I

Introduction

CHAPTER I

The metaphysics of medieval English

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This book explores how language forms, ideas about language, and the history of a language produce one another. And its crucial point is that the lines of influence among these concepts work in multiple ways. Looked at from one direction, a change in vowel quality (for example) can serve as a found fact for a larger coordinated mechanism like the Great Vowel Shift, which itself can become evidence for the broad separation of early modern from medieval English. Looked at from another, a broad historiographic category like Middle English (literature or language) can foster a sense of linguistic upheaval specifically after the Norman Conquest, which in turn can label some types of ongoing morphological variation as the loss of grammatical gender. Ultimately, this book concerns how we think about language, and in the process of thinking about it give substance to an array of phenomena, including grammar, usage, variation, change, regional dialects, sociolects, registers, periodization, and even language itself. To be sure, none of these concepts is arbitrary. But they all are arguments.

Some outstanding scholarship has focused on what I have called the found fact quality of medieval English. Edited collections like *The Oxford History of English* and the first two volumes of *The Cambridge History of the English Language* have laid open grammatical stabilities that identify the medieval period as a specific stage in the history of English. The structural details of this stage also have been well discussed throughout a long history of Old and Middle English grammars. And any number of recent critical studies, such as Ardis Butterfield's *The Familiar Enemy* and Elaine Treharne's *Living through Conquest*, begin with presumptions about stable medieval language categories and their conformity to modern language usage in order to advance insightful interpretations of medieval cultural and literary practices.

Such found facts are rooted, in turn, in long-standing ideas about coordinated structural and sociolinguistic change. Grammatical details like Old English Breaking, Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening, and

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the Great Vowel Shift are staples of histories of English, as is the linking of social transformation with the shift from Old to Middle stages of the language, the impact of Norman French on English, the development of a standard language, and the cultivation of the vernacular. For approximately two centuries ideas like these have been foundational not just in thinking about the medieval period but also in narrating English's 1,500-year history in general. Indeed, divisions between Old and Middle English and between Middle English and early Modern English are axiomatic in histories of the language, providing rationales for both the organization of the linguistic and literary record into historical stages and the focusing of cultural upheaval in the transitional moments between those stages.

At the same time, the structures and theories of language in medieval England have been the subject of increasing scrutiny and even doubt. A categorical shift between Old and Middle English, for instance, has been undermined by both grammar and usage – by work on grammatical gender and on the continuity of English from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries.[1] And the neat contours and phonological integrity of the Great Vowel Shift may largely be the product of nineteenth-century linguistic historiography.[2] If we are not quite experiencing the kind of scientific revolution described by Thomas Kuhn, we certainly have ample reasons to question many of the critical givens of the English language as it was used in the pre-modern period.[3]

Hence the appearance of *Imagining Medieval English*. Relying on broad theoretical perspectives and utilizing various kinds of evidence and sources, the book is the first to concentrate on what might be called the metaphysics of medieval English: the language's structural traits but also the sociolinguistic and theoretical expectations that frame them and make them real, whether today or in the past. It offers a comprehensive and critical rethinking of found facts, then, but also of enabling ideas. In these ways, *Imagining Medieval English* significantly and provocatively extends a developing paradigm for approaching the structures and theories of medieval English. And its rethinking affects views not just of medieval language practices but also of their modern descendants, for to a significant extent, understandings of medieval and Modern English dynamically depend on one another.

The very concept of medieval English is a good place to begin. Conventionally, medieval English might be defined as the Germanic language used widely and nearly exclusively in England during the medieval period, or from about 500 CE to about 1500 CE. So far, so good. And this definition

might be expanded to encompass certain period considerations of grammar (such as the phonemic character of vowel length), usage (such as the language's presence in a restricted range of domains and written genres), and repertoire (such as the variability of orthography). A definition like this has much to recommend it, based as it apparently is on certain hard facts. But it fails to capture the elusive nature of the facts themselves, as well as the elusive purposes to which those facts are put.

