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Material and Documentary Evidence

RELIGIOUS READING IN FRENCH AND MIDDLE DUTCH IN THE SOUTHERN LOW COUNTRIES AND NORTHERN FRANCE (c. 1400–c. 1520)

Margriet Hoogvliet

We must get away from the notion
that there is some kind of spatial
landscape against which time writes
its story.¹

‘**T**hough the people, men and women, [of Montreuil and Boulogne-sur-Mer] speak French they are like Flemings in dress and all other ways.’² This observation was written down on 9 August 1517 by the Italian Antonio de Beatis during his journey through north-western Europe as chaplain and amanuensis of the Cardinal of Aragon. It is an eyewitness account of the cultural continuity that characterized the area broadly speaking between Paris and Antwerp during this period,³ although in the

¹ Appadurai, *The Future as a Cultural Fact*, p. 66.

² *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis*, trans. by Hale, p. 106.

³ For a definition of the same geographical area, see: Lusignan, *La langue des rois*, pp. 225–31; Lusignan, *Essai d'histoire sociolinguistique*, p. 82; Busby, *Codex and Context*, pp. 513–35.

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northern half of the region predominantly Middle Dutch was spoken,⁴ and in the south French.⁵

Antonio de Beatis also noted the bilingual competences of many people, especially in the southern Low Countries: 'The native speech and idiom of the Flemings, *though almost all can speak French*, is much softer than the Germans'.⁶ This latter remark indicates that international contacts were becoming more frequent during the late Middle Ages and that French, being a 'cosmopolitan vernacular',⁷ was the preferred language for transnational exchanges, even between non-native speakers.⁸ Another striking aspect is de Beatis's description of the active participation of laypeople in religious life, less than ten years before the start of the violent iconoclast revolts of the Reformation:

Churchgoing is so constant that there is never a day, even a working day, when the churches are not full at service-time, and in the naves, aisles and chapels are many benches boxed in like those in public schools, many of them private, so that only their patrons can sit there.⁹

De Beatis's observations confirm the historical sources collected by the members of the ERC Starting Grant project *Holy Writ and Lay Readers* (2009–2013),¹⁰

⁴ The terminology is complicated. Researchers from the Netherlands tend to qualify this language as *Middle Dutch*, while those from Belgium and France often give preference to *Vlaams*, and *flamand*. Historical sources in Middle French use *flamench*, *thiois*, or *theutonico*, and those from the north *vlaemsch*, *dietsch*, or *duitsch*. All terms refer to the same language, although there were strong regional variations. In this article I will use *Middle Dutch* as a neutral term. Middle Dutch was an important language in areas that are now situated in France and a variant is still spoken in northern France; see: Ryckeboer, 'Dutch/Flemish in the North of France', pp. 22–35.

⁵ Here too the terminology is complicated, because French was not yet the unified language as we know it today. De Beatis referred to it as French, but in reality the language would rather have been Picard, see: Lusignan, *Essai d'histoire sociolinguistique*; or Walloon, in its largest sense, *la variété belgoromane*. See Boutier, 'Variétés linguistiques en concorde et en conflit'. On the diversity of the French vernaculars, see most recently Lusignan and others, *L'introuvable unité du français*; Trotter, 'Une et indivisible'.

⁶ *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis*, trans. by Hale, p. 102. My emphasis.

⁷ This term was first coined by: Armstrong, 'The Language Question in the Low Countries', p. 391. For (Old and Middle French) as a 'supra-local' language, see Gaunt, 'French Literature Abroad'.

⁸ For medieval sources stressing the importance of learning French for international exchanges, see also Glück, *Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, pp. 70–73.

⁹ *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis*, trans. by Hale, pp. 102–03.

¹⁰ Awarded to Sabrina Corbellini and carried out at the University of Groningen (<<http://www.rug.nl/let/holyandlay>>). The research is now continued by a new project funded by the

which also reveal the particular vitality of lay religiosity in the southern Low Countries and northern France together with the multilingual competences of many of the inhabitants.¹¹ In this chapter I will first present materials, texts, and archival sources that show the co-existence of French and Middle Dutch together with the receptiveness of both linguistic sides to each other's religious texts, either in the original language or in translation.

Departing from these sources I will argue that during the long fifteenth century (c. 1400–c. 1550) religious reading in the vernaculars of the southern Low Countries and northern France was a manifestation of a shared culture that should be approached from a transnational perspective, while taking into account the multilingual skills of many people and the cultural continuity facilitated by the connectivity of social networks. After a short presentation of book historical and archival sources, I will discuss traditional approaches to the textual cultures of this area that depart from the ideology of the homogeneous nation state, together with common and still-endorsed ideas about the *Francophonie* and the existence of linguistic borders. I will then turn to recent theoretical developments, most notably transnational approaches to multilingualism, cultural hybridity, and social networks, in order to show that these can open our eyes to historical sources that testify to the porousness of borders, multilingualism, the existence of a shared religious reading culture, and the importance of social networks in connecting people and the sharing of texts. Finally, and again based on historical documentation, I will show that transnational and multilingual *communities of interpretation* of religious texts in the vernacular during the long fifteenth century can actually be retraced.

Historical Sources of Multilingual Reading

The research into the historical sources demonstrating lay ownership of biblical and religious texts in the vernacular by the *Holy Writ and Lay Readers* project has resulted in some contradictory material that does not always allow for a clear demarcation between readers of French and Middle Dutch. Multilingual books and multilingual book ownership bear witness to the relative ease with which these

Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), with a special focus on multilingualism: *Cities of Readers: Religious Literacies in the Long Fifteenth Century* (2015–2020), also by the University of Groningen, directed by Sabrina Corbellini, Bart Ramakers, and Margriet Hoogvliet.

