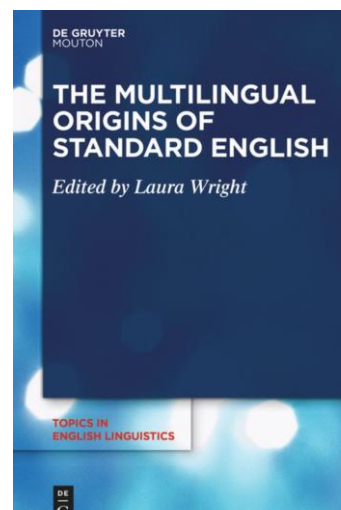Laura Wright, ed.

The Multilingual Origins of Standard English

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Review by Gloria Mambelli

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For more than a century, readers interested in the history of English have been informed that the origin of Standard written English is to be found in a 15th century variety called 'Chancery Standard,' originated in the East (or Central) Midlands and adopted by the King's Office of Chancery in London. Wright, whose substantial academic contribution mostly focuses on the standardisation of English and medieval mixed-language texts (2018; 2011; 2000; 1996 among others), tackles this issue with a new publication featuring the contributions of nineteen historical linguists. As stated by the editor herself in the *Introduction* to the volume, the purpose of this work is to "show why the current textbook explanations of the origins of Standard English are incorrect" (3) and, as the title suggests, to point out the role of multilingualism in the development of the language. As a matter of fact, recent scholarship acknowledges the influence of the multilingual context typifying late Medieval Britain, but "authors of chapters in handbooks aimed at undergraduates still feel compelled to give 'Chancery Standard' room due to its pervasive repetition" (19). The editor's critical approach towards this orthodox narrative generated by studies of monolingual English texts clearly emerges in the *Introduction,* where it is stated that most late medieval non-literary writing was multilingual. According to Wright, the reduction of variants underpinning standardisation did not emerge from a specific variety (the East or Central Midland one) or in a specific place (London) but it stemmed from the 15th century supralocalisation, a phenomenon driven by language contact occurring all over the country and thus impossible to geographically pinpoint. The Chancery Standard myth is debunked through eighteen chapters unravelling the complexities underlying the process of

standardisation, making this volume an important contribution to the field of English historical linguistics.

The Multilingual Origins of Standard English is divided into two parts, entitled "The orthodox version" and "The revised version" respectively. The former includes eight contributions mostly dealing with spelling, one of the main foci of traditional accounts of standardisation, in which the authors start from the orthodox narrative and present findings rebutting some aspects of it. The second section includes studies focusing on vocabulary: its role in the development of Standard English was already ascertained by nineteenth-century scholars, but "[w]hat is missing from previous discussions of standardisation is the fourteenth and fifteenth-century multilingual background against which English began to be written" (29). The ten contributions here provided show how mixed-language writing is the key to the understanding of standardisation.

The necessity of a revised version of the traditional narrative is advocated in the opening chapter, "A critical look at previous accounts of the standardisation of English," where the editor points out the inconsistencies and lack of evidence underpinning the orthodox version and tracks its development from the 19th century up to recent times. Wright's introductory essay illustrates how the idea of an East Midland origin of Standard English stemmed from observations dating back to the 1870s and which, fuelled by Samuels's (1963) "rhetorical overstatements" (1963) with regard to the language of post-1430 London government documents that he first labelled 'Chancery Standard' (25), was repeated ever since.

