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"Neithyr of hem cowd wel vndirstand other": Negotiating Collective and Individual Identity through Language Contact in the English Middle Ages

Margaret Bridges

Taking as my starting point different configurations in which Englishmen and Englishwomen came into contact with strangers, or were themselves strangers, I would like to reflect on the role of linguistic difference in the formation of collective and individual identity. Although this reflection has to a certain extent already taken place in historical sociolinguistics, a linguistic history of the subaltern, as opposed to a linguistic history of the literate elite, can at best only be a tentative one, handicapped as it must be by the essential elusiveness of speech and the necessary inadequacy of its written representations. As a contribution towards this tentative history, I propose to focus primarily – but not exclusively – on the late medieval monolingual speaker of English at a time when the elite of England were either plurilingual, or speakers of a language other than the English vernacular. This paper, then, is going to be less about the languages of literary production, and more about language speakers, inasmuch as we learn about them from literary and non-literary texts. In what follows I want to privilege one specific linguistic configuration, that involving language contact between speakers of English with speakers of "strange" languages at home, and that of English men and women abroad, at a time when English was virtually incomprehensible to most people living outside England, and even incomprehensible to many living within that blessed isle. Even making allowances for their imperfect representation in texts, I believe that in such contact situations we are afforded at least a glimpse into the otherwise still largely imperceptible linguistic history of the subaltern.[1]

[1] I would like here to pay homage to Karl Bertau, whose Geneva lectures (in the nineteen seventies) on the subject of "deutsche Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter" were a determining

From colonial Elizabethan England to the present day, the connection between language, thought and national identity has tended to be taken for granted. This connection was not, however, an obvious one in premodern times, when the hegemony of English as a cultural marker of Englishness was by no means assured at home or abroad. A distinguished contributor to the previous volume of SPELL, Tony Crowley, quotes an early seventeenth-century English merchant adventurer in Ireland, Fynes Moryson, as one of the first authors to have articulated the ideal of the community of language in connection with the secular, political project of colonization. If, in Moryson's words (in Crowley 13), "all nations have thought nothing more powerful to unite minds than the community of language," it went without saying that the common language was to be that of the colonizer, the English tongue whose "excellency" was praised, and confidently demonstrated, by Richard Carew in the antiquarian William Camden's *Remains Concerning Britain* (n.p.). Carew's arguments – aimed at demonstrating the phonological, lexical, communicative and even "performative" superiority of English over Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish and Dutch – deserve a study in their own right; here I merely want to make the rather obvious point that this Elizabethan writer's apology for the English tongue was part and parcel of his colonial, imperialist ideology.

Today, when English speakers abroad – such as the members of the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English – are repeatedly and embarrassingly confronted with the evidence of neo-colonization through linguistic, economic, and other forms of globalization, it is almost reassuring to be a medievalist. For no sociolinguistic or literary history of medieval England can afford to ignore the problematical status of English as a cultural marker of Englishness, or the fact that throughout much of the period speakers of English could not even be certain that they would be understood by those fellow-countrymen whose geographical and cultural space they shared, let alone communicate with foreigners when abroad. Barely a century before the advent of the Tudors, with whom we associate the political and linguistic expansion of Britannia, John of Trevisa wrote his famous comment on the disadvantages of English having succeeded French as the language of learning in the grammar schools. In book one, chapter 59, of his translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*, he articulates the risks run by travellers who know no more French than do their left heels "and that is harme for hem and they

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influence on my decision to become a medievalist, and whose forthcoming book on language, power and the three Mediterranean religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam has afforded me opportunity for discussing with him some of the issues raised in this article.

schulle passe the see and trauaille in straunge landes and in many other places" (161).

Literary history evidences that, in addition to handicapping monolingual travellers, the English tongue was an impediment to the circulation of texts. In spite of the European connections of, say, a poet like Chaucer, and in spite of Deschamps' praise of him as *grant translateur*, I am not aware of any late medieval translation *out* of English (into a European vernacular), as opposed to translation *into* English (from such a vernacular), and believe that it was not until well into so-called modern times that English literature enjoyed sufficient prestige for its poetry to become translated into other European languages.[2] Moreover, given the well-known fact that English was not in the (English) Middle Ages the only, or even the dominant literary language, our construction of an artificial tradition of medieval writing in English obscures much of what we might call the heteroglossic multiculturalism of medieval England. As Finke (58) and others have reminded us, at any given time English would jostle with the Celtic languages spoken in outlying areas in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall, and with the Scandinavian languages brought by Viking raiders – not to mention the Norman French spoken by the eleventh-century invaders whose political and cultural colonization of England gave way to the cultural colonization at court of Parisian French from the fourteenth century on. Throughout the period Latin was of course the spoken and written language of the literate clerical elite.

