



Universiteit  
Leiden

The Netherlands

## Introduction: keys to the history of English

Porck, M.H.; Gordon, M.S.; Caon, L.; Porck, T.

### Citation

Porck, M. H., Gordon, M. S., & Caon, L. (2024). Introduction: keys to the history of English. In T. Porck (Ed.), *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (pp. 1-7). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi:10.1075/cilt.363.00por

Version:

Publisher's Version

License:

[Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from:

<https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4212502>

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

# Introduction

## Keys to the history of English

Thijs Porck, Moragh Gordon & Luisella Caon  
Leiden University

### 1. Introduction

Ic ælfric wolde þas lytlan boc awendan to engliscum gereorde of  
ðam stæfcræfte, þe is gehaten GRAMMATICA, ... forðan ðe  
stæfcræft is seo cæg, ðe ðæra boca andgit unlicð.  
(Zupitza 1880: 2)

[I, Ælfric, wanted to translate into the English language this little  
book of grammar, that is called *Grammatica*, because grammar is  
the key that unlocks the understanding of books.]

Ælfric of Eynsham's reference to grammar as a key in the introduction to his Old English *Grammar* is reminiscent of the widespread medieval motif of the *claves sapientiae* 'keys of wisdom', which was typically associated with didactic and grammatical texts (see Bremmer 2014: 26–27; Cataldi 2022). As Ælfric and other medieval grammarians held, a proper understanding of language is often the first step to acquire wisdom; the papers collected in this volume *Keys to the history of English*, along with those in its companion volume *Unlocking the history of English*, naturally stand in this tradition. These contributions were selected from papers delivered at the twenty-first International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL-21), held 7–11 June, 2021, in the Dutch town of Leiden, also known as the 'City of Keys', owing to its coat of arms showing the two red keys of St. Peter. The contributions in this volume centre around three different themes: syntax and word order, diachronic linguistic change, and lexicography and lexis.

## 2. Syntax and word order

The three papers collected for this section of the volume deal with various aspects of English syntax across time and geographical space, ranging from questions to do with syntactic complexity, to word order in Old English, to grammar competition in Scots. All three papers make use of corpus methods to gain insight into syntactic structures. The first paper takes a diachronic approach and traces paratactic and hypotactic structures from the Old to Late Modern English periods. The second paper zooms in on the Old English period and considers a somewhat understudied area of investigation, namely different types of left-dislocation in Old English. The third paper shifts focus to Scots and the possible influence of English on its syntax.

**George Walkden's** paper busts the myth that hypotaxis more or less linearly developed out of parataxis in the history of English, by successfully refuting two claims that appear to underly this myth. The first is that the juxtaposition of paratactic constructions such as *[I think that.] [Jane left]* eventually led to the reanalysis of the construction into a hypotactic one containing a complement clause *[I think [that Jane left]]*. Based on Axel-Tober's (2017) work, Walkden suggests that relative clause constructions are more likely candidates for reanalysis into complement clauses. The second popular assumption is that there was a gradual increase in hypotactic constructions at the expense of paratactic constructions over time. As Walkden rightfully points out, this claim has never been substantiated by empirical evidence. By making use of the *York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose* and the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpora* that span the Middle to Late Modern English periods, Walkden is able to measure the level of hypotaxis in different text types over time, based on the clause types that occur in them. The claimed increase in hypotaxis is not found. Instead, it is text genre, rather than time, that is the main predictor for the level of hypotaxis. These findings underline the importance of taking into account text genres when studying the history of English.

**Artur Bartnik's** corpus study focuses on left-dislocation in the texts of the *York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose*. This linguistic phenomenon has been studied quite extensively from a cross-linguistic point of view, but its occurrence in Old English is still not well understood. More precisely, although there is general agreement that there are two types of left-dislocation, namely contrastive left-dislocation, as in the example *The people who earn millions and pay next to no tax, those are the targets*, and hanging topic left-dislocation, as illustrated by the example *John, I never really liked him*, it is not always clear what distinguishing features set the different types apart in Old English. In the case of the former, the traditional accounts state that the resumptive is a weak demonstrative that occurs high in the clause structure, and the dislocated phrase has to have the same case

as the resumptive, whereas, in the case of the latter, the resumptive typically is a personal pronoun that usually appears lower in the clause structure and need not match case with the dislocated phrase. Based on corpus data, Bartnik finds only one reliable distinguishing feature, however, and that is the type of resumptive. The study also raises another relevant point, which is the role of the individual authors of the texts: some authors follow the expected patterns more closely than others.

