**FROM OLD ENGLISH
TO STANDARD ENGLISH**

Studies in English Language series

A Course Book in English Grammar, 2nd Edition –
Dennis Freeborn

From Old English to Standard English, 2nd Edition –
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FROM OLD ENGLISH TO STANDARD ENGLISH

**A COURSE BOOK IN LANGUAGE
VARIATION ACROSS TIME**

Second Edition

Dennis Freeborn

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Preface to the second edition

The text of the first edition has been completely revised and enlarged to include nearly two hundred historical texts, of which more than half are reproduced in facsimile. The facsimiles are primary sources of our knowledge of the language, illustrating the development of handwriting, printing, punctuation and spelling in a way which is not possible using modern printed versions of old texts.

The practice of modernising the spelling of modern printed texts of earlier English like, for example, the 15th-century *Paston Letters* and Shakespeare's late 16th- and early 17th-century plays has obscured important and interesting changes that have taken place. Literary texts are generally printed with modern spelling and punctuation, and though editions of Old and Middle English retain much of the original spelling, they usually add present-day punctuation.

The texts

The core of the book is the series of texts exemplifying the changes in the language from Old English to the establishment of Standard English. The texts have been selected for a number of reasons. The Old English texts are almost all from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and so provide something of the historical context of the language a thousand years ago. Some texts have aspects of language itself as their subject. As we have no authentic records of the spoken language before the invention of sound recording, letters and diaries of the past are included, because they are likely to provide some evidence of informal uses of English. Some literary texts have been chosen, but the series does not constitute a history of English literature.

Readership

The first edition was intended for students of English Language at Advanced Level, but since publication in 1992 the book has been used in university departments of English, both in Britain and in over thirty overseas countries. As a

result, the enlarged text aims to provide more material and commentary which is suitable for study in higher education. For example, Chapter 6 demonstrates how a relatively short extract from an early Middle English text can be analysed to demonstrate the evidence for changes from Old English in spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar that had occurred.

Activities

The Activities are designed to encourage students to find out for themselves – to answer the question ‘how do you know?’ and to consider possible reasons for what they observe. They are able to study data at first hand and to consider hypotheses, rather than to accept the answers to problems of interpretation that others have given. The process of analysing the texts in itself demonstrates how our knowledge of earlier English has been arrived at. The surviving corpus of Old and Middle English texts is all the evidence we have about the language as it was. There are no grammar books, descriptions of pronunciation, spelling books or dictionaries of English before the 16th century. The tasks in the Activities are no more than suggestions, and teachers will omit, modify and add to them as they think useful.

Many of the simpler, basic activities in the first edition have, however, been omitted, and teachers will readily devise them if they are needed.

Levels of study

It is helpful to consider three levels of study which may be followed according to students’ needs, or to the amount of time available for study.

- At the first, observational level, features of the language can be simply noted and listed as interesting or different.
- At the second, descriptive level, such features are identified more specifically, using appropriate descriptive terms from a model of language.
- At the third, explanatory level, they are placed in their relation to general processes of language change, and in their social, political and historical context.

Language change

The English language, like all living languages, is in a continuous state of variation across time. The language of one generation of speakers will differ slightly from another, and at any one time there are ‘advanced’ and ‘conservative’ forms, whether they belong to regional, educational or class dialects. Change takes place at every level of language:

- **Lexical level** – new words are needed in the vocabulary to refer to new things or concepts, while other words are dropped when they no longer have any use in society.

- **Semantic level** – the meaning of words changes – *buxom* once meant *obedient*, *spill* meant *kill*, and *knight* meant *boy*.
- **Syntactic level** – a word-for-word translation of some Old English is unlikely to read like grammatical contemporary English, because word order and grammatical structure have changed as well as vocabulary.
- **Phonological level** – pronunciation in particular is always being modified and varies widely from one regional or social group to another.

The process of change has, however, considerably slowed since the 18th century, because the spelling system and grammatical structure have been standardised and are therefore highly resistant to further change.

Standard English

Standard English has a unique and special status. Its prestige is such that for many people it is synonymous with ‘the English language’. This book sets out to show what the origins of present-day Standard English were in the past. It is concerned principally with the forms of the language itself, and makes reference to the historical, social and political background to the establishment of Standard English in outline only.

Commentaries

Analytic commentaries are provided for some of the texts in the book. Each commentary is a case-study based upon the text itself, which provides some of the evidence for change in the language. Other texts are provided without commentary.