¹¹ I will be addressing here mainly bilingual competences in Middle French and Middle Dutch. However, archival sources indicate that some laypeople also kept religious books in Latin in their private rooms and that some among them must have been Latinate enough to understand their meaning.

texts transgressed linguistic and political borders, while the high number of translations attests the receptiveness to texts that were originally written in other languages and suggests the existence of a shared religious reading culture. Firstly, bilingual medieval manuscripts, combining texts in French and Middle Dutch (sometimes, but not necessarily, together with Latin), testify to the linguistic versatility of the readers. Some examples demonstrate this amply:

- In 1483 Philip Wilant, a lawyer living in Ghent, made an inventory of his impressive library, consisting of books in Latin, French, and Middle Dutch, including a book containing Cicero's *De senectute* in French, bound together with Jacob van Maerlant's *Wapene Martijn/Harau Martin* (c. 1266), a dialogue with moral and religious instructions, in Middle Dutch and in a French translation.¹²
- Jean de Stavelot, a monk from the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Laurent in Liège, wrote a trilingual poem about Saint Benedict in the first half of the fifteenth century (c. 1432–1437).¹³ The autograph consists of images accompanied by rhyming lines in Latin, French, and Middle Dutch that are not entirely congruous. This might be due to a deficient translation, but it is also possible that de Stavelot intended his work for an audience that could understand all three languages.
- Manuscript 133 F 2 of the Royal Library in The Hague, copied in Ghent in 1527 for the children of a blacksmith (possibly one of them was the copyist), reproduces biblical texts, prayers, and texts with religious instructions (such as a devotional ABC) in Latin and in Middle Dutch. The manuscript contains several colophons with *ex libris* notes, one of them in French, written by the same hand and forming part of the main text.¹⁴

¹² *Corpus catalogorum Belgii*, ed. by Derolez and others, III, 120–25, no. 105: 'Tullius de senectute in walssche, Wapene Mertin in vlaemssche ende in walssche'. Cf. Jacob van Maerlant, *Harau Martin*.

¹³ Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 738, fols 112^r–147^r. Henry, 'Une oeuvre trilingue'. I am grateful to Marcia Kupfer for bringing this manuscript to my attention.

¹⁴ I thank my colleague Suzan Folkerts for sharing her source material with me. The French colophon on fol. 109^{r-v} follows after a prayer in Middle Dutch that should be said after the Seven Psalms (in Latin). The French text reads: 'Ce livre appartient a Margarite de la Spurt fille de Jacques Marischaux et apres sa mort aviendra a ses soers Jehanne et Anthoine, ou a ses freres Gerart, Jehan, Liuerin, tous Marischaux habitans a Gandt sur le Zabulon pres de la Croix au quartier des chincq trouz venteux pas longs de la porte Sent Liuin. Escript en lan mil chincq cens xxvij le xiiij jour de fevrier. Jour de Sainct Mathij apostre' (This book belongs to Margarite de la Spurt, daughter of Jacques Marischault and after her death will it be passed on to her sisters Joan

- The combination of French and German also occurs, such as in a manuscript now in the Bibliothèque municipale of Troyes, dating from the fifteenth century and reproducing Frère Laurent's *Somme le Roi*, Saint's Lives together with passages from the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. A later reader has noted a poem in German, Volmar's *Steinbuch* (mid-thirteenth century), as a filler text on the last flyleaf of the manuscript.¹⁵

Bilingual book ownership is another indication for the linguistic competences of many readers in this area. Sometimes the texts show traces of non-native competence:

- Manuscript 11065–11073 of the Royal Library in Brussels is a religious miscellany in French dating from the fifteenth century. One of the owners has written an owner's mark partially in French and partially in Middle Dutch on the first folio: 'Apertient a Jean de Rome dit de Bruxelles painter. Heft ghecost xl st.' (This book belongs to Jean de Rome, also called de Bruxelles, painter. It cost 40 five-cent pieces.)
- In a copy of the abridged Old Testament in French, printed in Rouen c. 1516, now in the Bibliothèque de Genève, several early sixteenth-century readers have written translations in Middle Dutch in the margins, such as: 'la poitrine: de borst'; 'extreme demise: vvtterste berfe' (fol. 5^v); 'a mon encontre: in mijn gemoet' (fol. 13^v).¹⁶

Wills and post-mortem inventories are another important source for historical book ownership; these, too, show that books in Middle Dutch were sometimes present in predominantly French-speaking areas and that books in French were frequently owned by people in areas where Middle Dutch was the predominant language:

and Antonia, or to her brothers Gerard, John, Liuerin, all Marischauls, living in Ghent at the *Zabulon* (?) near the Cross in the district of the Five Windholes not far from Saint Livin's Gate. Written in the year 1527, on the 14th day of February, day of the apostle Saint Matthew) This is followed by the *Hours of the Passion* in Middle Dutch with directions on how to read them. On this manuscript, see: Porck and Porck, 'Eight Guidelines on Book Preservation'.

¹⁵ Troyes, BM, MS 751, fols 143^v–144^v. Kleist, 'Eine neue Handschrift von Volmars Steinbuch'. I owe this reference to Norbert Kössinger. For other examples of German–French bilingualism, see: Haubrichs, 'Das Bibliotheksverzeichnis eines Metzger Patriziers'; Gärtner and others, *Skripta, Schreiblandschaften und Standardisierungstendenzen*; Glück, *Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, pp. 233–45; Lévy, *La langue allemande en France*.

