Using Foreign Languages in the Middle Ages

Introduction

Over the past few decades, historians have signfincantly broadened their outlook on the past.
The growth of social, cultural, and economic history brought categories such as class, gender,
race, culture, and quantitative analyses into the mainstream of historical work. Optimists
credit new approaches with historians' richer understanding of the past, pessimists blame
them for the fragmentation of the historical profession, but none would deny that they are
the driving force behind much recent productive historical work, not least because they spur
the incorporation of approaches from other social sciences.

In this vein, some social historians have begun to investigate the "social history of language."[1] As language is studied from many viewpoints, the perspectives of linguists, literary
scholars, ethnographers, and so on are relevant to its role in history. This holds especially
true for the Middle Ages. Few medieval historians have focused exclusively on language,
perhaps in part because of the intense interest of philologers and literary scholars in the

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[1]Most prominently Peter Burke. i.e. Peter Burke, Roy Porter, eds. *The Social History of Language*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

period. This essay is a sketch of the place of foreign languages in medieval societies of Western Europe, from late Antiquity to around 1300. Because Latin in medieval societies was ubiquitous and has been (justifiably) well-studied, discussion of it is intentionally limited here to its social uses. In contrast to a picture of static Latin-vernacular diglossia, languages and their social meanings changed drastically during this period. Languages were learned and used for practical purposes or as tools of social power, and almost never for scholarly purposes or intellectual enrichment, as they would be from the Renaissance on.

Mutual Understanding

Conquests, colonization, and settlements took place frequently during the Middle Ages – how did groups of people speaking different languages communicate with each other? In a given situation, four options are possible. If the groups had relatively little contact, interpreters could have been used. The languages spoken by both groups could have been sufficiently mutually intelligible. Or both languages could have been used in the society shared by the groups. Sociolinguists have found that all societies have strict codes for which language (or form of a language) can be used in a given situation. A society where two languages are used in different situations and tend to reinforce a power dynamic is called diglossic. Without the power dynamic, the society is called bilingual. Excluding Latin/vernacular diglossia, several examples show that multilingual societies before 1300 were more bilingual than diglossic.

Viking Age England (c. 790-1066) was home to two peoples speaking two languages,

Old English and Old Norse.[2] Historians have long debated the extent to which English and Norse speakers interacted, but careful studies of the linguistic situation are relatively recent. Matthew Townend analyzed onomastic (name) evidence, contemporary Anglo-Saxon sources, and Norse sagas (which took place during this period, but were not written down until the 14th century) for information on Norse-English relations. He argues for "a situation of adequate mutual intelligibility between speakers of Norse and English in the Viking Age"[3] – the phonological systems of the two languages were similar enough that speakers of one language could learn to understand words spoken in the other. In this view, supported by archaeological evidence, Viking Age England was a divided society.[4] Bilingualism was societal, but not individual – the two groups remained largely separate and spoke different languages, although each language had uses common to both races. Old Norse was the court and administrative language of Scandinavian rulers of England, such as Canute (1016-1035). Bards from Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse poetic traditions competed at court, and had some familiarity with each other's repertoire. All writing had to be done in Latin or Anglo-Saxon, since Old Norse was not yet written. When Old Norse disappeared from England in the 11th century, it left behind a wealth of place names, but little other residue on English, a typical pattern in societies with little contact between conquering and conquered peoples.[5]

At least one author has argued for mutual intelligibility among most Germanic languages

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[2]Neither language was completely standardized at this point, but the different English dialects were much more similar to each other than to Scandinavian ones, and vice versa. The same holds true for most pairs of languages in this essay.

[3]Townend (2002), p. 182.

[4]Bibere (2001) also supports this view.

[5]Townend (2002), Chs. 1, 6.

in the Early Middle Ages.[6] In support of this view, Einhard writes in the 9th century that "all the rough and uncivilized peoples inhabiting Germany between the Rhine and Vistula rivers, the ocean and the Danube... almost all speak a similar language." Some exceptions must be made – he also writes that when a group of Frisians asked Charlemagne to send them an emissary to explain Christian doctrine, Charlemagne sent a Frisian, implying that a Frank would not have been understood.[7] Similarly, Richard Wright has argued for pan-Romance comprehension across the former Roman world well into the 10th century, pointing out that "there is never a sign of a need, in the early Middle Ages, for intra-romance interpreters."[8] Although such proofs rest uncomfortably on reasoning from negative evidence, large-scale mutual comprehension would have facilitated the shifting political alliances characteristic of different tribes in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages – to fight together, they had to understand each other.

