Abstract: In this paper, I explore the early history of the word *standard* as a linguistic term, arguing that it came to compete with the designation *common language* in the seventeenth century. The latter phrase was, in turn, formed by ideas on the Greek koine during the Renaissance and appears to have been the first widely used collocation referring to a standard language-like entity. In order to sketch this evolution, I first discuss premodern ideas on the koine. Then, I attempt to outline how the intuitive comparison of the koine with vernacular norms that were being increasingly regulated resulted in the development of the concept of common language, termed *lingua communis* in Latin (a calque of Greek ἡ κοινή διάλεκτος), in the sixteenth century. This phrase highlighted the communicative functionality of the vernaculars, which were being codified in grammars and dictionaries. Scholars contrasted these common languages with regional dialects, which had a limited reach in terms of communication. This distinction received a social and evaluative connotation during the seventeenth century, which created a need for terminological alternatives; an increasingly popular option competing with *common language* was *standard*, which was variously combined with *language* and *tongue* by English authors from about 1650 onwards, especially in Protestant circles, where the vernaculars tended to play a more prominent role than in Catholic areas. Of major importance for this evolution was the work and linguistic usage of the poet John Dryden (1631–1700). This essay uncovers the early history of *standard* as a key linguistic term, while also presenting a case study which shows the impact of the rediscovery of the Greek heritage on language studies in Western Europe, especially through the term *common language*.

**Keywords:** collocation; common language; early modern period; English; reception studies; standard language
1 Introduction: John Williams and a tongue’s standard

Where there are these different dialects, there generally is one way of speaking, which either from the eloquence or fashionableness of it, so far prevails as to be the standard of the tongue and to be used in writing books, letters, etc. and is understood by all. Such I conceive was anciently that which is called the common dialect in Greek. And of the like kind is that which is spoken in and about the court, and by scholars and persons of a liberal education amongst us; and elsewhere (Williams 1685: 5).

In 1685, the English clergyman John Williams (?1633/1636–1709), the later bishop of Chichester and a committed Protestant, held a discourse against the practise of celebrating mass in an unknown tongue. At the outset of his attack against Catholic clergymen and their use of the learned Latin language in church, Williams believed it necessary to reflect on a number of key linguistic concepts, among which the troublesome question of how to distinguish between a language and a dialect. In the passage cited above, Williams described at some length the language pole of the division by means of a term that has a surprisingly modern ring: standard. Indeed, the Anglican clergyman summed up the basic characteristics of modern ideas about what a standard language is; it is a cultivated language variety that has a broad communicative reach and is used in writing, this in contrast with regional dialects. He argued that there was a uniform and widely understood English tongue that could be used in mass. Some pages further, Williams (1685: 8) was even more explicit about the relationship between the standard variety and the dialects:

Which is (to speak charitably) for want of observing that the dialects are but several modes of speaking the same tongue; and that ordinarily there is some common standard, which (as I have said) over-rules the rest and is a guide common to all; as here in England, notwithstanding there be several dialects, and that there is one in Scotland differs much from them all [sic]; yet there is but one translation of the Bible, and one service for the use of the whole, and that is fully if not equally understood by all.

1 All emphases in this paper are original. I have regularised capitalisation in early modern quotes. I want to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their valuable suggestions, remarks, and corrections. Suffice to say, all remaining errors are mine. This contribution is a substantially revised version of my winning essay for the Vivien Law Prize 2018 of The Henry Sweet Society for Linguistic Ideas, revisiting and teasing out in greater detail my discussion in Van Rooy (2020b: Chapter 9). It is a result of my PhD fellowship (2013–17) funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO), project 11M6514N/11M6516N.

2 Biographical information on English authors is drawn from the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: www.oxforddnb.com.
The standard language “over-rules” the dialects – here we do not seem to be far removed from Heinz Kloss’ (1978 [1952]) metaphor of a standard language “roofing” the dialects resorting under it. Williams in other words seems to have been operating with an established linguistic concept that sounds very familiar to present-day readers. Nothing is what it seems, however, and Williams was in fact one of the first authors to use the term standard with reference to a normalised language variety. This observation raises several questions. What is the origin of standard as a linguistic term? How and in which context did its new meaning emerge? In this paper, I will try to answer these questions tentatively by taking a look at some key episodes and texts. I will start from Greek antiquity, where the seeds for a common language concept were sown, moving to the Renaissance appropriation of the Greek koine concept in the term lingua communis, and finishing with seventeenth-century England, where standard was refashioned as a linguistic term, partly in association with the language of ancient Greece.

