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Bilingualism and Social Snobbery in Medieval England

Jonathan Fruoco

According to the latest estimates, there would be around 7 000 languages, and thousands of dialectical variations, spoken in the 197 countries recognized by the U.N. There are, as a result, many plurilingual spaces around the globe, whether it is in a country using only one national language or in others in which plurilingualism has been institutionalized: Switzerland possesses, for instance, four national languages, Belgium has three, and Canada, two.

This dynamic is however far from being specific to the modern world, though and is especially relevant in the case of medieval England. For language has a unique capacity to reflect a profound social and political transformation. The Norman invasion in 1066 represented a massive language shift and cultural revolution in Anglo-Saxon England, which would lead to the co-existence of French and English – medieval England was, of course, a plurilingual space but we will mainly focus on French-English bilingualism today.

As we will see, the gradual “Frenchification” of the English language was not so much the result of a linguicide, as it was suggested in the past, but rather of a linguistic suicide motivated by social snobbery.

In a situation of advanced language contact, a distinction is usually made between two different linguistic changes with, on the one hand, fast-acting transformations that mainly modify the lexicon and the spelling and, on the other, long-term changes that focus on syntax, and morphology. William’s takeover was particularly violent, and interestingly enough, this idea of order and violence was reflected in the first stage of the Old English lexical transformation. The *Peterborough Chronicles* thus gives us a general idea of what sort of words was then borrowed: except for new ranks (*cuntesse*, *duc*), we find concepts such as doing *iustice* (to hang someone), *castel*, *prisun* or *crucethur* (a torture device) (Barber 166). These first loan words show, once more, the capacity of language to reflect a profound social and political transformation, and as Tom Shippey noticed, “[m]uch of this vocabulary looks like the words inmates of a concentration camp might learn from the guards” (2). But while contact with Old Norse helped Old English simplify through the loss of some of its inflections, French influenced English at a different level. Indeed, the Norman political shift was followed by such a massive transformation of the Old English lexicon that together with the already engaged process of morphological synthesis, the language evolved into a new

variety considered by linguists as a different idiom. In their *Manuel de l'anglais du Moyen-Âge*, Fernand Mossé and André Jolivet explained:

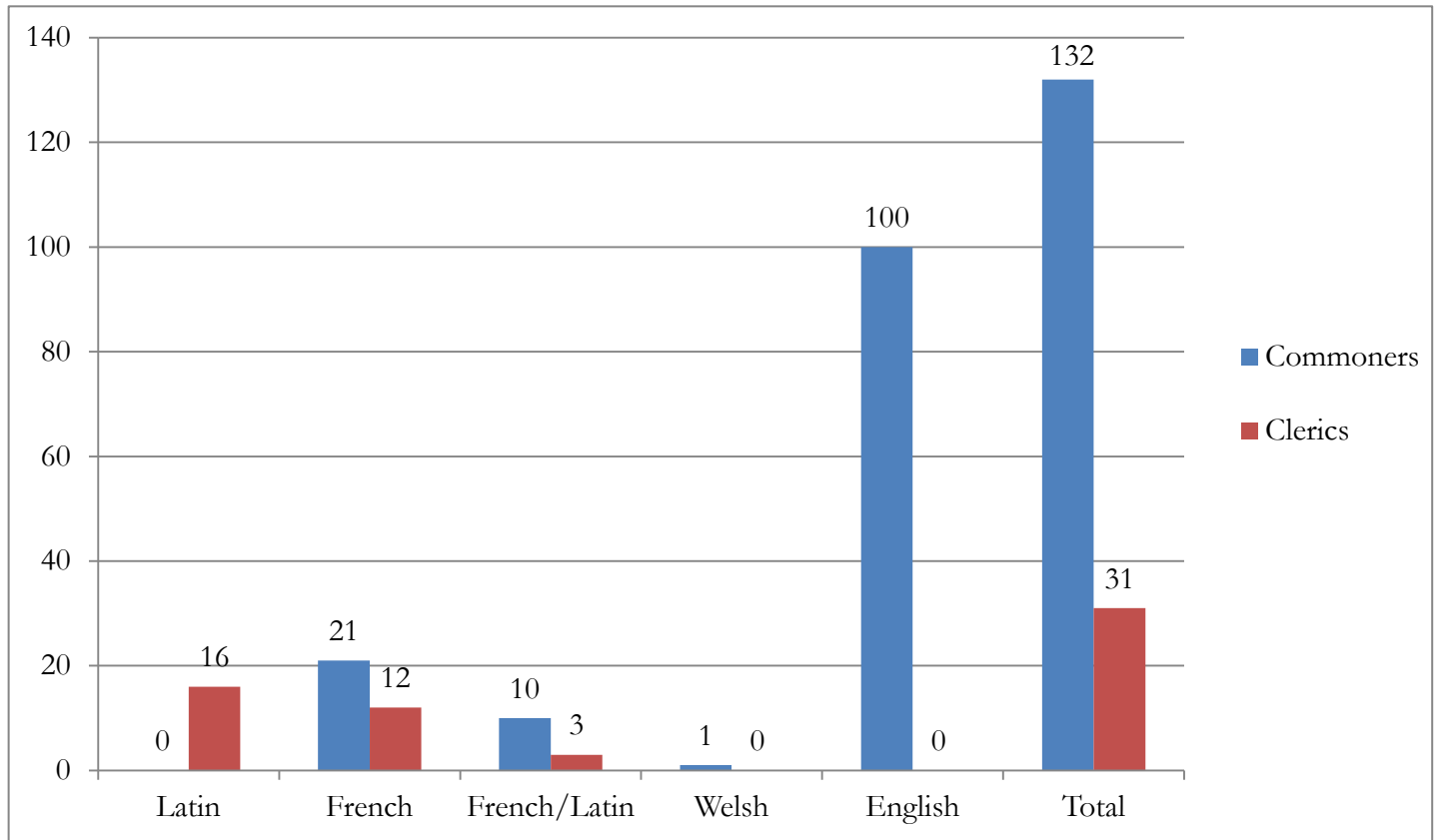
Following the transfer of the political center from Winchester to London, it is the Mercian dialect that became, after the Norman Conquest, the base of the common language and the source of Modern English. Although Alfred and Ælfric's language is quite close to Chaucer and Shakespeare's language, it is not exactly its ancestor. (Mossé and Jolivet 1. 21).

In the decades following the Norman Conquest, Old English began to evolve – or rather mutate – at an extraordinary speed, losing in that process much of its most distinctive characteristics. Nonetheless, even though inflections were gradually leveled, we cannot consider the Normans or the Vikings as being responsible for this morphological synthesis. Both Hastings and the Danelaw might be considered merely as accelerative factors of a natural phenomenon. This simplification of language is indeed very similar to what Dick Leith compared to a “gradual erosion” (100).

