



The Influence of Language on Culture and Thought

Essays in Honor of Joshua A. Fishman's
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The "mother tongue"

Einar Haugen

The term "mother tongue" is so current in most European languages today that one rarely thinks about its origin or history: Most people take it for granted that a child learns its first language from its mother, though one could easily demonstrate that it is just as likely to acquire the tongue of its father. In fact, Cicero referred to Latin as the *sermo patria*, i.e. the language of the fathers. The term "mother tongue" is not attested prior to 1100 A.D., and does not appear to occur in any ancient tongue (Byskov 1913: 2). Yet we never speak of the native language as one's "father tongue", though we do speak of the "fatherland". To my knowledge the problem has never been addressed in the literature.

As the Danish scholar J. Byskov once wrote: "It takes something special before a person would begin including the mother tongue among the things he thanks God for" (cited in Kristensen 1926: 66). While this is self-evidently true, one may well wonder just what that "something special" might have been. Byskov traced it back as far as the 14th century, "when Latin had long since become a dead language that was only used by learned men", and he concluded that the German and Scandinavian equivalents that occurred then and later were translations either from Latin or spoken German.

However, medieval evidence provides an earlier origin. Kluge in his *Etymologisches Wörterbuch* offers a reference from Strassburg to *materna lingua* as early as 1119 (Kluge 1967, s. v. *Muttersprache*). Unfortunately he does not identify his source, which has remained unexplained. But almost simultaneously Guibert de Nogent in his autobiography *Monodiae* from 1114-1121 wrote: "Fiebat autem res non materno sermone, sed literis," i.e. the matter was debated, not in the mother tongue, but in learned letters (cited by Jan Ziolkowski, personal communication). And in a verse composition (to be dated 1190 or 1191) that accompanies his *Tractatus contra curiales et officiales clericos* Nigel of Canterbury tells his book to behave properly in speaking to its dedicatee, the Norman William Longchamp: "Lingua tamen caveas ne sit materna. sed illa/Quam dedit et docuit lingua paterna tibi," i.e. watch out that you be not the mother's tongue, but the one that the father's tongue gave and taught you (Jan Ziolkowski, personal communication). Medieval dictionaries confirm the usage for later centuries, e.g. Latham has *maternus* with *lingua* for 1293, *lingua materna* for 1246 and 1503, and *lingua maternalis* in 1453. Maigne d'Arnis translates *materna lingua* in 1503 as *vulgaris, vernacula, l'idiome vulgaire* (Latham 1965; Maigne d'Arnis 1858). In his comments on Nigel's usage Boutemy (p. 31) refers to an article by Kugener (not yet located): "Ils se prêtent pourtant à une autre interprétation: lingua materna serait la

langue vulgaire opposée au latin (*lingua patria*, *lingua paterna*), ou plus généralement *sermo patrius*" (Jan Ziolkowski, personal communication).

The medieval evidence points unmistakably to a usage that equates the father's language with Latin and the mother's with the vernacular. The fact that the earliest reference comes from Strassburg leads to the further idea that the term arose because Strassburg was located at the border between the northernmost extension of Latin and the southernmost area of Germanic resistance to its extension. In the Germanic area there was a real need for the distinction, since men continued to be taught to read and speak Latin, while women did not. The evidence does not enable us to determine whether the term arose in Germanic or Latin speech, since all the writings by learned men were in Latin. Kluge was inclined to think that the Germanic word was a loan translation from Latin, but there is no clear evidence concerning the actual point of origin, nor its language. It is significant that the classical term was *sermo patria*. We recall the fact that in the Middle Ages only men received a "proper" education, and that women were relegated to the "inferior" task of nursing the infants. The distinction therefore seems to have arisen in a bilingual society, with women and their language seen as inferior to men and their language. The Swedish writer Thavenius has pointed out that medieval authors on pedagogy held that "woman's nature makes her quite unfitted for teaching" and that "only a man's nature has the firmness, strength, order, and force that is needed to transform nature into culture and thereby save the child's soul" (Thavenius 1981: 57). Whatever we may think of his theory, there seems no doubt that the first uses of *lingua materna* were rather more pejorative than favorable.

