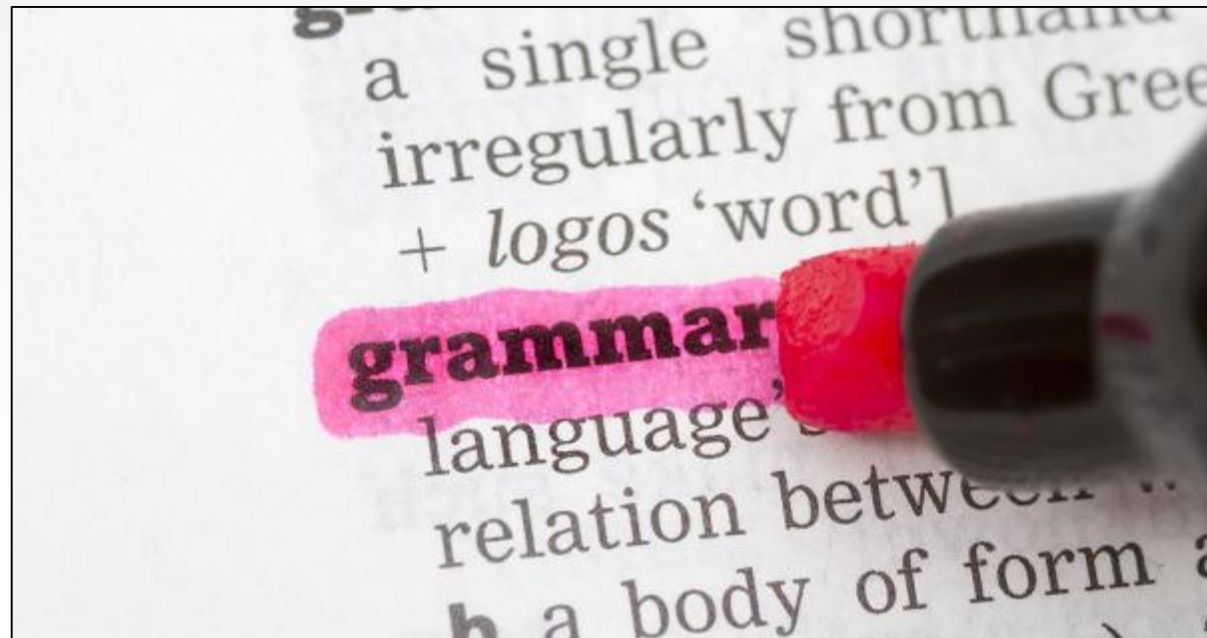
Jonathan  
Swift, Irish  
satirist and  
political writer

1667-1745

# Prescriptivism in England

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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.

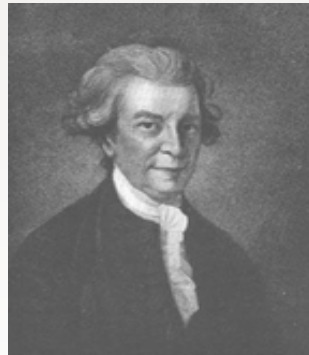


# Reassessments: The rise of standard English

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John Walker  
(1732-1807)



Thomas Sheridan  
(1719-1788)



Robert Lowth  
(1710-1787)



Samuel Johnson  
(1709-1784)



A SHORT  
INTRODUCTION  
TO  
ENGLISH GRAMMAR:  
WITH  
CRITICAL NOTES.

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THE SECOND EDITION, CORRECTED.

