8
MULTILINGUALISM

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Reading literature from a distant period involves not only adapting yourself to an earlier form of the language but also making the necessary meta-linguistic adjustments. In the case of Middle English, major adjustments are required. Present-day English is a global language, and often the only one that its native speakers can command. This situation has normalised the background assumption that English literature is written in a language that matters in the wider world. Middle English literature offers a refreshing contrast in this regard: the people who wrote it were typically multilingual and considered their native tongue to be comparatively insignificant. Middle English had no status abroad, while at home it emerged as the generally preferred language of writing and documentation only from the later fourteenth century onwards.

English Abroad

Because English-language literature did not travel, examples of it being produced on the Continent by non-natives are remarkable and fascinating. Sometime around 1390, a German lay brother at a monastery north of Cologne who named himself ‘Bruder Hans’ produced a sequence of poems in honour of the Virgin Mary (Newman 2006: 152–3; Rozenski 2020). He began this poem, Marienlieder, with a rhapsodic Ave Maria in 15 stanzas, each consisting of 12 lines, with the same rhyme scheme (aabcddbcceec) and the same arrangement of languages (line 1: Latin tag + German; line 2: French; line 3: English; line 4: Latin; line 5: German; line 6: French; line 7: English; lines 8 + 9: Latin; line 10: German; line 11: English; line 12: French). The first stanza illustrates this arrangement:

Ave alpha du stercher god!
Je diroy volentiers un mot
Of that swete ladi deer,
Cuius venter te portavit.
Ich meyn miin vrou dy alrebest,
Qui dame de toutes dames est,
Thu in hyr blisset woomb shy beer
Et te dulci lacte pavit
Et tam ardenter te amavit
Daz ir myn dich cund neder zeen.
This macaronic lyric employs four languages (not counting Greek ‘alpha’). The most astonishing thing about this poem, however, is not the number of languages it deploys. The Provençal poet Raimbaut the Vacqueiras wrote a descort (c. 1190), *Eras quan vey verdeyar*, that manages five: Provençal, Genoese, French, Gascon, and Spanish-Portuguese (Hagman 2006). What is really astonishing is that a foreigner should have chosen to make English one of them. From what ‘Bruder Hans’ says about himself in the poem, it appears that he had been a merchant before he joined a monastery, and he must have acquired English for purposes of trade across the North Sea. He also shows familiarity with English literature: ‘swete ladi deer’, for instance, is a poetic commonplace in Middle English love poetry.

Equally curious are the English songs that sporadically turn up in multilingual songbooks from the Continent. We have the opening lines of three English ballades in the splendid Mellon chansonnier (New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 91), which contains lyrics in no fewer than five different languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Latin, and English) and which was probably copied in Naples, c. 1475, by a Burgundian scribe (Perkins and Garey 1979). There is also a two-line snippet in the Escorial chansonnier, also compiled in Naples, c. 1460, which musters lyrics in an equally impressive array of languages (French, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, English, and some bilingual French-Latin and French-Italian):

*Princesse of yowth and flowre of godlihede*  
The perfight meror of all gentilnesse.

*(Chansonnier El Escorial, fols 114r–16r)*

I have reproduced this and the opening stanza of Bruder Hans’s *Marienlieder* as reconstructed by modern scholars rather than as written by the Continental scribes, who made a frightful mess of the Middle English. Thus the manuscript reading of the third line of *Marienlieder* is ‘Of dat swe | te layi. yeer’ (Rozenski 2020: 112), while the couplet above appears in the Escorial songbook as ‘Princhesse af youth and floree of god li he de | Che per fight meror ofalt gentilnes’ (Fallows: 1977: 40). The garbled English shows that the scribes had no familiarity with English, which had no currency abroad. What did export well in the fifteenth century was English music. Composers such as John Dunstable and Walter Frye were in vogue in the Burgundian Low Countries and beyond (Kennedy 1964), which explains the presence of Middle English lyrics in Continental chansonniers. The words came as appendages to the music.