¹⁶ *La Bible en françois*. Geneva, Bibliothèque de Genève, Inc. Bb 92.

- Jacquemine Rams, living in Saint-Omer, bequeathed a book with the Gospels, an Epistolarly and ‘a Golden Legend in Middle Dutch’ to the grand convent of the Beguines in her will from 1420, written in French.¹⁷
- Claire le Werke from Tournai bequeathed ‘a booklet with a part of the Psalter in Middle Dutch’ to her goddaughter in her 1417 will.¹⁸
- Jeanne Rollande dite Hardoye, also from Tournai, bequeathed her ‘large book in Flemish’ in 1448 to the town’s messenger Laurent Rasoir.¹⁹
- Michael Lievens, priest in the church of Our Lady of the Chapel in Brussels, owned, according to the 1495 inventory of his estate, mainly liturgical and theological works in Latin, but also books in the vernacular, such as a handwritten copy of Pierre de Luxembourg’s moralizing religious work *La diète du salut*, and many small books of little value in Middle Dutch and in Latin.²⁰
- The 1491 inventory of the estate of Ioannis van Elselaer, a merchant living in Brussels, mentions several books that were stored in a chest in his counter, a semi-public place where he would do his administration and receive business relations. Among these books were several religious works, such as Books of Hours and a Bible in Middle Dutch, but also a book in French that contained Couldrette’s version of the *Roman de Mélusine* together with other, unspecified works in French.²¹

Translations played an important role in these processes as well. Several texts originally written in French were translated into Middle Dutch, such as, for instance, *La*

¹⁷ Saint-Omer, Archives Communales, BB CCLVIII-10: ‘au grant couuent dez beghines [...] ung evangeliare et vng epistolaire et vne legende doree en flamenc’. For multilingual book possession by women in the British Isles, see: Meale, “... alle the bokes I haue of latyn, english and frensch”.

¹⁸ Vanwijnsberghe, *De fin or et d’azur*, p. 179: ‘ung livret d’une partie du sautier en flamench’.

¹⁹ Vanwijnsberghe, *De fin or et d’azur*, p. 193: ‘men grant livre en flameng’.

²⁰ *Corpus catalogorum Belgii*, ed. by Derolez and others, IV, 47–50: ‘55. Een en pappieren boec in walsche gescreven, beginnende “Quant je regarde, etc.”; 57. Item diversche quaternen ende cleyn boecxkens gescreven van diversen autoriteyten, oratien ende liedeken in lattine ende in dietssche, nyet weert tscrijvene.’ Cf. Pierre de Luxembourg, *Diète du salut*, incipit: ‘Quant je regarde quelle vie j’ai menée...’, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 182, fols 1–27’.

²¹ *Corpus catalogorum Belgii*, ed. by Derolez and others, IV, 151: ‘5. Een ander out boeck in francijne van den ouwen ende neuwen testamente in duytsche; 6. Een ander papieren boeck walsch, beghinnende “Le philosophe fut moult saige”, ende hout inne meer andere boeken alsoe tvercleert wort in tierste blat’.

somme le Roi by Frère Laurent, *La montaigne de contemplation* by Jean Gerson, *Le livre de bonnes meurs* by Jacques Legrand, and *Le pèlerinage de l'âme* by Guillaume de Digulleville.²² Conversely, important works originating in the Low Countries and the Rhineland were translated into French, such as Gerard van Vliederhoven's *Cordiale quattuor novissimorum*, Thomas à Kempis's *De imitatione Christi*, Henry of Suso's *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit*, Ludolph of Saxony's *Vita Christi*, and works written by Hendrik Herp.²³ The particular receptiveness in French-speaking areas during the fifteenth century to religious texts from the North is remarkable and deserves more investigation.

Transnational Approaches, Multilingualism, and Networks

Historical sources like these, attesting the multilingualism and shared cultures of religious reading in northern France and the southern Low Countries during the late Middle Ages, have not sufficiently been taken into account by modern research. A case in point is the publication of late medieval wills from Saint-Omer by Justin Deschamps de Pas, which only reproduces the French wills and leaves the examples in Middle Dutch aside.²⁴ This is partially due to the editor's ignorance of Germanic languages, but it is also caused by the idea that the history of France is the history of the geographical area defined by the present-day borders of the *République Française*, the language of which is uniquely French. The linguistic and cultural unity of France, fed by the Revolutionary ideals of *égalité* and of the *République une et indivisible*, continues to shape modern approaches to language, culture, and history. Catherine Wihtol de Wenden has qualified this as the 'myth of national homogeneity'.²⁵ The actual persistence of this myth is expressed

²² Hoogvliet, 'Middle Dutch Religious Reading Cultures'. These 'Old Pious Vernacular Successes' (*Oeuvres Pieuses Vernaculaires à Succès*) are presently studied on a European scale by the members of the ERC Starting Grant Project *OPVS* directed by Graldine Veyseyre (Paris, IRHT, <<http://www.opvs.fr>>).

²³ Dlabacova, *Literatuur en observantie*.

²⁴ 'Testaments transcrits l'chevinage de Saint-Omer', ed. by Deschamps de Pas, 197–263. The wills in Middle Dutch still remain unpublished. For critical reflections on (French) nationalism and historiography, see: Symes, 'The Middle Ages Between Nationalism and Colonialism'; Edwards, *Families and Frontiers*, pp. 26–33.