The focus on the early beginnings of the term standard is justified, since its establishment as linguistic terminology has thus far been poorly studied, with most attention going to how standard languages were developed in the early modern period and the contribution of grammarians in this regard (see e.g., Hundt 2000 and McLelland 2011 for German; Lodge 1993 for French). These numerous studies seem to confirm what Gerda Haßler (2009: 674) has noted on the nature of the early modern interest in standardisation: “The development of standardising a language was considered necessary and obvious in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” Yet, Haßler (2009: 674) goes on to suggest, early modern authors refrained from coining a uniform terminology to refer to the matter, instead working with language-specific notions such as that of ‘good usage’ (bon usage) in France. My contribution will at the same time confirm Haßler’s suggestion and trace the origin of a phrase which gradually transcended national contexts and did become the default term to refer to a uniform and regulated language with a wide communicative reach in the modern era, both in English and in several other modern languages.

2 To the roots: the koine from Greek antiquity to the Renaissance

In his brief description of what he believed to be “the standard of the tongue,” John Williams mentioned almost in passing the “the common dialect in Greek” as an

3 “Der Vorgang des Normierens einer Sprache wurde im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert als notwendig und selbstverständlich betrachtet.”
example, and this is by no means a coincidence. In Greek antiquity and the Byzantine period, the Greek koine was usually termed ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος (ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος), ‘the common speech,’ referring to the variety of Ancient Greek that became the norm throughout the Greek-speaking world in the wake of Alexander the Great’s conquests in the latter half of the fourth century BC (see e.g., Colvin 2011). When this phrase was coined, the term διάλεκτος still had the very general meaning of ‘speech,’ ‘manner of speaking,’ and even ‘language’ or ‘tongue’ – interpretations that are all far removed from what we call a dialect nowadays (see Van Rooy 2016 for an overview). For this reason, I will refrain from translating the Ancient and Byzantine Greek term διάλεκτος (plural: διάλεκτοι [διάλεκτοι]) into English in this essay.

A focused search in the Thesaurus linguae Graecae database demonstrates that the collocation ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος is particularly frequent in grammatical works, especially those attributed to Aelius Herodianus (fl. 2nd cent. AD) and Georgius Choeroboscus (fl. early 9th cent. AD), as well as in Eustathius of Thessalonica’s (ca. 1115–1195/1196) commentaries on the Homeric epics. When during the Renaissance Western European scholars rediscovered the Greek heritage, these texts were, however, only marginally known, if at all. Humanists could nonetheless encounter references to ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος in a corpus of Greek texts attributed to Plutarch (ca. AD 45–before AD 125), John the Grammarian (fl. 6th cent. AD?), and Gregory of Corinth (fl. 11th/12th cent. AD) that discussed the characteristics of the canonised literary διάλεκτοι of Ancient Greek. This collection of treatises circulated widely from the end of the fifteenth century onwards, first only in the Greek original, but soon also in Latin translation (see the appendix in Trovato 1984). The renowned Venice-based printer-scholar Aldus Manutius (†1515) published these texts for the first time together in 1496 as part of his Treasure: The horn of Amaltheia and the gardens of Adonis (Θησαυρός. Κέρας ἀμαλθείας, καὶ κῆποι Ἀδώνιδος), an extensive corpus of Greek grammatical texts; in this soon-to-be dialectological canon, the aspiring Hellenist eager to study the different varieties of Greek could read, among other things, the following observations:

Διάλεκτοι πέντε· ἰακ. ἀτθίς, δωρίς, αἰολίς, κοινή [Five διάλεκτοι: Ionic, Attic, Doric, Aeolic, common] (Manutius et al. 1496: 235).5

4 See the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae database at http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/.
5 Abbreviations and ligatures have been silently resolved both in Greek and in Latin quotes. Punctuation, capitalisation, and orthography are adapted to modern standards; in Latin and vernacular quotes v-spelling is favoured when it refers to the semivowel or the fricative, and u-spelling when it represents the vowel. I quote John the Grammarian’s work from Manutius et al.’s (1496) edition, since it has not yet been critically edited; obvious errors have been silently corrected.
Κοινὴ δὲ ἡ πάντες χρώμεθα. ἀλλὰ καὶ Πίνδαρος ταύτη ἐχρήσατο [And the common [diálektos] that we all use. But Pindar, too, used that] (Manutius et al. 1496: 248°).

