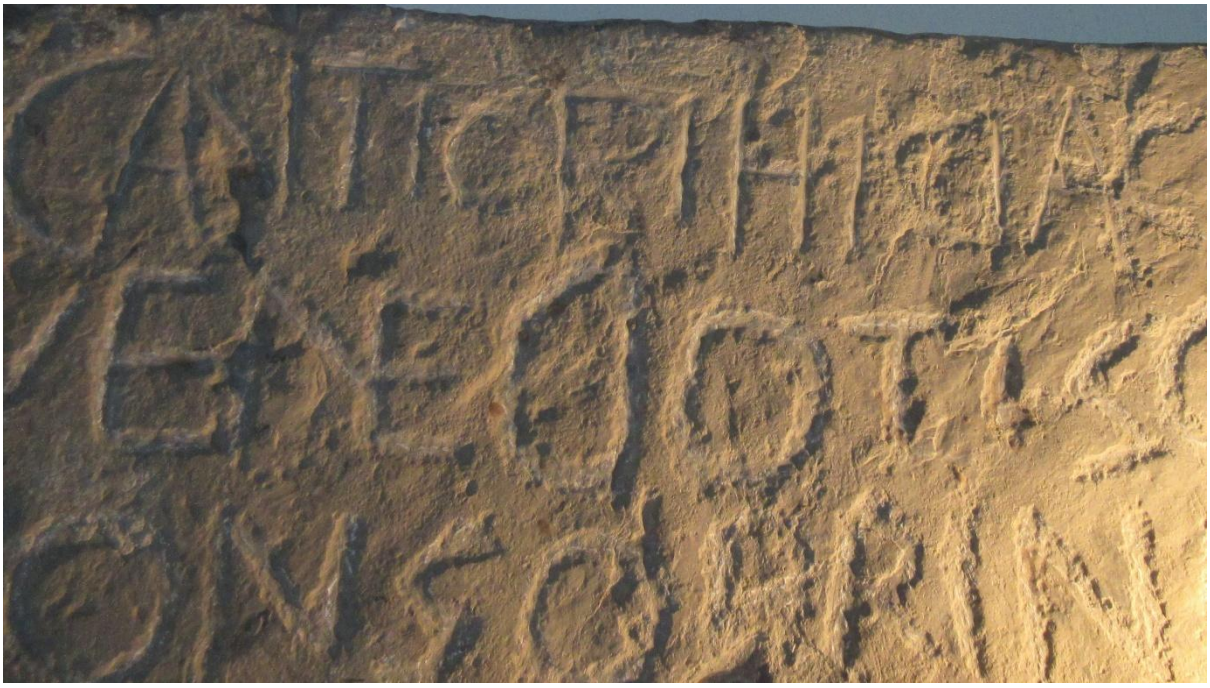
How linguistics can help the historian: Part V



Today we tackle a document that embodies a key piece of European language policy, as duly published in Strasbourg. So this is now an example from recent history — or is it? Not at all, actually; the document in question dates from the year 842! It contains the text of *les Serments de Strasbour*, the so-called Strasbourg Oaths. It is already of enormous importance for European history; but an initial impression of its nature is radically changed, and greatly enhanced, once one brings specifically linguistic considerations to bear upon it. What, then, is the context?

Europe up in arms

As is well known, things fell apart politically in the so-called Holy Roman Empire in the generation following Charlemagne's death in 814, stabilising to some extent in the year 843 when the empire was partitioned three ways by the treaty of Verdun. That treaty is commonly seen as marking the historical origin of France —the part of the empire stretching westwards for hundreds of