²⁵ Wihtol de Wenden, 'Multiculturalism in France'. For a discussion of French discourses about its regions, both modern and medieval, see: Bedos-Rezak, 'French Medieval Regions', pp. 151–66.

unambiguously by Rémy Knafou, professor emeritus of the University of Paris I — Panthéon-Sorbonne, who has sharply denounced the lack of attention for national unity in primary and secondary education:

Or, à lire les nouveaux programmes de géographie de 1re, on reste pantois devant l'élimination du niveau national: l'entité 'France', celle de la République française, a purement et simplement disparu au profit de deux autres niveaux: le niveau européen, d'un côté, et celui des territoires qui composent la France, de l'autre, la part belle étant faite aux 'territoires de proximité'. [...] Si l'école n'enseigne pas l'idée républicaine en lien avec un territoire, une société et son histoire, qui le fera?²⁶

[Judging the new programmes of geography, one is flabbergasted before the disappearing of the national level: the entity 'France', that of the French Republic, has simply disappeared in favour of two other levels: the European level on one side, and that of the territories that compose France on the other side, with particular attention to the 'territories of proximity'. [...] If the school does not teach the Republican idea connected to one territory, one society and its history, who will do it?]

During the past few years there has been an ongoing political debate in France about the official status of the regional languages within the territories of metropolitan and post-colonial France. Yet, at the same time article 2 of the French constitution, which states 'La langue de la République est le français' (The language of the Republic is French), is still particularly endorsed. In 2008 the French Senate rejected the following addition to the first article of the Constitution: 'Les langues régionales appartiennent au patrimoine de la nation' (Regional languages belong to the cultural heritage of the nation). In the 2008 revision of the French Constitution this stipulation was finally added to article 75-1, but only in order to comply with European regulations concerning the protection of linguistic minorities and regional languages.²⁷ In January 2014 it was only after two days of heated discussions in the French Assemblée nationale that the French Republic could finally ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Entirely in this spirit, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, in his study of France's regions published in 2001, considered regional languages above all as a matter of 'minorities' that are 'peripheral', and his study is in fact only concerned with their successful integration within mainstream French-speaking society.²⁸

²⁶ Knafou, 'Mais où est donc passée la France?.'

²⁷ Blanc, *La langue de la république est le français*, pp. 313–22; Reestman, 'Nationale minderheidstalen'.

²⁸ Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire de France des Régions*, pp. 17–18.

At the same time, the French Republic — by means of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF), with its headquarters in Paris — actively promotes the use of standard French outside metropolitan France. On its official website the organization is described as ‘Une communauté de destin consciente des liens et du potentiel qui procèdent du partage d’une langue, le français, et des valeurs universelles’ (a community of shared destiny that is aware of the bonds and the potentiality that come forth from the sharing of one language, French, and universal values).²⁹ However, Cécile B. Vigouroux has rightly criticized the ‘monocentric attitude’ of metropolitan France in these matters, because ‘the term francophone refers in fact to everybody who speaks French except the French people themselves’.³⁰ In spite of the OIF’s stated intentions of promoting cultural diversity, as far as language is concerned it actually only promotes standard French, as noted by Vigouroux: ‘[The term *francophone*] also endorses the centre-versus-periphery ideology according to which France is at the centre of the imperial structure and its Hexagonal variety is the yardstick against which the divergence, if not deviation, of all other varieties is measured’.³¹

On the other side of the modern French-Belgian border, monolingualism is explicitly enforced by law, and this, too, seriously hampers the systematic study of linguistic diversity in the past, although there is an awareness of the bilingual nature of the Burgundian state, most notably in the works of Henri Pirenne and more recently by other scholars.³² In our era, however, a national law from 8 November 1963 stipulating the languages of government has sharply defined the language borders in Belgium, separating Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking areas. Within these territories only one single language for public communication — including

²⁹ <<http://www.francophonie.org/L-Organisation-internationale-de-42707.html>>.

³⁰ Vigouroux, ‘Francophonie’, p. 380.

³¹ Vigouroux, ‘Francophonie’, p. 390. See also Lusignan and others, *L’introuvable unité du français*. In Belgium, too, speakers of Walloon are increasingly becoming aware of the specific qualities of their language; see Boutier, ‘Variétés linguistiques en concorde et en conflit’; Viroux, ‘Waaals tussen Romaans en Germaans’.

³² Boone, ‘Langue, pouvoirs et dialogue’, on Pirenne at pp. 11–12. On the multilingualism of the Burgundian state (often based primarily on surviving charters and documents of governance), see also: Armstrong, ‘The Language Question in the Low Countries’; De Hemptinne, ‘De doorbraak van de volkstaal’; Prevenier and De Hemptinne, ‘La Flandre au Moyen Âge’; Croenen, ‘Latin and the Vernaculars’; Peersman, *L’essor des langues vernaculaire*. For the position of French in Luxemburg (officially a multilingual state), see Fehlen, ‘Die Stellung des Französischen in Luxemburg’.

governance, education, justice, and commerce — is allowed.³³ Especially in the popular culture of Flanders, the language border between Dutch and French is historically justified by claiming that it still reflects the penetration of Germanic-speaking Franks into the Roman Empire during the third century CE and that it has remained stable throughout the ages.³⁴

The recent process of globalization and the intensification of cross-cultural contacts enabled by modern communication technology have profoundly changed approaches to languages and cultures based on the ideology of a homogeneous and monolingual nation state. New methodological approaches such as Social Network Analysis have questioned the centre-periphery model that often underpins traditional thinking about the nation state and have proposed to replace it by de-centred, or distributed networks describing the connectivity between individuals and within communities.³⁵ Parallel to this development, research into the history of reading has resulted in more attention for collective reading practices and textual communities sharing the same texts.³⁶

Transnational history, sometimes called post-national history,³⁷ is another approach challenging the writing of self-centred national historiographies and the ideology of the modern nation state with a supposedly homogeneous culture expressed by one language of identity as the basic entity for historical investigations. According to the participants in the discussion published in the 2006 issue of the *American Historical Review*, it should ideally entail 'a comparison between the

³³ Source: <http://www2.vlaanderen.be/taalwetgeving/taalgrens_en_taalgebieden.html>.

