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English Historical Linguistics at 20 ICEHLs

Citation for published version:

Los, B & Honeybone, P 2022, Introduction: English Historical Linguistics at 20 ICEHLs. in B Los, C Cowie, P Honeybone & G Trousdale (eds), *English Historical Linguistics: Change in Structure and Meaning*. Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, vol. 358, John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.358.int>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1075/cilt.358.int](https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.358.int)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

English Historical Linguistics

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published in 'English Historical Linguistics: Change in structure and meaning' edited by Bettelou Los, Claire Cowie, Patrick Honeybone and Graeme Trousdale, © John Benjamins Publishing Company, and available at <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.358.int>

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In: Los, Bettelou, Claire Cowie, Patrick Honeybone & Graeme Trousdale (eds.) (to appear) *English Historical Linguistics: Change in Structure and Meaning. Papers from the XXth ICEHL*, volume 1. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Chapter 1

Introduction: English Historical Linguistics at 20 ICEHLs

1. Introduction

Research on the history of English continues apace. Some of this work breaks new empirical ground, collecting novel evidence for change in the language from all stages of its existence, and other work reinterprets classic data, showing a new way to understand issues that have long intrigued English historical linguists. Some of this work is fundamentally philological, with its prime aim being to set out new discoveries about English, while other work aims wholeheartedly to interact with debates in general linguistics on how language can change in principle (both learning from and contributing to them). We are delighted that this volume contains research in all these areas (at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels), nicely representing the diversity that exists in the current landscape of English Historical Linguistics. The articles gathered here are all based on presentations delivered at the 20th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL), which took place at the University of Edinburgh on 27-31 August 2018.

With the twentieth instalment of the conference, 2018 was a crown year for the ICEHL, and we were excited to be able to hold it in Edinburgh, which has a long association with research in English Historical Linguistics. It was Charles Jones who founded the conference series in 1979, when he had just left Edinburgh to take up an appointment as the Chair of English Language at Durham University. ICEHL complemented another conference series that had been (co-)founded by Charles Jones (with John Anderson), in 1973, when they were both at Edinburgh: the International Conference on Historical Linguistics (ICHL). Both conferences have thrived ever since, as has a third conference series also founded by Charles Jones (once he had returned to Edinburgh to take up the Forbes Chair of English Language), the International Conference on Late Modern English, the first instalment of which took place in Edinburgh in 2001.

That first ICEHL, in 1979, attracted around a dozen people, but clearly a good time was had by all, because the conference series took off, to become the large event that it is today – the central fixture on the English Historical Linguistics calendar. Around 300 people attended the conference in 2018 in Edinburgh, from all of the world, showing both the popularity and the global reach of the ICEHL today. In time, the conference settled on a pattern of being held in even-numbered years (alternating with the ICHL in odd-numbered years), travelling round European universities, as set out in Table 1. At the time of writing, ICEHL-21 has had to break this biennial pattern because it needed to be postponed by a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic – it will now take place online, organised by colleagues at Leiden University. Writing this introduction in the midst of the pandemic, we are relieved that the Edinburgh conference occurred well before we had heard of coronaviruses, and we very much look forward to a time when the ICEHL can return to meeting in person.

	year	place	publications
ICEHL-1	1979	Durham	Blake & Jones (1984)
ICEHL-2	1981	Odense	Davenport et al. (1983)
ICEHL-3	1983	Sheffield	Crépin (1984) ¹
ICEHL-4	1985	Amsterdam	Eaton et al. (1985)
ICEHL-5	1987	Cambridge	Adamson et al. (1990)
ICEHL-6	1990	Helsinki	Rissanen et al. (1992)
ICEHL-7	1992	Valencia	Fernández et al. (1994)
ICEHL-8	1994	Edinburgh	Britton (1996)
ICEHL-9	1996	Poznań	Fisiak & Krygier (1998)
ICEHL-10	1998	Manchester	Bermúdez-Otero et al. (2000)
ICEHL-11	2000	Santiago de Compostela	Fanego et al. (2002a) Fanego et al. (2002b)
ICEHL-12	2002	Glasgow	Kay et al. (2004a) Kay et al. (2004b)
ICEHL-13	2004	Vienna	Ritt et al. (2006) Dalton-Puffer et al. (2006)
ICEHL-14	2006	Bergamo	Dossena et al. (2008) Dury et al. (2008) Gotti et al. (2008)
ICEHL-15	2008	Munich	Lenker et al. (2010) Sauer & Waxenberger (2012)
ICEHL-16	2010	Pécs	Hegedús & Fodor (2012)
ICEHL-17	2012	Zurich	Jucker et al. (2013) Pfenninger et al. (2014)
ICEHL-18	2014	Leuven	Cuyckens et al. (2018)
ICEHL-19	2016	Essen	
ICEHL-20	2018	Edinburgh	
ICEHL-21	2021	Leiden	