The eighth-century writer who seems to have been the first Englishman to give linguistic expression to the idea of a single English nation – as witnessed by the Latin title of his inexorably Latin work, the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* – was also the first to describe the island in terms of the five languages spoken there. Four of these languages correspond to the speakers of (Germanic) English, Welsh, Irish and Pictish – perceived not just in terms of linguistic difference but also as ethnically diverse. The fifth language, Latin, is perceived by Bede as overriding the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the other four: the language of the Scriptures, that is, of the Church, is seen as the common denominator of the inhabitants of the isle, united into a single "nation" or *gens* by virtue of their faith:

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[2] Recent discussions of Anglo-Norman literature and its relationship to English literature (such as we find in Crane 48-60) do not, to my knowledge, postulate anything but an insular audience for such works as the Anglo-Norman versions of *Ancrene Wisse*. Within both Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England, however, a number of works were either written in more than one language or were translated from one insular language to another.

> At the present time, there are five languages in Britain, just as the divine law is written in five books, all devoted to seeking out and setting forth one and the same kind of wisdom, namely the knowledge of sublime truth and of true sublimity. These are the English, British, Irish, Pictish, as well as the Latin languages; through the study of the scriptures, Latin is in general use among them all.[3]

In this quotation, Bede inscribes his history of the English *gens*, or race, within the Christian ideal of a community of the blessed that would not be marked by post-Babelian linguistic diversity. I shall be coming back to this point in connection with Augustine's commentary on the Babel episode; for the time being I merely want to stress that the native language of the English was not perceived by Bede as being in any way superior to the other languages. Moreover, by initiating a descriptive tradition of a multilingual Britain (most subsequent historiographers were to include this motif in their *Descriptiones Britanniae*) Bede also paved the way for the perception that there was no unifying or uniform vernacular that could lead to the equation of "one language, one nation."

The point is an important one, for throughout the English Middle Ages, though standardization processes were periodically set in motion, the inhabitants of English-speaking Britannia were – like speakers of other European languages – not speakers of a standardized language, but members of so-called linguistic diasystems constituted by a large variety of regional dialects. Sociolinguists like Braunmüller are interested in these diasystems, among other reasons, because they enabled speakers to be linguistically creative and to communicate, or engage in semi-communication with speakers of foreign languages without the mediation of interpreters, on condition that these foreign languages were cognate with the speakers' native language.

I am here less concerned, however, with speculating about the conditions under which communication was possible across linguistic and other boundaries, and more concerned with how English men and women negotiated situations of imperfect or thwarted communication. For such situations to arise they hardly needed to be abroad. As late as 1490, William Caxton, in the preface to his translation of a French version of *The Aeneid*, wrote his

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[3] Haec in praesenti iuxta numerum librorum quibus lex diuina scripta est, quinque gentium linguis unam eandemque summae ueritatis et uerae sublimitatis scientiam scrutatur et confitetur, Anglorum uidelicet Brettonum Scottorum Pictorum et Latinorum, quae meditatione scripturarum ceteris omnibus est facta communis. (Bede 16-17)

famous complaint about the inability of people speaking different regional dialects to understand one another:

> [. . .] A mercer, cam into an hows and axed for mete and specyally he axyd after eggys. And the goode wyf answerde that she coude speke no Frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry for he also coude speke no Frenshe, but wolde have hadde egges; and she understode him not. And thenne at last another sayd that he wolde have eyren; then the good wyf sayd that she understod hym wel. Loo! what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, "egges" or "eyren?" Certaynly it is harde to playse every man bycause of dyversite and chaunge of langage. (Caxton 79-80)

Caxton's complaint of course generated, or participated in, an impulse towards standardization that historical linguists have traditionally associated with the advent of printing, and the point sometimes made in connection with this passage – that a people who cannot even understand one another's simplest communication cannot imagine the kind of communal bond necessary to identify themselves as members of a nation (Finke 63) – hardly needs repeating. What I would like to suggest, though, is that the degree to which English men and women failed to understand each other's regional dialects, which they perceived as strange or foreign, might also be said to be the degree to which they were permeable to other – or foreign – languages, which they did not perceive as intrinsically different from the varieties of their own diasystem.