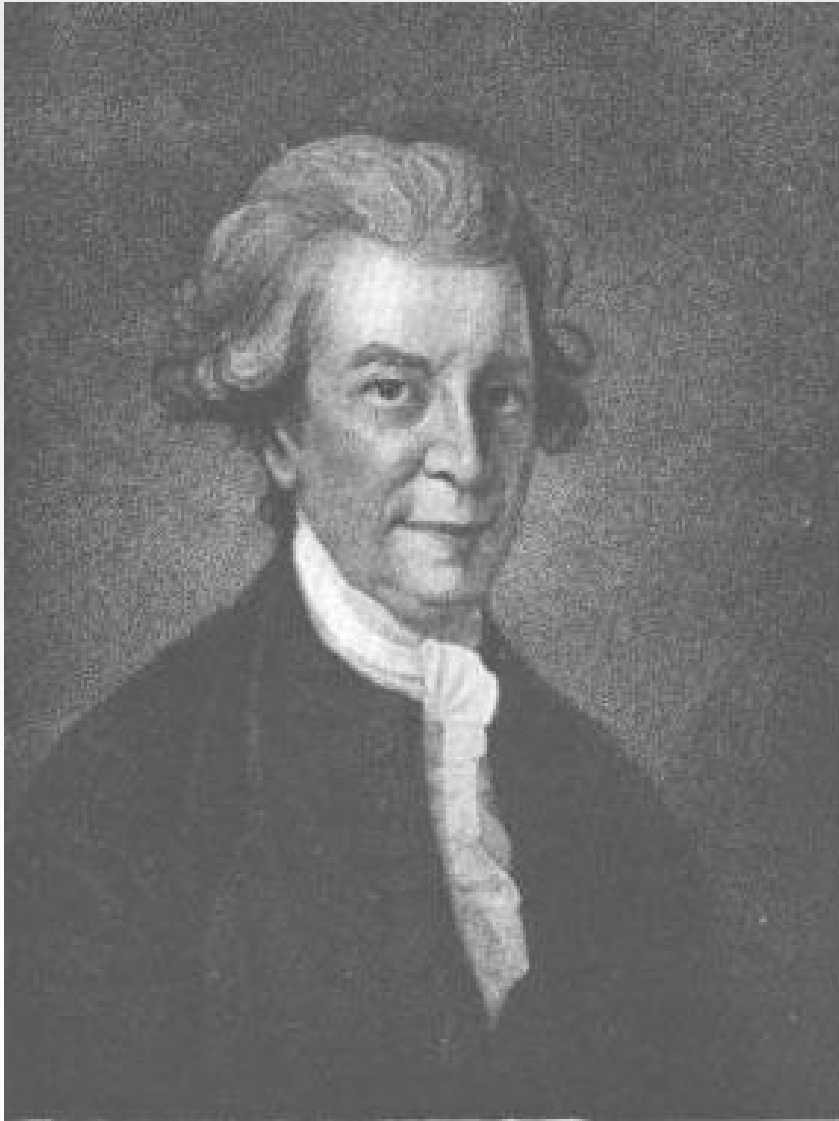
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Nam ipsum *Latine* loqui est illud quidem in magna laude ponendum: sed non tam sua sponte, quam quod est a plerisque neglectum. Non enim tam præclarum est scire *Latine*, quam turpe nescire; neque tam id mihi oratoris boni, quam civis *Romani* proprium videtur. CICERO.

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LONDON,  
Printed for A. MILLAR, in the *Strand*; and  
R. and J. DODSLEY, in *Pall-mall*,  
MDCCCLXIII.





**Sheridan, Thomas (1719-1788)**

Irish writer, born in Dublin and educated in London and Dublin. He was first an actor and is the author of a farce *The Brave Irishman; or Captain O'Blunder* (1743; published 1754).

Later he became a travelling expert on elocution. Sheridan produced *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762), *A Rhetorical Grammar of the English language* (1788) and *A General Dictionary of the English Language* (1780) in which he gives guidelines for the correct use of English.



**Walker, John (1732-1807)** A Londoner and prescriptive author of the late 18th century, best known for his *Critical pronouncing dictionary* (1791) which enjoyed great popularity in its day.



