

# The Development of Standard English 1300–1800

Theories, Descriptions, Conflicts

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Edited by

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# Introduction

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LAURA WRIGHT

Anyone wishing to find out about the rise of Standard English who turned to student textbooks on the history of the English language for enlightenment, would be forgiven for thinking that the topic is now understood. But the story found there is actually rather contradictory. The reader would discover that Standard English is not a development from London English, but is a descendant from some form of Midlands dialect; either East or Central Midlands, depending on which book you read. The selection of the particular Midlands dialect is triggered either by massive migration from the Central Midlands to London in the fourteenth century – or by the migration of a small number of important East Anglians. Why Midlanders coming to London should have caused Londoners to change their dialect is not made clear, nor is it ever spelled out in detail in what ways the Londoners changed their dialect from Southern English to Midland English. Alternatively, you will read that Standard English came from, or was shaped by, the practices of the Chancery – a medieval writing office for the king. Other explanations put forward for why English became standardised at the place and time it did are the prestige of educated speakers from the Oxford, Cambridge and London triangle (although Oxford English, Cambridge English and London English were very different from Standard English then and now); and the naturalness model, whereby Standard English simply came ‘naturally’ into existence (which seems to invoke an implicit assumption about natural selection; for the dangers of this, see Jonathan Hope’s contribution to this volume).<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the present volume is to reopen the topic of the standardisation of English, and to reconsider some of the work that has been done on its development. I include at the end of this introduction a brief bibliography so that the reader can see specifically what the papers in the present volume are responding to (and reacting against). The predominant names in this field to date are Morsbach (1888), Doelle (1913), Heuser (1914), Reaney (1925, 1926), Mackenzie (1928), Ekwall (1956), Samuels (1963) and Fisher (1977). The claim that Standard English came from the Central Midland dialect as propagated by clerks in Chancery was first developed by Samuels (1963) (based on his analysis

of the spelling of numerous Southern and Midland manuscripts, and a selective reading of Ekwall (1956)) and furthered by Fisher (1977). It is this version that dominates the textbooks, and it is sometimes made explicit, but sometimes not, that it has to do with the history of *written* Standard English. In the past, the term 'standard' has been applied rather loosely to cover what could more precisely be termed 'standardisation of spelling'. But questions relevant to the processes of standardisation should also involve lexis, morphology, syntax and pragmatics – for example:

Over what period of time, and in which text types, have morphological features and lexicalised phrases entered Standard English? This is the area that has received most attention in the last few decades, and it is broached by several contributors to the present volume.

Was there really a change in the London dialect in the fourteenth century from Southern to Midland, or could the process better be characterised as the diffusion of features from one dialect to another, due to a long period of contact between Old Norse and Old English in more Northern parts of the country? What effects have language contact, and dialect contact, subsequently had on Standard English, and how can we tell?

How did levelled varieties (in the sense of that term as used by Jim and Lesley Milroy; that is, contact varieties that result in the loss of the more marked features of the parent varieties) input into Standard English? Do we find interdialect features (in the sense of that term as used by Peter Trudgill; that is, forms that are the result of dialect contact but that are not found in any of the input systems) in Standard English? Can 'Chancery Standard' (Samuels' term), which is a kind of spelling system, with quite a lot of variation, as used by Chancery clerks in the fifteenth century, be regarded as a levelled spelling variety, or does levelling only apply to spoken forms?

How did the word-stock of Standard English get selected? How do we know which words are standard and which regional, or which can be written in Standard English, and which do not form part of the written register? Why is it that we are currently rather deaf to one of our most productive word-formation techniques, that of phrasal-verb derivatives (e.g. soaker-upper, turn-onable), and try to exclude them from Standard English writing (and search for them in vain in dictionaries) because we feel that they are 'slangy'?<sup>2</sup> In what sense can they be 'non-standard' – have we over-internalised the prescriptive grammarians' interdict on dangling particles?

There are many questions yet to be answered about the development of Standard English, and there is also the separate topic of the rise of language ideology and language policy, which has fixed the predominant position of Standard English in the Anglophone areas of the world today.

This book is divided into two sections: Part I explores the history of the ideology of Standard English, and Part II presents investigations into ways of