This way of looking at things goes against the grain of traditional language histories, which contend that in the second half of the fourteenth century the English began to affirm a sense of national identity through their strategic use of the vernacular, in opposition to French, which, from having been a marker of social status, came in the second half of the fourteenth century to be perceived as the language of a foreign power. This transition from the perception of French as a language through which the English could achieve prestige to one of French as the language of a monarchy alienated from its people is accompanied by a re-evaluation of the perception of English, which gradually became what sociolinguists would call a *promoted* language, a marker of Englishness (Leith 30). With Dick Leith we might summarize as follows the major social changes that accompany this late medieval promotion of English. The old feudal structure so successfully sustained by the Norman kings, the system of obligations between king and aristocracy, was giving way to an economy based not on land ownership but on money. We see the emergence of new bases of power, new feelings of

group loyalty, that is new forms of collective identity. Alliances were made between lesser landowners – who were making money out of raising sheep for wool – and the rising merchant class in the towns, and by the fourteenth century the balance of social forces was beginning to favour an increasingly articulate English-speaking merchant class (Leith 31).

A society that is in a state of upheaval is of course both figuratively and literally a mobile society. Geographical mobility is characteristic of whole sectors of the population – like university students (*vaganti*), migrant labourers, pilgrims and mendicants (including members of the medicant orders of friars), and the merchants themselves, whose trade in the fourteenth century took them largely to the Mediterranean world (e.g. when trading wine) or to Hanse-controlled Northern Europe. Finally, in a society that is on the move there will always be people who fall between the increasingly gaping cracks of the social structure, liminal or marginal individuals who, in Victor Turner's words, slip "through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (quoted in Coletti 132). Such individuals tend to be thought of as engaging in macaronic babble, as hybrid as their identity, like Salvatore in Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose.* In Theresa Coletti's semiotic reading of the semiotician's historical novel, she characterizes Salvatore as "a crude tapestry of contrary meanings [. . .] commingling high and low, official and unofficial culture" (132). As for his speech, the semiotician-novelist himself says that it was:

> [. . .] like his face, put together with pieces from other people's faces [. . .]. At the moment when I met him for the first time, Salvatore seemed to me, because of both his face and his way of speaking, a creature not unlike the hairy and hoofed hybrids I had just seen under the portal. (In Coletti 133)

If one didn't know better – because, even in these days of globalized English, Eco can hardly be expected to have read Margery Kempe's early fifteenth-century *Book* – one might have suspected that Salvatore was modelled on the hump-backed beggar whom Margery met in Venice when returning from her Jerusalem pilgrimage. Richard, whose clothes are as much of a patchwork (they are *forclowtyd*, Kempe 82) as are Salvatore's face and language, appears in answer to Margery's prayers that she may find someone to escort her from Venice to Rome, after she has been abandoned by her fellow-countrymen. He agrees to keep her company mornings and evenings for a small fee, which is not enough however for him to be able to give up the begging he does for a living during the day time. Even though he is a beggar, he is in a position to lend Margery money, and in doing so (over a

two-year period) demonstrates his uncanny ability to figure disempowerment at the same time as he figures certain forms of empowerment. He is also Margery's *ad hoc* guide and protector. Though Margery says nothing explicitly about his language, Richard – who is said to be from Ireland, and is therefore something of a displaced Englishman, even when he is not wandering by the pilgrims' way in Italy – seems to be sufficiently multilingual to be able to communicate on Margery's behalf with speakers of Italian, like the noblewoman and the friars, none of whom could understand her language:

> Sone aftyr ther cam too Grey Frerys and a woman that cam wyth hem fro Jerusalem, and sche had wyth hir an asse the whech bar a chyst and an ymage therin mad aftyr our Lord. And than seyd Richard to the forseyd creatur, "Thu schalt go forth wyth thes too men and woman, and I schal metyn wyth the at morwyn and at evyn, for I must gon on to my purchase and beggyn my levying." And so sche dede aftyr hys cownsel and went forth wyth the frerys and the woman. And non of hem cowde undirstand hir langage, and yet thei ordeyned for hir every day mete, drynke, and herborwe as wel as he dedyn for hemselfe and rathyr bettyr that sche was evyr bownden to prey for hem. And every evyn and morwyn Richard wyth the broke bak cam and comfortyd hir as he had promysed. (Kempe 83)

Not only those who were mobile, like beggars, and those whose business it was to travel, like merchants and pilgrims, but even those who led relatively "stable" existences back home in England would be liable to find themselves in situations where they would be in contact with strangers. For, as Derek Pearsall has pointed out, even where there is no clearly identifiable threat to a community, the concept of the stranger is so vital to the creation and preservation of closed communities, that strangers may have to be invented, or continually reinvented, often in the form of demonized racial or religious others, in order to preserve the established order of those communities (Pearsall 46). The same author has shown that fourteenth-century usage of the words "straunge" and "straungere" suggests that the community in question need not be national, but may be restricted to a social group or even to a family (47). In an urban community like the city of London, the unenfranchised, non-citizens – the *popolo minuto* consisting of peddlers, coal-vendors and dairywomen from the country – who were perceived to be an economic threat to the monopolistic pricefixing of the citizens, were all perceived as "straungers"/foreigners. No less so than the numerous immigrants from the provinces, from Germany and Flanders, and the Italian and French merchant strangers. These foreigners, in spite of – or on account of – the repeated hostility they were subjected to, played a vital role in the nation's

incipient sense of a collective identity that approximates the concept of Englishness, and it can be no coincidence that medieval descriptions of the languages and of the dialects of fourteenth-century England draw attention to contact situations with foreign peoples speaking other languages.

If the stranger within the land was important for the negotiation of collective identity at home, what were the experiences of English men and women as strangers themselves, and how did they cope with linguistic difference in various communicative situations? This question is beginning to be answered in connection with the activities of English merchants who travelled extensively, and constantly coped with the challenge of learning new languages. Kathryn Reyerson has recently argued that in the West the medieval merchant was perceived to be a marginal, even deviant, figure whose disposition towards change and adaptation might lead to that dangerous thing we call "innovation" (2). She contrasts this Christian suspicion of merchants with the relatively prestigious status of merchants in Islam, and underlines the role of Mediterranean pidgins for oral and written business transactions. Her findings are analogous to those of sociolinguists whose examination of language-contact in Northern European trading transactions has led them to postulate that the vast majority of Hanseatic merchants resorted to a linguistic compromise, or pidgin, based on the common structures of the two languages in contact. In the case of the Scandinavian, German and English languages, this form of what Braunmüller calls "semi-communication" is made possible by the fact that the languages in contact are "genetically related" (Braunmüller 367-71). But the linguistic strategies employed by merchants in language contact situations abroad have their correlatives in documents recorded not abroad, but back "home." The fact that most documents recording economic transactions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – documents like account rolls from the petty customs of the port of London – were multilingual (the languages in question often being only distantly related) and contained a number of features characteristic of pidgin languages suggests that for at least one category of mobile Englishman the equation of language and identity was not unproblematic (Wright 345-8).

A more unusual category of English "stranger" is that of the pilgrim when she is a woman – Chaucer's proportion of approximately one female pilgrim for ten male pilgrims may be fairly representative of what wandered on the pilgrims' paths. From a linguistic perspective a secular, non-aristocratic Englishwoman on pilgrimage abroad must have been particularly vulnerable, given her lack of Latin – a language that had international cur-

rency, and one that her sister in religious orders would have had access to – and given the unlikelihood that she would be steeped in the fashionable French of court circles that might have facilitated her travel in the Mediterranean. Margery Kempe of King's Lynn, whose pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1413 was the first of her many European travels, was such an English-speaking, middle-class, secular woman. Several episodes in her autobiographical *Book* draw attention to the special vulnerability of the monolingual speaker of English. Especially interesting are the occasions on which she shows her awareness that those who are interrogating her in Latin on matters relating to her faith are hardly giving her a fair trial. Once she has forced them to revert to the vernacular – a language that was virtually banned from all theological debate in the wake of Lollardy, also called the "English heresy" – she shows herself to be more than their equal. Even had she been capable of communicating in Latin, she would have been putting her life at risk by showing it, since Latin-speaking laywomen were perceived as having considerable subversive potential: one need only think of their ability to read and interpret scripture without the mediation of the clergy – which might lead to heretical positions – or their appropriation of the language of learning, which constituted an encroachment upon a male and clerical preserve.