kilometres from the Rhine — as well as of Germany, the part that stretches eastwards for a similar distance. There was a narrow, unstable, central strip; but the language boundary in that area, then as now, ran north and south along the river, and this was of course because the Rhine had marked the frontier of the original Roman empire. To the east, unromanised, everyone spoke a teutonic language that was the ancestor of modern German. To the west, romanised, everyone spoke quite a different tongue; but what was it? It is not begging the question to describe it as a Romance dialect — that is, a spoken language that had developed seamlessly, generation by generation, from the Latin of the Roman empire, and that would continue to develop seamlessly, generation by generation, until it ultimately became modern French. If readers think back to the poem by Theodulf of Orleans that we looked at in Part III and Part IV, they will remember that, unlike Hiberno-Latin, the dialect of speakers in that region had assibilated what had originally been hard, Classical consonants, and so didn't say [skientia] but [sientsia], well on the way to becoming modern French *science*; they didn't say [kaelo] but [tselo], prefiguring modern French *ciel*; they didn't say [askensu] but [assensu], reminding us of modern French *ascendre*; and so on. This was the local, naturally developed pronunciation of Latin, as one might say — Classical Latin plus nearly a thousand years of unconscious erosion, as it was passed on from parents to children in all the families of what had been romanised Gaul. (It was Battling Andrew's misguided attempt to imitate this that had landed him in such trouble.) Now, what happened to produce the very interesting Strasbourg document is this …

Speaking peace

Concilium europaeum
Strateburgi DCCCXLII

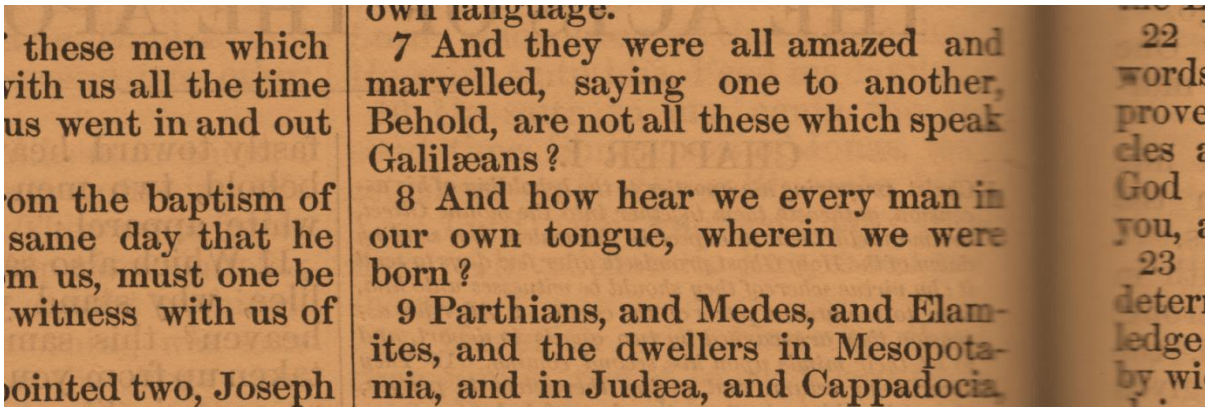
In 842, the year before the treaty of Verdun and paving the way for it, Charles II, known as the Bald, who was king of the West Franks (that is, Romance-speaking territory, what is now France), and Ludwig I, king of the East Franks (what is now Germany), took a formal oath of alliance in Strasbourg. We know that the scene was a solemn one. Ludwig the German-speaker and Charles the Romance-speaker assembled with their respective German-speaking and Romance-speaking troops. The two rulers each addressed their own men in their own tongue. Then they proceeded publicly to take the oath of alliance, one in one language and the other in the other, and — this is the important point — the text survives to this day, in the two versions.

It is to be hoped that the politicians who assemble so regularly on our behalf in Strasbourg today are aware that the issue of official working languages cropped up for the first time in Europe right there on their doorstep. The politicians from France probably do realise this, because the other striking thing about the Strasbourg Oaths is that the Romance version is the first document ever written in what is recognisably French — or something well on the way towards it — rather than in Latin. Here are some examples of items taken from the text:

- the word for ‘brother’, *fratre(m)* in standard Latin spelling, appears as *fradre*, on its way to becoming modern French *frère*;
- the word for the pronoun ‘I’, *ego* in standard Latin spelling, appears as *io*, on its way to becoming modern French *je*;
- the word for ‘says’, *dicit* in standard Latin spelling, appears as *dist*, on its way to becoming modern French *dit*;
- a phrase for ‘before’, *ab ante* in standard Latin spelling, appears as *avant* — already the same written form as in modern French.