In the later Middle Ages we perceive a gradual elevation of the term. Dante wrote his *Divina Commedia* in the early 1300's, using the *parlar materno*, but in defending its use he wrote in Latin, producing his book *De vulgari eloquentia* (*New Century Cyclopaedia*, s. v. Dante). Here he was addressing the learned world, not the illiterate laity. Whatever the source, the term soon acquired equivalents in all the Romance languages: French *langue maternelle*, Spanish *lengua materna*, Italian *lingua materna*, Romanian *limba materna*. In German the word for "language" was derived from a word for "speak": Low German *sprake*, High German *Sprache*, in Dutch *taal* (*modersprake*, *Muttersprache*, *moedertaal*).

In Scandinavian the word adopted in all the languages was *mál* (from which *mæla* "speak" was derived). It occurs in the Icelandic poem *Lilja*, attributed to one Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, who may have died in 1361:

Fyrri menn, er fræðin kunnu
form ok klók af heidnum bókum
slunginn mjúkt af sínum kongum
sungu lof með danskri tungu;
í þvílíku móðurmáli

meir skyldumz ek en nokkur þeira
hværdan dikt með ástarordum
allsvaldanda kongi at gjalda.
(Cited in Kristensen 1926: 67)
[Ancient men, who learned
From pagan books their lore,
Shaped winsome words for kings,
Sung in Danish speech their praises;
In such a mother tongue
I am more than any due
To honor the Almighty Ruler
With my loving words of praise.]
(Author's translation)

The word *mál* (Danish, Norwegian, Swedish *mål*) is the traditional word for "language", now partly replaced by the German loanword Danish *sprog*, Norwegian/Swedish *språk*. It tends to be limited to spoken language, speech, or even dialect. In Eysteinn's poem it is equated with *ðönsk* "Danish", then the usual word for Old Norse. Its continued association with the meaning "speech" supports my contention that *modersmál* is originally a woman's language, in contrast with Latin. In English this is reinforced by the corresponding use of *tongue* in *mother tongue*, and in Dutch by *taal* in *moedertaal*.

Other medieval examples were cited by Marius Kristensen in a noteworthy article on the subject (Kristensen 1926: 69-70). He found a remarkable vacillation in the Danish archbishop Andreas Sunesen's paraphrase of the Scanian Law (c. 1210). In his desperate efforts to find Latin equivalents for Danish legal terms, the archbishop is driven to insert expressions in Danish, describing them as being so called in *materna lingua vulgariter*, or *natale ydioma*, or *vulgari nostro*, or most often *lingua patria*, apparently as the most classical choice. In a Swedish translation of *Acts* from 1385 the passage (Chap. 2, v. 11) where the Holy Spirit speaks to all men "in our tongues", the text reads "på vor tungu och modhor male" for which the Vulgate has no model (Kristensen 1926: 68). Another Swedish example appears in a manuscript of the Vadstena Monastery Rules dated end of the fifteenth century, but originally from c. 1371: priests are directed to explain the Latin text in the *modher maale* (rendering the Latin *lingua materna*). Finally, an amusing (if also tragic) example from Norway is the legal document detailing the quarrel between two men from Telemark, Arne Tolleifson and Lidvord Asiakson, in 1489 (Hødnebo 1966: 93-94; cited in Haugen 1976: 339). Lidvord greeted Arne with a Low German phrase "Got synth jw" (God bless you). Arne replied "I don't like that gabble ... Let us speak our father's and mother's tongue - we won't be any greater than they have been". It ended with Lidvord's knifing Arne

so he died. Here the father's and the mother's language are accepted as equal. We seem to perceive a new spirit of equality for the mother tongue.

The example set by Dante and his contemporaries of the Renaissance led to the liberation of religious discourse from its male chauvinist tinge. The English reformer Wycliffe wrote in 1380 "Seclyr lordys schuld, in defawte of prekytes, lerne and preche the law of God in here modyr tonge" (*OED*, s. v. Mother Tongue). And in *Brut* for 1400 we read that "Hit was ordeyned, that men of lawe ... fro that tyme forth shold plede in her moder tunge" (*OED*, s. v. Mother Tongue). Circa 1382 Wycliffe translated the Bible into English, in defiance of the Pope's orders. Not until 1534 did Luther follow his example by completing a translation into German. From now on we can say that God began to speak in the mother tongue. In 1525 Luther wrote of "die rechte mutter sprache", which he recommended for his new church (Kluge 1967, s. v. *Muttersprache*; Grimm & Grimm 1885, s.v. *Muttersprache*). But in his writings he still used Latin, and his *Tischreden* to his disciples are a glorious mixture of German and Latin.