The emergence of English as a language co-produced by foreigners is a post-medieval development and is initially bound up with the rise of European cities such as Antwerp (in the sixteenth century) and Amsterdam (in the seventeenth) as international centres of printed book production (Franssen and Simoni 1986; Hellinga *et al*. 2010). The roots of this development, however, go back to the medieval period, for printing in English started in the Low Countries. Caxton’s first English-language book, *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, was probably published in Ghent (1473–1474) in collaboration with the scribe and book dealer David Aubert (Hellinga 2010a: 33–51). Alongside it, Caxton published a French-language version of the same text, *Le recueil des hystoires troyennes*, which is just as ground-breaking as its English counterpart. Setting aside a fragment of a translation...
of Donatus’ *Ars Minor* (undated and unattributed, c. 1470, printed in Holland), it is one of the earliest French books to be printed. The first dated French-language book from France is the *Legende doree*, printed in Lyon by Guillaume Leroy in 1476 (Colin et al. 1973: 201).

When Caxton, after setting up his printing press in Westminster, died in 1492, printers from the Low Countries moved into the market to maintain the supply of books for English readers. The printing of English-language books abroad can be said to begin at that point. A key figure here is Gerard Leeu, who may have been a business partner of Caxton and who, after Caxton’s death, produced a flurry of English books from his workshop in Antwerp (Goudriaan 1993; Hellinga 2010b: 18–22). Most of these were reprints of Caxton originals. The most intriguing English-language book printed by Leeu is *Solomon and Marcolf* (1492). This is not based on any known Caxton edition. Its ultimate source must be a Middle Dutch text that was translated by someone who was fluent in both languages – but sometimes thinking in Dutch. The description of Marcolf’s wife in the Prologue, for instance, shows signs of interference from Dutch:

> His wyf was of short stature, and she was out of mesure thycke wyth great brestys, and the here of hyr hede clustred lyke thystelys. She had longe wynde browes lyke brostelys of a swyne, longe erys lyke an asse.

(*Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* 2012: 27)

What are ‘wynde browes’? The editors gloss it as ‘twisted brows’, but this is wrong. The question is solved by looking at a Middle Dutch dictionary: *windbrauwe* is ‘eyebrow’, and the Dutch word was borrowed by Caxton who used it in his *Recuyell and Charles the Grete* (see OED s.v. winbrow).4 The ‘mistake’ might lead us to think that the translator was a Dutchman with good English, but it is possible that we are in fact dealing with one of Caxton’s own translations. As we shall see, such lapses into Dutch idiom are characteristic of Caxton’s language.

The Languages of Later Medieval Britain

English was always the mother tongue for the vast majority of people in later medieval Britain, though it was certainly much less dominant than it is today (Putter 2016). As a spoken language its catchment area was smaller. In Cornwall and parts of Devon, Cornish had been a community language, though by 1300 it had all but retreated to the western half of Cornwall, where it remained functional into the sixteenth century (Padel 2017). In later medieval Scotland, Gaelic was spoken, but like Cornish the language was in retreat. In the early twelfth century the English-Gaelic language border ran north of the Forth, but by 1500 English had spread to the lowlands and pushed Gaelic into the highlands (Filpulla, Klemola, and Pavlasto 2008: 21–2). Welsh was spoken not only in Wales but also in parts of England bordering on Wales, especially Herefordshire and Shropshire (Smith 2000).

A common type of medieval miracle story, about a saint who heals a mute person, provides valuable information about what expectations of normal speech were like. Not surprisingly, in these stories the mute usually ends up speaking English (Richter 1979: 71), the language of the illiterate majority, but in a variation on the familiar story from Herefordshire, a certain ‘Johannes’ is miraculously cured by St Thomas of Cantilupe, Bishop of Hereford (d. 1282) and subsequently speaks two languages, English and Welsh (‘et loquebatur linguagium [sic] sive ydioma Anglicum et Walense’). The Hereford cleric who is mentioned in the story as the eyewitness knew enough Welsh to quote Johannes’s first utterance: ‘Argluth deu e seint Thomas’ (Richter 1979: 196–7). ‘Argluth deu’ means ‘Lord God’. In modern Welsh standardised orthography this would be ‘Arglwydd Duw’, but there was no standardised spelling at the time, and ‘Argluth deu’ plausibly encodes the sounds of these words for speakers of English (Welsh <dd> is English <th>). It is also entirely plausible that a cleric in Herefordshire would
have known some Welsh (in addition to English, French, and Latin), not just because there were many Welsh-speakers in Herefordshire but also because parts of Wales (Radnorshire and eastern Montgomeryshire) fell under the jurisdiction of the Hereford Consistory Court, and Welsh was needed for interviewing defendants and witnesses from these parts.