A CRITICAL  
PRONOUNCING DICTIONARY,  
AND EXPOSITOR OF  
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:

IN WHICH, NOT ONLY THE MEANING OF EVERY WORD IS CLEARLY EXPLAINED,  
AND THE SOUND OF EVERY SYLLABLE DISTINCTLY SHOWN,  
BUT, WHERE WORDS ARE SUBJECT TO DIFFERENT PRONUNCIATIONS,  
THE AUTHORITIES OF OUR BEST PRONOUNCING DICTIONARIES ARE FULLY EXHIBITED,  
THE REASONS FOR EACH ARE AT LARGE DISPLAYED, AND THE  
PREFERABLE PRONUNCIATION IS POINTED OUT.

*To which are prefixed,*

PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION:

IN WHICH THE SOUNDS OF LETTERS, SYLLABLES, AND WORDS, ARE CRITICALLY  
INVESTIGATED, AND SYSTEMATICALLY ARRANGED;  
THE INFLUENCE OF THE GREEK AND LATIN ACCENT AND QUANTITY, ON THE ACCENT AND QUANTITY  
OF THE ENGLISH, IS THOROUGHLY EXAMINED, AND CLEARLY DEFINED;  
AND THE ANALOGIES OF THE LANGUAGE ARE SO FULLY SHOWN AS TO LAY THE FOUNDATION  
OF A CONSISTENT AND RATIONAL PRONUNCIATION.

LIKEWISE,

*Rules to be observed by the Natives of Scotland, Ireland, and London,  
for avoiding their respective peculiarities; and*

DIRECTIONS TO FOREIGNERS, FOR ACQUIRING A KNOWLEDGE OF THE USE OF THIS DICTIONARY.

The whole interspersed with

OBSERVATIONS, ETYMOLOGICAL, CRITICAL, AND GRAMMATICAL.

BY JOHN WALKER,

AUTHOR OF ELEMENTS OF ELOCUTION, RHYMING DICTIONARY, &c. &c.

Quare, si fieri potest, et verba omnia, et vox, hujus aliquid urbis eluant: ut oratio Romana placeat videntur, non civitate donata.—Quint.

THE FIFTEENTH EDITION.

LONDON:

STEREOTYPED AND PRINTED BY A. WILSON, CAMDEN TOWN;  
FOR T. CADEL AND W. DAVIES; G. WILKIE; LONGMAN, HURST, REES, ORME, AND BROWN;  
E. AND R. CROSBY; G. AND S. ROBINSON; CRADOCK AND JOY; SHERWOOD,  
NEELY, AND JONES; AND WALKER, EDWARDS, AND REYNOLDS.

1815.

IN WHICH  
THE WORDS are deduced from their ORIGINALS,  
AND  
ILLUSTRATED in their DIFFERENT SIGNIFICATIONS  
BY  
EXAMPLES from the best WRITERS,  
TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED,  
A HISTORY of the LANGUAGE,  
AND  
AN ENGLISH GRAMMAR.

IN TWO VOLUMES

[illegible]

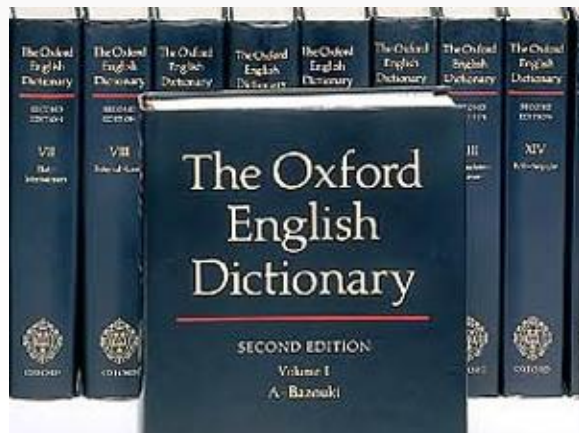
For J. and P. Knapton; T. and T. Lorchman; C. Hitch and L. Hawes;  
A. Miller; and R. and J. Doreilly.

