

## **REPRESENTATIONS OF MULTILINGUALISM IN MEDIEVAL GERMAN LITERATURE**

Monolingualism is a concept invented in the 17th century (Gramling 2016). The rise of nationalism brought with it the idea that each person had a “natural” language or mother tongue which marked their belonging to a single family or empire. Even now, the words for language and nationality are often the same (e.g. English, German, French) (Yildiz 2012). In the medieval period, however, these ideas simply did not exist (Kibbee 2010; Baldzuhn & Putzo 2011; Canagarajah & Liyanage 2021; Gramling 2021; Piccardo 2022). Linguistic and geographic boundaries in the medieval period more closely resemble watercolours bleeding together than the neat divisions seen on our modern maps and described in our dictionaries (Piccardo 2018). By using current plurilingual theory to analyze multilingualism in medieval German literature, my project will create a new model for understanding medieval multilingualism, free from the traditional yet limiting associations between language and nationality. Furthermore, by looking at representations of multilingualism which pre-date nationalism (specifically, from 1150 to 1300 CE), my project will also provide insight to scholars of linguistics and second-language acquisition, as they seek to construct new theoretical models and pedagogical practices which embrace language mixing, and are thus more appropriate for our present era of globalisation.

**Research Background and Context:** My project will contribute to the rapidly expanding field of medieval multilingual research that has seen the publication of many new anthologies and studies in the last two decades alone (see Bibliography). Germany plays a key role in this emergent research, since its geographic location made it a natural epicentre for language contact between Europe and Asia. Consequently, from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century onward, we see an explosion of German vernacular poetry written which features a plethora of foreign terminology and multilingual heroes. For example, in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Willehalm*, a 13<sup>th</sup> century courtly epic, there are roughly 1,650 uses of words from foreign languages, such as French, Latin, and Arabic (Vorderstemann 1974). In all but three cases, these “foreign” words are incorporated into German sentences without being glossed or defined, strongly suggesting that the author expected his audience to understand these terms (Lofmark 1972; Curschmann 1975; Bendheim 2019). Foreign languages are also key to the plot, as the protagonist, Willehalm, uses his ability to speak foreign languages to evade enemy capture and win allies. Thus, this work, and many other medieval German texts, are a particularly rich source for investigating medieval multilingualism.

Unfortunately, the inherent diversity and inter-culturalism embedded in many of these texts was glossed over by early modern scholars and artists serving a nationalist agenda. Medieval German literature in particular became a key part of building national identity; heroes like the *Nibelungenlied*’s Sigfried and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival were cast as prototypical examples of German masculinity and superiority. Meanwhile, texts and figures which did not fit their ideologies—such as Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan, who is clearly described in the 12<sup>th</sup> century romance as a foreigner (Middle High German: *ellende*) and experiences both xenophobia and ostracism on account of his multilingual abilities—were denounced as morally debased and rejected from the canon. While 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship has seen a renewed interest in uncovering alternative voices (Hathaway 2012; Weigand 2015; Kasten & Auteri 2017; Bendheim 2019; Scheibel 2021), there remains a significant methodological hurdle to studies on alterity and multilingualism specifically within medieval German studies: the lack of appropriate models of medieval multilingualism.

Enter plurilingualism, a newly emergent framework of multilingualism adopted by the CEFR in 2001 (Council of Europe 2001). Unlike traditional multilingual frameworks, which typically assumed that each person had one “natural” language and all additional languages were stored by the brain separately, plurilingualism recognizes the fluidity of linguistic boundaries and challenges the myths of the “idealised” native speaker and a unique “mother tongue” (Piccardo et al., 2022). This makes it highly applicable to the medieval period, as evinced by several recent publications exploring plurilingual codemixing, primarily focussed on Latin and Romance languages, in medieval Europe (Fortuna 2017;

Bertagnolli & Zironi 2025). Comparatively little attention has been paid to medieval Germany and German literature, and there remains much work to be done in this field.

**Research Questions and Methodology:** Through close readings of primary sources (such as epic and romance poetry, *Minnesang* “love songs”, and religious texts) in Middle High German, I will address the following questions:

1) *How are multilinguals and multilingualism represented in medieval German literature between 1150 and 1300 CE?* My project aims to expand on a growing body of scholarship constructing an alternative account to myth of “natural” monolingualism; whereas much of this research is focussed on the sixteenth century onwards, my project would extend this investigation to include medieval texts, which have much to add to the conversation. Portrayals of medieval multilingualism in literature is highly complex and, often, heavily gendered. For example, while Willehalm’s multilingualism functions as an extension of his martial prowess, his wife’s multilinguistic abilities primarily facilitate her conversion to Christianity and betrayal of her “Saracen” fiancée and family. She is thus characterised as a “promiscuous pagan polyglot princess”, a well-attested archetype in the Romance corpus (Jones 2005). My research will consequently address intersectional issues of language, gender, and ethnicity, informed by contemporary critical theory in gender studies, particularly Judith Butler’s (1999) theory of performativity and Susan Hekman’s (1995) work on redefining agency as a subject’s ability to engage with empowering discourses available to them in their specific cultural and historical realities in order to destabilize the hegemonic discourses working against them.

2) *In what ways can this premodern perspective help us build new models of multilingualism, free from implicit associations between language and nation inherited from early modern nationalism?* In other words, how can medieval German literature help us better understand plurilingual phenomena in the present? Linguists and language instructors are calling for new models of multilingualism which better suit our current, highly globalized and interconnected era. Medieval multilingualism provides us with one such model in which people seem to understand their relationship to languages as instrumental rather than nationalist, i.e. choosing to use languages based on their suitability to a specific context or task rather than feeling an identity-based connection to them (Poor 2018).

In answering these questions, my approach will be interdisciplinary and cross-cultural by necessity, looking beyond traditional national, philological, and disciplinary boundaries.

**Research Institution and Timelines:** I am a second year PhD student at the University of Toronto’s Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, and will sit my qualifying exams in April 2026. My committee includes my supervisor, Professor Markus Stock, a leading expert in medieval German literature; Professor Enrica Piccardo, co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook of Plurilingual Language Education* (Piccardo 2022) and contributor to the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference of Languages Expert Group (Goodier, North, & Piccardo 2018); and Professor Dorothea Kullmann, a specialist in medieval multilingualism and Old French epic. During my tenure of this award, I will conduct close readings of primary sources in my third year (2026-2027), for which I already possess the necessary language skills (Modern German, Old & Middle High German, Latin, and French). In my fourth year (2028-2029), I intend to conduct manuscript research in Germany, and then in my fifth year (2028-2029), I will finalize my dissertation and seek out relevant publication opportunities.

**Additional significance:** Beyond its academic significance, my research will work against far-right neo-nationalist groups on the rise in both North America and Germany. These groups often use recruitment rhetoric which misrepresents the past as a homogenous, monolingual utopia in contrast with a fractured, multilingual present, but I will show that a multiplicity of voices was present in German culture from its inception.