Scandinavians, whose kings followed the example of the North German princes in adopting Lutheranism, quickly set translators to work on the Bible. From the 1520s translators were busy, and final versions of the complete Bible appeared; the Danish version of King Christern III in 1550, which was also introduced in Norway; the Swedish King Gustavus Vasa's Bible in 1541, and the Icelandic Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson's in 1584 (Haugen 1976: 323ff.). These versions gave the mother tongues of these respective countries a new official status as standard languages. Although Latin was still the language of the schools, the mother tongues had broken through and established themselves as the norms of discourse for the layman.

From this time on the term *modersmål* became a part of general Scandinavian usage. But as long as the average layman remained illiterate, the mother tongue was still a stepchild in relation to Latin. The most famous work of the seventeenth century in Denmark was Eleonora Christine's diary of 1685, known as *Jammersminde*. It was written in Danish, and she speaks of a woman who "hawver glemt noget aff sit *modermaal*" (has forgotten some of her mother tongue) elsewhere *modersmaal* (Skautrup 1953: 2, 277; Kristensen 1926: 68). In 1685 the first Danish grammar written in Danish appeared, whose author Peder Syv was a warm defender of the mother tongue (Skautrup 1953: 2, 285). Not until Ludvig Holberg began publishing his comedies in 1723 did Danish really get established as a literary language. In his jesting way he introduced them by writing: "Vort Danske Moders Maal i Aar en Moder bliver, Og med Comedie-Kunst sit første Foster giver" (Our Danish mother tongue this year becomes a mother, and as her first offspring gets the art of comedy) (*Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, s. v. *Modersmaal*). But Holberg's serious works were all in Latin.

As long as the average layman was still illiterate, the mother tongue remained a stepchild in relation to the universal Latin language. Not until the French

Revolution of the late eighteenth century did the demand arise for an educated laity. England had led the way by its flowering of an English-speaking literature from Chaucer's time, with Shakespeare and his contemporaries as the great example. Germany gradually was restored after the establishment of the Reformation. In Scandinavia the Napoleonic wars awakened uneasiness; Sweden and Denmark chose different sides, and Sweden usurped Denmark's long unquestioned leadership. Denmark lost its Swedish provinces, and in 1814 the European powers handed over Norway to Sweden in compensation for giving Finland to Russia. The Dano-German war of 1864 deprived Denmark of Schleswig-Holstein. In World War II Denmark also lost Iceland. Each of these countries was now on its own, and one consequence was that the standard language became an important symbol of nationhood.

While each section or province had its own speech, which had now come to be seen as a dialect, the standard languages were raised into symbols in a movement known as Romanticism.

In Germany Romanticism flourished already in the late eighteenth century, sometimes known as the *Sturm und Drang* period, which can be traced to the writings of Herder (1744–1803) on behalf of a specially German nationality. Great writers like Goethe (1749–1832) and Schiller (1759–1805) followed in his footsteps. In the early 1800s the most imminent threat was Napoleon, who had acquired dominance over much of Germany. There was as yet no united Germany, only such struggling states as Bavaria, Baden, Württemberg, Hannover, and Prussia. Austria was the strongest power through its leadership in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At this point the young voice of Max von Schenkendorf was heard in a hymn to the mother tongue which has long reverberated in the German-speaking world.¹ It was the special contribution to the movement of resistance to French domination which we can attribute to the Romantics, that they made the national symbol into a poem. His poems of resistance against the French "tyrant" were sung by soldiers at the front and even though his name is now largely forgotten, his poems have long held a prominent place in German anthologies. Schenkendorf (1783–1817) was a young nobleman born in Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia (Grosz 1912; Köhler 1915; Baehr 1888; Hagen 1883).² His early poetry is gentle and elegiac, romantic in tone; after he joined the army he wrote flaming verse against his enemy; his poems were set to music and sung in battle. His poem "Muttersprache" was printed in 1814 and held its position in German anthologies down to World War II; I cite two stanzas:³

Muttersprache, Mutterlaut,
wie so wonnesam, so traut!
Erstes Wort, das mir erschallet,
süszes, erstes Liebeswort,

erster Ton, den ich gelallet,
klingest ewig in mir fort.

Ach, wie trüb ist meinem Sinn,
wenn ich in der Fremde bin,
wenn ich fremde Zungen üben,
fremde Worte brauchen musz,
die ich nimmermehr kann lieben,
sie nicht klingen als ein Gruszl

[Oh mother tongue, oh mother sound,
How blissful, how beloved;
The first word to me reechoed,
The first sweet word of love,
The first tune I ever babbled,
It rings forever in my ear.

