Code-switching in Historical Materials: 
Research at the Limits of Contact Linguistics

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1 Introduction

Code-switching is widely studied within contact linguistics, as one of the “symptoms of contact” (Gardner-Chloros, 2010: 194) or “mechanisms of contact-induced change” (Thomason, 2001: 60). On-going since the 1970s, the research has mainly focused on interactional code-switching characteristic of spoken language, and the materials explored have typically been contemporary or at least relatively recent (see e.g. Poplack, 1980; Auer, 1998; Muysken, 2000). In the last twenty years, however, there has also been increasing interest in individual and societal bi- and multilingualism and ‘multilingual practices’, such as code-switching, in historical linguistics. This particularly applies to English historical linguistics (e.g. Trotter, 2000; Davidson, 2003; Schendl and Wright, 2011).

Despite the growing number of publications in this field, historical code-switching research does not easily fall into one specific discipline within linguistics. For example, many historical linguists working on multilingual features recorded in older texts and genres may not think of themselves as contact linguists, regardless of the presence of two or more languages in their research materials. And while code-switching (henceforth CS) has moved into—or at least closer to—the mainstream of historical linguistics, little or no reference seems to be made to CS in the written communication of the past in many of the recent key works written by and for contact linguists. What, then, is historical CS research a sub-discipline of?

This chapter addresses the above question by discussing historically oriented contact linguistics (is there such a sub-discipline?) and reviewing the

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2 Although the cited publications are quite recent and highlight multilingual practices involving English, it is worth noting that there is important work on non-English language mixing which predates current research by more than a century (e.g. Schuchardt, 1884).
concept of contact in historically based CS studies (do researchers refer to language contact or to contact linguistics?). Importantly, the latter question entails the problem of language contact as a phenomenon: if the phenomenon studied by contact linguists is essentially speaker contact, can reader contact, or contact mediated by writing, also constitute language contact proper?

As an introduction to the topic, we first offer an overview of the visibility of contact linguistics as a field in a selection of CS studies by historical linguists, and of the presence (or absence) of the historical perspective in recent handbooks, textbooks and reference works dealing with language contact. Subsequently, historical CS is discussed as a language-contact phenomenon, alongside the issue of using written rather than spoken data in research on multilingual practices, societies and language users. The penultimate section presents as empirical evidence data from medieval and early modern texts, particularly examples of Latin switches embedded in material with a variety of early English as the matrix language. Finally, we provide some concluding remarks on language contact as a phenomenon in historically oriented research.

2 Historical CS in Recent Publications

In order to find a place for historical CS research within (contact linguistics, we need to survey where it is currently located and how it is treated by historically oriented linguists on the one hand and by contact linguists on the other. This section therefore reviews some relatively recent scholarly work by researchers in these two groups. The following does not, however, seek to posit the argument that a historical or contact-linguistic perspective ought to be present in every textbook and reference work; nor do we report our findings as criticism but merely as a step towards understanding why the field currently looks the way it does. We shall return to some of the topics emerging from the survey in the subsequent sections.

2.1 Studies of Historical CS and Multilingualism

Recent as it is, the field of historical CS research has produced a relatively large number of article-length and longer publications with a variety of focal questions. As it is unfeasible to comb every one of them for references to contact linguistics and definitions of language contact or CS, we concentrate on some studies of the history of English and of Classical languages and prioritize published collections over individual papers, the selection of which would inevitably be more arbitrary.