The Transmission of Anglo-Norman

Language history and language acquisition

Richard Ingham

Language Faculty and Beyond
Internal and External Variation in Linguistics

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Internal and External Variation in Linguistics

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Volume 9

The Transmission of Anglo-Norman. Language history and language acquisition
by Richard Ingham

Preface

The idea that the writings of later medieval Anglo-Norman clerks might have something to tell us about the workings of the human language faculty might at first seem far-fetched. Yet thanks to the unusual circumstances in which the language they conveyed to us arose, it has much to tell us of relevance to current thinking on the nature of language. It allows us, in brief, to observe what happens when the ordinary environment for language acquisition is absent. Conventionally, language acquisition takes place through the coming together of a species-specific capacity for language, of linguistic input from the earliest years of life, and of interaction with caregivers in a nurturant home environment. In the case of later Anglo-Norman, however, it appears that the second and third were not generally present in the experience of its users, so that the first factor, the language faculty itself, can be studied under a different set of circumstances from the usual case. As with linguistic studies of the deaf and of language deprivation, though in a different way, we can ask how far the outcome departs from the language phenotype constituted by the regular form-meaning correspondences of a conventionally acquired mother tongue. In the period with which we are mainly concerned in this book, Anglo-Norman was a second language, though not one learned by explicit instruction. Its users acquired it in middle childhood, approximately between 5 and 7 years of age, in what appears to have been an immersion environment at school. Their mother tongue would normally have been English. Thanks to the very substantial amount of material extant in Anglo-Norman, spanning nearly 300 years, we will be able to see how far it was influenced by its speakers' mother tongue English. In this study the question at issue, then, is how robust the capacity for acquiring a second language independently of a mother tongue is at that stage of life.

I also aim in this book to address a long-standing problem in the linguistic history of England: Anglo-Norman is widely thought to have died out as a native speaker variety early in the 13th century. Yet from then on we find extensive and growing evidence of its influence on English, raising the problem of how a language variety that had virtually expired could have been so influential. Bringing to bear recent research into language acquisition, particularly the acquisition of a second language in childhood, the status of Anglo-Norman as a source language for contact with English is re-thought and put on a new basis.

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The book is laid out as, first, three chapters that situate the problem of later Anglo-Norman in relation to its historical context and to current issues in the transmission of language, a chapter that sets out the methodology and resources used, and then six chapters that analyse specific areas of language for the outcomes of its acquisition in atypical circumstances.

In considering language acquisition, I have always been guided by Steven Pinker's question: 'What is acquired?' (Pinker 1984), and I believe the equivalent question must be answered in diachronic study, in the form: 'What changes?' To answer it means proposing specific analyses of the linguistic properties that change. Therefore, the approach taken here is formal, in that I concentrate on linguistic forms, but it is not formalist, in the sense of arguing for a single theoretical analysis to the exclusion of others. The analysis chapters take a broadly descriptive approach to the linguistic features of medieval French (including Anglo-Norman) and English. The terms and concepts employed in the chapters on phonology, as well as those on the structure of nominals and of clauses can be found in standard textbooks. Where formal structural analyses are introduced, as in Chapters 8 and 9, explanations are given.

The origins of the book lie in my curiosity about the nature of language acquisition in atypical circumstances, assisted by the 'rich input' on issues to do with second language learning provided by former colleagues at the University of Reading. Along the way, supervising students researching language change and language acquisition constantly refreshed my intention to consider what the limits are to acquiring a language successfully, and what maintains the transmission of language across time.

Because the book assimilates research results from more than one subject area, I have been selective in the sources I have drawn on, and have limited my coverage to the perspectives and findings I judged most relevant to the central topic under discussion in this volume. This has probably meant in some cases that key issues in those subject domains, taken in their own right, may have not been given their due. This applies in particular to questions of what conditions ultimate attainment in L2 acquisition, and also to matters of syntactic theory. In both areas I have tried to adopt a stance that represents what would command fairly general assent in the field, for example invoking a 'sensitive period' facilitating acquisition, rather than a 'critical period' beyond which the human capacity for language acquisition is abruptly switched off. Accordingly, the book is not a guide to current state of research in the respective fields of enquiry, but draws somewhat eclectically on what contributes to a better understanding of the problems discussed.

