1   Introduction

The purpose of this book is to present an outline of the history of English syntax. The main changes in this component of the English language will be discussed and – where possible – something will be said about the factors that played a role in causing the changes and about the effects of individual changes on other structures. Overall, it could be said that English in its earliest stages was a heavily inflected language with a relatively free word order and a lexical base of mainly Germanic words, rather like modern German today. A host of changes over the centuries has made it into what it is today: a language with a morphology and syntax radically different from that of German. The main causes of these changes are the rapid loss of inflexions brought about both by internal phonological weakening and by intense contact with other languages after the Viking and Norman invasions and perhaps by the continuing presence of a Celtic substratum. Throughout the volume, we will document the ways in which these factors have led to a radical transformation of English syntax.

In doing so, we will be able to draw on the considerable volume of descriptive, explanatory and exploratory work on English historical syntax. However, rather than going for breadth of coverage, we will try to go for representativeness of material in terms of importance and interest, providing a full discussion of the major developments and a selection of additional changes that we think are illuminating and/or intriguing. Inevitably, there are many other changes that we could not include. Our apologies to these changes and the scholars that have identified and written about them. We focus on syntactic change in the common core of English, for reasons of both space and availability of materials (though we have allowed ourselves one or two digressions on non-standard developments). In the discussion of individual changes that we have included, we try to reflect the current state of scholarship so that various kinds of approach to historical syntax are represented. Nevertheless, we have attempted at all points to tell a coherent story rather than present an inventory of what has been said and written. At regular points in this story, we alert the reader to the fact that particular changes have not been adequately explained or even described yet – a sobering but also encouraging message, because on the one hand it forces us to recognize that progress in this field can be tantalizingly

slow, while on the other it entails that the field is not cut-and-dried and finished, and that there is still plenty to discover and explain.

As one sobering and encouraging example, we may briefly mention here the general changes in word order that English has undergone over the centuries (for discussion of the details, see Chapter 9). The fact that word order in earlier English showed certain resemblances to that of modern German and Dutch was realized long ago, but it has taken a surprisingly long time for the precise extent of the similarities and dissimilarities to become fully appreciated. This, it must be admitted, is not because the basic data are hard to find – a look at any Old or Middle English (OE/ME) text will suffice to establish that both German/Dutch-like and Present-Day-English (PDE)-like orders occur side by side. What is more difficult is to systematic-ally analyse the word orders found in a large number of texts, from various stages of the language, and to do so in a theoretical framework which enables meaningful comparisons to be made. This is more difficult not only because it requires more time and effort (and the availability of a generally accepted and adequate framework), but also because there is a strong temptation to be resisted: the temptation to move from description to explanation as soon as possible. This urge to explain, while admirable in itself, has resulted in some accounts of the word-order changes that are virtually divorced from any empirical findings and that basically leave intact all the questions and puzzles that there were in this field. The other side of the coin, of course, is that answers to these questions and puzzles are still welcome, and that even relatively modest or small-scale studies, provided they are firmly grounded in what is already available, can make a real contribution.

Our own view is that additional studies are most likely to produce answers if they combine detailed philological work (or full consideration of relevant existing work of this type) with the use of theoretical tools. Although this volume, which deals with syntax in the entire history of the English language, is based on the results of research accumulated over the years rather than on a completely new investigation of the field, such a combined empirical-theoretical approach is a line of recent enquiry that we think will lead to additional interesting findings in the years to come. Thus, in the field of word order again, it is easy to find very broad and general claims in the earlier literature to the effect that English word order was influenced by word order in Old French or Old Norse, or in the indigenous Celtic languages. What one usually looks for in vain are claims about the precise locus and nature of this influence, or indeed empirical backing of these ideas which goes beyond the facts to be explained. However, current work by several scholars explores dialectal differences in word order in early English, working with carefully chosen materials and a well-informed theoretical model that promises to finally enable us to substantiate some of the earlier claims and to discount others.

In the pages that follow, we have adopted as a working principle that changes first need to be described and only then explained. The result is a discussion in which description is preponderant, which we take to be a good thing for a presentation of the topic. Nevertheless, we also show for many changes what kinds of explanations have been advanced and where they are still absent. As will become evident, the best and most detailed explanatory work on English historical syntax so far has been structural in nature, in the sense that the rise and decline of syntactic constructions have been ascribed to specific structural properties of the language at the time concerned. This, however, is no doubt partly a result of the scarcity or relative inaccessibility of other types of empirical information for large periods of the history of English. The reader should therefore keep in mind that we present a picture of the subject that in many places is oversimplified, and not only because we have had to cram more than a thousand years' worth of changes in English speech and writing into a relatively brief historical overview.

