Contact Phenomena in Medieval Business Texts

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Abstract : Among the studies flourished in the field of historical sociolinguistics, mainly in the strand devoted to English history, during its Medieval and early modern phases, multilingual texts had been analysed using theories and models coming from contact linguistics, thus applying synchronic models and approaches to the past. This is true also in the case of contact phenomena which would transcend the writing level involving the language systems implicated in contact processes to the point of perceiving a new variety. This is the case for medieval administrative-commercial texts in which, according to some Scholars, the degree of fusion of Anglo-Norman, Latin and middle English is so high a mixed code emerges, and there are recurrent patterns of mixed forms. Interesting is a collection of multilingual business writings by John Balmayn, an Englishman overseeing a large shipment in Tuscany, namely the Cantelowe accounts. These documents display various analogies with multilingual texts written in England in the same period; in fact, the writer seems to make use of the above-mentioned patterns, with Middle English, Latin, Anglo-Norman, and the newly added Italian. Applying an atomistic yet dynamic approach to the study of contact phenomena, we will investigate these documents, trying to explore the nature of the switching forms they contain from an intra-writer variation perspective. After analysing the accounts and the type of multilingualism in them, we will take stock of the assumed mixed code nature, comparing the characteristics found in this genre with modern assumptions. The aim is to evaluate the possibility to consider the switching forms as core elements of a mixed code, used as professional variety among merchant communities, or whether such texts should be analysed from a switching perspective.
Keywords : historical sociolinguistics, historical code switching, letters, medieval england
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