

Chaucer's English and Multilingualism*

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A few years ago, Sogen Yoshizumi (1919~), a Japanese monk and poet, came all the way from Kyoto to lead a Zen retreat at our small temple in Chiayi. During his short yet busy visit, he asked me to take him to our university's main library, saying that he wanted to consult books produced in the Tang dynasty (618~906) about the versification of Chinese poetry. It was not until then that I realized that he not only reads classic Chinese, but also writes poetry in traditional Chinese, albeit in a Japanese style. His Chinese handwriting is similar to that of Wang Hsi-chih (a Chinese courtier and calligrapher, 303-61).¹ When we were about to go, to my surprise, he presented me with a lyric that he had improvised in Japanized Chinese. It is a sort of haiku of ten Chinese characters divided into two lines. The poem can be translated into English as follows: in an autumn night the

* My thanks to Derek Pearsall, Catherine Batt, Candace Barrington, and also the two anonymous readers for their generous and pertinent advice on the essay.

¹ Wang Hsi-chih (301-61) was a Chinese calligrapher traditionally referred to as the Sage of Calligraphy, who was the most important and esteemed calligrapher during and after the Tang Dynasty (618-906).

bright moon cleanses the sky, shining through the dust.² He kept reciting the poem aloud in Japanese on our way back to the temple. I do not speak Japanese so I could not understand what he was saying, yet I do of course read Chinese, so I could fully understand what he wanted to express in ten Chinese words. A few months later, I received a gift from him. On a piece of processed bamboo, he inscribed the ten Chinese words of his poem with his signature. For me, the Japanese monk was in effect speaking Chinese in Japanese and writing Japanese poetry in Chinese words. This is not unusual among Zen practitioners in Japan (and I guess, in Korea and many other parts of the world where Chinese is a first or second language). Multilingualism is a common but difficult fact in the linguistic history of many areas in Asia, including China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, and many other lands. The Japanese monk's poem shows me that the creation of literary language is not just a matter of syntax and rhyme, but of words, words that in this case derive from classic Chinese. It also reminds me of Chaucer's English. By contrast, in Chaucer's case, his words derived from Anglo-Saxon and Latin, as well as French.

In the western medieval period, the area of Europe occupied by the Romans adopted Latin, and adapted it into the various Romance languages of French, Provençal, Italian and so on. In the history of England's languages, it is unclear how far Latin replaced British as the vernacular of Britain, but according to Norman Davis and J. David Burnley, whatever language commonly spoken in the British Isles in the early fifth century was almost completely displaced by the tongue of the invading Saxons.³ After the Anglo-Saxon settlement, the Germanic language displaced the

² Ming-yueh, literally "Bright Moon" in Chinese, is my first name. In Japanese, the two characters are pronounced mei-geizu. In Chinese culture, brightness symbolizes clarity, transparency, and brilliance. In Zen literature, a shining moon connotes liberation from all earthly matters.

³ See also the collection of essays edited by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., *Language and Culture in Medieval Britain: the French of England*.

indigenous Brythonic languages and Latin as the vernacular in most of the areas of Britain that later became England. Whereas Latin remained in these areas as the language of the Church and of higher education, the original Celtic languages remained in parts of Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall.⁴ The period we call Middle English begins soon after the Norman invasion and runs from the beginning of the twelfth century to the middle of the fifteenth century. After the Conquest, French rapidly established itself as England's second vernacular.⁵ The gradual decay of Anglo-Saxon traditions and literary practices, along with the emergence of French and Latin literacy, gives much of the English language of this period an elusive and

⁴ There are over 1,500 Scandinavian parish names in England, especially in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, such as Derby, Grimsby, Rugby, Naseby, Whitby, etc. That a large number of compound Celtic-Germanic place names survive up to now hints early language mixing. For more information on English place name, please see K. Cameron.

⁵ According to Helen Cooper, the history of post-Conquest English was not just a matter of gradual assimilation of the language of the Normans into the English mother tongue until it fell out of use in England. Scottish and Northumbrian English have retained features of Old English in vocabulary and pronunciation. Old English was spoken until the twelfth century or thirteenth century. Merchants were bilingual in Anglo-Norman and English. The French vocabulary kept alive, with the Channel serving literally as a channel of communication. As mentioned in the previous note, all the post-Conquest English monarchs except Henry I (1100-35) down to Edward IV (1461-83) married Frenchwomen, or women from one or other of those not quite so French areas such as Flanders. According to Cooper, one London merchant, Henry Waleys, was at various times mayor of both London and Bordeaux. He was one of the earliest members of the poetry society founded in London on the model of those already existing on the continent, known as *puy*s. Those members who brought a song of their own composition to the annual supper, both words and music, got their meal free, and the one judged the best was further rewarded. The songs were, inevitably at this date (around 1300), composed in French. Cooper further infers that "the London *puy* shows no signs of having survived to Chaucer's lifetime, but it may still have offered a model for the storytelling competition of *The Canterbury Tales*" (11). Butterfield also suggests that these societies offer a context for the poetic exchanges between a number of late fourteenth-century French poets, perhaps extending as far as Chaucer's relationships with those of them who spent long periods at the English court: Froissart, Graunson and, more briefly, Deschamps.

unfocused character. For centuries, the Norman kings and courtiers in England and in the British Isles spoke Anglo-Norman, a variety of Old Norman, originating from a northern *langue d'oïl* dialect.⁶ French dominated the English court for more than 300 years, but soon became a language that had to be learned.⁷ Latin was reintroduced to England by missionaries from both the Celtic and Roman Churches and greatly influenced English.