Even so, mutual intelligibility was never possible between speakers of Romance and Germanic languages, as in Merovingian and Carolingian Gaul, bilingual societies where Frankish and Gallo-Roman were spoken. As in the pre-conquest England case, the linguistic burden was on the dominant class. The Frankish nobility and court spoke Frankish, but only made up %10-15 of the population and were at least functionally bilingual. Gallo-Roman was, up to the Carolingian reforms, largely spoken Latin, so Latin literacy, surprisingly common in the Frankish upper classes, probably facilitated bilingualism. Speaking Frankish did serve

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[6]Moulton (1988).

[7]Einhard, pp. 24-25.

[8]"Early Medieval Pan-Romance Comprehension", in Wright (2002). p. 181.

to reinforce the nobility's privileges.[9] A Gallo-Roman would have to learn Frankish for a political or administrative position, but most seemed not to care. Pierre Flobert's claim that Gallo-Roman speakers "were aware of their position of strength [as Latin speakers] and made absolutely no attempt to learn Frankish" is unsubstantiated, but perhaps true. Gregory of Tours, a Gallo-Roman who delights in recording any conflict involving Franks, mentions no linguistic ones in his *History of the Franks*.[10] He does sprinkle Frankish terms through his narrative, but they cannot have been in widespread use – like Old Norse, Frankish left behind few loanwords when it disappeared, only place names.

Post-conquest England is the most well-known medieval bilingual society. Anglo-Norman (the insular dialect of French)/English bilingualism helped define life in England into the seventeenth century. At first, Anglo-Norman was the language of the ruling Norman nobility, serving both to distinguish them from the English and restrict access to certain professions, like Frankish in Gaul. Most English-speakers never knew French, but quickly realized its function: "from soon after the conquest there are indications that monolingual speakers perceive their ignorance of French to be a factor in their subordination."[11] Yet Anglo-Norman relatively quickly became like Latin, a language which anyone had to learn for certain societal advances, but no one spoke natively. W. Rothwell has shown that the numerous idiosyncrasies of thirteenth-century English guides for learning Anglo-Norman are best understood as intended for adult learners with some non-native Anglo-Norman experience. Authors' expectations quickly decreased to the point of assuming no Anglo-

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[9]Banniard (1995).
[10]Flobert (2002), p. 427.
[11]Crane (1997), p. 104.

Norman knowledge.[12] This interpretation fits with R.A. Lodge's claim that native Anglo-Norman speakers were gone by the early twelfth century. Reflecting this change, a 1258 proclamation by Henry III (r. 1216-1272) was the first post-conquest official statement in English (along with French and Latin), and after his reign Anglo-Norman ceased to be used at all in the royal household.[13]

The social value of French only increased as it became harder to learn. Women read and patronized Anglo-Norman literature to a much greater extent that within France, seizing the middle ground between English, spoken by all, and Latin, which women were thought unable to learn. In literature, law, courts, and government, French became firmly established only *after* 1200, when it became invariably a cultural achievement rather than a mother tongue.[14] The well-known medieval proverb, "Jack would be a gentleman if he could speak French" must post-date this shift, as the word "gentleman" is not attested until the late 13th century.[15] Most notably, the huge influx of French loanwords into English only began in the early 13th century, reaching its peak around 1350.[16]

French in England thus illustrates an interesting generalization about multilingual medieval societies up to 1300 – bilingual situations of two living languages never involve significant power dynamics, of the sort seen in almost any multilingual state today. A few other examples follow the same pattern. Arabic/Ibero-Romance bilingualism in Spain did

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[12]Rothwell (1968).

[13]Lodge (1991), pp. 79-80.

[14]Crane (1997), pp. 105-106.

[15]Proverb from front page, Calvet (2002). Etymology from Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com>.