Table 1. Place and years of ICEHL conferences, with references to their proceedings

The conference has from its very beginnings been marked by collegiality and collaboration, reflecting the latest research into the history of English, from a wealth of different theoretical frameworks and approaches. It has spawned many publications, not only as conference proceedings from its general sessions (generally, but not invariably, published by John Benjamins, which has been a constant supporter and sponsor of ICEHL), but also as special journal issues and published volumes, based on papers given in its many workshops. Although the conference venues have so far been restricted to Europe, this is not true of its participants, who come from all over the world, and who testify to the worldwide interest in the English language, and in its history.

¹ Only some of the papers gathered in this volume were delivered at the Sheffield ICEHL.

2. Themes

The traditional heartlands of English historical linguistics were well represented at the 20th ICEHL conference, and papers from many of them have made it into this volume. There was representation of work on historical phonology (see e.g. Gjertrud F. Stenbrenden's paper included in this volume), on morphological change (see e.g. Don Ringe & Charles Yang's paper included here), on morphosyntactic change including grammaticalisation, particularly of auxiliaries (see e.g. Lilo Moessner's paper in this volume for a contribution to charting their development), on manuscript evidence, and on contact linguistics, as well as on the still relatively new fields of standardisation, prescriptivism, historical pragmatics and historical speech acts. This introduction does not have the space to mention all the 224 papers or the nine workshops that made up the conference at Edinburgh, but we will highlight some new trends in English Historical Linguistics, representing avenues of research in the field that are opening up (to accompany more established subfields). The clearest signs of new ground are evident in the themes of the workshops that formed part of the conference: interfaces, new methodologies and new tools, and a new field in English historical linguistics: paratextual studies.

Two workshops investigated interfaces – that between segmental phonology and prosody (*The foot in the phonological history of English*, see e.g. Elan Dresher & Aditi Lahiri's paper in this volume), and that between syntax and semantics (*Degree phenomena in the history of English*). A paper from a third workshop (*English as a syntactic outlier*) contributes to an exploration of the interface between syntax, information structure and prosody (De Bastiani's paper in this volume).

Another trend, outside the workshops, was represented by a significant clutch of papers that reported on phenomena investigated over very large time frames, including the history of English in its entirety; these papers were able to take the long view because of the increasing quality and accessibility of digital tools. Two of the nine workshops focused on those tools: *Visualisations in Historical Linguistics*, which showcased what can be done with data-driven approaches like n-gramming and correspondence analysis, and with specific tools like Stylo, HistoBankVis, TVE2 (*Text Variation Explorer*) and Medusa (a spiderweb-visualisation of spellings and sounds, as a tool for exploring the phonology of under-researched languages), as well as that other powerful new resource, the *Historical Thesaurus of English*; and the workshop *Computational approaches to investigating meaning in the history of English*, which similarly included work on data-driven methods (like Gerold Schneider's paper, included in this volume). A further workshop at the conference positioned itself as a reaction to the pervasive quantitative methodologies and broke a lance for developing a methodology for qualitative evidence (*Qualitative evidence and methodologies in historical linguistics*). There was also a trend among some papers in the general sessions in which new methods are applied to old problems, e.g. Aaron Eca'y's use of insights from psycholinguistic priming studies to determine whether affirmative declarative *do* and the NICE contexts share an underlying syntax; and Don Ringe's plenary, where the replacement of regular past tenses and past participles (such as *stringed*) by irregular ones (such as *strung*) in Early Modern English is investigated using the mathematical model of Yang's Tolerance Principle (this formed the basis of the paper by Don Ringe & Charles Yang included in this volume).

Finally, there was a workshop at the conference on *paratextual communication* – the way in which layout conventions arose in printing, like the footnote, or text boxes in a

pamphlet, which have developed communicative functions of their own. Some related papers in the general sessions were on the development of specific genres – for example, the patent specification genre, and minute-writing as a text-type.

3. Other publications proceeding from ICEHL-20

Apart from a companion volume *English Historical Linguistics: Historical English in Contact*, edited by Bettelou Los, Chris Cummins, Lisa Gotthard, Alpo Honkapohja and Benjamin Molineaux, also published in the CILT series, some of the conference's workshops led to edited volumes and special journal issues:

Some of the papers presented at Workshop 3, "Computational approaches to investigating meaning in the history of the English language", will be published as a special issue of the *Transactions of the Philological Society*, edited by Susan Fitzmaurice and Seth Mehl.