Now that would be interesting enough if that were all there was to it. One could imagine the German text being read out to the East Frankish troops by Ludwig the German-speaker, and the French text, with these kinds of spellings in it, being read out to the West Frankish troops by Charles the Romance-speaker; and the two armies then standing down, each reassured by having heard an oath of peace being taken in the native language of its own men. Such a picture might even be quite inspiring. However, it cannot possibly be right! There is a glaring illogicality at the heart of that scenario …

Pentecostal inspiration?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own language.
7 And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilæans?
8 And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?
9 Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judæa, and Cappadocia

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… as specifically linguistic considerations can show us. We have just seen how, only a generation earlier and in the same district, Romance speakers had come to read out the Latin word spelled *scientia* as [sientsia], not as [skientia], and *caelo* as [tselo] rather than as [kaelo]. That being the case, how would king Charles the Romance-speaker, if reading out a text written in standard Latin, have pronounced the word for ‘brother’ when he came across it in its traditional spelling *fratrem*? Well, as [fradre]. So for whose benefit does the Strasbourg text spell this word *fradre*? Again, confronted with the Latin word spelled *ego*, how would Charles have read it out? As [jo]. Or take the word for ‘says’ — in Classical Latin [di:kit], spelled *dicit*. How would Charles have pronounced it?

As [dist], well on the way to modern French *dit*; so why the phonetic-style spelling in the Strasbourg text? After all, Charles already knew how to pronounce his own language. Or how about the word or phrase meaning 'before'? In Latin, this was spelled *ab ante*, but in the relevant geographical area was already by now pronounced with a [v] sound. All literate Romance-speakers knew this; it was, after all, their own mother tongue, and they spoke it every day. So what was the point of this new spelling-system, with the [v] sound carefully specified with the letter *v*? It is as if we suddenly started spelling the English word 'knife' without its historical *k*, or 'school' without the *h*, or 'tough' as *tuff*. For whose benefit might one do this? The answer surely is: for the benefit of someone who, confronted with the spelling *knife*, might be tempted to pronounce it with a *k*-sound — or, faced with *school*, might say [shu:l]; or, seeing *tough*, might utter it with the same sound at the end as in 'lough'. Who would be likely to make this kind of mistake? Someone not entirely familiar with the language, that's who — and if the phonetic spelling is extended to very common items, as we see it is with the words for 'brother' and 'before' in the Strasbourg Oaths, then the answer is clear. The text was written to be read out by a foreigner. Who was the foreigner present on the occasion? None other than king Ludwig, the German-speaker! A close look at the rubric to the text, such as that expounded by the Liverpool linguist Roger Wright in 1982, shows that the oath-taking was an even more carefully thought out confidence-building measure than it seems at first sight. In Strasbourg in 842, it was Charles the Romance-speaker who read out the German-language version, and Ludwig the German-speaker who pronounced the Romance-language version. Each army of troops thus heard the leader of their potential enemies addressing them, and not in an incomprehensible foreign tongue but in their own mother idiom. With its echoes of Pentecost Sunday, was that not a superb diplomatic move, well calculated to overcome mistrust? And is it not great that the linguist scribe, commissioned to write in a phonetic script that he must

brilliantly have invented for the occasion, in that act unwittingly founded the tradition of writing, not in Latin, but in the distinct language French, for the very first time anywhere? The system that he produced in order to help with a well-intentioned but once-off piece of diplomacy went on to last for, by now, well over a thousand years, and to dominate the education systems of countries around the world. Blessed are the peacemakers indeed …

Many thanks for continuing to read this blog — and do get in touch with the author (A.Harvey@ria.ie), at the Royal Irish Academy's Dictionary of Celtic Latin project. We are still busy drafting, in spite of the lockdown!