

The role of French in the Johnsons' correspondence

Among the studies flourished in the field of historical sociolinguistics, mainly in the strand devoted to English history, during its Medieval and early modern phases, multilingual texts have been analysed using theories and models coming from contact linguistics, thus applying synchronic models and approaches to the study of the past (Eckert 2012, Nurmi & Phata 2004, among others).

This contribution aims at investigating the role and the usage of the French language in the correspondence between Otwell Johnson and his brother, John Johnson, merchants of the Staple in Calais. Their letters, along with those of their other brother and their partners, were preserved only because of legal reasons (Oldroyd 1998), and the entire collection was subsequently transcribed for biographical studies by Winchester (1955).

The letters written by Otwell Johnson to his brother display interesting usages of the French language, making them multilingual; although the writer makes predominant use of English, we can find French elements in 17 letters (out of 161). These non-English items can be broadly grouped into three different contact phenomena: language choice, inter-sentential code switching, and intra-sentential code switching (defined as in Ciccolone & Dal Negro 2021).

Applying an atomistic approach (Hernández-Campoy 2003) to the study of the contact phenomena, I will investigate the above-mentioned documents, trying to explore the nature of the switching forms they contain, from an intra-writer variation perspective (Auer 2015, Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003). After analysing the letters and the type of multilingualism in them, I will also try to evaluate the functions given to the French language in this specific context.

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