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Middle Yiddish and Chaucer's English considered as Fusion Languages

Jennifer G. Wollock

The classification of languages is not a preoccupation for many readers of Middle English. Every language is a world of its own, an 'old-growth forest of the mind'.¹ The existing tools serve them well; the simple but visually powerful 'language tree' model shows how languages derive from one another as if along biological lines, each branching off from a parental trunk into a separate leafy branch, well exemplified by an attractive recent version by Minna Sundberg.² For most students of Middle English, this orientation provides sufficient background. Their concern is with the wonders of English, distinctive features of a language still too little explored.

Others, however, consider that many languages, notably Middle English, still require more specific tools for their understanding. The 'language tree' depicts English among West Germanic languages branching off from one another — but what happens when languages fuse together? Here this simple, elegant, visually clear model fails us; it glosses over what is in fact a complex, dynamic problem of linguistic contact and interplay, as multiple languages recombine to form the English of the Middle Ages. Middle English demands to be understood in a way that promotes our better appreciation of its sources and nature. In this paper I would like to discuss the usefulness of conceptual tools (notably Max Weinreich's term 'Fusion Language') originally developed for a different member of the West Germanic linguistic family, Yiddish, to clarify the situation of Middle English — and which apply, in analogous ways, to both languages.

The 'language tree' offers a clear, linear, static image of a fully developed, mature organism. It puts the stress on a single line of parentage, without complications. The challenge to students of language development is to arrive at a better way of visualizing and describing the situation, one that reflects the full history of each language without minimizing the importance of their respective Germanic origins, but also without erasing the other contributing linguistic forces that make them distinctive. The symbiosis that shapes a language — more complex with some than with others — demands much more recognition than it has

¹ Wade Davis, *The Light at the Edge of the World* (Vancouver: Douglas & MacIntyre, 2009), p. 9. My thanks to Isabelle Barrière for pointing out this quotation, and for much expert linguistic advice.

² 'A Comprehensive Overlook of the Nordic Languages in the Old World Language Families', in *Stand Still, Stay Silent, Volume 1* (Portland, OR: Hiveworks, 2018), p. 196, accessed from <<http://www.ssscomic.com/comic.php?page=196>> [accessed 20 April 2020].

been afforded so far. It requires not merely a visual representation, but an articulation that sorts languages according to their full historical trajectories.

Approaching the problem of classifying Chaucer's Middle English from history and comparative literature rather than linguistics, which means dealing with language as it is used over time, in literary texts written in multiple languages, has offered me a different perspective on the subject than that of a full-time linguist, if not the status of an outside observer. My students in Texas used to say to me, in another connection, 'you're not from around here, are you?', and that is my situation here as well. As a stranger in town, let me attempt to bring a contrasting viewpoint to the recurrent conversation on Chaucer's Middle English as a possible pidgin or creole of Old French.³

Finding an adequate descriptive framework for Chaucer's language is not a new problem. The literature divides itself into two camps. The first focuses on how to describe this particular language, the Middle English of the later fourteenth century, as a kind of hybrid; the second insists that no amount of stress on its hybrid character must be allowed to distance it from the family of Germanic languages or impugn its essential Englishness. This is not a simple territorial struggle over which 'stock language' is more important to Chaucer's English, German or French (i.e., a longstanding European nationalist rivalry still smouldering on the linguistic front), but speaks to the larger problem of how to describe and understand languages of the type that Jespersen in 1905 described as 'mixed languages'.⁴

The hypothesis that Middle English can be best explained as a pidgin or creole of Old French has resurfaced from time to time among scholars of historical linguistics since Charles James Nice Bailey and Karl Maroldt first proposed it in 1977.⁵ Fabienne Toupin further extended this line of discussion in an article published in 2008.⁶ The title of the collection in which her article appears — *Une Espace colonial et ses avatars* — bears witness that the appeal of this approach would seem to stem at least in part from postcolonial studies, a sweeping influence that has reshaped scholarly understanding on a broad historical front since the later years of the twentieth century.

A major problem with the idea of Chaucer's English as a creole of Old French, however, is that this approach narrows the historical-linguistic focus to the historical relationship between these two languages.⁷ In the process it necessarily leaves out the inconvenient and complicated previous history of the Indo-European languages concerned. Earlier contacts between West Germanic dialects — which after the Germanic-speakers migrated to Britain

³ The earliest version of this paper was delivered on 29 July 2006 at the New Chaucer Society biennial congress at Fordham University in New York, as part of a panel organized by Dr Fabienne Toupin of the University of Tours, 'Is Middle English a Creole of Old French?' I am most grateful to Dr Toupin, a specialist in the linguistic development of medieval English, for drawing my attention to this subject, and for her cogent analysis of the problem.

⁴ Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, 9th edn (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1960) [first publ. 1905], pp. 39–41. For discussion of the resistance to the concept of 'mixed languages' in neogrammarian historical linguistics see Edwin Ardener, 'Social Anthropology and the Historicity of Historical Linguistics', *Social Anthropology and Language*, 67 (1971), 209–41 (esp. pp. 220–22).

⁵ Charles James Nice Bailey and Karl Maroldt, 'The French Lineage of English', in *Languages en contact: Pidgins, Creoles*, ed. by Jürgen M. Meisel (Tübingen: Narr, 1977), pp. 21–53.

⁶ Fabienne Toupin, 'Des Phénomènes de pidginisation et de créolisation en moyen anglais', in *Une Espace colonial et ses avatars: Naissance d'identités nationales*, ed. by Florence Bourgne, Leo M. Carruthers and Arlette Sancery (Paris: Presses universitaires Sorbonne, 2008), pp. 179–201.

