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Studi e ricerche sul plurilinguismo 8

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1. Multilinguismo - Atti di congressi

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by Fabiana Fusco, Carla Marcato, Renato Oniga	7
Section I. National and regional language	9
Ada Bier, David Lasagabaster <i>Introducing FURLEUS: a cross-country, cross-stage, cross-level comparison of Friulan and Basque teachers' language attitudes and motivation in search of best practices</i>	11
Isabella Ferron <i>«Mein Sprachengemenge ist nicht mein Verdienst». Oskar Pastior as a plurilingual writer</i>	25
Federica Ricci Garotti <i>An ecology of multilingualism in schools: the Mòcheno language project in Trentino</i>	43
Gabriele Zanello <i>A perspective on the multilingualism of the Patriarchate of Aquileia between the 13th and 14th centuries through a new project</i>	55
Section II. Plurilingualism in migration contexts	69
Sabrina Alessandrini <i>Second Generations and multilingualism: the linguistic identity of adolescents born in French-speaking Africa immigrant families</i>	71
Gianluca Baldo <i>Urban linguistic repertoires and uses in a migration context. A survey in the Friulian territory</i>	97

Margherita Di Salvo	
<i>Linguistic innovations in an Italian heritage community</i>	109
Mikka Petris	
<i>The Friulian language in Belgium: an overview of the analysis of a multigenerational corpus</i>	129
Francesco Goglia	
<i>Onward migration and double language maintenance: the case of Italian-Bangladeshis in London</i>	153
Federico Salvaggio	
<i>Speaking in tongues: language diversity and its symbolic significance within the Islamic linguistic tradition</i>	171
Section III. Plurilingualism and language teaching	181
Lucija Čok, Irina Moira Cavaion	
<i>Languages and cultures beyond borders</i>	183
Natalia Dankova	
<i>Remedial courses in French as the language of instruction. Attitudes and practices of unilingual, bilingual or trilingual students</i>	203
Paolo Nitti	
<i>The promotion of minority languages in the multilingual class. The results of a survey on the plurilingualism dimension in the lower secondary school</i>	213
Carmela Perta	
<i>Language contact and historical data. Letters in the domain of religion.....</i>	239
Marta Guarda	
<i>Plurilingual education through the teachers' eyes: insights from South Tyrol</i>	251
M. Rafael Salaberry	
<i>The pedagogical implementation of translanguaging: the challenge of linking theory and practice</i>	271

Language contact and historical data. Letters in the domain of religion*

Carmela Pertà**

1. Introduction

There has recently been an explosion of interest towards England from Middle Ages to its early modern period, as is proved by a number of recent studies which take multilingualism as their point of departure. Actually, it is not surprising to find different types of mixed language texts against the background of endemic multilingualism and pervasive language contact in medieval England. However, the bulk of research on contact-induced change in earlier English has been carried out in the frame of lexical borrowing: only since the early 1990s, have a small number of historical (socio)linguists begun to rethink of language contact products from new perspectives. This process is parallel to an increasing interest in linguistic phenomena pertaining to multilingualism in present-day speech communities and in the processes of contact-induced change. Therefore, this line of historical sociolinguistics research¹, when applied to the history of English, started analyzing data where English is found mostly co-occurring with Latin and/or French, as to provide a new outlook on written data surviving from earlier periods.

This article focuses on code-switching² in England with an emphasis on its

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¹ Flourishing particularly in the context of Medieval and Early Modern England, this field, generally referred to as historical code switching (HCS), has developed as a sub-discipline of historical sociolinguistics, with an interdisciplinary approach that combines the assumptions of historical linguistics with sociolinguistics and social history. This new and richer perspective in the analysis of multilingual texts is witnessed by an increasing number of contributions within HCS. A significant example is the volume edited by Schendl and Wright (2011), in which works focused on the analysis of medieval multilingual texts, written in England and belonging to different textual genres, are collected.

² While in present day research there is a complete agreement on the substance of the linguistic phenomena labelled as code switching, generally defined as «the juxtaposition

early modern period. The focus will be on personal letters, a type of ego-documents which, mostly due to their dialogical character, share various features of bilingual speech, a situation for which theories and models of contact linguistics had been developed³. I will present some letters belonging to the Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC), particularly those pertaining to the domain of religion, analyzing language contact phenomena and evaluating the sociolinguistic implications arising from the writing strategies found. Finally, in light of the nature of the available data, I will consider some methodological issues in historical sociolinguistics research.