An episode that is particularly significant in this connection relates how Margery, who had been taken into custody in Leicester on her return journey from Santiago, via Bristol and Hailes, is interrogated by the steward of Leicester. The steward's reply to Margery's injunction that he should address her in English, and not Latin, "for I undyrstonde not what ye sey," suggests that he does not believe her *not* to be in command of Latin, "Thu lyest falsly in pleyn Englysch":

> The styward anon, as he sey hir, spak Latyn unto hir, many prestys stondyng abowtyn to here what sche shulde say and other pepyl also. Sche seyd to the stywarde, "Spekyth Englysch, if yow lyketh, for I undyrstonde not what ye sey." The styward seyd unto hir, "Thu lyest falsly in pleyn Englysch." Than seyd sche unto hym agen, "Syr, askyth what qwestyon ye wil in Englysch, and thorw the grace of my Lord Jhesu Cryst I schal answeyn yow resonabely therto." And than askyd he many qwestyonys, to the whech sche answeryd redily and resonabely that he cowde getyn no cawse ageyn hir. (Kempe 114-15)

This is not the only occasion on which Margery uses her real or assumed inability to communicate in another language to her advantage. The episode that is most interesting for our purposes takes place in Rome, while Margery is still under the protection of the broken-backed beggar mentioned above.

The opening of chapter 32 of her *Book* sees her once again abandoned by her fellow-pilgrims and countrymen, who have been staying at the Hospice of St Thomas of Canterbury (a hospice for English pilgrims since 1362) from which she has been expelled. She attributes this expulsion to the slander of a priest who was one of her companions and one of her own countrymen.

> Whan this creatur sey sche was forsakyn [. . .] sche was ful hevy, most for sche had no confessowr ne myth not then be schrevyn than as sche wolde. [. . .] And sithyn sche clepyd onto hir the forseyd Richard wyth the broke bak, preyng hym to go ovyr to a cherch agen the hospital and enformyn the person of the chyrche of hir maner of governawnce, and what sorwe sche had, and how sche wept for sche myth not be schrevyn ne howselyd, and what compunccyon and contricyon sche had for hir synnes. (Kempe 86)

Richard's mediation achieves the desired effect, for the foreign parson – presumably Italian – agrees to hear her confession and to give her commun-ion, even though "he cowde not undyrstond non Englysch." Any doubts that the reader – following Margery herself and the foreign priest in question – might have had with regard to the validity of an incomprehended confession and a "blank-cheque" absolution, are resolved by Margery's report of an opportune miracle:

> Than owyr Lord sent Seynt John the Evangelyst to heryn hir confessyon, and sche said "Benedicité" and he seyd "Dominus" verily in hir sowle, that sche saw hym and herd hym in hire ghostly undirstondyng as sche schuld a do an other preste be hir bodily wittys. (Kempe 86)

In other words, the obstacle of imperfect or impossible communication is turned into an occasion for stressing Margery's visionary capacities: the holy woman who communicates through spiritual understanding – not merely through contingent sounds and words – is above linguistic difference, as she is above those men and women who cannot communicate across language boundaries.

Margery's problems are not over, however, for she can hardly do without priests altogether, particular if she wants to affirm her orthodox submission to the ecclesiastical hierarchy – something she of course has to do repeatedly when she is interrogated as a suspected Lollard. While still in Rome, and hearing mass at St John Lateran, her attention is caught by the officiating priest, "who semyd a good man and devowte" (87-8). Again she sends bro-ken-backed Richard to the priest, but the priest, who has of course been saying mass in Latin, turns out to be a *Dewchman* (a generic term for the

northern Germans), who understands no English and cannot understand what Margery is saying, until they communicate with the help of an unnamed interpreter. This interpreter is probably not Richard, but someone with both German and English: "a man that telde her eythyr what other seyde" (88). Again Margery exploits the situation of imperfect communication as an occasion to fashion for herself an identity which, though grounded in the insignificance of late-medieval Englishness, marks her as a privileged member of the trans-national community of Saints:

> Sche was sor mevyd in spiryt to speke wyth hym. Than sche preyd hir man wyth the brokyn bak for to gon to the preste and preyn hym to spekyn wyth hir. Than the preste undirstod non Englysch ne wist not what sche seyd, and sche cowde non other langage than Englisch, and therfor thei spokyn be an interpretowr, a man that telde her eythyt what other seyde. Than sche preyd the preste in the name of Jhesu that he wolde makyn hys preyeris to the blysful Trinité, to owir Lady, and to alle the blissed sentys in hevyn, also steryn other that lovedyn owir Lord to preyn for hym, that he myth han grace to undirstondyn hir langage and hir speche in swech thyngys as sche thorw the grace of God wold seyn and schewyn unto hym. The preste was a good man, and of hys birth he was a Dewcheman, a good clerke, and a wel lernyd man, hily belovyd, wel cherschyd, and myche trostyd in Rome, and had on of the grettest office of any preste in Rome. Desyryng to plese God, he folwyd the cownsel of this creatur, and mad hys praerys to God devowtly as he cowde every day that he myth han grace to undirstandyn what the forseyd creatur wolde seyn to hym, and also he mad other loverys of owyr Lord to prey for hym. Thus thei preyd therten days. And aftyr therten days the preste cam ageyn to hir to prevyn the effect of her preyerys, and than he undirstod what sche seyd in Englysch to hym and sche undirstod what that he seyd. And yet he undirstod not Englisch that other men spokyn; thow thei spokyn the same wordys that sche spak, yet he undirstod hem not les than sche spak hirselfe. (Kempe 88)

As this passage testifies, Margery's hagiographical self-fashioning involves first of all identifying the priest in question as sufficiently holy for the heavenly community to be moved by his prayers. In this communicative impasse, Margery, through an interpreter, prays to the holy priest to pray to the blessed Trinity, to our Lady and to all the blessed saints in heaven, also urging others who loved our Lord to pray for him, so that he might have grace to understand her language and her speech in such things as she, through the grace of God, would say to him. When, after thirteen days, the priest came back to her to test the efficacy of their prayers, he understood what she said to him in English, and she understood him. But this communicative miracle is not intended to imply that the German has acquired enough English in

thirteen days to be able to understand speakers of Margery's national vernacular. For Margery goes on to emphasize that he did not understand the English that was spoken by others, even though they used the same words she did. He could not, in other words, understand a word of English that she had not pronounced herself. From now on, and for as long as Margery remains in Rome, the German priest not only serves as her confessor, but also upholds her identity as a holy woman, defending her against the slander levelled at her by her countrymen. Margery's Englishness in this episode could therefore be said to serve to establish an identity that is both individual and collective: the holy woman that she has constituted herself as in this language contact situation is both singular – unlike other Englishwomen – and yet recognizably like other holy women, those many continental mystics on whose biographies Margery's own trajectory was modelled.

It would probably not be too far-fetched, if one were intent upon demystifying this unusual communicative situation, to postulate that the Englishwoman and the *Dewchman* were communicating through an Anglo-German pidgin, which Margery's first scribe also seems to have been using. He is described in the prologue as an Englishman by birth who was married and resided in Germany until he came to live in Margery's household in King's Lynn – a town with many commercial ties to the Hanseatic league. His transcription of Margery's orally dictated "felyngys" and "revelacyons" was, according to the cleric who tried to read it, ill-written in that it was neither good English nor German, nor were the letters shaped or formed as other letters are. Therefore the priest (whom Margery has asked to transcribe the original, unfinished manuscript of her *Book*) fully believed that nobody would ever be able to read it, "but it wer special grace" (19). Needless to say, this communicative impasse is negotiated by Margery in such a way as to make the actual writing of her book an act of special grace, and a confirmation of her identity as saint.