James Murray, the first editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, once said that the concern of the Philological Society was the "perfection of the Dictionary in its *data*."[4] To this end Murray set about a process of collecting written quotations – a process that took him over thirty years and that continues today – that he and his staff then could assemble into semantic categories illustrating the histories of individual words as well as outlining the contours of the historical English lexicon. In effect, Murray provided evidence alongside his conclusions and thereby underscored the reliability of both. The data of usage and the data of the English lexicon necessarily verified one another.

Yet Murray's data for the Middle Ages, indeed any data for the Middle Ages, can achieve perfection in only very limited ways. They are all written, of course, and for the most part they are all written in manuscripts: for every Ruthwell Cross or Franks Casket, there are hundreds of booklets, codices, and rolls. And any inscribed text necessarily reflects one or more written genres, whether legal, theological, historical, or belletristic. Even written representations of spoken language, Colette Moore argues later in this book, are performative, evoking a stylized written conception of ordinary speech rather than simply unmediated talk. And if before anything else medieval language data are exclusively written data, they also are data produced by the then small English population, perhaps less than 10 percent of all adults, who could read and write.

The more we pursue this line of thinking, the more limitations we see and the farther the record of medieval English falls from perfection. For instance, the most commonly consulted format for written medieval texts today is of course not the medieval manuscript but the scholarly edition, which fashions medieval data in still other ways. Editors may emend silently, or construct critical texts, and both procedures have the advantage of recovering (potentially) an author's original intentions. But they also have the disadvantage of concealing what real medieval speakers – various scribes – actually wrote and might have considered well-formed English.[5] As Simon Horobin points out, indeed, scribes are themselves sociolinguistic informants who can reveal much about medieval language practices.

Despite this, and despite the fact that distinguishing scribal from authorial language always involves critical judgment as well as linguistic data, since the fifteenth century and its praise of Chaucer's illuminations of English, the language of the text (and specifically of its author) has been the focus of most critical commentary. Chaucer in particular, Helen Cooper shows, has been the lodestar that long has guided explorations of medieval English in general. Belletristic written language like that of his poetry, rather than scribal language or spoken language or the language of commerce and advertisement, is what is codified in Johnson's *Dictionary* as well as the *OED*, and it is what histories of English still foreground. As essential as they are, dictionaries further muddy the study of English when they are understood to provide an exact rendering of historical practice, since the earliest citations in the *OED* or the *Middle English Dictionary* are not always the earliest occurrences in the written record. Perhaps more significantly, the earliest extant written example can lag by decades, even centuries, behind the earliest usage. The upheaval of English grammar at all levels (morphological, lexical, and syntactic) that in the written record follows the Norman Conquest and that serves as one of the key organizing principles for the medieval period, then, may well be only apparent, recording changes that had figured for many years in spoken language. The characteristically Middle English leveling and reduction of final unstressed syllables, as well as the habitual subject–verb order in main clauses, in fact appear already in tenth-century Old English texts. As in any area of historical linguistic study, Cynthia Allen illustrates, the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.

All these issues complicate our understanding of medieval English. They all raise questions about what we can comprehend and how we can comprehend it. What makes language data reliable, for instance? How can we know them apart from our frames of analysis, whether linguistic or literary? And how can we construct these frames without the data? What relevance do medieval pronouncements about language, whether by kings or clerics, have to the English used by the vast majority of illiterate speakers? Most broadly, just what constitutes the data of medieval English, as opposed to (say) the data of particular text types, such as written charters or written poetry? In Andrew Galloway's analysis, literary language always imposes generic constraints on spoken forms.

Murray was certainly correct to say that data can produce historical study's perfection, then. But they are equally its biggest challenge. The linguistic record from the years 500 to 1500, surviving as it does in manuscripts and inscriptions, is shaped by chance, access to literacy, and

social practice. Within the framework of the uniformitarian principle, which dictates that whatever is impossible now would have been impossible in the past, reconstructions and comparative evidence allow us to fill in some gaps in this historical record.[6] But this kind of evidence is probably most reliable in the narrowest details, such as phonology and morphology, and increasingly less reliable as we move through larger categories like words, syntax, sociolinguistic usage, and cultural practice. Further, the historical record, for the most part, is partial and, as William Labov has said of all historical data, not created to prove any point.[7] As historians of language we often have to fall back on anecdotal evidence, even though, as the old adage has it, the plural of anecdote is not data. Ultimately, medieval English, whether in large discursive habits or in the localized grammatical detail that Jeremy Smith examines, is less a found fact than one constructed through interpretation and classification of the linguistic record by means of varying practical and theoretical concerns. And as a label for the first millennium of English's history, "medieval" itself represents an argument about the categorization, continuity, and discontinuity of this record.