⁷ Brandy Ryan, 'Middle English as Creole: "Still trying not to refer to you lot as 'bloody colonials"' (2005) <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~cpercycourses/6361ryan.htm>> [accessed 11 October 2019]. See also Toupin, 'Des Phénomènes'.

promoted regional variants of Old English — the Celtic languages of Britain, the Latin of the Church, and the North Germanic of the Vikings had all left their mark on Old English well before the advent of the Normans. The evidence supporting the concept of Middle English as a ‘creole’ focuses instead on features that scholars argue reflect ‘pidginization’, particularly the loss of grammatical inflections and gender.⁸

It does seem to me, as an interested spectator following the contest from a distance, that the existing tools are inadequate. The term ‘creole’ can be redefined and broadened to serve many purposes, but in linguistics it still best describes an asymmetric binary relationship between two languages, one a prestige language, the other a language socially and culturally subordinated to it. The result is the product of the unequal union of these two partners. This characterization of Middle English is only made possible by ignoring the past and future of the language — its trajectory or directionality — as well as much of Chaucer, let alone other Middle English writers. Problems of this kind have indeed led many current linguistic thinkers to debate the usefulness of the ‘creole’ designation for languages long identified in this way.⁹

To cope with this problem, various other descriptive terms have been suggested, for instance, ‘hybrid language’ (preferred by Nicole Z. Domingue) or Ellen Prince’s ‘contact language’.¹⁰ These are too broad, and not really descriptive except in the most general terms. Where ‘creole’ is specific and restrictive, even allowing for definite confusion over the meaning of that term, these substitutes are too abstract. Another persistent term, ‘mixed language’ (*vermischte Sprache*), originated as a pejorative label (as applied to Yiddish in 1733 by the missionary and linguist Johann Heinrich Callenberg, and to English by German students of the history of language as early as the seventeenth century).¹¹ These terms contrast the ‘mixed’ language, by implication if not directly, with other languages that are understood to be ‘pure’ — a doubtful possibility in the extreme. Again, we find ourselves straying across the border into the realm of the politics of language, although this realm may be impossible to avoid when attempting to cope with such a subject. Having reached this impasse, it may be useful to look at another medieval language of a comparable type, one in much the same boat when it comes to linguistic terminology and the socio-politics, philosophy, mythology, or psychology of language. That language is Yiddish.

Although their linguistic timelines are not synchronized with one another, the points of correspondence between these two major Germanic languages have long been numerous and familiar, to Yiddishists, at least.¹² As Joachim Neugroschel writes, ‘[The Haskala (the Jewish

⁸ See David DeCamp’s ‘Introduction to the Study of Pidgin and Creole Languages’, in *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*, ed. by Dell Hymes (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 13–42. De Camp updated his work in ‘The Development of Pidgin and Creole Studies’, *Pidgin and Creole Linguistics*, ed. by Albert Valdman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 13–20.

⁹ See the ongoing discussions of Michel DeGraff and Derek Bickerton, continuing the exchange from DeGraff, ‘Against Creole Exceptionalism’, *Language*, 80 (2004), 828–33, and their successors, e.g., Michel DeGraff, ‘Against Creole Exceptionalism (Redux)’, *Language*, 80 (2004), 834–39, and ‘Linguists’ Most Dangerous Myths: The Fallacy of Creole Exceptionalism’, *Language in Society*, 34 (2005), 533–91. See also Isabelle Barrière, ‘L’Haïtianophonie aux États-Unis’ [The Haitianophone World in the United States], *Haiti Liberté*, 4.3 (2010), 18–19.

¹⁰ See a full discussion of the history of the problem in Richard J. Watts, ‘The Construction of a Modern Myth: Middle English as a Creole’, in his *Language Myths and the History of English* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 83–113. For Domingue, see p. 90.

¹¹ Jean Baumgarten, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature*, trans. by Jerold C. Frakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 14–15. See also Jerold Frakes, *The Politics of Interpretation: Alterity and Ideology in Old Yiddish Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

¹² Max Weinreich, ‘History of the Yiddish Language: The Problems and Their Implications’, *Proceedings of the*

Enlightenment]) castigated [Yiddish] as a mishmash jargon — though any educated person knew that a major tongue like English (on which the sun never set) was far more of a fusion language than Yiddish could ever strive to be'.¹³

Like Old English, Yiddish is West Germanic in origin (though from a different branch), and seems to have first appeared as a result of Jewish settlement in the Rhineland in the ninth and tenth centuries, four or five centuries after the earliest surviving Old English phrase was engraved in runic letters on the Undley Bracteate, a gold medallion found in Suffolk in 1882. In each case there are not two but multiple contributing component languages. English stems from at least four West Germanic Old English dialects, as well as Danish, Latin, Norman French, and 'French of Paris'. Yiddish combines two kinds of Judeo-French (northern and southern Laaz), Hebrew, Aramaic, German, and, later, various Slavic languages, beginning with Old Czech around the fourteenth century. In both cases the dominant language is Germanic, but contributing component languages introduce distinctive complications and make it possible for the speaker or writer to communicate with a variety of multilingual or monolingual acquaintances in a variety of contrasting registers depending on choice of vocabulary. My discussion in this paper will not focus on the entire trajectory of either language, or on the vexed question of which dialect represents the original parent from which either one of them sprang, but on the formation of Middle English, leading to the fourteenth-century language of Chaucer (c. 1342–1400), as compared with the emergence of Middle Yiddish in the works of a comparable poet who was also a pioneering scholar of Hebrew and Yiddish, Eliahu Levita (also known as Elye Bokher) (1469–1549). It is important to emphasize from the outset that the two languages are at different stages of development as they appear in the work of these two key witnesses, with Middle English much more advanced in its process of fusion.