The English language had been used in poetry and prose for at least six centuries before Chaucer began to write. It emerged over time out of many "foreign" languages of the colonisers and remains a Germanic language. In general, idiomatic, concrete, and descriptive English tends to

⁶ There was close contact between France and England following the exile to Normandy of Edward the Confessor, the son of Aethelred II and Emma, daughter of the Duke of Normandy. Edward lived there for 25 years, returning to England in 1041 with many French courtiers. William I (1066-87) spent about half of his reign in France. William II (1087-1100) and Henry I (1100-35) also spent half of their reigns in France. Henry I was the only king to have an English wife until Edward IV (1461-83). Later kings such as Henry II (1154-89) and Richard I (1189-99) seldom stayed in England. English kings, from Henry II on, were *liege lords* in France as well as England. Edward II, Edward II, and Richard II all had queens from France, or neighboring Hainault. Richard was born in Bordeaux in 1367; the Black Prince, Richard's father, held a court in Aquitaine during his extensive periods of rule in France. Most of the Anglo-Norman kings were unable to speak English at all. However, by the end of the fourteenth century, the situation had changed. Richard II addressed his people in English during the Peasants' Revolt (1381). Henry IV's speeches at Richard's deposition were made in English. And Henry's will was the first royal will to be written in English.

⁷ Henry, Duke of Lancaster, wrote in 1354 a devotional treatise in Anglo-Norman, *Le Livre de Seyntz Medecines* (*The Book of Holy Medicines*), where he explains in an apologetic gesture as he found fit: "*Si le franceis ne soit pas bon, jeo doie estre excusee, pur ceo qe jeo sui engleis et n'ai pas moelt hauntee le franceis*" (If the French is not good, I should be excused, because I am English and have not had much to do with French. [My translation]) (239) (ed. E. J. Arnould. *Anglo-Norman Texts 2*, Blackwell, 1940). French was not his first language, he said, but it was the correct language to write in, so was Latin for John Gower, when he lists and describes his three major works at the end of his *Confessio Amantis*. Arguments may also be made for Henry V and his brothers as readers of Latin, French, and English.

be from Anglo-Saxon origins whereas intellectual and abstract English often contain Latin and French influences. Until the fourteenth century, Anglo-Norman and, later, Anglo-French was the language of courts and law. The Provisions of Oxford, released in 1258, was the first English official record to be published in the English language after the Norman Conquest. In 1362, Edward III became the first king to address Parliament in English. The *Pleading in English Act 1362* made English the only language in which court proceedings could be held; however, the official record remained in Latin. In less official domains, English begins in the thirteenth century to appear more frequent in sermons, prayers, songs, romances, religious lyrics, and confessors' manuals, sometimes alone but frequently in mixed company with French and Latin texts. The usual pattern, as Ardis Butterfield has shown, is that pieces of English verse are cited in the midst of Latin sermons and other preaching, devotional or pedagogic lyrics.⁸ Chaucer's poetry was in effect written in a dialect associated with London and spelling associated with the emergent Chancery Standard.⁹ By the late fourteenth century, French words (or Anglo-Norman, or Anglo-French) were taken up by the thousand into the vocabulary of English. In this sense, we may infer that the main influence on Chaucer's English was, of course, international French.¹⁰

⁸ For more discussion on the "macaronic", or bilingual, or plurilingual medieval manuscripts, esp., the presence of French as a co-vernacular in England alongside English, see Ardis Butterfield's keynote speech in the proceedings of 2013 MEMESAK conference, 43-47.

⁹ Chancery Standard was largely based on the London and East Midland dialects, since those areas were both political and demographic centers of English society. The history of this familiar form of the written (not spoken) language properly begins about 1430, employed by the court and scribes in Westminster. For more information about the linguistic shifts in the history of English, see Baugh 92-105.

