



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Review of Brinton, L. English historical linguistics: approaches and perspectives**

Fonteyn, L.

### **Citation**

Fonteyn, L. (2020). Review of Brinton, L. English historical linguistics: approaches and perspectives. *Journal Of English Linguistics*, 48(2), 199-204. doi:10.1177/0075424220913087

Version: Publisher's Version  
License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC 4.0 license](#)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3308921>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Book Reviews

Journal of English Linguistics

2020, Vol. 48(2) 199–212

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)[journals.sagepub.com/home/eng](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/eng)

*English Historical Linguistics: Approaches and Perspectives*. By Laurel Brinton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xx + 410. ISBN: 1107534216.

**Reviewed by:** Lauren Fonteyn , Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, the Netherlands  
DOI: 10.1177/0075424220913087

## I. Introduction

While there is no question that all textbooks on the history of English are worth reading, readers may still wonder what sets new publications such as *English Historical Linguistics: Approaches and Perspectives* apart from the vast number of alternatives. Because it would be virtually impossible for this review to match the book it evaluates in breadth of scope and depth of detail, I will discuss *English Historical Linguistics* in light of the two features that distinguish it from other textbooks: the volume's design and structure (section 2) and its value as a coursebook that supports and stimulates (undergraduate) student research in English Historical Linguistics (section 3).

A brief chapter overview immediately reveals that *English Historical Linguistics* presents the history of the English language through a wide range of different lenses. In its first chapter, Brinton defines the volume's overall aims and provides brief summaries of its contents. In chapter 2 ("The Scope of English Historical Linguistics"), Raymond Hickey provides an overview of the various approaches, frameworks, and domains in the field of (English) historical linguistics past and present (including a section on comparative historical linguistics). Subsequently, Cynthia Allen explains how the history of English has been studied by Generative linguists in chapter 3 ("Generative Approaches"). In chapter 4 ("Psycholinguistic Perspectives"), Martin Hilpert introduces the seemingly contradictory "Psycholinguistic-Historical Approach," defining some of the most important concepts in historical linguistics (e.g., reanalysis and analogy). Chapter 5 ("Corpus-based Approaches: Watching English Change"), by Marianne Hundt and Anne-Christine Gardner, introduces the reader to historical corpus-based research. Chapter 6 ("Approaches to Grammaticalization and Lexicalization"), by Lieselotte Brems and Sebastian Hoffmann, dives into the many theories of grammaticalization and lexicalization that have been proposed over the past few decades. In chapter 7 ("Inferential-based Approaches"), María José López-Couso further elaborates on the notion of invited inferencing, and discusses its role in processes of semantic change and (inter-)subjectification. In chapter 8 ("Discourse-based Approaches"), Claudia

Claridge explains that not only sounds, words, and grammar, but also entire text-types and registers can change over time. In chapter 9 (“Sociohistorical Approaches”), Peter Grund underscores that “language is socially embedded” and demonstrates that by means of two well-known case studies. Chapter 10, written by Laurel Brinton, acquaints the reader with the (fairly new) domain of “Historical Pragmatic Approaches,” in which the researcher devotes more careful attention to the context in which utterances are produced. In chapter 11 (“Perspectives on Standardization: From Codification to Prescriptivism”), Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade discusses the rise of the English usage guide. Chapter 12 (“Perspectives on Geographical Variation”), written by Merja Stenroos, discusses the difficulties of studying geographical variation in the past and the complicated relationship between sound and spelling in historical documents. Finally, the volume is concluded by Edgar Schneider, who uses the thirteenth chapter (“Perspectives on Language Contact”) to provide a very welcome overview of how English has been—and continues to be— influenced by other languages.

## 2. Design and Structure

In the spirit of the many thought-provoking and enjoyable analogies that are drawn in the individual chapters, the design of *English Historical Linguistics* could be compared to that of a competition-based reality TV show, in which a jury of experts discusses a contestant’s act from different perspectives. In some ways, the appeal of *English Historical Linguistics* can similarly be attributed to the fact that it is designed as an aggregation of perspectives on a single topic. With a few (relatively recent) exceptions (e.g., Fischer, De Smet & van der Wurff 2017), “histories of the English language (. . .) are typically organized by period (like histories of the English language)” (1). By contrast, *English Historical Linguistics* is organized as a collection of twelve chapters in which a team of experts discusses the history of the English language in different ways, and from different angles. Thus, the volume may be of interest not only to a student audience, but also to researchers who are not yet aware that the term “English Historical Linguistics” is, in fact, surprisingly polysemous.

With one introductory chapter followed by a varied list of approaches summarized in twenty-five-page chapters, the edited volume’s structure seems remarkably balanced. However, one could argue that the interest of the volume is not equally distributed over the different approaches, despite the fact that each chapter covers roughly the same number of pages. For instance, following Jucker’s (2008) characterization of historical pragmatics (represented in Table 10.1 [247]), chapters 7 and 10 could be considered two subcomponents of the same discipline (i.e., Historical Pragmatics). While Inference-based approaches and Historical pragmatic approaches are each awarded their own chapter, Cynthia Allen (chapter 3) is tasked with capturing the essence of the Generative Approach in a single chapter (while such an endeavor would ideally require its own 433-page textbook). As a result, readers should be aware that some chapters require additional reading to get a sense of the approach or perspective

under discussion. Fortunately, suggestions for further study are always provided at the end of each chapter.

