

English in the Middle Ages

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The Ecology of Middle English

A language is a population of variants moving through time,
and subject to selection.

Roger Lass¹

Linguistic history and linguistic inquiry

Textbooks for courses on the development of English often focus on grammatical forms, giving chronological and contextual accounts of phonological innovation, lexical borrowing, and syntactic change. With the evidence of late Old English manuscripts, they demonstrate the levelling of inflectional morphology in the tenth and eleventh centuries, just as early modern rhymes and orthoepist discussions are used to document the phonological changes collectively known as the Great Vowel Shift. If a particular cause for a change or its precise beginning cannot always be determined, it is often possible, drawing on historical knowledge and the regularities of linguistic structure, variation, and transformation, to identify a change's general circumstances, its ordering in relation to other changes, and a general time scheme, sometimes as narrow as a half century, in which it transpired. The changes of the Great Vowel Shift well illustrate this principle. By one widespread if still contested analysis of rhymes and early modern metalinguistic commentary, these changes are judged to

¹ Roger Lass, *Historical Linguistics and Language Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 377.

have begun with the rising of the mid-tense vowels /e/ and /o/, a rising that phonologically compelled the diphthongization of the high vowels /i/ and /u/ and allowed for the subsequent rising of low vowels; this shift is thought to be rooted in the sociolinguistic consequences of late-medieval immigration to London, particularly from East Anglia, that brought slightly different phonologies with slightly different social valuations into contact with one another; and traces of this change are understood to indicate that it was occurring already late in the fourteenth century, pervasive in the fifteenth and sixteenth, and completed in the seventeenth.²

Typically less prominent in histories of English is the fact that like syntax, phonology, morphology, and lexicon, beliefs about the status of a language—including its social meanings, its uses, and its speakers—have histories, too. They, too, come about in particular sociolinguistic contexts for particular reasons. The nineteenth-century identification of Finnish with Finnish independence is a case in point. In the face of increasing domination by Tsarist Russia, the use of Finnish worked to sustain the ethnic and cultural identity of the Finns precisely because the Finnish language, along with Finnish music, art, and other cultural traditions—emblemized by Elias Lönnrot's efforts to collect the poems of *Kalevala*—was cultivated as an ideological statement in and of itself, one that sought to articulate social and cultural independence in linguistic form. Social vision similarly underlay the nineteenth-century attempts of Ivar Aasen to formulate a Nynorsk, or new Norwegian. At a time of expanding nationalism across Europe and when Norway had emerged from hundreds of years of Danish rule only to remain a dependent of Sweden, Aasen saw in the northern, rural dialects of Norway traces of the Norwegian language that elsewhere had long since assumed characteristics of the Danish used by Norway's ruling class. From these dialects he constructed a language that aspired at once to be a linguistic

² See e.g. Jeremy J. Smith, *An Historical Study of English: Function, Form and Change* (London: Routledge, 1996), 79–111; and Roger Lass, 'Phonology and Morphology,' in Lass (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, iii. 1476–1776 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 72–85.

atavism and constitute a medium of nationalism, a medium that, even after Norway gained independence from Sweden in 1905, has continued to be the subject of grammatical adjustment and symbolic investment.³

Such examples suggest not only that the status of a language has a history but also that, like the history of linguistic forms, this is a history that is sometimes documented and that can be studied. Indeed, the development of sociolinguistics over the past forty years has provided much of the evidence for studying a language's roles in a linguistic repertoire and the means to approach them. Tape recorders, questionnaires, and census data offer concrete information about speakers and their beliefs, which in turn has served as the basis for studies of prestige in language variation, of group identification with a patois, and of responses to the cultural significances embedded in language shift. For English in particular, such analysis has refined thinking on the development and spread of standard written English, on the influential growth of Received Pronunciation, on the social implications of African American Vernacular English, and so forth.