In his 2013 article for the first issue of the new *Journal of Jewish Languages*, Alexander Beider analyzes 'Language Tree' (i.e. 'Germanistic') and 'Judeo-centric' approaches to the study of the history of Yiddish, and finds for the 'Germanistic' 'Language Tree' model, while admitting that a combination of both methods would provide a better framework for understanding its trajectory.¹⁴ A full response to his proposal from the standpoint of the English specialist demands a different paper — one that could discuss the benefits of the knowledge of Middle English for the better understanding of the development of Yiddish. Here, grappling with Middle English, the historical linguist rejoices in a well-established 'Germanistic Language Tree' from which its English branch springs without dispute. What the student of Middle English (and, incidentally, Old French) lacks, and what the present

American Philosophical Society, 103 (1959), 563–70.

¹³ Neugroschel, p. 142. See also Lytton Strachey, 'Racine', in *Books and Characters, French and English* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), p. 13. 'Owing mainly, no doubt, to the double origin of our language, with its strange and violent contrasts between the highly-coloured crudity of the Saxon words and the ambiguous splendour of the Latin vocabulary, owing partly, perhaps, to a national taste for the intensively imaginative, and partly, too, to the vast and penetrating influence of those grand masters of bizarrerie — the Hebrew Prophets — our poetry, our prose, and our whole conception of the art of writing have fallen under the dominion of the emphatic, the extraordinary, and the bold. No one in his senses would regret this, for it has given our literature all its most characteristic glories[...]. See also his essay on Sir Thomas Browne for its discussion of Browne's manipulation of Latinate and Saxon words, pp. 38–43.

¹⁴ Alexander Beider, 'Reapplying the Language Tree Model to the History of Yiddish', *Journal of Jewish Languages*, 1 (2013), 77–121. See also Beider's important new study, *Origins of Yiddish Dialects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For an astute response and critique, see Alec Burko, 'The New Yiddish Dialectology: A Review of Alexander Beider's *The Origins of Yiddish Dialects*', *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (2016), 1–15.

paper attempts to supply, are the key tools supplied for Yiddish by what Beider identifies as a ‘Judeo-centric’, or what might be termed, in the case of English, an ‘Anglo-centric’ slant. Both viewpoints have merits, and both are necessary for the better analysis of these two cognate languages at different stages of their histories.

‘Fusion languages’, to return to the term Max Weinreich proposed for Yiddish, are built from the daily experience of including or excluding conversational partners, flashing instant linguistic signals to those in the know while confounding the uninitiated. This feature proves of special importance for both Middle English and Yiddish literature. These languages, with their built-in contrasts, hybrid words and expressions, and multi-level synonyms, make code-switching and sophisticated compounding techniques almost irresistible to the writer as literary tools within his or her native tongue. It is worth adding that code-switching was of great interest to Chaucer. He darts between French, Latin, or Northumbrian dialect, puncturing flights of aureate learned rhetoric with down-to-earth native English translations: ‘For th’orisonte hath reft the sonne his lyght — | This is as muche to seye as it was nyght’;

the gentile, in estaat above
 She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;
 And for that oother is a povre womman,
 She shal be cleped his wenche or his lemman.¹⁵

Both English and Yiddish spring from the differential multilingualism of the communities that produced them, each with substantial bilingualism in the center, trilingual or quadrilingual learned populations, and important monolingual groups in different social layers. The work of the late Joshua Fishman, a language sociologist, suggests that this high degree of variable multilingualism within the community would seem to be the key factor in generating ‘fusion languages’ (or language-fusion effects).¹⁶

Indeed, it was to cope with this complex linguistic situation that the preeminent Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich proposed the term ‘fusion language’ (in Yiddish, *shmeltsshprakh*) in 1940.¹⁷ This term has been criticized as ‘pre-theoretical’ and without an established technical definition.¹⁸ Yet it is the one that most Yiddishists still find most satisfactory, and Weinreich did define it in a 1956 article in *Romance Philology*:

I use ‘fusion language’ as the label for ‘a type of language in which the fusion principle is dominant;’ this presupposes another language type in which a different principle — which we may call ‘lineal’ — dominates. The two principles are construed as opposite poles of an axis; each, to a varying degree, is perceptible in any language, and any language may be thought of as occupying the continuum between the two extremes. Consequently, ‘lineal language’ and ‘fusion language’ are ideal types which never occur in reality; but few will hesitate to place, let us say, Icelandic, Gaelic, or Lithuanian nearer one pole and English, Rumanian [*sic*], or Yiddish closer to the opposite pole, while French or Russian may be

¹⁵ All references to Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987): *The Franklin’s Tale*, p. 182, ll. 1016–17; *The Manciple’s Tale*, p. 285, ll. 217–20, the latter a trenchant comment on class influence in word choice.

¹⁶ Joshua A. Fishman, ‘Post-Exilic Jewish Languages and Pidgins/Creoles: Two Mutually Clarifying Perspectives’, *Multilingua*, 6 (1987), 7–24.

¹⁷ Dovid Braun, ‘A reply to Vulf Plotkin [re: Yiddish is not a ‘mixed’ language]’, *Mendele*, 6.2 (February 2002) <<http://yiddish.haifa.ac.il/tmr/tmr06/tmr06002.txt>> [accessed 11 October 2019].