The medieval Church always did have a tendency to subsume questions of language and national identity under the more general question of salvation; so from St Augustine onwards the post-Babelian fragmentation of nations and languages is resolved in a vision that restores to the blessed a mode of communication in which linguistic difference plays no part. St Augustine imagines God communicating with the angels in the following terms:

> And God does not speak to the angels in the same way as we speak to one another, or to God, or to the angels, or as the angels speak to us. He speaks in his own fashion, which is beyond our describing. But his speech is explained to us in our fashion. God's speech, to be sure, is on a higher plane; it precedes his action

> as the changeless reason of the action itself; and his speaking has no sound, no transitory noise; it has a power that persists for eternity and operates in time. It is with this speech that he addresses the holy angels, whereas he speaks to us, who are situated far off, in a different way. And yet, when we also grasp something of this kind of speech with our inward ears, we come close to the angels. (*City of God* 660)

Without phonemes, the divine language is nevertheless performative ("it has a power that persists for eternity and operates in time") and is a mode of speech that can be perceived with inward ears only. No doubt the medieval laywoman would have characterized the language her inward ear perceived when she was in a state of grace along similar lines.

Alongside its conception of beatitude as a supra-linguistic state, the early Mediterranean Church, when engaged in its colonizing missions in Germanic Britannia, had not been above establishing a political connection between language, national identity and the theological principle of election. I am thinking in particular of Bede's story about Pope Gregory's decision to send an evangelizing mission to that distant isle at the edge of the world. That decision is represented in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* – which was at that time a *gens* in Bede's mind only, and not yet a political reality – as being subsequent to an encounter between the Mediterranean prelate (Gregory) and members of the most subaltern category of displaced individuals – one can hardly, after all, use the word "travellers" of the Anglian slave boys whom Gregory is said to have stopped to admire on the Roman marketplace. In a justly famous episode, we can see how, enquiring about the provenance of the boys, Gregory learns from an informant (an interpreter?) that they are from Anglia – upon which their faces are pronounced to be like those of the blessed angels they are destined to join. The question as to the name of the particular province they come from in Anglia affords a pun on the name Deira and the Latin phrase associated with the salvation of the good from the anger of God (*de ira dei*) on Judgment Day. And finally, the name of the ruler of the province, Aelle, allows Gregory to praise God – *alleluia* – for having thus predicated the necessary salvation of the Angles in the names of their tribe, their province and their ruler:

> We must not fail to relate the story about St. Gregory which has come down to us as a tradition of our forefathers. It explains the reason why he showed such earnest solicitude for the salvation of our race. It is said that one day, soon after some merchants had arrived in Rome, a quantity of merchandise was exposed for sale in the market place. Crowds came to buy and Gregory too amongst them. As well as other merchandise he saw some boys put up for sale, with fair complex-

> ions, handsome faces, and lovely hair. On seeing them he asked, so it is said, from what region or land they had been brought. He was told that they came from the island of Britain, whose inhabitants were like that in appearance. He asked again whether those islanders were Christians or still entangled in the errors of heathenism. He was told that they were heathen. Then with a deep-drawn sigh he said, "Alas, that the author of darkness should have men so bright of face in his grip, and that minds devoid of grace should bear so graceful an outward form." Again he asked for the name of the race. He was told that they were called *Angli.* "Good," he said, "they have the face of angels, and such men should be fellow-heirs of the angels in heaven." "What is the name," he asked, "of the kingdom from which they have been brought?" He was told that the men of the kingdom were called *Deiri.* "*Deiri,*" he replied, "*De ira!* good! snatched from the wrath of Christ and called to his mercy. And what is the name of the king of the land?" He was told that it was Ælle; and playing on the name, he said, "Alleluia! the praise of God the Creator must be sung in those parts." So he went to the bishop of Rome and of the apostolic see, for he himself had not yet been made pope, and asked him to send some ministers of the word to the race of the Angles in Britain to convert them to Christ. (Bede 132-5)

At the outset of the English Middle Ages, then, Bede represents the mute Anglian boys as the object of economic and political negotiation. The slaves on the Roman marketplace are perceived as unwittingly triggering off the project of conversion and the destiny of a not-yet-existent nation is constructed from the phonological resemblance between Anglian and Latin. Seven centuries later, towards the close of the English Middle Ages, one could argue that the subaltern has achieved a voice – albeit one that is confined to an unprestigious vernacular. For the time being, I believe the evidence is too scrappy for us to be able to construct a credible linguistic history of the vernacular-speaking subaltern Englishman or Englishwoman, but today's talk has suggested ways in which language contact situations must have contributed to that as yet unwritten history. I look forward to further sociolinguistic work in this new and exciting field.

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