

# From aspect to voice: The descent of the passive light verb in English

Elizabeth Cowper<sup>1</sup> & Daniel Currie Hall<sup>2,1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Toronto, <sup>2</sup>Saint Mary's University

## 1. Introduction

Three developments in English ca. the late 18th century:

- Decline of the passival:

(1) « Whereas a Brass Foundry is now building at Woolwich...  
(*London Gazette*, 10 July 1716, quoted in OED s.v. *brass*)

- Acceptance of the progressive passive (replacing the passival):

(2) » ...like a fellow whose uttermost upper grinder is being torn out...  
(R. Southey, letter of 9 Oct. 1795, quoted in OED s.v. *be*)

- Final decline of the *be*-perfect (replaced by the *have*-perfect):

(3) « ...he informs me his son is set out...  
(O. Goldsmith, *She stoops to conquer* I.i, 1773, quoted in OED s.v. *be*)

One change: The splitting of two featurally distinct instantiations of an Aspect head into two separate heads, with the resultative version becoming a passive light verb and the processual version becoming a marker of imperfective viewpoint aspect.

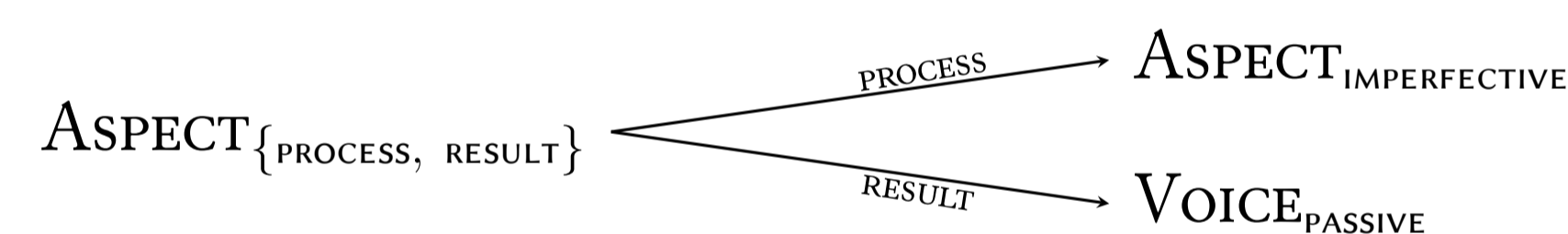


Figure 1: From process and result to imperfective and passive

## 2. The *be*-perfect and the *have*-perfect

McFadden & Alexiadou's (2006; 2010) analysis:

- Pre-OE period: resultative "perfect" only, both *be* and *have*:

(4) a. *Hie wæron cumen Leonīðan to fultume*  
they were come to-Leonidas as help  
'They had come to Leonidas to help him.'  
b. *þa þa ge hiene gebundenne hæfdon*  
then when you him bound had  
'then when you {had bound him/had him in the state of being bound}'  
(Alfred's translation of Orosius, ca. 893, quoted in Traugott (1992))

- Earlier English (until late 18thC): resultative *be*-perfect as before, full *have*-perfect:

(5) a. *I am come as ze bade me.*  
'I have come as you asked me.'  
b. ...and if they had come sooner, they could haue holpen them.  
McFadden & Alexiadou (2006, 2010)

