

The Text-Type of London Medieval Mixed-Language Business Writing

Laura Wright (Cambridge University)

This paper will discuss the kind of mixed-language business texts produced in large quantities in Britain between 1066 and 1500. The text-type is that of accountancy, that is, management of money movement, and so the social contexts include texts produced by mercantile trading, estate management, perpetual institutions like St Paul's Cathedral or London Bridge, wills and testaments, livery companies, and private individuals keeping track of their money. Essentially, anyone in any walk of life that required a written inventory of goods, places, people or services used the mixed-language text-type to a greater or lesser degree.

The day-to-day spoken language during this period would have been Middle English and, up to about 1300, Anglo-Norman (see Ingham forthcoming); but what got written down was an orderly mix of Medieval Latin, Anglo-Norman and Middle English, which came to be conventionalised over the decades and which changed only a little over time. Some institutions and individuals abandoned this practice and switched to monolingual English in the mid-1400s, others continued to use it til the turn of the century, but by 1500 most archives show the switch to English to have been completed. There were, I suggest, two factors at work here: the language-death process of Anglo-Norman, which Ingham's recent work has shown to have lasted as a spoken vernacular in Britain until around 1300, coupled with a fundamental change in trade patterns, which occurred over the fifteenth century.

I will briefly rehearse the grammatical constraints of the written mixed-language business variety, and then I will consider its replacement, the emergent proto-Standard dialect of English. I will suggest that Standard English bears many of the hallmarks of a contact variety, including koineisation, and that it is the written medieval mixed-language predecessor that influenced its development.

Reference

Ingham, Richard. Forthcoming. "Code-switching in the later medieval English lay subsidy rolls". In Herbert Schendl and Laura Wright (eds). *Code-switching in Early English*. Berlin: Mouton.