¹⁰ According to Ardis Butterfield, "only in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did the dialect Francien, spoken in and around Paris, become more widely dominant, and therefore synonymous with 'French.' Before that there were many kinds of 'French': Breton, Artois, Picard, and Norman, and this did not include

In 1387, the Cornishman John of Trevisa, an Oxford scholar and clergyman, translated Ranulf Higden's Latin *Polychoronicon*. Commenting on the language teaching situation in England, Higden gives two reasons for the decline of English:

One reason is that children in school, contrary to the usage and custom of all other nations, are compelled to abandon their own language, and to carry on their lessons and their affairs in French, and have done so since the Normans first came to England. Also the children of gentlemen are taught to speak French from the time that they are rocked in their cradle, and learn to speak and play with a child's trinket; and rustic men will make themselves like gentlemen, and seek with great industry to speak French, to be more highly thought of. (qtd. in Crystal 35)

Being an English scholar, John of Trevisa gives his feedback:

This practice was much used before the first plague, and has since been somewhat changed. For John Cornwall, a teacher of grammar, changed the teaching in the grammar school and the construing of French *into English*; and Richard Penkrige learned that method of teaching from him, and other men from Penkrige, so that now, AD 1385, the ninth year of the reign of the second King Richard after the Conquest, *in all the grammar schools of England children abandon French, and compose and learn in English*, and have thereby an advantage on the one hand, and a disadvantage on the other. The advantage is that they learn their grammar in less time than children used to do. The disadvantage is that nowadays children at grammar school know no more French than their left heel, and that is a misfortune for them if they should cross the sea and travel in foreign countries, and in other such circumstances. Also, gentlemen have now largely abandoned teaching their children French. (qtd in Crystal 35, my emphases).

dialect languages spoken in southern regions. The French that was used in England was also varied...In Chaucer's London, and in court circles, the French that was used was not local but international" ("Chaucer's French Inheritance" 21).

MED also shows that the great load of words entering the English language from Latin and French was decreasing by 1350, English by then having asserted itself by absorbing its rivals, often through the translation of texts. Writers such as Chaucer, the *Gawain* Poet and William Langland used their own regional forms of English as there was no standard English. From this perspective, Chaucer's practice of borrowings of Latin and French seems traditional and practical rather than novel. My point is that Chaucer's English productions followed a trend of his time. Chaucer's English is arguably a mixture of languages such as Genoese, Flemish, Tuscan, Anglo-Saxon, Latin, French, etc, and it all came naturally to him because he was always in a poly-lingual milieu. The mix of languages, and of literary cultures made his poetry possible allowing a hybrid of "heteroglossia" in late-fourteenth-century England. Chaucer was one of the poets who profited from the contemporary hybridization of languages and cultures.

Geoffrey Chaucer came from a well-to-do merchant family that had lived for several generations in Ipswich, some seventy miles northeast of London. The city exported wool to Flanders and imported wine from France. By the late thirteenth century Robert Chaucer, his grandfather, and Mary Chaucer, his grandmother, had settled in London. In 1357 Geoffrey became a page in the service of Countess of Ulster, the wife of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, and later joined the household of King Edward III. He served in the French campaign, was taken prisoner in Normandy, and ransomed by Edward III in 1359-60. In the mid-1360s he married the daughter of Sir Payne Roet, Philippa, through whose sister he was later linked by marriage to John of Gaunt. By 1368 he was one of the king's esquires and possibly visited Italy for the first time. He traveled widely on diplomatic missions abroad during the 1370s, notably to Genoa and Florence, and received several official appointments.¹¹ In 1374 he was appointed Controller of Customs in London. In 1382 he was made

comptroller of the Petty Customs, and in 1386 was elected a Member of Parliament for Kent. He then lost his offices, probably as part of the political strife surrounding the authority of the young King Richard II, and fell into debt. In 1389, when Richard came of age, Chaucer was appointed Clerk of the King's Works, Commissioner of Walls and Ditches, but in 1391 left this post, becoming deputy forester at Peterton in Somerset. In 1399 he took a lease of a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey, and died the following year. He was buried in the Abbey, and it is through this that part of the building came to be known as Poets' Corner.

In a deed of 19 June 1381, Chaucer described himself as "son of John Chaucer, vintner of London." Chaucer's parents, Agnes and John Chaucer, owned property in Vintry Ward, one of the two wealthiest wards in medieval London. As a son of a London wine merchant, he was probably brought up bilingual in Anglo-French and English, given that the area of the Vintry Ward, especially around Thames Street and Royal Street was a popular resort and residence of alien merchants in medieval London,¹²

¹¹ For details of Chaucer's 1373 visit to Genoa and Florence, see *Chaucer's Life-Records*, 32-40; D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer and His World*, 119-31.

¹² In the 1350s, London, with a population of about 50,000, was by far the largest city in England, yet it was a city still small compared with Paris or Hamburg or Genoa, Venice and Florence, where the population might reach 100,000, and tiny compared with Hang-chou, China, which had close on 2 million. Some of London's leading merchants, among the richest men in the city, lived in the Vintry, say, mayors like John Stodeye and Henry Picard, "riche and sellers of vitualille" (GP I. 248) like Nicholas Brembre, John Philipot, and William Walworth; nobles such as Queen Philippa owned a dwelling there called Tower Royal, after her death it passed to her daughter-in-law, mother of Richard II, Joan of Kent. Nearby there were Gascon wine merchants, an Italian family, and Flemings. In brief, London in Chaucer's boyhood was already a cosmopolitan city. From a demographical point of view, the number of French speakers in England was never at any time in the period after the Norman Conquest large enough to repress English. See Martin M. Crow and Virginia E. Leland, xvi-xxvi; May McKisack's *The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399*; Alec R. Myers's *London in the Age of Chaucer*.

