

REVIEW

The Multilingual Origins of Standard English. By Laura Wright (ed.). De Gruyter Mouton, 2020. Pp. xi + 534 + 114 b/w illustrations, 84 b/w tables.

Reviewed by Justyna Rogos-Hebda (Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

Eleven years after the publication of *The Development of Standard English, 1300–1800* (2009), Laura Wright returns as the editor to a volume tackling the problem of the origins of Standard English – this time from a multilingual perspective. While the 2009 publication dealt with – on the one hand – approaches to studying the standardisation of English and – on the other – processes of standardisation as evidenced in the extant historical material, the collective aim of contributors to *The Multilingual Origins of Standard English* (2020) is to shift the paradigm, to use a tired, yet fitting cliché. Laura Wright, the volume’s editor, is „the best person for the job“, as it were, as she has devoted much of her academic career to unpacking the multilingual underpinnings of gradual vernacularisation of English documents between the High and Late Middle Ages (e.g., Wright 2000, 2002, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015). Hers has also been one of the most audible voices in reframing the narratives on the emergence of Standard English. In *The Multilingual Origins of Standard English* the revisionist approach is stated in full force: “This collaboration by nineteen historical linguists shows why the current textbook explanations of the origins of Standard English are incorrect” (p. 3). Both the Introduction (pp. 3–16) and Wright’s Chapter 1 (“A critical look at previous accounts of the standardisation of English”, pp. 17–38) articulate the volume’s central vision, which is that despite decades of research and the predominant consensus that such terms as “Chancery standard” or “East/ Central Midlands standard” find little support in actual linguistic evidence “these origin myths have continued to be repeated, especially in textbooks aimed at undergraduates” (p. 3).

What Wright et al. promise then in the outline of the volume’s aims and structure is not so much preaching to the choir (“scholars who work on the origins of Standard English no longer accept that “Chancery Standard” was a cohesive entity, and believe that the multilingual context of late Medieval Britain (both written and spoken) had an important influence”, p. 19), but rather reconciling

‘what we know’ with ‘what we teach’ (since “authors of chapters in handbooks aimed at undergraduates still feel compelled to give “Chancery Standard” room due to its pervasive repetition”, p. 19). Origin myths are a powerful heuristic, providing (seemingly) simple answers to (patently) complex processes. Yet, as argued by Wright, it is time to let go of them. The eighteen chapters in *The Multilingual Origins...* unpick different strands of traditional narratives on historical origins of Standard English and reintroduce complexity, nuance, and, inevitably, a little bit of chaos into ‘received wisdom’ on the standardisation of that language.

The overarching aim of the volume is twofold: to provide a case-by-case illustration of the shortcomings, inadequacies or simply failures of the “standard narrative” to hold up to scrutiny, and to outline alternative explanations (Wright, in fact, uses the singular “explanation” in her Introduction). The eighteen contributions by nineteen authors have been divided into two parts, dealing with the orthodox and the revised versions respectively. The former set tackles familiar concepts, traditionally associated with standardisation and mostly related to spelling (in)variance in written sources linked to (incipient) Middle English standard: ‘anglicisation’ in local administrative writing (Stenroos, pp. 39–85); localised scribal languages (Carillo-Linares & Williamson, pp. 87–139); spelling practices in medical *Fachprosa* (Moreno Olalla, pp. 141–163); standard(ising) spellings in the Auchinleck manuscript (Thaisen, pp. 165–190); the <th>, <þ>, and <y> spellings as indicators of the “North-South divide” in administrative documents and correspondence (Gordon; pp. 191–214, and Hernández-Campoy, pp. 215–237, for Paston letters); or the role of the Book of Common Prayer in promoting a standard (Nevalainen, pp. 239–265).

For each of these contributions the point of departure is some tenet of the “standard narrative” (either concerning supposed evidence for the emerging standard in a specific text or text-type or in the practices of a specific author/scribe), and for each the presumed evidence for standardisation is either not there or it is less than compelling. Wright’s introductory “A critical look at previous accounts of the standardisation of English” addresses the theoretical underpinnings of traditional narratives of the standard, pointing out their unprovability and contradictiveness, at the same time drawing attention to the disconnect between “textbook” and “scholarly” versions of the story. From this more theoretical chapter the volume turns to a series of “case study”-chapters. First, Stenroos (“The ‘vernacularisation’ and ‘standardisation’ of local administrative writing in late and post-medieval England”) concludes that “referring to standardisation in the context of the present material certainly makes little sense” (p. 66), since local administrative documents point to continued variation, rather than incipient standardisation. Similarly, Carillo-Linares & Williamson (“The linguistic character of manuscripts attributed to the Beryn

