

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Languages

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ANCIENT PERIOD

Indo European. Almost all the languages spoken in Europe today are descendants of Proto Indo European, their hypothetical but evidence-supported father language. That proto Indo European is a theoretical language, based on the evidence of language and speech predating the Christian era by many thousand years, and itself part of a distant pre-writing era, and yet we have no better argument evidence, for the diverse but interrelated facts of language history, than a hypothetical language-father origin.

Origins. Evidence from the three main language phyla currently dominant in Europe concentrates on: the *Romance* (215 million European speaker-users); the *Germanic* ('an estimated 210 million Europeans are native speakers of Germanic languages'); and the Anglo-Frisian, most dramatically represented by contemporary English, currently boasting some 60 million native speakers in the United Kingdom and a difficult to determine number of English speakers in the European Union, where perhaps as many as 100 million speakers now reside. Each of these three huge language phyla tracks its origins to Proto Indo European, as also does Slavic, of which there are 250 million native speakers in south eastern Europe. (We omit the Slavic element in this profile, which confines itself to the three most closely interrelated language families, Germanic, Romance, and English).

The three language phyla named above all passed through their ancient period—that period which, for ancient European philosophy, religion, and science, we have been accepting our weakness in evidence—as vehicles of the experience, and communication-desire, of widely outspread tribal and clan survivalists, who were living in loose bands with gradually thickening bonds of specialized labor. The barbarians to whom the ancient Romans turned, in their various efforts to pin the blame for their fall, were an already fairly developed example of the kinds of new language potential being imported onto the continent of what would later be called Europe. Of the proto languages they brought with them, over the time border into the postclassical age, we can say that they were kin but separate, say, from the Greek or Roman they would have intersected, at those points where the mature impulse of western civilization was already at work.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

The three phyla. The period of a millennium and a half, which we hope to cover with the term 'postclassical', is one in which the phenomenon of language development manifests concurrently with socio-political development, among the tribal units interweaving and mutually conflicting along a wide territorial band, reaching—in the case of our three phyla—from the eastern portions of the British Isles (formative English), through the marches and fortified boundaries of a fallen Rome whose language, a degraded Latin, was falling apart into 'vulgar Latin', the mother of the Romance languages, to the multi-terrained landscape of contemporary Germany north into Scandinavia, and as far offshore as Iceland, in all of which areas formative establishments of a Germanic language were coalescing and growing internally.

Development. Cultural and political developments were doubtless markers of the process by which fairly limited language tools were refined into the potentialities of, say, literary expression and communication. (We have started, in other words, into the 'evolution of culture,' which as we know accelerates incrementally, once established, once the premises of writing, and communicating that writing, and retaining the memory of the past have been widely internalized. On the horizon from the early postclassical we can see the *Nibelungenlied*, *The Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decamerone* or *The chanson de Roland*. The question is what will take us to that horizon? (The perception that languages constantly *grow* takes us back to incisive German linguists like Franz Bopp (1791-1867) and August Pott (1802-1888), who opened up the idea that languages grow like species in the evolutionary schema of Charles Darwin.) A number of different explanations were in the air, by the mid-nineteenth century, to account for the internal drivers that set languages in purposeful motion: the shaping and fine tuning of verbal forms under the pressure of needing efficient communication; the enrichment of individual languages by borrowing from others; the improvement of speakers' locations, from the point of view of accumulating positive new experiences; migrations, in which new pidgins and creoles are invented, which have the power to regenerate or remake old language forms.

RENAISSANCE AND EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Diversity. With the advent of all the Renaissance meant to western Europe—cities and their packing in of verbal thinkers; Universities and soon printing press facilities, which abet language invention and transmission, even translation; public conflicts of language, such as those touched off by the conflict between the Protestants and Catholics in the Reformation; a great widening of the audience for imaginative literature, and uptick in the population of literary creators, whose business is enriching and reinterpreting language—it is no surprise that the three language phyla we are tracking should have with the climate of the Renaissance confirmed and refined their distinctive characteristics.

Nationalism. Another byproduct of the Renaissance, which was certain to shape the way languages evolved during the period, was the growth of nationalism, which involved, in its desire for integrity and independence, the languages central to the nation in question: France and England, especially, were by 1500 administratively independent and proud functioning entities, with armies, universities, law systems; and with all those appurtenances these social power horses prided themselves on a national language and all that went with it. Nothing could more fully have satisfied this ambition than the *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) which was compiled and published by Samuel Johnson, and which was devoted to standardizing both English as a language and the ways English 'should be' used. Both England, and France through the *Académie française* (founded 1634), moved to reify the language central to their culture, and thus to establish the national language on a throne.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Germany, England, France. While the nineteenth century in Germany was slowly pulling itself together as a nation-concept, and there found itself speaking a scattered and regional tongue, both England and France found 'themselves' as budding, and soon colonial 'nations,' with ambitions for glory, and an increasingly curried narrative, to which the country could turn as its 'proud past.' 'Having colonies' was no small part of these industrial nations' strategy for disseminating its products, its culture system, and the regal dignity of its language. To this latter end, the British were careful to provide for colonial school systems in which, for example, the proper usages of English would be appropriately emphasized by the choice of grammar texts sent out from the home country. Higher education in Britain centered around a canon of the great texts of British literature—same in France, where the *gloire de la patrie* was celebrated in the iconic brilliance of the French academy and its heralded intellectuals. In both Britain and France efforts were mounted to protect the King's English or the language of Racine, to which reference was constant in France.