In other notable twelfth-century variations on the meme of the healing saint, a mute man from Somerset (c. 1150) gains the power of speech in French as well as English, while a deaf and mute Jewish woman who visits the shrine of St Remigius returns understanding and speaking French (Richter 1979: 69, 87). England, as this story reminds us, had a Jewish community before 1290, when all Jews were expelled by Edward I. Most came from Normandy, spoke French, and used that language in communications with Christians (De Visscher 2013). It thus made sense to imagine that the language divinely bestowed on a Jewish woman should be French.

The two major languages which kept English in its place were French and Latin. Right across Western Europe, Latin was the language of the church and the learned, and during the High Middle Ages it also reigned supreme as the medium of official record and international diplomacy. It is often stereotyped as a ‘dead construct’ in comparison with the ‘living vernaculars’ of French and English (Rothwell 1994: 45), but this underestimates the extent to which Latin was a spoken as well as a written language. The existence of regulations prohibiting the speaking of English in schools and monasteries (Leach 1899: 164–6; Richter 1979: 152, 156) reminds us that in some settings Latin (alongside French) was the official medium of spoken communication. For some speakers it was a language of everyday life (Sharpe 1996). When the Franciscan scholar Roger Bacon (d. 1294) wrote about his mother tongues he said he had three: English, French, and Latin (Lusignan 1986: 67). He and all those involved in proceedings conducted wholly or partly in Latin – the liturgy, synods, church councils, high-level meetings of clerical and secular dignitaries (Russell 1973: 1154–5; Richter 1979: 56–7, 100–1) – would surely not have thought of Latin as a ‘dead construct’. Latin literacy was less common in female monastic houses, where French was thought more appropriate (Richter 1979: 153–4; Rothwell 2001), but nuns too knew it as the language of the liturgy, and a minority of nuns read non-liturgical Latin (Bell 2007).

The records of the process of canonisation of St Thomas Cantilupe provide a snapshot of the linguistic situation in the early fourteenth century, and spoken Latin is part of the picture (Richter 1979: 173–201; English summary in Richter 2000). In 1307, a papal delegation was dispatched to gather character witnesses from those who had known Cantilupe. Interpreters were recruited from local friaries. The delegation visited London, Swansea, Conwy, Hereford, and the surrounding countryside. Unusually, the records give the language in which the locals gave their oral testimonies. Of the secular clergy, half spoke Latin and the other half French or a mixture of French and English; the regular clergy spoke mostly Latin. As far as the laity is concerned, in the towns, half of all men spoke English and the other half French or a mixture of French and Latin. In Swansea only one man spoke Welsh, but that is not surprising since the Welsh had been banned from the ‘English’ borough towns in Wales. Of the ten women who were interviewed, three answered in English, seven in French or a mixture of French and English; the regular clergy spoke mostly Latin. As far as the laity is concerned, in the towns, half of all men spoke English and the other half French or a mixture of French and Latin. In Swansea only one man spoke Welsh, but that is not surprising since the Welsh had been banned from the ‘English’ borough towns in Wales. Of the ten women who were interviewed, three answered in English, seven in French or a mixture of French and English; the regular clergy spoke mostly Latin. As far as the laity is concerned, in the towns, half of all men spoke English and the other half French or a mixture of French and Latin. In Swansea only one man spoke Welsh, but that is not surprising since the Welsh had been banned from the ‘English’ borough towns in Wales. 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The fact that Latin was spoken as well as read explains why the humanist campaign to restore Latin to its classical purity was not just about spelling and composition but also about pronunciation. The obstacle to the mutual comprehensibility of internationally mobile intellectuals, so Erasmus complained, was that each nation spoke a different kind of Latin. His proposals for the regularisation of the language on the basis of classical rules of spelling and pronunciation were designed to put an end to ‘regional Latins’. The process of turning Latin into a dead language had begun (Putter 2016: 140).
French was the language of the ruling elite that colonised England after the Norman Conquest of 1066. One might have expected the higher echelons of society to abandon French after a century on English-speaking soil, but in fact Anglo-French became increasingly influential, reaching its peak in the early fourteenth century (Ailes and Putter 2014). One reason for its ascendancy was that, when some functions of administration and government were finally entrusted to a vernacular language, the successor to Latin was initially French rather than English (Suggett 1946). The last vestige of this state of affairs is the formulary of Thomas Hoccleve (c. 1422), a massive volume of missives that could be used as templates by a Privy Seal clerk. They are in French and Latin (for ecclesiastical matters). As the editor notes, Hoccleve’s *magnum opus* was out of date almost as soon as it was completed, for the next generation pursued this business in English (Bentley 1965: xxvii). The same chronological order of appearance (first Latin, then French, then the Germanic vernacular) is seen in official documents from the Dutch-speaking Low Countries (Kurth 1896: II, 29). Compared with Dutch in the Low Countries, however, Middle English was a late starter, while Anglo-French was ahead of the curve. The first French-language charter in Western Europe is of English provenance (c. 1170) (Richardson 1940). On the Continent, the first Old French charters also come from outside France, namely from the regions of Flanders and Hainaut, the earliest one dated 1194 (de Hemptinne and Prevenier 2003). The earliest French chronicle (Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis*, c. 1138) and some of the oldest *chansons de geste* manuscripts are also insular (Ailes and Putter 2014: 61–3), as is one of the earliest examples of jurisprudence in French: Magna Carta, drawn up in Latin in 1215, was almost immediately translated into French, and only 50 years later into English (Richter 1979: 109–11).