describing the spread of standardisation. Derek Keene's paper was specially invited to discuss the supposed migration (tentatively suggested by Ekwall and more firmly stated by Samuels) of East and/or Central Midland speakers into London in the fourteenth century. He demonstrates how historians reconstruct patterns of mobility back and forth between London and the provinces, using as examples transport costs to London, fields of migration, debtors to Londoners, and the origins of butchers' apprentices. He emphasises the importance in language evolution of face-to-face exchange between individuals – particularly when that exchange is reinforced by physical negotiation and contractual obligation, and finds this kind of exchange more important than migration. Jim Milroy is concerned with how the myth about the development of Standard English has had a unilinear effect on the study of the subject. Middle English texts have traditionally been 'edited' (or 'corrected according to the best witness') according to the editors' notions of what the language ought to have looked like. In a circular way, these edited forms have then been adduced to support the superiority of Standard English by giving it a historical depth and legitimacy, so that the traditional histories of English are themselves contributing to the standard ideology. He questions the sociolinguist's common appeal to 'prestige' as a motivation for change, and suggests instead the notion of stigma, as does Raymond Hickey. Milroy makes a point that recurs throughout several papers, that changes 'take place in some usages before standard written practice accepted them'. Richard Watts examines how the myth of the 'perfection' of Standard English came into existence. He notes that any language ideology can only come about as the result of beliefs and attitudes towards language which already have a long history, prior to overt implementation. He examines prescriptive attitudes before the eighteenth century, and considers the role of teaching books and popular public lectures on the spread of prescription. Both Watts and Milroy consider why the standardisation ideology came about, as well as how it was propagated. The eighteenth-century language commentators tended to prohibit things (like multiple negation) that had long been absent from the emergent standard anyway. Prescriptivism tends to follow, rather than precede, standardisation, so that by the time a grammarian tells us what we should be doing, we have already been doing it (in certain contexts) for centuries: prescriptivism cannot be a cause of standardisation. To this end, Matti Rissanen pioneers an analysis of legal documents, demonstrating that some of the very things (like single negation) that end up in the standard, can be found centuries earlier in such texts. He directs our attention to the vast repository of data contained in the *Statutes of the Realm*, and investigates *shall/will*, multiple negation, *provided that* and compound adverbs. He finds that the form that ends up as Standard English is found in these governmental texts first. Susan Fitzmaurice examines the myth that late eighteenth-century grammar writers were instrumental in the perpetration of Standard English's rules of grammar. She focuses on the social and political factors that lead to the prescriptivist movement, and tries to reconstruct by means of social network theory how one particular group of

people came to have such an influence on what came to be considered ‘good’ English. She demonstrates how eighteenth-century commentators actually perpetrated the very ‘errors’ they were busy prohibiting, and touches on the tremendous wealth of self-help literature available for speakers and writers from then up to the present day. In the twentieth century, Gabriella Mazzon considers the implications of the ‘correctness’ myth for speakers of English as a second language around the world. In a detailed study of linguists’ comments on the state of spoken and written English worldwide, she finds that, unsurprisingly, the history of the new varieties was influenced by the ideology of Standard English. In the institutionalisation of present-day New Standard Englishes, schools, media, government and academics all play their part in establishing the variety. Mazzon concludes that the spoken and unspoken consensus of expert and inexpert opinion is that new varieties, whether regarded as localised standards or not, are, in practice, considered to be inferior variants.

Jonathan Hope tackles the Chancery Standard model by pointing out that its very creation is dependent on an earlier type of theoretical thinking, where variation was not fully taken into account. He argues that one should stop looking for a single ancestor to the standard dialect, because such a search is a result of a biological metaphor: the notion of a ‘parent’ dialect transmitting directly over time into a ‘daughter’ dialect. He offers an alternative view of standardisation as a multiple, rather than a unitary, process, observing that Standard English ends up as being a typologically rare, or unlikely, dialect. Raymond Hickey also considers the typological unlikelihood of the Standard dialect, and relates it to the notion of stigma. He takes Irish English as his data and notes that Standard Irish English does things that neighbouring dialects do not do, thus providing speakers with ‘us’ and ‘them’ choices. He questions by what mechanism speakers come to stigmatise some differences, whilst not noticing others. Irma Taavitsainen looks for Chancery Standard spellings in several fifteenth-century medical manuscripts, and again, does not find the clear-cut move towards Standard English that the Chancery Standard model would lead one to expect. She notes that the importance of scientific writing has been greatly downplayed in accounts of the development of Standard English hitherto, and suggests that its role was not so marginal. Anneli Meurman-Solin takes two corpora of Scottish English as data, the Helsinki Corpus of Older Scots, and the Corpus of Scottish Correspondence, 1450–1800. She investigates the classic Labovian dichotomy of ‘change from above’ versus ‘change from below’; that is, does language change from above the level of consciousness and from the élite social classes, or does it change below the level of speakers’ consciousness and percolate from the working classes upwards? To answer this, she divides her corpora according to social spaces as well as the more familiar categories of text-type, gender, etc. Variants lie along clines such as peripheral–central, formal–informal, speech–writing, and her study is further enriched by the fact that Scottish texts exhibit two competing centres of standardisation: Standard English and Standard Scottish English. Texts show varying amounts



of deanglicisation (a movement towards Scottish English) and descotticisation (a movement towards Standard English). She concludes that the social function of a text and its audience are paramount in conditioning change in Scottish English, with the drift being from administrative, legal, political and cultural institutions to the private domain. Merja Kytö and Suzanne Romaine compare inflectional adjective comparatives (e.g. *easier*) with the newer periphrastic forms (e.g. *more easy*, *more easier*) in British and American English. Their work is also corpus-based, using the Corpus of Early American English (1620–1720) and A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers. As with so many of the investigations reported here, they find that change proceeded along divergent tracks, depending on environment. The use of the newer form peaked during the Late Middle English period, and the older inflectional type has been reasserting itself ever since, to the extent that it seems to be the predominant form in present-day English. British English was slightly ahead of American English at each subperiod they sample in implementing the change towards the inflectional type of adjective comparison. Essentially, they observe the Standard's 'uneven diffusion', and draw a picture of 'regularisation of a confused situation'.