Alas, how sad at heart am I
When I in foreign lands reside,
When in foreign tongues I speak,
Have to use the foreign words
That I can never really love,
That do not ever reach my heart!]
(Author's translation)

Schenkendorf died young like so many of the poets of Romanticism, contrary to his Danish counterpart, the poet Grundtvig, who lived to ripe old age (1783–1872) (Grundtvig 1840–, 4: 201, 2, 162–163).⁴ The comparison with Schenkendorf is due to Grundtvig's having also written a famous poem about the mother tongue (1837). It begins as a poem about "mother": "Moders navn er en himmelsk lyd, så vide som bølgen blåner" (Mother's name is a heavenly sound as far as waves are blue). But most of the more than twenty stanzas begin with "modersmålet" (the mother tongue) and end with the refrain "Sødt i Lyst og sødt i Nød, sødt i Liv og sødt i Død, sødt i Eftermælet" (Sweet in joy and sweet in need, sweet in life and sweet in death, sweet in reminiscence). Grundtvig grows ecstatic in his praise of the mother tongue: not only is it "the cradle song that pleases us best of all"; it has a "heavenly sound"; it is the language of beauty, of our kings and heroic ancestors, and the "ribbon of roses that binds us all together". In the most classic and oft-quoted verse he proclaims:

Modersmaal er vort Hjertesprog,
Kun Iøs er al fremmed Tale.
Det alene i Mund og Bog
Kan vække et Folk af Dvale.

[The mother tongue is the language of our hearts,
All foreign tongues are but loose,
It alone on our lips and books
Can waken a people from their sleep.]
(Author's translation)

For Grundtvig it was a matter of moment to waken his people to the dangers that faced them. His poem served as a motto for his book *Skolen for Livet* (The School for Life), which contained his vigorous attack on the Danish Latin school. This had also been his school, and yet he now denounced it as a "school for death". It was then the only advanced school in Denmark, as elsewhere in Scandinavia and Germany. He declared that "it begins with letters and ends with book learning ... All letters are dead, though they be written with the fingers of angels and the pens of the stars, and all book learning is dead that is not tied to the reader's life." He directed his poem to Denmark's mothers, who "will understand his call for the right of life above that of theory". In time his agitation would lead to the founding of the folk high schools. In his youth Grundtvig had made three journeys to England to reveal the Nordic spirit in Anglo-Saxon literature. He became a pioneer in the study of *Beowulf*. In his *Nordisk Mytologi* (1832) he advanced a whole program of religious and social reform inspired by the old Germanic literature. He also produced Danish translations of the Latin *History of Denmark* by Saxo Grammaticus and of the Icelandic history of Norway by Snorri Sturluson known as *Heimskringla*. He had good reason to be uneasy about the future of Denmark; Danish had actually become the "ribbon of roses that binds us all together".

Romanticism soon won a foothold in Sweden as well, though it did not result in any hymns in honor of the mother tongue. The young Swedes of the early 1800's found their heroic models in the Old Icelandic sagas, which they called "Gothic" (from Swedish *Göta*land) (Götiska Förbundet; see Blanck 1918: 6 ff.; Wahlström 1907: xx; Geijer 1923–1931, 2: 35; Tegnér 1817: 197–198; cited in Haugen 1976: 433). Such poets as Erik Gustav Geijer (1783–1847) and Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846) were fervent advocates of Swedish letters, and they found abundant opportunity to express their love in romantic poems. When the teaching of Swedish became strong enough to support an organization in 1894, they adopted *Modersmålet* as the name of their subject until 1969, when *Modersmålsförbundet* became *Svenskläroförbundet*, and their subject became *Svensk (Ordbok över svenska språket; s. v. modersmål, v. 17, sp. 17.1252–1253)*.

