Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies (MEITS)

The Emergence of Standard English in Multilingual Britain, c.1300-1800

Proposals are welcomed from Early Career Researchers on any of the themes outlined below, or anything else that relates to multilingualism in Britain and emerging standard languages. Proposals with an explicitly methodological focus, e.g. exploring a new methodological approach to uncover interactions between historical multilingualism and the emergence of a standard variety, are also welcome. The confirmed speakers for the event are:

Prof Paivi Pahta, University of Tampere
Prof Terttu Nevalainen, University of Helsinki
Prof Merja Stenroos, University of Stavanger
Dr Jacob Thaisen, University of Oslo
Prof Juan Manuel Hernandez Campoy, University of Murcia
Prof Juan Camilo Conde Silvestre, University of Murcia
Dr Alpo Honkapohja, University of Zurich
Prof Anita Auer, University of Lausanne

Please send your abstract of no more than 1 side of A4 to meits@mml.cam.ac.uk by no later than 11 November 2016. Practical details about the workshop and its location can be found at www.meits.org/events/event/the-emergence-of-standard-english-in-multilingual-britain. This workshop is being organised as part of the AHRC-funded project Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies (MEITS).

Workshop Themes

The history of Standard English as told in the handbooks is essentially a monolingual one. Yet anyone who has worked with late medieval texts written in Britain has to contend with at least Medieval Latin and Anglo-Norman French, as well as potentially the influences of one or more Celtic languages and Old Norse. Recent decades have seen a burgeoning of work in historical sociolinguistics, where perspectives of variation, multilingualism, and writing from below are applied to social groupings and political systems.

This two-day workshop aims to bring together people who are interested in BOTH historical multilingualism AND the evolution of Standard English.
Research questions include, but are not limited to, such things as:

- “minimal variation and maximal uniformity confers social capital”: when did this become true of written English and was it simply a direct porting of Medieval Latin qualities into written English? And if so, why isn’t it explained thus in English Language handbooks? Have ideological, nation-building concepts of linguistic purity driven histories of standardisation?

- spelling forms and allographic variation: how do texts written in English compare with those written in Latin and French of the same date and text-type? Was there always more variation in the L1 than the learned L2 and L3 – is lack of variation a feature of second language learning in the classroom? At what point in time around the country did variation contract down to just a few spellings for a given word?

- a two-part model: first, reduction in variation, second, selection of a given word and spelling – is this a robust algorithm for the standardisation of English, and what role does multilingualism play? In what kind of words do variants reduce first – in function words or Romance lexis? Does variation reduce in writing by multilingual communities of practice first, before those of monolingual English writers?

- why do monolingual English texts begin in earnest at the end of the fourteenth century: the political upheavals of the day, and the politics of who had access to Latin and Anglo-Norman French. How does this relate to writing from the Celtic-speaking area?

- individual writers: in corpora of correspondence, for example, does multilingualism, or multilingual influence, correlate with any kind of standardisation – morphological, orthographical, lexical, or anything else?

- how can multilingual influences on the processes of standardisation be identified in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – that is, before Standard English crystalised into its modern form? Where should we be looking – at what kind of pragmatic acts and text types? At what kind of features – morphology, syntax, lexis?

- how do concepts of communities of practice relate to multilingual individuals deploying their language skills to different ends? What influenced multilingual professionals such as the Hammond scribe to write given texts in a given language, or mix of languages? The simplistic division of Latin/high, Anglo-Norman/middle and English/low register belies a more complex relationship with mixed-language business writing, legal/administrative trilingual texts, medical Arabic translations, religious Latin-based sermons, etc. The role of the individual writer responding to the demands of the various pragmatic norms of the day has not been foregrounded in the story of the standardisation of English.

- the role of late medieval mixed-language business writing: when this system gave way to monolingual English, the resulting late 15th / early 16th century texts were written in a kind of proto-Standard, supralocal English. How did these supralocal standards vary across time and place? Can any kind of synthesis be attempted yet? Can such proto-Standard English be identified as influenced by, or based on, Medieval Latin or Anglo-Norman writing conventions?
- clause make-up and linkage and the development of the modern English sentence: Early Modern sentences contained many more clauses than Present-day English allows; medieval clause initiators and but are frowned on now (by schoolteachers, at least). Is the contraindication of such features (by orthoepists and others) based on Neo-Latin models? Is the Early Modern period and Latin high-register writing the correct place to look, or can earlier trends be found in e.g. Anglo-Norman writing?

- With regard to Anglo-Norman in particular, the late David Trotter was working on French vocabulary in Middle English rural, land-management text-types (which is the opposite of the usual handbook description of Anglo-Norman as comparatively high in register), resulting in, for example, such rural vocabulary as vartiwell, vardle ‘gate-hinge’, which entered English via Anglo-Norman (ultimately derived from Latin vertibulum ‘joint’), still in use in late nineteenth century East Anglian English. Can this be characterised as a development from Standard (Latin) to regional English? Could it be argued that in such cases the shift from Latin to French to English was one of destandardisation?

Population movement of “influential people” is still appealed to as the main explanation of the development of Standard English, even though modern sociolinguistic investigation shows that language is rarely driven top-down, language change doesn’t depend on exodus of speakers, and Standard English contains features from disparate regions (Northern are, South-western do). The writing system used in medieval Britain – the letter-graph variants (allographs of <a>, allographs of <r>), and the abbreviation and suspension symbols, are usually only discussed in specialist literature. The dramatic reduction of scribal variation in written English during the fifteenth century (that is, individual scribes coming to use just two or three graphic variants per given word, rather than six or more) is not usually mentioned in handbooks, rather, the selection of specific vocabulary and spellings is privileged as being of primary importance (as in the “Chancery Standard” model), even though the one-word, one-spelling system didn’t settle down until the end of the eighteenth century. The evolution of the written sentence is not usually given prominence, even though it is, along with invariant spellings, perhaps the most characteristic feature of Standard English, and again, one that continued to standardise over the eighteenth century (the definition of Standard English in practice being the ability to write in sentences, to spell correctly, and to omit regional features). Have we uncovered and identified all the multilingualism present in extant data, including texts from the Celtic areas, and from Old Norse speaking parts? There are trade documents dealing with Hanseatic League countries (such as from the Mercers’ Livery Company, for instance) which provide evidence of use of languages not yet mentioned. Is there evidence of language learning for pragmatic purposes, such as were needed by lawyers and merchants? Would such material bear upon standardisation, or norms of Language for Special Purposes? Are there specific text types where multilingualism proliferates which have not been identified as such so far?

Wendy Ayres Bennett, Nicola McLelland, Laura Wright