MDCCLV.



# The legacy of Samuel Johnson

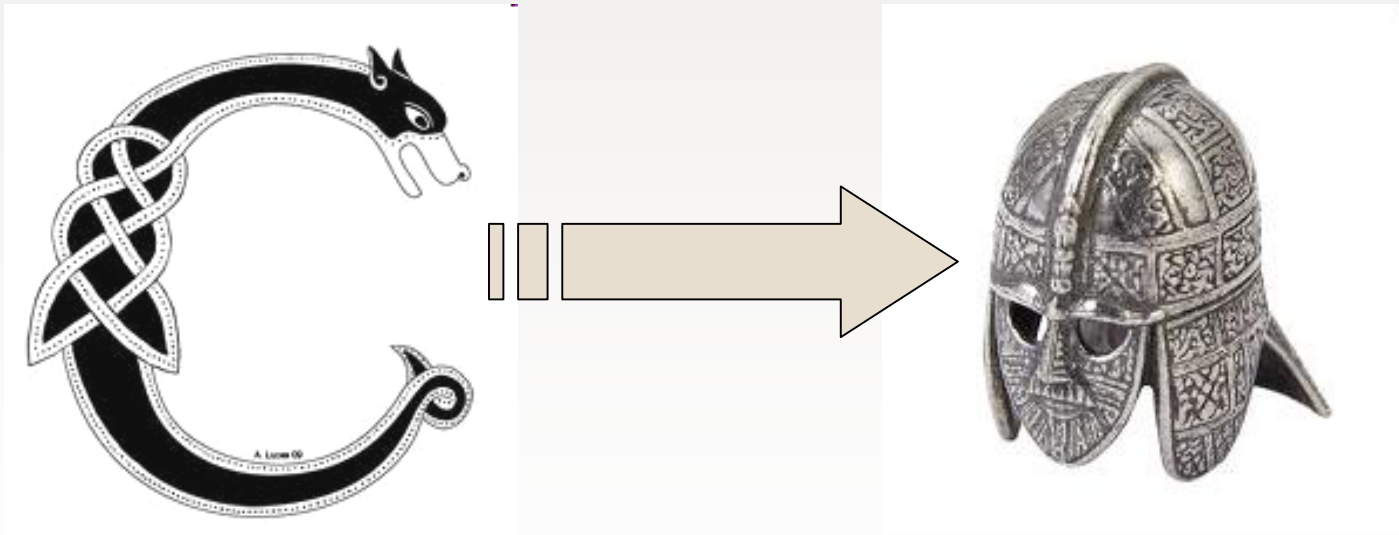
Johnson's dictionary became the standard work of English lexicography because of its range, objectivity and use of quotations from major authors to back up definitions given. It was not until over a century later that it was superseded by the dictionary which was to become the *Oxford English Dictionary*.