The use of French for the literature of entertainment and the writing of history continued strong until the mid-fourteenth-century. When Geoffroy le Baker wrote his *Chronicon*, charting English history from 1303 to 1356, he did so in Latin (for he was a cleric), but Geoffroy’s patron, Sir Thomas de la More, personally contributed an account of a military campaign he had been involved in. This he wrote in French, as Geoffroy says: ’sicut vidisti et in gallico scripsisti’ (as you have seen it and as you have written it in French; Geoffroy le Baker 1889: 27). While Geoffroy took the trouble to translate such French material into Latin, other Anglo-Latin chroniclers were content to leave dispatches from the battlefield written by English knights in their original French language (Smalley 1960: 12–13). The earliest full-length chronicle by an English layman, Sir Thomas Gray’s *Scalachronica*, was written around the same time as Geoffroy le Baker’s *Chronicon*. Despite the Latinate title, it was written in French (Gray 2007). Other substantial French books by English gentlemen from this same period are *Le livre des merveilles du monde* (better known as *Mandeville’s Travels*), probably composed by an English knight in Liège c. 1356 (Mandeville 2000), and the devotional *Livre de Seyntz Medicines* by Henry of Grosmont, Duke of Lancaster (d. 1361) (Henry, Duke of Lancaster 1940 and 2014). As the author’s name suggests, Henry was brought up in what was then Welsh-speaking Gromont in Monmouthshire, and well into the fifteenth century, the Lords of Raglan acted as patrons for Welsh poets.

In the second half of the fourteenth century, Anglo-French went into decline. Richard Ingham (2013) has suggested that the Black Death wiped out a generation of elders able to pass on their knowledge of French to the next generation (Ingham 2013: 35–6). But whatever the causes, there are numerous signs that French was ceasing to function as a living vernacular. While Ranulph Higden in his Latin *Polychronicon* (c. 1357) records the fact that the children of noblemen learn French from the cradle, John Trevisa in his English translation of the work (c. 1385) adds the information that it is no longer so: ‘gentilmen hauþ now moche i-left for to teche here children Frensche’ (*Polychronicon*: I, 161). He also notes the decline of French and the rise of English in the schoolroom. It had been customary, Higden and others observe (Richter 1979: 36–7), to teach French to English schoolboys and to use that as the medium for teaching Latin (the main business of elementary education), but Trevisa notes that English has now replaced French. The result was that students of the ‘new school’ were no longer fluent in French. William Langland’s complaint in
Piers Plowman (B.15.372) about a generation of clerics (‘thise newe clerkes’) who cannot construe ‘but [except] in Latyn or English’ (Langland 1995) should be seen in this context. Another symptom of decline is that scribes responsible for writing Anglo-French after c. 1370 could no longer get French grammatical gender right (Ingham 2013: 89–99). Even manuscripts of Anglo-French teaching manuals that claim to teach ‘proper French’ make mistakes (Kristol 1989).

