

THE ROLE OF ITALIAN IN MEDIEVAL BUSINESS WRITING: A MULTILINGUAL TEXT BY A LONDONER (1450-1451)

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1. THE MULTILINGUALISM OF THE CANTELOWE ACCOUNTS: FEATURES AND CHALLENGES

This chapter focuses on the Cantelowe Accounts (CA), a collection of multilingual business writings composed in Italy in 1450-1451 and edited by Tiddeman (2022)². The author is a London agent, John Balmayn³, who used a mixture of Middle English (ME), Latin (Lt), and Anglo-Norman (AN)⁴, with Italian (It)⁵, for accounting goods of a large shipment in Tuscany, on behalf of his master William Cantelowe⁶. Like most administrative-mercantile documents, the CA are very repetitive and some phrases and fixed expressions are used several times. Moreover, the alternation of AN, ME, and Lt seems to be analogous to that found in the administrative-business texts produced in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, whose multilingualism has been deeply analysed by Trotter (2010) and Wright (1998, 2002, 2011), among others⁷. The addition of Italian, which makes the CA a unique example in the landscape of medieval mixed texts, can be observed, as we will see, through lexical insertions – typical of medieval mercantile practice, such as goods, jobs, currency, measurement –, fixed forms, and inter- and intra-sentential code switching phenomena.

There are some challenging aspects when analysing the CA. One of the main problems is linked to the categorisation of the languages used in composing the text. This is particularly due to two aspects. First, given the chronological location of this medieval text, it is difficult to distinguish AN forms from the ME equivalents, because some

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² Her edition is used as the source of the analysis that follows. As most multilingual medieval texts, the Accounts include abbreviation and suspension symbols, whose expansions will be presented here according to the editor’s methodology.

³ CA are recorded in the Salviati Archive catalogue (AS Serie I: 339, 35 folios).

⁴ Here we use Anglo-Norman to refer to that variety of French which had been mainly in use in the Court since the Norman Conquest (cf. Perta, Ferrari, 2023 for the reasons behind this choice).

⁵ We refer to Italian as the Tuscan vernacular to which Balmayn would have been exposed during his time in Italy.

⁶ John Balmayn methodically recorded all the details of the cargo delivery and purchase in Pisa and Florence by forty-four Italian buyers over a period of eleven months. His records offer a picture of the relationship between the English and the Italian mercantile worlds, and they evidence Anglo-Italian language contact.

⁷ Among the works on historical code-switching, see Baglioni (2016), Schendl (2012), as well as Sebba *et al.* (2012).

material from AN – as well as from Lt – had been crystallised, becoming typical of mercantile texts, real conventional writing practices belonging to that specific genre. As for Lt and It, they are not always easily distinguishable because of the similarity of corresponding forms. Second, in this type of business texts scribes could obscure the information encoded in the morphological endings of lexemes (i.e. grammatical suffixes), or shorten lexemes such as certain common prepositions, which could then be expanded by the reader in different ways, because the abbreviated element may often belong to the various languages in which the text is composed⁸.

Another problematic aspect is the frequent change of the matrix language⁹: it is ME in most entries, whereas others have a particular non-Germanic base, as we will see later. In some instances, the matrix language could be easily recognised, as in (1)¹⁰, where ME is dominant both quantitatively and qualitatively:

1. Firste, for the costys of *iiijc lxvi pokes wolle* of my mayster, Wylliam Cantelowe, comyd to the Porte Pysane in the caryke of Antonio de Aurea, patronne et marchaunt of Jene, send fro Hamptone to Pyse by Johan de Albycys et *compagnia*, marchaunt of Florens, to Fraunces et Johan Salviati et *compagnia* in Pisa and they for to send hit to Florens to Jacob Salviati et *compagnia* (Tiddeman, 2022: 110).

Or, as in (2), where It appears to be the dominant language in an entry about the tare of the wool sacks:

2. *Tare pour* uso et maca³oni et *suprapiù* de sackes et *suprapiù* de pezo et umido: lb 18 *pour* poke (Tiddeman, 2022: 115).

However, in several passages it is hard to recognise a matrix language, as in (3), an entry regarding the supply of clothes for Cantelowe for a year:

3. *Item* le dyd for a savacondyd *pour* le robe de William Cantelowe *duryng*e a yere: fl. 30 s. 19 d. 4 (Tiddeman, 2022: 159).

Moreover, the inserted lexemes or switched phrases may belong to one of the languages of the text. In fact, three or occasionally four languages can be found in a single sentence¹¹. All these features make it hard to recognise patterns, because the matrix language changes frequently and the switching points are difficult to identify or they seem to be casual, making an analysis in language contact perspective challenging.