[16]Graph quoted in Calvet (2002), p. 136

not significantly enforce social hierarchies or inflame conflicts, the Arabic-speaking, Christian Mozarabs in fact flourished.[17] Linguistic issues seemingly never contributed to tensions with Jews and Greeks living in Western Europe – if anything, knowledge of Greek and Hebrew provided a rare common interest with medieval scholars.[18] Even in crusader states in the multilingual Holy Land, language is rarely mentioned in a secular context. One scholar argues that crusader states built ethnic identities around origin myths based on common descent, heroic conquest, and shared values – but not language.[19] These examples are unusual because language is today usually a fundamental part of group identity, implying power dynamics. Perhaps it makes sense that in a more religious world, most of these dynamics would take place through the church.

Language as Power

The Latin language was the most powerful cultural symbol in Western Europe perhaps until the 19th century.[20] In the period under consideration, Latin played a variety of roles. Most international secular written communication and all clerical communication was in Latin. Throughout the Middle Ages, Latin was an effective *spoken* lingua franca for clergy and educated laymen. Regional pronunciation differences and modern vocabulary deficits only became endemic in the 15th century, if not later. Most of all, the history of Latin in this period shows how it became increasingly a tool of power for church and secular elites over

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[17] "Sociolinguistics in Spain (8th-11th centuries)", in Wright (1994), 155-164.
[18] Some examples given in Bischoff (1961).
[19] Murray (1995).
[20] Information on Latin from 1500 on from Françoise Waquet, *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign.*

those who originally spoke it.

Latin originally became the language of Roman Christianity to make Christian teachings more accessible to the masses. In the 5th century, St. Jerome translated the Bible from Greek into so-called Late Latin, the language of the Roman plebs. All Christians therefore theoretically had direct access to the Bible, even if in practice teachings usually came through a Priest speaking Late Latin.[21] Gradually, however, the gap between Romance dialects and Late Latin widened. St. Jerome's translation and the Latin language itself came to be seen as sacred, and symbolic of the church's authority. In an 865 exchange of letters, Pope Nicholas defended Latin against insults from Constantinople, and demanded that it be seen as a sacred language, like Greek and Hebrew, but this was an extreme view for the time.[22] In communication to the 9th-century mission to the Slavs, Pope John VIII wrote that "there is nothing contrary to the faith or to sound doctrine in singing mass in the said Slavonic language,"[23] contributing to the creation of Cyrillic script and mass in Slavic languages. Rome panicked, and tried in vain for decades thereafter to ensure that only Latin be used in Slavic services.[24]

Over time, knowledge of Latin came to symbolize the mediating function of priests and distinguish them from other members of society. The fact that most parishioners (and some priests) could not understand the Latin mass became acceptable because priests were meant to interpret the Word.[25] The beautiful pictures seen in illuminated manuscripts and stained-

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[21] Banniard (1999), pp. 229-230.
[22] Richter (1976), p. 49.
[23] Richter (1975), p. 77.
[24] Richter (1976), p. 53.
[25] Banniard (1995).

glass windows were offered as the equivalent for the *illiterati*.[26] By the 12th century, Latin was seen in church doctrine as the language of the Word of God, expressed through his servants.[27] Though there is no evidence that this process was planned, clerical control of the divine language and, by extension, most knowledge, became a self-propagating process.

Romance speakers eventually might have stopped understanding Mass at some point as their languages drifted further from Church Latin, but were cut off earlier. Into the 9th century, adaption to local pronunciation could have made the Latin Mass understandable to Romance-speaking parishioners, with increasing local divergences from any norm. Inadvertently or not, the Carolingian pronunciation reforms put a stop to this process throughout Europe by requiring that Latin be read according to a standardized, fixed pronunciation of every letter, far from any contemporary dialect.[28] This reform sealed the distinction between popular and clerical language among Romance-speakers. Canon 17 of the Council of Tours famously established that preaching texts were no longer to be said in Latin, but "rusticam Romanam linguam Theodiscam aut, quo facilius cuncti possint intellegere quae dicuntur," i.e. in the local Germanic or Romance language.[29] Significantly, priests would *preach* in the local vernacular, while Mass and the Bible remained in Latin, maintaining the clerical monopoly on information.