In literature, the decline of French is seen in macaronic poetry: before 1400, numerous poets mixed French with English, with Latin and English, or just with Latin, but in the fifteenth century, French disappears from the macaronic repertoire. Otto Wehrle (1933: 62) in his survey found only two fifteen-century macaronic lyrics that still use French. Since the rate of production and survival of Middle English literature increased exponentially in the fifteenth century, the figures are striking. Macaronic literature was becoming an exclusively English-Latin affair in the fifteenth century.

Attitudes towards the French language were also changing. Before its decline, French had been available to anyone with a basic education, and so Anglo-French writers had naturally regarded French as the shared vernacular. They called English a patois – a local language which, unlike Anglo-French, was subject to regional variation so extensive as to make it hard to comprehend outside of its own locale (Rothwell 1994: 57). Nicholas Bozon, an early fourteenth-century Franciscan friar who adapted a set of Latin proverbs into French verse (Bozon 1921), explained in his prologue that he had selected the ‘commun langage pur amis’ (the common language for the sake of friends who have not acquired learning; lines 7–8). At the close of the fourteenth century, however, the phrase ‘commun langage’ was borrowed into English as ‘common speche’, and it now referred to English rather than French (cf. Watson 2009), while the ‘commun langage’ of Bozon’s Proverbes was no longer deemed accessible. Accordingly, a late fourteenth-century English translator changed the bilingual Latin-French format in which Bozon’s Proverbes had previously circulated into a trilingual one, providing the Anglo-French with a translation into English verse. This trilingual version survives in the Simeon (London, BL MS Add. 22283) and Vernon (Oxford, Bodl. MS Eng. poet a. 1) manuscripts (c. 1390). Here the English is flagged up with paraph signs to direct users to their own language (Putter 2015: 92–3). Bozon’s Proverbes is followed in the Vernon manuscript (Scase 2012: fol. 309v) by the Latin school-text The Distichs of Cato with its Anglo-French translation by Everart. This text was given the same treatment: an English crib was added. While literature in French certainly continued to be read and copied by English people, and in some genres (for instance, letters and lyrics) continued to be composed by them, it had become a niche language. The kinds of comments that French begins to attract in late medieval sources, that it is ‘fair’, ‘sweet’, ‘beautiful’, ‘gracious’, etc., betray the inner ears of people who had begun to hear it as a foreign language (Machan 2009; Butterfield 2009: 144–5).

Beyond Trilingualism

The pervasive multilingualism of medieval Britain and the fact that no foreigner could be expected to speak English explain the readiness of medieval English speakers to learn other languages. I would like to discuss two examples: Geoffrey Chaucer and William Caxton. Both have been drawn into popular generalisations about English as the national language, Chaucer as the ‘Father of English poetry’ (Dryden) and Caxton as the ‘Father of modern English.’ Both, however, were polyglots and their works and their language show clear traces of this. Chaucer was the son of a wine merchant (Pearsall 1992). His mother tongue was English, but merchants (as Bruder Hans shows) also dealt in other languages (Hsy 2013), and Chaucer absorbed what he heard around him, while also working in French and Latin at school. As a teenager he was a page in the household of Countess Elizabeth of Ulster, wife of Lionel of Antwerp, Edward III’s third son. The polite language of princely courts in the 1350s is still likely to have been French. French was presumably also the language of Chaucer’s wife Philippa de Roet. She was from Hainaut, which was Francophone but with some Dutch-speaking areas in the north (Kurth 1896: I, 168, 209). Philippa was a lady-
in-waiting in the household of Edward III’s wife, also named Philippa and also from Hainaut. We do not know if the French-language lyrics sometimes attributed to Chaucer are really his, but he certainly wrote in French in his professional capacity as controller of customs. In fact, the document that has the best claim to being a Chaucer holograph is in French. 9 It is a memorandum of Chaucer’s appointment of a deputy, and reads:

Geffrey Chaucer conterollour de le Wolkeye en le Port de Loundris par lauis & assent du counseil nostre sieur de Roy a constitut Richard baret de estre soun lieutenaunt en loffice avant dite de xvi iour de Mai lan du Roy Richard Iuque a sa revenue a Loundris.