The aim of this work is to investigate the multilingual practices in the CA, examining whether they are exclusively the result of conventional writing practices belonging to that specific genre, or also the outcome of idiosyncratic and ephemeral forms in the writer's non-native languages¹². In other words, we try to understand whether the features that characterise the multilingual practices in the text are either textual conventions or the

⁸ See Wright (2011).

⁹ Matrix language is used here to refer to the dominant language of the phrase, mainly from a quantitative point of view, rather than Myers-Scotton's (1993) and Myers-Scotton and Jake's (2001) definition.

¹⁰ In the examples the italics represent the expansion of abbreviations in the original manuscript.

¹¹ Balmayn often switched from one language to another, and very rarely reported switching: there are four instances only where a word is preceded by *callyd*, for example: «*Item* for cariours the *whiche* be *callyd* victura for the bryngynge fro Pise to Florens» (Tiddemann, 2022: 112) or *vocat*: «*Et* in numero Cxxxv sunt lane *vocate* flesse wolle que ponderant *cloves vij*» (Tiddemann, 2022: 108).

¹² Cf. Perta, Ferrari, Iezzi (2024) where the writing practices in the CA are presented through an overview of code switching instances.

result of multilingual creativity, or both, looking at the dynamics between fixed segments and code switching. Methodologically we use a language contact approach in order to differentiate between the two, by focusing on the employment of Italian within the mixed system; we evaluate its role, whether it provides lexical insertions – linked to particular mercantile practices or to specific aspects of the Italian reality –, or whether it also consists of fixed forms, or is even used productively.

2. THE USE OF ITALIAN WITHIN THE CA

The presence of It as a fourth language, in addition to the languages typically used in these kinds of multilingual documents produced in England, is a distinctive characteristic of the CA. The It language is used in many parts of the text, and its presence varies both quantitatively and qualitatively in the entries. We can identify three different types of It influence. First, the insertion of single lexemes – which are typical of mercantile practices or linked to the Italian culture, for example objects, professions, places –, or more complex syntagms can be recognised. Second, some fixed expressions with a formulaic character are repeated throughout the text. Last, we can notice more complex chunks, where the use of It seems to be more productive. Through selected examples we will examine cases of lexical insertions (Section 2.1) and fixed expressions (Section 2.2), and we will observe how It can be used productively (Section 2.3). Then, the different roles of It will be outlined by comparing them to the types of contact phenomena mentioned above (Section 3).

2.1. *Lexical insertions*

As for the lexical insertions, the CA contain many It lexemes belonging to the medieval mercantile activity, showing Anglo-Italian contact in this field (Perta, 2024). Some occur repeatedly, but others are only seen a handful of times, or just a single time. Most of them occur within a ME entry, as in (4) and (5), where only the lexeme is in It, while the article is in ME as well:

4. [...] and at Florens as hit apperyth by the *parcelle* wretyne in this boke in the **carta** of 41. The *summa* ys in florinys (Tiddeman, 2022: 154).
5. *Item* s.1 *pour* poke for the ry3th of the schipe house þat ys for to saye the **arsinà** of Lyvorne (Tiddeman, 2022: 110).

In the previous examples, *carta* (4) refers to a page of the account¹³, whereas *arsinà* (5) indicates the dockyard in the city of Livorno (Tuscany)¹⁴.

Other lexemes appear in entries whose matrix language is difficult to define; this is the case in example (6), where the It syntagm *la partita* refers to the expenses for the service of the clerks¹⁵. The introduction of the full noun phrase (determiner + noun) might be linked to the non-ME matrix language of the entry.

¹³ Cf. Italian *carta* in Battaglia (Vol. II: 808). Also cf. Tiddeman (2022: 168).

¹⁴ Cf. Italian *arsenale* in Battaglia (Vol. I: 702). Also cf. Tiddeman (2022: 167).

¹⁵ Cf. Italian *partita* in Battaglia (Vol. XII: 691).

6. Et pour **la partita** to the clerkys, £2. *Summa totale* fl. 1623 [...] pour solidi, £6 s.18 d.3 de peçz, valeuta de grossy: fl.1624 s.18 d.4 (Tiddeman, 2022: 112).

2.2. Fixed elements

Besides the lexical items exemplified above, the CA also contain a range of fixed expressions taken from all of the four languages that are used throughout the text. In the case of the It ones, a quite recurrent element is the adjective *ditto* ('the abovesaid'), also in its plural form *ditti*.

