

Literature Review

In the past few decades, historians have focused on social groups or concepts in past societies to better understand these societies as a whole. Studies on gender, race, labor, peasants, once seen as unconventional, have led to a much richer understanding of the past. Within the past two decades, some social historians have begun to investigate “language in history” in the same way. Since language is studied from many viewpoints, the work of linguists, literary scholars, ethnographers, and so on is relevant to the social history of language. In this essay, I aim to show how study of the status of foreign languages (living, non-mother tongues) in medieval societies can both confirm and expand our understanding of them.

Latin is excluded here when possible, for several reasons. As the lingua franca of western Christendom, Latin held a special place, superior to all other languages. A social history of Latin in medieval Europe, though not yet written, would surely be very productive for understanding medieval cultures. Yet Latin was present in every medieval society, “living” in its use but “dead” because it was always taught, and is therefore not “foreign” in the sense of French in England, Arabic in Spain, or Byzantine Greek in the West. Classical languages like Ancient Greek are similarly excluded, both because they are not “foreign” in this sense and because extensive debates on the knowledge of Ancient Greek in the medieval world continue to this day.

Generally, foreign languages were little known in medieval Europe. Primary source authors sometimes describe their encounters with other languages as short and unpleasant, even when other aspects of culture are tolerable. A twelfth-century pilgrimage guide to Santiago de Compostela describes peoples encountered en-route. In the Bordelais, “le vin est excellent, le poisson abondant, mais le langage rude.” Gascons are “légers en paroles, bavards, moquers...”, Basques notable for “la férocité de leurs visages et samblablement, celle de leur parler barbare.” The author gives a Basque-Latin glossary not to help the traveler, but to prove that “en les écoutant parler, on croit entendre des chiens aboyer,” paradoxically providing our earliest knowledge of Basque.¹ Even though the intended recipients of this guide are, by modern standards, French, their regional dialect of French would differ significantly from the dialects of Gascon Frenchmen.

Similar situations obtained in Byzantium. A frustrated Byzantine traveler from the same period, forced to stop on Cyprus on his way home, accosts a Cypriot peasant: “Man, please, go just a little further, don’t approach. You smell of garlic, and therefore move far away.” The man’s fails to comply, likely because he does not understand the refined language of Constantinople.² Even when medieval travelers do not give a negative impression of other languages, they rarely show knowledge of them beyond a few practical phrases. Ibn Battuta’s diaries are sprinkled with words from peoples he meets, but little more. Marco Polo supposedly learned several languages during his travels, but offers little evidence beyond lists

¹*Le Guide du Pèlerin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*. Tr. Jeanne Viellard. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Brin, 1984 [12th century, various manuscripts]. pp. 19, 23, 33.

²W.J. Aerts. “A Byzantine Traveler to One of the Crusader States.” *East and West in the Crusader States: Context, Contacts, Confrontations*. Krijnie Ciggaar and Herman Teule, eds. Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2003. pp. 169, 215.

of words. Even in the fifteenth century, the pilgrimage narrative of the Cologne nobleman Arnold von Harff includes only words and a few key phrases, such as “Good morning,” “How much does this cost?”, and “Lady, may I sleep with you?”³

Foreign language learning thus seems rare, sporadic, and functional, reflecting the local nature of much medieval experience, at least before the late middle ages. Still, several types of situations obtained where foreign languages were needed. Missionaries learned foreign languages to convert pagans, but often reluctantly. The idea of a unified Latin-speaking Christendom drove efforts to evangelize in Latin from early Christianity until the seventeenth century. Such efforts almost always failed, leading to the use of vernacular languages. After the conversion of continental Europe, the most successful evangelism efforts were led by the Franciscan and Dominican orders, precisely because they worked through foreign vernaculars. Yet missionary efforts were always hampered by discomfort with the idea of the religious use of foreign languages. Roman clergy were uncomfortably aware of Greek, Armenian, and Coptic christianity, all rival churches using non-Latin languages more or less spoken by parishioners. Latin use was one of the most important defining features of the Catholic church, complicating efforts to learn and preach in vernaculars.

Merchants speaking different languages also needed to communicate, but often did so in pidgins sufficient to conduct business. The late medieval *lingua franca* was only one of many pidgins used to communicate in the Mediterranean world since *koiné*, a variety of Ancient Greek. Merchants in England, faced with a French-English dialect continuum, used

³Bernard Bischoff. “The Study of Foreign Languages in the Middle Ages.” *Speculum*, 36.2 (1961), 209-224. pp. 219-220.

a “Macaronic” combination of French and English. Other profession-specific communicative codes arose in England for use in law and other professions. Importantly, all these methods of communication were basically local and functional – members of a profession used the method of communication that was constantly evolving for their immediate needs, not at all like the later use of standardized vernaculars for international communication. At least in the early middle ages, before the cultural contact engendered by the crusades, when total competence in foreign languages was needed for a job, few people qualified. Liudprand of Cremora, a Bishop sent by Otto the Great to Constantinople in 968, says that he was sent in no small part because he was one of the few who spoke fluent Greek.⁴

In the absence of standardized languages, bilingual or dialect continuum situations were the norm in medieval Europe. Linguists have recently lent some support to the hypothesis that different early medieval Germanic peoples still spoke mutually intelligible languages, making the idea of a “foreign language” to learn anachronistic in this situation. Similar evidence has been advanced for the mutual intelligibility of Old Norse and Old English at the time of the Viking conquest of much of England. Still, evidence from place names within the Danelaw suggests that the Vikings did not assimilate, and interpreted Old English language, like culture, with a Norse accent. This idea of societal bilingualism between Old Norse and Old English, with individual speakers only knowing one or the other, seems plausible given archaeological evidence for continued separation of the two populations.⁵ The two distinct

⁴Liudprand of Cremora. “The Embassy to Constantinople.” *The Embassy to Constantinople and Other Writings*. F.A. Wright, tr., J.J. Norwich, ed. London: J.M. Dent, 1993.

⁵Matthew Townend. *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations Between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002.

languages were also the material of competing poetic traditions at the courts of English kings such as Ethelred the Unready.⁶ (Stuff on French-English situation in England from 1066 on, but I haven't researched it yet.)

few people

⁶Paul Bibere. "North Sea Language Contacts in the Early Middle Ages: English and Norse." *The North Sea World in the Middle Ages: Studies in the Cultural History of North-Western Europe*. Thomas Litzka and Lorna Walker, eds. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001.