Chapter 2, "The *'vernacularisation'* and *'standardisation'* of local administrative writing in late and post-medieval England," introduces the contributors' case studies: by means of an analysis of the variant forms of certain lexical items, Stenroos shows how spelling in 15th and 16th century local administrative writing was still far from undergoing any process of standardisation. The following chapter, "The linguistic character of manuscripts attributed to the Beryn Scribe: A comparative study," presents an investigation of the Beryn Scribe's spelling choices revealing inconsistencies and impossibility to state his provenance, contrary to previous claims. Carrillo-Linares and Williamson's concluding remarks suggest that the genesis of standardisation of English is to be found in scribal preference for certain variants, the same conclusion reiterated by Moreno Olalla in Chapter 4, "Spelling practices in late Middle English medical prose: A quantitative analysis." His investigation of medieval scientific prose demonstrates how standardisation was brought about by the scribes' individual practice rather than by orthographic norms set by Chancery or Westminster. In Chapter 5, "Standardisation, exemplars, and the Auchinleck manuscript," Thaisen focuses on the orthography of texts whose

language was classified by Samuels as 'Type II' (1963) and demonstrates how no relationship with standardisation can be confidently identified, since no consistency in the different scribes' spelling practices can be found in the manuscripts under examination. The following two chapters are case studies relating to the distribution of the spelling variants <th> and <þ>. In "Bristol <th>, <þ> and <y>: The North-South divide revisited, 1400–1700," Gordon's investigation of Bristol texts shows evidence of the use of the <y> graph to represent a dental fricative in the South, contrary to Benskin's (1982) claims, and suggesting the persistence of variation, although reduced, up until the 18th century. Hernández-Campoy's study of the Paston letters, "<th> versus <þ>: Latin-based influences and social awareness in the Paston letters," shows how prestige contributed to the growing adoption of the foreign digraph <th> and, consequently, how innovations spread from idiosyncratic practices. Nevalainen's contribution, an investigation of Early Modern liturgical language entitled "Early mass communication as a standardizing influence? The case of the *Book of Common Prayer*," concludes the first part of the volume: a comparison of three versions of the *Book of Common Prayer* leads to the conclusion that the linguistic modernisation characterising the latest version is conservative and did not contribute to the standardisation of grammar, although it contributed to register perception.

Chapter 9, "Abbreviations and standardisation in the *Polychronicon*: Latin to English and manuscript to print," opens the section presenting the revised version of the orthodox narrative while linking it to the previous one. The focus is still on spelling: by examining copies of the *Polychronicon,* Honkapohja and Liira found how reduction of spelling variation was preceded by a process of reduction in the use of abbreviations. Chapter 10, where the newly emerging text-type of travel notes is considered, introduces the contributions tackling multilingual writing. In "William Worcester's *Itineraria*: Mixed-language notes of a medieval traveller," Schendl focuses on Worcester's travel accounts, which share the patterns of language-mixing usually found in administrative texts, to remark on "the relevance of this type of mixed-coding for the development of English" (340). Chapter 11, "The relationship of borrowing from French and Latin in the Middle English period with the development of the lexicon of Standard English: Some observations and a lot of questions," emphasises the role of Anglo-Norman and Latin borrowing in the development of Standard English. Durkin investigates the large contribution to Present-Day English high-frequency vocabulary made by loanwords of French and Latin origin from both a synchronic and diachronic perspective and advocates further research on "this enormous topic" (357). The influence of late medieval borrowing on the lexis of everyday life pinpointed by Durkin is the focus of the following chapter, "The role of multilingualism in