Not coincidentally, all these examples from English and other languages date to the last few hundred years. It was print that led to significant increases in written material and (concomitantly) in literacy across Europe, increases that account for the substantive record on which studies of prestige or linguistic nationalism can be based. And these increases are recent to be sure: England's first press was established by William Caxton around 1476, and even rudimentary skills of reading and writing cannot be said to have been predominant in England and the United States until the nineteenth century. For structural linguistics, this relation between chronology and extant data means that studies of early periods must often rely on extrapolations from a relatively small record; but as long as there is a written document, there is some grammatical evidence, and the rigours of historical and comparative methodology provide well-attested principles by which such

³ Einar Haugen, *Language Conflict and Language Planning: The Case of Modern Norwegian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).

extrapolation can proceed. The history of a language's social meanings and functions is made more complicated, since it confronts not only the gaps in the historical record but also the fact that much of the linguistic self-consciousness that motivates individuals to write about sociolinguistic issues seems to be even more recent than the advent of print. If historians of Old English must content themselves with the limited poetry and prose that survive, for example, historians of Anglo-Saxon sociolinguistic practices in some cases have very little evidence at all. While it is reasonable to wonder whether women as opposed to men might have had distinctive Old English usages and beliefs, extant documents provide scant information to decide the matter, and throughout the medieval period the same is true for such topics as attitudes about the speech of children as opposed to that of adults or about the accents of native English speakers when conversing in Welsh or Cornish. Such topics may well have had sociolinguistic reality and speakers may well have had broadly shared opinions on them, but lacking the direct evidence that orthoepists such as John Hart or John Wallis provide for the Great Vowel Shift, analysis of them must remain tentative.

None the less, this is a book about linguistic beliefs and the status of a language, specifically about the status of English in the late-medieval period among those who used or encountered it, whether personally or institutionally. When Bede's Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invaded and conquered the British Isles in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, they did so speaking varieties of a preliterate West Germanic language. These earliest preliterate Anglophones gave no clues that they conceived of themselves as anything but a loose confederation of groups sharing certain cultural traditions, just as they left little indication of the role (if any) that their language played in group definition, including whether they conceived of themselves as speaking the same language, what sociolinguistic functions varieties of the language served, and when they thought any speech or writing had special metalinguistic significance. Fifteen hundred years later, in the present, Anglophonic cultures are primarily textual ones, in which English figures significantly, though variously, in social structure and

national self-definition. In modern Anglophonic cultures, indeed, there is often an administrative presumption and cultivation of linguistic and geographical boundaries as coincident; by means of such language rationalization, a common language and its identification with an ethnic or political group facilitate and help to constitute government or social policy.⁴ If the structural history of English is one of continuous and gradual loss of inflections, regularization of syntactic ordering, and lexical borrowing from contact languages, then, its conceptual history is one of continuous and gradual transition from the largely unsystematized orality of the Anglo-Saxon period to the primary and well-documented textuality and linguistic rationalization of the modern one. This is the history that produced and institutionalized modern, socially powerful meanings of English.

Increasingly, the most important moment of transition in this conceptual history has been situated in the Middle English period. In Margery Kempe's early fifteenth-century critiques of English society and religion, for example, the English language has been seen to have political significance in and of itself, as a language that both embodies a resistant English community and articulates that community's radical orientation towards orthodox social and religious authority.⁵ English has been attributed with similar socio-linguistic significance for both late-medieval mysticism and the heterodox Lollard movement. Here, it is sometimes understood to have helped constitute a distinctive and disruptive vernacular theology whose suppression by the 1407–9 Constitutions of Arundel was linguistic as well as theological: biblical translation was thereby proscribed, as was possession of other English translations dating to John Wyclif's lifetime.⁶ An emergent status for English

⁴ David D. Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3–23.

⁵ Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). Also see her edition, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: TEAMS, 1996).

⁶ Nicholas Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409,' *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 822–64, and 'Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God,' *New Medieval Literatures*, 1 (1997), 85–124. For

as a community-defining language has likewise been implicated in late-medieval concerns with literary authority. In this case, Middle English works and their prefaces, when approached with post-modern theories of authorship, cultural practice, and social power, have been understood to advance collectively the cause of the idea of vernacular language, literature, and culture in the late-medieval period, to create, in effect, a distinctively Middle English literary criticism.⁷

