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English in modern times, 1700-1945

By Joan C. Beal


English in the Middle Ages

By Tim William Machan


The development of Standard English, 1300-1800: Theories, descriptions, conflicts

Edited by Laura Wright


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Relevance of these books

English is possibly the most studied language in history. We have both a long chronological time span to study and a wide synchronic scope to study. In the chronological study of the development of English there has been a widely held belief that Modern Standard English developed from a Midlands variety in the fourteenth century (for example, Crystal 2003:54). A key element of this theory has been that the court language, called Chancery English, was the source of Modern Standard English.

The three books reviewed here deal with a re-evaluation of the development of modern standardized English. The volumes focus primarily on chronological change and the standardization of English. (See Decker 2005 for my review of other volumes for a discussion of synchronic variation in English.) My interest in these books is to learn about the current research on the changes to the language. These books consider a wider variety of factors effecting the development of English than has been considered by other authors in the past. As I will describe
in the “Discussion of Issues”, part 3, these books also have relevance to other people involved with language-based development.

**Development of ideas**

In this section I will give a brief description of each of the books and the development of ideas in the book. In section 4 I will give a brief technical evaluation of each of the books. For a detailed listing of chapters see section 5.

**Machan’s English in the Middle Ages**

Dr. T. W. Machan, a professor at Marquette University, has written extensively on medieval English and Old Norse. The purpose of his book, *English in the Middle Ages*, is to reassess our understanding of medieval English, and to propose a better method for understanding the writings of the period. In the past, the discussion concerning the development of English has been based largely on textual criticism. Machan uses his study of Middle English as a basis for proposing an analysis of the sociolinguistic context of the texts to better understand the historical dynamics behind the texts.

Chapter one, titled The Ecology of Middle English, lays a foundation for Machan’s analysis of Middle English. He uses the concept of language ecology (Haugen 1972), “the structured, learned, and analysable sociolinguistic relationships that obtain between speakers and the linguistic varieties they use” (p. 10), as the foundation for how he intends to describe Middle English. Machan expands his use of the ecology of language concept through the study of numerous texts from the Middle Ages. Through these texts he describes variation of registers and dialects, and the multilingualism present in England during this period. He uses Chaucer’s writings to look at the variation found in the writings of one man. Machan uses the Arthurian legend of Sir Gawain to explain the moralistic reasoning behind the development of such legends. He also describes the development of rhetorical devices and other literary strategies in Middle English.

From the earliest days of Middle English Machan studies two letters from King Henry the III that were published in 1258 in English, as well as in French and Latin. The letters were significant because a king was publishing in English a couple of hundred years before publication in English became more commonplace. Later in the book Machan uses a fourteenth century poem entitled *Piers Plowman*, as first published in 1550 by Robert Crowley. He uses the 1550 version for the preface written by Crowley. In the preface Crowley references Wyclif and his impact on the developments of written English. English had by this time passed into the Early Modern English period. In contrast to the times of King Henry the III, English had become a symbol of nationalism.

From these examples we see that during the Middle English period different people had different purposes for writing and publishing in English: religious, political, entertainment, and moralistic. There was language variation regionally, and even in the writings of one person. The things that had influence on the development of Modern English had to be much wider than simply the influence of Chancery English.
Beal’s *English in modern times*

Dr. Joan C. Beal has been a prolific writer on English dialects in Great Britain for the last two decades. She is presently the director of the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom.

Beal’s book describes the influence of historical factors from 1660 to 1945 on the linguistic developments of Late Modern English. To establish this time period Beal uses changes in politics, science, British society, trends in urbanization, transportation, and communications to define the period. Beal explains how these and other factors influenced the development and changes to the vocabulary, grammar, and phonology.

Of the three books, Beal gives the most attention to the effect of prescriptivism on language development. She describes the importance of dictionaries, grammars, and an emphasis on proper pronunciation to the standardization of Modern English. These changes had much to do with class distinction and attempts at social engineering.

Wright’s *The development of Standard English*

While all three books reconsider the Midlands-source explanation for the development of Standard English, it is the express purpose of *The development of Standard English* to reassess the theory. The book is a collection of twelve articles, each by a different author, discussing aspects of the origins and concept of Standard English.

I will only mention a few of the authors and articles here. The articles in the first part of the book explore the concept of “standard” English. Jim Milroy, in ‘Historical description and the ideology of the standard language’, describes the development of what he calls “the myth of the development of Standard English.” He shows how the theories of this development have influenced how the subject was further studied, thus creating circular reasoning. ‘Mythical strands in the ideology of prescriptivism’ by Richard J. Watts, on the topic of prescriptivism, describes how the concept of a “perfect” Standard English developed. Expanding this idea, Gabriella Mazzon, in ‘The ideology of the standard and the development of Extraterritorial Englishes’, considers the concept of “correctness” and it’s impact worldwide on speakers of English as a second language.