³⁴ 'De Belgische taalgrens ontstond vanaf het einde van de 3e eeuw tijdens de ondergang van het West-Romeinse Rijk' (The Belgian linguistic frontier emerged as of the end of the third century during the fall of the Western Roman Empire). <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taalgrens_in_België>. For critical remarks see also: Stein, 'An Urban Network in The Low Countries', p. 62.

³⁵ Literature about social network analysis (SNA) is burgeoning at the moment. Particularly relevant for historical research are: Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*; Erickson, 'Social Networks and History'; Lemerrier, 'Analyse de réseaux et histoire'; Müller and Neurath, ed., *Historische Netzwerkanalysen*.

³⁶ Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, p. 522; Chartier, *Culture écrite et société*, pp. 133–54; Scase, 'Reading Communities', pp. 557–73; Hoogvliet, 'Pour faire laies personnes entendre les hystoires des escriptures anciennes', pp. 261–67. This is also one of the focal points of COST Action IS1301 *New Communities of Interpretation: Contexts, Strategies and Processes of Religious Transformation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2013–2017 <<http://www.rug.nl/let/costaction-is1301>>).

³⁷ This is the approach of the ERC Starting Grant Project *Overmode*, directed by Pavlina Rychterova, Vienna, Austrian Academy of Sciences: <<http://overmode.oew.ac.at/index.php>>.

contemporary movement of groups, goods, technology, or people across national borders and the transit of similar or related objects or people in an earlier time', while 'being inclusive of the regional, the national, and the local in historical writing'.³⁸ The term 'entangled history', which has recently been proposed by Patrick J. Geary,³⁹ is of particular relevance for my argument concerning the cultural continuity of the area under consideration here: as I will argue below, the presence of two vernacular languages did not necessarily result in the transfer or exchange of two different religious cultures, but rather, in this particular area, one religious reading culture shared by two languages.

Transnational approaches have also pushed socio-linguistic research in new directions. In a recent article, Anna de Fina and Sabina Perrino have investigated the consequences of globalization for modern conceptualizations of languages and identities. In their critical reflections on the relations between languages and identities, they identify four focal points for innovative research, of which two are of particular relevance here:

- The critique of a view of speech communities as relatively homogeneous, sharing in cultural repertoires and beliefs, and bound to specific locations.
- The critical re-assessment of a default conception of languages as well-defined codes that can be easily separated from each other and that are anchored to distinctive and bounded speech.⁴⁰

De Fina and Perrino point to 'the inadequacy of a view of speech communities as relatively homogeneous and populated by stable linguistic subjects' and propose instead to study 'in-betweenness' and 'hybridity', together with their consequences for self-other definition. For linguistic research this implies that phenomena such as 'code-switching' and 'language mixing' (the latter including new constructs such as 'translanguaging', 'polylanguaging', and 'code-meshing') should become guiding principles in research.

The phenomena 'in-betweenness' and 'hybridity' referred to by De Fina and Perrino originate in cultural research. For instance, Peter Burke has recently made a case for the study of cultural hybridity during the early modern period, and he has

³⁸ 'AHR Conversation: On Transnational History'.

³⁹ Geary and Klaniczay, eds, *Manufacturing Middle Ages*.

⁴⁰ De Fina and Perrino, 'Transnational Identities'. See also Carton, 'La question des limites du picard', p. 89: 'Les langues, souvent comparées à des êtres vivants, n'ont en réalité pas de peau: elles s'interpénètrent constamment' (Languages, often compared to living beings, actually do not have a skin: they interpenetrate constantly).

stressed the importance of frontiers and borderlands: 'Frontier zones [...] may be described as "intercultures", intersections between cultures, in which the process of mixing ends in the creation of something new and distinctive'.⁴¹ Borderlands, liminal 'in-between' places, contact zones, and places of cultural hybridity have become the innovative focal points in recent research in cultural history, especially because these places are likely to result in cultural exchange and innovation. Moreover, being places of intense interaction and exchange, the study of borderlands allows for going beyond the local and the national, in favour of the discovery of widely shared attitudes, values, and knowledge.⁴²

Transnational and Multilingual Communities of Interpretation

These recent developments in modern theory create awareness of situations of multilingualism and shared cultures in the later Middle Ages.⁴³ It is especially during this period that the borderland area between Antwerp and Paris cannot be seen as consisting of two distinct regions with well-defined and stable political borders, separating two homogeneous languages expressing two different cultures. It could better be described in terms of fluidity and hybridity and, to my view, it should be approached from a transnational perspective with much attention for social networks connecting the inhabitants and facilitating the sharing of texts and ideas.

Firstly, the political borders differed profoundly from those we know today, and on top of this they were subjected to continuous changes.⁴⁴ For instance, it would be entirely wrong to study the history of Saint-Omer as a part of French history alone, because this town was situated in Flanders until 1212. From then until 1384 it was French; after this year Saint-Omer fell under the rule of the dukes of Burgundy and formed part of the Burgundian Netherlands until 1678 when it definitively became part of France. Most towns in present-day north-eastern

⁴¹ Burke, *Cultural hybridity*, pp. 72, 76–77. See also: Stanford Friedman, 'Das Sprechen über Grenzen, Hybridität und Performativität'; Hobsbawm, *On History*, pp. 172–73; Bhabha, 'Cultures In-Between'; Borgolte and Schneidmüller, eds, *Hybride Kulturen / Hybrid Cultures*.

