

Introduction

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.252.02int>

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New Perspectives on English Historical Linguistics. Volume II: Lexis and Transmission : Selected papers from 12 ICEHL, Glasgow, 21–26 August 2002

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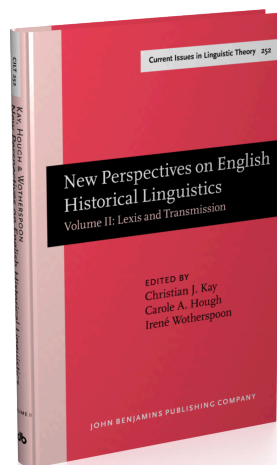
[*Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, 252]

2004. xii, 271 pp.

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Introduction

The papers collected in this volume are a selection of those given at ICEHL12, which was held at Glasgow University in August 2002. They are concerned, very broadly, with the historical lexicology and transmission of English. A first volume, concerned with grammatical issues, is being published simultaneously, and together the two volumes provide a fair summary of many if not most issues that are currently engaging practitioners of English historical linguistics.

The editors spent some time deciding on a title for these volumes, and the final choice, *New Perspectives on English Historical Linguistics*, is a somewhat sober compromise. But, as I point out in the preface to Volume I, this is of course a sober title with an ambitious claim. The historical study of the English lexicon and sound-/writing-system has a long pedigree, and it is sometimes hard to see one's work as much more than simply footnotes to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the works of Karl Luick or Eric Dobson. Is it possible, in other words, to say something really new on these subjects? Is it possible to justify the historical study of the English lexicon and its transmission as something worth doing — something for which, to put it bluntly, it is legitimate to be paid to pursue? We think it is, and the evidence is supplied by the papers printed here.

ICEHL12 did, of course, coincide happily with one event whose newness cannot be disputed: the publication of the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*. *DOST* is one of that “select band of historical dictionaries” (as Philip Durkin described them in his celebratory speech) envisaged by Sir William Craigie back in 1919 as the obvious next steps after the completion of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As an intellectual achievement *DOST* is rivalled only by the *Middle English Dictionary* which, with much greater resources, was completed the previous year. Together with the *Scottish National Dictionary*, which appeared in 1976 and covered the period since 1700, *DOST* enables scholars to trace the complete history of the Scots lexicon from its origins in the twelfth century up to the present day. Marace Dareau's paper, which derives from her plenary presentation at the conference, will become a classic description of the vicissitudes of undertaking a long-term research project during a

period of unparalleled social and intellectual change in the British — specifically Scottish — university system.

It is tempting to see the completion of such projects as in some sense a final statement: a line is drawn, and scholarship turns to other research questions in other fields where answers are more easily and more quickly found. Certainly some would have been tempted to encourage such a development: the authorities of the ancient Scottish universities, perhaps, who (with occasional gaps and with occasional protests) kept *DOST* in funds for so many years. However, the other papers in this book demonstrate very clearly that lexicographical monuments such as *OED*, *MED*, *SND* and *DOST* are rather like the Victorian infrastructures on which modern cities depend. First, they are never truly finished, and need constant renewal. Thus, for instance, all are being or have been revised or reconfigured to take advantage of advances in computer technology — something, incidentally, on which the greatest editor of *DOST*, the late Jack Aitken, was a world authority. Secondly, they are also indispensable foundations for further scholarly endeavour, and most of the remaining papers in this volume show how the disciplines of historical lexicology can be pushed forward in the light of such achievements.

In so doing they constitute a definition of what historical lexicology should be about, and it is perhaps appropriate in this introduction to ask such a defining question. The study of the lexicon has suffered in some circles from under-theorising, perhaps because its study requires engagement with all levels of language. Lexicology is sometimes identified with semantics, but this is wrong; semantics is the underpinning for all levels of language (grammar, lexicon and transmission). The lexicologist needs to engage with semantic notions in relation to the lexicon, but also with other levels of language: morphology, syntax and transmission. Onomastics, a distinct branch of lexicology which raises complex questions of semantics and morphology, forms another strand of research. The lexicologist needs to develop an historical sense through, for example, the study of etymology, and engage with questions of evidence, and of style and register, both diachronically and diatopically. This will include insights from modern sociolinguistics, whereby the “present can explain the past”. More generally, lexicologists find themselves confronted constantly with questions of classification and organisation, often, until the recent renewal of interest through cognitive semantics, without the formalist luxuries afforded to some schools, say, of phonology or grammar.

Above all, though, lexicology is the area of linguistic enquiry where data are of paramount importance. The historical lexicologist of English is confronted

with literally millions of words recorded over 1500 years. In such circumstances, of course, it is only too easy for scholars to lose sight of the wood amidst the trees, and the task of the lexicologist in particular is to make sense of this mass of data. Many, if not all, of the papers in this volume begin with a close study of a piece of data, but all of them — it was something the editors tried to emphasise in making their selection from those delivered at ICEHL — attempt to draw conclusions with a more general significance for linguistic theory. Many use new research tools, such as machine-readable corpora, or new intellectual tools, such as cognitive linguistics. More broadly, all the papers in this volume, whether concerned with lexicology or transmission, have a social orientation; neither lexicology nor phonology, according to the authors of the papers collected here, can be seen as divorced from their social setting.

Although it is a claim which is also a cliché, it may be supposed that such developments constitute a new Kuhnian paradigm for English historical linguistics. This paradigm has been emerging for the last thirty years: the rapprochement between philology and linguistics. At one time, philology — data-centred, apparently innocent of theory — seemed to many in the academic community to have completed its task. Texts had been edited, dictionaries completed, dialectological surveys undertaken. The way was open for theory-rich linguistics to take over, and indeed some felt able to claim that all previous scholarship needed to be recouched in (say) the terminology of generative theory before further progress could be made. Philological reaction to such opinions was often hostile, and for some time the two approaches to the historical study of English diverged markedly. The focus on data which is characteristic of lexicology is not, of course, confined to that subject, and the essays on phonology and writing-systems in this volume are similarly data-centred.

The divergence between philology and linguistics is now surely over. To paraphrase Michael Halliday, we have learnt “to build on our predecessors and move forward, instead of constantly staying behind where they were in order to trample them underfoot” (Halliday 1987: 152). The most exciting current work in the field draws on the strengths of both philological and linguistic traditions; both traditions have learnt to value each other, and the dialogue between these complementary approaches is one of the most encouraging characteristics of the discipline as it is currently practised. These essays demonstrate how productive this dialogue is proving to be.

Jeremy J. Smith
Glasgow, 2003

Reference

Halliday, M. A. K. 1987. "Language and the order of nature". *The Linguistics of Writing* ed. by N. Fabb & A. Durant, 135–154. Manchester: Manchester University Press.