## Reassessments:

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

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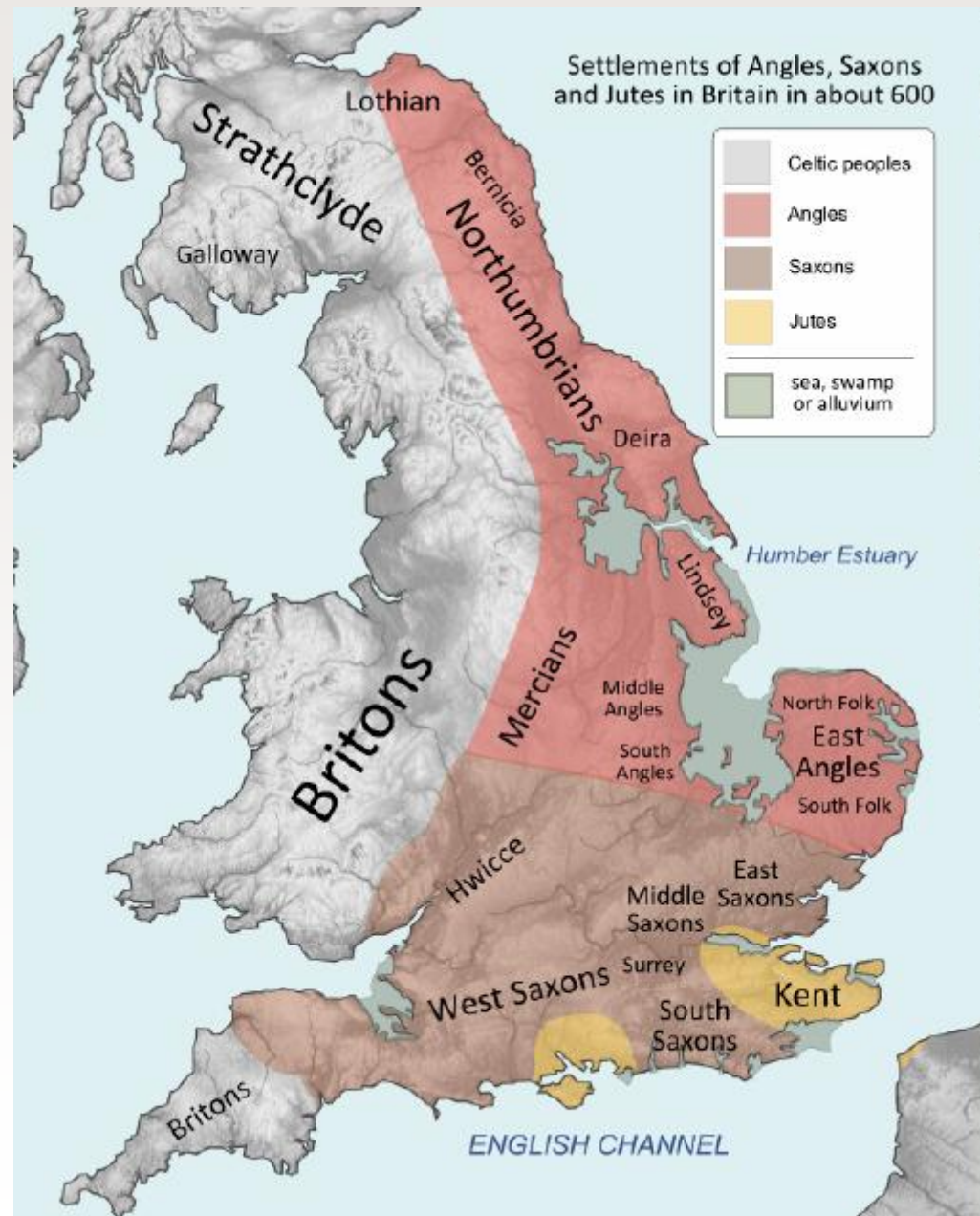


Possible Celtic influence on Old English:

1) Use of possessive pronouns with parts of the body: *I broke my leg; My tooth is sore.*

2) Use of same form for reflexives and emphatics: *He washed himself; The mayor himself came to the meeting.*

