

The Emergence of Standard English

John H. Fisher. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996. 208 pages, including notes, bibliography, and index. \$16.95 (softcover).

Imagine going to court to defend yourself against charges of a petty crime only to find that the judge, lawyers, and clerks of the court are speaking French. After a summary judgment against you—known to you only by the gavel crack and scolding countenance of the judge—the clerk hands you some papers to sign. As you attempt to read the papers, you realize that they are written in Latin. “Appelez-vous,” the clerk says. “Appelez-vous.”

Is this an episode of the Twilight Zone? No. It’s 14th-century reality in England, as described by John H. Fisher in his scholastic achievement titled The Emergence of Standard English. Why should technical communicators understand how standard English emerged from the commingling of the dominant European languages of that time? No doubt that some technical communicators simply find historical explorations of the English language fascinating, but the exploration promised by Fisher is much more consequential to the field of technical communication than mere fascination. As Fisher himself argues, “language is standardized by government and business rather than by literary usage.” Technical and science communicators—who are largely responsible for creating the prose artifacts of business and government—have inherited the stewardship of standard English. And as stewards, technical and science communicators have a responsibility to understand the writing system in their care.

In The Emergence, Fisher explores the very beginnings of the inherited standard. He divides the book into nine chapters:

1. Introduction
2. A Language Policy for Lancastrian England
3. Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English
4. European Chancelleries and the Rise of Standard Languages
5. Animadversions on the Text of Chaucer
6. Chaucer's French: A Metalinguistic Inquiry
7. Piers Plowman and Chancery English
8. Caxton and Chancery English
9. The History of Received Pronunciation.

These chapters, which include copious endnotes, are in fact revised papers that were previously published in journals. The book is a mere convenience for bringing these papers together. The subject that really binds the chapters together is Fisher's apparent ardor for Chaucer, his works, his times, his lore, and his influence upon the English language. Fisher seems to draw a rhetorical energy from Chaucer that spikes the book with inspired prose. Nevertheless, his enthusiasm is not enough to hold the book together. Only chapters one, two, three, four, and eight constitute a cohesive discussion about the emergence of standard English; the other chapters are interesting asides.

A recognized Chaucerian scholar and professor emeritus of English at the University of Tennessee, Fisher introduces the argument surrounding the emergence of standard English in the Introduction. The polemic he describes is similar to that in geology between those who believe in catastrophism (geological structures are formed by cataclysmic events) and those who believe in uniformitarianism (geological structures are

slowly formed by complex terrestrial interactions). Was standard English created from succinct deliberation and sudden dissemination by established authority? Or did it evolve slowly, shaped by the multitude of English speakers over centuries? Never afraid to enter the fray, Fisher moves swiftly to one side, launching an assault upon the traditional views that standard English just happened by osmosis, seeping slowly from London into English society at large. In fact, Fisher asserts that the emergence of standard English was more like the sudden explosion of the Big Bang than a tedious evolution. With that assertion, he takes on his opponents one at a time, carefully selecting quotes from their various treatises, weaving each like a thread into a tapestry of incontrovertible absurdity.

The second, third, fourth, and eighth chapters offer the proof proper of Fisher's thesis, that standard English emerged from the regularity of the writing by clerks in the English Chancery in the 1420s, after Henry V established English as the language of England. Here, we find the most interesting facts and the most lucid articulation in the book, even though the reader must sometimes wade through dense, microscopic details to reach Fisher's always thoughtful and often consequential conclusions. In these four chapters, Fisher describes the accidental process of creating a standard: The influence of Chaucer upon the English language and the Court; the establishment of English as the official language by Henry V; the nearly uniform style of the Chancery clerks; the printers' upholding of that style a la Caxton, who introduced printing to England in 1476; and the attempts to formalize standard English, including such contemporary style-guide giants as the Chicago Manual of Style, which merely records the English used in government and business.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters are digressions that add little if any grist to Fisher's argument mill. In the latter, he painstakingly compares different versions of the manuscript of Piers Plowman to demonstrate how English usage drifted toward the Chancery standard. The two chapters about Chaucer celebrate Chaucer's influence upon the English language and acknowledge the difficulties in studying his works. The connection to Fisher's thesis is never clearly drawn, which muddies the thoughtful discussion about the emergence of standard English so carefully developed in the first four chapters. The last chapter, "The History of Received Pronunciation," is quite interesting but nevertheless as digressive as the Chaucer chapters, especially considering that Fisher notes repeatedly that standard English has little if anything to do with spoken English.

Fisher's drawing out of details throughout the book may alienate many readers, especially those who are not familiar with the vernacular of text analysis, which he freely indulges. For some, Fisher's autobiographical tendencies may detract from his message. In the Introduction, for example, he exclaims, "For many years, I have been a voice crying in the wilderness." In fact, the Introduction is as much about Fisher than his subject, a narration about how he set out to the great libraries of England to discover the proofs of his thesis. Also, Fisher jumps around in time. He moves from subject to subject, not from time to time or epoch to epoch, which may trouble those who wish to get a firm grasp of the events in their full historical context. Finally, his fondness for quoting in French and Latin add an air of pretentiousness and false elevation that detract from his argument.

The Emergence of Standard English is at least a diligent work of scholarship, and at most foundational in any movement toward an improved standard. Fisher's insight into the way language becomes standardized, coupled with Kuhn's theory of the paradigm shift, gives hope to those of us who have utilitarian enthusiasms for improving the writing system we have inherited. For those with such enthusiasms, for those with patience and an appetite for history of the English language, I recommend Fisher's book despite its compositional shortcomings.