While in these cases, changes in the status of English have been approached as concomitants to other cultural changes, John Fisher, Thorlac Turville-Petre, and others have argued that linguistic issues have been pre-eminent. Fisher's concern is specific and narrowly defined: the development of standard written English, whose origins he locates in the early fifteenth-century cultivation of Chancery English.⁸ This is a significant claim in and of itself, but Turville-Petre attributes even greater consequence to Middle English in the conceptual history of the language. Focusing on several prolific and sometimes difficult writers and works, including Robert of Gloucester, Robert Mannyng, *Cursor Mundi*, and the *South English Legendary*, he argues that early in the fourteenth century a sense of English nationalism and national culture coalesced around an expanding evaluation of the vernacular and an identification of it with English nationhood. Pointing in particular to the ways English figured distinctively in religion, to the increasing production of English national chronicles, and to multilingual manuscripts that putatively arrogate elevated literary status to English, Turville-Petre sees the low social prestige of the vernacular being elevated by a nexus of simplicity, 'lewednesse,'

arguments that associate the sociolinguistic significance of the vernacular with literacy, see Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (eds.), *Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). In Ch. 3, I return to the issue of Lollardy and its implications for English linguistic history.

⁷ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (eds.), *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Also see Helen Barr, *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ Fisher, *The Emergence of Standard English* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1996).

and the perceived virtue of the English language. For Turville-Petre, it is a change in linguistic attitudes that enables other literary, political, and religious transitions: 'The use of English was a precondition of the process of deepening and consolidating the sense of national identity by harnessing the emotive energy of the association between language and nationalism.'⁹

The recent *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* extends this line of thinking still further. In this wide-ranging and exemplary collection of papers that will influence approaches to medieval literature for years to come, notions of vernacularity and vernacular English culture function as leitmotifs, recurring ideas that sustain late-medieval culture and thereby unify the collection. The thirteenth-century scribe known as the Tremulous Hand, for instance, is understood to write 'English as the abiding articulation of a realm territorially defined, durable through time, and coherent in its religious, political and cultural interests,' while London's citizenry, in their presumed search for 'an authoritative form of the vernacular,' is judged 'a crucial force in the formation of canonical literature and in the emergence of English as an authorized language.' Chaucer's use of English rather than French, similarly, 'cannot be divorced from the political and ideological contexts (and sometimes contests) in which English acquired cultural prestige and power.'¹⁰ In these ways, the status and social meaning of late-medieval English serve less as hypotheses to be tested than as theoretical prerequisites for the examination of various literary and historical issues in a narrative of vernacular culture's protracted struggle with late-medieval authority in its various guises.

Focusing on belletristic remains and literal meaning, all these critical accounts attribute a variety of innovative and influential

⁹ Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 10. Similar arguments appear in several papers in Helen Cooney (ed.), *Nation, Court and Culture* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001). Also see my review of *England the Nation* in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 96 (1997), 437–9.

¹⁰ David Wallace (ed.), *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 75, 298, 283, 581.

significances to English in the Middle Ages: literary trope, instrument of social unrest, form of theological dissent, and manifestation of national identity. As disparate as these accounts may be, they do however share one theoretical orientation. They all, to a greater or lesser extent, make sociolinguistic claims, for they all posit relations between language and social structure that are themselves based on particular understandings of such relations. A vernacular theology or literary criticism, for example, presupposes a stable and clear role for vernacular language at a particular cultural moment, while language rationalization of the sort imagined by Turville-Petre presupposes both this and a metalinguistic discourse framing and furthering the implication of national identity in language. Sociolinguistics is itself a discipline, of course, with its own theoretical principles and practical strategies that sometimes diverge in important ways from those of literary or religious or historical studies in general. From this vantage, which has not figured significantly in any of the discussions I sketched above, the medieval status of English would be not a presupposition or theoretical prerequisite but itself the object of study and interrogation.

Some methodological considerations

This is the particular approach of *English in the Middle Ages*—a sociolinguistic inquiry into the status of English in the late-medieval period: the meanings, reputation, and purposes of both the language in general and some of its varieties in particular. All these issues are interconnected, of course, for if the beliefs of speakers about a language, and the functions they perform with it, accord that language particular status, that status in turn encourages beliefs, justifies functions, and generally produces social meanings for uses (and users) of the language. Necessarily, I touch on several of the political, literary, and religious issues that others have explored so well, but I do so from a different, avowedly sociolinguistic perspective. My focus is not on what use Margery Kempe or John Wyclif (say) made of English but on what sociolinguistic

practices underwrote the language's status irrespective of their use of it, and in this way, by beginning with language, my inquiries complement previous thinking on these topics. Since I am above all concerned with the development and use of the social meanings and functions of English, indeed, my only interest in specifically literary or theological issues is in their relation to larger concerns that inform these sociolinguistic practices.