A wide-ranging piece of research such as this has incurred debts of gratitude to a wide range of people, which it is a most pleasurable duty for me to acknowledge. Going way back, I would like to thank Neil Smith and Roy Harris, who in their very different respects, gave me the knowledge and the curiosity that eventually led to this book, Paul Fletcher, who showed me how to do language acquisition, David Wilkins, who sparked my interest in L2, James Hiddleston, who trusted me to do French, and more recently David Roberts, who trusted me to do English. My indebtedness to David Trotter for the incomparable research opportunities his Anglo-Norman Hub facility provided, as well as for his vast knowledge of the subject area, which will be evident on virtually every page of this book. Others from whom I have gained many insights on Anglo-Norman are Andres Kristol, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Serge Lusignan, Brian Merrilees, Ian Short, William Rothwell, and Marianne Ailes. At key moments, the help and encouragement of Eric Haeberli, David Lightfoot, David Birdsong, Pierre Larrivée, Christiane Marchello-Nizia, Tony Lodge, Paul Brand, Paul Kerswill, Laura Wright, Dominique Nouveau, Herbert Schendl, and Ann Curry have all been greatly appreciated. A research leave semester granted to me by Birmingham City University in 2011 made it possible for me to write up the book. Special thanks go to the series editors for their constant support, and their determination to see this book through to its final state, and to Anke de Looper of John Benjamin's, who in the publication process was there at the right time and knew just what to do. I thank two anonymous reviewers who read the draft of the book in 2011–2012 and gave me much valued feedback. Any remaining errors and misjudgments are my own. Finally I should like to record my gratitude for the endless patience and good humour of my wife Fusae, which allowed me to reach the finishing line still in good spirits.

A language is not some gradually and imperceptibly changing
object which smoothly floats through time and space,
as historical linguistics based on philological material all too easily suggests.
Rather, the transmission of language is discontinuous, and a language is
recreated by each child on the basis of the speech data it hears.

Kiparsky (1968: 175)

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to key issues

1.1 The research problem

Languages without native speakers die out. Unremarkable though this proposition may sound, it challenges us to consider some of the most fundamental issues in the study of the human language faculty. What is a native speaker, and what does it mean for a language to live? It is fairly easy to deal with such questions, at least for pedagogical purposes, by appealing to clearly contrasting examples, such as the different cases of Latin and of Icelandic. Latin now has to be learnt by a process of explicit instruction, and furthermore does not develop across time: the classical models and rules for instruction in Latin remained the same today as 500 years ago. Conversely, those who speak Icelandic have mostly learned it as a mother tongue, and it is a living language in the sense that it changes, as can be demonstrated by comparing its modern manifestations with Old Icelandic, which will show that there have been systemic developments in its morphology and syntax, as well as many lexical changes. Furthermore, native speakers acquiring it sound in certain ways a little different from their parents, a sign that a language is gradually evolving.

Yet although the contrasting cases of Latin and Icelandic may seem to illustrate the issues in question well enough, clear examples do not establish principles. The language variety to be studied in this volume, Anglo-Norman, poses the problem that it appears to have continued to show systemic development, long after losing its native speakers. Far from dying out, it flourished to the point of causing concern in some quarters in the early 14th century that its continued use was threatening the position of English. Importantly, for upwards of 200 years, virtually all those who used it were bilingual, usually with English as their mother tongue. The question, then, is how to relate Anglo-Norman, as the second language in this bilingual setting, to currently viable notions of linguistic nativeness.[1] The status of Anglo-Norman has long been debated, though often by historians and literary scholars whose specialisms lay at some remove from issues in linguistics. Nonetheless, it is of linguistic interest because it clearly raises issues of the nature of a form of language that is no longer a monolingual native speaker variety. In this study criteria will be sought on which to base our assessment of

what counts as a native language variety, and which can be deployed in order to resolve the problem posed by Anglo-Norman.

We return below to the challenges (and opportunities) inherent in addressing the matter in relation to a long-disappeared historical variety. First it should be noted that the core of the problem posed above is very much in the forefront of the linguistic study of contemporary societies. To look no further than English, there are overseas varieties, Singaporean English for example, that children learn as a mother tongue, even though sociolinguists might consider such varieties to have a different status from e.g. British or Australian mother-tongue English. The grounds on which such a distinction would be drawn would typically be that a variety such as Singaporean English is a second language. But nothing in principle prevents a person from being a native speaker of two or more languages. In practice, being a native speaker is generally related to how early the second language is acquired. Much recent research has taken place into this particular question, precisely because so much uncertainty has existed as to the distinction between a monolingual native speaker of a language variety, and a bilingual speaker of the same variety who acquired it in childhood. A central point at issue is whether the second language is acquired independently of the other language in the child's entourage; in the case of Singaporean English this is usually a Malay variety of Chinese, typologically very different from English in its grammatical and phonological systems. *Mutatis mutandis*, the present study will focus on how far Anglo-Norman, typologically a Romance variety, was acquired independently of the originally Germanic system properties of Middle English.

