LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY IN THE MANOR OF SPELSBURY AT THE END OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

Luis IGLESIAS-RABADE

Traditionally, many students of Anglo-Norman contended over the levels of usage of this language and English in the post-Conquest period. Some have held that English was almost entirely superseded by Anglo-Norman, to the extent that even the lower classes have been supposed to have spoken French. This notion, due largely to Vising (1923), has been vigorously opposed by the members of the historical school, for whom Anglo-Norman had become a cultural artificial language, and can certainly never have made any impact on lower class speech (Baugh, 1951). Both these positions have been supported by written records, but it may be questioned whether much of this textual evidence is really representative of the spoken language. The contending scholars have probably shown little awareness of the need to study the language usage in the light of the various social strata of the time within an ampler context of a general understanding of the linguistic consequences of particular socio-cultural settings.

Current socio-linguistic research allows us to study the nature of variation in the spoken language of today on the basis of traced patterns

of social and stylistic variation. During the 1980's, however, it has appeared more and more likely that the analysis of diachronic variable speech data may shed further light on the great unsolved problems of language usage in the past (Short, 1980; Richter, 1985). Following this historical sociolinguistic trend, this article intends to grasp boldly the nettle and try to reconcile the conflicting interpretations of the textual evidence through the examination of the likely sociolinguistic interactions in a typical small English community, the manor of Spelsbury in Oxfordshire, in the last three decades of the thirteenth century.

Before attacking the linguistic problem, we must first examine part of the social organization of medieval England, which has been described as:

> "a state of society in which all or a great part of public rights and duties are inextricably interwoven with the tenure of land, in which the whole governmental system –financial, military, judicial– is part of the law of private property" (Chrimes1966).

This social pattern, the feudal system introduced into England in its purest and strictest form by William the Conqueror, was generated by the basic principle that all land was held contingently in return for service, rent or tribute paid to an overlord, together with the understanding that in the last instance the whole realm was the property of the King. Within this system, the fundamental unit of land was the manor, for it was at the level of the manor that agricultural production upon which the economy was based was organized. As a result, the majority of English peasants, whatever their legal status as regards their freedom to the land they tilled, were in practice tied lifelong to the manor upon which they were born, whereas the lords of these manors (when not themselves members of the higher nobility) made up the lowest social stratum that was free in the sense of not being directly involved in working the land. A large proportion of lords were in fact permanently absent from their manors.

Within the manor, a large part of the land constituted the lord's demesne, whose produce was entirely at the lord's disposal. This land was worked by the villeins who made up most of the population and paid this and other services in return for the benefits they enjoyed, which ranged from the possession of a cottage and plots of their own

(for which they also paid rent) to the mere receipt of bed and board in the manor hall or its outhouses. Between the villeins and the lord there was nevertheless a small "middle class" of freeholders, who paid rent for their land but were not obliged to work the demesne, and who themselves maintained hewes (servants living and sleeping in the freeholder's house) and undersettles (a family living in a separate cottage on the freeholding).

Apart from the well defined social groups mentioned above, a typical manor featured three individuals of great importance: the parson, the steward and the bailiff. The steward and his assistant the bailiff were the officers who effectively ran the manor in the absence of its lord, by whom they were appointed. Their main duties were to preside over hallmote (the manor court held every three weeks) and to collect and administer the revenues paid to the lord by the peasants of the manor. The parson, who was usually also chosen by the lord of the manor, not only received tithes paid by the villagers, but also the produce of the glebeland worked by his hewes and undersettles.

The actual management of the demesne was carried out by a number of subordinate officers, the chief of whom was the reeve, who organized the service done by the villeins in the demesne. The duties and denominations of the others varied considerably from one part of the country to another: a typical manor might have a hayward to watch over the lord's corn, and over other crops at harvest time; a woodward to guard the lord's woodland; a beadle to deliver summonses and collect fines and rents, and, if the manor was large enough to have its own market, an aletaster to inspect weights and measures. These lesser officers, including the reeve, were in principle elected by the villagers –often yearly– subject to the lord's approval (or that of the steward), but the fact that the names of their offices were often used as identifying surnames in court proceedings shows that in practice these posts were virtually perennial and possibly hereditary. No-one will have stood against any candidate proposed by the manor hall; and in the absence of any such "official" candidate in a small community, there would probably be general agreement –or at least an unchangeable balance of opinion– concerning the most suitable man for the job.