including those Italian wine-traders from whom Chaucer probably also picked up the language that was later important in his public and poetic career. In the *Chaucer Life-Records*, Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson collected 493 documentary records of his life. The records show that Chaucer came from the rising merchant class, yet when he entered court service in his teens, he bridged the gap between the world of the urban merchant class and the nobility. His main patron was John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, third son of King Edward III. He served the courts of Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV (John of Gaunt's son). Chaucer's wife, Philippa, served in the households of Edward's queen and of John of Gaunt's second wife, Constance, daughter of the king of Castile. Chaucer could have had the chance to improve his French and Latin while he was a page at court; he would also acquire French books of religious instruction, and of chivalric and courtly conduct, and above all with the fashionable French love-allegories and romances, and their English adaptations. On the king's business he traveled over much of southeast England, to France and Spain, and at least twice to Italy. London in Chaucer's boyhood was already a cosmopolitan city: many Italian families lived in London, some near the Chaucer house in the Vintry. In fact, Chaucer's father and grandfather had business dealings with Italian wine merchants. Chaucer's knowledge of Italian may have occasioned his journey of 1372-73 to Genoa and Florence. In any event, by 1373, Chaucer certainly knew Italy at first hand. During the 1360s when Chaucer was in the king's service, he may have studied Latin and French. His later official positions, as controller of the customs and clerk of the king's works, would have required him to use French and Latin legal formulas, skills that he may have been trained at the Inns of Courts.¹³

Derek S. Brewer's *Chaucer in His Time* provides a useful introduction to Chaucer's social milieu.

¹³ See "Introduction" in the *Riverside Chaucer*, xv-xxvi.

Chaucer's poetry is important to the history of English partly because 1) in total, he produced a quantity of 43,000 lines of poetry and two major prose works, and partly because 2) the breadth and variety of his language in addition to its literary merits are so unique that his writing provides crucial evidence about Middle English grammar, vocabulary, meter, and pronunciation. Indeed, we have the major achievement of Middle English Literature in the writing of Chaucer. In Chaucer's poetry, the poet identifies himself as "Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly / On metres and on rymyng craftily," in the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale* (II. 47-48), as the author of the legends that make up *The Legend of Good Women*; in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* he acknowledges himself to be the author of *Troilus and Criseyde* (F. 332), *The House of Fame*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and other works (F. 417-30); and in the Retraction at the end of *The Canterbury Tales* he adds to all these works *The Canterbury Tales* itself. Like many of his European predecessors such as Machaut, Froissart, Deschamps, and Christine de Pizan (Christian de Pizan is largely writing later than Chaucer—and she outlives him by some 30 years), Chaucer expresses his remarkable yet humble assurance in himself as a poet, an English poet, in the European way. He conveys distinctive and consistent sense of his "writerly" identity, not just as a poet or a "speaking voice" in a text, but as a "real" person, about whom one can dig up biographical and historical facts apparently crucial to assessing his rhetorical skill (Aers 177-202; Howard) and to the understanding of the way he and his contemporary writers perceived the relationship between art and life (Minnis 20-21).

Some recent critics argue that the posthumous fame of Chaucer as the Father of English poetry is inaccurate so far as language is concerned. Derek Pearsall once said that Chaucer's intention in using English was to enable England to take its place among those more advanced parts of Europe—France and Italy—that already had remarkable vernaculars. For

Pearsall, English is part of Chaucer's European project. He cogently argues that "there is no English poet who is less English than Chaucer: he is, above all, in his own view, and in any sober historical view, a great European poet" ("Chaucer and Englishness" 83). Ardis Butterfield suggests that Chaucer was in effect speaking French in English (*Familiar Enemy* 155-98, 270-308). English was not the only choice for Chaucer but it was a language that thrived "at a deep level with the dominant *lingua franca* of French" (235). English was evidently not the only language in which writers such as John Gower and Henry of Lancaster think of themselves as English. Chaucer scholars like Elizabeth Salter, Derek Pearsall, Barry Windeatt, and Ardis Butterfield are correct that Chaucer deliberately chose to write in English. It may be part of an "international project" on his part, the assertion of a cultural status for English whereby it could catch up as fully as it could with the dominant *lingua franca* French.¹⁴ Yet, multilingualism by Chaucer's time, in romance and love poetry, in particular, was already international; the rhyme scheme, syntax, words, and "figures of speech" we often find in Chaucer's poetry are commonplace in Latinized, Anglo-French, Frenchified writings. One may also argue that Chaucer is working along with a collective and popular "international project" on the continent, and therefore his English is a product of "heteroglossia," a hybrid at best. It is interesting to note that one of the first tributes to Chaucer as poet came from France in 1385-86. Chaucer's friend, Sir Lewis Clifford, returned from France bringing him a poem of generous praise, written by the leading French poet, Eustache Deschamps. Deschamps praised Chaucer as a "great translator, noble Geoffrey

¹⁴ For information about the English court in the mid-fourteenth century, see Elizabeth Salter, "Chaucer and Internationalism," *SAC*, 2 (1980), 71-79; James I. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love-Poets*, 43; Barry A. Windeatt, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues*, 7; Ardis Butterfield, *Familiar Enemy*, 270-308.