### 3. English Historical Linguistics: Approaches and Perspectives as Course Material

#### 3.1. Level of Difficulty

For reasons that are most likely related to the differences in scope, the level of difficulty and prerequisite knowledge varies from chapter to chapter. Naturally, because the volume aims to introduce theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of the history of English, it accommodates the needs of university instructors who are increasingly expected to develop research-led teaching material (that is, teaching material informed by—but also providing insight into—the research practice). Overall, the volume is not intended to serve as a basic introduction to the history of English itself (2), and basic prerequisite knowledge is clearly assumed. Furthermore, given that introductory courses into the history of English are often structured chronologically (for good reasons), the volume's design makes it more suitable for a more advanced course.

Still, the contributors have clearly made an effort to make the approaches accessible and relatable. For instance, in chapter 4, Martin Hilpert uses numerous relatable non-linguistic examples to clarify the concepts he introduces: to explain what “automation” (also known as “chunking”; cf. Bybee 2010) is, for instance, he asks the reader to consider how difficult it is to write down a list of instructions for someone who has never tied their shoelaces before. Other examples include the strategic choice of some authors to introduce their chapter by asking the reader to draw on their own linguistic intuition about an interesting phenomenon in a particular utterance or text (e.g., chapters 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 13). As such, even chapter 3—which does require the reader to have some background in and familiarity with the Generative jargon and formalisms—still manages to accessibly highlight the main concerns of the generative linguist by showing how some Shakespearian sentence structures are no longer considered “normal” by Present-day English speakers.

What may arguably make the volume less accessible is that there is, in some ways, a “remarkably low level of dialogue between the individual chapters” (Włodarczyk 2018:10). One way to remedy this problem would be to include more cross-referencing between chapters, and perhaps opting to scrutinize the same examples in different chapters. Returning to the TV-competition analogy, it is indeed more difficult for the audience to decide which contestant they favor if each member of the expert panel uses their expertise to judge a different contestant. The problem of *English Historical Linguistics* is, however, not one of insufficient overlap between examples treated in the chapters. Quite the contrary: the volume strikes a nice balance between diversity and continuity of examples. The example of the pragmatic difference between *thou* and *you*, for instance, is taken up in chapters 8, 9, and 10, with each chapter adding its own specific detail: chapter 8 shows how *thou* has acquired religious/literary

connotations, while chapter 9 discusses how *thou* was previously used in an insulting manner (232), and chapter 10 illustrates the use of *thou* as a *verb* of insult (i.e., performative verb [259]).

Instead, the problem may rather be that cross-referencing is not always done explicitly when examples or ideas overlap. To give an example: both chapter 3 and chapter 4 mention the reanalysis of *a(n)* before a consonant (48, 81), but neither chapter refers to the other. Similarly, there is no cross-referencing between chapters 6 and 7, despite the fact that they both extensively discuss the diachronic development of the connective *while*. If this is considered an issue, instructors could take it upon themselves to use the index to map out unflagged overlap, and establish inter-approach similarities and contrasts when discussing the text with students. At the same time, it should also be considered that the way in which the chapters are currently structured (introduction, elaboration, illustrative case studies, conclusion) makes them quite suitable to be used independently. As such, the more accessible chapters could be used in intro-level courses, or some individual chapters could be used to introduce a historical component in a more general course on, for instance, Psycho- (chapter 4) or Sociolinguistics (chapters 9, 12, and 13). If the chapters start relying more heavily on extensive cross-referencing, they may become less suitable for those purposes.

### 3.2. A Guide to (Student) Research?

Similarly, *English Historical Linguistics* also caters well to another key component of a research-led course design, that is, the integration of student research. It is obvious that the edited volume was set up with a clear goal, that is, to “give you a sense of how English historical linguistic study is (and has been) undertaken over the years” (2), by describing different theoretical approaches and methodologies, and illustrating them with authentic examples and case studies. The contributing authors have clearly taken this goal to heart, as each chapter presents a carefully composed introduction to what it means to inspect the history of the English language through the eyes of a particular type of researcher. Of course, there are some differences in style and strategy between authors: the set-up of chapter 11—which offers a narrative overview of the development of the English Usage Guide (with the occasional reference to possible research resources)—differs from that of other chapters, which provide brief historical overviews and critical reviews of the subfield (e.g., chapters 2, 3, 6, 9, 10), or place more explicit emphasis on research practice. Some nice examples of the latter type are chapter 8, which makes explicit reference to the different ways in which the diachronic evolution of texts can be studied, and chapter 5, which could almost serve as an instruction manual on how to set up a corpus-based study (if a few small details were added, such as how to normalize frequencies).