In the case of the manor at Spelsbury, we can compare the social composition recorded in *Domesday Book* in 1086 by William I's

commissioners with that noted in 1279 by the clerks sent out by Edward I to compile the *Rotuli Hundredorum*, which revised the by then outdated records. In *Domesday* (16.161) we find that:

> "The Bishop of Worcester holds Spelsbury and Urso holds from him. 10 hides. Land for 16 ploughs. In lordship 4 ploughs; 5 slaves; 25 villagers and 12 smallholders with 12 ploughs. A mill at 50 d; meadow, 36 acres; woodland 1 league and a furlong long and 7 furlongs wide. The value was and is £10".

The plough (land) and the hide are both usually taken to have measured about 120 acres, being defined as the land that could be tilled by an 8-ox plough team in one year. This was the area considered necessary for the support of a free family and its dependants. Why the ploughland and the hide are differentiated in this passage from *Domesday* is not clear. The yardland mentioned later in the *Rotuli Hundredorum* measured 30 acres. At an average family size of 4.2 persons (Russell, 1958: Part 3), the Spelsbury of 1086 was thus inhabited by about 160 people.

In the following 200 years Spelsbury changed quite little, though the need for the revision of *Domesday* is illustrated by the fact that the lord of the manor (actually a lady) had somehow acquired the right to hold the view of frankpledge[2] and certain other rights normally reserved to the King, and which the Conqueror had been notoriously loath to alienate. Spelsbury was still held from the King by the Bishop of Worcester; from the Bishop it was now held by the Earl of Warenne and Surrey, and from him by the dowager countess, Lady Angareta de Beauchamp, widow of the former Earl (see Table 1). It had also grown minimally in comparison with some other manors; the entry for Spelsbury in the *Rotuli Hundredorum* (II-332) mentions 55 tenements, i.e. a population of about 230, or rather more if hewes and undersettles are taken into account; this 50% rise may be compared with the ninefold increase in the population of manors like Hales Owen in Worcestershire. 33 of the 55 tenements were one-yardland plots held by villeins, among them Thomas Reeve. Ten villeins had half-yardland holdings, among them Ricard Bedell. There were six cotters.

The main social difference between the Spelsbury of 1086 and the Spelsbury of 1279 was the presence of six freeholders: William of Colthurn, Thomas le Venur, John Fraunckelein, Henry of Richel, Thomas Smith and Robert le Duk. William of Colthurn held a mill and 6 acres of land and was free of all duties except attendance at the twice-yearly view of frakpledge, in return for which he paid a yearly rent of 20s 4d. Thomas le Venur held three yardlands and a half and was bound to do suit (at hallmote) and forensic service (services owed by the manor to the King, chiefly attendance at the royal Hundred and Shire Courts). Johan Fraunckelein held two yardlands and six acres of assart (forest clearing), likewise for suit and service. Henry of Richel held one yardland for a rent of 3s, suit and service, whereas Robert le Duk held but a half yardland for 4s 6d rent, 6d worth of ploughing, 3d worth of boon works in harvest and four hens; the labour service, which would no doubt be performed by Robert's hewes and undersettles, presumably made up for the freedom from suit and forensic service.Finally, Thomas Smith held one yardland in return for suit at hallmote and the duty of making the coulters and shares for three of the lady's ploughs (out of her iron) (see Table 1).

Lady Angareta was of Norman stock. Her steward, bailiff and parson, though not mentioned explicitly, were also no doubt of Norman or French origin; the steward and the bailiff because these posts were in practice often hereditary since the conquest of England by the Normans, who had of course installed their own dependants in these offices, and the parson because he was chosen by the lady of the manor and was therefore probably either a poor relative, or a relative o someone for whom she wished to do a favour (who would no doubt be a member of the French nobility), or possibly the son of some favoured Spelsbury family who had taken holy orders (in which case his father must necessarily have been a freeholder, because villeins' sons had been forbidden from taking holy orders by the Constitutions of Clarendon of 1164). Of the six freeholders, four have surnames indicative of a French origin: Thomas le Venur, Henry of Richel, Robert Le Duk and John Fraunckelein. The French or Norman provenance of Le Venur, Richel and Le Duk might admit some type of uncertainty, yet this is not so in the case of John Fraunckelein who was probably descended from the very first freeman of Spelsbury after the Norman Conquest. For this a Norman surname, which itself means "freeman" was applied in the eleventh century (after 1066) to men who had been

granted their freedom as a reward for military service under a knight. Two other freeholders, (William of Colthurn and Thomas Smith), seem to have been of English descent, although Colthurn and Smith must not necessarily be considered as English surnames as it was quite a frequent occurrence that scribes in manorial Court records registered people until the middle of the fourteenth century, identifying them in utter confusion. Thus, some are recorded by their family relationship, others by their profession or place of origin. Therein Colthurn might possibly be a rural settlement and Smith the profession of Thomas. However, we venture to assess that William of Colthurn and Thomas Smith were of English provenance due to their "hypothetical" little fluency in French by considering that this was the reason why they were freed from attending the Hundred Courts where proceedings were, as we try to prove below, run in the most part in French.