The reader of these texts could moreover learn that Greek scholars had debated about the nature of the common diálektos and its relationship vis-à-vis the other Greek diálektoi, and that they had formulated different hypotheses about it. One suggestion was that the koinē diálektos was composed out of the four other dialects as a kind of tetraphármakos (τετραφάρμακος), a ‘compound of four drugs,’ for which reason it had no particular features of its own (see Manutius et al. 1496: 236°–237°; Van Rooy 2020a: 13–15). John the Grammarian likewise contrasted the koine with the other Greek diálektoi, but he did so in normative terms, conceiving of the koine as the rule (κανόν/κανών) and associating the others with particularity (идιότης/ιδιότητα).6 A number of Byzantine scholars in other words had the feeling that the koine was somewhat different from the other canonical varieties of the Greek language (cf. also Consani 1993, 2000), a feeling they instilled in their Renaissance readers.

When humanists managed to obtain access to the Greek heritage and gain mastery of its language and after a while also of its different literary forms, they wanted to provide the necessary means for prospective students of the language to be able to do so, too. The indispensable first step had been taken by Aldus Manutius, as he had published three key treatises on the Greek diálektoi. The second step consisted in making these pieces of scholarship available to a wider audience by translating them into Latin, a feat Manutius himself realised as well. To his 1512 edition of Constantine Lascaris’ (1434–1501) Greek grammar, he appended the dialectological texts in a bilingual Greek and Latin version (see Lascaris and Manutius 1512). Manutius translated diálektos both as lingua and as dialectus. The collocation koinē diálektos, too, appeared in Latin both as dialectus communis (‘common dialect,’ e.g., Lascaris and Manutius 1512: x i°) and lingua communis (‘common language,’ e.g., Lascaris and Manutius 1512: x ii°), sometimes even on one and the same page (e.g., Lascaris and Manutius 1512: x ii°). The former form, however, slightly predominated in Manutius’ Latin.

The third major step was the humanists’ full appropriation of Greek scholarship on the diálektoi, which manifested itself in two principal ways. On the one hand, Renaissance humanists integrated information on this aspect of the Ancient Greek language into their own grammars, as for instance the Protestant Hellenist Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) did in his Greek grammar, first published in 1518 and popular especially in reformed areas. On the verso side of the title page,

6 “ἀναπεμπτέον δὲ ταύτην μὲν ὡς πρὸς κανόνα, τὰς δὲ λοιπὰς πρὸς ἰδιότητα” (Manutius et al. 1496: 236°).
Melanchthon (1518: a i) explained that “the speech (sermo) that is common to all, is called common language (lingua communis).” On the other hand, scholars started treating the matter of the Greek diálektai in separate treatises. The first original and separately published booklet on the matter was Adrien Amerot’s (ca. 1495–1560) On the diverse dialects (De dialectis diversis) of 1530, which, as its full title states, was based on the canon of texts Aldus Manutius had established some decades earlier (see Amerot 1530; Hummel 1999). This work was in the first place intended for the students Amerot taught at Lily College of Louvain University in the 1510s and was to this end initially incorporated into his grammar (Amerot 1520), but the humanist from Soissons extracted this section out of his handbook at a later stage, most likely because he realised that this was the most original part of his work and there was a market for handbooks on this topic. The excerpt, first published in Paris, enjoyed numerous reprints throughout Western Europe and had a wide readership up until the eighteenth century (see Hoven 1985: 1–27 for an excellent overview). In the booklet, Amerot (1530: I) referred to the Greek koine as lingua communis, “common language,” which “is not regarded as peculiar to any nation, as the others, but it is that which all Greeks use commonly and usually.”

To sum up, in the early sixteenth century, Renaissance Hellenists frequently translated the Greek phrase ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος into Latin as dialectus communis and increasingly also as lingua communis, a choice motivated by their perception of the Greek koine as something fundamentally different from the other Greek dialects. It is important to stress here that the Greek and Latin terms for ‘common’ were not granted a negative connotation in discussions of the Greek dialects. Instead, ‘common’ served to indicate that the koine was composed of the other Greek dialects and therefore consisted of what was common to these dialects, and/or that the koine was used as a common variety transcending regional differences and therefore intelligible to all Greeks.