The forms *ditto* and *ditti* appear several times in the accounts. *Ditto* occurs more frequently, and is exclusively used in a formulaic way to refer to dates, following two different patterns:

- a) most of the occurrences are preceded by “*a di / a di + n^o*”, as in (7):

7. *Item a di 11 ditto*, send by usaunce to Bruges a gr. 52¹/₃ a Lorenxo Banbo, for here hadde hit Jacobo Pissamano (Tiddeman, 2022: 160).

- b) others are preceded by the AN article “*le + n^o*”, as in (8):

8. *Item le 13 ditto*, send by usaunce to London a st. 44¹/₂ a Lowes Strossy [...] (Tiddeman, 2022: 160).

The singular form *ditto* is used in morphological accordance with the singular noun *di*, as in (7), or simply with the date, as in (8), because the noun *jour* is implied.

Differently, the plural form is also used in some other contexts, as follows:

- a) as adjective of *denari* ('money'), as in (9), where the writer talks about the expenses for the brokers' fee:

9. *Item per senceria de ditti denari* cambiati per sencyale: fl.3 s. 16 d.4 (Tiddeman, 2022: 159).

- b) within the phrase *a ditti da lloro midesimi* ('to the abovesaid upon themselves')¹⁶, as in (10):

10. *Item a di 13 ditto* pour £80 s. 4 d. – peçz 12 de gr. send by usaunce a Venecia **a ditti da lloro midesimi**, a £15 st .17 d.10 a fl. pour libra de gr., for hit was delyverd here to the seyd *compagnia* de le dyd Russelay et Strossy (Tiddeman, 2022: 156).

- c) with proper names, as in (11):

11. *Item le xxvij ditto* pour £28 de gr. send to Venecia **a ditti Russelay et Strossy** for to resseyve of Lowes Pig[o], a £15 s. 18 d. 4 a fl. pour £ de gr., for here hadde hit Cornelio de Mysser Carlo et *compagnia* (Tiddeman, 2022: 157).

¹⁶ Interestingly, in «[...] a le dyd Russelay et Strossy upone themeselffe», *le dyd* is followed by the ME *upone themeselffe* rather than the It equivalent *da lloro midesimi* (Tiddeman, 2022: 157).

These examples show how, in general, the element *ditti* morphologically aligns with the plural Italian elements of the syntagms to which they belong¹⁷. This grammatical consistency and the differentiation between singular and plural forms show that the element is used productively by the writer, rather than being fixed.

The fixed expression *que fa* ('that makes'), instead, which appears many times regardless of the matrix language, is utilised to indicate money conversion or the result of unladen weight, so it is followed by units of measurement and numbers, as in examples (12) and (13):

12. *Item for cariours the whiche be callyd victura for the bryngynge fro Pise to Florens the forseyd 466 pokes wolle weyng lb.123000 a s.18 le C. de pezoly 36 que fa £1107* (Tiddeman, 2022: 112).
13. *Summa: viijc xlvij florins and vij s. of golde que fa fl. 848 s. 10, a payer argent content* (Tiddeman, 2022: 114).

It is unknown whether the writer actually repeated the expression as a fixed phrase or he understood the meaning of each element (*que* and *fa*). Although the expression has by all means a formulaic nature, it seems to be found in a more productive context in one occurrence, as explained in Section 2.3.

2.3. Italian segments

While in the case of lexical insertions and fixed expressions small segments are transferred, we also find more complex switched chunks, as we can see in (14), where the use of It displays a higher level of flexibility compared to what we observed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2:

14. *Item pour taratura que fa le tare de le lana s.2 d.6 de pez. pour poke que fa pokes 448 come appare per vendute que [fa] £56 de pez., valeno: fl. 13 s. 5 d. 2* (Tiddeman, 2022: 112).

Whereas the second and the third occurrences of the fixed element *que fa* in *que fa pokes 448, que [fa] £56 de pez.*, are similar to those shown in Section 2.2, the first one in *que fa le tare de le lana s.2 d.6 de pez. pour poke* is used within a different context: not only does it introduce a price or a measure, but it specifies the implications of the noun *taratura*, that is the calibration or adjustment of tare to be deducted from the gross weight¹⁸. Therefore, this is an example of the use of *que fa* which goes beyond the simple repetition of fixed elements. This type of productive use of *que fa*, unusual in other entries of the text, together with several lexical elements related to the wool trade (*taratura, tare, lana*), seems to indicate quite a good competence of It by Balmayn. The following example suggests further evidence for this competence:

15. [...] Et pour duodesimo, þe whyche ys uno parte de xij parte de le maiore [...]
- (Tiddeman, 2022: 112).