In inferring the preferred linguistic usage of the groups and individuals described above, it must be borne in mind that the use of French was not simply a question of racial origin, but a matter of social status. It has been said, indeed, that during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries:

> "even the peasants became sick of their language and endeavoured to speak a little French, which was then no small sign of distinction, and no wonder, for every French charlatan who came to England was regarded as a fine gentleman simply because he was arrogant and could speak his own language" (Clover 1888: 71).

It may nevertheless be confidently asumed that these endeavours were largely fruitless; if the English peasantry as a whole had at any time come to use French as their normal means of expression it is inconceivable that English should ever have been recovered. It is true that French may have been thoroughly learnt and adopted by entreprising individuals who, for example, escaped from the manor to be taken into service by French speaking families in towns; but the bulk of the villeinage must indubitably have continued to use English as their chief language. Contrariwise, the social benefits of French –indeed, its social correctness– must have meant that all those social classes in which the Conquest established a French speaking majority continued to prefer this language until in the fourteenth century the Hundred Years' War, the Black Death and the growth of cities combined to change the social structure of England and the ruling classes' attitude

towards the English tongue. We may accordingly be fairly sure that French was the language habitually spoken not only by the Lady Angareta, the families of her steward and bailiff and her parson (a futher reason for supposing the latter to have been of French origin is indeed that Lady Angareta will have preferred her parson to speak her own language quite naturally), but also by the four French freeholders, whereas English will have been the mother tongue and major linguistic medium of all those below the rank of freeholder. English was probably also the language of the two English freeholders, William of Colthurn and Thomas Smith. The former, or one of his ancestors, had presumably been able to buy his freedom with the profits of his lucrative milling business, which likewise enabled him to acquire his 6-acre estate and his freedom from almost all civic duties. The latter, on the other hand, seems not to have been particularly rich, and his freedom may have been granted in view of his special function as blacksmith, which would be largely incompatible with participation in working the demesne because he would be required to prepare and repair the agricultural implements that the villeins were to use on the land. It is significant that Thomas Smith, like William of Colthurn and Robert le Duk, was freed of forensic service, for whereas the latter two quite evidently paid through the nose for this exemption, there is no evidence that the blacksmith did. It seems likely that this artisan was considered fit for service at a French-speaking court, i.e. that he would be unable to follow the proceedings because his command of French was insufficient.

Nobody doubts that Anglo-Norman was the official language of law in the post-Conquest period, particularly of proceedings run in Royal Courts. The chronicler Robert Holcot, quoted by Vising (1923: 13), wrote that the Conqueror "ordinavit quod nullus in Curia Regis placitaret nisi in Gallico". But that French was the official language of manorial courts is still under discussion. This article is written, however, assuming on the whole that Anglo-Norman was the official language of pleadings in the Court of Spelsbury in the last decades of the thirteenth century. We substantiate this argument broadly in the *Statute of Pleading (Statutes of Realm II)* of 1362 in which the Parliament urged suitors and judges of local courts to run their proceedings in English due to the "great mischiefs" caused to the

villagers for running proceedings in French. One should not forget that this State Document was issued nearly a hundred years after the time this research covers, that is, in a period in which English had already recovered formal purposes. It is also very illustrative of the appearance of many handbooks of Court procedure for stewards in the thirteenth century written in French and titled *La Court de Baron*, but no equivalent text in English has ever been found. The validity of these arguments helps us to substantiate that Anglo-Norman was alive in the manor of Spelsbury as in most manors of England, at least in two decisive and dreadful instances – at Church and in the Manor Court.

The contact between the mainly French-speaking and mainly English-speaking groups identified above (Table 1) was continual and fundamental to the life of the manor. In such a closed society, virtually everyone must have been bilingual in some sense and to some extent; the problem is to ascertain in what sense and to what extent. Bloomfield (1967: 56) concisely defined bilingualism as "a native-like control of two languages". Apparently less demandingly, Haugen (1953: 7) considered that, granted command over one language, the bilingual has the ability "to produce complete and meaningful utterances in the other language"; and three years later (Haugen 1956: 10) that:

> "for any given case of bilingualism it will therefore be important to establish two quite different dimensions: a) the speaker's knowledge of each language, which may range from a mere smattering to literary mastery; and b) the language distance, ranging from a barely perceptible difference to completely contrasting structures".