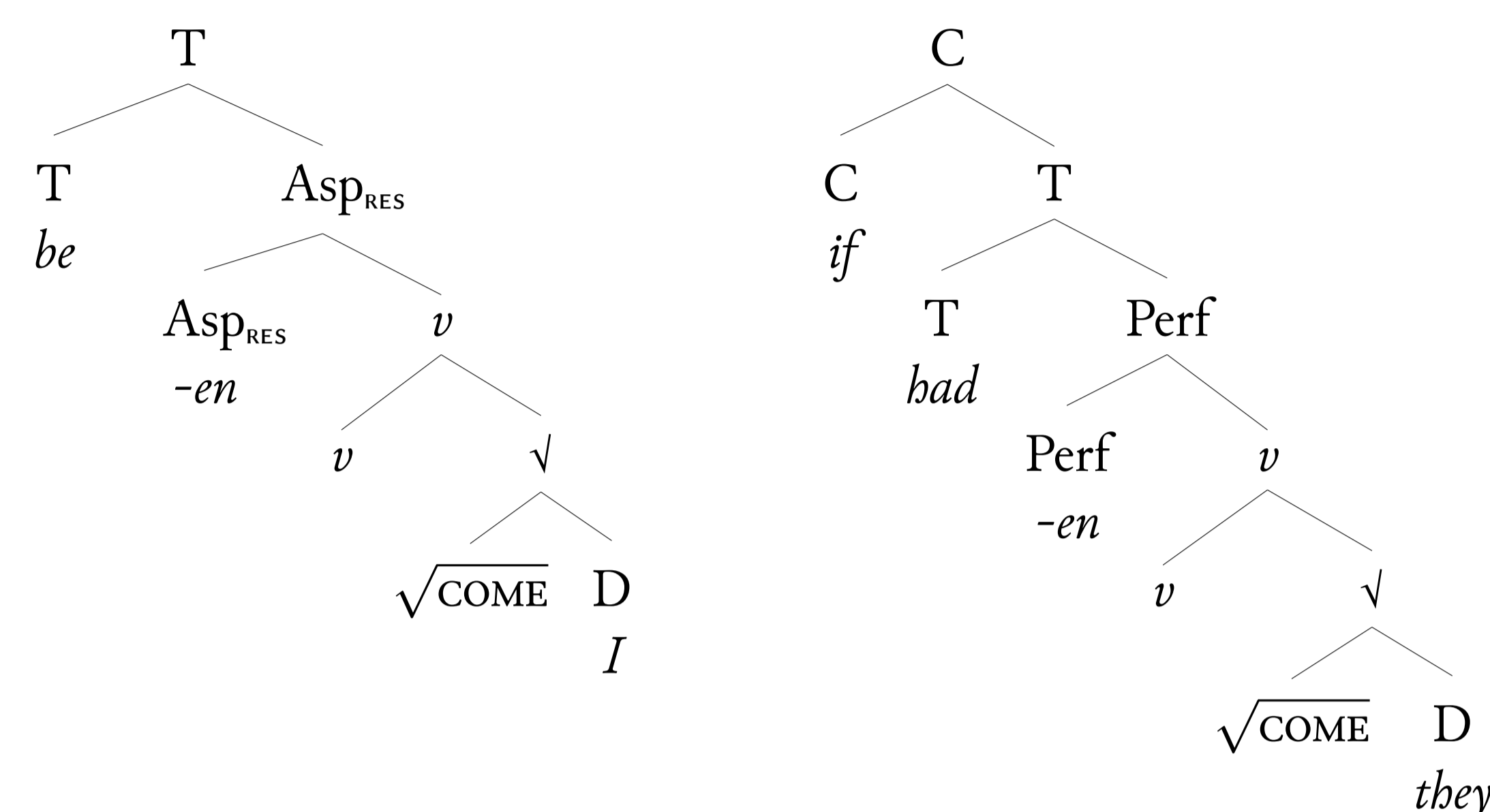


Figure 2: The *be*-perfect and the *have*-perfect  
Adapted from McFadden & Alexiadou (2010)

–  $Asp_{RES}$  gives a result state. No temporal anteriority, so not used with counterfactuals, etc.

– Perf gives anteriority. Has full range of meanings associated with the PDE perfect.

- Present-Day English: The resultative perfect with *be* is no longer used. All perfects use *have* and can express the full range of perfect meanings.

**Puzzle #1:** Why, after co-existing with the *have*-perfect for several hundred years, did the resultative *be*-perfect essentially disappear around the end of the 18th century?

## 3. The passival and the progressive passive

- Earlier English Passives (until late 18th C):

Plain passive: *The house is/was built.*  
Passival: *The house is/was building.*

- Present-Day English Passives:

Plain passive: *The house is/was built.*  
Progressive passive: *The house is/was being built.*

**Puzzle #2:** Why was the progressive passive ill-formed in earlier English?

**Puzzle #3:** Why did the passival disappear around the same time as the *be*-perfect?

**Puzzle #4:** How did the progressive passive become possible at the same time as the passival was lost?

## 4. Proposal: from resultative to passive

Before the changes: Two aspectual heads that appear below the copula, each of which could bear an optional feature [PASS], giving four structures:

- $Asp_{RES}$  and  $Asp_{RES, PASS}$ : the resultative perfect and passive. Spelled out by *-en*.
- $Asp_{PROC}$  and  $Asp_{PROC, PASS}$ : the progressive and the passival. Spelled out by *-ing*.

**Answer to Puzzle #2 – the previously ill-formed progressive passive:**

The progressive was formed with  $Asp_{PROC}$ , while the passive in *-en* was formed with  $Asp_{RES}$ . These are two versions of the same functional head and are thus in complementary distribution.

**What happened around the end of the 18th Century?**

$Asp_{RES}$  and  $Asp_{PROC}$  split into two functional projections.  $Asp_{RES}$  became a passive Voice head, obligatorily carrying the PASS feature.  $Asp_{PROC}$  became a purely aspectual head with no argument-structure properties. The aspectual system was simplified:  $Asp_{PROC}$  became a viewpoint aspect head encoding imperfectivity.

