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Preface and acknowledgements

The **history of English** spans more than 1500 years. From humble beginnings, English has developed into one of the world's most important languages, as even opponents of globalisation have to admit. Originally, it was spoken only by scattered groups of Germanic settlers who conquered England from around 450 A.D. onwards. Today, English is used either as a first or as a second language by a significant proportion of the world's population: it has between 300 and 400 million native speakers.¹ The number of speakers of English as a second or foreign language is even larger, being estimated to border on one billion.² It has become the *lingua franca* of science, economics, international relations, travel, etc.

Its prominence has also attracted the attention of linguists, and a lot of research on its history, structure and use has been done. Apart from countless specialist studies, more than a hundred histories and historical grammars of English have been published since the nineteenth century.³ They range in length from brief introductions such as Otto Jespersen's successful *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (first edition 1905, 10th edition 1985), to two-volume handbooks such as Karl Brunner's *Die englische Sprache* (second edition 1960-1962), or *English Historical Linguistics* edited by Bergs & Brinton (2012), up to the *CHEL* (*Cambridge History of the English Language*, 1992-2001, general editor Richard Hogg), which comprises six volumes.

Several ways of arranging the material have been proposed. Often a chronological approach has been adopted, e.g. by Baugh & Cable, *A History of the English Language* (first edition 1935, 6th edition 2013), who basically follow the traditional periodisation (i.e. Old English, Middle English, Modern English) and treat each period in turn. An interesting experiment was Barbara Strang's *A History of English* (1970), which started from the present and then worked its way back into the past; but none of the later authors adopted this scheme. Another approach is to proceed by linguistic level (phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.) and treat the historical development separately on each level; this was done, for example, by Manfred Görlach, *Einführung in die englische Sprachgeschichte* (1st edition 1974, 5th edition 2002).

1 According to the 17th edition of the online reference *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (URL 1).

2 Cf. Graddol et al. (2007: 11); McCrum et al. (2002: 9f.).

3 The first seems to have been Latham 1841, but even Dr. Samuel Johnson put a brief history of English at the beginning of his *Dictionary* of 1755. For (selective) lists of such works cf. e.g. Fisiak (1987: 27-31); Gneuss (1996: 48-50, 125f.); Reichl (1993: 180-182); Tajima (1988: 25-37).

The chronological approach is particularly appropriate for accounts that emphasise the **external history** of the language, i.e. the historical events and changing social conditions that have helped to shape the language at each successive stage. The separate treatment of linguistic levels, on the other hand, allows linguists to focus on the **internal history** of the language and to trace its evolution as a **system**.

In our book, we have tried to achieve a balanced presentation of both external factors and internal evolution and therefore we have chosen the chronological approach for Chapter 3 (“The periods of English”) and the systematic approach for all following chapters. There is no absolute division, however. Especially for the earliest stages, i.e. Indo-European and Germanic, there is little tangible historical background. The chronological approach is mainly connected with the discipline ‘history of a language’ (in our case, of English), whereas the systematic approach is primarily connected with the discipline of ‘**historical linguistics**’.⁴ We will be introducing the methods, approaches and basic technical terms of the latter as we go along.

English has never been a monolithic entity. In the beginning, it existed in a number of dialects, and the present standard language only developed from the late 15th century onwards. As English spread beyond its original borders, however, a number of national varieties of that standard sprang up. The most influential of these is **American Standard English**, which is now ousting **British (English) Standard English** from the position of the preferred norm in international communication, but it is by no means the only one. We discuss the history of the English dialects, the question of standardisation and the proliferation of Modern standard varieties in Chapter 11. We print important terms in **boldface**, especially when they are used for the first time.

Apart from the question of structure, one problem for books dealing with the history of the English language is finding a distinctive title. Only limited variations of the elements *English, Language/Linguistic, History, Introduction* seem possible, but each permutation has its own implications. We have chosen our title for its conciseness and to emphasize that we are looking at English language history specifically from the point of view of its consequences for present-day English.

This book has been very long in the making (fortunately not as long as the English language took to develop to its present state). Brigitte Narr, the publisher of the Stauffenburg Verlag, kindly suggested it and then waited patiently for its completion; therefore, our thanks are primarily due to her and her constant support. We also thank Sarah Bohn from the Stauffenburg Verlag for typesetting and proofreading the book, and Inge Milfull from the *OED*, who contributed to the first chapters.

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4 Cf. Chapter 2. A third related, but also distinct discipline is ‘history of linguistics’, of which we give a very brief sketch in 1.6.

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We hope that our book will be useful both to introductory courses to the history of English and to beginners in the field as well as to more advanced students.

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