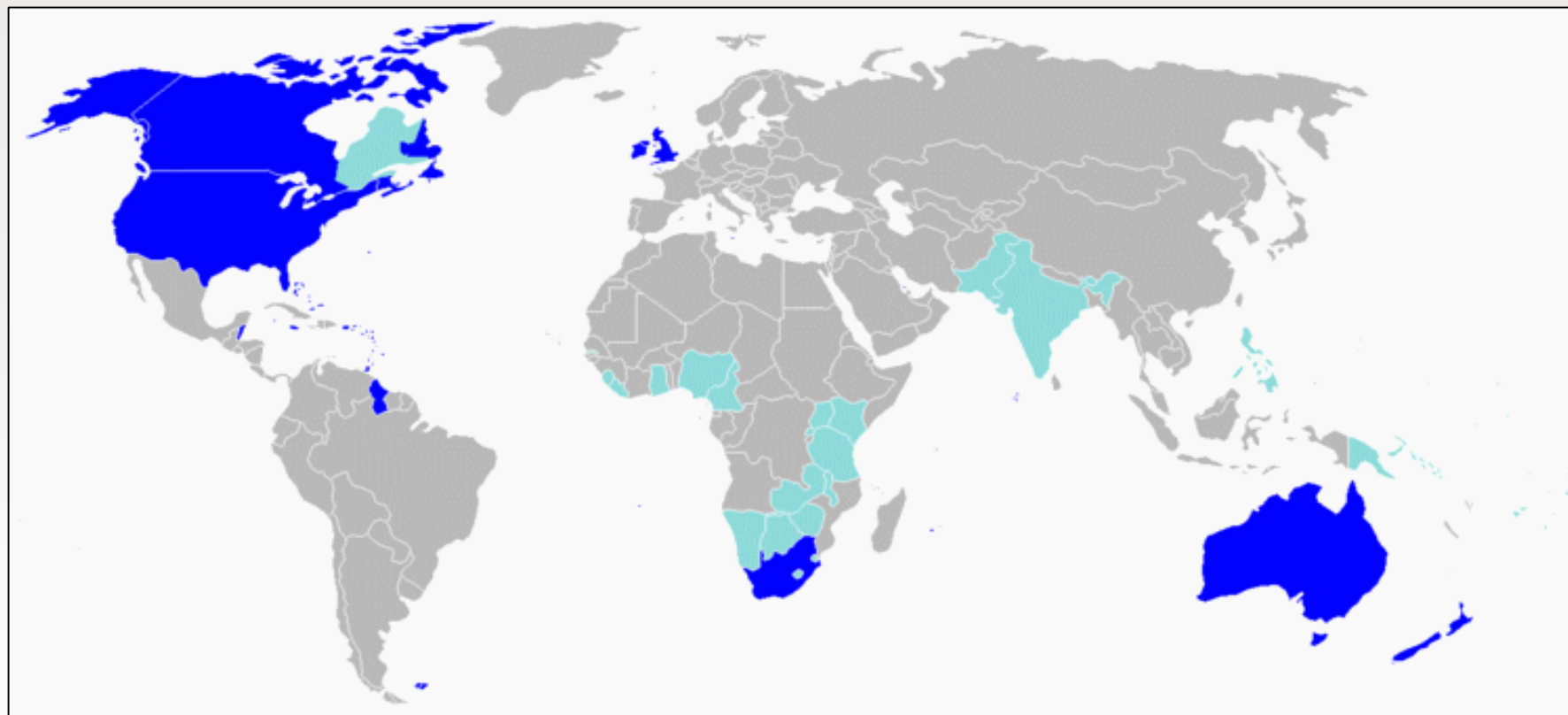
Case of convergence: rise of the continuous form with verbs, e.g. *He was hunting all the day* (Old English: 'he was on hunting all the day')