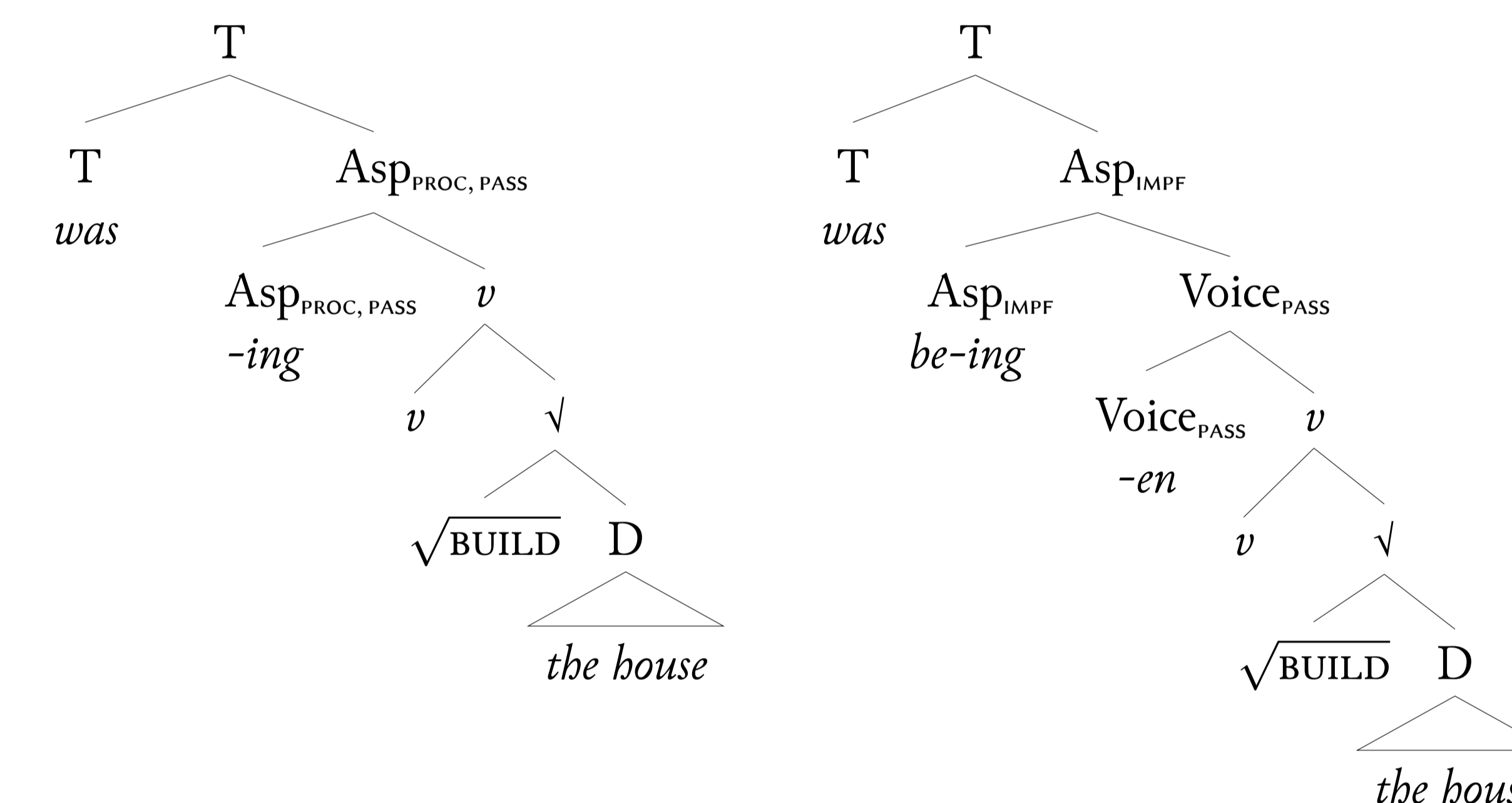


Figure 3: The passival and the progressive passive

**Answer to Puzzle #1 – the disappearing resultative *be*-perfect:**

The aspectual head that characterized the *be*-perfect has been reanalyzed as a passive voice head. There is no longer a resultative aspectual head in the language, and the resultative *be*-perfect can no longer be constructed.

**Answer to Puzzle #3 – the disappearing passival:**

The passival crucially required PASS as an optional feature on the  $Asp_{PROC}$  head. Now, PASS heads its own Voice projection, and has its own spellout (*-en*) independently of the progressive aspectual head.

**Answer to Puzzle #4 – the advent of the progressive passive:**

Whereas the two morphological components of the progressive passive, *-ing* and *-en*, had previously spelled out two aspectual heads in complementary distribution, they now spell out two distinct heads, Asp and Voice. Nothing now prevents them from co-occurring.

## References

McFadden, Thomas & Artemis Alexiadou. 2006. Auxiliary selection and counter-factuality in the history of English and Germanic. In Jutta M. Hartmann & László

Molnárfi (eds.), *Comparative studies in Germanic syntax*, 237–262. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

McFadden, Thomas & Artemis Alexiadou. 2010. Perfects, resultatives, and auxiliaries in earlier English. *Linguistic Inquiry* 41(3). 389–425.

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs. 1992. Syntax. In Richard M. Hogg (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the English language, vol. 1: The beginnings to 1066*, 168–289. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.