In its 1,500-year history, the English language has seen dramatic grammatical changes. This book offers a comprehensive and reader-friendly account of the major developments, including changes in word order, the noun phrase and verb phrase, changing relations between clausal constituents and the development of new subordinate constructions. The book puts forward possible explanations for change, drawing on the existing and most recent literature and with reference to the major theoretical models. The authors use corpus evidence to investigate language-internal and language-external motivations for change, including the impact of language contact. The book is intended for students who have been introduced to the history of English and want to deepen their understanding of major grammatical changes, and for linguists in general with a historical interest. It will also be of value to literary scholars professionally engaged with older texts.

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A Brief History of English Syntax

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book has been a long time in the making. The first ideas for it were developed after the publication of the chapter on syntax in Hogg and Denison (2007) by two of the present authors. Since we had a lot more material for which there was no room in that chapter, it looked like a good idea to use this material for a more elaborate book on the history of English syntax. And indeed this book builds further upon the 2007 syntax chapter. To it we have added additional chapters on the handling of data, the theoretical background and the changes syntax underwent due to contact. Some of this material was also based on earlier work, such as Fischer (2007) for Chapter 3 and Fischer (2013) for Chapter 5. We have everywhere updated the information with the latest research done in the area, which constituted a fair amount due to the spate of handbooks that have appeared in the last decade, and to the flourishing of the field of historical linguistics with more and more PhDs and journal articles seeing the light of day (although no doubt the pressure to “publish or perish” also plays a role here). We therefore had to make choices, and we hope we have made the right ones.

The present volume is intended for everyone who has an interest in the way English has changed syntactically over a period of more than 1,000 years. For that reason, we have tried to avoid theoretical jargon as much as possible, so that the book can be used both in and outside of universities. It can be used as a textbook but has not been set up as one. It is not restricted to one particular approach to syntax; rather, it is broad in its scope and takes surface phenomena as a first point of departure. Where possible, we have tried also to explain why the changes occurred, making use of the various models of syntax and change, of both a formal and a functional nature, that are around.

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