

Wright, Laura 1996: *Sources of London English. Medieval Thames Vocabulary*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Sources of London English would be too broad a title for a book which concentrates its study on “some Middle English technical vocabulary concerned with life on the River Thames” as is stated in the Introduction. Hence the addition of a convenient subtitle, *Medieval Thames Vocabulary* to make explicit that this is one of the possible sources for the characterisation of London English. In fact, it covers manuscripts ranging from the 13th to the 16th century which are classified as of a business writing type, a very specific text type that deals with an even more specific semantic field. This is the reason why, when studying London English, an academic work of this kind must be accompanied by the analysis of literary and other non-literary writings. The point is that the author herself seems to agree on this matter when she briefly mentions previous studies based on literary sources without disregarding them. I claim that any language or dialect studied from a diachronic standpoint must be tackled taking into account all sorts of available manuscripts, independently of register or style if any can be traced. This observation made, I consider the book a careful and detailed work whose main aim is to offer a new perspective and to outline future linguistic research as a way of throwing new light on the origin and evolution of Standard English.

The book contains an Introduction and four chapters. In the initial part, Laura Wright justifies the basis and purpose of her work, to study the English of medieval business documents, and, what is more remarkable at this stage, she approaches the situation of Standard English in the late Middle Ages. The traditional view (Fisher 1977)¹ that the Standard variety of English is the direct outcome of Chancery English² is challenged and discussed by modern theories (Davis 1983; Wright 1996b; 1997)³. As she puts it (1996: 3):

¹ Fisher, J. H. “Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century”. *Speculum* 52 (1977): 870-899.

² During a Conference on Multilingualism in the late Middle Ages held in Aberystwyth (Wales) in September 1997, Professor Benskin himself refuted firmly the traditional theories which, to this respect, I mentioned when reading a paper of mine.

³ Their theory evinces a more individualistic conception of the rise of Standard English, at least, at the very beginning of the process.

Chancery English is just one functional variety of written English, with a very limited readership, whereas Standard English has come to be multifunctional. It is not adequate to suggest that this diversity of function could have arisen solely from Chancery documents, without at least investigating other text types.

Fisher's claim that Chancery English can be regarded as the immediate ancestor of Standard English has been amply criticised by Norman Davis who in his article "The Language of Two Brothers in the Fifteenth Century"¹ states that it is hard to support evidence of a written standard in view of the writings of some high status members of society even at this date being, hence, unpredictable the degree of influence exerted by the Chancery. He goes even further when he concludes that "the part played by Chancery in its evolution can hardly have been decisive" (Davis 1983: 28). Likewise, Wright (1996b)² shows to be reluctant to accept the migration theory, first put forward by Ekwall (1956)³ and later adopted by many historians of the language, that people from the Central and East Midlands came to London influencing, consequently, the variety of this area. She claims that the northern features found in the London speech are not the corollary of a migration process because "there is already a population of Norse-influenced speakers on the doorstep" (1996b: 113). The grammatical study of medieval Thames vocabulary reinforces her views on the standardisation phenomenon in late fourteenth century England:

there is no identifiable 'London usage' or 'precursor to standardisation'; but individual scribes do have stable writing habits. Note that this does not mean that they always chose the same morphological form or spelled a word in the same way, On the contrary, they usually chose more than one form, but the ratios at which they chose that form were stable (1996b: 112).

¹ This article was published in E.G. Stanley and Douglas Gray (eds.). *Five Hundred Years of Words and Sounds: a Festschrift for Eric Dobson*. Cambridge: D. S Brewer, 1983: 23-28.

² Wright, L. "Evolution of Standard English". In Toswell, M. J. and E. M. Tyler. *Studies in English Language and Literature: 'Doubt wisely'. Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley*. London: Routledge. 1996: 99-115.

³ Ekwall, E. *Studies on the population of Medieval London*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell. 1956.

