Mary Catherine Davidson, *Medievalism, Multilingualism, and Chaucer*
Reviewed by EBI Hisato, Kobe Women's University

In Japan, there has been a lot of controversy recently about the national language, Japanese. While some stand up for actively supporting the introduction of English as a global language in elementary school classes, others contend for protecting the national language and against exposing young children too early in life to a foreign language. Linguistic nationalists say that the national language and the culture specific to it should have priority over foreign language(s) and culture(s) in public education. The argument about how to deal with language contact between the national language and other acquired languages might be going around in circles. Anywhere in the world, either language education or language policy would sharply outline the structure of nationalism and national identity lurking in the depths of our consciousness. In addition, differentiation or conflict between the national or official language and other minor languages is growing in multilingual and multiracial nations like the United States.

Taking a broad view of the history of English ranging from the Middle Ages to modern times where American English has been flourishing as the colonizing or global language, Davidson's *Medievalism, Multilingualism, and Chaucer* provides a "Middle English" with multilingual conditions in which Latin, French, and English interacted with each other in England before and after the Conquest. This book successfully challenges the traditional diachronic history of the English language, of which a disciplinary view has been based on a kind of linguistic Darwinism. Particularly, English has been fictionalized in monolingual superiority privileged as a "manly" language since the nineteenth century. Davidson's argument is based not simply on feminism nor post-colonialism; rather, she uses documentary evidence to support how it will be able to be persuasive in revising the historical view of English constructed by scholars of monolingualism and masculinity.

In the Introduction subtitiled "Monolingualism and Middle English" (pp. 1–16), Davidson suggests her own disciplinary position as follows: "[T]his study examines scholarly constructions of Middle English as a language of community by focusing on modern nationalist and colonialisit discourses that have concealed Anglophone privilege and expansion often at the expense of multilingualism itself" (p. 2), and "this study focuses on determining what role code-switching had not in the genesis of borrowing but in the negotiation specifically of language attitudes and identities in late medieval England" (p. 10). This raises an objection to the historical view of English in which Middle English has been inflexibly fixed in the framework of monolingual imaginary and masculine fiction. One such example is how Middle English has been imagined as a point of origin for modern English through its standardization and globalization. Chaucer has been fictionalized and sexualized as "the national-language pioneer" and "the father of English poetry."
When her view of Middle English and Chaucer shifts from monolingualism to multilingualism in a social and cultural perspective, Davidson is proposing a key-word "diglossia" which should be carefully taken into consideration. Her concept of "diglossia" is extended in its usage to multilingualism, meaning language contact between two or more languages. Two discourses cited from Samson the abbot of Bury St. Edmunds of Cronica Jocelinii de Brakelonda (c. 1202) and the Pardoner of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales (CT) illustrate the use of "diglossia." Both Samson and the Pardoner who belong to the clergy switch strategically between English and Latin depending on their audience, though their proficiency with Latinity may be different from each other.

Part I titled “Traditions of Contact and Conflict in the History of English” is divided into two sections. Davidson opens Section 1, “Medievalism and Monolingualism” (pp. 17–44), by criticizing the discourses used by Joseph Mersand, William Swinton, and A. C. Baugh and T. Cable, who have dedicated themselves to establishing the commonly accepted theory of the history of English. Her criticism is based on a disciplinary standard that English has never registered the linguistic genealogy growing under monolingual conditions completely isolated from other languages. According to the monolingual receptive theory of borrowing, Chaucer's adoption of the French lexis cited in OED would show the generosity and superiority of Anglophones to and over foreign languages. Davidson traces the monolingual discourses back to their origin, and uses Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe (1819) as an example. This novel, set in twelfth century England, describes the cross-linguistic hostility between French-speaking Normans and English-speaking Saxons, and the nineteenth century cultural movement of returning to the Middle Ages, which today is called “Medievalism.” Scott had succeeded in portraying an image of Anglophones who try to stand against Francophones and establish their national identity.