Papers from Workshop 5, "Paratextual Communication in a Historical Linguistic Perspective", were published in 2020 as a volume edited by Matti Peikola and Birte Bös, under the title *The Dynamics of text and framing phenomena: Historical approaches to paratext and metadiscourse in English* (Pragmatics & Beyond New Series, 317), by John Benjamins (<https://benjamins.com/catalog/pbns.317>).

Workshop 6, "Degree phenomena in the history of English" has been published (2021) as a double special issue of the *Journal of English Linguistics* (vol. 49, issues 1–2), with the title "Degree and related phenomena in the history of English", edited by Claudia Claridge and Merja Kytö.

Workshop 7, "Visualisations in Historical Linguistics", has been published as a special issue of the *Journal of Data Mining and Digital Humanities* in 2020, edited by Benjamin Molineaux, Bettelou Los and Martti Mäkinen (<https://jdmdh.episciences.org/page/special-issue-on-visualisations-in-historical-linguistics>).

4. The papers in this volume

On the 224 papers that we presented at Edinburgh during the 20th ICEHL, 43 were submitted for publication in these general proceedings. A selection of these was made on the basis of extended abstracts, in order to create thematically coherent volumes, and these submissions were then subjected to peer review. Those papers which made it through this process make up this volume, and also its companion volume, *English Historical Linguistics: Historical English in Contact. Papers from the XXth ICEHL*, vol. 2

The thirteen papers in this volume address various aspects of grammatical structure and linguistic meaning, and we have grouped them loosely into three parts: those which deal with aspects of phonology and morphology, those which deal with aspects of syntax, and those which deal with aspects of meaning (such as semantics and pragmatics). The first part on phonology and morphology contains four papers:

Gjertrud F. Stenbrenden's *Grimm's Law and Verner's Law: Towards a unified phonetic account* reconsiders the patterning and causation of Grimm's Law and Verner's Law, to investigate the extent to which a unified description of the changes involved can be given: are all the changes fundamentally the same kind of thing (and are they all lenitions)? And what exactly were the changes in the first place (and the pre-change states)? The author reviews a wide range of classic and current literature on the changes, from both

phonological and phonetic perspectives, and fundamentally adopts the position (often known as “Laryngeal Realism”) that Germanic, like English and most other contemporary Germanic languages, marked the contrast between its two series of obstruents using the feature [spread glottis], not [voice]. Stenbrenden relates this, and the associated aspiration in fortis stops, to the change from PIE’s pitch accent to Germanic stress accent, arguing that this change was fundamental in setting off the chain of changes which she interprets Grimm’s and Verner’s Laws to be.

B. Elan Dresher & Aditi Lahiri’s *The foot in the history of English: Challenges to metrical coherence* addresses the classic issue of change in the stress patterns of English, based on a consideration of the role of the foot: what exactly was the basic English foot during this period? How was it assigned? Which foot received primary stress? The authors have a broad focus, taking in changes that occurred over the course of many centuries, from Old English, through Middle English, to the Early Modern period when the effect of Romance loanwords was fully felt. The authors consider how the fundamental principles of stress assignment changed in English over this period, using evidence from a range of sources, including patterns in phonological change and transcriptions in pronouncing dictionaries, and engaging with issues in stress assignment from theoretical phonology. A key argument is that Yang’s Tolerance Principle (also discussed by Ringe & Yang in chapter 5 of this volume) explains why Romance loanwords did not have a fundamental effect on the phonology of the foot in English (and hence on stress assignment) until much later than is often thought.

Mieko Ogura & William S-Y. Wang’s *Ambiguity resolution and the evolution of homophones in English* also consider change in the stress patterns of English, but from a very different perspective to that of the previous chapter. Ogura & Wang focus on the issue of the development of diatonic pairs (that is, stress doublets of the kind that exist in Present-Day English noun and verb forms of words like *permit*). The authors consider evidence that derives from pronouncing dictionaries from earlier periods of English, and also present novel contemporary neurolinguistic evidence (from near-infrared spectroscopy) which shows differences in the processing of nouns and verbs. They argue from a functionalist perspective that the noun-type non-final stress developed in diatonic pairs due to a pressure to avoid homophony, which they relate to functional pressures to comply with speakers’ and hearers’ needs, arguing that pressures from production led in this process in the 16th century, and that pressures from perception led in the process after the 17th century.

