



Constructions and Environments: Copular, Passive, and Related Constructions in Old and Middle English (Oxford Studies in the History of English)

By Peter Petré

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This monograph presents the first comprehensive diachronic account of copular and passive verb constructions in Old and Middle English. Peter Petré analyzes:

- The mysterious loss of the high-frequency verb *weorðan* 'become' as a casualty of changing word order in narrative during Middle English.
- The merger of *is* 'is' and *bið* 'shall be, is generally' into a single suppletive verb, and how it is related to the development of a general analytic future *shall be*.
- The co-occurrence of multiple changes that led to *become* and *wax* crossing a threshold of similarity with existing copulas, from which they analogically adopted full productivity in one fell swoop.

In explaining each of these changes, Petré goes beyond the level of the verb and its complements, drawing attention to analogical networks and the importance of a verb's embeddedness in clausal and textual environments.

Using a radically usage-based approach, treating syntax as emerging from (changing) frequencies, Petré draws attention to general principles of constructional change, including but not limited to grammaticalization and lexicalization. He proposes novel parallelisms between linguistic and ecological evolution. Going beyond the view of language change as propagating only in social interaction, Petré explains how each individual's mental grammar can be seen as a dynamic ecosystem with hierarchical environments (clausal niches, textual habitats). In this view, the interconnectedness of seemingly unrelated changes, itself resulting from cognitive economy principles, is arguably more decisive in lexical change than is functional competition.

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Constructions and Environments: Copular, Passive, and Related Constructions in Old and Middle English (Oxford Studies in the History of English) By Peter Petré Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #5421848 in Books
- Published on: 2014-07-16
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.30" h x 1.20" w x 9.30" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Peter Petré holds a PhD in linguistics from the KU Leuven (University of Leuven). His research aims at keeping a wide view, combining insights and research methods from linguistics, history, philosophy, and research on evolutionary systems.

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