Chapter 1, “Business Documents” depicts the status of Medieval Latin and Anglo-Norman¹ and their respective macaronic versions. The term 'macaronic' implies the documents under analysis were written in a mixture of English + Anglo-Norman or English + Latin. The existence of macaronic writings complies with the unavoidable interaction of speech habits from members of both linguistic communities. In line with this revision, there follows a morphological account of these writings concluding that code switching and overlapping of forms constitute the hallmarks of what the author calls 'macaronic'. She also contends it can be regarded as a functionally distinctive style with its own characteristics. This chapter ends listing the London local records —preserved at the Corporation of London Records Office— which conform the primary sources of the research.

Chapter 2, “Methodology”, provides the reader with an explanation of the methods and editorial procedures employed in the next chapter, “Vocabulary Survey”, to wit, the core of the linguistic investigation. In Chapter 3 (“Vocabulary Survey”) there is a first classification of the semantic field “Medieval Thames vocabulary” containing subsequent lexical groupings. The main topics in connection with the river encompass different types of constructions, terms for workers, objects, the very states or situations of the river and, activities such as fishing and shipping. The reader may, in turn, find subclassifications which contain several terms for the materials used in the constructions or even for the tools employed; in addition, specific lexicon on fishing in the river includes terms for the common mechanisms to trap fish and different names for fish found in the Thames. Vocabulary for states of the river im-

¹ Basing her assumptions on a Transcript of the 1421 *Inquisition of the River Thames*, (Wright, L. “Medieval Latin, Anglo-Norman and Middle English in a London Civic Text: An Inquisition of the River Thames, 1421”. In Trotter, D. A and Stewart Gregory (eds.) *De mot en mot. Aspects of medieval linguistics. Essays in honour of William Rothwell*. Cardiff: The U of Wales P in conjunction with the Modern Humanities Association Research. 1997: 223-260), the author advocates the influential status of Anglo-Norman in Medieval England so as to explain the presence of most of the words contained in a Middle English corpus. This postulate embodies faithfully William Rothwell’s principles concerning the development and effects of Anglo-Norman on the growth of other languages as he himself demonstrated in “The ‘Faus francois d’Angleterre’: later Anglo-Norman”, in Ian Short (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Anniversary Essays*. Anglo-Norman Text Society Occasional Publications 2. London: Anglo-Norman Text Society. 1993: 309-330; or in “From Latin to Anglo-French and Middle English: The Role of the Multilingual Gloss”. *Modern Language Review* 88/3, 1993: 581-599.

plies states of the water, the river bank and its inlets. Objects found or put into the river are also mentioned. Names for fishing and accessories of ships can be traced as well and, finally, names for the various jobs of people working in the river.

Each of the terms in the survey is followed by a definition, the reference to the source or sources where it has occurred, a list of quotations illustrating the previously mentioned meaning, the variety of spellings traced, the etymology of the terms and references to those terms in other dictionaries — mainly the *Middle* and the *Oxford English Dictionaries*. The comprehensive characterisation of the lexical items leads us to Chapter 4, “Analysis of Headwords”, in which the author offers a compilation of the most outstanding linguistic traits found in her corpus of data. The analysis is carried out from three different viewpoints: orthographical, phonological and morphological. There seems to be a logical reasoning behind the inclusion of these aspects in the final remarks of the survey since the semantic one has already been covered, and more intra-systemic information can be profitable for the purpose of the investigation.

As a conclusion, I would like to pinpoint the theoretical line of argumentation about standardisation in the late Middle Ages she has adumbrated in the introduction and, in like manner, emphasise the careful organisation of this academic work, the brevity and clarity in the expression of ideas as well as the detailed description of each of the items, which has presumably meant a considerable effort. Her in-depth and thorough observation of the items of a particular semantic field elicited from medieval documents evinces some relevant linguistic traits of the period. For all these reasons, those who are seriously interested in Middle English lexicon and standardisation will find Laura Wright’s book stimulating, useful, easy to read and most valuable for further research on the field.

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