This volume largely concentrates on syntax and morphology, but how speakers expressed their oral version of Standard English has its own history, in the development of Received Pronunciation. Roger Lass plots the spread of RP, and in particular, the spread of /a:/ in *path*. He finds that modern /a:/ largely represents lengthened and quality-shifted seventeenth-century /æ/; with lowering to [a:] during the course of the eighteenth century, and gradual retraction during the later nineteenth century. Lengthening occurred before /r/, voiceless fricatives except /f/, and to some extent before nasal groups /nt, ns/. He calls it Lengthening I, as opposed to later lengthening of /æ/ before voiced stops and nasals, which is Lengthening II. So Lengthening I gives us /a:/ in *path*, and Lengthening II gives us /æ/ in *bag*. Lengthening I is first commented on by Cooper in 1687, and has a complicated history in the following century, as commentators disagreed about which words had the new vowel, although they did agree as to its quality. However, in the 1780s and 90s a reversal occurred, and /æ/ seemed to be reinstated, before turning again into the present-day pattern. Simultaneously, the pronunciation of *moss* as *mawse* became stigmatised as vulgar. By 1874, Ellis reported considerable variation – indeed, he saw no conflict between variability and standardisation. It is only in the 1920s that the situation seems to settle down to its present-day pattern.

If, as the papers here suggest, the claim that Standard English came from the Central Midland dialect as propagated by clerks in Chancery is to be revised, where, then, did Standard English come from? The conclusion to be drawn from the present volume is that there is no single ancestor for Standard English, be it a single dialect, a single text type, a single place, or a single point in time. Standard English has gradually emerged over the centuries, and the rise of the ideology of the Standard arose only when many of its linguistic features were

already in place (and others have yet to be standardised: consider the variants *I don't have any* v. *I have none*, or *the book which I lent you* v. *the book that I lent you*). Standardisation is a continuing and changing process. It draws its features from many authoritative texts – texts that readers turn to when they wish to ascertain something as serious or true. In the present volume, legal texts, scientific treatises and journalism are investigated; at the workshop and conference we also heard about religious writing and literature. No doubt there are many other written text types which influenced its development – notably, mercantile and business usage. The approach undertaken here has effectively become possible through the creation of the Helsinki Corpus, which takes text type as a fundament from which to look at language change over time. It seems likely that we will increasingly come to see standardisation as arising from acrolectal writings (that is, writings held in high esteem by society, which is not the same thing as texts written by people of high social status) from various places on various subjects growing more and more like each other. My personal view of where to continue the search lies with a thorough examination of *all* text types, not just Chancery texts, written not only in English, but in the languages that Londoners and others used as they went about their daily business, including the commonly written languages Anglo-Norman and Medieval Latin. Such writing is non-regional, as it was produced in each and every region; London is only one of the places where authoritative writing was produced. Merchants, reporters, engineers, accountants, bureaucrats, clerics, scholars, lawyers, doctors and so on wrote everywhere they went. We can define their work as serious in content, educated, and non-ephemeral – that is, written for a public, and often for posterity. Treatises on medicine, copies of the Bible, records of law suits, and records of financial transactions were written not only for the immediate user but for readers in generations yet to come. Standard English is to some extent a consensus dialect, a consensus of features from authoritative texts, meaning that no single late Middle English or early Early Modern authority will show all the features that end up in Standard English. Sixteenth-century witnesses who show standardisation of a given feature do not necessarily show standardisation in any other feature: it did not progress as a bundle of features, but in piecemeal fashion. Subsequently, the rise of prescriptivism in education ensured that ‘standards’ be enforced; such that I had to write *consensus* and not *concensus* in the above sentence. Some of the papers presented here report data which displays not the familiar S-curve of change, but a more unwieldy W-curve (that is, changes which begin, progress, then recede, then progress again – see for example Kytö and Romaine, and Lass). Standardisation is shown not to be a linear, unidirectional or ‘natural’ development, but a set of processes which occur in a set of social spaces, developing at different rates in different registers in different idiolects. And the ideology surrounding its later development is also shown to be contradictory. Far from answering the questions ‘what is Standard English and where did it come from?’, this volume demonstrates that Standard English is a complex issue however one looks at it, and it is to be hoped that future linguists will enjoy its exploration.

## Notes

- 1 For a detailed discussion about these various explanations see Wright (1996), which sets out these contradictions and explains how they came about.
- 2 See Rolando Bacchielli, 'An Annotated Bibliography on Phrasal Verbs. Part 2', *SLIN Newsletter* 21 (1999), 20 (*SLIN* is the national organisation of Italian scholars working on the history of English).

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