Supplementary Materials

Two supplementary books in typescript (photocopiable) and a cassette tape are available from the author for teachers, lecturers and advanced students.

- ***Text Commentary Book***

The *Text Commentary Book* contains additional descriptive textual analyses which are indicated in *From Old English to Standard English* after the relevant texts and the sign . There is also one further chapter:

Chaucer's rhymes as evidence of changes in pronunciation.

- ***Word Book***

The *Word Book* contains a complete word-list in alphabetical order for each Old and Middle English text. The lists for the Old English texts give the base form of inflected words and a translation, so that students can refer to an Old English dictionary or grammar more easily. Those for the Middle English texts include the derivation of each word. The *Word Book* also contains selected

lists of words in present-day English which are derived from Old English, Old French, Old Norse or Celtic. These supplement the lists of loan-words which are included at the end of many of the chapters.

- **Cassette tape**

The cassette tape contains readings of the following texts:

1	Texts 4 & 5b	<i>Peterborough Chronicle</i>	Old English
2	Text 14	<i>Cædmon's hymn</i>	West Saxon & Northumbrian Old English
3	Text 33	<i>Peterborough Chronicle</i> , 1140	Early Middle English
4	Text 35	<i>Ormulum</i> , late 12th C	Early East Midlands Middle English
5	Text 53	<i>Ayenbyrte of Inwit</i> , 1340	Kentish Middle English
6	Text 59	Barbour's <i>Bruce</i> , c. 1375	Scots Middle English
7	Text 62	<i>York Pentecost Play</i> , c. 1470	Northern Middle English
8	Text 66	<i>Sir Gawayn and þe Grene Knyȝt</i>	West Midland Middle English
9	Text 68	<i>Piers Plowman</i> , c. 1370	West Midland Middle English
10	Text 82	<i>Friar's Tale</i> , late 14th C	East Midland/London Middle English
11	Text 85	<i>Boke of Margery Kempe</i> , c. 1420	East Midland Early Modern English
12	Text 89	<i>Paston Letters</i> , c. 1480	East Midland Early Modern English
13	Text 109	John Hart's <i>An Orthographie</i> , 1569	London Early Modern English
14	Text 120	Sir Thomas Browne's <i>Of the Badger</i> , 1646	Early Modern English
15	Text 146	Rhymes in John Dryden's <i>Aeneis</i> , 1697	Early Modern English

Versions of 'Peter's denial' – St Matthew's Gospel, 26: 69–75

16	Text 174	Late West Saxon Old English
17	Text 175	14th C South Midlands Middle English
18	Text 176	Early 16th C Scots Middle English
19	Text 177	Early Modern English late 16th C
20	Text 178	Early Modern English early 17th C
21	Text 179	20th C Scots
22	Text 180	20th C Modern English
23	Text 181	20th C Bislama (Vanuatu Pidgin English)

A phonetic transcription follows each recorded text in this book.

For details of the supplementary books and cassette tape contact the author:

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Dennis Freeborn

1997

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Symbols

Languages

OE	Old English
ME	Middle English
EMnE	Early Modern English
MnE	Modern English
Fr	French
OF	Old French
ONF	Old Northern French
AN	Anglo-Norman
AF	Anglo-French
ON	Old Norse
MS	manuscript
fr	from

Grammar

m	masculine (gender)
f	feminine
n	neuter
nom	nominative (case)
acc	accusative
gen	genitive
dat	dative
sg	singular (number)
pl	plural

S	subject (in clause structure)
P	predicator
C	complement
O	object
A	adverbial
Ø	stands for a deleted element in grammatical analysis

Writing and printing

Symbols used for OE letters in transcriptions of facsimiles:

f	long ⟨s⟩
ɿ	insular ⟨s⟩
ɪ	letter ⟨i⟩ in manuscript (no dot)
þ/ƥ	letter thorn (lower case and capital)
ð/Ð	letter eth (lower case and capital)
ȝ/Ȝ	letter yogh (lower case and capital)
ƿ/Ʋ	letter wynn (lower case and capital)
þ̥	abbreviation for <i>þæt</i>

Letters in caret brackets identify written letters of the alphabet, e.g. ⟨e⟩.

Letters in square brackets identify spoken sounds, using the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), e.g. [ə], [ʃ], [iː]. The IPA symbols can be found in *Gimson's Pronunciation of English*, 5th edn, revised by Alan Cruttenden (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 32, and *Varieties of English*, 2nd edn, Dennis Freeborn, with Peter French and David Langford (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), Chapter 4, pp. 67–8.

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