

## Re(de)fining the beginnings of written Standard English

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The emergence of what is often referred to as written Standard English has already received much attention by historians of the English language and historical linguists. Until today, the variety of English used in administrative texts from London, particularly that used and propagated by Chancery clerks, is often perceived as the source of what developed into written Standard English (cf. Fisher 1977; Fisher et al. 1984). Even though this truism has been convincingly challenged by for instance Wright (2000) and Benskin (2004), the processes involved in the uniformisation of written English, e.g. the conditioning factors for changes on different linguistic levels, are not fully understood yet. In recent years, several historical linguists, e.g. Laura Wright (multilingualism), Merja Stenroos (*Middle English Grammar Corpus, Corpus of Middle English Local Documents*) and others, have therefore continued to investigate these processes. Similarly, the project *Emerging Standards: Urbanisation and the Development of Standard English, c.1400-1700* aims at shedding light on the complex processes that are involved in the emergence and development of what became written Standard English. Even though London as the metropolis was undoubtedly of great importance for the actuation and diffusion of many linguistic features, other written varieties of English also need to be considered in order to gain a more complete picture. For this reason, the Emerging Standards Project, focuses on regional urban varieties between 1400-1700, notably those of York, Bristol, Coventry, and Norwich, which constituted the largest communities and important regional centres at the time (cf. Kermode 2000: 442; Trudgill 2010: 53). As literacy rates were significantly higher in these places, it is possible to investigate and compare various text types (manuscript-based; civic records and ego-documents) from the different urban centres.

It is the aim of this paper to contribute to the history of emerging written Standard English by presenting new findings on the diffusion of linguistic features by paying attention to both external and internal factors of language change. More precisely, based on data from York, Bristol and Coventry, I will focus on (1) the shift from Latin and Anglo-Norman to English in civic records, i.e. to determine in which text types English was used first in the surviving data, and (2) the variation and change of selected linguistic features, notably (a) the present indicative 3rd person singular variable as well as (b) orthographic variation, in the different regional centres during the (late) Middle English period. The systematic investigation of these linguistic features and the comparison across text types and region, also including findings from other relevant studies, allows us to gain a better understanding of the beginnings of written Standard English.

## References:

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