3 Intuitive extrapolation: from koine Greek to common language

What humanists did with the Greek phrase koinē diálektos, however, went much further than merely translating in the strict sense. From the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards, the phrase was also translated on a conceptual level

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7 “Qui sermo communis omnibus est, lingua communis dicitur […].”
8 “[…] non alicui genti peculiaris habetur, ut ceterae, sed ea est qua communiter ac promiscue Graeci omnes utuntur.”
9 On these two widespread interpretations of the koine in premodern scholarship and their relationship to other, more marginal views, see Van Rooy (2020a: 13–15 and 30–34).
and extrapolated from the Greek context to the European vernaculars. Melanchthon’s observation on the koine quoted only partly above may serve as an early example of the intuitive reflex to tie the Greek koine to a vernacular pendant. Melanchthon (1518: a i’) remarked the following, in an attempt at explaining the Greek koine to the German-speaking audience of his grammar: “The speech that is common to all, is called common language, just as there is with us a certain common fashion of speaking among the Swabians, the Bavarians, and the Ubians; yet each of them has particularities of its own.” Eventually, abstraction was made from the Greek koine and the vernacular common varieties compared to it, resulting in the development of a common language concept, usually expressed in Latin as *lingua communis* or *sermo communis*, originally loan translations of the Greek phrase *hē koinē diálektos*, tailored to refer to the Greek koine only. This conceptual abstraction, involving the generalisation of what was at first a language-specific concept, was not only informed by the widespread didactic concern of explaining the Greek koine by referring to a comparable vernacular counterpart, as in Melanchthon’s case. Also, and more importantly, humanists needed a workable concept to speak about the vernacular norm they were trying to codify in grammars, and this concept had to highlight one of the core motivations to construe such a norm, namely its wide communicative reach, i.e., its ‘commonness.’

This criterion of commonness stands in glaring contrast to Dante Alighieri’s (1265–1321) concept of an Italian *vulgare illustre*, which he framed as an elevated ideal restricted to the preserve of illustrious literary authors, although it could be sensed in the vernacular varieties, too (see Van Rooy 2018: 191 and 194–196 and the references there). Despite the limited circulation of Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*, his ideas inspired Italian, and perhaps also French, Renaissance authors to develop an illustrious vernacular (Lucarelli 2015), suggesting that conceptions of normative varieties had diverging origins. Yet, for developing an abstract common language concept, Renaissance writers found first and foremost inspiration in (scholarship on) the Greek language, which pervaded humanist culture and became its defining factor in many respects (cf. Constantinidou and Lamers 2020). Before the sixteenth century, most scholars had not felt a need to devise a common language concept, since they saw their native Western European tongues in their spoken form as continua of base regional varieties which precluded long-range

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10 “Qui sermo communis omnibus est, lingua communis dicitur perinde ut apud nos est aliqua ratio loquendi communis Suevis, Boiis, Ubiiis; singulis tamen sui sunt idiotismi.” It is unclear to whom Melanchthon was referring by means of the ancient ethnonym *Ubii*. It most likely denotes Germans living near Bonn and Cologne along the Rhine. On this comparison, and the German print language Melanchthon might be referring to, see also Van Rooy (2020a: 123).
communication. And even though supra-regional writing traditions emerged already in the Middle Ages for various vernaculars, authors wishing to reach a wider audience saw no other option than employing the uniform Latin tongue, the language of knowledge and culture par excellence. In the sixteenth century, however, various factors – cultural, socio-economic as well as ideological – precipitated a change in the way in which the vernaculars and their diversity were conceptualised. It is well-known that Italian humanists debated on the linguistic norm to be adopted in the so-called *questione della lingua* (see e.g., Tavoni 1984). The upcoming merchant middle class that did not master Latin, or at least not well, needed a uniform language for effective communication, especially over longer distances (e.g., through letters). The concern over a fixed linguistic form was enhanced by the commercialisation of the printing press, which made authors and publishers aware of the need for uniform vernacular languages (see e.g., Giard 1992: 206–208). In addition, increased national sentiment among humanists led them to postulate clear borders between different ethnic groups and their respective languages (cf. Hirschi 2012), triggering a need for distinct and identifiable languages.

The concept of common language made an early career especially in the language questions of Italy and Germany, most probably because in these politically diverse areas the choice of a linguistic standard was less obvious than in politically more unitary regions such as Spain and France and also because Greek studies flourished there first. In Italy, for example, ‘Il Calmeta,’ the alter ego of Vincenzo Colli (ca. 1460–1508), suggested to design one language out of the various Romance varieties spoken in Rome, for which the Greek koine was his conceptual source of inspiration. He did not yet, however, use the phrase *common language* in this context.\(^\text{11}\) For Germany, Melanchthon provided an early example, which I have already quoted above. It is not unlikely that the foreman of the Reformation, Martin Luther (1483–1546), took the concept over from Melanchthon, his right hand; Luther went a step further, however, and spoke of the German *lingua communissima*, “most common language,” which the Saxon chancellery practised and which he adopted himself in his own writings.\(^\text{12}\) He used the