Chaucer," who had made *Le Roman de la rose* accessible to English readers. In late 1385, a London clerk, Thomas Usk, in his prose *Testament of Love* called Chaucer "the noble philosophical poete," while John Gower, in his *Confessio amantis* (1390) praises Chaucer for his "songes glade," and "ditees." But no one in England by 1400 could foresee that Chaucer would become the "stremes hede" of English poetry.

I want to turn to the second part of my paper now, using Chaucer and the fourteenth Century as a preliminary structural paradigm to determine how far Chaucer has any established sense of English as a mother tongue with regard to other "foreign" languages. Like many medieval writers, Chaucer uses the word "strange" or "straunge" to refer to people from afar, from distant parts, from a place not one's own; to refer to people who are not members of one's social group or class; to refer to people who are not members of one's household; and to refer to people who are not members of one's family.¹⁵ The words can be used to reinforce and consolidate relations within these four circles of exclusiveness (in decreasing size). One can look at the words "strange," "straunge," "forinsecus" and "extraneus" in Chaucer and see how they set up an interlocking series of semantic boundaries that tend to strengthen a given community's sense of belonging. They can be seen as a linguistic embodiment of a community, or a linguistic system of exclusion, but they are embedded in Chaucer's English through which his community expresses and identifies itself. Chaucer is now entering the eighth century of his posthumous fame as the Father of English poetry. How is he doing in Taiwan? What is his current reputation and the current state of Chaucer studies in Asia? How has his poetry responded to treatment at the hands of sociolinguists, lexicologists, TESL, and literary critics in Chinese

¹⁵ See Barbara Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint, Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (1999) and *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (2006).

communities? This second part of my paper, which I've framed as a kind of personal retrospect upon 20 years of teaching Chaucer in Taiwan, will address the issues of Chaucer's Englishness and English studies in Taiwan, given the marginalization in which the poet now stands in college English curricula in Taiwan and the increasing impatience of English majors with languages other than modern Anglo-American.

Back in the 1980s, when I started to learn Chaucer at UNC-Chapel Hill (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) in the USA, philology was a non-negotiable degree requirement. We had two full years of compulsory Old English, Middle English, and Latin. There was also a required course called "The History of the English Language." As a foreign student from Asia, I had no idea, like most of my American classmates, why we had to do all these kinds of language study in the first place, and what it all meant, and none of my teachers explained anything. I fulfilled the requirements of my advanced English studies eventually. In 1993, I finished my doctoral studies in the States and returned to my country to teach Old English and Middle English Literature, not in the original languages, but in modern English translation—except for Chaucer. For those of us who teach Chaucer it means of course that we have to deal with his English, grammar and syntax, phonology, dialect, and semantics. However, 99% of my students are simply not interested. I assign the students a project on Chaucer, and they often write it without having read the works in the original language or even without having read them at all in modern English and/or Chinese translation. Being a professional English educator in Taiwan, I could not help wondering: when the local Chaucer goes global, what can we do about his English?

For nearly 600 years, the foundational status of Chaucer's English has been an unflinching truism of English literary history. By honoring Chaucer as the "first fyndere of our faire langage," Thomas Hoccleve (and later John Lydgate) promoted themselves as Chaucer's self-appointed successors; in

the sixteenth century, Chaucer's writings were praised as marking the obscure beginnings of a national literature; early literary critics, such as John Dryden and Thomas Wharton, consolidated Chaucer's status as the Father of English poetry, and his privileged treatment in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Middle English Dictionary* have perpetuated it. Is the notion of an English literary tradition so securely Anglophone? How about Chaucer's translations and translations of his poetry into Korean, Chinese and Japanese? How does Chaucer's multilingualism affect Taiwanese students' understanding of his work as an English major author? Do they, to put it bluntly, need to recognize that he was in reality working across, among, and between European languages? Is it still significant that "the History of the Language of English," Old English, and Middle English are non-negotiable degree requirements for English-majors? Given that Chaucer's English is not "pure," should we define his English as a "foreign" language for Anglo-American literature students? Our account of Chaucer's English would look more convincing if it accommodates the polyglot cultural space where the surplus value of his English is won and lost.

In what sense, then, is Chaucer's English English to non-English speakers? I will now turn to the third part of my paper so as to give a few more qualifications to my reading of Chaucer's English and multilingualism in his poetry. First, Chaucer's English works simultaneously in two ways: it constitutes both the Latinate and Frenchified "hauteyne speche" of the learned and noble, and the indigenous English, or "cherles termes" of the low-bred, in a hybridization of languages that reflects the "dialogic" nature of social differences within his own society.¹⁶ Secondly, verse in English in the fourteenth century was composed in two different traditions: one evolved from Old English and the general Germanic languages, with a

¹⁶ For example, four-stress lines form part of the "tail-rhyme" stanzas of the *Tale of Sir Thopas*.

pattern of stressed syllables in each line, linked by alliteration of initial sounds, without rhyme; the other derived from imitation from French and Latin models, in couplets or groups of rhyming final sounds. The mixture of the two traditions, which resulted in a poetic line that featured by four stresses or beats in each line, was used in many English poems from the early thirteenth century onwards. It was in reality well known long before Chaucer began to write.