Lisa Gotthard's paper makes use of the new *Parsed Corpus of Scottish Correspondence (1540–1750)* to study the emergence of *do*-support in Scots between 1540 and 1750. This is a particularly interesting time period for written Scots, a variety quite distinct from southern English, as it increasingly incorporated features from the written southern English variety. There is some debate as to whether *do*-support in Scots was a form of structural borrowing from English, but extensive studies that can support or dispute this are scant. Gotthard's work addresses this caveat and systematically traces the rise of negative and declarative *do*-support in Scottish correspondence. The relatively late and slow emergence of the structure seems to point to at least some influence from the south. Furthermore, structural change of this kind has some interesting implications in that Scots traditionally had a distinct set of subject-verb concord constraints, also known as the Northern Subject Rule, which, like *do*-support, operates on a so-called last resort principle. Interestingly, Gotthard finds that as *do*-support increases, Northern Subject Rule constraints seem to decline, which points to possible competition between the two grammar systems.

### 3. Diachronic linguistic change

The papers collected in this section trace changes stretching long timespans and shed light on long-term developments on various linguistic levels. The first paper investigates phonological changes from an articulatory phonology point of view, and in doing so uses modern insights to explain phonological developments in the past. The second paper provides an overview of how the subjunctive and different expressions of modality compete in noun clauses over time. Lastly, the third study of this section demonstrates the risks of not fully taking into account diachronic linguistic change and the problems that occur when modern punctuation practices are imposed on Middle English texts.

Gjertrud Stenbrenden's paper sheds new light on phonological changes that are associated with lateral /l/ in coda position. Historically, coda /l/ appears conducive to change, and there are many examples of changes to be found in these environments such as lengthening of the vowel preceding /l/, rounding of preceding vowels, or l-vocalisation, often leading to the formation of diphthongs.

These changes have been well attested and studied in the history of English. What makes Stenbrenden's approach unique, however, is that it interprets and categorizes these historical changes from Old English to Present-day British English on the basis of modern and recent insights from experimental phonetics. Based on modern articulatory findings on the production of laterals, Stenbrenden is able to explain what gestural mechanisms and articulatory conflicts underly the numerous changes in coda lateral positions. It is noteworthy that Stenbrenden also highlights the relevance of perceptual and acoustic phonetics in explaining the spread of a sound change; perceptual properties of a lateral can reinforce listeners to reinterpret certain sounds and this can further induce changes.

Lilo Moessner's paper too spans a long time period and is concerned with the expression of modality in noun clauses in the *Helsinki Corpus*, which covers the Old to Early Modern English periods. In earlier stages of English, the subjunctive mood was a very productive means to express non-factual/root modality, but it underwent increasing competition from other constructions such as modal verb constructions from the Middle English period onwards, and it has often been predicted that the subjunctive is on the verge of extinction. However, the subjunctive is still with us and, as Moessner points out, seems to be on the increase in some varieties of English. Why this might be the case is difficult to answer because studies that look at the subjunctive diachronically and comprehensively are scarce. Moessner's study provides some interesting pieces to the subjunctive survival puzzle. Most notably, she shows that there was only competition between certain types of modality expression: the modal auxiliaries *shall*, *must* and *þurfe*, carrying the meaning of obligation and expressing non-fact/root modality, may have competed with the subjunctive, whereas modal auxiliaries *can*, *may*, and *will* came to be preferred for the expression of epistemic modality, thus not competing with the subjunctive in non-fact/root modality contexts.

In the final paper in this section, Sabina Nedelius highlights an issue that bears great relevance to linguists working with edited versions of Middle English texts. Modern editions tend to follow modern punctuation patterns that significantly deviate from that of the original medieval manuscripts. This is often done in an effort to demarcate syntactic sentence boundaries and make syntactic parsing easier for modern readers. Nedelius states that this usage of punctuation is based primarily on syntactic criteria only developed around the mid-eighteenth century. Before that time, punctuation was chiefly used to mark prosodic features. The question emerges as to how editors of medieval manuscripts dealt with this discrepancy in punctuation practices, and to what extent modernized punctuation affects the philological reliability of the texts. Nedelius' study greatly contributes to the answer to this question by taking a quantitative approach and studying nine Middle English prose texts along with two editions of each text.

The results reveal that the punctuation imposed by modern editions quite often leads to syntactic sentence boundaries not supported by the original manuscripts. This, in turn, has serious implications for anyone basing their linguistic research on these edited editions.

#### 4. Lexicography and lexis

The four papers that make up this section deal with lexicographical resources and the study of English vocabulary. These strands of historical linguistics were well represented at ICEHL-21, which also included a workshop on the *Thesaurus of Old English* and the digital platform Evoke (see Porck & Stolk 2021). The first two papers of this section deal with early attempts at creating resources that shed light on the meaning of words, while the last two papers demonstrate how modern, digital resources can be used to study developments in the lexis of English.