\(^{11}\) Calmeta’s work, which has not come down to us, is quoted by Pietro Bembo (1525, XII–XIII): “[…] come i Greci quattro lingue hanno alquanto tra se differenti et separate, delle quali tutte una ne traggono, che niuna di queste è, ma bene ha in se molte parti et molte qualita di ciascuna, così di quelle, che in Roma per la varieta delle genti, che si come fiumi al mare, vi corrono et allagan’vi d’ogni parte, sono senza fallo infinite, se ne genera et escene questa, che io dico: laquale altresì, come quella Greca si vede havere, sue regole, sue leggi ha, suoi termini, suoi confini, ne quali contenendosi valere se ne puo, chiuunque scrive.”

\(^{12}\) On Luther’s *lingua communissima*, see very recently Mihm (2019), who underscores its oral dimension.
superlative phrase during one of the ‘table talks’ (Tischreden) he held in Wittenberg between 1531 and 1544, as the notes of his students prove (see Luther 1913: 640). From about 1550 onwards, the concept of common language increasingly appeared outside of Italy and Germany, too; it is employed especially keenly to refer to the normalised varieties of French, Dutch and Spanish (see Van Rooy 2020a: 130–133; 2020b: 67–74 for more details).

In short, the Greek koine proved a welcome source of inspiration to conceptualise the vernacular norms that were being encoded by humanists in grammars from the turn of the sixteenth century onwards, which often solidified earlier supralocal writing traditions. This intellectual and normative process went hand in hand with the didactic concern of showing students of the Greek language to what in their own environment the Greek koine more or less corresponded.

## 4 Towards the idea(l) of standard language

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, scholars resorted to the concept of common language to describe the languages they were codifying in grammatical rules and dictionaries. This concept highlighted the ideal principal function of such a language: being common to a wide region and intelligible to the people living there, whatever their native dialect. No strong value judgements were at this point attached to the common language as opposed to the dialects spoken in the region the common language covered or was at least claimed to cover. This neutral attitude gradually changed from the early seventeenth century onwards, culminating in a strong evaluative turn in conceptualising the linguistic norm. Dialects were increasingly seen as corrupted deviations from the esteemed common language, a change related to new sociolinguistic realities establishing themselves in the course of the seventeenth century. In this period, the standard-speaking elite retreated from popular culture, an event which caused the gap with the regional dialects to widen not only in normative but also in social and evaluative terms (see Burke 2004: 110). In 1619 already, the schoolmaster Alexander Gil(l) (1565–1635) made a clear distinction between the English common language and the dialects:

> “What I say here regarding the dialects, you must realise, refers only to country people, since among persons of genteel character and cultured upbringing, there is but one universal speech, in pronunciation and meaning.”

As a result, certain scholars must have felt that the designation common language was not adequate or strong enough to designate the linguistic norm. Various competing alternatives

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were suggested. The French lexicographer Antoine Furetière (1619–1688), for instance, spoke of the ‘general or principal language of the realm’ (‘Langue générale ou principale du Royaume’), from which the dialects were corrupted (Furetière 1690: s.v. dialecte). In France, the idea of ‘good usage’ (bon usage) was particularly widespread (see e.g., Ayres-Bennett and Seijido 2013).

It is, however, on the origin of the linguistic meaning of the English word standard I want to concentrate in the remainder of this essay for two principal reasons. On the one hand, this new interpretation proved to be highly popular and the word is still widely used in this meaning by linguists and laymen alike, both in English and in other tongues. On the other hand, as far as I can tell at the moment, the new linguistic interpretation seems to have originated in English. This conclusion may, however, be biased by the fact that early modern printed books in this language are most easily accessible and searchable through platforms such as Early English Books Online (EEBO), even if historical corpora of other languages are massively growing.14