2. Multilingualism in England

It is commonplace to assert that Medieval England was a trilingual country; however, trilingualism is a considerable simplification of its sociolinguistic situation. The classical view is that in post-conquest England the three principal languages were English, French and Latin⁴; their status and social functions were different from each other and changed over time, mostly towards the later Middle Ages, with English gaining ground in various communicative situations.

within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems» (Gumperz, 1982, p. 59) or, even more succinctly, «the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation» (Milroy, Muysken, 1995, p. 7), on the other hand, there are conflicting opinions as to the relevance of the distinction between inter- and intra-sentential code switching. Assuming that these categories are in fact blurred, and aware of the use of cover terms for the two phenomena, it seems reasonable here to maintain the distinction between code switching and code mixing; in line with Muysken's view (2000, 1) «the [...] term code-switching will be reserved for the rapid succession of several languages in a single speech event» and «I am using the term code-mixing to refer to all cases where lexical items and grammatical features from two languages appear in one sentence». The necessity of the distinction is due to the pragmatic-functional value (generally) conveyed by the former phenomenon rather than by the latter; this is the reason why the analysis of code switching forms involves pragmatics and textual linguistics, while for phenomena of code mixing the syntactic inquiry is comprised.

³ Language contact phenomena in bilingual speech have been analyzed from different perspectives, such as the structural (see the Matrix Language Framework by Myers-Scotton, 1993, 2002, 2006; Myers-Scotton, Jake, 2009, and formal models MacSwan, 2009), the pragmatic-functional (among others Auer, 1998, 1999; on conversational aspects of code switching Gafaranga, 2009), and from the point of view of their sociolinguistic implications (see Bullock, Toribio, 2009, pp. 14-17).

⁴ People were speaking also Old Norse, the Celtic languages – Welsh, Gaelic and Cornish – spoken in some western and northern areas, Irish, (especially in the Flemish colony in Pembrokeshire) Dutch and Hebrew, spoken among the Jewish communities.

The changes in the patterns of use were connected with a number of current social and political processes and events⁵. Judging by the extant written records, the spread of English to new communicative functions seems to have been rapid in the course of the fourteenth century. By the early fifteenth century, English had emerged as a professional language along with its appearance in scientific and medical writing. Furthermore, it started to be used in religious and philosophical treatises, and, against official church policy, in Bible translation, as well as more private forms of writing in English emerged in this period⁶. Despite its gradual spread in writing, the other two languages continued to hold ground. French retained its status as a written language well into the fifteenth century (Ingham, 2009), and the functions of Latin stayed largely unchanged until the religious reformation in the 1530s, after which it was used in some formal documents, in different disputations, as well as in academic writing (Watson, 1999, p. 333).

It is difficult to assess the extent to which this complex societal multilingualism was realized as individual bilingualism in the strict modern sense, but it is obvious that throughout the period there were individuals and social groups fluent in more than one language⁷.

3. Code switching in textual genres

Parallel with the flourishing of studies on bilingual speech and from a different field of research, there has been a growing awareness that the phenomenon of multilingualism is not limited to modern situations, but extends itself as far as the written documentation can provide us with evidence of the linguistic panorama. Hence, a new perspective of analysis of historical multilingual data has emerged; this material has been considered as evidence of writer's multilingual competence, a possible reflection of the social repertoire, rather than as evidence of his imperfect language knowledge. The most direct consequence of such a broadening in the analysis of multilingualism is that theories and models elaborated for contemporary situations have been progressively applied to linguistic phases of which we know through written data only.

⁵ These included the increasing number of intermarriages between French and English speaking populations, the break-up of relationships with France, along with the emergent sense of patriotism for England and for English (see e.g. Keen, 1990).

⁶ For example, the earliest extant personal letters written in English date from the very end of the fourteenth century (Schendl, 2002, 2012; Perta, 2019).

⁷ Already third- or fourth-generation descendants of the Norman conquerors were probably bilingual (Briggs, 1994, p. 85). At the top of the social hierarchy, English monarchs had French as their first language until the end of the fourteenth century.

In the history of English, the effects of the long-standing complex societal multilingualism are visible in the co-occurrence, in different types of texts, of the languages available in the social repertoire of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Multilingual writings contain various types of mixture: generally, rather large segments of text are switched, while phenomena deriving from a greater interpenetration between languages occupy a limited space and appear in certain textual genres only. Therefore, language contact outcomes vary from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, with reference to syntactic patterns and pragmatic functions involved⁸: some textual genres, including technical, economic and legal writings, seem to be more prone to mixing than others characterized exclusively by switching. In other words, the kinds of mixture shown seem to depend on the genre the text belongs to. Therefore, it is possible to think of multilingual texts as categories in a continuum where at the antipodes are writings where the language of an independent text, such as a preface, is different from that of the main one, and writings with frequent inter- and intra-sential switching forms, as in economic and administrative-legal texts. This is the case of some writings which bear witness to something of a mixed code, where the languages are integrated to an extent where they seem to be a single grammatical system instead of two separate ones⁹. At the same time, texts traditionally perceived as monolingual English have also been shown to contain a substantial amount of language mixing, including linguistic units, whose position on the scale of foreignness from code switching forms to lexical borrowings is difficult to define precisely¹⁰.