Yet, if an instructor were to adopt the volume as a coursebook in a research-led course, one question they may raise is whether the structure of the volume would give the impression that research into the history of English is not simply multi-faceted, but compartmentalized. This is because explicit comparison or juxtaposition between theoretical frameworks remains fairly sparse in the volume; such comparison is perhaps

most prominently featured in chapter 2, which provides a historical overview of the field more generally, but it is indeed less visible in other chapters. Still, this does not mean that there are no (explicit or more subtle) links and connections drawn between the approaches and perspectives described in this volume: chapter 4, for instance, includes a section on how Psycholinguistic concepts are treated in linguistic theories (91-93), chapter 10 (“Historical Pragmatic Approaches”) includes a table adapted from Jucker (2008) that essentially compares and connects the approaches of chapters 6, 7, 8, and 10, and chapter 6 also briefly engages in a framework comparison when it states that the “functional-cognitive approach is in stark contrast to theories of language that consider incomplete transmission of grammatical structure to be the main impetus for language change” (137). Moreover, the added value of the introductory chapter, where the approaches addressed in the individual chapters are placed in their historical context, should not be overlooked. Finally, I am inclined to argue that it is much more strategic to keep juxtapositions between frameworks subtle and sparse: explicitly juxtaposing formalist and functionalist theories may precisely be what causes students to acquire a fractured view of the field, which could negatively affect the growing reconciliation between these frameworks (cf. Fonteyn & Walkden 2019). As such, keeping such framework-based contrasts to a minimum is, in some ways, precisely what a modern Historical Linguistics textbook should do.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is certainly not difficult to determine what sets *English Historical Linguistics* apart from other textbooks on the history of the English language: any review of this edited volume will tell you that it is a one-of-a-kind textbook that presents the history of English in a unique, multi-faceted, and research-oriented way. It is with this set-up that this volume has managed to cover a niche, despite the fact that there is a large number of (excellent) textbooks of historical English on the market. With the publication of *English Historical Linguistics*, instructors who aim to familiarize their students with the many theoretical and methodological approaches to historical linguistic research no longer have to scrape together introductions of domain-specific text- or handbooks, but can now rely on a centralized and remarkably accessible collection of chapters written by internationally-renowned experts in the field. At the same time, those instructors may find that this volume is a life-saver (or at least a valuable time-saver) because of its excellent exercises, which can easily be discussed in seminars, used as exam questions, or given as coursework assignments. Finally, because the individual chapters work quite well as stand-alone texts, *English Historical Linguistics* could also be the ideal companion for instructors who are looking for complementary readings, or even historical linguistics researchers who wish to read a digestible introduction to one of the many different approaches and perspectives taken in their many-splendored field.

#### ORCID iD

Lauren Fonteyn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5706-8418>

## References

- Bybee, Joan. 2010. *Language, usage and cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fischer, Olga, Hendrik De Smet & Wim van der Wurff. 2017. *A brief history of English syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fonteyn, Lauren & George Walkden. 2019. Review of Fischer, De Smet & van der Wurff (2017), *A brief history of English syntax*. *Journal of Historical Syntax* 3(1). 1-12.
- Jucker, Andreas H. 2008. Historical Pragmatics. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2(5). 894-906.
- Włodarczyk, Matylda. 2018. English Historical Linguistics: A textbook for the 21st century? *Pragmatics. Reviews* 6(1). 5-11.

---

*Language, Sexuality and Education*. By Helen Sauntson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xi + 204. ISBN: 9781107126879.

**Reviewed by:** Brian W. King , University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong  
DOI: 10.1177/0075424220924116

In Helen Sauntson's latest book, her stated aim is to extend, into the school setting of the United Kingdom as well as the United States, the study of discriminatory sexuality discourses in English. This move is certainly justifiable and welcome because very often attitudes and ideologies in schools lag behind progressive legislation and educational policy. On the one hand this is a somewhat open secret, but where Sauntson's study adds so much value is in its meticulous execution and the uncovering of precisely how this lag is perpetuated by discourses both in schools and in curriculum documents.

It soon became clear to me, while reading the book, that the target readership is educationalists as much as it is linguists, and this makes a great deal of sense considering the book's topic and aims. Where the book is highly instructive for a specialist audience of linguists is in its goals to stimulate dialogue between queer linguistics and applied linguistics, and to enable resistance to the pervasive problem of discriminatory sexuality discourses. This contribution takes the form of a theoretical framework that Sauntson calls Queer Applied Linguistics (QAL).

Sauntson prefaces the explication of QAL by asserting that queer theory is best placed to explain how identity categories come to have salience and come to be difficult to challenge in linguistic interaction. QAL is framed by Sauntson as an approach that uses queer linguistics within Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL), informing CAL about how to address social concerns with inequalities around gender and sexuality. It is a framework for examining how normative and non-normative constructions of sexual identity are enacted through and inscribed in language practices. Normativity is seen to be unstable precisely because it is temporally and spatially contingent (i.e., what is normative differs over time and across space). These theoretical commitments