Chaucer's poetry also tends to reflect his reading and intellectual interests. His early works reflect his reading of and admiration for French courtly verse. In the late 1370s, Chaucer's reading of Italian poetry, mainly that of Boccaccio, is apparent in the form and subject matter of almost everything he wrote. In the 1380s he undertook the translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and this affected his works that include *Troilus and Criseyde*; *Palamoun and Arcite (The Knight's Tale)*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and many other minor poems. In the beginning of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer put on display the process of multilingualism by constant movement from "hauteyne speche" to native diction and back again within the space of 34 lines. That Chaucer's English melt multiple languages and traditions can be demonstrated by a closer look at the first 34 lines of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*:

Here bygynneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury.

- 1 Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
- 2 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
- 3 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
- 4 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
- 5 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
- 6 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
- 7 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
- 8 Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,

9 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 10 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
 11 (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages),
 12 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
 13 And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
 14 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
 15 And specially from every shires ende
 16 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
 17 The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
 18 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

19 Bifil that in that seson on a day,
 20 In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay
 21 Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage
 22 To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
 23 At nyght was come into that hostelrye
 24 Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye
 25 Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
 26 In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
 27 That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.
 28 The chambres and the stables weren wyde,
 29 And wel we weren esed atte beste.
 30 And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
 31 So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
 32 That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,
 33 And made forward erly for to ryse,
 34 To take oure wey ther as I yow devyse.

Consider the rhyme pattern of the opening 18 lines. The rhyme on “corages” (line 11) and “pilgrimages” (line 12) suggests a difference, or an unexpected connection, between the natural and the cultural world. The lines work partly because of the rhyme and partly because of the meter. The long sequence of clauses, identifying the first season of the year, then another, also promotes a leisurely, conversational, story-telling tone for the following

16 lines. And "corage" and "pilgrimage" are both ultimately derived from Latin. The first sentence contains many classical references. The names of the months—"Aprill" and "March"—are derived from classical Roman; "Zephirus" is the Roman god responsible for the west wind, and the Ram is a sign of zodiac, whereas words such "palmeres," "halwes," "martir" are drawn from a religious lexical set, related to the business of pilgrimage. Rhyme is an audible linguistic patterning, and so a literary device. It not only serves as a kind of background music to poetry, but often has thematic significance. This is true of the "corages"/"pilgrimages" rhyme, since it humorously links the natural world of animals and the cultural world of men. The rhyme relates the two by suggesting that the human world of religious practice also takes its impetus from nature. Look also at lines 21-22, where the Narrator playfully suggests that his behavior fully aligns human intention (corage) with action (going on pilgrimage). The opening 18-line sentence is formal, full of technical jargons, with many subordinate clauses that contain words often Latinate in origin, relating to the natural sciences, for example, "veyne," "vertu," "engendred," "inspired," etc. Here, the *doing* of pilgrimage and the *being* a pilgrim are subjects referring to the human world of religious/cultural practice, yet happening within a frame of natural cycles, described by the poet in words derived from classical, Anglo-Saxon/Germanic, French and native English sources. The way in which Chaucer can capture the nature features of his mother tongue is well illustrated in lines 19-34. Here we see the way in which Chaucer capture so vividly the intriguing character of the narrator, and to reflect so naturally the colloquial features of his speech. Out of this mix of languages, out of its syntax and vocabulary, emerges a complex sense of the inter-relation between different usages of words in different "national" contexts. What Chaucer was doing in verse was what was already happening in court with all the linguistic mixing. By mixing "the languages of others" with his own mother tongue, Chaucer "invents" an English literary language. By

supplementing the English prose and poetry of the South-East, written in the dialect of London, with new words from French literature and court speech and learned words from works written in Latin, Chaucer's English is international and comprehensible to his contemporary readers.

One could compare the opening lines of *The Book of the Duchess* and those of Froissart's *Le Paradis d'Amours*, which Chaucer is blatantly imitating, albeit with sensitive improvisations and accommodations:

Je sui de moi en grant merveille
 Coument tant vifs car moult je velle
 Et on ne poroit en vellant
 Trouver de moi plus travellant
 Car bien sachies que par vellier
 Me viennent souvent travellier
 Pensees et merancholies.

I am myself amazed that I am still alive, when I lie awake so much.
 And one cannot find a sleepless person more tormented than myself,
 because you know well that when I am lying awake worries and
 melancholy often come to torture me. (my translation)

Yet, by contrast, Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* opens with:

I have gret wonder, be this light,
 How that I lyve, for day ne nyght
 I may nat slepe wel nygh nought;
 I have so many an idel thought
 Purely for defaute of slep
 That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
 Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
 Ne me nys nothing leef nor looth. (1-8)

The point is not the closeness of the imitation of a French poem in

Chaucer's hand: obviously the very "I" of the French love-allegories can be defined as an exploration of the lyric first person in a polite and measured poetic language. However, we can see the difference more clearly in Chaucer if we compare the images of the "persona" in the French and English texts. As one can find in the second movement of the opening lines of the General Prologue quoted above (lines 19-34), Chaucer's English is more conversational and plain, with a kind of liveliness, using an intimate and chatty tone. Chaucer's Frenchified English embraces a more personal tone, sharper visual and audio imagery, and a vigorous quality of English sense and sensibility. And all this is natural when he decides to write in the English familiar to him from business as well as from court circles in London and Westminster.