¹⁸ Laszlo Cseresnyesi, ‘On the Term “Fusion Language”’, in *Sum: Creolistics*, ed. by Ann Dizard, *Linguist List*, 7.1721 (6 December 1996), <<https://linguistlist.org/issues/7/7-1721.html>> [accessed 11 October 2019].

assigned intermediate places. Obviously, many languages that we choose to label 'lineal' may give us that impression simply because their early history is insufficiently known.¹⁹

Even today, mainstream linguistics tends to regard 'lineal' or 'genetic' development of languages as its gold standard, and anything else (including fusion or contact effects) as aberrant. Whether this simplistic, pseudo-Darwinian bias is still appropriate to the study of languages is a question worth asking, particularly as biology itself moves toward recognizing more complex forms of hybridization and symbiosis in all forms of life. The simple tree model is no longer adequate.²⁰

Languages created by fusion are often accused of not being languages at all, but degenerate forms of the language they grow out of. Yiddish, which has never 'had an army and a navy', has attracted such opinions for a long time, but this is even true of English at a time when the English did not enjoy much prestige on the Continent. Until the later nineteenth century, very few Germans knew English. In the sixteenth century many German authors — not least Martin Luther — looked down on English, characterizing it much as did Justus Georgius Schottelius (who in 1641 called it *spuma linguarum*, 'the scum of language'), and (in an interesting psycholinguistic reaction to the different rhythmic nature of English with its strong stresses on initial syllables and fondness for alliteration, 'rum, ram, ruf by letter' as Chaucer phrased it) described it as sounding like the barking of dogs. In a fascinating study, William Jervis Jones provides many examples of German writers from the sixteenth century on through the eighteenth century expressing this general impression of English as a motley language.²¹

Among linguists the term 'fusion language' is largely restricted to Yiddish, or by extension on rare occasions, to Modern Hebrew, Romanian, Greek, and sometimes Afrikaans. (Maltese would seem to be another excellent candidate for inclusion in this category.) There are linguists who object to it in the case of Yiddish, notably the late Ellen Prince, or more often ignore it, but to my knowledge nothing better has been proposed, and arguments against it are scarce.²² The advantage of the term is first of all that it describes the language not just as a 'hybrid', but a hybrid of a specific type, which is, as it happens, the same specific type as Middle English.

The idea of Yiddish as simply a curious if not corrupt sub-dialect of German with a few loan words and insignificant grammatical variations seems to be whistling past the graveyard; it really does not do justice to the language's distinctive character or its striking non-Germanic elements — for Neil Jacobs, features unlike those of any other Germanic language.²³ This is

¹⁹ Max Weinreich, 'The Jewish Languages of Romance Stock and their Relation to Earliest Yiddish', *Romance Philology*, 9 (1956), 403–28; see also Max Weinreich, 'Yiddish, Knaanic, Slavic: The Basic Relationships', in *For Roman Jakobson: Essays on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. by Hugh McLean, Horace G. Lunt and Cornelis H. Van Schooneveld, compiled by Morris Halle (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), pp. 622–32.

²⁰ See, for example, Jordana Cepelewicz, 'Interspecies Hybrids Play a Vital Role in Evolution', *Quanta Magazine*, 5 (August 24, 2017) <<https://www.quantamagazine.org/interspecies-hybrids-play-a-vital-role-in-evolution-20170824/>> [accessed 11 October 2019]; Lucía Morales and Bernard Dujon, 'Evolutionary Role of Interspecies Hybridization and Genetic Exchanges in Yeasts', *Microbiology and Molecular Biology Review*, 76 (2012), 721–39; David Quammen, *The Tangled Tree: A Radical New History of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Loren H. Rieseberg, 'The Role of Hybridization in Evolution: Old Wine in New Skins', *American Journal of Botany*, 82 (1995), 944–53.

²¹ Justus Georgius Schottelius, *Teutsche Sprachkunst* (Braunschweig: Gruber, 1641), p. 141; William Jervis Jones, *Images of Language: Six Essays on German Attitudes to European Languages from 1500 to 1800* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999).

²² Ellen Prince, 'Yiddish as a Contact Language', in *Creolization and Contact*, ed. by Norval Smith and Tonjes Veenstra, Creole Language Library, 23 (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001), pp. 263–90.

²³ Neil Jacobs, *Yiddish: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 17.

also the problem with defining Chaucer's Middle English as a pidgin, creole, or sub-dialect of Old French. The genesis of both languages is markedly different from that of either a pidgin or a Creole, an issue well discussed for Yiddish by Joshua Fishman, and for Middle English by Richard J. Watts in 2011. As Fishman points out, Yiddish shares with pidgins and Creoles 'the disparateness of their etymological components' and a 'frequent "non-standard" (that is, "dialectal") image'. Yet no post-exilic Jewish language originates in the way that classic pidgins and creoles do, as a simplified medium of communication for 'dislocated members of a newly constituted aggregate' with no common language, who 'must communicate with one another on a make-shift basis as much as they are forced to do so with their masters'. This was no more the case for Yiddish than it was for English. The ninth-century Jews, like the eleventh-century English, already had their own languages. One should note that Old Yiddish developed among a population that had been not just bilingual but multilingual for centuries. Dovid Katz traces this multilingualism as far back as the encounter of Hebrew and Aramaic in the ancient Near East.²⁴ Fishman concludes: 'thus, the genesis of a post-exilic Jewish language [PEJL] is an instance of language spread from, initially, intergroup to, primarily, intragroup purposes'. As the language is adapted by its new community of speakers for their own purposes, different speech networks may be at different stages in the chain of linguistic developments, and, indeed, these groups may be 'differentially instrumental in bringing about the ultimate distancing between PEJLs and their coterritorial correlates'.²⁵