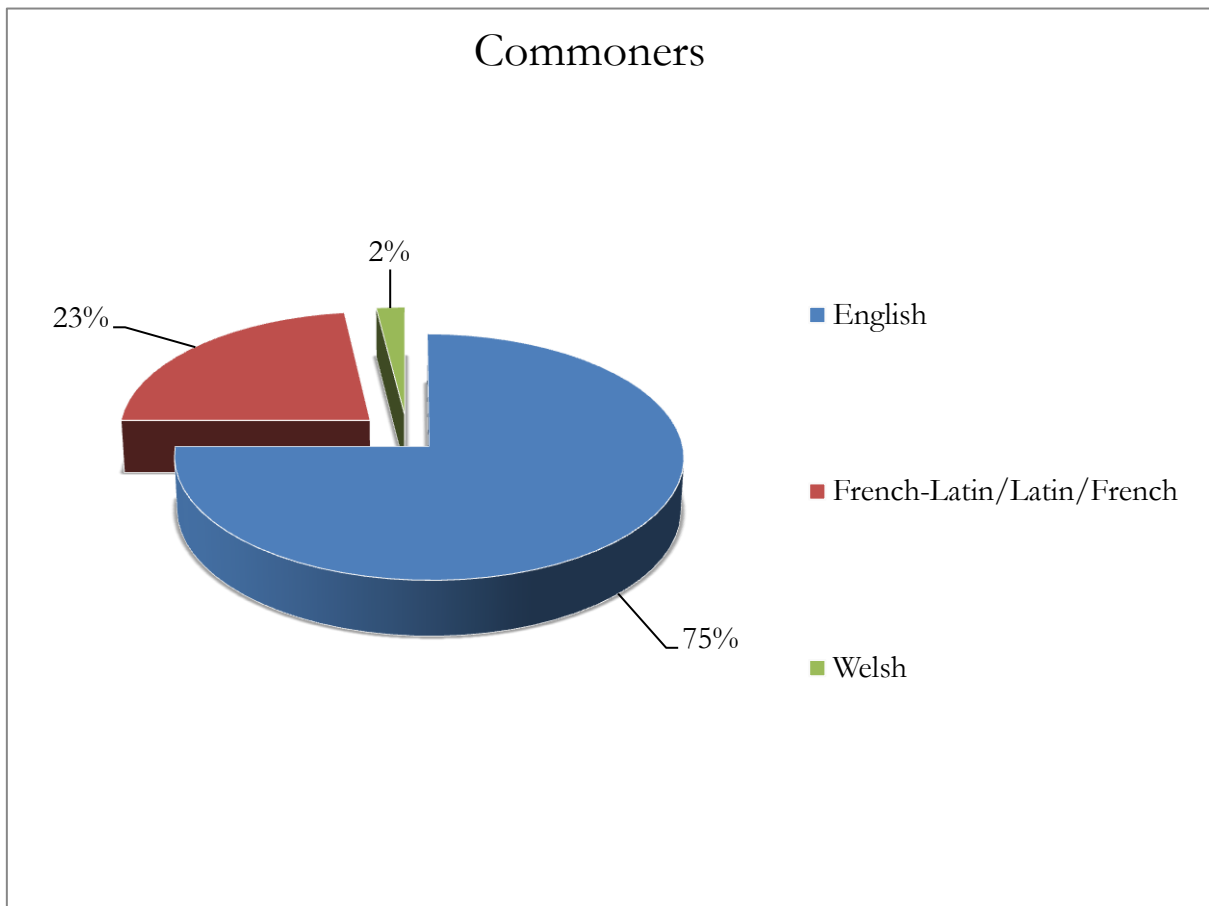
The contact between French and English did not produce, as one might have expected, a large-scale pidginization since the invaders were simply too few in numbers. Between 50 000 and 60 000 Normans settled in an England then inhabited by a million and a half people, leading to bilingualism, and actually to be more precise, to a reinforced plurilingualism (Crépin 30). England was still, as a result, a plurilingual society, even during the fourteenth century, and “[b]y Chaucer's time it is probable that almost everyone born in England, with the exception of some of those on the Celtic marches of Wales and Cornwall, grew up with English as their main and native language” (Shippey 1). But even though English had become the main language used by most of the population, its essence was still marked by the contact with other cultures.

The Norman Invasion had thus left deep marks in the English linguistic background, especially in the upper reaches of society, where social rank and fluency in French were still strongly correlated. Although a situation of coexisting monoglots certainly lasted for some time once William the Conqueror was crowned, it gradually disappeared, leaving in its wake a much more enduring sense of linguistic stratification: French outranked English, yes, but Latin being the language of the Church, outranked French. “And on the Celtic marches English was allowed to outrank Welsh, and with many local adjustments Cornish, Irish and Scots Gaelic too” (Shippey 1).