Chaucer's decision to write in English was extraordinary for a writer attached to the English royal household of the 1360s. It looks, nonetheless, natural. English, though it may have lacked the sophistication of the "hauteyne speche" of the learned and noble French courtly poetry and the technical jargons of Latin treatises and works of religious instruction, was after all Chaucer's mother tongue, handy to use and ingenious to express powerful feelings for his "emotional community" (Barbara Rosenwein). So Dante and Boccaccio chose to write in their vernaculars in Italy. All these issues lead me to argue that we need to be alive to the medieval context in which Chaucer wrote in English. For Chaucer, French is a practical or "naturalized" language rather than a foreign tongue; his English is international because Latin and French were not just ingrained in his own "national" context but also embedded in the English habits of thinking and writing for over 300 years. But, Chaucer wrote in the dialect of London, at a time when continental French becomes Anglo-French and then gains a new continental French resonance in the English court and capital city. All this is in an "English" context, the kind of context provided by the comprehensive manuscript of English poetry such as the Auchinleck

manuscript, which was made in London, probably for a rich merchant, in the 1330s. Much of this literary production could have come to Chaucer as many critics have plausibly argued.¹⁷ That Chaucer chose to write in English suggests that English was not a single language for a writer of English in the late-fourteenth-century England.

Being a multilingual speaker, Chaucer chose to write in his native language while habitually borrowing words from foreign languages, or in Bakhtin's words, "speaking through the others."¹⁸ Chaucer complains the problems of linguistic diversity in his time:

And for ther is so gret diversite
 In English and in writyng of oure tonge,
 So prey I God that non myswrite the,
 Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge;
 And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
 That thow be understonde, God I beseche! (*Troilus and Criseyde*
 4.1793-98)

Chaucer's complaint makes a necessary distinction between "Englissh" and "writyng of oure tonge" (*Troilus and Criseyde* 4.1793-94). Any language spoken by many peoples for any length of time will naturally exhibit "gret diversite": speeches will vary from place to place, time to time, people to

¹⁷ For more discussion, see P. M. Kear's *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, 5-23, J. A. Burrow's *Ricardian Poetry*, 12, and D. S. Brewer's *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, 1-38.

¹⁸ Bakhtin reminds us of the dialogism and *heterglossia* involved in spoken and written words. In any speech act, there is always a third person, a hidden polemic conducted by voices, both audible and silent. For Bakhtin, nobody speaks only one language; any speech act is dialogic, when it comes to communication, so that one's language can be "answerable" across and among and between the languages of others. This may well seem too philosophical a comparison to fit with Chaucer's English. But some connections may be made. Most generally, Bakhtin shows that *heterglossia* is an innate element of any speech act.

people, and person to person. As Ardis Butterfield cogently asks: What is the difference between English and French, the English and the French, England and France? ("Bilingualism" 37). For poets in England in the later fourteenth century, the parameters, the notions of boundary, matters of geographical location and possession were certainly different from ours. They spoke not only English but other languages and a writer of English may well have felt that English was "his" language, available (or comfortable) and powerful enough to be a "courtly" or "poetic" language. In the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Chaucer decides to use "naked wordes in Englishsh," because his son knows little Latin. In the prologue the poet tells his "little Lewis" that he will explain all that need to be learned about the astrolabe in English, in the same manner as each—Greek, Arab, Hebrew, and Latin—forming the chain of transmission of this scientific knowledge acquired it in its own language and style:

This tretis, divided in 5 parties, wol I shewe the under full light reules and naked wordes in Englishsh, for Latyn canst thou yit but small, my litel sone. But natheles suffise to the these trewe conclusions in Englishsh as wel as sufficith to these noble clerkes Grekes these same conclusions in Grek; and to Arabiens in Arabik, and to Jewes in Ebrew, and to Latyn folk in Latyn; which Latyn folk had hem first out of othere diverse langages, and written hme in her owne tunge, that is to seyn, in Latyn. And God woot that in alle these langages and in many moo han these conclusions ben suffisantly lerned and taught, and yit by diverse reules; right as diverse pathes leden diverse folk the right way to Rome. (*Riverside Chaucer* 662)

As people in Greece speak Greek so Arabs speak Arabic, Jews in Hebrew, Latin folks in Latin, and Englishmen speak and write "naked words" in English. Chaucer's English or the multilingualism in his poetry and translation can be seen as, politically and linguistically, a correct choice.

