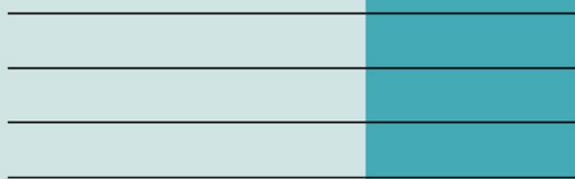


A history  
*of the*  
french  
language

PETER RICKARD



Second  
Edition



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A HISTORY OF THE  
FRENCH LANGUAGE



# A HISTORY OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

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Second edition



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## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

As the vehicle of a culture and of a literature of the highest order, French has been for centuries the foreign language most widely known and studied in Great Britain, and its influence on the development of the English language has been considerable. Those who study it as it is spoken and written today are probably aware that it derives from Latin and therefore belongs to the Romance group of Indo-European languages; and some may have wondered by what process or processes an ancient language becomes a modern one. English readers of seventeenth-century French texts will have observed that some words now have a different meaning, while others have fallen into disuse, and they may also have noticed vestiges of older grammatical constructions today considered impossible, incorrect or at best archaic and quaint. Such differences will strike the reader even more forcibly as he goes further back, through the French of the sixteenth century to that of the Middle Ages. The French reader, too, finds the language increasingly opaque and baffling as he goes further back through its abundant literature. Indeed, unless he is a specialist, he will have to read such masterpieces as the *Song of Roland* and the *Romance of the Rose* in modern translations.

What were the immediate Latin antecedents of French? What was the earliest French like? What were the circumstances which favoured the emergence, from a welter of dialects, of a language which gradually spread over the whole country, and was subsequently carried to other continents? What were the factors, internal or external, spontaneous or contrived, which shaped its evolution? What are its dominant characteristics today, viewed in the light of its past? These are the questions I have tried to answer, in the hope that this book may serve as an introduction to more

detailed or specialised studies in this field, a vast one which has been intensively investigated, by no means exclusively in France, for well over a hundred years.

A work of the modest scope of the present volume is obviously not intended to be an historical grammar: it is intended simply to provide, in English, a concise survey of a type already long available in French, and to indicate main outlines and significant developments, without going into so much detail as to hold the reader up as he tries to follow the broad sweep of linguistic evolution. If, for instance, I have endeavoured to characterise Old French in its dominant features, it was precisely in order not to have to describe it in detail. The reader who wishes to learn Old French as a grammatical system in its own right should turn to a more relevant book: in this one, Old French is regarded merely as a staging-post.

It is a great pleasure to record my gratitude to Mlle S.Dayras of Paris-III and Dr T.G.S.Combe of Pembroke College for their kindness in reading Chapter 7 in typescript, for their extremely valuable criticisms and for the most helpful corrections and additions they enabled me to make.

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the fifteen years which have elapsed since the first edition of this book, there has been no loss of momentum in the research carried out, in France and elsewhere, into every imaginable aspect of the development of the French language. Many discoveries have been made, many mysteries cleared up, and although much remains conjectural, at least conjecture may now often be based on more abundant and more reliable data.

In preparing this revised edition, I have taken account of at least some of that research and benefited from at least some of those discoveries. I have also learned much from comments made by reviewers when the book first appeared. On many points I now express a somewhat modified view; some themes, rather summarily dealt with before, have been expanded and provided with additional examples. In particular, Chapters 7 and 8, and the Appendix, which by their nature have dated more rapidly than the rest, have been thoroughly overhauled.

Reviewers expressed some regret that I did not include in Chapter 7 any specimen passages of nineteenth and twentieth-century French. I now feel that I should give readers an opportunity to judge for themselves the major points of similarity—and comparatively slight differences—between the literary 1980. I have accordingly brought Chapter 7 into line with the French of the late eighteenth century, and that of 1847, 1926 and earlier chapters in this respect.

*Cambridge*

P.R.