

## Failed multilingualism

*The central to late Middle Ages are often associated with the rapid growth of vernaculars – with both functional and ideological implications. This shift, together with the ever expanding role of diplomacy, commerce and other forms of exchange across borders, led to an increased perceived need for talented polyglots who could fulfil important administrative, commercial and political roles.*

*I am particularly interested in what happens when multilingualism goes wrong or proves inadequate. What were the consequences when administrative figures were unable to understand several languages? What was the role of multilingualism in conflicts between different linguistic areas? What were the consequences in cosmopolitan medieval universities when monolingual students with poor Latin insisted on using their vernacular tongues and failed to understand each other? When did multilingualism serve to intensify antipathies? Which social groups were perceived to be most inept linguistically, and were the failings of artisans or merchants castigated more strongly than linguistic ineptitudes on the part of noblemen?*

*This anonymous fabliau provides a humorous starting point for addressing some of these questions. It dates probably from the thirteenth century and comes from northern France. It is preserved in a single manuscript, Paris BN fr. 19152, fol. 47d-48a. It can be found in Willem Noomen's Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux, (Van Gorcum, Assen, 1994), vol. 8, no. 90; an older edition can be found online at [http://fontenele.free.fr/fabliaux/fabliaux\\_2\\_N0209380\\_PDF\\_1\\_366.pdf](http://fontenele.free.fr/fabliaux/fabliaux_2_N0209380_PDF_1_366.pdf) pp.184-187.*

*A rough translation of the Noomen edition is provided here. The story hinges upon the mispronunciation of the word 'agneau' – 'lamb', by one of the protagonists – since this is impossible to render in translation, I've indicated the French terms. The text achieves much of its humour via the poor grammar and pronunciation of the Englishmen – again, whilst I have occasionally tried to render this in translation, I have not always done so because I did not want to produce an incomprehensible English text!*

Les deus anglois et l'anel

I want to tell you a story  
 About two Englishmen (I'll try to tell it right),  
 One of whom was unwell.  
 The other, as he should,  
 Looked after him as best he could,  
 And managed to find what was needed:  
 So much so that the time came  
 When the invalid began to sweat out his sickness.  
 When he felt better,  
 He spoke to his companion.

He wanted to tell him what he wished for in French,  
 But his language was anglicised,  
 Which is not surprising really.

He wakes Alein, his companion-  
 Now listen to what he said to him:  
 ‘Alein, he said, are you there?  
 I’ve slept for so long.  
 Me think me bit better:  
 Me sweated all night long;  
 Me think me sweated more now,  
 Me think want eat a little something.’

‘Ah!’ said Alein, ‘May the Holy Spirit  
 Give health to me friend  
 For whom me so worried!’

‘Friend’, said the invalid, ‘By Saint Thomas,  
 If you had some juicy lamb,  
 Me might just about manage to eat that, me think.’

‘You shall have one, in faith’, said he.  
 ‘I’ll go off straightaway and find one!’

‘Friend, may God reward you!’

So off went Alein.  
 He went searching around the town  
 Until he entered a house.  
 He spoke to good man who lived there  
 In the best language he could manage;  
 But he wasn’t able to stop himself  
 Mixing it with English.  
 So he stuffed his French with anglicisms:

‘Sire’, he said, ‘By Saint Thomas,  
 If you have any juicy lamb [he mispronounces *agneau* as *anel* – donkey foal]  
 Me buy willingly.  
 And I pay you good money,  
 And good farthings,  
 Pay you good sterling.’

When the good man,  
 Who was busy harnessing an animal,  
 Heard this gibberish,  
 He had no idea what he meant:  
 ‘What do you want, talking gibberish?  
 I don’t know what mischief you’re talking about:  
 Get lost, and shame on you!  
 Are you from the Auvergne or Flanders?’

‘Nay, nay’, said the Englishman, ‘Me was English.’

The good man heard him, and laughed.

‘What are you saying then, friend?  
Tell what what you want!’

‘Listen to me, you will find out.  
My friend was very ill:  
He pray me that I buy for him  
A lamb [*ainel* – donkey foal], that he wants eat.’

The good man, who was called Mainier,  
Thought he’d understood him.  
‘You’ve come to the right place’, he said.  
‘My donkey [*anesse*] had a nice one last night.’

He brought the donkey meat to the Englishman,  
And sold it to him: the Englishman bought it.  
He came to his lodgings, and skinned it.  
When it was cooked and prepared,  
He carried to his companion  
One of the thighs with a foot;  
And his friend ate it happily,  
Because he was craving meat  
And was feeling much better.

When he’d eaten greedily,  
He looked at the large bones  
And the hip and the whole thigh  
And he saw that it was really large and chunky.

He called his friend: ‘Alein!’  
And Alein came running.  
‘What do you want, you cheat,  
Do you think I’m an idiot?  
What kind of a beast have you brought me?’

‘A lamb [*anel* – again he mispronounces, thinking that this means ‘lamb’], in faith.’  
‘A lamb?’ said he, ‘By Saint Almon,  
This is not the offspring of a sheep!’

‘Yes it is: I bought a lamb,  
It was the biggest that I’ve seen.’

‘A lamb! Devil! Truly  
It seems like the meat of an old beast of burden:  
This is donkey meat that I see before me!’

‘Pardon me, it really was a lamb!  
If you don’t believe that it was lamb,  
I’ll go and get the skin to show you.’

‘Yes’, he said, ‘Show me that!’

So the other brought the skin,  
And stretched it out in front of his companion.  
The latter looked at it long and hard,  
The feet, the head, the ears.

‘Alein’, he said, ‘You’re talking nonsense.  
Lambs don’t have feet like this, a muzzle like this  
Or a pelt like this.  
Little lambs have little bones,  
A short spine and a short back:  
This isn’t the offspring of a baa-baa!  
What do you think it is, Alein?  
This isn’t a young sheep!’

‘You’re right, by Saint Felix:  
By Saint John,  
This is the young of an ee-aw!  
There was a donkey in the house,  
And I’ve brought you donkey foal!’

When the invalid heard him say this,  
He couldn’t stop himself laughing:  
He was cured, and got better.  
The donkey meat which he ate  
Didn’t do him any harm, according to  
The composer of the fabliau of the Englishmen.