Weinreich (1968: 496) similarly distinguishes between "coordinate bilingualism" – when a speaker enjoys equally complete command of more than one language, either as the result of learning them simultaneously as his native languages during childhood or through subsequent acquisition of total mastery of a non-mother tongue –and "subordinate bilingualism"– when there is non-native proficiency or fluency in the non-mother tongue. A different set of distinctions was drawn by Elwert (1973), who classified bilingual phenomena as a) individual bilingualism, in which the individual acquires a "native-like control of two or more languages" that is lacked by most of his fellows; b) social bilingualism, in which two languages are spoken by the majority of individuals within a particular geographical or social area;

and c) stylistic bilingualism, in which two forms of the same language are spoken by the same group for different purposes – formal and informal usage. Elwert's "stylistic bilingualism" is in fact what is usually called "diglossia", a word coined by Charles A. Ferguson, who defined it (Ferguson 1959: 336) as referring to:

> "a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal purposes but is not used by any other sector of the community for ordinary conversation".

This definition of the term "diglossia" allows its application to widely differing kinds of situation. At one extreme, "monoglots" do not exist; as Ferguson himself states, every community is diglossic, since nobody speaks in the same way in both formal and informal contexts. At the other extreme, the term also lends itself to situations in which a single social group uses two different languages, a higher language for formal purposes and a lower one for informal conversation. Thus, Joshua Fishman, commenting on Ferguson's use of the term, says (Fishman 1972: 92) that:

> "whereas one set of behaviors, attitudes and values supported, and was expressed in, one language, another set of behaviours, attitudes, and values supported and was expressed in the other. Both sets of behaviours, attitudes, and values were fully accepted as culturally legitimate and complementary (i.e. non-conflictual), and indeed little if any conflict between them was possible in view of the functional separation between them. This separation was most often along the lines of a High Language, on the one hand, utilized in conjunction with religion, education and other aspects of High Culture, and a Low Language on the other hand, utilized in conjunction with everyday pursuits of hearth, home and work of a lower sphere".

It is this second sense ("diglossic bilingualism") which is relevant to thirteenth century Spelsbury, where the linguistic behaviour of the manor as a whole may be described as "social subordinate bilingualism of a diglossic nature" – "social" because some degree of bilingual ability will have been possessed by a large part of the population rather

than a few gifted or privileged individuals; "subordinate" because the skill of all but a few individuals in French and English will have been quite unequal, some (Francophones) speaking better French than English and others (Anglophones) better English than French; and "diglossic" because the switch from English to French or vice versa will have depended on the context and content of the speech act. This latter aspect requires some further attention.

Within their own social circle, the Anglophones of mediaeval Spelsbury will have spoken English and the Francophones French. In reaching conclusions regarding the kind of language-switching practised by these two groups when brought into contact with members of the opposite group, we must determine which social contexts demanded the use of the high language (French) by Anglophones, and which the use of the low language (English) by Francophones. Two kinds of social contact may be distinguished; on the one hand, the interaction between superiors and underlings in the course of their daily tasks; and on the other, situation such as mass or hallmote, in which the variety of speech employed was as important a part of the event as the factual information conveyed. In their everyday contacts at work, in the home or the fields it seems likely that intercourse between freeholders and villeins must have taken place mainly in different sytles of a single language, for as Mackey (1962: 51) says:

> "a closed community in which everyone is fluent in two languages could get along just as well with one language".

and in view of the fact that almost all the vocabulary of Modern English relating to husbandry is of Anglo-Saxon origin, we may conclude that this common working language was English. The English used by the freeholders of French origin may indeed have been very defective, with strong interference from French; and the speech of the villeins themselves had no doubt acquired a considerable number of French loans associated with well assimilated concepts and artefacts of French culture, but the matrix in which such variation occurred seems to have been English. At hallmote or mass, on the other hand, French will have prevailed; at mass because the priest, even if –improbably– of English descent, will have preached in the language of the local upper class; and

at hallmote because it was the prescribed language and was in any case the language of the steward who presided over the proceedings, whom few will have wished to antagonize by speaking English. That the lower classes were capable of using some kind of French on these occasions is attested by the fact that the minor manor officers such as Thomas Reeve and Richard Bedell, though villeins, had to present suit against offenders in French; and it is unquestionable that in their daily life they had abundant opportunity to learn sufficient French for these purposes.

In conclusion, the diglossic aspect of the linguistic behaviour current in late thirteenth century Spelsbury is likely to have reduced to this; that the lower classes adopted the upperclass language in formal situations in which its use was obligatory or politic, whereas the upper classes adopted the lower-class language when to do so facilitated their practical ends.

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