The term 'fusion language' brings with it an alternative way of thinking about language. It stresses the integrity and interrelationship of the multiple components of the language, as opposed to the binary asymmetry of the classic creole, with one language seen as superior, the speech of the ruling class, and the other as inferior, or the 'mixed' language as opposed to other 'pure and unmixed' languages. As the Yiddish poet Matisyahu Mises pointed out in 1908, and Weinreich reiterated in 1956, all European languages are hybrids of one sort or another; Dovid Katz would go further and see all languages as fusion languages in origin.²⁶

Another linguist interested in language mixing was the Soviet academician Nikolai Yakovlevich Marr (1865–1934). Although Marr's controversial linguistic theories were not accepted outside the USSR and were discredited by Stalin himself in 1950, emphasis on hybridization as a key factor in the evolution of languages is one element of his theory that cannot be so easily rejected. Another is his insistence on the importance of sociolinguistic factors (albeit from a Marxist-Leninist perspective) in linguistic evolution. Marr was 'one of the first to insist that languages coalesce, as much as they "derive", that constructing family trees is to over-simplify a process by which one language absorbs another'.²⁷ During the short time that Max Weinreich studied at the University of St Petersburg (1912), Marr was Dean of the Faculty of Oriental Languages there. More significantly, Weinreich, as a linguistic theorist in Poland in the 1920s and 30s, would certainly have been aware of Marr's ideas. But, having studied linguistics at Marburg (1919–23), Weinreich would by that time have

²⁴ Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), pp. 13–15.

²⁵ Fishman, 'Post-Exilic Jewish Languages', pp. 13, 8.

²⁶ Getzel Kressel, 'Matisyahu Mizes un di polemik vegn yidish', *Di Goldene Keyt*, 28 (1957), 143–63; Katz, *Words on Fire*, p. 14. Weinreich, 'The Jewish Languages', pp. 12–13.

²⁷ Donald Rayfield, 'Nikolai Marr' (16 March 2015), <<http://britishgeorgiansociety.org/events/11-past/206-nokolai-marr-a-talk-by-donald-rayfield-17-february>> [accessed 11 October 2019]. See also Patrick Sériot, *Structure and the Whole: East, West, and non-Darwinian Biology in the Origins of Structural Linguistics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 117–118 and 136–37. Sériot provides much additional information on the interest in hybridization theory in European and particularly Eastern European linguistics of the 1920s and 30s.

been thoroughly imbued in the German linguistic tradition. He would certainly have known the work of Jespersen.

Without going to extremes, the advantages of seeing Chaucer's Middle English as a fusion language (as against seeing it as a 'creole' or simply Germanic or French), and of bringing in Yiddish as a parallel case, are numerous. It interested me to see the term 'fusion' recur several times without explanation in Otto Jespersen's classic account of Middle English from 1905, and again in Baugh and Cable's description of the development of Middle English. An examination of the parallel and complementary trajectories of English and Yiddish makes it clear that the Middle English of 1350 was well ahead of Yiddish in its process of fusion. The two languages develop along parallel lines at different rates: Old English forms in the context of fifth-century migrations to Britain, encountering Old Norse and Norman French around the ninth to eleventh centuries and entering its 'middle' period around the twelfth century; Yiddish begins with Jewish migrations to the Middle Rhine region in the ninth to tenth centuries, encountering Slavic (Old Czech) around the mid-thirteenth century, and entering its 'middle' period around the fifteenth century.²⁸

Both Katz and Max Weinreich call attention to the combination of elements from different source languages in the same word as a sign of a fusion language. The *-nik* suffix (*shlimazlnik*, *olrightnik*, or, worse yet, *nogoodnik* in today's Yinglish) combines German, English, or Hebrew roots with a Slavic ending; the feminine personal name *Blumke* unites the German *blum*, 'flower', with the Old Czech diminutive *-ka*. Jespersen notes the same feature in Middle English, and remarks that this practice of combining native words with foreign affixes is an uncommon feature of the language as compared with other languages more resistant to external elements. Jespersen regarded this type of 'hybridism', commonplace in Middle English, as much rarer in other languages, though it is more frequently found in Germanic than in Romance languages.²⁹ Familiar English composite words that bring together French and English elements in this way (as in 'shepherdess') reveal code-switching so pervasive that it appears even within the word itself, not to mention within a phrase or sentence.

Katz and Weinreich both adapt (with some reservations) Ber Borekhov's (1881–1917) hypothesis that Yiddish uses different components for different purposes, due in part to the differential multilingualism of the population: German or Slavic (or, in the Middle Yiddish poet Eliahu Levita's case, Italian) for everyday domestic or marketplace use, Hebrew or Aramaic terms for tasks related to the Jewish community and communal experience.³⁰ The English tendency to use French for the culinary and courtly spheres, Latin for learning and religion, and English for agricultural and domestic life, as in the familiar examples *cow/beef*, *sheep/mutton*, *veal/calf*, with the animal changing its name and nationality as it is slaughtered and enters the kitchen, ties in with this observation. This stratification of layers within the fusion language connects with the cultivation of rhetorical 'registers' that combine to give the fusion languages a special literary character.

The term 'fusion language' takes into account directionality — what might be called the dynamics of the language as it develops. Middle English is not in the process of becoming

²⁸ See Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 3rd edn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 50, 177; Baumgarten, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature*; Weinreich, 'History of the Yiddish Language'.

²⁹ Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, pp. 109–11.

³⁰ For a pertinent overview, see Barry Trachtenberg, 'Ber Borochov's 'The Tasks of Yiddish Philology'', *Science in Context*, 20 (2007), 341–52.