[Geoffrey Chaucer, controller of the wool quay in the Port of London on the advice and with the approval of the council of our Lord the King has appointed Richard Baret as his deputy in the aforementioned office from the sixteenth of May in the first regnal year of King Richard [1378] until his return to London.]

A ballade by Eustache Deschamps (Butterfield 2009: 144–5) praises Chaucer as the ‘grand translateur’ (line 10), in recognition of Chaucer’s translation of the *Roman de la Rose*. Chaucer was in touch not just with Old French ‘classics’ but with the latest poets such as Machaut and Froissart. He also translated from Latin, though where possible he would use a French translation as an aid to comprehension.

We glimpse here the ‘Trilingual England of Geoffrey Chaucer’ (Rothwell 1994), though Chaucer’s life and works clearly show that we should reckon with other languages besides the Holy Trinity of current research: English, French, and Latin. Chaucer’s translations from Italian and his use of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* show he had good Italian. The ease with which Chaucer acquired Italian, unaided by any of the tools available today (dictionaries, grammars, Google-translate), is awesome by modern standards. But since Chaucer was twice sent to Italy on official business and since no-one there could be expected to speak English, he, like other English travellers, found it necessary and therefore psychologically easier to learn other languages.

He probably knew some Dutch too. ‘The Miller’s Tale’ seems to be based on a Middle Dutch *fablau, Heile van Berseele* (Beidler 2005; but see Biggs 2005), and he cites Flemish proverbs in the *Canterbury Tales* (Grauls and Vanderheyden 1934; Latré 2001). One is paraphrased in English (IX. lines 349–50), but the other has a Dutch word left in (‘quaad’, ‘evil’): “sooth pley, quaad pley,” as the Flemynge seith’ (I. line 4357). Some scribes went further and quoted the proverb in more fully-fledged Dutch form, substituting ‘pley’ with Dutch ‘spel’. 10 Chaucer’s travels and his marriage to a lady from Hainaut, where Dutch was a fringe language, 11 help to explain his linguistic versatility, but Dutch and Italian were also minority languages in Chaucer’s London, which has sizeable migrant communities from Italy and the Low Countries (Ormrod, Lambert, Mackman 2019: 102–10, 113–16). As far as I am aware, there are no written documents in Italian or Dutch before the middle of the fourteenth century that can confidently be associated with these linguistic communities, but later evidence suggests that the languages of these migrant communities existed in written as well as spoken forms. For instance, a manuscript of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* was bought in London by an Italian in 1451 (Havely 2014: 1–3, 34), and the London branches of Italian companies kept their accounts in Italian. Some of their correspondence and ledger books survive’ (Bruscoli 2016, Fulton and Campopiano 2018). The Dutch community, too, had books. Fragments of manuscripts of the mid-fourteenth-century Antwerp poet Jan van Boendale, who has recently been discovered to have visited England in person (Gordeau 2020), may well be the remains of books owned by Dutch migrant communities in London and Norwich (Putter 2020). In 1495, a copy was made of the ‘ordenaunces, actis, constitucions and rules ... specyfyed and declared in the Duych tong’ by the Dutch Fraternity of Saint Katherine which convened at Crutched Friars in London (Coote 1871: 75). The copy did not survive, but from six years later we have the bilingual
Dutch-English statutes of a Dutch craft fraternity of hatmakers who met in Blackfriars, London (London, Guildhall Library MS 15838).12

The trilingual model is also inadequate for William Caxton. Born in Kent, he was apprenticed to Robert Large, the mayor of London. In the 1440s, he left England for Flanders, returning in 1476 to set up the first printing press in England in Westminster. Caxton had Latin, though, like Chaucer, he preferred to access Latin literature in translation. For his own version of the collection of saints’ lives known as The Golden Legend or Legenda aurea (the title of the original Latin version by Jacobus de Voragine), he made use of French and English translations of saints’ lives. Where these were unavailable, he set to work on the Latin. The Life of St Roch was apparently only available to him in Latin, because he ends his version with the statement that this ‘lyf is translated out of latyn into Englysshe by me William Caxton’ (Sister Mary Jeremy 1952). Most of his books were translated by or for Caxton out of French, but he also personally undertook translations from Dutch.