⁴² Edwards, *Families and Frontiers*; Power, 'Frontiers'; Abulafia and Berend, eds, *Medieval Frontiers*.

⁴³ For multilingualism, code-switching and code-mixing in the Middle Ages, see: Burke, *Cultural Hybridity*; Burke, *Language and Identity in Early Modern Italy*, pp. 15–20, 66–88; Amsler, *Affective Literacies*, pp. xv, 4–22, 48–66, 93–95; Kleinhenz and Busby, eds, *Medieval Multilingualism*.

⁴⁴ Vermeir and Boone, 'Les frontières des Pays-Bas Méridionaux'.

France have a similar history: Amiens was first French, then part of the Burgundian Netherlands between 1435 and 1477, and then once again French. Lille was first situated in Flanders, then in the French kingdom from 1304 to 1369, when it joined the Burgundian Netherlands, and the town did not become French again until 1668. Farther towards the south, Noyon, only 100 kilometres north of Paris, was in the possession of the Dukes of Burgundy between 1363 and 1516. And after centuries of territorial disputes, Bapaume was only conquered by Louis XIII in 1641; Aire-sur-la-Lys was definitively joined to France even as late as 1715. On the other hand, Tournai, now a Belgian town, was a French exclave in the Burgundian Netherlands until 1521.⁴⁵ To complicate matters even more, during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, several of these towns also experienced a short period under English rule, such as Tournai in 1513. In reality during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, territorial borders were subject to frequent changes, territories were disputed by several parties, and historical sources testify to the irregularity of borders, their porousness, the uncertainty about their exact location; a situation complicated by the existence of multiple enclaves.⁴⁶

Secondly, the lives of the inhabitants of this area (actually of all of Western Europe during this period) were characterized by a much greater mobility and connectivity than often thought. People were connected through commercial, social, and religious networks, and interregional events enabling intensive contacts occurred regularly.⁴⁷ For instance, merchants from all over Europe visited the markets in Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Picardy, and the Champagne.⁴⁸ A surviving account book in Walloon from 1460 to 1461 kept by two merchants from Metz (until 1552 situated in the Empire) shows that they visited several times the markets in Ghent, Antwerp, and Bergen op Zoom (the latter town is now situated in the Netherlands) for business purposes.⁴⁹ Large groups of artisans and labourers in the wool industry (such as weavers and wool combers) moved across linguistic

⁴⁵ Small, 'Centre and Periphery in Late Medieval France'.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Families and Frontiers*; Clémenceau, 'Une frontière ouverte'; Power, 'French and Norman Frontiers'; Leerssen, 'Europe as a Set of Borders'.

⁴⁷ For the centrality of the Low Countries and its connectedness with the rest of Europe during the early modern period, see: Gelderbloom and de Jong, eds, *The Low Countries as Crossroads*.

⁴⁸ Stabel, *Dwarfs among Giants*, pp. 137–50; Nicholas, *The Metamorphosis of a Medieval City*, pp. 152, 167, 186, 198, 298. For the mobility of merchants during the Middle Ages see also: Edwards, *Families and Frontiers*, pp. 157–67; Reyerson, *The Art of the Deal*, pp. 84–91.

⁴⁹ *Le livre de comptes*, ed. by Schneider, pp. 15–17, 28–29.

and political borders looking for work,⁵⁰ for instance a certain Adrien de Zélandres, who died in Amiens in 1518.⁵¹ Important religious centres attracted pilgrims from far away, such as the Sainte-Chandelle in Arras,⁵² and the relic of the Holy Blood in Bruges.⁵³ Festivals, such as theatre competitions and archery competitions, attracted participants from towns as far north as Antwerp and as far south as Paris. Sometimes theatre competitions included plays in French as well as in Middle Dutch, while the invitations were often written in both languages.⁵⁴

This kind of evidence shows that most francophone inhabitants of this area had frequent and intensive contact with speakers of Middle Dutch, and vice versa. As is shown by the earlier-mentioned quotation from Antonio de Beatis's travel account, most of the inhabitants of the southern Low Countries were bilingual in Middle Dutch and French. In the Low Countries, children — both boys and girls — could learn French in primary school.⁵⁵ The production of linguistic aids is more evidence of the efforts by native speakers of Middle Dutch to obtain competences in French, and by native speakers of French to learn Middle Dutch.⁵⁶ Other sources indicate that merchants sent their sons to other families in their commercial network for a while in order to learn French or Middle Dutch.⁵⁷ This shows that in spite of the widespread use of French as a *lingua franca* for international exchanges, some native speakers of French still made efforts to learn Middle Dutch. The *Vocabulaire de François et de Flameng* was also targeting French-speaking audiences and it was actually in use,⁵⁸ as is shown by the 1569 auction of books

⁵⁰ Rosenberg, *Social Experience and Religious Choice*, pp. 136–38; Glück, *Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, pp. 98–102.

⁵¹ As is testified by the post-mortem inventory of his estate: Amiens, Archives communales, FF 160/32 (1518). At present Zeeland is situated in the Netherlands. Judging by the age and the heavily used state of most of his belongings, he was not very rich.

⁵² Symes, 'The Confraternity of Jongleurs', p. 192.

⁵³ Brown, *Civic Ceremony and Religion*, pp. 37–72.

⁵⁴ Lavéant, *Un théâtre des frontières*, pp. 166–69; Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, pp. 29–33; Crombie, 'French and Flemish Urban Festive Networks', p. 157–75.

⁵⁵ De Ridder-Symoens, 'Education and Literacy', p. 10. For examples from Germany, see: Glück, *Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, pp. 87–91.