French, though without question it becomes more frenchified than before. It becomes Modern English. Yiddish is not becoming Russian or Modern Hebrew. In fact, the fusion language idea helps explain the directionality of English — why it was not replaced altogether by French in the aftermath of 1066, in the way that conquerors' languages so often supplant those of the conquered — just as it helps explain why Yiddish does not become altogether Slavic as the Jewish population of Europe was pushed further and further into Eastern Europe, though it is significantly slaviced. Ongoing fusions of Yiddish, English, and Modern Hebrew in present-day British, American, and Israeli speech are fascinating subjects of current linguistic research.³¹

The term 'fusion language' emphasizes the nature of the resulting language, rather than over-stressing the role of one or another component. In fact, the components become inextricable parts of a new language that has its own identity, integrity, and dignity. As the late Yiddish philologist Mordkhe Schaechter (1927–2007) liked to insist, a Hebrew word or a Slavic word adopted into Yiddish is a Yiddish word in good standing, a fully functional and fully integrated element of a new system, just as a French word has the potential to become a perfectly respectable Middle English word, and indeed, to be productive, when combined with non-French elements to produce new English words.³² Baugh and Cable list early combinations of French loan-words with English endings: 'for example, the adjective "gentle" is recorded in 1225 and within five years we have it compounded with an English noun to make "gentlewoman" (1230) [...] It is clear that the new French words were quickly assimilated, and [that they] entered into an easy and natural fusion with the native element in English'.³³ As Jespersen noted, the compounding of the native word with non-native affixes, uncommon in more isolated linguistic situations, seems to be a defining marker of fusion languages. In Eliahu Levita's Middle Yiddish *Bove Bukh* of 1507–8 words of Hebrew origin are inflected according to German grammatical usage on a regular basis.³⁴ We see this same productive fusion of French and English continuing into Chaucer's phase of Middle English as well, and beyond him into the fifteenth century. It might be argued that they are woven out of code-switching.

For Chaucer studies, and indeed for medieval English studies across the board, one benefit of the concept of the 'fusion language' may be a more sophisticated appreciation of the resources such a language offers to the attentive writer (and, consequently, reader). Chaucer is well aware of this, as he plays with contrasts between courtly (or, for that matter, legal) French terms and *burel* (simple, rude) English, and flights of aureate or legal Latinity or Latin tags, like the Pardoner's *Radix malorum est Cupiditas*, the Summoner's *questio quid juris*, or the Nun's Priest's *mulier est hominis confusio*, 'woman is man's ruin', mistranslated with a wink as 'woman is mannes joye and al his blis' for a differentially multilingual audience of male and female pilgrims.³⁵

³¹ For an example, see Isabelle Barrière's study, 'The Vitality of Yiddish among Hasidic Infants and Toddlers in a Low SES Preschool in Brooklyn', *Yiddish — a Jewish National Language at 100: Proceedings of the Czernowitz Yiddish Language 2008 International Centenary Conference*, Jews and Slavs, 22 (Jerusalem-Kyiv: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010), pp. 170–96.

³² Mordkhe Schaechter, personal communication. August 18, 1997.

³³ Baugh and Cable, *A History of the English Language*, p. 166.

³⁴ Jerry C. Smith, 'Elia Levita's *Bovo-Buch*: A Yiddish Romance of the Early Sixteenth Century' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1968), p. 544.

³⁵ *Radix malorum est Cupiditas* (1 Timothy 6. 10), *Pardoner's Prologue*, p. 194, l. 334; *Questio quid iuris*, *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, p. 33, l. 646; *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, p. 257, ll. 3163–64.

The comedy of Chaucer's love-lyric 'To Rosemounde' as an expression of frustrated love is rooted in the joys and perils of code-switching in the Middle English of the later fourteenth century.³⁶ The elusive lady Rosamounde takes form within a frame of courtly French, between the elegant, formal opening address *Madame* (first occurring in English c. 1300) and the refrain's closing note of the 'daliaunce' again and again denied to the speaker as he snatches at sonorous but incongruous French words (*oynement*, *galantine*) from medicine and the kitchen (along with the geographical Latin of *mappemounde*) and mashes up the French and English forms of the name *Tristan* (from the original perhaps Pictish *Drust*, Welsh and Cornish *Drystan*, later to appear in French as *Tristan* and English as *Tristram*) to get 'Tristam'. A sprint through the online *Middle English Dictionary* brings out the novelty of many of the French and Latin polysyllabic words.³⁷ *Cercled*, *mapemounde*, *jocounde*, *galantine*, *daliaunce* all appear first in English in this poem: *oynement* turned up in 1290, *crystal* in 1300. Chaucer shares the honor of the earliest *MED* instances of *revell* and *daunce* with the early alliterative romance *William of Palerne* (c. 1350–61). The polysyllables tend to stand out, while earlier French *beauté* (c. 1275), *curtaysly* (*Ancrene Riwe*, 'kurtesye', c. 1225), *divine* (F. *deviner*, twelfth century), and Latin borrowings like *shrine*, from *scrinium* (a chest or box), *walwed* (from *volvere*, 'to roll'), are much more deeply embedded among the short words of Germanic origin so beloved of George Orwell — *chekes*, *teres*, *wo*, *herte*, *founde*, *bounde*, *mery*, *blis*, *trewes*, *brenne*, *lyst*.³⁸ In true fusion language style, *walwed* is domesticated as a weak verb with its non-Latinate dental preterite (-ed), *curtays* becomes an English adverb with its equally English suffix -ly, and *was* combines with the ancient Indo-European negative particle *ne* that French and Old English shared to form the ubiquitous negative contraction *nas*. When the poet concludes the final stanza, 'Do what you lyst, I wyl your thral be founde, | Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce', he strikes a powerful note by diving not just deep into the Old English register (over the entire penultimate line) to identify himself as his lady's 'thral', her abject slave (originally, a 'gofer', a servant running with a message), but by choosing an Old Norse loan-word over the more pejorative French possibility, *vileyn*, or, for that matter, the Anglo-Saxon alternative *cherl*. The Northern *thral* is, for Chaucer, a strong word to be used at key moments: in *The Man of Law's Tale* its embattled heroine Constance sighs that 'Women are born to thralldom and penance | And to be under mannes governaunce'.³⁹ In *The Franklin's Tale*, the narrator retorts that 'Wommen desiren to han sovereignte | And nat to be constrained as a thral, | And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal'.⁴⁰ In *The Physician's Tale*, the doomed Roman maiden Virginia is ruled a slave by the predatory judge Appius Claudius, with "The cherl shal have his thral, this I awarde".⁴¹ On all occasions, the word *thral* strikes a dire note, suggesting the depths of servitude. At the same time, the teasing key word *daliaunce* — covering any form of social interaction from a friendly greeting to a romp in the shrubbery — that ends each stanza, remains courtly and French. The contrast between courtly, learned, elegant polysyllables and the stark monosyllables of the 'pyk' (already in Old English, with Latin or Celtic roots) surrounded by his French sauce, or of the 'thral' enslaved to his lady,