Caxton’s fluency in Dutch seems remarkable today, but it was not uncommon for someone in his line of work. Caxton was a mercer and in that capacity he spent decades in the Low Countries, where the best cloth was made (with imported English wool). In his preface to his earliest English-language publication, The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye, translated from French, he apologised for the

symplenes and vnperfightnes that I had in bothe langages, that is to wete in Frenshe and in Englissh. For in France was I never, and was born and lerned myn Englissh in Kent in the Weeld, where I doubt not is spoken as brode and rude English as in ony place of Englund, & have contynued by the space of.xxx. yere for the most part in the contres of Braband, Flandres, Holand, and Zeland.13

The suggestion here is that, after thirty years in Dutch-speaking lands, Caxton had become more at home in Dutch than in his mother tongue. Apologies for ‘rude’ English were conventional, but Caxton really had reason to apologise, for the English found in his translations is often very peculiar. For instance, in Dialogues in French and English (translated from a French-Dutch original), he translates the French Ce nest mye le derrain argent que vous ares de moy as ‘It en is not the last silver that ye shall have of me’ (Caxton 1900: 18), where ‘It en is not’ is modelled on Flemish Het en es niet. As Henry Bradley noted in his edition of Caxton’s Dialogues, ‘evidently when this was written Caxton had become more familiar with Flemish than with his native English’ (Bradley 1900: xi). A sentence from his History of Reynard the Fox, also translated from the Dutch, confirms this impression:

Yf the fox will telle how it byfel, I wyl gyve hym the fordele thereof, for I can not telle it so wel but he shal beryspe me.  

(History of Reynard: 92)

[If the fox will tell me what happened, I will give him the privilege of doing so, for I cannot tell it so well that he would not reproach me.]

The two words I have italicised are borrowed from Dutch, like so many words in Caxton’s History of Reynard (Blake 1970: xxiv-xlvi).

Caxton’s ‘double Dutch’ has encouraged the view that he was translating slavishly and over-hastily from his Dutch source (Blake 1963–1964; Blake 1970: li, lxv), but on closer inspection the situation proves to be more complicated and more interesting. For example, while ‘beryspe’ was probably taken over verbatim by Caxton from his Dutch source (which reads berispen; Hellinga: 1952: 295), ‘fordede’ does not occur in the corresponding passage from the Dutch source, which reads vorwaerde. Moreover, where the Dutch equivalent of ‘fordede’, vondele, does occur in Caxton’s source, it only ever has the usual meaning ‘advantage’, in which sense it was borrowed into English.
in the fifteenth century (OED, s.v. fordele). The context in which Caxton uses ‘fordele’ shows, however, that he was sufficiently fluent in Dutch to know that vordele had another sense in Middle Dutch, namely ‘privilege, precedence’. The discovery of the copy of a business letter, written by Caxton in Dutch in North Holland (1475), proves that he was fluent in that language (Bakker and Gerritsen 2004).

In linguistics, the cross-contamination of languages in bilingual speakers is known as interference, and this linguistic perspective provides a more fruitful way of approaching Caxton’s English. It explains, for instance, why Caxton was also influenced by Dutch when he was translating from French. Examples of Dutch words that infiltrated his French-based books are ‘butter’ (cheat), from Middle Dutch botter, in The Game and Playe of The Chesse (1474) and ‘spynroke’ (distaff) in The Book of the Knight of the Tower (1484). It also explains why Dutch shaped not only Caxton’s vocabulary but also other aspects of his language. For instance, in the History of Jason (1477), Caxton occasionally spells ‘fleece’ in Dutch fashion as ‘vliese’ (Caxton 1913: 86, 89, 108). In The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye (Caxton 1894, he once writes ‘stiefmoeder’ (I, 83, corresponding with Dutch stiefmoeder) instead of his normal ‘stepmoeder’ (I, 304, 348), and ‘behoeffyd’ (II, 659, corresponding with Dutch behoeft) instead of his normal ‘behouyd’ (I, 127). None of these Dutch-style spellings had much of an afterlife in the English language beyond Caxton, the exception being his innovative spelling of Middle English ‘gost’ with <gh> (reflecting Flemish ‘gheest’), which we still use today. Why the h stuck in ‘ghost’ and not in the many other words where Caxton also introduced it is a mystery. The history of English language is full of accidents, and embracing that complexity is much better for the subject than clinging to the belief that Caxton introduced standard English. Nor can Caxton’s habits be explained by assuming he was lazily following Dutch sources, since specimens such as ‘gheest’ (Caxton 1894: I, 127), ‘ghilles’ (Caxton 1894: I, 278) and ‘ghifte’ (Caxton 1913: 82) also occur in translations from French texts. The issue with Caxton’s English is not just that he translated Dutch literally, but that he could not help thinking in Dutch, even when he was translating from French (Putter 2021).