In Norway Romanticism was indissolubly tied to the new state that came into being in 1814, when the union with Denmark was dissolved. The poet Henrik Wergeland (1808–1845) became the first advocate of a thoroughgoing nationalism that felt uneasy about Norway's use of Danish in its writing. In his essay *Om norsk Sprogreformation* (1835) (On Reformation of the Norwegian Language) he called for a Norwegian language (Wergeland, 1918–1940: 4, 2.172; cited in Hau-

gen 1966: 27). His appeal inspired two scholars to work out proposals: Knud Knudsen's for the stepwise Norwegianization of the established Danish and Ivar Aasen's for the creation of a radical new Norwegian norm. These resulted in the two Norwegian language forms now known as *Bokmål* (book language) and *Nynorsk* (New Norwegian). While the Bokmål people could adopt Grundtvig's poem, the Nynorsk adherents got their own hymn in a poem by Anders Reitan (1867):

Maalet hennar Mo'r me vil
aldri, aldri gløyma!
Kor det gjeng i Verdi til,
det vil Tunga gjøyma
Der me fekk i Moder-Arv
alt det betste, Hjartat tarv!
[Mother's tongue we will
Never, never forget:
Whatever happens in the world,
Our tongue will treasure it!
A heritage our mothers gave us
Of all the best our heart doth need!]
(Author's translation)

In conclusion, I would suggest as a reasonable hypothesis that the term "mother tongue" has passed through three phases. In the early Middle Ages it was a primarily pejorative term to describe the unlearned language of women and children. It was in contrast with the "father's language" which was Latin. We cannot be sure whether it arose in Latin or German, but its presence in the Romance languages suggests that it may have been Latin. There is no reason to place it farther back than 1100. It arose to describe the new contrast between men's and women's language.

A second stage came with the Renaissance and the Reformation, when the mother tongue became also the language of God, speaking through the Bible. Thanks to Wycliffe in England and Luther in Germany and their Scandinavian followers, the mother tongue became a force to be reckoned with. But it remained to a great degree limited to the religious sphere.

Not until the Romantic eighteenth hundreds did it become a concern of the heart that came home to every man and woman. After people like Dante, Shakespeare, and Holberg had created a public for the *vulgari eloquentia*, it became a point of honor to promote and care for the folk language in country after country. Then writers like Schenkendorf and Grundtvig could write lyrics to the mother tongue. Mother had been promoted from being a mere wet nurse to becoming the spokesman of God and finally a human being.

Notes

1. My attention was first drawn to Schenkendorf by Grace Jungkuntz (Mrs. Richard), Tacoma, Washington.
2. On German Romanticism and the mother tongue see Daube (1940) and Weisgerber (1957).
3. Schenkendorf, *Christliche Gedichte* 1814; also in his *Gedichte*, ed. Grosz (1912: 84-85) and Baehr (1888: 25).
4. On Grundtvig see Aronson (1960); Hay (1960); Nägele (1971).
5. *Den norske Folkeskole* 28th february 1867; cited in Haugen 1976: 436-437.

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Linguacentrism and language history

Nancy C. Dorian

In his determination to shake the speakers of various Indo-European languages from the complacency and smug self-assurance engendered by their political, economic, and social dominance, Benjamin Lee Whorf chose a method of presentation which emphasized to the greatest possible degree the differences in linguistic structure between Hopi, his chief non-Indo-European exemplar, and English (or the Standard Average European [SAE] which included English). The section headings in his paper on "The relation of habitual thought and behavior to language" (1956) demonstrate his method of diametric contrasts perfectly: "Plurality and numeration in SAE and Hopi"; "Nouns of physical quantity in SAE and Hopi"; "Phases of cycles in SAE and Hopi"; and so forth through six sets of oppositions.

Fishman (1985: 464) has pointed out two serious criticisms to which this habit, among others, has left Whorf open: that he had an oversimplistic view of the speech community as invariant; and that he had an equally rigid view of language structures as given and unmodifiable. At the same time Fishman, more than most, has given Whorf his due, recognizing in him a champion of multilingualism who "stress[ed] that ethnolinguistic communities have their unique ways of viewing the world" and argued "against the excessive pride of English monolinguals" (1985: 453).

Just how variable speech forms actually are has been demonstrated by dialectologists and sociolinguists; just how modifiable they are has been the concern of historical linguists most especially. In general we can say that when languages are in close contact over a long period of time, they prove remarkably permeable to one another and make considerable mutual accommodation. Although this seems an obvious matter, it proves to be something which requires special attention if the *extent* to which it is true is to be appreciated.

Where language-contact settings in our own time are concerned, two factors in particular tend to prevent full recognition of the reciprocal nature of language-contact influence. One is that a great many of the contact settings are also language-shift settings, in which one or another "major" language such as Spanish, English, or Russian is replacing a language of much lesser currency with a very much smaller population base. Since the shrinking language is showing considerable structural change under the pressure of the ongoing shift, and is also in many cases in danger of disappearing altogether, investigators working in such settings (the present writer included) expend nearly all of their time and energy investigating the condition of the imperiled language, something which is a vast un-