¹⁷ There is only one occurrence where *ditti* is used with reference to a single person («[...] a ditti Russelay») (Tiddeman, 2022: 157). This could be a mistake made by Balmayn while writing the entry, due to the influence of a very similar expression which appears in the preceding entry, exemplified in (11).

¹⁸ Cf. the glossary in Tiddeman (2022: 171).

It is interesting that the noun *duodesimo* ('twelfth') is glossed in It (*uno parte de xij parte de le maiore*); the explanation of the word is introduced by the ME expression *pe whyche ys* ('the which is'). However, the gloss is not used to translate the lexeme into ME, but to explain its meaning, again in It.

3. THE USES OF ITALIAN: A SUMMARY

As seen above, It appears in various contexts: from It switched elements in ME entries, which have different types of interference, to instances where It is the matrix language of the entry. Indeed, we find It in the form of single-word insertions in contexts where the matrix language is ME, in more complex switched segments, and in entries almost entirely written in It. Here, we will give an overview of the possible ways in which It can be used.

When the It language is present in entries that are almost entirely written in ME, the insertions we find are quantitatively limited, recurrent, and formulaic, as in the following examples:

16. *Memorandum* that this ys the money send by exchange fro Florens by Alaman Salviati to Venice and to London for the *parte* of the *conto* de G, for the whyche the seyd Alaman Salviati hathe wretyne to Johan Russelay et Vanni Francisco de Strossy et *compagnia* de Venecia for to rescyve of divers personis as folewyth. And that the seyd Johanne Russelay et Vanni Francisco de Strossy et *compagnia* de Venecia scholde send the same money by exchange to Jacob Salviati et *compagnia* de Londra *per conto* de G and of this marke † (Tiddeman, 2022: 156)
17. A *item* for weynge in the custome house of Florens and for the berynge to the magasyn, s.2 de peꝝ. *pour poke* que *fa* £46 s.12 de peꝝ., valeno:
fl. 10 s. 28 d. -
Summa totale: fl. 3165 s. 5 d. 8 (Tiddeman, 2022: 113).
18. *Item a dī* 13 ditto *pour* £80 s.4 d. – peꝝ.12 de gr. send by usaunce a Venecia a ditti da lloꝝo midesimi, a £15 st.17 d.10 a fl. *pour* libra de gr., for hit was delyverd here to the seyd *compagnia* de le dyd Russelay et Strossy: fl. 878 s. 28 d. 7 (Tiddeman, 2022: 156).

In the examples above we find different types of Italian elements. First, there are lexical insertions as proper nouns, more or less adapted in writing (e.g. *Alaman Salviati*, *Vanni Francisco de Strossy*, *Russelay*), and expressions referring to the Italian companies (*compagnia*), particularly in the syntagms *compagnia de Venecia*, *compagnia de Londra* (whereas in the same entry we find *Venice* and *London* referring to the places); there are also insertions linked to the mercantile practice, such as the noun *conto* ('set of accounts')¹⁹. It is worth mentioning that *conto* occurs throughout the text preceded by prepositions belonging to different languages (i.e. *of the conto*, *per conto* in (18), but also *for the conto* (Tiddeman, 2022: 159), *pour conto* (Ib. 160)).

Among the fixed expressions, *a dī ditto* (example 18) is recurrent in the Accounts (cf. Section 3.2). Prices are also referred to as a recurrent expression introduced by the preposition *a* (*a £15 st.17 d.10* 'at the cost of £15 st. 17 d. 10')²⁰.

¹⁹ Cf. the glossary in Tiddeman (2022: 168).

²⁰ The preposition *a* introducing prices is found since the earliest Italo-Romance vernacular texts (cf. Battaglia, Vol. I: 4).

The form *valeno*, third person plural of the verb *valere* ('to be worth'), appears three times in the text quoted in (17), with reference to the economic value of the goods. *Valeno* is quite interesting because it might be interpreted in two different ways: on the one hand its morphological consistency with the subject could be the result of a productive use of IT by the writer; on the other, we cannot rule out that the author used it as a frozen form²¹.

In (18) the Italian segment *a Venecia a ditti da lloro midesimi*, after *send by usaunce*, shows an interesting use of the preposition of movement *a*. This is not part of a recurrent expression, but it ensures syntactic coherence with the verb *send*, which governs the syntagm *a Venecia*. It is worth noticing the use of the corresponding ME syntagm *to Venice* in a ME context in (16) (*send by exchaunge fro Florens by Alaman Salviati to Venice and to London*). In (18), the verb *send* also governs the syntagm *a ditti da lloro midesimi*, where the preposition *a* introduces the indirect object. Example (18), in particular, displays an alternational pattern between segments in ME and others made of an association of AN + It²².