Latin was a tool of both secular and church power simply because it had to be acquired to be used. Learning to read or write Latin took years, at best a difficult process and at worst

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[26]Bäuml (1997), p. 132.
[27]Law (2003), p. 204.
[28]Banniard (1999).
[29]Banniard (1999), p. 236.

ending in failure. Pedagogic techniques and an understanding of grammar took centuries to develop for a difficult language under any circumstances.[30] Contrasted with working the land and fighting, it is perhaps not surprising that "literacy was generally despised by the laity as an unmanly skill."[31] Despite the proverb that "rex illiteratus est quasi asinus coronatus," many kings and nobles were partially or wholly illiterate.[32] In short, few forces operated to promote literacy, let alone mass literacy. Most medieval knowledge thus in practice remained the preserve of those whose job it was to be literate. For others, Latin's power was more symbolic.

The mystical power of Latin, the written word, and literacy were central to church power. Latin was the most important foreign language of the Middle Ages not because it was universal, but because it and the books written in it commanded tremendous symbolic power. For centuries, most Europeans heard knowledge from one book, once per week, in a language they did not understand. Prayers in Latin marked all major life events. It is inevitable that Latin and the Latin Bible became important cultural symbols, adapting to new cultural conditions. As a distinct urban lifestyle developed in the 11th and 12th centuries, Latin came to be associated with *urbanitas*, security, and civility, as opposed to *rusticitas*, recalling the *lingua rustica* vernaculars.[33] Latin and literacy also played a crucial role in missionary attempts of late antiquity. Some peoples, like the Eastern Franks, had no written tradition before Christianity, enabling missionaries to almost mold future literate

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[30]On the pain of learning Latin, see Law (2003) and *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign.*
[31]Richter (1975), p. 74.
[32]Ibid., p. 73.
[33]"*Urbanitas-Rusticitas*: Linguistic Aspects of a Medieval Dichotomy." In Richter (1995), 54-60.

consciousness. As one scholar notes, "in this context Christianity and writing must be thought of together."[34] Books could be powerful symbols for preliterate pagans. In a letter of 735, Boniface asks that an abbess "copy out for me in letters of gold the epistles of my lord, St. Peter, that a reverence and love of the Holy Scriptures may be impressed on the minds of the heathens to whom I preach," implying that an impressive book is as important as his actual message to conversion.[35]

Language and Identity

In the examples seen so far, language was used more as a tool of power than a means of self-definition. To the extent that ethnic or national identities were defined, language did not play an important role. But in the 12th and 13th centuries, language and group identity became slowly more intertwined, in several contexts. This link was always made with reference to other languages, showing the changing ways they were thought about and used.

Scholars agree that England's Norman conquerors "generally became English while continuing to speak French," though estimates on when they thought of themselves as English range across the twelfth century, making it hard to consider a link between their linguistic and cultural identifications. But it is clear that by the 14th century, the notion of a unified English people had become associated with the English language. Middle English had vocal proponents for its use as a literary language by 1300, while the new Lancaster dynasty sought symbols of Englishness to legitimate its dubious claim to the throne. Englishness and

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[34]Bäuml (1997), p. 124.
[35]Boniface, Letter 21.

the English language were opposed to their French equivalents, an opposition strengthened during the Hundred Years War.[36]

Relative to Romance languages, English may have been easy to redefine for purposes of national identity. Richard Wright argues that a "metalinguistic divergence" creating linguistic self-consciousness took place in two steps on the Iberian peninsula.[37] In the first half of the 13th century, advocates of written use of Romance languages in Iberian kingdoms battled those who wanted to continue using Latin. Over the second half, the Romance languages won out, but also got caught up with nascent senses of national identities. Though long different, the Romance dialects of different kingdoms had never been emphasized as distinct entities. Starting after 1200, Castillians began to talk of "nuestro romance castellano," and similarly for Catalonia and Portugal. Given the fractious relations between these states over the 13th and 14th centuries, the differences between their languages were emphasized. Portuguese-Castillian acrimony in particular cultimated in the 1385 Battle of Aljubarrota. Wright emphasizes that Iberian "[linguistic] fragmentation was a contingential cultural political invention rather than an inevitable linguistic development."[38] Although Wright may be too optimistic in mourning the lost possibility of a pan-Iberian Romance literary language on the model of Latin America, the more general point is valid. By linking language to national identity, states lost the benefits of easy international communication.