For Caxton then, as for Chaucer, quadrilingualism is closer to the mark than trilingualism. And in Caxton’s day, too, all four languages were not just written and spoken abroad but also home-produced. An interesting manuscript to consider in this context is the Book of Privileges (Sutton and Visser-Fuchs 2009). The single surviving manuscript copy of this book was produced in London around 1485. The book contains copies of the various privileges granted to English merchants by the rulers of the Low Countries, from 1296 to 1483, in their original languages: Latin, French, and (from the fifteenth century) Dutch, with Middle English translations. A connection between this manuscript and Caxton is likely, for an earlier version of this quadrilingual dossier was probably drawn up for Caxton’s personal use in his negotiations with Charles the Bold in 1468 (Sutton and Visser-Fuchs 2009: 35), when Caxton was ‘Governor of the English Nation’ (director of the company of English merchants stationed in the Low Countries). The provision of English translations might be read as a sign that readers could not cope with the other languages, but the manuscript of The Book of Privileges shows signs to the contrary. Quite apart from the single London scribe, who copied the whole dossier with a fair degree of competence, there was an early reader who added notes and marks in the margins of passages. He went through the text in all four languages: Dutch, Latin, French, and English. As the editors conclude, ‘At no time is it advisable to underrate the language capacity of these merchants’ (Sutton and Visser-Fuchs 2009: 37).

In conclusion, while it is now generally accepted that Middle English language and literature cannot be studied in isolation from the languages and literatures that surrounded it, we have yet to take the full measure of the multilingualism of medieval Britain. In addition to the big three – Latin, French, and English, all of them languages of speech as well as writing – there were the Celtic languages, the languages of migrant communities, and the languages of trade, with Dutch becoming increasingly important as the medieval period drew to a close. When considering Middle
English writers such as Chaucer and Caxton, we should not therefore stop at trilingualism. The ‘multi’ in medieval multilingualism must mean more than that.

Notes

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1 The text is based on Marienlieder, with various emendations. All translations are mine.

2 The manuscript is available digitally at https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3522414. For the English ballades (Menner 1945), see folios 61v–63r (‘So ys emprentid’), 65v–67r (‘My hertis lust’), and 77v–79r (‘Alas, alas, alas’ is my chief song’).

3 Fallows argues, unpersuasively, that the lines originate from Lydgate’s Temple of Glas.

4 See Middelnederlands Woordenboek, s.v. wintrbrau, at http://gtb.inl.nl/search/.


6 Since Wehrle’s study, a few more macaronic lyrics (c. 1400) that include French have come to light (Putter 2009), but these do not affect the validity of his general conclusions.

7 A good source for such comments are French teaching manuals aimed at Anglophone students, such as Manières de langage 1995: 3, 32: ‘la [sic] plus gracious langage et la [sic] plus noble parlere, doulx franceys, beal langage’.

8 See Wright 2020 on this history of this myth.


10 The variant reading is found in two fifteenth-century manuscripts from East Anglia: London, BL MSS Egerton 2864 and Add. 5140. See Manly and Rickert 1940: V, 430.


12 Shannon McSheffrey and I are working on a book (with an edition of this manuscript) on this immigrant community.

13 The text is based on Recueyell: I, 4, but I have modernised capitalisation and punctuation.

14 Middelnederlands woordenboek, s.v. voredeel, at http://gtb.inl.nl/search/#.

15 OED, s.v. botter and spin-rock.

16 For instance, there are manicula on folios 3r and 3v (Latin) and 18r (Dutch) of the manuscript, which had no shelfmark when I consulted it.

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