As written before, the past decade has witnessed an increasing interest in historical code switching research¹¹, showing that some of the functions and meanings of code-switching identified in present-day spoken data can also be found in written texts surviving from past periods. Furthermore, switching

⁸ Cfr. Schendl, Wright, 2011; Wright, 2011.

⁹ In such texts, the type of mixture between the codes leads some scholars to assert that the phenomena found would be a reflection of a mixed language. In this regard, Wright (2011) observes that, in the case of business texts, the high frequency with which certain syntactic structures are expressed in one language rather than another denotes the presence of recurrent patterns of variation, and at the same time, a high level of writers' linguistic and metalinguistic competence (see also Trotter, 2011; Wright, 2017, 2020). For a discussion about this topic see Schendl, 2015 and Perta, 2021.

¹⁰ Cfr. Pahta, Nurmi, 2006.

¹¹ See e.g. Wenzel, 1994; Wright, 1998; Schendl, 2002; Pahta, 2004; Nurmi, Pahta, 2004; Pahta, Nurmi, 2006. For a discussion on this topic cfr. Schendl, 2012, p. 57 and Schendl, Wright, 2011, pp. 16-17.

patterns, typical of specific genres can also be detected, including code-switching related to language use within a professional group¹², or conventions in letters, such as the use of code-switched dates or formulas¹³.

4. Letters

On the basis of the historical sociolinguistics approach named language history from below, the use of letters and other types of ego-documents as research material provides an insight in the language of «larger sections of the population, particularly the lower and lower middle classes» (Elspaß, 2007, p. 4, 2012a, p. 161)¹⁴. One of the main advantages in analyzing letter writing is that it shows linguistic features which are not otherwise easily reached¹⁵: letters, whether private, semi-official or official, more than others, could be a reflection of writers' linguistic uses, beyond the genre specific conventions. Indeed, personal letters between intimates are generally written in informal registers, even in case of literate writers and those aware of the conventions of written language and letter writing. In other words, correspondence may be likely to be a reflection of the language of private spheres of writers from various social ranks.

Furthermore, letters offer an interesting mirror to social reality. Indeed, the relationship between social factors and the epistolary genre is undoubtedly profound: through the analysis of letters, it is possible to make inferences about the social frame at a micro-sociolinguistic level, that is about the spheres of the society which the writer is a member of. In other words, the epistolary genre potentially constitutes an interesting test-bed for contact linguistics theories with a functional and/or sociolinguistic approach, and where possible, with a structural one.

¹² Cfr. Wright, 1998; Nurmi, Pahta, 2004; Pahta, 2004.

¹³ See Nurmi, Pahta, 2004; Pahta, Nurmi, 2007.

¹⁴ According to this approach (Elspaß, 2005, 2007, 2012a, 2012b; Elspaß *et al.*, 2007), emphasis is given to the study of written language use particularly from the lower ranks of society or from emigrants, trying to establish the role played by the lower classes in language change and in standardization processes.

¹⁵ Biber (2001, pp. 98-99) recognizes some linguistic features commonly attested in letters, such as expressing interactiveness and personal involvement, personal stance and structural reduction. Furthermore, Nurmi and Palander-Collin (2008) identify constraints of letter writing, such as opening and closing formulas and the dating of letters, as well as temporal expressions.

4.1. Letters in the domain of religion

In England, until the end of the 14th century, official, semi-official and private letters were generally in French, or in Latin when written by members of ecclesiastical spheres or for international political communication; while English, which was not considered suitable for this text type, was progressively introduced during Henry IV reign, particularly for semi-official and private letters¹⁶. Therefore, the language preference was correlated to the official nature of the letter, and this pattern of functional variation left no room for frequent examples of switching phenomena and deeper forms of linguistic mixture.