In its modern versions, the status of English varies significantly from one region to another, with historical and social reasons distinguishing the social meanings and functions of English in the United Kingdom from its counterparts in post-colonial regions. Even among post-colonial countries such as Nigeria and India, these meanings and functions vary, as they also do in the areas Braj Kachru has called the Inner Circle—the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.¹¹ An abstraction of the significance of English in this Inner Circle could be put this way: the language is group-defining, authorizing, and ennobling, a historical vernacular with national and sometimes official status. For any moment in the history of English in England—the point of reference for much of this book—the concerns that would define such a status include the role of the language in England's linguistic repertoire; the relations among and social significances of varieties of English; the extent to which English could serve as a national or ethnic symbol; and the ideological and political implications of the language's uses. The breadth of these concerns has shaped my critical approach to them, for, as I suggest throughout this book, the meanings and functions of a language emerge not from the linguistic or social issues of isolated disciplines (literature, criticism, theology, and so forth) but from a broad sociolinguistic context that Einar Haugen calls the ecology of a language.¹²

¹¹ 'The Second Diaspora of English,' in T. W. Machan and Charles T. Scott (eds.), *English In Its Social Contexts: Essays in Historical Sociolinguistics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 230–52.

¹² Haugen, *The Ecology of Language*, ed. Anwar S. Dil (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972).

As conventionally used, ecology refers to analyses of natural systems—to the relations that exist among individual members of a species and between various species coexisting in a particular environment. Transferring this analytic frame to linguistics, Haugen writes of the ecology of a language as the structured, learned, and analysable sociolinguistic relationships that obtain between speakers and the linguistic varieties they use—whether channels, registers, dialects, or distinct languages—in sustaining particular social and even natural environments. Recently, Salikoko Mufwene has usefully expanded this concept by focusing primarily on the grammatical structure of a language, for which ecology serves as a mechanism that accounts for language evolution, especially through language contact, in both creole and genetic developments.¹³ As a way to account for the pragmatics of linguistic uses and beliefs, however, Haugen's early formulation of language ecology retains a good deal of explanatory power. Some aspects of a language ecology in this general, pragmatic sense, like some aspects of a biosystem, may remain relatively constant across time, while others may change rapidly and do so in ways that transform other features of the ecology with them. Whether its focus is diachronic or synchronic, an account of the ecology of a natural language such as Middle English, by describing who uses what linguistic varieties under which circumstances and with what social effects, characterizes the relations between a speech community's linguistic repertoire (its registers and varieties) and social practices. These ecological practices, in turn, emerge from and enact the overarching status of a language.

In a model like this, literal statements about the social significance of English and metaphorical treatments of it assume their meaning and representational value from their relation to larger sociolinguistic practices, including historiography, business, education, law, text production, and the functional distribution of languages and varieties. A language's past and future are also relevant, since they allow for a kind of interpretative triangulation:

¹³ Mufwene, *The Ecology of Language Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

if we know what happened structurally and pragmatically before a given moment in a language's history and also what happened afterwards, we gain some additional sense of the moment itself. In this way, my vantage on the status of English in the late-medieval period is indeed theoretically and practically broad, seeking to understand this status within the framework of the language's ecology, which itself must be understood within frameworks of medieval cultural practices and modern linguistic theories.