Articles in the second part of *The development of Standard English* describe the processes involved in the spread of standardization. In ‘Rats, bats, sparrows and dogs: biology, linguistics and the nature of Standard English’, Jonathan Hope confronts the concept that there might have been one source from which Standard English developed. He describes many sources for the vocabulary of Modern Standard English. Raymond Hickey, in ‘Salience, stigma and standard’, considers the importance of stigmatized phonological and grammatical features that affect the development of a particular speech variety. In ‘Standardisation and the language of early statutes’, Matti Rissanen explores legal texts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He describes how some linguistic features show up in early legal documents, linguistic features that don’t become standard in the spoken language until many years later. Irma Taavitsainen, in ‘Scientific language and spelling standardisation 1375–1550’, confronts the theory of Chancery
English as a source for standardization. She describes how scientific writing was another source for standardization.

**Discussion of the issues**

My initial interest in these books was to see what I could learn about language change. The evidence presented by these various authors is that languages change in many ways, with changes occurring at different rates, and in varying reactions to different stimuli. Change does not occur as a bundle of features. Furthermore, surprisingly, some changes are reversed also.

There are a number of related features to these three books. To one degree or another they are all concerned with the development of Modern Standard English. To this they are all in agreement that the theory concerning the fourteenth century Midlands source for the standardization of Modern English is not an adequate explanation. All of these authors consider that previous research has ignored the reality of language variation. The general conclusion I draw from reading these books is that there were numerous factors involved in the development of Standard English. Furthermore, the identification of a “standard” English is another part of the problem. There is no standard spoken English. There are normative features that are generally considered when writing English, but even within these conventions there is variation.

Machan is the least concerned with this specific source question. His primary motivation is to propose a perspective for understanding Middle English texts and methodology for their analysis. However, he makes an important point relevant to understanding how standardization happens. He tells us that numerous writers have suggested that King Henry’s letters, written in 1258, are a first attempt at the assertion of English as a symbol of nationalism (p. 25), or the beginning of a written standard of London English. Machan argues that they could be no such thing, “there was no sociolinguistic history to sustain significance for English as a broadly national symbol or to foster a shared memory of its meaning” (p. 69). To me, the significance is that even if this had been an attempt at asserting English as a nationalistic symbol, it failed miserably. The rise of English as a part of English identity did not occur for two hundred more years and resulted from socio-political changes of the day. For many people groups, their language is not a marker of identity, and without that identification with the language, there cannot be successful language development.

In sociolinguistic circles there is often an inclination to consider that all change is toward a prestige variety or feature, motivated by aspirations to attain the prestigious variety or feature. Milroy describes how stigma is not necessarily the converse of prestige, in other words, a move away from a stigmatized variety or feature is not always the same as a move toward a prestige variety or feature. Milroy gives examples of high social class speech features that have clearly been avoided by the general population. Hickey’s chapter on ‘Salience, Stigma, and Standard’ gives even more detailed support for this refinement of the theory based on small mechanisms of language change. Milroy also makes the point, as do several other authors, that sometimes changes occur and become accepted usage in spoken language before they become accepted in written form. This is contrasted by Risanen who shows the use of standardized features in written documents before they are accepted as standard in the spoken language. The reality is obviously that changes can occur both ways.
Meurman-Solin considers the theory that change is influenced by the elite. In her study of Scottish English texts she notes some change of linguistic features towards standard English but also some movement away from Standard English in other features. She concludes that the social function of the text, why someone is writing, and its audience are the most effectual factors in determining the features chosen by the writer, not simply whether a feature is of a prestigious nature or not.

The concepts of correctness and prescriptivism are considered in all three books. While the activities of prescriptivists is a matter of record, their effect on standardization is questioned. Beal gives the greatest amount of space to describing the efforts of grammarians and dictionary makers. Fitzmaurice gives a detailed account of the role of a handful of powerful men, who through their influence, promoted certain standards of language use in the early 1700s.

From the various approaches to the prescriptivist issue we learn that linguistic features tend to become standardized in speech before they are considered as standards for the language. Furthermore, the natural patterns of language transmission from speaker to speaker do not occur as overt acts, but rather that people pick up new linguistic features as a by-product of their social interaction with others. Conversely, the act of establishing a language standard is an overt process taken by a group of self-appointed authorities. Standards can be imposed upon institutionalized promoters of the written form of the language, for example newspaper or magazine publishers. However, as Beal concludes, “It would appear that the efforts of grammarians…have done little to ‘fix’ the language, but they have left us a legacy of ‘linguistic insecurity’.” It is this “linguistic insecurity” that continues to be a major issue. Writers keep writing books on correct English, and linguists keep debating what defines standard English. (Once again I refer the reader to my review of books on worldwide varieties of English, Decker 2005.) As described by Mazzon, and Beal in her eighth chapter, the prescriptivists notions of correct English leave the developing varieties of English to be considered as inferior.