Looking at the different types of writings produced by members of the church, Latin was undoubtedly the preferred language, which is to be expected given its role as traditional language of the church. However, the fact that clergy frequently used Latin even in correspondence is a further indication of a deep bilingualism English-Latin in this domain. On the other hand, French does not appear significantly in letters, even though it was expression of power in Medieval England: the switched segments to French concern mainly genre specific conventions, such as dates or addresses placed outside the letter, or instances of reported speech. Thus, letters mirror an informal use of multilingual resources from the writers who were used to handle more than one language in a domain permeated by multilingualism. This is correlated to their level of education and position in the hierarchy of the church: overall, a higher position within the clergy also implies a more frequent use of Latin in correspondence.

5. The Corpus of Early English Correspondence: Stephen Gardiner's letters

In this section I will present some letters from the Corpus of Early English Correspondence¹⁷, particularly those belonging to the domain of religion, which were written in the first half of the 1500s, with the aim of analyzing the language mixture in them. Despite the lower number of language contact phenomena in comparison to letters of the fifteenth century, the choice of this timeframe is due to the fact that in this period there is a diastatic variation in the use of multilingual practices in correspondence: members belonging to high ecclesiastical spheres used different forms of code switching, while lower-

¹⁶ The king's letters to various French officials are written in English. This choice, obviously made for its political implications, represents a turning point for the spread of English.

¹⁷ For the methodology used for the collection, which is available on line, see Nevalainen, Raumolin-Brunberg, 2003.

ranking clergy officials avoided them. In general, code switching reflects the writer and recipient's degree of multilingualism, by virtue of the interactional aspect of epistolary communication: it is obvious that if the recipient did not know Latin well, the writer did not include switching forms to Latin, unless he deliberately wanted to mark the social distance with him. In cases where the latter was competent in Latin, its use could be both a unifying element between the two and a way of classifying both the writer and the recipient as belonging to the ecclesiastical elite.

Some multilingual passages from letters by Stephen Gardiner¹⁸, Bishop of Winchester and British politician during the Anglican schism and later Lord Chancellor, will be analyzed below. In Bishop's correspondence switching forms to French and to Latin within an English framework could be observed.

In cases of French insertions, switching phenomena usually involve reported speech, as in (1) and (2). The former is a passage from a letter by Gardiner to Sir William Paget, member of the Privy Council of the Crown and then Secretary of State, written in Bruges on November 11 in 1545, during a visit aimed at revitalizing, together with a group of negotiators, the Anglo-Imperial alliance.

- (1)
The Chaunceler spake a foule worde, to saye, Rendez Boloigne [Hand over Boloigne]

(Gardiner, 1545, Stephen Gardiner, p. 183).

Moreover, considering the French setting, insular French seems to be connected with the writer's physical environment.

In (2) a passage from a letter by Gardiner to Paget written in Utrecht on January 11 in 1546 is reported.

- (2)
he turned him to thEmperour and with a lowde voyce said, 'Il est morte' [He is dead]

(Gardiner, 1546, Stephen Gardiner, p. 216).

In both examples, code-switching functions as a tool to organise the discourse by separating different levels of text, constituting a strategy used by Gardiner to emphasize the dichotomy between first person narrator *vs.* reported speech.

¹⁸ Some of the letters by Stephen Gardner have been studied by Nurmi, Pahta, 2004; Pahta, Nurmi, 2011: their studies intended to give a picture of multilingualism in letters correlating it with social ranks.

Regarding the use of Latin, most of the switching forms are quotations within an English frame as in (3), a passage from Gardiner's letter to Sir William Paget, written in Bruges on November 13 in 1545, where a quote from Terence and one from Virgil are reported.

(3)

And thiese Protestantes be entangled with thre encombres; that is to saye, with povertie, with subjection in duetie to hym they resist, thEmperour, and with want of credite and truste. **Non Appollinis responsum magis est verum** [The answer of Apollo is not more truthful] as he said; and we have prouf by experience **et crimine ab uno disce omnes** [and from one crime you can tell the character of all] (Aen, II, pp. 65-66).

(Gardiner, 1545, Stephen Gardiner, pp. 187-188).

As written above, switching forms to Latin are attested in letters between members belonging to high ecclesiastical ranks, but they occur in correspondence between church representatives and high ranks of society also, persons with recognized proficiency in Latin, as in (4); here a passage from Gardiner's letter to King Henry VIII during the Bishop's stay in Viterbo on June 11 in 1528 is reported.