A brief detour by Thomas Cantilupe’s beatification commission, which was held in 1320 in Hereford, near the Welsh border, will help us to better visualize how marked England’s plurilingualism was and how the English people reacted to the situation.



Michael Richter notes that the detailed records of Cantilupe’s beatification commission show that one hundred and sixty-three witnesses were questioned, most of whom tried to speak in the most prestigious language they knew. The table presented here gives us a unique glimpse at the linguistic hierarchy in medieval England: among the thirty-one clerics, none spoke English or Welsh, sixteen used pure Latin, twelve French and three used a mixture of French and Latin. The situation is even more interesting for commoners: one hundred and thirty-two people addressed the commission, one hundred of whom spoke in English, twenty-one in French, ten in a mixture of French and Latin and only one in Welsh (Richter 188-190). This happened in Hereford, only a few miles away from Wales. In other words, 75% of commoners used English, which proves that the vernacular was still quite important for many people, but 23% of them tried to impress the commission with the highest-ranked idiom they could possibly speak.



Besides, we know that out of the 64% of commoners living in rural areas, only 9.4% used French while out of the 36% living in cities, almost 49% spoke either French or a mixture of French and Latin. There was consequently a major difference between the province and the cities, a difference that was not only geographical or political but also ideological. In the province, people are traditionally more conservative than in urban areas, where both languages and cultures are subjected to a strong homogenization.

As you can see, this social snobbery was already very much influencing the linguistic situation, even of the most uneducated members of the population. And interestingly enough, this notion is also brilliantly illustrated by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*. If J. R. R. Tolkien was correct in his 1934 lecture to the Philological Society, then Chaucer was not only a gifted poet but also a remarkable philologist, thinking like a linguist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this respect, Chaucer was probably more conscious than anyone else of the sociolinguistic situation in England.

The Summoner's Tale is a wonderful example of Chaucer's abilities as a sociolinguist, for it illustrates this plurilingualism and the sense of social snobbery made obvious by the details of Cantilupe's beatification commission. Indeed, in that Tale, the friar often uses Latin, which

seems normal for a cleric, but also tends to punctuate his speech with French phrases, especially when he is addressing Thomas, “O Thomas, je vous dy, Thomas, Thomas!” (III.1832), and his wife, “’Now dame,’ quod he, ‘now je vous dy sanz doute’” (III.1838). Here, the Friar obviously uses fragments of French in order to make apparent his social rank and to impress Thomas’s wife. But when the friar asks Thomas about the whereabouts of his spouse, Thomas shows little desire to react to this linguistic competition and answers in provincial Middle English, “‘Yond in the yerd I trowe that she be, [...] and she wol come anon’” (III.1798-99). Had he said that very same sentence a few centuries earlier, he would have said, “Geond on thæm geared ic tuwie that heo beo, [...] and heo wile on an cuman” (4), which shows very little difference between Old English and Thomas’s own idiom. Yet, when his wife finally joins them, she starts reacting to the friar’s linguistic prowess and flirtatious words with the same provincial Middle English, but this time enriched by French words (“desire”, “disport”, “plese”, l. 1826, 1830, 1831). And in fact,

her by-play with the friar is meant to show an urge towards social climbing, a readiness to side with, and flirt with, what she takes to be the upper classes. She uses the French vocabulary of romantic involvement not because she needs it or has no other words available, but to indicate, or to pretend, that she is, or was, or one day will be, something better than a farmer’s wife in a barnyard. (7)

Chaucer was, in other words, quite aware of the importance of French and English bilingualism in England and of the prestige associated with French. And like a true sociolinguist, he shows how language could be manipulated to enhance one’s social rank, thus echoing in a work fiction the data collected during the beatification commission. In that sense, the linguistic consequences of the Norman invasion were as much the result of the Anglo-Saxon’s own snobbery as the new rulers’ desire to impose their own idiom. After all, even the Pardoner recognizes that

in Latyn I speke a wordes few,
To saffron with my predicacioun,
And for to stire hem to devocioun
(VI.344-46)

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