In *The threshold of productivity and the “irregularization” of verbs in Early Modern English* by Don Ringe & Charles Yang, the interplay of language change and language acquisition in the domain of inflectional morphology is investigated, drawing on Yang (2016)’s Tolerance Principle (TP) as a statistical measure of a productivity threshold. In particular, it examines data from the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English (PPCEME; Kroch, Santorini & Delfs 2004) relating to variation in the past tense form of verbs whose infinitive form ends in /-ɪŋ/, e.g. Modern English *bring-brought* vs. *sing-sang* vs. *ding-dinged* vs. *sting-stung*. Ringe and Yang explore whether the TP can help to explain patterns in PPCEME, and conclude that the TP is useful for predicting likely productive morphological rules, while acknowledging complexities that arise from competition between closely related forms. They consider the role of adult speakers in the development of particular innovations.

Part 2: Syntax, contains the following five papers:

Chiara De Bastiani's *The reanalysis of VO in the history of English: Evidence for a language-internal account* investigates the change from OV to VO by considering the information-structural status (given or new) and weight of pre- or postverbal constituents in subclauses in selected Early Middle English texts. Pre-verbal elements turn out to be a more homogeneous set than post-verbal elements, as they are overwhelmingly given, while post-verbal elements are neither homogeneous in terms of given/new, or in terms of weight. Some Middle English dialects are clearly more advanced in terms of their progression to VO than others; and the investigation shows that charting this progress in the dialects can be obscured if the investigation fails to exclude texts that are Middle English copies of earlier material rather than authentic Middle English. The findings have consequences for earlier claims about the interaction of information status and weight as a trigger for particular word orders.

In *The role of (the avoidance of) centre embedding in the change from OV to VO in English* by Rodrigo Pérez Loid, the object of the investigation is centre-embedded structures like (*The man [the boy [the woman saw] heard] left*). These structures are difficult to process, as they make a heavy demand on short-time memory. We find various escape hatches cross-linguistically; for instance, in OV languages with postnominal relatives, like Old English, object modifiers but also the object in its entirety can be extraposed. There have been various proposals in the literature that Relative Clause Extraposition as a means to avoid centre-embedded structures is relevant to the change of OV to VO in English. This investigation is the first to probe the limits of clausal embedding in Old English, based on an extensive corpus analysis. Centre embedding turns out to have been a viable grammatical option in Old English, and its selection appears to operate in much the same force field of factors that govern embedded relative objects in other modern SOV languages, like Modern German. The decrease in the frequency of preverbal relative objects from early to late Old English supports the claim that the change of OV to VO was already on the way in late Old English.

Centre-stage in Gerold Schneider's *Syntactic changes in verbal clauses and noun phrases from 1500 onwards* are data-driven methodologies on parsed diachronic corpora. Findings from the ARCHER corpus are validated against the Penn Corpora, investigating frequency and creativity (i.e. the extent to which the language is "chunked" and/or formulaic). The results align with what we know about syntactic trends in the history of English style; since the end of the Middle English period, the "verbal" (sometimes called "Doric") style is decreasing, while the "nominal" ("Attic") style is increasing; there is a shift from a preponderance of finite clauses to non-finite clauses, and of parataxis to hypotaxis. Word order is increasingly becoming fixed, strengthening the principle of dependency length minimisation. The difficulty of data-driven approaches is how to interpret the results in terms of linguistic or stylistic change; in the case of English, the results could be matched, and validated, by what we know of EModE and LModE change from the literature. The advantage these approaches offer, Schneider argues, is a holistic perspective which is able to detect long-term diachronic trends in the face of short-term synchronic linguistic variation, and hence opens up new avenues of research.

Eva Zehentner & Marianne Hundt's *Prepositions in Early Modern English: Argument structure and beyond* examines the development of prepositional arguments, focussing mainly on English in modern times. Hundt and Zehentner consider the various roles that prepositional phrases (PPs) play in early Modern English, and in contemporary world Englishes. Using a range of corpora, they provide a quantitative analysis of the frequency

of prepositions at various stages in the language, and across varieties. The findings suggest that PPs are increasingly used as verbal arguments (with integration resulting in the development of “prepositional verbs” such as *rely on*), but that there is also significant lexical variation. In addition, while certain patterns in world Englishes reflect uses attested in early modern corpora, there does not seem to be evidence that speakers of English as a second or other language are more likely to use PP variants (over NP alternatives) compared to native speakers.

Lilo Moessner’s *Should with non-past reference: A corpus-based diachronic study* explores the rise of *should* in mandative constructions, as an alternative to the subjunctive (compare *It’s vital that John be there* vs. *It’s vital that John should be there*) in the history of English, focussing particularly on uses of *should* in two main corpora (the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts, and the Middle English Dictionary). The rise of the mandative use of *should* represents a semantic split between the present and the past tense forms of this modal, so that this paper contributes to the literature on the grammaticalization of the modals in English. Moessner argues that this development is strongly connected to other developments in the history of *should*, specifically a set of semantic changes relating to the marking of obligation vs. non-factivity, which calls for a consideration of the range of syntactic contexts in which the subjunctive appeared historically. Her findings suggest that the competition between the subjunctive and *should* in mandative constructions is more recent than has been assumed in the literature, as it cannot be traced back any earlier than the late Middle English period.