I have also learned some about the symbolism of language planning efforts. The rise of a language variety as a symbol of nationalism, if successful, probably originated in reaction against another perceived hegemony. Thus, when factions try to force their prescriptions of language use upon others, they become viewed as the oppressive force and may likely work to empower the stigmatized varieties. Related to this, the authors that have written on the development of the prescriptivist movement show us how too much focus on a writing system that represents one form of speech can be used to oppress other people.

To me, the eighth chapter of English in Modern Times is the high point of these books. Throughout the book there has been a description of the trend towards a standard lexicon, grammar, and pronunciation. Standardization has been the goal of so many well-intentioned efforts through the period. Then in the eighth chapter Beal discusses the recognition of non-standard varieties of English, their use in literature and the growing emphasis upon the study of them. After all the efforts for standardization and efforts to stigmatize the nonstandard varieties, the nonstandard varieties are gaining their own validation and recognition. This is a wonderful irony.
Finally, an observation made by Milroy stands as a warning to linguists. When languages are described as stereotypical, uniform, clearly defined entities, there is neglect of the true variable structure of the spoken language. When we study unwritten languages we begin to impose concepts of the “proper” form of that language. I’m reminded of a favourite quote from John Baugh (1993), “linguists of every theoretical persuasion consider all dialects to be equal, regardless of the social status of their speakers. This egalitarian philosophy has no basis in social reality.” Possibly, most linguists, because they are human, subconsciously believe that there truly is a more “pure” form of every language.

**Evaluation of the books**

I found these books to be very readable and interesting. They all represent a good standard of scholarship. All three of these books bring a more interdisciplinary approach to consideration of factors influencing these developments.

*English in the Middle Ages* is good for its application of the concept of the ecology of language. Machan’s clear description of the socio-political and sociolinguistic environment presents a good case study for someone struggling with understanding the value of the ecology of language concept. The ecology of language is a concept with which anyone working in language development should be familiar. The book is also an interesting look into the history of English at a time when it was becoming a recognized, nationalistic language and developing as a written language.

*English in modern times* is good for its overview of the development of Modern English. I really liked the way Beal paired chapters discussing first the linguistic realities of language change and then covering the documentation of those features, i.e. changes in the vocabulary and the making of dictionaries. She also provides copious examples for each topic. In the Preface Beal claims this to be the first undergraduate level textbook on this period of English development. I don’t know enough about the availability of other texts to determine if it really is the first. However, as a textbook, it does not include any exercises or review questions at the end of chapters, and there are no suggestions for further readings, the kinds of things one might expect from a textbook. This doesn’t detract from the books excellence, but some might not find it to be all that they hope it to be if used as a textbook.

*The development of Standard English* is good for the various methodologies which are used to analyze and understand the sociolinguistic environment. I think this is the most relevant of the three books for anyone in the field of language development. One can glean lessons learned from the history of English. On the other hand, if there is one complaint against any of these books, it is that this one hasn’t been better integrated. As is often the case with books that are collections, there is always more that could have been done if each of the authors had been able to comment in their own articles about things said in the other articles, thus connecting the material more thoroughly.
Book organization

*English in modern times* by Joan C. Beal

1. Modern English and modern times
2. The vocabulary of Later Modern English
3. Recording and regulating the lexicon: dictionaries from Dr. Johnson to the Oxford English Dictionary
4. Syntactic change in Later Modern English
5. Grammars and grammarians
6. Phonological change in Later Modern English
7. Defining the standard of pronunciation: pronouncing dictionaries and the rise of RP
8. Beyond standard English: varieties of English in the later modern period

*English in the Middle Ages* by Tim William Machan

1. The Ecology of Middle English
2. The Baron’s War and Henry’s Letters
3. Language, Dialect, Nation
4. What’s a Dialect Before It’s a Dialect?
5. After Middle English

*The development of Standard English, 1300-1800: Theories, descriptions, conflicts* edited by Laura Wright

1. Historical description and the ideology of the standard language by Jim Milroy.
4. Salience, stigma and standard by Raymond Hickey.
5. The ideology of the standard and the development of Extraterritorial Englishes by Gabriella Mazzon.
6. Metropolitan values: migration, mobility and cultural norms, London 1100-1700 by Derek Keene.
7. Standardisation and the language of early statutes by Matti Rissanen.
8. Scientific language and spelling standardisation 1375-1550 by Irma Taavitsainen.
9. Change from above or below? Mapping the loci of linguistic change in the history of Scottish English by Anneli Meurman-Solin.
10. Adjective comparison and standardisation processes in American and British English from 1620 to the present by Merja Kytö and Suzanne Romaine.
11. The Spectator, the politics of social networks, and language standardisation in eighteenth-century England by Susan Fitzmaurice.
References