In France, the language of Paris was increasingly contrasted with regional languages within French territory from the 13th century on, probably due to the increasing power of

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[36]Crane (1997), quote from p. 113.
[37]"The Assertion of Ibero-Romance," in Wright (2002), pp. 262-281.
[38]Ibid., p. 273.

its kings and prestige of its university. Regional features which had been popular in 12th century literature fell out of fashion.[39] The rich tradition of composition in Occitan, the language of southern France, quickly declined after the area came under increased French control following a Crusade through the region. As the prestige of the Paris dialect rose, this author's 1325 apologetic became typical:[40]

> Si m'escuse de mon langage
>
> rude, malostru et sauvage
>
> car nes ne sui pas de Paris
>
> ne si cointes com fut Paris;
>
> mais me raporte et me compere
>
> au parler que m'aprist ma mere
>
> a Meun quant je l'alaitoie
>
> dont mes parlers ne s'en devoye
>
> ne n'ay nul parler plus habile
>
> que celui qui keurt a no vile

Two centuries after the heyday of regional literatures, this anonymous author is ashamed to be from Meung, 90 miles from Paris. The rise of Parisian French was linked to campaigns to extend the king's influence over speakers of regional dialects, Occitan, and even English (during the Hundred Years War). But the decision to link battles between peoples to battles

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[39]Lodge (1991), p. 77.

[40]Quoted in Lodge (1991), pp. 77-78.

between languages was new. One can only speculate on why language was linked to group identity in several contexts during the twelfth century. It is tempting to generalize R.A. Lodge's emphasis in the French case on the rise of centers of power outside the church which needed cultural self-definition, especially given the obvious link between Dante's late 13th-century defense of Tuscan as a literary language and the increasing power of Italian city states.[41]

Practical Usage

When not used in bilingual communities or in a clerical or scholarly position, foreign languages were learned for practical usage only. European merchants, especially Italians, who traveled east to trade communicated in pidgins sufficient to conduct business, such as the Italian-derived late medieval *lingua franca*. Although some may have grown up in Greek, Arabic, or Hebrew-speaking bilingual communities, there is little evidence that European merchants learned foreign languages in this period, or needed to. Before the establishment of crusader states, where European languages would have sufficed, Italian merchants were required to do business at points of exchange external to Muslim cities in the Levant, eliminating the need to communicate with non-merchants.[42] In England, profession-specific "Macaronic" combinations of English and French emerged out of the dialect continuum between them. All these methods of communication were basically local and functional – members of a profession used a method of communication which continually evolved for

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[41]Lodge (1993), p. 108.
[42]Metcalf (1996), p. 224.

immediate needs, not at all like the later use of standardized vernaculars for international communication. Excluding a few multilingual areas such as Sicily and the Levant, when total competence in a foreign language was needed for a job, few people qualified. Liudprand of Cremona, 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.[43]

Liudprand learned Greek during an earlier voyage to Constantinople. This voyage was exceptional – long-distance travel was rare in the Middle Ages, and travelers often describe their encounters with other languages and peoples in unfavorable terms, certainly not studying them. Most medieval travellers were more goal-oriented than a tourist today would be and less interested in local flavor. A twelfth-century pilgrimage guide to to Santiago de Compostela describes peoples one would encounter en route: In the Bordelais "le vin est excellent, le poisson abondant, mais le langage rude", while Basques are 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.[44] Readers of this guide, very popular in its day, do not seem to require knowledge of foreign languages.

Of the great medieval travelers, neither Ibn Battuta or Marco Polo show much interest in foreign languages. A frustrated 13th-century Byzantine traveler, forced to stop on Cyprus on his way home, accosts a Cypriot peasant: "Man, please, go just a little further, don't

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[43]Liudprand of Cremona.
[44]*Le Guide du Pélerin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle.* pp. 19, 33.

approach. You smell of garlic, and therefore move far away." The Cypriot fails to comply, likely because he does not understand the refined language of Constantinople.[45] Even the zeal of the fifteenth-century Cologne nobleman Arnold von Harff, who records phrases of many different languages in his pilgrimage narrative, has pragmatic aims, asking, "Good morning," "How much does this cost?", and "Lady, may I sleep with you?"[46] German language guides of the 9th and 11th centuries, as well as 14th century Flemish/French and Russian guides, are similarly structured around pragmatic dialogues for trade, travel, or commanding servants.[47] Languages were only learned out of necessity – at the other end of the social hierarchy, immigrants to foreign lands needed to learn the local language to survive, as in one 13th century German epic:[48]

Wie der Beheim rede, Walch und Unger,

Daz muoz lernen manic man

Dem biutel, hant, und mage ist wan

(*How the Bohemians, Italians and Hungarians speak,*

many a man must learn,

whose purse, hand, and stomach are empty.)