Section 2, “Hengist’s Tongue: A Medieval History of English” (pp. 45–78), discusses John Gower the trilingualist before introducing the Hengist episode as the central theme of the section. Based on lines 17–24 cited from the Prologue of Confessio Amantis (CA) revised around 1392, Davidson suggests that the dedication of the CA to “Engelond” (l. 24) and “of Lancastre Henri” (l. 87) by selecting “oure englishh” (l. 23) has motivated Gower to call on linguistic identity and patriotism. Davidson’s suggestion, though not assertive but modest, raises another serious question about what happened to Gower between 1390 and 1392. In 1390, Gower completed the original version of the CA, and dedicated it to Richard II and Chaucer. His dedication should have drastically shifted in its tone from an obsequious compliment of 1390 to a brilliant patriotic gesture in 1392. Davidson carries her discussion further to the main theme of this section concerning the Hengist episode. The phrase, “Hengist lingua canit Insula Bruti (Hengist’s language sung in Brut’s isle)” of the Latin invocatio with which Gower prefaced the Prologue, functions well to describe how English had functioned in the multilingual conditions of the Middle Ages.

The Hengist episode which recorded the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain in the 5th
century should have initiated historians or historiographers after the Conquest to construct
the history of English people and their language. Rowena (Ronewenne) the daughter of
Hengist, goes down to her knees before Vortigen, the king of the Britons, and says in her
own language, “Wassail (Washail)” and “Drincheil (Drinchайл).” Yet, Vortigen could not
understand her words. This cross-linguistic communication describes the first language
contact between Anglo-Saxon as the ancestor of English and the foreign language as it was.
The *Hengisti lingua* narrative will provide Davidson’s view of the history of English with a
wide range of perspective toward multilingualism, language contact, linguistic identity, and
linguistic nationalism.

**Part II “And in Latyn... a words fewe’: Contact and Medieval Conformity” is divided
two sections as well.** Section 3, “Multilingual Writing and William Langland” (pp. 79–108),
examines the B text of *Piers Plowman* (PP) by William Langland in great detail and wide
perspective, discussing the language contact or language switch/shift/choice between
English, Latin, and French. The process on how to construct the structure of Davidson’s
argumentation is remarkably interesting and persuasive.

PP has been so far classified as sermon literature written in mixed or “macaronic”
languages and deprived of linguistic dynamism. Davidson, however, is taking one more step
forward with the re-evaluation of this work. Her approach is to place it in a dynamic
language context and reconsider its textuality. Citing “Periculum est in falsis fratibus! (There
is danger in false brothers (or friars!))” from the Bible in the context of “I”’s complaining to
Patience, Langland switches from English to Latin, and then from Latin to English (B.13.
68–73). He has a good command of diglossia by letting “I” and Patience share the same
Latin proficiency while his imaginary “lewed” audience is excluded from Latinity and
granted only “english” ability.

Both “I” of PP and the Pardoner of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (VI 344–46) can switch
between English and Latin depending on their audience. “I”’s discourses are functional at
his sermon and sincere to “al þe people” and “goode men,” though the Pardoner’s ones are
intended only “to saffron” and sounds malicious in his rhetoric. According to Davidson, “I,”
the narrator of PP, “constructs as linguistic others those ‘goode’ men who, though laity
lacking Latin, conceptually contrast the corruption of their potentially false brothers, that is
friars who gloss in service of themselves rather than the laity” (p. 92).

The usage frequency of French is remarkably low in comparison with that of Latin in PP.
The traditional view is that this reflects the social situation of late 14th century England, in
which French or Norman-French had become a dead language. Davidson offers a conclusive
suggestion concerning French usage of PP that “French was socially common to neither the
clerk nor lay audiences that the text imagines as its spiritual readers. This alliance of
monolinguals and clerks—although clerks were themselves ideally bilingual with Latin—
consensually constructs and distances such vice as characteristic of a linguistic outgroup of
“Frenche men and fre men” (B.11. 384) to which neither belong” (p. 101). From the
beginning Langland does not expect that Francophones including Norman-French and central French, and their social rank as free in rank or condition, having the social status of a noble or a freeman, not a slave or serf in medieval England, would be his audience or reader.