the emergence of a technical register in the Middle English period." Sylvester effectively elucidates the revised narrative proposed by this volume by claiming how multilingualism is "the key to the notion of standardisation of the lexicon" (366) since it produced synonyms with different sociolinguistic connotations or functions. Her findings, drawn from a study of the semantic fields of clothing and farming, show that the origin of standardisation lies in the co-existence of near-synonyms of different origins found at different levels of the semantic hierarchy, rather than in the competition and eventual elimination of variants. Another study of lexis relating to everyday life activities is found in Chapter 13, "More sugar and spice: Revisiting medieval Italian influence on the mercantile lexis of England," where Tiddeman identifies links between Anglo-Norman and Italian by considering some likely Italian borrowings that entered the English language via Anglo-Norman in the context of 14th and 15th century sugar and spice trade. In the following contribution, "-Mannus makyth man(n)? Latin as an indirect source for English lexical history," the focus shifts from English to Latin: Ashdowne considers medieval Latin words ending in *-mannus* as evidence of English-origin borrowing to point out the two-way nature of language contact. Chapter 15, "Communities of practice, proto-standardisation and spelling focusing in the Stonor letters," returns to spelling matters by examining the letters exchanged by members and non-members of a specific community of practice. Conde-Silvestre's study identifies a higher degree of spelling "focusing," a term coined by Le Page (1980) and here used to refer to the process of variant reduction, in the letters written by members of the community and especially in Romance word-forms, confirming how "English took over Anglo-Norman's pragmatic roles on the page" and "its convention for spelling" (463). Romero-Barranco presents another study focusing on private correspondence, entitled "Comparison of some French and English nominal suffixes in early English correspondence (1420–1681)." His findings, based on the analysis of the distribution of competing nominal suffixes, show that mixed-language writing was "a precursor to, and a catalyst of, the diffusion of French-derived nominal suffixes into monolingual Standard English" (483) and support "the hypothesis that standardisation emanated from, and was spread by, the middle social ranks as they engaged in their daily business" (467). Chapter 17, "Textual standardisation of legal Scots vis a vis Latin," moves away from English to focus on Scots, "the other standardising Germanic language in the island of Great Britain in the medieval and early modern times," in order to provide "a comparative background" (487). In tracing the impact of Latin on the Scots burgh laws, Kopaczyk found that "the textual stability is largely independent of Latin" (506) and may constitute a harbinger of incipient standardisation.

The final chapter, "Rising living standards, the demise of Anglo-Norman and mixed-language writing, and standard English," is a befitting conclusion to the volume: the editor provides her own contribution by relating the standardisation of the language to social changes occurring in the 14th century and returns to the key aspects of the revised approach outlined in the *Introduction.* Once again, she challenges the orthodox view of later 15th century London monolingual English as the origin of Standard English by providing examples taken from London financial accounts lacking certain linguistic features of Standard English. The basis for the revised version is here clearly presented: the traditional assumption "ignores the fact that Standard English came to be written countrywide" (527) and that the process of variant reduction was the result of English taking over "the relatively invariant, consistent spelling quality of Anglo-Norman and Medieval Latin" (528). Given that individual scribal habits acquired through mixed-language writing "worked their way into written English over the course of the 15th century," standardisation appears to be the result of "a slow accumulation of features from below, rather than a sudden official imposition from above" (529).

By bringing together such a rich and diversified set of contributions conveying an up-to-date overview of matters of standardisation from a multilingual perspective, *The Multilingual Origins of Standard English* proves an extremely valuable addition to the field of English historical linguistics, which has "been based on studies of monolingual English literary and religious writing" (5) for too long. Since the standardisation of written English represents a key aspect in the development of the language, both written and spoken, this volume can be regarded as a further step towards a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying language change and a significant contribution to broader discussions of the history of the English language. Moreover, by including studies dealing with evidence provided by professional and private writing, such as those by Stenroos, Schendl, Sylvester, Tiddeman, Conde-Silvestre, and Romero-Barranco, this publication responds to the long-felt need for investigation of "the vast amount of largely unexplored non-literary material dealing (broadly speaking) with everyday life" (Trotter 2006, 73). The acknowledgement of the role of communities of practice in the process of standardisation suggests implications for further research on underexplored domains relating to ordinary activities carried out by individuals in the multilingual environment of post-Conquest England. As a result, this remarkable publication represents an essential reading for linguists engaged in diachronic studies. Not only researchers, however, may benefit from this reading: the editor's provocative statements pointing out the unverifiable underpinnings of the orthodox version will certainly contribute to raising awareness of the fallibility of long-established narratives in teachers and students as

well, urging them to take recent scholarship into account rather than blindly adhere to what is repeated in textbooks.

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