Latin Christian missionaries learned and used foreign languages to convert pagans, though 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

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[45]Aerts (2003), pp. 169, 215. The translation sounds awkward due to meter restrictions.
[46]Quoted in Bischoff (1961), pp. 219-220.
[47]i.e. "Gimer min ros!" (*give me my horse!*). Penzl (1984), pp. 394-395.
[48]Quoted in Penzl (1984), p 396.

always failed, leading to the use of vernacular languages. When possible, missionaries whose native languages were close enough to the target population were used.[49] Otherwise, missionaries had to learn pagan languages on-site.[50] Those who did often adopted sophisticated methods to successfully convert pagans. Missionaries adopted the rich oral traditions of pagan Germanic peoples to Christian stories and wrote them down, both meeting potential converts halfway and establishing the vernacular literary traditions that were crucial to evangelization. They then used the new vernacular texts to preach tailor-made sermons to pagans in their own languages.[51] Such efforts by missionaries, however, were still probably simply pragmatic measures taken to break down pagan cultural resistance – there is almost no evidence of further interest in Germanic languages or cultures in the frequent written communication between missionaries and their bases.[52]

After the conversion of continental Europe, the most successful evangelism efforts were led by the Franciscan and Dominican orders in the East, precisely because they worked through foreign vernaculars and local knowledge. In the account of a 13th-century Syraic chronicler, the "well-trained and multilingual" Dominicans offered to mediate heated local disputes, implying good knowledge of at least Arabic and Greek.[53] Yet Latin Christians were always uncomfortable with native Christians in the Levant because of cultural differences. The Syrian Orthodox, for example, were of the same church as Latin Christians but "were despised because their religious customs did not appear to derive from the same root as their

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[49]Many examples of this practice in Bede.
[50]Penzl (1984), p. 393.
[51]Bäuml (1997).
[52]Sullivan (1953). Sample communication with missionaries in Boniface.
[53]Weltecke (2003), p. 68.

ethnicity."[54] They spoke Arabic natively and used Greek in their liturgy, two ties to foes of the Roman church. In the 1220s, the French chronicler Jacques de Vitry describes Syrians as[55]

> ...for the most part untrustworthy, duplicitous, and like the Greeks, as cunning as foxes... For trifling sums of money they betray the secrets of the Christians to the Muslims, among whom they have been brought up, whose language they speak, and whose perverse customs they mostly imitate.

Missionary efforts beyond Western Europe were always hampered by such discomfort with the idea of the religious use of languages other than Latin. 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, but complicated efforts to learn and preach in vernaculars.

Summing Up

Foreign languages in Western Europe prior to 1300 were consistently used for pragmatism or power. Scholars and theologians in this period worked under the sign of Latin and the search for the divine Word. It seems fair to say that the role of foreign languages in this period is best illustrated in the lack of scholarly interest in Greek, Arabic, or even classical Latin scholarship. Learning Greek or Arabic would have been difficult, but almost no scholars

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[54]Joyischky (2003), p. 10.
[55]Quoted in Jotischky (2003), p. 10.

seriously tried, and the linguistic resources available in thirteenth-century Italy were around much earlier. Most sights were on Latin grammar and theology – the efforts spent on understanding Priscian and Donatus could have started the Renaissance at any point if so directed.

Mainstream scholars simply did not care to look in the directions that would eventually energize Europe's rise to world dominance. Rather than begrudge medieval Europeans, their worldview can be taken as a normal reminder of how much local culture matters to historical change. European scholars did not rediscover ancient knowledge on their doorstep for the same reason their Chinese counterparts did not harness steam engines for power – they had no reason to. The transmission of Arabic and Greek learning into Latin in the 13th and 14th century was largely due to a small number of multilingual people living in cultural borderlands such as Spain and Sicily.[56] Had Europe been more geographically isolated, perhaps the Renaissance would have happened somewhere else.

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[56]Lindberg (1978).

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