A History of the English Language

The history and development of English, from the earliest known writings to its status today as a dominant world language, is a subject of major importance to linguists and historians. In this authoritative volume, a team of international experts cover the entire recorded history of the English language, outlining its development over fifteen centuries. With an emphasis on more recent periods, every key stage in the history of the language is discussed, with full accounts of standardisation, names, the distribution of English in Britain and North America, and its global spread. New historical surveys of the crucial aspects of the language (sounds, word structure, grammar and vocabulary) are presented, and historical changes that have affected English are treated as a continuing process, helping to explain the shape of the language today. Comprehensive and fully up-to-date, the volume will be indispensable to all advanced students, scholars and teachers in this prominent field.

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Frontispiece: Map of England
A History of the English Language

Edited by

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Preface

Who is this book written for? There are already so many books on the history of English, both large and small, that another one might at first sight seem otiose, redundant and unnecessary. But one of the beauties of the language is its ability to show continuous change and flexibility while in some sense remaining the same. And if that is true of the language, it is also true of the study of the language, whether undertaken for strictly academic purposes or not. This book is pitched at senior undergraduates in the main, though we trust that the general reader will also find in it much that is enlightening and enjoyable. Our justification for this work, then, is that knowledge of the history of English is a part of our common culture which needs – and repays – constant renewal.

But there is more to it than that. There are indeed many good existing accounts, including, in particular, Barbara Strang’s first-class A History of English (1970). In the thirty-five years since its publication, the language has continued to change, and scholarship has advanced along several different paths. Most obviously, the advent of computerised material has enabled us to analyse and hence understand much material which was previously impractical for the individual scholar to assimilate. Secondly, the (very different) Chomskyan and Labovian revolutions in linguistics, both in their infancy in 1970, have had repercussions in many domains relevant to this book. While the essence of the subject remains the same, the focus of attention may have shifted.

How does the current work relate to The Cambridge History of the English Language (CHEL; six volumes, 1992–2001)? A mixture of old and new contributors will be apparent, albeit with some of the ‘old’ contributors working on ‘new’ areas (and the whole book in any case written afresh). More important is the fact that the orientation of this work is rather different from that of CHEL. The most obvious difference is in emphasis, now tilted (within a full account of the history of the language) slightly more towards the later than the earlier periods. A further shift is the emphasis on variation, both in terms of standard and non-standard varieties and of different Englishes – in Britain, North America and worldwide.

On the other hand, we do attempt to cover, if more concisely than was possible in CHEL, the ‘core’ structural elements of the language. To make a slightly artificial division, Chapters 2 to 4 deal with major domains of the internal, structural history of English, while Chapters 5 to 9 tackle aspects of its use, distribution and variation. All eight are individual, coherent and linguistically informed accounts, taking their subject-matter through the whole sweep of the recorded history of
English. In the opening chapter, and continuing throughout the book, we attempt to situate these linguistic developments in their historical and social context. From the continual, dynamic interaction of internal and external factors comes what is by any standards a richly varied language.

Richard Hogg and David Denison, Manchester, May 2005
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