Some of the fundamental issues in linguistics can thus be examined by considering how a language is maintained as a second acquired variety. They are empirical questions, with undoubtedly major theoretical consequences. The generative linguistics precept that the object of study in linguistics is native speaker competence is invoked. So is the distinction drawn by Labov (1994, 2007) between the transmission and the diffusion of a language variety, which involves the difference between linguistically conditioned properties acquired in childhood, and features of a new dialect acquired by an adult who picks them up in adulthood. Both approaches to language, however different they are in terms of approach, have at their heart the concept of a natural process of acquisition. It is the replication of this natural process of native speaker acquisition that is crucial to the survival of a language. The key factor in language maintenance or death is the persistence of opportunities for a significant number of speakers to acquire the language within the time period of early childhood that seems biologically designed for that purpose, and language acquisition studies in the last half-century or so have provided a wealth of detail as to how this process takes place. Essential though this work has been, there is a sense in which it tells us only what we know already, that the human language faculty, in

the sense of Chomsky (2000) works extremely well: children usually acquire something very much like their parents' language. Far rarer have been studies that push at the boundaries of what is possible for the human language faculty. How robust is it, and how far can it cope with suboptimal conditions?[2]

This is the problem space in which the present study operates, the transmission of language 'under exceptional circumstances' (De Graff 1999). We ask what can be deduced about the human language faculty from studying an acquisition scenario that diverges in key respects from the conventional home language/mother tongue scenario. How far is language learnable under non-normal conditions that modify input characteristics, learner characteristics or both? The language variety studied in this volume was transmitted in a context that allows answers to be provided taking both set of factors into account. First, by the period with which we are concerned, it was almost never a mother tongue L1 acquired from birth in a nurturant home setting: it was acquired naturalistically from informal input in an educational setting. Second, learners were typically exposed to it in middle childhood, at a point when a mother tongue L1 had been acquired, but while the opportunity for naturalistic language learning, at least concerning some aspects of language, is generally thought to be still available.

There are major debates over the nature/nurture question in language acquisition, especially over the concept of a critical period for it, but the usual view that 'earlier is better' in this respect is hardly seriously questioned. This is especially the case when it comes to the system properties of a language, notably its syntactic and phonological features. It will be seen that in Anglo-Norman a dissociation is evident by the late C13 between the transmission of inherited forms in phonology and in syntax. Whereas the latter had been successfully transmitted for about 200 years after the Conquest, phonology evidently had not. The analysis chapters of this volume provide empirical substantiation of this point.

1.2 Anglo-Norman and second language transmission

Let us now consider how a long-dead language variety can be studied in relation to the issues of language maintenance and acquisition posed above. What sources of evidence are there, and what can they tell us of the means by which the forms of language were reproduced?

Anglo-Norman is the conventional name for the variety of French used in the British Isles between the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 and the beginning of the 15th century. Largely terminological debates have been conducted on the propriety of this label, and in particular as to whether a later 'Anglo-French' period should be distinguished from an earlier 'Anglo-Norman' period of insular

French, but for convenience the designation 'Anglo-Norman' is retained here as it has institutional prestige associated with the Anglo-Norman Dictionary project and the major source of published texts, the Anglo-Norman Text Society. The choice of the label 'Anglo-Norman' in this study will be given no theoretical significance. Because those who acquired this variety left a rich written record, extending over hundreds of years, its evolution over time can be studied, and equally plentiful data sources from France will allow a comparison to be made with (varieties of) mother tongue mediaeval French.[3] It will thus provide empirical evidence permitting the synchronic and diachronic study of language varieties distinguished by ordinary versus exceptional acquisition circumstances.

While of course the experimental rigour of a laboratory setting can never be attained, it seems that the opportunity afforded by Anglo-Norman may be somewhere near-unique in the above respects. It can provide answers to the question: 'Under what circumstances can a language live?', as much as 'Under what circumstances will a language die?' Evidently, it lived, without native speakers in the conventional sense, for hundreds of years, and then, under well documented circumstances, it died. In this study the aim is to identify the 'support system' that permitted its extended survival, and whose removal caused its death. Answers will be provided by analysing the system properties of Anglo-Norman, especially its grammar and phonology, the levels that most decisively allow conclusions to be drawn about the psycholinguistic status of speaker varieties, i.e. whether they were native-like or not.

Our sources of evidence are essentially of two kinds: the language produced by Anglo-Norman users extant in written texts, and the socio-historical information that is available regarding chiefly the contexts in which Anglo-Norman was used. It is the latter which will substantiate a view of the setting of acquisition which we have labelled 'exceptional'. Admittedly, the school setting is found in many places in the contemporary world (especially in so-called language immersion schemes such as that practised in Canada from the 1970s onwards), so it could be studied directly, without considering data from the 13th or 14th centuries. But the studies made of such contemporary equivalents are essentially synchronic snapshots. They do not offer the opportunity to study over an extended time-frame the evolution of a language acquired in this way, nor to identify the factors potentially responsible for its dissolution.