Empire. The Industrial revolution and the spread of colonial empire were both keys to the spread and power of a national language. (Colonialism will have provided the same support for linguistic self-promotion among all the major partners in the colonial enterprise: Germany, Portugal, Italy.) The industrial revolution was one of the many epochs of transformative experience, to which the British people

have found themselves subjected: the Norman Invasion, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the adventures of Englishmen and women of all ages, in the explorations of Africa; and yet no epoch could have outdone the Industrial Revolution in fertility of neologisms (*train, revolver, pulley, camera, telegraph, and many more.*)

Europe. The point is not that England is the benchmark of language development in Western Europe's nineteenth century, but that the kinds of social experience the British and French had were emblematic of the ever evolving foundation of the languages of these two countries. The Baltic, Scandinavian, and Portuguese cultures were also in their own unique ways growing from the times they were placed in, their decisions about how to shape their futures, and the distinctive hungers of their enemies.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Evolution. Nothing we have said about language evolution in the nineteenth century would not apply to what we have to say of the twentieth. Of the twentieth century in Western Europe, however, we will want to make the global statement that television, radio, the internet and its social media have greatly intensified the presence of language in the world of the individual citizen. The Western European is saturated with language, from waking to sleeping, or arguably while sleeping. The language he/she is constructing him/herself of is not the static challenge posed by written symbols to the monk in mediaeval Rouen, the shimmering word-tumult that a Renaissance dramatist like Marlowe might adore to see emerge from his pen, or the hewn marble of academic prose that a scholar like Peter Brown offers us as he dissects the mindsets of early Christian intellectuals like Augustine or Cassiodorus; the language the West European of our time is made up of the language of opinion surveys, podcasts, twitter feeds, ten minute read politics surveys, and then, over on the more personal side of the ledger, of the language of daily life, his daughter's upcoming trip, his mom's arthritis, and then of course the news, the news which is basically language and which forever constitutes and reconstitutes us.

Babel. If the above makes sense, it touches the way the language of Western Europe varies from the languages of the same area in the past when verbal symbols had the weight of execution and initiation behind them. It also touches the multiplication and diversification of identified and studied components in the makeup of western Europe. Not only is population explosion decisive for the issue in question, but also nationalism and the social self-awareness that goes with the mindset, the pleasure of being a located culture in a jigsaw puzzle of verbal schematics. (Is this not an identity gratification—think Estonian or Albanian, or the Turkic or Uralic components of the western European maze, languages as glad to be part of the whole verbal achievement of mankind as they had been assured, on the Tower of Babel, would one day be the case.)

Literature. And from the midst even of these twentieth century drivers of language change comes the fertile and tireless imagination of man, which in turns of skill like literature sets itself the challenge of inventing new ways for language to remake itself. To illustrate by a single case, what could be a continent wide instance of how imaginative language builds language itself, consider what James Joyce did for English by dismembering, reestablishing, and then representing the English language in the form it assumes in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), or even in Molly Bloom's soliloquy in *Ulysses*. In the latter instance Joyce makes us discover a kind of new language inside language, and through that discovery makes us restore the life giving sense of language as free possibility for mankind—always a tonic for writers, and eventually for new users; from whom even newer readers emerge, whether or not they read this or that particular text. So much for wide scale enrichment through language, as we find it in *Finnegans Wake*. The offering up of Joyce's *Ulysses* to his culture, to his language, and then, through translation, to every written language in Europe, was a much less recondite example of enabling. *Scandal* created by its subject, a lady having an orgasm, the soliloquy of Molly Bloom lived, at its time, as the once unspoken possibility of saying it all out, of breathing forth your life through the energies of your language. Whether in high brow examples, like Joyce, or in high brow pop culture examples like those Jerry Seinfeld created—in christening *regifit, lowtalker, Jimmy legs or anti-dentite*—the growth points of language will continue to self-regenerate, like dendrites, from their own follicles.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The languages of Western Europe—arguably language in general—have evolved. But have they a ‘direction’? Is language evolution ‘going somewhere,’ or simply diversifying? Is there a peak achievement in a given language, or set of languages like those of Western Europe, which represents the highest achievement that language is capable of?

How do you see language development and language decline actually playing out? Does a select body of speaker/users beef up a language, while later an increasingly negligent set of users allows the structure to collapse? English, we suggested in mentioning the Industrial Revolution or the Joyce examples, seems capable of growth at various points along its surface—socio-cultural, aesthetic.

The European Union aspires to be a union, in which common interests and practices are shared. Is it a serious hindrance, to that ideal of the EU, that it is divided into three or four major language phyla, and thus into four different major forms of self-expression? Is there a good reason to reconsider the use of some kind of artificial language, like *Esperanto* (created 1887), as a binder language to hold Western Europe together? Or has English assumed that role?

SUGGESTED READING

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