In the previous chapter we discussed two models for the standardization process put forward by Kloss and Joseph. While some illustration for their views was given, no focus on the complete standardization process for any language over time was permitted. In this chapter, four standardizations will be considered – three successful and one failed – which will not only help to test Kloss’ and Joseph’s models, but also produce further understanding of the processes involved.

5.1 English

Of all the Germanic languages, English has the longest continuous written heritage; interestingly, it also represents their earliest example of an attempt at standardization, the late West Saxon Schriftsprache, ‘written [or “writing”] language’, which was used in the tenth and eleventh centuries, both within the West Saxon kingdom, centred intellectually on the chancery at Winchester, and in other centres outside the West Saxon dialect area (Gneuss 1972). Late West Saxon was employed in a number of genres at a time when these roles were normally assigned to Latin in other parts of western Europe, thereby suggesting an acculturation process which partly removed the previous superposition. Prior to this, local usages prevailed, emanating from monastery or cathedral scriptoria. It was not the case that, as Luick suggested, *man schrieb wie man sprach* ‘you wrote as you spoke’ (Stanley 1988); it must certainly be suspected that these local ‘standards’ did have a strong flavour of local language, however.

This Schriftsprache cannot be described as a fully fledged *standard*, however: primarily because a standard proper would only normally come into being in an era where literacy is spreading, particularly
among a putative middle class. Whilst literacy was by no means uncommon in Anglo-Saxon England (Kelly 1990), there is no doubt that it was the province of a numerically insignificant (although socially influential) elite. Yet its influence over the rest of England’s literate class bears many similarities to later standardization processes for English and other languages. We might put forward the term micro-standardization.

Along with manuscripts written in West Saxon from elsewhere in England, there are texts which hypercorrect – using features which the (non-West Saxon) scribe considers West Saxon, but which are actually based upon a conflict between the usage of that dialect and his own. This level of imitation beyond imitation represents, in the starkest way, what marks off standardization processes which proceeded by routes which Joseph would describe as circumstantial (that is, where it is impossible to distinguish individuals or groups acting as language planners) from engineered ones. These scribes must have considered their own usage to be inferior to the West Saxon one. It was, in some intangible sense, more ‘correct’, more ‘English’, than their own regional forms.

In the course of two or three generations after the Norman conquest of 1066, the Schriftsprache was gradually replaced, when English was written at all, by forms of writing which again were rooted in local scrip-torial tradition. English was changing rapidly during the eleventh and twelfth centuries; indeed, when attempts at a form of writing representing the old model were made, these tend to demonstrate only a fitful understanding of certain of its orthographical, lexical and — above all — morphological features (Stanley 1969, 1988). As English re-surfaced, challenging the superposition of French, it did so in a variety of forms, depending on the provenance of author and scribe.

One of these local usages did demonstrate considerable spread during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, however. Originally developing from the house styles of the scriptoria in the area around Hereford and Worcester, this usage, termed ‘AB language’ by Tolkien (as discussed by d’Ardenne (1961: 177–250)), is found in a wide range of texts, largely religious and didactic in nature, the most famous of which being Ancrene Riwle, ‘a rule for anchorites’. What is interesting is that something approaching this ‘house style’ is to be found in texts written or copied a considerable distance outside its original heartland. There must have been a sense that this was a ‘correct’ way to write English, at least when it came to texts from this set of nested genres.

Why did this not become Standard English, therefore? In the first place, the south-west midlands were linguistically conservative, compared to areas both to the north and east; this meant that certain features