Perhaps the greatest challenges we confront in approaching this record are what might be called the fault lines between medieval and modern linguistic sensibilities. Put simply, medieval English speakers do not seem to have been interested in many of the things that interest modern linguists and literary scholars. What poets and even clerics thought was linguistically significant, indeed, does not well match what we tend to think of as significant. For as much attention as historical linguistics of the past two centuries has paid to the Norman Conquest, for instance, we have virtually no contemporary comments about any linguistic changes associated with it – no notices that grammatical gender is disappearing or word order becoming more fixed. And the same is true of the emergence of Winchester Old English or Chancery Standard, of the differences between the speech of adults and that of children, of the acquisition of English by non-native speakers, or of the earliest phonological changes associated with the Great Vowel Shift. As interested as we are in these topics as well as in language as an expression of political resistance and ethnic and regional identity, as much as we talk about a subversive vernacular, with a few exceptions medieval writers rarely comment on these matters.

Even when medieval English speakers do talk about topics that loom large in modern literary and linguistic discussions, they often do so with different emphases. In recent years multilingualism thus has emerged as a particular scholarly interest. But while modern comments often focus on details like code-switching or cultural practices like the appropriation of

literary authority by individual vernacular writers, medieval ones charac-
teristically emphasize the juxtaposition of languages in the abstract or the
theological implications of language use. When Norman chroniclers wrote
about post-Conquest language habits in England, for example, they often
framed language contact as an other-worldly experience, one that took
place between revenants and humans rather than Francophones and
Anglophones. William of Newburgh thus tells of a pair of extraordinary
green children who emerge from an East Anglian ditch, speaking some
unknown language, while Gerald of Wales narrates the life of a boy
captured by pygmies, whose language he acquires and is able to explain
when he returns and becomes a priest. In this way the chroniclers manage
to look only obliquely at the linguistic situation created by their presence in
England. Similarly, when later writers viewed the post-Conquest English
linguistic experience, they did so with an uneasiness born of increasing
tensions with France at that time, which they projected onto history.
Indeed, stories about William the Conqueror's desire to extirpate English
date to the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, not to the eleventh.[8]

What even this evidence means is uncertain, since clerical usage and
attitudes need not be the same as those of speakers on the ground (in
Christopher Cain's phrasing). We know that clerks and the Church Fathers
regarded language change as a reflex of Babel and the arrogance associated
with its construction, but what did real medieval millers and real nuns think
about historical changes in the English they spoke, or about the evident
atrophy of French language skills in the late fourteenth century? And we
know that Anglo-Saxon manuscripts were actively copied in monasteries
into the twelfth century. But even as this continuity again blurs any neat
distinctions between the Old and Middle English periods, it does little to
tell us whether by the twelfth century people on the street – or, for that
matter, many monks themselves – regarded early forms of English as
archaic. We might well ask whether anyone in medieval England even
had a sense of archaism (at least one that matched Spenser's) as the cultiva-
tion of recognizably out-of-date forms for literary and political purposes.[9]

Without doubt medieval English was part of a multilingual repertoire,
making it what Seth Lerer describes as a relational term: English as related
not only to other languages (chiefly Latin, French, and Norse) but among
other forms of English itself, i.e., regional and social dialects. We can use a
frame like this to sort individual texts and language forms, though not
without in the process once more shaping the nature of the texts and forms
themselves. Simply by labeling a text as in Kentish or Northumbrian
English, that is, we fashion a variety from what the manuscripts preserve