⁵⁶ *Het Brugsche Livre des mestiers en zijn navolgingen*, ed. by Gessler. See also: Glück, *Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, pp. 431–32.

⁵⁷ Lusignan, *Essai d'histoire*, p. 205; Small, 'Centre and Periphery in Late Medieval France', p. 148; Glück, *Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, pp. 102–04; Coornaert, *Les Français et le commerce international à Anvers*, p. 320; Lévy, *La langue allemande en France*, pp. 92–93.

⁵⁸ *Het Brugsche Livre des mestiers en zijn navolgingen*, ed. by Gessler.

confiscated from the protestant nobleman Charles de Houchin, from the region near Béthune.⁵⁹ There are also indications for the porousness of French resulting in the absorption of expressions in Middle Dutch, bringing about linguistic convergence and code mixing.⁶⁰ For instance, the earlier-mentioned account book kept by two merchants from Metz shows their frequent use of words borrowed from the Germanic languages,⁶¹ and one of the inventories from Amiens mentions a painting representing ‘ung dronquart’, an expression derived from the Middle Dutch *dronkaard* (someone who is drunk).⁶²

There is, however, evidence that the towns in the southern Low Countries were very attached to their linguistic identity, especially those towns that had chosen to use Middle Dutch as the language for their administration. Joep Leerssen has studied the linguistic choices made by the aldermen of villages in the Liège-Maastricht-Aachen area, who insisted on either *Diets* or *Romance* as language for communication with the Dukes of Burgundy in Brussels and, hence, as the language of their identity.⁶³ Marc Boone has shown that large towns such as Bruges, Ghent, and Leper occasionally expressed their concerns about governance in French; their attitude in these matters, however, was shaped by pragmatism rather than ideology.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Lottin, ‘Nobles, calvinistes et Gueux en 1566’, pp. 311 and 325. The book was bought at the auction in 1569 by a certain Jehan Zembourg, thus testifying of the continuing usefulness of the *Vocabulaire* for French readers.

⁶⁰ Lusignan, *Essai d'histoire*, pp. 211–12 qualifies French as the language of the upper classes (*langue haute*). Although (Old and Middle) French served as a language for international communication and it had longer been in use for political, administrative, scientific, religious, and literary texts than Middle Dutch, I do not agree entirely with Lusignan's conclusion that Picard remained free from Middle Dutch linguistic influences, while Middle Dutch incorporated many French words. I would like to argue in favour of the multilingualism of many inhabitants of the regions under consideration and the porousness of *both* languages. For linguistic exchanges between Picard and Dutch, both in the past and the present, see: Carton, ‘La question des limites du picard’. Moreover, Lusignan's conclusions are largely based on a lexical research in modern Dutch dictionaries and he fails to mention that many of the Gallicisms found there were actually introduced into Dutch after the French occupation of 1795–1814/1794–1815 and the importance of French in the cultural life of the Low Countries during the nineteenth century. See Brems and others, *Het Frans als lingua franca*.

⁶¹ *Le livre de comptes*, ed. by Schneider, pp. 94–95: *cheffe, handelette, haquette, houssiez, olle, tuxe*.

⁶² Amiens, Archives communales, FF 154/2 (1504). See also the lemma ‘dronquard’ in the online *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* <<http://www.atilf.fr/dmf>>.

⁶³ Leerssen, ‘Medieval Heteronomy’, pp. 581–93.

⁶⁴ Boone, ‘Langue, pouvoirs et dialogue’, pp. 20–28.

At a personal level, linguistic identities were even more flexible and fluid, to such a point that Robert Stein has observed that for individuals in this multilingual area language was not the prime ‘vector of identity’:

language appears to be of minor importance as a marker of identity — at least in the case of the Low Countries. Although there are a few signs that the inhabitants of Flanders were opposed to an administration that did not speak the Flemish language, there is virtually no trace of an identity formation based on language, constructing in-groups and out-groups. In fact, most evidence points to the ease with which people communicated across languages, apparently understanding each other well enough to do business and work together.⁶⁵

As we have seen, the linguistic situation in the southern Low Countries — and I would like to extend Stein’s conclusions to large parts of northern France — was characterized by frequent code-switching (especially by native speakers of Middle Dutch, but incidentally also by speakers of French/Picard/Walloon), multilingualism, and linguistic convergence. This indicates that many readers could participate in the textual cultures of both vernacular languages that were in use here, and that books and texts were points of convergence for readers of both languages.

In the light of these weak ties between language and cultural identity, at least in this area during the later Middle Ages, the question arises whether different languages are *always* vehicles of different cultures, as suggested by Michel d’Espagne’s seminal notion of ‘cultural transfer’. According to Espagne, the translation of a text into a different language is necessarily accompanied by a profound adaptation of its semantics and its cultural encoding in order to make it effective in the new linguistic and cultural context, a process that he has characterized as *métissages*.⁶⁶ Later theoretical elaborations of Espagne’s approach have underscored the reciprocity of cultural transfers and have proposed to use terminologies such as *histoire croisée* and ‘cultural exchange’ instead.⁶⁷ For the situation in the southern Low Countries and northern France in the later Middle Ages, where people were reading the same texts, the same texts in translation, or very similar texts, I would like to suggest that the shared religious reading culture across linguistic and political frontiers should rather be described in terms of cultural continuity and ‘entangled history’.

⁶⁵ Stein, ‘Introduction’, p. 16. See also: Boone, ‘Langue, pouvoirs et dialogue’, p. 32. However, Cerquiglini-Toulet, ‘Language, Literature, and Identity in the Middle Ages’, stresses French identities attached to the use of French.