³⁶ *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 649.

³⁷ *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>> [accessed August 8 2018].

³⁸ George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon*, vol. 13, issue 76 (1946), 252–65.

³⁹ *The Man of Law's Tale*, p. 91, ll. 286–87.

⁴⁰ *The Franklin's Tale*, p. 179, ll. 769–770.

⁴¹ *The Physician's Tale*, p. 192, l. 202.

is what makes the poem funny and poignant, even for readers so accustomed to the fusion character of English that these linguistic effects are barely noticed.

As the Ukrainian linguist Alexander A. Potebnja noted in 1904, our sensitivity to these linguistic roots may well become blunted over time, though they persist in the form and sound of the word and the internal images it has the potential to generate.⁴² 'To Rosemounde' stands out as a *tour de force* demonstrating the art of the fusion language in action. The series of jarring, comic discords called up by the sounds and varied linguistic origins of the words contribute to conjure up a series of incongruous mental images that illuminate the speaker's struggle to find the words to court his unresponsive lady.

A century and a half later, Eliahu Levita would deploy the resources of a Yiddish enriched both by learned Hebrew and the Italian of his adoptive country in a variety of poetic ventures, in particular his delightful version of *Bevis of Hampton*, the *Bove-Bukh*. From the title page on into his preface he describes himself as *Elia Bokher* (Heb. *Bakhu*), *Elia ha-mechaber*, and *Elia Levi*, introducing himself as (according to his nickname) still a bachelor (*bakhur*), but also *The Author* (*ha-mechaber*), and using three familiar Hebrew terms to define himself as youthful, the writer in command of his book, and a man whose pedigree connects him to the Levites, the tribe entrusted by Moses with the musical component of the service in the temple in Jerusalem. These three words paint his portrait for the Yiddish-speaking reader as he or she opens the book, investing the poet in progressive layers of dignity. (This is, for the Jewish reader, his *yikhes*, i.e., his pedigree as a poet and, indeed, a sort of musician.) The opening is spiced with a little *gematria* for his learned readers who appreciate the numerical values of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet: '*Elye Ha-mekhaber* equals the year'. (To decode the message the knowledgeable reader adds up the Hebrew letters in the author's name to make the number 302 — 5302 in the Jewish reckoning, 1541 CE.) Its flash from the allusion to his ancestors' divine service to Elye Bokher's own service to 'all pious women' that has led him to publish this romance builds its humor on the simultaneous parallelisms and contrasts of the situation, packed into the language itself. It is left to the male or female readers, to learned colleagues or *frume vayber* (pious women), to decide what comedy lurks in the shift from the temple to the contemporary Jewish household, from the choral music of the Levite of old to the chivalric romance translated from the Italian that entertains the Sabbath-observant Jewish wife, or from religious service to the courtly service offered to ladies. There is much more to come, but the opening lines already suggest the range of possibilities. The fusion language changes its flavor as the speaker crosses linguistic borders. For the Yiddish-speaking reader not resident in Italy the poet (who was also a distinguished lexicographer) supplies a glossary of the Italian words that pepper his Yiddish, from *ancora* to *stora*.⁴³ Here, too, the prestige language embedded within the everyday vernaculars encourages harmonic or dissonant effects at the touch of a key. The instrument — the fusion language — is as sophisticated as a pipe organ, and as responsive as a pennywhistle.

To say that Chaucer's Middle English is x% French by computer analysis is to flatten out completely where and when and how Chaucer uses his different French registers (Frenches of England or of Paris, of the court or of the law), as well as his regional and socially

⁴² John Fizer, *Alexander A. Potebnja's Psycholinguistic Theory of Literature: A Metacritical Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 31–33.

⁴³ Jerry C. Smith, *Elia Levita Bachur's Bovo-Buch: A Translation of the Old Yiddish Edition of 1541* (Tucson: Fenestra, 2003), pp. 105–106. Levita himself published the first Yiddish-Hebrew dictionary, *Shemot Devari*, in collaboration with Paul Fagius, his publisher (Isny, 1542).

marked English and Latin registers, against one another — the versatility, sophistication, and opportunities of a fusion language. As in Yiddish, the component languages form a flexible entity with its own distinct identity as a language, capable of being very French or very Germanic or very Latinate or very English or all four at once. Such a language is slippery and difficult to pin down, a medium eminently suitable to Chaucer himself.