Clearly, the model of linguistic ecology—whether in Haugen's or Mufwene's formulation—diverges markedly from previous approaches to late-medieval English.¹⁴ While structural linguistics tends to distance the form of a language such as Middle English from its social functions and interpretative criticism tends to subordinate linguistic principles to hermeneutic objectives, Haugen's analysis in particular conceives linguistic form and social process as mutually constitutive, with the meanings of specific utterances or speech acts or varieties emerging from the sociolinguistic contexts that produced them and from the regularities of sociolinguis-

¹⁴ Related concepts on which I have profitably drawn are David Burnley's analyses of the 'architecture' of Chaucer's language and Michael Richter's examinations of the social status of Latin. See Burnley, 'The Sheffield Chaucer Textbase: Its Compilation and Uses,' in Ian Lancashire (ed.), *Computer-Based Chaucer Studies* (Toronto: Centre for Computing in the Humanities, 1993), 123–40; and 'On the Architecture of Chaucer's Language,' in Erik Kooper (ed.), *This Noble Craft . . . Proceedings of the Xth Research Symposium of the Dutch and Belgian University Teachers of Old and Middle English and Historical Linguistics, Utrecht, 19–20 January, 1989* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), 43–57. Also see Richter, *Studies in Medieval Language and Culture* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995); and *Sprache und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen zur Mündlichen Kommunikation in England von der Mitte des Elften bis zum Beginn des Vierzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1979). There are in general few sociolinguistic approaches to Middle English language and literature, of which the following may be mentioned: Jeremy J. Smith, 'The Use of English: Language Contact, Dialect Variation, and Written Standardisation during the Middle English Period,' in Machan and Scott (eds.), *English In Its Social Contexts*, 47–68; Suzanne Romaine, *Socio-historical Linguistics: Its Status and Methodology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Jacek Fisiak, 'Sociolinguistics and Middle English: Some Socially Motivated Changes in the History of English,' *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, 24 (1977), 247–59. More generally see Norman Blake (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, ii, 1066–1476 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); James Milroy, *Linguistic Variation and Change: On the Historical Sociolinguistics of English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Dick Leith, *A Social History of English*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1997); and Smith, *An Historical Study of English*.

tic patterning across time. These contexts need to be reconstructed out of the historical record, and much of this book is devoted to just that end, but the patterning depends (in the first instance) on the Uniformitarian Principle, the axiom on which all varieties of historiography rest.

Roger Lass formulates the most general form of the principle in this way: ‘Nothing (no event, sequence of events, constellation of properties, general law) that cannot for some good reason be the case in the present was ever true in the past.’¹⁵ In the grammatical areas that primarily concern Lass, no historical phonology ever could have lacked front vowels, nor could any historical syntax have been utterly random, for modern linguistic theory, reflecting modern linguistic understanding, proscribes such grammars. In principle, there is no reason that the Uniformitarian Principle cannot be extended from such issues of language structure to those of language use. Indeed, Suzanne Romaine inverts this principle and applies it directly to society and language, whereby the Uniformitarian Principle means that ‘the linguistic forces which operate today and are observable around us are not unlike those which have operated in the past. Sociolinguistically speaking, this means that there is no reason for claiming that language did not vary in the same patterned ways in the past as it has been observed to do today.’¹⁶ The historical absence of any regional or social variation is thus impossible, as would be the absence of structured borrowing between languages, or of the negotiation of social processes through conversation—all impossible then, whenever then was,

¹⁵ *On Explaining Language Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 55. Lass notes that this kind of reasoning ‘may be “irrational,” in precisely the same sense as everyday induction is; it is not strictly rational (though it may be useful) to believe that constant co-occurrence in the past will be repeated in the future. And if this is so, why should we believe that the present is in some sense a “repetition” of the past? But either we believe this or we give up’ (54–5). The whole of Lass’s discussion on 45–63 is valuable, as is his further consideration of these issues in *Historical Linguistics and Language Change*, 24–32.

¹⁶ Romaine, *Socio-historical Linguistics*, 122–3. Also see William Labov, *Principles of Linguistic Change*, i. *Internal Factors* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 10–27; and ‘On the Use of the Present to Explain the Past,’ in Philip Baldi and Ronald N. Werth (eds.), *Readings in Historical Phonology: Chapters in the Theory of Sound Change* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 275–312.

because they are all impossible now. In any discipline, the Uniformitarian Principle does not preclude novelties; it does, however, guarantee that they will emerge according to type, that is, 'that their differentia will not involve the transgression of other necessary principles.' As Lass observes elsewhere, 'We insist not on the barring of novelty *per se*, but only a guarantee that as far as our current understanding of the world holds, all past novelties are lawful. No leap of faith is necessary to accept any novelty properly generated under these conditions.'¹⁷ By no means, then, does the Uniformitarian Principle require an anachronistic or ethnocentric view that all speech communities are structured in the same fashion; it does not dictate which varieties will be socially advantageous, for example, or that any given vernacular must serve as a national symbol. What it does require is that the social meanings and uses of language conform to historical sociolinguistic regularities, the details of which will evolve from the details of specific language contexts.¹⁸