⁶⁶ Espagne, *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands*, p. 20.

⁶⁷ Werner and Zimmermann, ‘Penser l’histoire croisée’.

The importance of social connectedness and the sharing of religious knowledge are also underscored in religious texts in the vernaculars, for instance by encouraging the lay readers to connect with other people through works of charity and 'loving one's neighbour as oneself; neighbours including servants, employees, members of the extended household, members of the parish, the confraternity, poor people, pilgrims, and visitors. A frequently recurring feature in these vernacular texts is the endorsement of sharing religious knowledge, by making books available to others, or by reading the text aloud to a group of listeners, sometimes with the promise of indulgences as a reward.⁶⁸ Laypeople were also encouraged to give religious instruction to others, and in this manner they increasingly grew into the role of mediators of religious knowledge. For instance, in the Middle Dutch work *Spiegel ofte reghel der kersten ghelove* (*Mirror or Rule of the Christian Faith*), written in 1462, the reader is told to make sure that children and servants receive a good level of religious education so that they know God's law and are eager to listen to God's Word.⁶⁹ In the widely read French work the *Doctrinal aux simples gens* (c. 1389) the lay reader is exhorted to teach ignorant people, and it is even a sin not to 'preach a good Gospel or Exemplum, if you know one'.⁷⁰ Jean Gerson wrote in a French treatise for laypeople that heads of families were expected to read biblical and religious works with the entire household and visitors on Sundays.⁷¹

Returning to the historical sources presented earlier; they indicate that, in this particular area, members of textual communities, or communities of interpretation, shared texts independently of language. In predominantly French-speaking areas laypeople bequeathed religious books in Flemish to other laypeople, and not necessarily close relatives. Jaqueline Rams from Saint-Omer, for instance, left a

⁶⁸ As in Guy de Roye's prologue to the *Doctrinal aux simples gens* (1385–1390).

⁶⁹ Bange, ed., *Een handvol wijsheden*, pp. 87–88: 'Voert so siet oec dat ghi uwe ondersaten ende uwe kinderen wel regyert ende die wet Gods wel leert [...] ende dat woert Gods gheerne horen ende des savens te samen vercallen. Ende ist dat ghi tijt hebt soe leest alle avent een capittel van goeder leringhe der heiligher scriften eer ghi slapen gaet.'

⁷⁰ *Le doctrinal aux simples gens*; BnF, Rés. D 2388: 'Les [oeuvres de misericorde] spirituelles sont telles: aultruy bien conseiller pour son sauvement, monstrier a aultruy sa mesprison ou son default pour soy amender, conforter les desconfortez, deporter les ignorans, enseigner et prier pour eulx [...] sig. [b 8]'; 'Le docteur dit se tu ne sces que vne euangile ou vng bon exemple tu le dois prescher ou tu pechez, car autant vault science qui nest mise en oeuvre comme tresor qui est cache' sig. [e 6].

⁷¹ Gerson, *Le miroir de l'âme*, 'On doit lors oyr la parole de Dieu et bons enseignemens selon ce que on peut. [...] Et doit on enseigner ses filz et filles et serveurs et aultres que on ha en gouuernement'; Glorieux, *Jean Gerson*, VII/1. pp. 197–98.

Flemish book to a convent of the beguines, lay religious women who were very active as educators of the laity and who often shared their books with readers both inside and outside their community.⁷² Michael Lievens, the priest in Brussels, had a copy of Pierre de Luxembourg's moralizing religious work *La diète du salut* and several biblical texts in Middle Dutch. These could possibly have been intended for private use, but priests were also expected to give religious instruction to their parishioners by reading texts to them.⁷³ The merchant Ioannis van Elselaer, also in Brussels, kept his books in a chest in his counter. In the late medieval household this was generally a place where business partners would be received for negotiations and for financial transactions. The presence of books with religious texts in this semi-public room suggests that people outside the household (as other merchants, debtors, notaries) could have assisted in reading sessions as well.⁷⁴ Finally, the rich library of the lawyer Philip Wilant in Ghent was most likely not only for his private use. As shown above, literate laypeople were expected to share their texts and knowledge with others. Other sources have taught us that members of the household did have access to the domestic library.⁷⁵

The historical sources from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries presented here testify to the great mobility of texts, through formal and informal social networks, regardless of linguistic differences. Laypeople acted as agents enabling the mobility of texts across linguistic, political, and identitarian borders, often in collaboration with religious men and women. Northern France and the southern Low Countries formed a linguistic contact zone with shared texts and a religious reading culture that was largely common for speakers of French and Middle Dutch. Books and texts were points of convergence for readers of both languages, rather than barriers separating them. Modern research needs to become more aware of the multilingualism of this area during the later Middle Ages, and more research is needed in order to obtain a better understanding of the mobility of texts through interregional networks.⁷⁶

⁷² Stabler Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris*, pp. 224–32; I am grateful to the author for making her book available to me prior to its publication; Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, pp. 80–85; Simons, 'Geletterdheid en boekegebruik', pp. 177–78; Galloway, "'Life, Learning, and Wisdom'".

⁷³ Hermand, 'Le prêtre de paroisse et le livre'; Wranowix, 'Ulrich Pfeffel's Library'.

⁷⁴ Corbellini and Hoogvliet, 'Artisans and Religious Reading'.

⁷⁵ *Le ménager de Paris*, ed. by Brereton and Ferrier, p. 85.

⁷⁶ In collaboration with Anna Dlabacova I am currently preparing an article about the shared religious reading culture in Middle Dutch and French during the fifteenth and early sixteenth century.

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