

Colonisation, Conversion and Slavery:

Social Aspects of Language Change in Early Medieval Northwestern Europe

While historical linguistics has generally harboured a certain scepticism with regard to the invocation of language contact to explain developments in historically remote periods, an increasing number of linguists have in recent years been centrally concerned with refining models of how social conditions affect language change. There has consequently also been an increasing number of scholars who attempt to apply the insights of contact studies, sociolinguistics and typology to old and remote problems. Without doubt, some of these attempts have borne fruit, while others have only given traditionally oriented historical linguists further cause to doubt the validity of the enterprise. Such scepticism is healthy to the degree that it causes one to reject facile explanations based on meagre and selective sets of historical and linguistic facts and demands rigorous consideration of possible internal motivations for change; but it is at times unhealthy, representing an adverse reaction to that which is new and unfamiliar. Obviously, there exist insuperable limits of historical knowledge for the settings of many compelling problems of language change which may conceivably have involved contact, but it is the contention of this writer that for many others, what has been lacking has been not so much historical information but sufficient understanding of the mechanisms of language contact and sufficient desire to delve into the available historical material. In this paper, we call attention to an important aspect of early medieval society which has been all but ignored by historical linguists, namely, the institution of slavery. The neglect of the topic reflects in part the remarkably limited attention it has received in general historical works, but there exists a considerable specialised literature on early medieval slavery. Given the inherent ways that slavery involves the interaction of ethnically and linguistically distinct groups, it behooves the student of linguistic change in the early Middle Ages to consider the possible rôle it played in those areas where the institution was prevalent.

The core of this paper examines the sociohistorical contexts for developments in two different parts of northwestern Europe. In the first, we discuss briefly the setting for and dynamics of the contact between Ingvaëonic or North Sea Germanic speakers and Franconian speakers in the Low Countries during the Merovingian period (7-8th century), a contact which resulted in language shift by Ingvaëonic speakers and restructuring of the Franconian target; out of this restructured Franconian, the coastal dialects and ultimately standard variety of Dutch developed. We argue that the primary contexts for this language contact were the large domains established by the Frankish nobility and Church in and near the zones of Ingvaëonic settlement after the Frankish conquest of the region. These estates, where Franks were in the rôle of leadership and management, were undoubtedly worked by enslaved and indentured local Ingvaëonic speakers, who were almost certainly supplemented by imported slaves, both English and Celtic, from across the Channel. The subject of the second part of this study is the development of the English in northern Britain. In previous research we have argued that a feature attested in northern English and Scots, the syntactically conditioned opposition of two patterns of present tense inflexion, was the result of a complex combination of internally and externally motivated changes, with the crucial external influence coming from the Celtic languages in the Old English period. Focussing now on the sociohistorical setting for this Celtic influence on northern English, we argue that, though the situation in northern Britain was in ways unlike that in the Low Countries discussed above, here too both slavery and the Church played important rôles in shaping social interactions and linguistic change. (30 min.)