For the sociolinguistic status of a dead language such as Middle English, these are devilish details, because if imprecisely applied, the Uniformitarian Principle can lead to the misapplication of modern sociolinguistic concepts. Heuristics and expectations that

¹⁷ Lass, *On Explaining Language Change*, 60, and *Historical Linguistics and Language Change*, 26. I would add only that the absence of a particular grammatical or sociolinguistic feature in a given language or at a particular time does not imply its impossibility. Linguistic theory continues to accommodate large-scale alterations of consonantal phonemes, even if nothing like the phenomena described by the First Consonant Shift are now evident in English; another consonant shift might well begin next week.

¹⁸ Dell Hymes notes that 'The individual speaker of Searle's speech acts is an invalid model for the speech acts of the Ilongot of the Philippines (as shown in the work of Michelle Rosaldo). It is an enormity to imply that the maxims of Grice, stated as imperatives, should be taken as embedded in the values systems and personality structures of every community in the world, Moslem, Chinese, Eskimo, whatever. . . . Such work on speech acts and conversational implicatures does point to *dimensions* of the use of language that may be universal, in the sense that the system of any community may involve orientation to the dimensions. But the value and weighting given them, the negative or positive attitude taken toward them, their organization, must be inductively discovered' (*Toward Linguistic Competence*, Texas Working Papers in Sociolinguistics, 16 (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1982), 22–3). Also see Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), 148.

we might utilize in reading older linguistic history—heuristics of modern dialectology and expectations about how the vernacular contributes to nationhood—can be the result of more recent developments in linguistic theory and practice, which themselves depend on recent features of government, technology, and education. Inevitably, such heuristics and expectations will materially affect our sense of language in the Middle Ages, and for this reason alone accepting medieval statements about language at face value without considering the discursive practices that enabled them or the ways in which they relate to other language practices can render them more modern in sentiment than they may be. This is a theoretical hazard that I return to at several points in this book.

Another, more practical matter also affects sociolinguistic approaches to dead languages such as Middle English. In the modern period, sociolinguistic variation and meaning can be studied by means of tools such as interviews, matched guise and pronunciation tests, census data, and tape-recorded or videotaped conversations. Each tool can verify and expand evidence from the others, so that conclusions about a particular community's attitudes towards bilingual ballots or African American Vernacular English can be reached with a fair degree of confidence. Yet most of these tools require electronic aids and the location of a speaker in a specific physical and social environment; they may also depend on the statistical thoroughness of modern survey techniques. And this is as much to say that they are inapplicable to the study of historical languages and cultures such as Middle English. Accordingly, we can learn very little about the social semiotics of intonation, pronunciation, and proxemics, and even less about the Middle English speech community in general with the degree of statistical certainty common in modern sociolinguistic studies. We cannot know whether and how the speech of men and women differed absolutely in the late-medieval period, nor can we know how frequently speakers of English and Manx (say) confronted one another and how they communicated when they did.

These difficulties arise for at least three reasons. First, without electronic recordings we have no direct access to the actual (as opposed to reconstructed) sound of spoken Middle English,

Latin, or Old French—the three most prominent languages in the linguistic repertoire of late-medieval England—and I nowhere consider such topics in this book. Second, it is impossible to determine how well extant literary works represent the entirety of what was produced in the Middle Ages. While it is possible to make informed speculation about what was written but has not survived, therefore, the uncertain character of the evidence precludes definitive conclusions about language and society in general.¹⁹ This difficulty, at least, is neither completely debilitating nor insurmountable. As William Labov points out, though historical data are fragmentary and inherently accidental, depending on what chanced to be recorded and what of this record chanced to survive, ‘the same accidents give the record its primary advantage as objective evidence—it was not created to prove any point that we might have in mind, or to serve the purposes of some research program that we have set in motion.’²⁰ Further, the accuracy and thoroughness of modern sociolinguistic data are themselves sometimes illusory. In interviews, some speakers may be more voluble than other, more grammatically or pragmatically representative ones, and some data may be elicited only under specific circumstances not present in an interview.²¹ The sociolinguistic interview is itself a culturally situated communicative event that can conflict with the norms of a particular speech community in such a way as to result in severely distorted or partial data reflecting the context of the interview more than unmediated linguistic usage.²² The difficulties evolving from the fragmentary character of the Middle English corpus are thus relative, and though they may preclude categorical judgements, they do allow directed ones, particularly those that take heed of discursive conventions.