In the following example, finally, we can notice an entry made almost entirely of It elements, where the author writes about the stock of the wool:

19. *Item pour farle styvare et restivare più volte quando sono mostro a chomperatore. Et pour spago pour consare le dyd pokes non se mitte nulla, que seribbino più di [due] fl.: fl. - d. - (Tiddeman, 2022: 113).*

In other words, It could be considered the matrix language of the entry, being used productively: the Italian elements do not have a formulaic character, rather an idiosyncratic one. We can find some recurrent fixed elements in AN (*pour, le dyd*) and the lexical insertion of *pokes*, commonly present in the text to indicate a unit of weight for wool²³.

4. DISCUSSION

As written above, the CA are unique in the panorama of business multilingual texts for the use of It along with the languages of medieval England; therefore, it is not possible to make any comparison with regard to the way It is integrated within the mixed text. If on the one hand the mixing style of the CA seems to be similar to that of the administrative-business texts produced in England, on the other, the way of mixing the languages is peculiar. What kind of multilingualism is this? Is it simply the outcome of the insertion of lexemes and fixed expressions in languages different from Balmayn's mother tongue? Or is it the outcome of deeper contact phenomena? Both alternatives seem to be

²¹ The presence of this verb is also interesting when compared to what we find in analogous texts produced in Italy. Third-person plural forms of *valere* 'to be worth', analogous to *valeno* found in the CA, is common in currency equivalence in Italian mercantile texts, as we can see in the following examples from the OVI corpus. These examples are older than the CA, which demonstrates the use of the expression in mercantile texts:

- «Ànde chointanti die xx settembre fiorini cento ottantacinque d'oro forti, valiono lb. v.c.xxxvj s. x.» (*Libro d'una compagnia mercantile lucchese*, 1333-1336)
- «Somma fior. MMCLXIII 1/3 d'oro. Valglono a fffior. lbr. MMMCXXXVIII s. V d. VIII» (*Libro arancio DD dell'avere e del dare*, 1348-1350)
- «Montarono onc(e) 81 e teri 20. Valgiono, a fffior. lbr. 725» (*Libro bianco dell'Arte della lana di Francesco di Iacopo Del Bene e di Stoldo di Lapo Stoldi*, 1355-71).

²² In the light of Muysken's typology of mixing (Muysken, 2000: 3).

²³ Cf. the glossary in Tiddeman (2022: 170).

plausible. The classical template of business writings produced in his country saw some genre-related conventions in AN and Lt, so that few elements from these languages were recurrent and fixed, such as ‘pour’ or ‘Item’, and found in the CA as well. Besides this, if we analyse the CA from a code switching perspective, it supposedly seems that there is no reasoning in the switching. Indeed, apart from some elements that act as triggers, such as *pour* which facilitates the introduction of non-ME material, few patterns of code switching can be isolated. First, it is possible to identify the main direction of code switching: in most cases it is from ME to AN, Lt, and It, which can also appear combined in a single switched segment; however, their contribution to the switched portion is different. Considering the function of It in the text, Balmayn was able to switch to this language not only through lexical insertions and fixed elements, but also producing idiosyncratic and ephemeral complex structures. If the insertion of fixed expressions and of single lexemes – mainly referring to specific objects of Italian reality or to mercantile practices –, could be predictable, more complex segments also in switched chunks are not. Indeed, the writer is able to use integrated grammatical forms such as inflected noun phrases and verbs, suggesting a quite high competence in It²⁴. This is the reason why the switched It elements are involved in insertional code switching – with both single lexemes and full noun phrases – and in a particular type of alternational code switching which consists in the alternation between ME and a mix of the non-native languages - with It being the dominant one – and back to ME.

Turning to the main question, that is the role of It in the CA, it might be possible to assume that the writer inherited the composite nature of business texts which he kept alive through a substitution of AN – previously the vital language of business in England – with It, the language of trade in Italy. Therefore, the pattern was modified in that It functions in place of AN by contributing to this composite text in a productive way, being a vital language, acting as a real L2. In other words, the way of composing the text was a reproduction of the same mixed modality used to write administrative-business texts in England, but with different linguistic means. In conclusion, the CA present a multilingual modality where Balmayn’s mother tongue is used together with mercantile conventions – that are crystallised forms of AN and Lt –, as well as fixed segments, lexical and grammatical insertions in It, creating an exceptional mercantile multilingual text.

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²⁴ Cf. Perta, Ferrari, Iezzi (2024).

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