## Varieties of English in the twenty-first century

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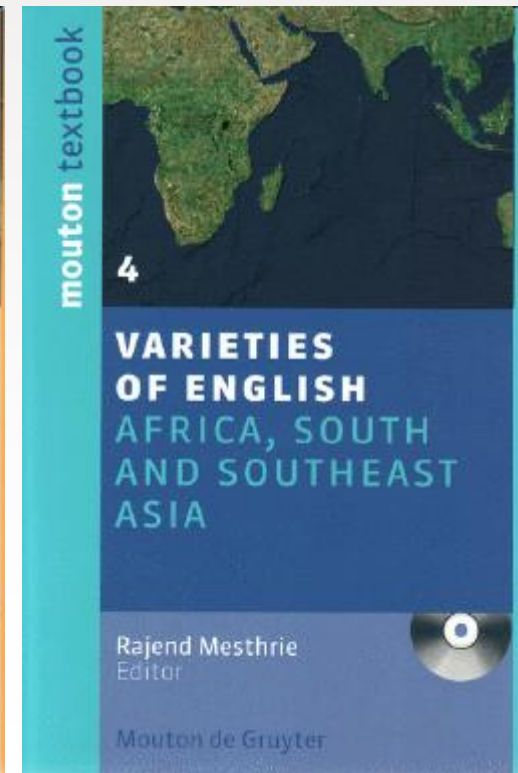
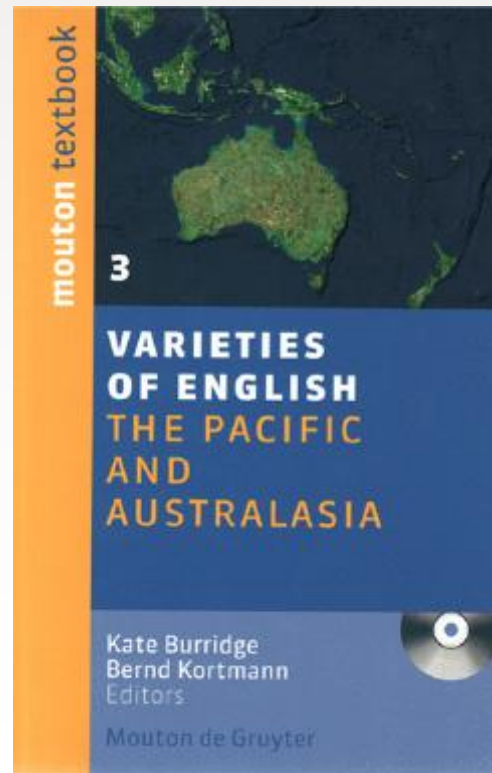


Areas in blue: destinations for settlers; areas in green: countries without any large English-speaking settler population; there was also a small amount of emigration to non-anglophone countries, e.g. Argentina.

# Varieties of English around the World

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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

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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.



## Expanding the base: English in Asia

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There are several chapters dealing with English in the countries of Asia, both former colonies, such as India and Sri Lanka, and countries, like Japan, Korea, China and the Philippines, where English plays an increasingly important role in society.



## Expanding the base: English in Africa

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In many former colonies of Britain English is the language of official public usage given the plethora of indigenous languages. How English has developed in Africa and its structural features are examined in several chapters dedicated to individual countries.



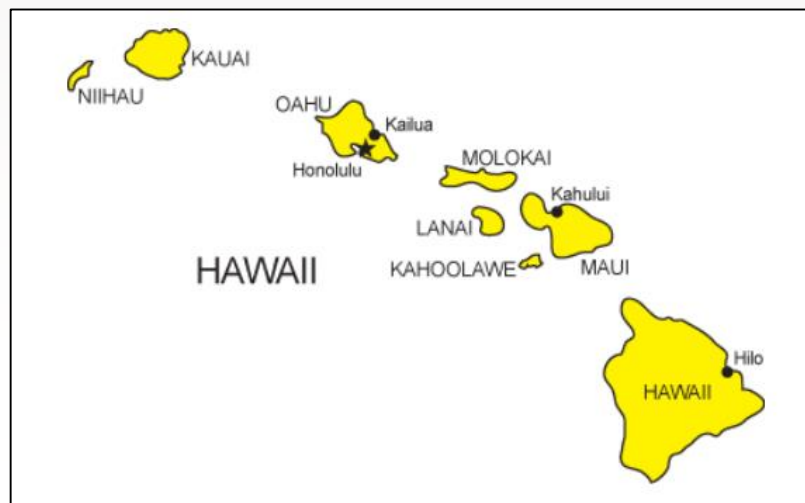
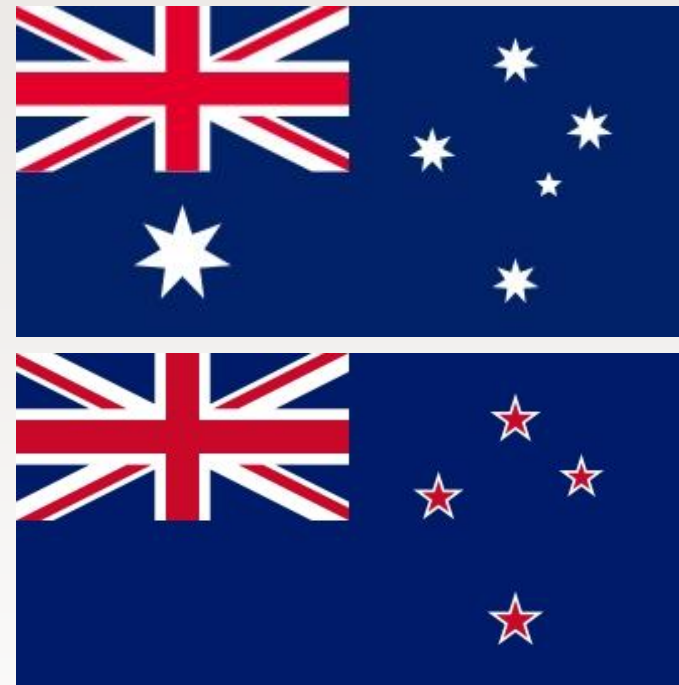