**Christopher Langmuir's** paper discusses a peculiar aspect of the glossing practice of the tenth-century Northumbrian scribe Aldred in Durham Cathedral Library, MS A.iv.19, otherwise known as the 'Durham Collectar' or 'Durham Ritual'. In his interlinear Old English glosses to Latin words, Aldred frequently used incomplete double glosses (a single gloss followed only by an abbreviation for *uel* 'or'). The exact purpose of these incomplete double glosses is not entirely clear, especially since the manuscript often does not provide space for an alternative gloss to be supplied. Langmuir suggests that these incomplete double glosses were intended to alert readers about the provisional or conjectural character of the Old English gloss. As such, this glossing practice may have invited readers to interrogate the original Latin text themselves. Langmuir's paper thus demonstrates that glossing words was not a straightforward act of translation; moreover, he shows that in analyzing early lexicographical resources, the presentation and location of the glosses on the page need to be taken into account.

This last point is also illustrated by **Melanie Vollbrecht's** study of the contents, layouts and extratextual markings in a number of hand-written copies of an early modern Old English-Latin dictionary. These copies, produced in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany, all find their origins in the sizable Old English dictionary made by John Joscelyn (1529–1603) and John Parker (1548–1618). Vollbrecht demonstrates how the German scholars Friedrich Lindembrog (1573–1648), Johann Georg von Eckhart (1664–1730) and Dietrich von Stade (1637–1718) each used distinct layouts and marginal markings in their copies of the Joscelyn/Parker dictionary. Vollbrecht further highlights how the appearance of these copies may have been affected by the changing motivations for engaging with the study of Old English in Germany, ranging from an interest in ecclesiastical and legal history to

comparative philology. This paper constitutes an important reminder of the early modern continental European contributions to early English lexicography (see, e.g., Dekker 1999) and sheds lights on some forgotten early modern precursors of the Old English dictionaries by Bosworth-Toller, Clark Hall and the *Toronto Dictionary of Old English* project.

The next paper, by **Marta Sylwanowicz and Anna Wojtyś**, showcases the importance of such dictionaries for historical linguistic research. Drawing on the digitized versions of the Bosworth-Toller dictionary of Old English and the *Middle English Dictionary*, Sylwanowicz and Wojtyś are able to establish that the transition from Old English to Middle English involved a dramatic decrease in the number of words beginning with the element *wiper-*: from 69 entries in the Old English dictionary to 24 in the Middle English dictionary. In their paper, they provide a survey of these words and analyse their attestations in various electronic corpora. Eventually, they are able to attribute the sharp decline in *wiper*-words to a variety of factors, ranging from low-frequency-use to semantic overlap, as well as the competition of foreign loanwords and native words with the prefix *wip-*.

Drawing on another digital lexicographical resource, the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, alongside a number of electronic text corpora, **Julia Landmann** analyzes the presence, meaning and contextual use of Yiddish loanwords in English. A corpus of 248 Yiddish borrowings is first grouped into semantic categories and then analyzed in order to establish what may have prompted the adoption of these words into English. Again, a wide array of motivating factors is established. Some terms fill lexical gaps and were borrowed to express concepts so specific to the culture of their speakers that they had not previously been lexicalised in English. In cases where words for concepts already existed in English, Yiddish borrowings were likely inspired by a desire to express one's social and cultural identity. As such, Landmann's paper shows that it is important to take into account both language-internal and language-external contexts to discuss linguistic developments.

## 5. Conclusion

Each of the contributions in this volume adds to our knowledge of the history of English and sets an example of how to research aspects of the ever-changing English language. While the keys of Leiden's coat of arms, belonging to St Peter, open the Kingdom of Heaven, the 'keys' presented as part of this volume have a more mundane purpose. As editors, we hope that they will bring the reader closer to a fuller understanding of English historical linguistics and, in doing so, aid in the unlocking of wisdom.

## Bibliography

-  Axel-Tober, K. 2017. The development of the declarative complementizer in German. *Language (Historical Syntax)* 93. e29–e65.
-  Bremmer, R. H., Jr. 2014. The orality of Old Frisian law texts. In R. H. Bremmer Jr, S. Laker & O. Vries (eds.), *Directions for Old Frisian philology*, 1–48. Rodopi.
-  Cataldi, C. 2022. The Old Frisian *Five Keys of Wisdom* and its background. *Us Wurk* 71. 1–21.
-  Dekker, C. 1999. *The origins of Old Germanic studies in the Low Countries*. Brill.
- Porck, T. & S. S. Stolk (eds.). 2021. *Exploring early medieval English eloquence: A Digital Humanities approach with A Thesaurus of Old English and Evoke* (Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik 81[3–4]). Brill.
- Zupitza, J. 1880. *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar*. Weidmannsche Buchhandlung.