The basic method of presentation in the following pages is simple; we first deal with general issues before we tackle various syntactic constructions and their developments in detail. We start with a chapter on the nature of the data and how to use it (Chapter 2), followed by an overview of the theoretical models that are currently used in syntactic change (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 offers a discussion of the extent to which English syntax has been influenced by other languages, concentrating on the OE and ME periods when this influence was most pervasive. Next follow five chapters that deal with the syntactic changes themselves. We start with the composition of the noun phrase (NP) (Chapter 5) and the verbal group (VP) (Chapter 6), and then move on to discuss the way these can be combined to form sentences. This is dealt with in Chapter 7 on clausal constituents; changes in negative and interrogative clauses are also discussed here. Chapter 8 deals with subordinate clauses, both finite and non-finite. Finally, Chapter 9 provides a separate discussion of word order, where we again look at the clausal constituents but concentrate on the position they have in the clause, and especially the changes that took place here, which also affected other areas of syntax, such as, for instance, verbal and complementation patterns discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. Other topics have been included where they fitted in most conveniently; where necessary, cross-references are given to help readers find their way to specific subjects.

Additional help is provided by Table 1.1, which contains a summary of the material dealt with in the book. It is organized as follows: in the first column, a list of the changes discussed in the various chapters is found. They are ordered in the same way as the chapters are – that is, elements within the NP are given first, followed by the four systems (mood, tense, etc.) that play a role in the VP. This is supplemented by changes that have taken place in the negative and interrogative systems. What follows next is the constituents of the clause

4

Table 1.1 *Overview of syntactic categories and their changes*

Changes in:	Old English	Middle English	M
case form and function:			
genitive	various functions	genitive case for subjective/poss.; *of*-phrase elsewhere	s
dative	various functions/PP sporadic	increase in *to*-phrase; impersonal dative lost	
accusative	main function: direct object	accusative case lost, direct object mainly marked by position	
determiners:			
system	articles present in embryo form, system developing	articles used for presentational and referential functions	a
double det.	present	rare	a
quantifiers:			
position of	relatively free	more restricted	f
adjectives:			
position	both pre- and postnominal	mainly prenominal	p
form/function	strong/weak forms, functionally distinct	remnants of strong/weak forms; not functional	c
as head	fully operative	reduced; introduction of *one*	r
'stacking' of	not possible	possible	p
adjectival or relative clause	relative: *se, se þe, þe,* zero subject rel.	new: *þæt, wh*-relative (except *who*), zero obj. rel.	w
adj. + to-*inf.*	only active infinitives	active and passive inf.	r
aspect-system:			
use of perfect	embryonic	more frequent; in competition with 'past'	p

form of perfect	BE/HAVE (past part. sometimes declined)	BE/HAVE; HAVE becomes more frequent
use and form of progressive	BE + *-ende*; function not clear	BE + *-ing*, infrequent, more aspectual
tense-system:		
'present'	used for present tense, progressive, future	used for present tense and progr.; (future tense develops)
'past'	used for past tense, (plu)perfect, past progr.	still used also for past progr. and perfect; new: modal past
mood-system:		
expressed by	subjunctive, modal verbs (+ epistemic advbs)	mainly modal verbs (+ develop. quasi-modals); modal past tense
category of core modals	verbs (with exception features)	verbs (with exception features)
voice-system:		
passive form	*beon/weorðan* + (inflected) past part.	BE + uninfl. past part
indirect pass.	absent	developing
prep. pass.	absent	developing
pass. infin.	only after modal verbs	after full verbs, with some nouns and adject.
negative system	*ne*+verb(+ other negator)	*(ne)*+verb+*not;* rare *not*+verb
interrog.system	inversion: VS	inversion: VS
DO *as operator*	absent	infrequent, not grammaticalized
subject:		
position filled	some *pro*-drop possible; dummy subjects not compulsory	*pro*-drop rare; dummy subjects become the norm

5

6   Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Changes in:	Old English	Middle English	N
clauses	absent	*that*-clauses and infinitival clauses	r
subjectless/ impersonal constructions	common	subject position becomes obligatorily filled	e
position with respect to V	both S(..)V and VS	S(. . .)V; VS becomes re-stricted to yes/no quest.	c
object:			
clauses	mainly finite *þæt*-cl., also zero/ *to*-infinitive	stark increase in infinitival cl.	i
position with respect to V	VO and OV	VO; OV becomes restricted	V
position IO - DO	both orders; pronominal IO-DO preferred	nominal IO-DO the norm, introduction of DO *for/to* IO	I
clitic pronouns	syntactic clitics	clitics disappearing	c
adverbs:			
position	fairly free	more restricted	f
clauses	use of correlatives + different word orders	distinct conjunctions; word order mainly SVO	a
phrasal verbs	position particle: both pre- and postverbal	great increase; position: postverbal	s
preposition stranding	only with pronouns (incl. R-pronouns: *þær, etc.*) and relative *þe*	no longer with pronouns, but new with prep. passives, interrog, and other relative clauses	r

(subject, object, etc.), and the way in which these positions can be filled (e.g. by zero, by a lexical NP, a clause, etc.). The next three columns in each row show the overall changes that each construction has undergone in the three main periods of the history of English. The last column indicates where the relevant discussion can be found.

We have everywhere tried to give as many examples as space allowed us. Also for space considerations, we have tried to draw these from two main corpora for the OE and ME periods, so as not to overburden the reference system. Thus OE examples have all been taken from the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (concentrating on prose rather than poetry), and the ME examples are taken from the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*.[1] In other cases, references to the primary or secondary source have been provided.

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[1] See http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/ and http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/, respectively.