## Expanding the base: English in Australasia and the Pacific

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Both Australia and New Zealand have settler and indigenous populations which have developed unique varieties of English.

Many island nations of the Pacific also have a British colonial background with individual forms of English which have arisen there.



# Redressing an imbalance I: the case of Canada

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Chapters in original Cambridge history: 2

Chapters in new Cambridge history: 7



# Redressing an imbalance II: the case of South Africa

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Chapters in original Cambridge history: 1

Chapters in new Cambridge history: 4



There are many internet resources available for English historical linguistics and these are listed and discussed the new Cambridge History of the English Language

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# And what about AI and historical linguistics ?

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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

Combining though large amounts of data for lexicographical work

In such cases AI would be of assistance to historical linguists. The jury is out on whether it could be creative in this field, i.e. carry out independent linguistic analysis. We don't know right now (2025).

But watch this space for updates...





Where to find out more: [www.raymondhickey.com](http://www.raymondhickey.com)

## 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).

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  - Sounds of English Worldwide
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- Various papers
- Corpus linguistics

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### New Cambridge History of the English Language



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#### Volume I: Context, contact and development

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

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1. The Indo-European framework (Donald Ringe)
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# The New Cambridge History of the English Language

Context, Contact and Development

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Print publication year:	2025
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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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## Studying the History of English

## Themes in *Studying the History of English*

The current website – *Studying the History of English* – is intended as a resource for linguistics students at various levels who are concerned with the history of the English language. The material in this website is organised into sections, each of which corresponds to a menu on the top row of the desktop. Each menu then leads to a series of sub-menus which contain texts explaining various aspects of the topic of the particular menu. Because of the size of texts, some sub-menus lead to a screen showing a tree on the left and a window on the right, e.g. in the sub-menu on *Vocabulary* under the *Levels* menu. You click on the node of a tree to have the associated item displayed on the right. Click on the last node of a tree, labelled *Exit to desktop*, to return to the initial screen of the website. For texts without an associated tree there is a button at the very top which is labelled *Desktop*. Clicking on this has the same effect.

The information on this website has been deposited here to allow students to access information on the history of English with maximum ease in the hope that this will heighten their interest in and improve their knowledge of the subject. The material here, the texts, the timelines, the galleries, the bibliographies, etc. have been compiled by the author of this website, Raymond Hickey, and if you use this data for your own work — term essays, publications, presentations or whatever — then you are asked to acknowledge this accordingly.

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November 2025