¹⁹ See R. M. Wilson, *The Lost Literature of Medieval England* (London: Methuen, 1952).

²⁰ Labov, *Principles of Linguistic Change*, 74.

²¹ See Ronald Macaulay, *Locating Dialect in Discourse: The Language of Honest Men and Bonnie Lasses in Ayr* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3–5; and James Milroy, *Linguistic Variation and Change*, especially 27–8 and 53–6.

²² Charles L. Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Such conventions figure in the third factor complicating the study of medieval sociolinguistic practice. As written remains, extant Middle English works clearly do not offer transcriptions of natural speech. Particularly in the case of poetry, Middle English writings are fundamentally rhetorical exercises that are constrained by various social factors and conditioned by medieval discursive practices as well as by strictly sociolinguistic impulses. In some instances, such as in works traditionally considered belletristic, the rhetorical stylizing may owe to the demands of metre or genre. For legal, ecclesiastical, or historical works, traditional expressions, narrative conventions, or ideological imperatives may overlie any genuine spoken usage. In this way, the speech of lower-rank individuals such as millers or women from Bath is not only always a written representation of that speech but also often the work of a fairly narrow social group—male, courtly, and devout—that might well have a vested interest in the putative character and content of this speech.

But the difficulties occasioned by this situation are again only relative. Written or spoken, all language enacts, in M. A. K. Halliday's felicitous phrase, a social semiotics.²³ Legal publications, bank statements, and advertisements may do so rather obviously in the way they fashion social identities and relations, but poetry and fiction participate in the production of social meaning as well. On a purely technical level of grammar and usage, the language of literature is not fundamentally different from the language of daily life, for spoken language is characterized by the presence of the same tropes and rhetorical strategies as literary language and therefore responds to the same kinds of study.²⁴ The primary differences between literary and daily language lie in the use to

²³ Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).

²⁴ See, e.g., studies by Monika Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1993); Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Douglas Biber, *Variation across Speech and Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Recent criticism on this topic thus rejects the Prague School of Linguistics's claims about the peculiarity of literary language.

which such strategies are put and in the degree to which they are used at all. More importantly for the issues I explore in this book, when utterances, speech acts, or the representation of varieties serve the mimetic aspirations of a work's fictional world, they succeed or fail in accordance with how well they reproduce the linguistic semiotics of the reader's social world. To be recognized as a trial, for instance, even in the chaotic environment of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a speech event must include speech acts and speaking roles characteristic of a trial, and Alice's trial might therefore serve as a partial model of linguistic activity in historical Victorian courtrooms, just as, more generally, fictional utterances and pragmatics can offer insights into their real-life counterparts.

Beyond this, however, literary language is itself both socially situated and, like other kinds of language, performative of particular social meanings. Roger Fowler has thus argued 'that a novel or a poem is a complexly structured text; that its structural form, by social semiotic processes, constitutes a representation of a world, characterized by activities and states and values; that this text is a communicative interaction between its producer and its consumers, within relevant social and institutional contexts.'²⁵ By reinscribing, contesting, or bypassing particular social attitudes towards language—by ignoring the presence of bilinguals, for example, or representing characters adhering to traditional roles in traditional speech acts—literature serves as the vehicle for and endorsement of such attitudes. The non-standard language of Huckleberry Finn, thus, ultimately reinforces connections between standard language and conventional social success, while the presence of just one linguistic code in the Heaven, Hell, and Eden of *Paradise Lost* articulates a prelapsarian fantasy of uniform, transparent, and unmediated communication, a fantasy that Milton implicitly endorses throughout the poem and explicitly so at its conclusion.²⁶

²⁵ Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10. Also see his *Literature as Social Discourse: The Practice of Linguistic Criticism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1981).