(4)

write unto your Majestie the truth and lightlywodes of truth as they shal appere unto me, whether the same shal delighte and please for the tyme or otherwise; knowing wel that to be the oonly thing which shal obteyne **solidam veram et perpetuam gratiam a Maiestate vestra, que templum est fidei (sic!) et veritatis unicum in orbe relictum, in quo certa harum numina esse creduntur** [real, true and perpetual grace from your Majesty, who is the only temple of faith and truth left in the world, in which certain demonstrations of these (qualities) are believed to reside]. Which thing moved me by myn other letters to expresse such dispayre as Ithenne had, being moch more thenne I coulde by wordes in convenient maner expresse; trusting always that in compassing and conducing such thinges as depende upon a nother mannes acte, your Highnes wil not conjoyne **studium et voluntatem meam cum eventu** [my intentional focus on this event]; but perceyving **fidem, studium, et voluntatem meam** [my faith, zeal and willingness] to have effectually concurred, as it hath and shal ever doo

[...] At Viterbe the 11th of June

Your Highnes most humble subget servaunt and dayly orator,
Stephen Gardyner

(Gardiner, 1528, Stephen Gardiner, p. 6).

The kind of mixture in (4) differs from that in the previous examples, i.e., reported speech or quotations either in insular French or in Latin, in that various mixing phenomena are present. In particular in the first three cases of switching to Latin, the VP is split between the two codes; in the first case (... the oonly thing which shal obteyne *solidam veram et perpetuam gratiam a Maiestate vestra*) the transition to Latin of NP and PP causes two hypotactic insertions (*que templum...*, *in quo...*). The other two intra-sential switching forms (your Highnes will not conjoyne *studium et voluntatem meam cum eventu*; but *perceiving fidem, studium, et voluntatem meam* to have...), which fall into the alternation typology in Muysken's view, or rather it is an alternating style, show the writer's great skill in combining elements coming from the two languages, without any of the two grammars being violated. Moreover, Gardiner seems to attribute a function to the mixing to wich consists in highlighting the contrast between reality *vs.* perception.

6. Data and methods: final remarks

As mentioned above, letters are extremely significant for their relationship with the social panorama, since from their analysis it is possible to deduce micro-sociolinguistic characteristics related to writers – in terms of competence, attitudes and, in part, of linguistic identity. Considering Stephen Gardiners' letters presented above, some conclusion could be drawn on the basis of his use of different codes. Firstly, the insertion of French material responds to the need of text organization and separation of textual levels; secondly on the basis of the switching forms to Latin two trends could be outlined: in correspondence with educated recipients, as William Paget, the use of Latin expressions emphasizes the group relationship between the writer and the recipient; moreover, it is shown that the Bishop's multilingual expertise is used and exhibited as a resource also in the case of correspondence to the king, a fact confirming that multilingual practices were socially accepted.

This leads us to reflect on the available data in historical sociolinguistics research: given that the two actors are a bishop and the king, a point characterizing the nature of data is confirmed, namely that the available evidence reflects only a portion of sociolinguistic reality, mirroring a picture of multilingualism linked to and determined by socio-demographic variables, that is social ranks and gender. In this respect code-switching in the data analyzed here is primarily an in-group feature. Too often the available sources are strongly skewed towards formal writings from members of high ranks of society, with a strong bias towards educated people in terms of production and

use of texts, excluding a large part of the population from any text representation. Therefore, it is not easy to obtain a picture of the social distribution of any linguistic feature at a given moment in the past. If, on the one hand, the reliability of the data could be questioned because of their small amount and their pre-selective nature, on the other hand, because of the need to know the social distribution of linguistic characteristics, there is a constant thirst for data, making necessary to compensate them with different kind of material. Hence, the recent efforts to use sources from parts of society that have remained largely unheard, such as the lower ranks.

Considering the nature of data of the epistolary genre, it seems to me appropriate to make a methodological reversal towards the use of an atomistic approach. This would mean a shift from traditional historical sociolinguistics studies conducted from a macroscopic perspective, typically focused on the linguistic community as macrocosm, to a microscopic perspective according to which any individual writer, together with his text, are put under the magnifying glass. In other words, I claim that an atomistic and inductive model should be preferred, aiming to cumulate, interpret, classify according to different degrees of diaphasic and only then diastratic categories, the textual events. Basically, the most recent sociolinguistic approach consists in this methodological reversal, but its application to historical contexts is not without problems¹⁹. In fact, historical sociolinguistics studies from a microscopic perspective are scarce to date, but only by shifting the analysis from the community to single speaker/writer can we account for individual linguistic variation which is the function, rather than derivation of community variation, and driving force of linguistic change.

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¹⁹ Historical sociolinguistics paradigm has developed on the basis of the first and second approaches of sociolinguistic research, with studies, according to the first wave, drawing connections between past linguistic data and the classical variables of class, age, and gender, and between social network within the second wave (cfr. Nevalainen, Raumolin-Brunberg, 1996, 2003; Conde-Silvestre, 2007; Hernández-Campoy, Conde-Silvestre, 2012).

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