Above all, Anglo-Norman offers the opportunity to investigate over time the effect of language transmission where initial exposure to a language takes place in middle childhood. In particular, outcomes can be observed when the initial exposure, at around age 5, probably came too late for phonology to be native-like, but was in time for syntax acquisition to be native-like. In this volume those two dimensions are investigated systematically.

There is a quite widespread belief among previous authors that Anglo-Norman (henceforth A-N) survived as a school subject in which older child learners received instruction. Accordingly, the possibility that A-N was transmitted as an instructed L2 will be treated as a plausible eventuality, even though the historical record offers no evidence for formal instruction until too late a date for it to be of explanatory value. Our approach will be to test this claim by looking at the language produced by those who acquired A-N, to see which account is better supported by linguistic analysis: A-N as an instructed L2 taught to older learners, or as a naturalistic variety acquired in mid-childhood. If the outcomes tend more towards showing the effects of naturalistic acquisition than of instructed learning, this will be counted against the claim that it was 'taught', in the sense of being the object of conscious instruction.

To return to the exceptional scenarios envisaged by De Graff (1999), Anglo-Norman constituted an exceptional case of first language acquisition in the sense that almost none of its users acquired it as a conventional primary L1 in a home setting. By the period in which we have a large body of textual sources, the late 12th century, they were native speakers of English as well as speakers of Anglo-Norman. As shown by Short (1980), earlier distinctions between French and English ethnic communities when referring to historical events in England were replaced by using the term 'English' to refer to all subjects of the English crown, regardless of Norman or Saxon ancestry. Once it was no longer clear from individuals' language what their ethnic origin was, the situation ceased to be one of a societally bilingual but individually monolingual country. Individuals enjoying superior status by birth or by education knew French, in its insular incarnation, at least as well as English. Lower status individuals generally knew only English. The primary first language of virtually everyone was English, it is thought, because even aristocratic infants were attended by English-speaking wet nurses. But higher-status children subsequently acquired French, to the extent of being able to provide the audience for a substantial literary culture, as well as providing the producers and end-users of an extensive central and local government bureaucracy conducted in Anglo-Norman. A key issue in this book will be to understand how this was made possible for so long. In other societies, cases of a non-native higher status language being used for administrative and literary purposes are common enough (present-day Francophone Africa for example). But this state of affairs has been made possible because French has in these contexts been an instructed language imparted as a school subject. As noted above, A-N does not appear to have been passed on in this way. This is the reason why it poses an interesting puzzle: it offers the prospect of understanding the outcomes of language acquisition, and the continued transmission of a language, in unusual circumstances, and in these respects may contribute to the study of the human capacity for language.

1.3 Language transmission

The modern linguistic concepts deployed in this volume include the notion of the reliable transmission of a language in the context of child language acquisition, a point common to generative approaches (Lightfoot 1999, 2006) and sociolinguistic ones (Labov 1994, 2007). Both perspectives highlight the ability of young children to acquire linguistic systems accurately, though both maintain that variable input may be a catalyst for language change. The present research draws on these insights to shed light on the problem of the linguistic status of A-N.

Transmission is defined by Labov (2007: 7) as 'the product of the acquisition of language by young children'. It is characteristic of systems transmitted in such fashion that richly structured distinctions are observed, and that as systems become modified they are still linguistically constrained, albeit that in a subsequent state of language such constraints operate differently than in an earlier one. Transmission can operate as a process of change, in the form of 'incrementation' of a feature by children, who 'reproduce and advance their parents' system' (Labov 2007: 51). Young children accentuate the direction of change, taking up a variant feature witnessed in their caregivers' language and systematising it. The transmission of language in childhood is contrasted with the spread of a feature by diffusion, typically the learning of new forms by adults via contact with another language variety. Where modifications to language arise by diffusion, they tend to efface linguistic constraints on the distribution of forms.[4] 'The common marks of adult language learning [are] the loss of linguistic configurations that are reliably transmitted only by child language learners' (Labov 2007: 14). This is dubbed 'generational learning'. A study by Tagliamonte & D'Arcy (2009) of new grammar and discourse particle features in contemporary English showed that incrementation peaks in adolescent use, so young children may not yet drastically modify the frequencies of a new variant as compared with the input they hear. The change gathers momentum in the speech community itself. This is important for our purpose in this research because it means that the observed phenomena noted in our analysis chapters, of conformity with changes in continental French, do not have to be seen as somehow 'imported' into England from France, but rather can be interpreted as normal language acquisition in the transmission scenario of Labov and others.

The approach taken by Lightfoot (1999, 2006), in common with much other work in principles and parameters research, is to see the role of the child in grammar acquisition as identifying cues in input to successful parameter-setting, thanks to an innate endowment of some kind which favours the acquisition of language naturalistically (i.e. without instruction) in early childhood. Language change may take place when modifications to input arise, as for example in

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