When in 1685 John Williams spoke about “the standard of the tongue” and the “common standard” of a language, he was not inventing a new phrase on the top of his head; he was merely an early adopter. The earliest known usage of the term standard with linguistic connotations seems to date to 27 March 1643, when the clergyman and scholar Thomas Fuller (1607/1608–1661) preached the following in a sermon held to commemorate Charles I’s accession to the throne eighteen years earlier: “But first we must know, that it behoved Mephibosheth to do something extraordinary; and in his expressions to exceed the size and standard of common language; were it only to unstain his credit from the suspicion of disloyalty Ziba had cast upon him” (Fuller 1643: 9). However, Fuller used the term standard here to refer to discursive appropriateness rather than to a true linguistic norm, even though the term appeared in close connection with the phrase common language. With his History of the worthies of England, published posthumously some twenty years later, we seem to be moving closer toward the idea of a linguistic norm. In this work, Fuller (1662: 68) stated on the language of some late medieval English authors: “If Chaucers coin were of a greater weight for deeper learning, Lydgates were of a more refined standard for purer language, so that one might mistake him for a modern writer.” Around the same time, another clergyman, John Owen (1616–1683), translated a Hebrew phrase of the Basel orientalist Johannes Buxtorf the Younger (1599–1664) as “standard of the holy tongue” in order to denote the normative status of Biblical Hebrew, regarded as the sacred language of God and Scripture (see Owen 1659: 287, where Buxtorf’s original Hebrew is also quoted). By

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14 See https://search.proquest.com/eebo. For a good overview of available historical corpora, see https://www.clarin.eu/resource-families/historical-corpora.
tracing these early attestations by means of modern digital means, I have been able to push back the date of the earliest collocations of *standard* with *language* and *tongue* by several decades in comparison with available studies on the matter (see especially Joseph 1987: 3–4).

The cases of Fuller, Owen and Williams suggest that it were reformed clergymen who first started using the term *standard* with a predominantly linguistic meaning. This trend is perhaps not surprising in view of the fact that in Protestant circles the issue of language standardisation was more urgent than in Catholic ones, where the uniform Latin tongue was still the principal liturgical language and also remained the predominant scholarly lingua franca. Reformed theologians such as John Williams were concerned over what form of the vernacular they should use in spreading the word of God, a concern fuelled by the fact that the standardisation process of English was still in full swing. Expanding on their metalinguistic apparatus, these clergymen extended the meaning of *standard*. Since the fifteenth century, this term had the meaning of “authoritative or recognized exemplar of correctness, perfection, or some definite degree of any quality,” to quote the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and now received a specifically normative-linguistic interpretation.\(^\text{15}\)

Among the early adopters of the phrase, one influential author stands out: the productive playwright, poet, and translator John Dryden (1631–1700), who frequently employed the term *standard* in its new linguistic sense. Co-founder of the Royal Society and England’s first Poet Laureate, Dryden relied on the term to deplore the underdeveloped and unfixed status of the English language – its lack of a *standard* – in comparison with other vernaculars such as Italian and French as well as the ancient tongue of Greece. He did so in the paratexts accompanying the rewritten version of William Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* he published in 1679, both in his letter dedicating the play to Robert Spencer (1641–1702), earl of Sunderland, and in his much-read critical preface on “The grounds of criticism in tragedy.” When arguing how English was lagging behind the other major tongues of Europe, Dryden repeatedly resorted to the term *standard*, thus substantially contributing to establishing the myth of an ideal standard language for English (cf. Watts 2011: especially Chapters 5–7):

> I am desirous if it were possible that we might all write with the same certainty of words and purity of phrase, to which the Italians first arriv’d, and after them the French; at least that we might advance so far, as our tongue is capable of such a standard (Dryden 1679: sig. A 3’).

> In the age of that poet [sc. Aeschylus], the Greek tongue was arriv’d to its full perfection; they had then amongst them an exact standard of writing and of speaking. The English language is

not capable of such a certainty; and we are at present so far from it, that we are wanting in the very foundation of it, a perfect grammar (Dryden 1679: A 4).

Dryden seems to have thought in the first place about the esteemed Attic dialect rather than the koine when referring to the “standard” of Greek, since he mentioned the Athenian playwright Aeschylus. Although I should recall that the nature of the Greek koine was not yet understood very well, and often wrongly assumed to have existed already in the fifth century BC, it is unclear what variety of Greek Dryden was precisely thinking about here. Be that as it may, it remains telling that Dryden resorted so emphatically to the Ancient Greek context, anachronistically attributing a standard to this language, a standard which other English authors such as John Williams did identify with the koine.