In Seoul, I have had no problem reading Korean calligraphy in Chinese,

which I often found displayed in Buddhist temples and museums. The mix of languages is the most immediately obvious to me verbally in the phrase “THANK YOU”: it shows me as much amusement for my limited Japanese, Korean, Chinese, as for my fluent Taiwanese. The sound of “THANK YOU” in Korean (“gam-sha ha mi ta”) is similar to that in Taiwanese (“gam-sha”), not mandarin Chinese. Amazing, isn’t it? But if we trace the origins of Taiwanese and Korean and Japanese, then it is understandable because it all has much to do with Li Po’s Chinese in eighth-century China. In today’s Taiwan, education is in mandarin Chinese: the younger generation all speak it fluently, but with their families many speak the local language—Taiwanese, a dialect of Chinese spoken by the Hoklo people. I am no exception. When Japan occupied Taiwan, education was in Japanese; my parents received their formal education in Japanese, so they spoke fluent Japanese, but with their folks they still spoke the Chinese dialect as many did during the Japanese colonial period (1895 -1945).¹⁹ The same may be the case for the Japanese in the eighth century under the influence of Chinese culture, and for the Anglo-Saxons after the Norman Conquest. Yet, when the Norsemen established themselves in Normandy and gave it their name, they adopted the French vernacular of the people they had conquered. Indeed, there seem to be no fixed rules for what happens to languages after invasion (Cooper 9).

What is Chaucer’s English?²⁰ This is a very tricky subject as it is

¹⁹ In 1895 (21st year of Guangxu Emperor), China and Japan signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki ceding Taiwan to Japan, which subsequently exercised governance over the territory. In 1945, when Japan was defeated in the Second World War, the Allies ordered the Japanese forces present in Taiwan to surrender China Area Command. It marked the end of 50 years of Japanese occupation and rule of Taiwan.

²⁰ Recently, there is a heated dispute among the academic linguistic community on whether or not Middle English was a creole (Watts 83). In my view, the linguistic term “creole” tends to cloud our ability to assess the change, variability, heterogeneity, and hybridity as features of Chaucer’s English. Rather than seeing

difficult to make an argument that is specifically about a single author's English inheritance, linguistic treatment, and legacy. In what does the Englishness of Chaucer's poetry inhere? It is another subject no less tricky than his English.²¹ What is English? One notices that the question itself is fraught with difficulty, because of the need to distinguish between England and Britain, between Britain and the United Kingdom, and between the United Kingdom and the British Isles. Back to my story about the Japanese poem the Buddhist monk composed in classic Chinese. What were the language difficulties that he had to go through when he wrote in Chinese yet speaking Japanese? One may also wonder: what were the language difficulties that Chaucer had to go through when he chose to write in English rather than Latin, Anglo-Norman, and French?

It is difficult to make an argument about Chaucer's Englishness because he was not the one and only writer of English to engage with French, Italian, and classical literature during the reigns of Edward III and Richard II. However, on the other hand, the detail of his poetry shows that, as his prologue to the *Treatise on Astrolabe* has shown, he was aware of the dialogic nature of English through his international contacts; and this may be one reason why he may also be said to be an English poet speaking in French or a European writer who writes in English. To conclude, from our investigation of the complex evidence for the status of Chaucer's English in relation to French, Latin, and Anglo/Germanic languages, it is difficult to

Chaucer's English as a creole that took on aspects of the socially dominant language in England, here I argue that our treatment of Chaucer's English as trilingual allows us to examine the variation of contact, influence, and change in Chaucer's poetry.

²¹ I have profited greatly from the lecture by Derek Pearsall, "Chaucer's Englishness," given at National Chung Cheng University in October 2001. I am very grateful to Professor Pearsall for providing me with a copy of his lecture draft, with his own marginal comments and revisions. This paper derives from my recollections of a few exchanges of our dialogues over the years in our emails about multilingualism in literature produced in Europe and China in the western medieval times.

identify “English” as an entity that leaves a particular legacy to the writings in English during and after Chaucer’s time.

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ABSTRACT**Chaucer's English and Multilingualism****Denise Ming-yueh Wang**

What is Chaucer's English? In this paper, I talk about Chaucer's English inheritance from my Taiwanese-Chinese point of view. How is Chaucer doing in non-English speaking countries? When the local Chaucer goes global, what can we do about his English? The first part of my paper is about multilingualism in Chinese and medieval English culture. The second part gives a brief account of the cultural situation of Chaucer's life in fourteenth-century England, using it as a preliminary structural paradigm to determine how far Chaucer has any established sense of English as a mother tongue with regard to other "foreign" languages. An account of Chaucer's literary experience depends as much on general speculation as on the facts of his understanding of French, Latin, Italian, and archaic English. Then, I address the question: In what sense is Chaucer's English English to non-English speakers? Finally, I conclude that it is difficult to identify "English" as an entity that leaves a particular legacy in Chaucer's writing, for the reason that medieval English literature in general, Chaucer's poetry in particular, is by and large a product of cross-cultural and multilingual literary experience.

Key Words | Chaucer, multilingualism, Middle English, *The Canterbury Tales*, Taiwan