only as variation. And modern terminology can produce similar transform-
ations of the medieval record. In a multilingual world, for instance, speakers
still might have what is commonly and professionally known as a mother
tongue: a language spoken from birth and, presumably, learned in part from
a mother. When surveying the languages of England in the late fourteenth
century, Thomas Usk in fact uses this very idea: "Let than clerkes endyten
in Latyn, for they have the propretee of science, and the knowynge in that
facultee; and let Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt
termes, for it is kyndely to their mouthes; and let us shewe our fantasyes in
such words as we lerneden of our dames tonge."[10] Yet in a world where
some or many speakers had wet nurses, studied Latin in school, spoke
French at home and abroad, and simply moved among multiple languages
during the course of a day, a mother tongue, in its status as well as its
characteristics, becomes as elusive as Murray's perfect data. At the very least,
Ad Putter demonstrates, this is a term without a fixed medieval reference.

Similar things might be said of regional dialects. Since the nineteenth
century, when projects like Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary*
were undertaken, they have been a common way for organizing medieval
linguistic data and their social implications, inevitably by attaching
modern associations to them. Projecting modern regional attitudes and
notions of dialect writing onto the Middle Ages, thus, J. R. R. Tolkien saw
the northernisms in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* as "a slender jest" at which only
"a philologist can laugh sincerely."[11] And utilizing what is called the "fit
technique," both the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* and *The
Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* rely on geography as the primary
determinant of linguistic form.[12] Yet medieval language – any language –
equally is conditioned by speaker identity and text type, purpose, and
history. Says Merja Stenroos, in short, human geography is not the same as
physical geography. And the medieval English we see, as well as how we see
it, is located in both landscapes.

The grammar of Modern English and modern ideas of grammar in
general, particularly when unexamined, likewise can affect our sense of
medieval English. They can encourage us to see in Old and Middle
English contemporary notions of linguistic regularity and irregularity,
error, and self-expression. More broadly, categories like Old and Middle
English themselves, or even West Saxon or a West Midlands dialect,
impose a static identity and historical development on what, the records
demonstrate, was always a continuous process of linguistic variation. And
they can do so, David Matthews contends, for reasons that transcend
linguistic structure and periodization. Even as Anglo-Saxon has designated

a structural stage of English, it also has testified for the ethnicity of at least some of its speakers.

The history of medieval English thus becomes an attempt less to perfect the data than to identify them, to hold them together, and to find causes and effects among them. And to do this becomes an act of imagination in the sense used by medieval rhetoricians: the construction of a composite mental picture out of sometimes discordant sensory perceptions. This is a continually redrawn picture, one that must visualize grammar as witnessed in the forms preserved by manuscripts and inscriptions; use this grammar to visualize moments of stasis (like dialects) and narratives of change (like periodizations); and use this synchronic variation and diachronic change to visualize sociolinguistic movements like a vernacular culture, a national identity mediated by language, or a golden age of language and literature. And as I said at the outset, this hermeneutic chain can be traced in multiple directions. The perception of a triumphant English leads to the visualization of regularized grammatical forms, just as the perception of grammatical irregularity produces a picture of linguistic and cultural primitivism.

Imagining Medieval English offers an original and broadly disruptive set of arguments about English, its uses, and this hermeneutic chain between the years 500 and 1500. Given the book's focus on both the linguistic record and its conceptual framing, multiple continuities run throughout the twelve original chapters that it contains. Indeed, the chapters aspire to engage the metaphysics of medieval English not as a disparate collection of papers on related topics but as a coherent whole, and in this, too, seek to go beyond current critical discussions. To further this effect, the chapters are arranged in four clusters, with the chapters in Part II, "Organizing ideas," all considering how broad perspectives categorize the medieval English record. Exploring medieval English not as a set of standards, teleologically driven, but as a set of contingencies, Seth Lerer argues that medieval English was a social condition of people living with competing vernaculars, synchronically differing dialects, and an awareness of ongoing diachronic change. Jeremy Smith then champions what might be called a new-new-new philology, demonstrating how a focus on the formal characteristics of texts – their grammar and vocabulary, spelling, punctuation (if any), paleographical characteristics and layout – can be related intimately to their textual function. And my own chapter surveys the various candidates put forth as standards of medieval English, suggesting that while these episodes chronologically followed one another, they unfolded less as chapters in a master narrative of Standard English and more as random moments in a linguistic board game.