Scribe: A comparative study”) see little evidence for purported ‘standardising features’ of the well-known ‘Beryn scribe’, whose hand was among those analysed for *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*. They find that neither can his spelling practices be confidently assigned to a specific locality, nor that the language of the manuscripts attributed to him is particularly consistent (p. 135). While the authors are sympathetic to the view that increasing numbers of professionals “must have developed an awareness of and sensitivity to what was becoming more widely used within English manuscript culture” (p. 137), it was in preference for certain variants rather than in a steady elimination of these variants that what has traditionally been dubbed ‘standardisation’ manifested itself. This conclusion is reiterated by Moreno Ollala (“Spelling practices in late Middle English medical prose: A quantitative analysis”), whose study of spelling practices in medical *Fachprosa* demonstrates similar tendencies: while scribes were aware of standardisation processes in operation, their practices point to selection from a limited pool of variants rather than rigorously implementing whatever forms were promoted by Chancery or Westminster practices (p. 160). Thaisen’s chapter on “Standardisation, exemplars, and the Auchinleck manuscript” is perhaps the most direct rebuttal of “these truths” of Middle English studies, as he argues against one of Samuels’ (1963) incipient standards, i.e., Type II, linked to Scribe 1 of NLS Adv MS 19.2.1. Applying a “probabilistic language model trained on all the forms found in one text” (p. 166), Thaisen demonstrates that “it is unclear or undetermined what variables truly unite the Type II texts” (p. 186), let alone how these variables are related to the incipient standard and London as its *locus*. The only unifying feature of the spellings in Auchinleck and its exemplars, Thaisen posits, is the fact that they support the existence a “community of book artisans in early to mid-fourteenth century London whose collaboration extended to them exchanging exemplars with one another” (p. 186).

Communal practices are also the focus of two chapters focusing on the <th> and <þ>/ <y> spelling variants and their purported isoglottic functions. Revisiting the “North-South” distribution of the three *litterae* (posited in Benskin 1982), Gordon (“Bristol <th>, <þ> and <y>: The North-South divide revisited, 1400–1700”) finds that, contrary to Benskin’s influential model, “which was that <þ> and <y> were used interchangeably to represent <th> only in North/ South border areas” (p. 211), the south-western city of Bristol’s “letter-writers used <y> as a minority variant in the function words *the, that, them, this*” (p. 161) and that “literary text-types lagged behind in the adoption of [supralocal] <th>, with correspondence in the lead, followed by documentary texts” (p. 198). Hernández-Campoy (“<th> versus <þ>: Latin-based influences and social awareness in the Paston letters”) likewise looks at evidence from correspondence at the level of community practices: his focus, however, is on the Paston letters and

“the situation of variability between the innovation <th> and the conservative form <þ> [as] a sign of language change in progress through generational waves” (p. 223). He views the adoption of <th> as first and foremost a language-contact phenomenon and sees its growing incidence in his corpus over time as a sign of “the awareness of the growing norm/usage dilemma and the new standard-ideology, where ‘prestige’ and ‘attitude’ contributed to the generalization of a foreign orthographic digraph adopted by the incipient Standard variety as a contact-induced process” (p. 231).

Nevalainen, in turn, takes a look at a community in the religious/spiritual sense. “Early mass communication as a standardizing influence? The case of the Book of Common Prayer” considers whether it is possible “to detect the impact of liturgical language on the mainstream usage of the period and, ultimately, on the English language at large” (p. 240). Comparing the 16th- and 17th-c. editions of the Book of Common Prayer, Nevalainen establishes that linguistic revisions to the original text did not always aim at reflecting the language of the then linguistic community: “the modernization of the 1662 BCP was conservative, consolidating”, often retroactive (p. 262). Far from exerting an influence on the perception of a standard, the Book of Common Prayer seems to have “made a long-term, cumulative impression on the register perception of the language community” (p. 262), not unlike the perception of prestigiousness of Latin-influenced <th>-spellings in the correspondence of Pastons, referred to above.