The parallels between Middle English and other fusion languages, notably Yiddish, offer plenty of opportunities for technical comparative linguistic studies, things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. They also offer innumerable opportunities for the literary scholar to see how a skillful poet — Chaucer or Elia Bokher Levita — can take advantage of the full range of resources of such a complex fusion of disparate elements. Other effects drawing on the character of English as fusion language can be seen throughout Middle English literature, including the stark contrasts of aureate and vulgar as they recur throughout *Piers Plowman* (whose running Latin allusions help to make it more of a 'fusion poem' than perhaps any other that we have) or for dramatic characterization in, say, *Mankind*, where the rudest of the little vices tells the dignified Mercy that his 'body is full of Englisch Laten', as indeed it is.⁴⁴ They carry on through the Early Modern period with Shakespeare's Monsieur Le Beau of *As you Like It*, to mention one obvious instance, up into the aureate academic registers of our own day. These languages are nobody's pidgin.

What the situation really demands is the reintegration of literature and language studies (philology or linguistics, as you please) envisioned in J. R. R. Tolkien's 'Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford' of 1959.⁴⁵ Tolkien's own experience as a philologist at Leeds over the five years he taught there (1920–25), and upon his return to Oxford, underlines the difficulty of bringing these conflicting visions of English studies into some kind of alignment. Today, almost a century later, we still need to reconnect the shards, if we are to understand either language or literature, English or Yiddish.

In conclusion, it seems important to return to the fundamental questions raised by this discussion. What does the term 'fusion language' and the suggested analogy between Middle English and Yiddish contribute to our understanding of Middle English? Why do this? First, because Yiddish is an analogue to Middle English, developing from a different combination of Germanic and non-Germanic sources along a distinct but parallel timeline, from differentially multilingual populations. Both languages have been too often misunderstood, and indeed denigrated as languages. The continuing discussion, throughout history down to the present, of whether such hybrids are truly languages at all, or represent some degenerate form of the 'parent' language deserves to be recognized as belonging to the politics and psychology of language. This has to do with the 'ethical' evaluation of language, evoking standards of 'purity' that reflect the cultural biases of the writer. Yiddish and English may be better understood together than separately.

The advantage of the 'fusion language' term is clarity. It seems desirable to have an appropriate descriptive name to aid in classifying and grouping such languages. 'Mixed language', one suggested alternative term, is a large generic category covering all sorts of

⁴⁴ 'NEW-G[U]ISE: Ey, ey, yowr body is full of Englisch Laten! I I am aferde it will brest.' *Mankind*, in *Medieval Drama*, ed. by David Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 907, ll. 124–25.

⁴⁵ Michael Drout, 'J. R. R. Tolkien's Medieval Scholarship and its Significance', *Tolkien Studies*, 4 (2007), 113–76. See also Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), pp. 273, 332, 337–38. J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford', in *The Monsters and the Critics*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 224–40 [first publ. London: Allan and Unwin, 1983].

languages, perhaps every language on the planet. Like the ‘mixed breed’ dog, every breed of dog is technically a mixture of earlier varieties. Does it really mean anything, other than to point out that languages do mix, and some are more mixed than others? ‘Mixed language’ does not specify the nature or extent of the mixture of elements within the language. Terms like ‘pidgin’, ‘creole’, and ‘fusion language’ denote subgroups within this much larger ‘mixed language’ field. Of these, only ‘fusion language’ stands up to the critique of ‘Creole Exceptionalism’.

‘Fusion language’ represents a clarification as a term for Middle English, resulting in a higher degree of specificity. It describes a particular subset of languages (among them Albanian, English, Garifuna, Maltese, Yiddish) within the broad category of ‘mixed languages’. It counters the misleading mental image conjured up by the familiar ‘language tree’ diagram, in which languages are shown branching out from a parental stem representing its original language family (e.g. Proto-Indo-European). The trajectory is linear, growing out in one direction only. Old English is customarily represented in this way as a West Germanic language descendant of Ingvaeonic (North Sea German) dialects and migrating to Britain in the fifth century. The ‘language tree’ model does not begin to express the idea of languages from different branches of the tree merging to form new independent languages. This is the phenomenon described by the term ‘fusion language’.

The concept of ‘fusion language’ directs attention toward necessary new directions in the study of language formation and affiliation. Such studies should bring linguistics into productive dialogue with recent work on the modeling of biological descent. This approach has deep roots in the history of linguistic thought. Antecedents of Weinreich’s ideas of linguistic blending can be seen in the work of Jespersen and Marr, and others discussed by Sériot.⁴⁶ From this perspective Middle English and Yiddish are eminently comparable, and equally relevant to literary scholarship: future comparative studies will offer students of both languages a chance to arrive at deeper insights into the origins and nature of Chaucer’s and Elye Bokher’s languages and of language in general.

Where the ‘language tree’ model emphasizes lineal descent in one direction, the term ‘fusion language’ stresses the strength and endurance of bonds that unite disparate linguistic strands, melting or fusing them together in a new language with its own unique character. Of the two taxonomic terms, ‘fusion language’ is the stronger and more accurately descriptive, focusing attention on the distinctive way in which languages form by recombining. The subset of ‘mixed languages’ that share the ‘fusion language’ features of origin and structure should be identified as a group and need an appropriate name, such as this one, which has the merit of historical priority. In this way, scholars can get a more accurate picture of the relationships between languages, and how individual languages develop. The ‘fusion language’ idea corrects the innate bias inherent in the ‘language tree’ by putting the emphasis on coming into contact, fusing into one — the linguistic equivalent of marriage, biological symbiosis and genetic recombination.

⁴⁶ Sériot, *Structure and the Whole*.