

# Introduction

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.251.02int>

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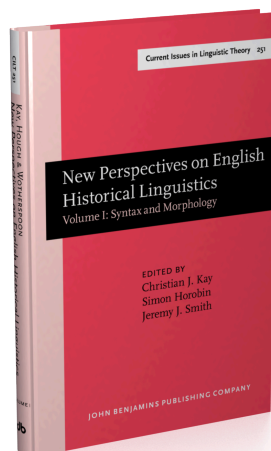
**New Perspectives on English Historical Linguistics. Volume I: Syntax and Morphology : Selected papers from 12 ICEHL, Glasgow, 21–26 August 2002**

**Edited by Christian Kay, Simon Horobin and Jeremy J. Smith**  
[Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, 251] 2004. x, 262 pp.

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# Introduction

The papers collected in this volume are a selection of those given at ICEHL 12, which was held at Glasgow University in August 2002. Most are concerned with the historical grammar of English; a second volume, concerned primarily with issues of lexis and transmission, is being published simultaneously. Together the two volumes provide a fair summary of many issues that are currently engaging practitioners in the field of English historical linguistics.

As I indicate in the introduction to Volume II of these papers, *New Perspectives on English Historical Linguistics* is a sober title making a big claim. The study of the history of English grammar has a long pedigree, and it is therefore sometimes hard to see one's work as much more than simply footnotes to Sweet or Jespersen or Ellegård or Mustanoja or Mitchell or Visser. But the essays presented here all genuinely move the subject forward by pursuing wider theoretical implications; indeed, this consideration guided the authors in making their selection from the papers offered at the conference. This is particularly apparent in the plenary papers by David Denison, Olga Fischer and April and Robert McMahon, all three of which link the engagement with data — an inheritance from the philological tradition — with attention to current linguistic theory. It seems that we have learned (in Michael Halliday's phrase) that we need not trample on our predecessors in order to make progress — surely a sign of the maturity of our subject.

It is perhaps appropriate in a preface of this nature to sum up some of the directions in which the historical study of English grammar is going, as witnessed by the papers presented here. I will choose three issues in particular.

First, there is a question of the health of the discipline. It is noticeable that English historical linguistics is in many ways a subject pursued more strongly outwith the Anglophone world than within it, and many of the most exciting contributions to the conference, both in papers and in subsequent discussion, were offered by scholars from continental Europe and Asia (notably Japan). This is in some ways a paradoxical state of affairs, and it certainly challenges

those of us working in (say) the United Kingdom to develop a greater evangelical zeal for our subject. At the same time, the present volumes remind us that the history of English as well as English itself is now an international possession.

Secondly, the welcome rapprochement between linguistics and philology — discussed briefly in the preface to the second volume — has meant a new interest in bringing data into closer articulation with linguistic theory. An encouraging factor here has been the adoption of what may still (just) be called “the new technology”. In another forum, Anneli Meurman-Solin has called for the establishment of “computational philology”, whereby the power of the computer can be harnessed to the analysis of large historical corpora. Of these, the most famous is undoubtedly the Helsinki Corpus, but this pioneering work is now being supplemented by massive new resources with much-enhanced functionality. Some of these new resources are described in these volumes.

Finally, an exciting new development is the concern with models. Perhaps “new” is a misnomer; after all, Max Mueller and Auguste Schleicher, responding to Darwin, called for a “biological” linguistics in the 1860s. But historical linguists have always been a somewhat piratical lot, willing to raid other disciplines for useful models and metaphors in order to help them practise their craft more effectively. Our grammars leak and breed, sprout and flow, blend and split; their categories are fuzzy, yet have prototypical cores. (“Perspectives”, of course, is a metaphor.) What all this modelling indicates, it seems to me, is that English historical linguists are always eager to examine the intellectual underpinning of their subject. Such constant self-reflexivity, though hardly healthy for an individual, is an extremely healthy sign for an academic discipline.

In sum, it seems that English historical linguists have no shortage of exciting research questions to address. And the essays in this volume indicate that equally exciting answers to these questions — and in turn more questions — are continuing to emerge.

Jeremy Smith  
Glasgow, 2003