In the second part of the volume, the focus shifts from spelling to lexis, shedding light on the role of lexical borrowings, semantic specialisation (and its opposite), social awareness and prestige, and the emergence of new registers as hallmarks of (supposed) standardisation. The first chapter in the series, Honkapohja & Liira’s “Abbreviations and standardisation in the *Polychronicon*: Latin to English and manuscript to print”, provides a hook linking the first and second parts of the volume: while also focused on elements of spelling in Middle English documents, it reaches to external causes of “changes in the abbreviations and variation across copies of a single work, Ranulph Higden’ *Polychronicon*” in order to “build a foundation for the timeline and reasons of the loss of the abbreviation system” (p. 269). Considering how changes in book production technology, script systems, and materials used are reflected in changing abbreviating practices, Honkapohja & Liira’s findings generally support the conclusions of the above-summarised chapters: that movement towards spelling standardisation (better termed “reduction of variants”) was not a linear process but one that was marked by idiosyncratic practices of scribes and printers. Schendl picks up on the idea of idiosyncratic responses to standardising tendencies in his study of “William Worcester’s *Itineraria*: Mixed-language notes of a medieval traveller”. Schendl points to the linguistic means which Worcester resorts to in asserting his informal *Itineraria* as a mixed-language text,

and asserts that his notes “show a very intimate fusion of Latin and English, whose major function seems to be to establish the multilingualism of the text” (p. 339). Durkin’s “The relationship of borrowing from French and Latin in the Middle English period with the development of the lexicon of Standard English”, apart from the usual suspect, i.e., medieval Latin as a source of lexical standardisation of English, considers also the role of Anglo-Norman. Unlike traditional narratives of linguistic contact and standardisation, however, his contribution focuses on everyday lexis of “handcrafts, farming and everyday trade and commerce” (p. 357), arguing that Romance lexis often demonstrated “rapid generalization from (relatively) specialised use in the technical vocabulary of a trade to general use in the everyday lexicon”. Sylvester likewise emphasises the influence of multilingualism on lexically supported standardisation (“The role of multilingualism in the emergence of a technical register in the Middle English period”). Arguing that “the establishment of anything like a standard in vocabulary seems to depend on increased variation” (p. 365), she goes on to say that “Multilingualism thus appears to be key to the notion of standardisation of the lexicon, since it enabled the possibility of synonyms that have different sociolinguistic connotations (such as prestige) or functions (such as technicality)” (p. 366).

Tiddeman’s “More sugar and spice: Revisiting medieval Italian influence on the mercantile lexis of England” suggests the opposite direction of influence (although one which concurs with Durkin’s preliminary conclusions). Likewise focusing on what seems like a specialist lexicon (i.e., the language of spice trade), Tiddeman argues that “semantic field of trade offers the ideal background to investigate the overlap and exchange of vocabulary from numerous languages in an ‘everyday’ context” (p. 381). In this framing, Italian dialects play the role of linguistic mediators, bringing into English elements of lexicon from ‘oriental’ languages (Arabic being of prime importance) and serving as a “bridge” between the “oriental Bazaar and the English cloister” (p. 405).

While Durkin, Sylvester, and Tiddeman look at the foreign languages-to-English direction of linguistic borrowing, Richard Ashdowne’s “*-mannus makyth man(n)?* Latin as an indirect source for English lexical history” looks in the opposite direction of transfer, finding “some possible Medieval Latin evidence for English, including some instances where Latin provides what appears to be, at present, the sole evidence for an English usage” (p. 412). This ‘flipped’ perspective is a reminder of the complex and multilayered relations among the three languages of medieval England: English, Latin, and (Anglo-Norman) French. Yet another instance of a flipped perspective is Kopaczyk’s “Textual standardisation of legal Scots vis a vis Latin”, which “provides a comparative background” (p. 487) for the remaining seventeen Anglo-centric chapters. In tracing the influence of medieval Latin on the vernacularizing legal Scots

Kopaczyk discovers that Scottish scribes “drew on the Latin text and strove to find the best way of capturing the same meaning, sometimes through a direct translation, and sometimes through adapting a given syntactic construction” (p. 499) so that “the resources and practices from one language could be replicated in the other” (p. 505).

Just like in the “orthodoxy” part of the volume, also in its “revision” portion there are studies of correspondence material. Conde-Silvestre looks into Stonor family letters as manifestations of communal practices (“Communities of practice, proto-standardisation and spelling focusing in the Stonor letters”), pointing to “a higher degree of spelling focusing [a term preferred to ‘standardisation’] in the letters by members of the community of practice” (p. 462), whereas Romero-Barranco (“A comparison of some French and English nominal suffixes in early English correspondence (1420–1681)”) discerns a community of practice among “the gentry and the professionals, that is, the middling social ranks” (p. 467), who were “[t]he social leaders in the diffusion of French-derived nominal suffixes”.