²⁶ *Paradise Lost*, XII, 24–62.

For the study of historical linguistic beliefs, functions, and social meanings, there is even an advantage to the written basis of the remains, and this is that a sociolinguistic inquiry based exclusively on written remains avoids the most debilitating factor of any contemporary analysis, the so-called Observer's Paradox that arises from the need to make a systematic study of language in its natural, unstudied state. According to this principle, if language is to be examined in anything resembling laboratory conditions with some control over the possible variables, the observed speakers will necessarily be conscious of the examination and therefore likely, depending on their attitudes towards language and society, to hypercorrect their usage in one direction or another. Inasmuch as their composition has long since been completed, medieval England's written remains clearly cannot be affected in this way—they are impervious to the critical observer, and they were not, to reprise Labov, 'created to prove any point' supporting or contesting a research programme.

The scope of this book

While the difficulties inherent in the nature of written remains prevent a broad sociolinguistic profile of the kind pursued in studies of contemporary cultures, then, they do not preclude recognition of how some language helped to produce some social practices and linguistic beliefs (and vice versa), including the medieval status of English for those who used and interacted with the language. I begin my inquiry with an examination of two royal letters that were written in English and released by Henry III in 1258, using these letters as an opportunity to talk about the many contextual factors that give utterances and codes their social meanings. How, I ask, does the status of a language such as Middle English come into being? In order to understand how such status takes shape in relation to the ecology of a language, Chapter 3 explores the relations between languages, dialects, and nations. Chapter 4 pushes the argument one step further, to consideration of how the status of a language can figure in cultural activity, by looking at two

late-medieval poems and their implications for the significance of social and regional variation in Middle English; here, I do offer readings of literary works but only as platforms to talk about larger issues of social practice and the semiotics of language. In the final chapter, I consider the post-medieval history of English for the insights it can provide on the sociolinguistic meanings and practices it replaced. By returning throughout to the ecology of Middle English, I concentrate not on the eventual sociolinguistic history of English but on medieval contextual practice, in which actions or utterances that might retrospectively be seen as crucial to the formation of a modern status of English may have meant and functioned quite differently. In this way, my critical orientation differs fundamentally from that of earlier critics, who argued for the ‘triumph’ of English in the early modern period, and later ones, who have championed the vernacular’s medieval power of dissent.²⁷ These are diachronic perspectives on a sociolinguistic moment, perspectives that sharply focus change or the seeds of change, while my own view is distinctly synchronic, focusing not what would be but what was.

In calling a language a population of variants moving through time and subject to selection, Lass has in mind grammatical properties, but I would extend his definition to pragmatics and add this: all language also does something socially. Sociolinguistic practices will vary synchronically and change diachronically, but at every moment every piece of language or language activity—whether a chronicle, an edict, an utterance, or a poem—will accomplish some social purpose in accordance with the ecology of the language. To understand the ecology of a historical language, the nuances of these purposes and their contexts become all important, for without them it becomes possible to see the past as the present, to presume sociolinguistic continuity where there might be none. As I will suggest throughout this book, crucial differences exist between the ecologies of Middle and modern or even early modern English, differences that frequently coun-

²⁷ Richard Foster Jones, *The Triumph of the English Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

terpoint my discussion. In comparison to its medieval predecessor, the modern ecology of English in the United States or the United Kingdom varies in linguistic repertoire, in the functions assigned to varieties in this repertoire, in popular access to these varieties, in the kinds of social practices that language mediates, in a general sense of what language is and does, and, indeed, in their respective statuses of English. The dynamics of such differences, in turn, can illuminate the modern as well as the medieval. By examining the late-medieval status of English as it emerges from a profile of the relations between language and society in the English Middle Ages, I therefore hope also to contribute to understanding of sociolinguistic processes in general, including the inevitability of variation, the ability of language and linguistic acts to sustain social institutions and meanings, the naturalized and unexamined character of many such institutions and meanings, the ideological power of discursive practices, the historical specificity of language ecologies, and the history of linguistic beliefs. As variable grammatical and pragmatic populations move through time, individual selection pressures produce historically specific linguistic ecologies, among which larger linguistic principles guarantee coherence.