In Section 4, "Chaucer's 'Diversite'," Davidson focuses on Chaucer's multilingualism. As previously, Chaucer has kept his indisputable position as "the national-language pioneer" and "the father of English poetry" in the history of English language and English literature since Dryden's *Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1700). Keeping some distance from the traditional monolingual assessment, she provides us with a disciplinary access to Chaucer's English and textuality. Chaucer's English is reconsidered from the view of multilingual language contact in the interaction between a speaker and a listener or an audience, and the CT's textuality is reinterpreted in its linguistic aspect from gender identity.

In "The Nun's Priest's Tale," Chaunticleer the cock crows Latin for Pertelote, one of his many hens: "*In principio, Mulier est hominis confusion*" (VII 3163–64). This intentionally selective combination in Latin, Davidson argues, is significant not only of social and cultural relationship of superior masculinity and the inferior femininity in literacy, but also of a linguistic relationship of the superior Latin and inferior English. Here the language switch by the Pardoner (VI 344–46) is again discussed, and his hidden malicious intent ends up by being labeled as ironically suspicious sexuality ("geldying or a mare" I 691). Davidson's analysis of these two examples of language switch/shift can show that Chaucer is remarkably skilled in controlling plural languages in social and cultural contexts.

It is very interesting that the Wife of Bath is sexualized with both masculinity and femininity in aspect of her multilingualism, though completely different in her role from the Pardoner's suspicious sexuality. Davidson examines the Wife's usage of French and Latin referring to the female genital organs. The Wife preaching for the religious significance of marriage casually switches to French "bele chose" (III 447, 510) and Latin "quoniam" (III 608). Using such a "lingua queynte (language of cunt/sex terms)" has been considered as a modest euphemism in order to avoid filthy indecency (cf. The Riverside Chaucer, footnotes to 447, 510, 608, and Explanatory Note to 608). The Wife's "quoniam" may be very idiomatic; it appears only in MS Hegwryt, while "queynye" in other MSS. Only this usage is listed in MED as the source for its quoted example. How is "quoniam" transformed to noun, though originally adverb, and how can the Wife obtain this Latin word? Davidson's answer to it seems to be persuasive and interesting: "its homophonic synonym in Old Norse 'cunt,' the noun 'queynye' and "its accidental resemblances in sound to the most vulgar word she [the Wife of Bath] already knows" (p. 120).

The Wife's usage of French discloses her true intention in that she is never conforming to or sympathizing with a decent courtly manner, but knows exactly how her own words work on the audience. Following the quoted sources of MED from John Trevisa and Bartholomew de Anglicus, Davidson concludes that "bele chose" was not a euphemism, but had been already established in medical fields as a technical term. Moreover, she adds, "[I]f 'Chaucer bows to courtly sensibilities' by rendering the Wife's language as 'a display of
conventional euphemisms,' her switches to French and Latin nevertheless suggest his vernacularity and her vulgarity can be stretched no farther" (p. 121). If Davidson’s argument for the Wife of Bath as a whole is acceptable, the Wife will be able to become independent even from Chaucer her inventor. Other evidence such as the Latin-English switch which the friar in “The Summoner’s Tale” and Friar Huberd in CT are practicing, is discussed to effectively show “so gret diversite” (TC, V 1793) of language in Chaucerian multilingualism.

Finally, in the Afterword with a subtitle of “Postcolonialism and Chaucer’s English” (pp. 133–38), Davidson mentions that the diachronic and evolutionary view of the history of English should be questioned. According to monolingualism, periodization of “Middle English” into a “Middle” period may be consciously or unconsciously intended to colonize the periodical terrain, and Chaucer’s “Middle English” can be a starting point of modern English. The author of Medievalism, Multilingualism, and Chaucer offers a reconsideration of “Middle English” and “Chaucer’s English” in multilingualism.

The reviewer picks up two typographical errors:

p. 81 “the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” → “the twelfth and thirteenth centuries”
p. 109 “The Nuns’ Priest’s Tale” → “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”