Laura Wright returns in the final chapter, thus visually and conceptually bracing the volume she edits. Looking at “Rising living standards, the demise of Anglo-Norman and mixed-language writing, and standard English” she argues that “the standardisation of English is the long-term result of changes in living standards in the fourteenth century” and that changes in social structure and social networks resulted “in supralocal Englishes and Medieval Latin (...) continuing on as written norms into the next century” (p. 530), although Standard English was nowhere to be seen before the sixteenth century.

In many respects, *The Multilingual Origins of Standard English* is a *tour de force*: its scope, range of topics, variety of approaches, multitude of text-types, research perspectives, and linguistic contexts, do not become a cacophony, however. Rather, Wright managed to facilitate a dialogue, not just among her contributors, who explicitly promote the volume’s central vision and often cross-reference each other’s chapters. Also, the volume invites a dialogue with “the standard tradition”, offering criticisms and at the same time also acknowledging its importance. Finally, the volume under review is a dialogue with the (non-academic) reader; with their preconceptions about the origins of Standard English, misconceived notions of linguistic variability, and the confidence in the infallibility of long-established scholarship. As such, it is a much needed and, indeed, a long overdue contribution to studies in the history of English.

REFERENCES

- Benskin, Michael. 1982. The letters and <y> in Later Middle English, and some related matters. *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 7(1). 13–30. DOI: [10.1080/00379818209514199](https://doi.org/10.1080/00379818209514199)
- McIntosh, Angus, Michael L. Samuels & Michael Benskin. 1986. *A linguistic atlas of Late Mediaeval English*. 4 vols. Aberdeen University Press.
- Samuels, Michael. 1963. Some applications of Middle English dialectology. *English Studies* 44. 81–94. DOI: [10.1080/00138386308597155](https://doi.org/10.1080/00138386308597155)
- Wright, Laura. 2000. Bills, accounts, inventories: Everyday trilingual activities in the business world of later medieval England. In D. A. Trotter (ed.), *Multilingualism in later medieval Britain*, D. S. Brewer. 149–156.
- Wright, Laura. 2002. Code-intermediate phenomena in medieval mixed-language business texts. *Language Sciences* 24(3–4). 471–489. DOI: [10.1016/S0388-0001\(01\)00045-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0388-0001(01)00045-6)
- Wright, Laura (ed.). 2009. *The development of Standard English, 1300–1800: Theories, descriptions, conflicts*. Cambridge University Press. DOI: [10.1017/CBO9780511551758](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511551758)
- Wright, Laura. 2010. A pilot study on the singular definite articles *le* and *la* in fifteenth-century London mixed-language business writing”. In Richard Ingham (ed.), *The Anglo-Norman language and its contexts*, York Medieval Press & The Boydell Press. 130–142.
- Wright, Laura. 2011. On variation in medieval mixed-language business writing. In Herbert Schendl & Laura Wright (eds.), *Code-switching in early English*, De Gruyter Mouton. 191–218. DOI: [10.1515/9783110253368.191](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110253368.191)
- Wright, Laura. 2012. On variation and change in London medieval mixed-language business documents. In Merja Stenroos, Martti Mäkinen & Inge Særheim (eds.), *Language contact and development around the North Sea*, John Benjamins. 99–116. DOI: [10.1075/cilt.321.06wri](https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.321.06wri)
- Wright, Laura. 2013a. The contact origins of Standard English. In Daniel Schreier & Marianne Hundt (eds), *English as a contact language*, Cambridge University Press. 58–74. DOI: [10.1017/CBO9780511740060.004](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511740060.004)
- Wright, Laura. 2013b. Mixed-language accounts as sources for linguistic analysis. In Judith A. Jefferson & Ad Putter (eds.), *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain (c. 1066–1520): Sources and analysis*, Brepols. 123–136. DOI: [10.1484/m.tcne-eb.1.100797](https://doi.org/10.1484/m.tcne-eb.1.100797)
- Wright, Laura. 2015. On medieval wills and the rise of written monolingual English. In Javier Calle Martín & Juan Camilo Conde Silvestre (eds.), *Approaches to Middle English. Contact, variation and change*, Peter Lang. 35–54.