Dryden further contributed to the establishment of standard as a linguistic term in his later works. There, too, the Ancient Greek context could serve as a trigger; in his biography of the Greek author Plutarch, for instance, Dryden (1683: 19) compared French disdain for English to Greek contempt of Latin: “This is to arrogate a superiority in nature over us, as undoubtedly the Grecians did over their conquerours, by establishing their language for a standard.” Similar examples from Dryden’s work can be multiplied without much effort; just as in the passages already quoted, his observations usually regarded the classical languages Greek and Latin as well as the prominent vernacular tongues English, Italian and French.16

Dryden’s concern with linguistic norms was not merely a conceptual or terminological one, but, as Paul Hammond (2009) remarks, he actively tried to remedy the lack of regulation in the English language himself, especially on the level of syntax. As a matter of fact, he had plans to found an English academy already in 1664, and in the early 1680s he most likely assisted Wentworth Dillon (1637–1685), fourth earl of Roscommon, in establishing such a society for fixing a standard for the English language after the example of Richelieu’s French Academy (Académie française), founded in 1635. Yet this short-lived English academy never became as productive as its French model, and its precise status and impact remain unclear; it seems to have promoted the refinement of English not only by means of grammars and dictionaries, but also through poetic translation and composition, and its influence likely persisted even after Roscommon’s death in 1685 (see Clingham 2002 for a good summary).

The fact that Dryden frequently used the term standard in combination with language and tongue in his widely read oeuvre ensured the success of the linguistic meaning of the word. Indeed, in the 1680s and 1690s, numerous English authors

16 See e.g., also Dryden (1685: (a)\(^{\dagger}\), (b)\(^{\dagger}\); 1700: *A 1\(^{\dagger}\)); Dryden in Virgil (1697: (e) 2\(^{\dagger}\)).
spoke of the ‘standard’ of a certain ‘language’ or ‘tongue,’ this in various works and contexts. For instance, one author shared Dryden’s concern that a standard still needed to be designed for English: “There is no fixt true standard for the English language” (Monro 1696: 8). Yet probably the best indication of Dryden’s influence in spreading and establishing the new linguistic sense of standard is a poem written by the musician and poet Henry Hall (ca. 1656–1707) at the occasion of Dryden’s death:

And as what Virgil, and what Horace sung,
is still the standard of the Latin tongue,
so will thy works to long posterity,
the touch-stone of our British poesy be (Hall 1700: 20).

Two things are worthy of note here. Not only does Hall confirm Dryden’s status as a model for English by these verses, but the passage also reveals a mixed interpretation of the term standard. The word designates, on the one hand, the linguistic norm that should be followed, but more directly it refers here to a literary standard, evoking in the first place notions of elegance and literary quality. Linguistic normativity and evaluative properties such as elegance were indeed more often amalgamated into the notion of standard in the late seventeenth century, for instance also in the orientalist Humphrey Prideaux’ (1648–1724) assessment of the language of the Quran: “the Alcoran […] is as to the stile and language the standard of elegancy in the Arab tongue” (Prideaux 1697: 36). Interestingly, the term standard was soon also used to doubt the very possibility of regulating a language, thus debunking the standard language myth, this only a couple of decades after the word standard had received its new linguistic meaning. In a work dismissing learning in favour of revelation, we read: “[The dictionary of the Académie française] has not escaped censure, but has been thought to want correction, and does thereby shew how impossible it is to set bounds, or give a standard to a language, for which purpose it was design’d” (Baker 1700: 20).

In conclusion, standard as a linguistic term became fashionable in the second half of the seventeenth century, a development in which John Dryden’s influential work and linguistic usage was pivotal; Dryden’s contribution was still recognised and appreciated in the eighteenth century.17 The new meaning of standard came about as a side effect of the desire of English authors for creating a cultivated linguistic norm; they realised that they were lagging behind other languages, especially French and Italian, and wanted to remedy this. They did their best to

17 See e.g., Warton (1756: 199): “He had laid a design of forming a society for the refining, and fixing the standard of, our language: in which project, his intimate friend Dryden was a principal assistant.”
separate the norm clearly from the regional dialects, which were increasingly described in depreciatory terms from the seventeenth century onwards. The term *standard* was mainly applied to English and other vernaculars, but scholars versed in classical philology – and most early adopters of the term were – usually reached back to antiquity to find ancient examples of linguistic *standards*, which they found in both Latin and Greek.

It does not lie within the scope of the present essay to explore the fate of the linguistic usage of *standard* in the eighteenth century, but a preliminary search through the *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* database demonstrates that the word became ever more frequently used in connection with *language* and *tongue*, with reference to the classical languages Latin and Greek as well as to the vernaculars, especially English.18 For instance, in his Latin grammar, the eccentric clergyman John Henley (1692–1756) remarked that “[t]here were most certainly a variety of dialects in the Latin; but the best writers do not use them: for the Roman standard of speaking was the rule they follow’d” (Henley 1720: 118).

