Author and Speaker Design in medieval multilingual texts from England

Herbert Schendl
University of Vienna, Department of English, Austria

The complex multilingual situation of medieval England is well reflected in the different functions of its three languages of literacy, Latin, French and English, in which a wide range of non-literary and literary texts were produced. Though many of these are by unknown authors and scribes, we have sufficient evidence that multilingual authors often chose different languages for different texts and for specific purposes or at specific times in their lives. Apart from monolingual texts, however, there is also a large number of mixed-language texts, i.e. texts which provide evidence that written code-switching was not only wide-spread but also widely accepted and hardly ever stigmatized in medieval England, since it could even be used in letters to and from the king.

Both code-choice in monolingual texts and code-switching offer highly interesting data for the analysis of the sociolinguistic functions of multilingual strategies in medieval English society, and a number of studies have addressed such questions (see the contributions in Schendl & Wright 2011). However, an 'agency-focused' approach to these phenomena, such as the study of Author and Speaker Design, has so far received little attention, though it seems to enable interesting insights into the functions of multilingual strategies in medieval England. The present paper will illustrate some of these issues mainly on the basis of selected examples from different mixed-language texts, both literary and non-literary, but will also discuss some of the problems linked to the nature of medieval written code-switching data.

Reference:


Keywords: code-switching, English, medieval.