The final part of the volume, Semantics and Pragmatics, contains four papers:

Gabriella Mazzon’s *Shifting responsibility in passing information: Stance-taking in Sir Thomas Bodley’s diplomatic correspondence* explores diplomatic correspondence at the turn of the 16th century by investigating the letters of Thomas Bodley, master spy to Queen Elizabeth I, concerning his missions to the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and France, in which he reports on Protestant revolts and their implications for trade. It was important for Bodley to make his reports credible and useful, but at the same time, he needed not to sound overconfident, so as not to lose face if he was disproved. In some cases he names a source, and in others he alludes to rumour or the “bruit”. For scholars this is an excellent opportunity to explore the Early Modern expression of stance towards information, and stance towards sources. Mazzon surveys a wide range of epistemic and evidential markers which Bodley deploys to this end: epistemic modals, main verbs of cognition, hedges, direct and indirect speech. Extensive quotation shows the density of these markers, which is a distinction of the register.

James Hyett & Carol Percy’s *Theatrical practices and grammatical standardization in eighteenth-century Britain: YOU WAS and YOU WERE* contributes to our knowledge of *YOU WAS*, a short-lived construction of the first half of the eighteenth century, which plays a role in the shift of the *YOU* pronoun from plural to singular, and of *YOU WERE* from plural to singular. *YOU WAS* shares some of the profile of *THOU* as the low status variant. The peak and rapid dropping off of *YOU WAS* around the 1750s has been observed in letters and fiction, before its proscription by figures such as Bishop Lowth in the 1760s. Hyett and Percy focus on its appearance in drama between 1740 and 1760. The authors innovatively adapt large corpora such as *LION* and *ECCO* (not specifically designed for (historical) linguistics) to build a subcorpus of mostly comedies for their purposes. Given their preoccupations with the accumulation of wealth, and the acquisition of social status, the comedies are full of social stereotypes, and *YOU WAS* is used extensively to index low

status characters, but also figures in attempts by high status characters to get close to these characters. The detailed qualitative analysis of the comedies reveals that YOU WAS and YOU WERE vary within plays, within scenes, and within characters, highlighting the usefulness of this genre for historical sociolinguistic research.

Anne-Christine Gardner's *Towards a companionate marriage in Late Modern England? Two critical episodes in Mary Hamilton's courtship letters to John Dickenson* analyses letters from the Hamilton-Dickenson courtship, and shows how the couple's exchanges respond to eighteenth century notions of equality and companionship in courtship and marriage. This genre has been explored before, but the article highlights interesting differences between this couple and their contemporaries. The power balance between the two is negotiated through epistolary "crises", shown here in two episodes at different stages of the courtship. Gardner is concerned not just with the text but the material written object, particularly Anne's self-censorship at the time of writing, and many years later in the construction of her personal archive. We also see how the mechanics of letter writing and the timing of exchanges shape the relationship. The Critical Discourse Analysis approach that Gardner adopts allows the micro- and macro- contexts to be brought together through concepts like intertextuality and materiality.

Ekkehard Koenig & Letizia Vezzosi's *On the development of OE swā to ModE so and related changes in an atypical group of demonstratives* builds on previous comparative studies and comparative reconstructions, as well as corpus investigations, to trace the syntactic and semantic development of OE *swā*, *swylc* and *þus* to Modern English *so*, *such* and *thus*. The chapter argues that these lexemes form a distinct set, best described as "demonstratives of manner, quality and degree". Starting out from a basic exophoric (gestural) use and its typical extensions to anaphoric and cataphoric uses, these expressions develop into a wide variety of grammatical markers in ModE.

5. Conclusion

The papers in this volume show very clearly that research on the history of English continues apace, both in terms of investigations using classic, well-tried frameworks and methodologies and in terms of research using novel, often interdisciplinary methods. All periods remain popular objects of research; this volume contains work on, in effect, the complete history of the language, from Germanic through to Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English and Late Modern English. The chapters showcase a range of frameworks, with linguistic change investigated through the lens of generative theory, functional approaches, computational approaches, pragmatics, and Critical Discourse Analysis. We see this diversity as a great strength, and we look forward to the next twenty ICEHLs (and to all the ICEHLs after that, too) with excitement.

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