Especially in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the new linguistic interpretation of *standard* became increasingly popular, being recorded in dictionaries, too.19 In 1766, the word even featured prominently on the title page of one of the obscure grammarian James Buchanan’s (fl. 1753–73) works on the English tongue: *An essay towards establishing a standard for an elegant and uniform pronunciation of the English language, throughout the British dominions, as practised by the most learned and polite speakers.* Buchanan (1766: xi) wrote this essay as he wanted to “exclude all local dialects, with which the speech of some, who are otherwise accounted polite, is too much tinctured.”

The focus on English is not surprising in view of the fact that the standardisation of this language was mainly a feat of eighteenth-century grammarians, who catered to the needs of a newly developed middle class which struggled to speak correct English (see Beal 2004: Chapter 5; Hickey 2010). Up till this point, *standard* had been principally in use as an autonomously employed substantive in close association with *language* and *tongue*, usually in a genitival relationship: “the standard of a language/tongue.” In the last decades of the eighteenth century, however, the familiar compound usage of *standard* in combination with *language* started to appear. For example, in his *New geographical, historical, and commercial*
grammar of 1771, the journalist and historian William Guthrie (1708–1770) remarked the following on the linguistic state of affairs in Italy, which he claimed still needed a unified language: “Almost every state in Italy has a different dialect; and the prodigious pains taken by the literary societies there, may at last fix the Italian into a standard language. At present, the Tuscan stile and writing is most in request.”

Sketching the fixation of standard language as a widely used compound noun would, however, lead me too far astray. Let me instead formulate the conclusions we can draw from the developments I have sketched roughly here.

5 Conclusion

I have tried to argue in this paper that the early modern era witnessed the evolution from normative concepts tailored to specific contexts such as koine Greek in antiquity to less locally bound concepts that could be applied to various linguistic situations. In a first step, humanist Hellenists distilled the concept of common language out of koine Greek, one of the canonical literary varieties of the highly valued Ancient Greek language, by comparison with evolutions in Italian, German and French; the Latin phrase lingua communis, which was soon vernacularised, highlighted the functionality and communicative reach of the vernacular norms that were in design.

From the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, English scholars gradually started using collocations with standard as a competing alternative for the phrase common language; this shift entailed a change in focus from the communicative value of the standardised variety to its prestige and normative status, a development related to the retreat of the standard-speaking elite from popular culture and the dialects closely tied to it. Even though standard was associated with language and tongue from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, it was apparently only in the final decades of the eighteenth century that it started to appear in the collocation standard language that is familiar to the modern reader. Before that, there was considerable phraseological diversity. Even though standard was only one among many terms to designate the linguistic norm in the early modern period, competing with various area-specific phrases, it managed to settle itself firmly in the linguistic jargon, becoming a key term in modern investigations of sociolinguistics and language ideology, both in English and various other western tongues.

20 Guthrie (1771: 483). See e.g., also Clarke (1777: 18): “I have seen men who knew not p from q, by being habituated in youth to hear and speak the standard language, have more address and sentiment, than others who had been taught reading, writing, and the use of numbers.”
In this paper, I have only been able to make some observations on the origin and history of the term standard, pointing out a number of main authors, episodes and texts in the process. Special reference has been made to English-speaking areas, where the term standard appears to have first received a linguistic interpretation. Further study will no doubt result in a more fine-tuned picture of the history of standard as a linguistic term. Another issue requiring closer attention is, as I have already mentioned, the way in which standard language became a fixed compound noun, which seems to have started in the eighteenth century.\footnote{On the modern career of the collocation standard language, see already Crowley (2003: 77–173).}

Finally, the present contribution has also served as a case study demonstrating the far-reaching consequences a new body of knowledge in a previously unintelligible language can have on intellectual history in general and the history of linguistic thought in particular. In the case of the reappearance of Greek on the intellectual scene of the Renaissance, this effect has been suggested numerous times in existing secondary literature, even though modern researchers have generally refrained from thoroughly investigating the actual intellectual impact of this momentous event. Investing in this promising research strand seems all the more worthwhile since the rediscovery of the Greek heritage did not only open up new avenues to approach age-old linguistic problems at the beginning of the Renaissance, but it kept inspiring scholars with an interest in language throughout the entire early modern period. The phrase common language (lingua communis) was very obviously inspired by Greek scholarship, but even the term standard was at various occasions associated with the linguistic context of ancient Greece by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English scholars such as John Dryden and John Williams. They seem to have conceived of Greek as an illustrious ancient prototype of a standard language and wanted their own English vernacular to attain a similar status.

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