

Emanuele Banfi

(Accademia della Crusca; *Accademia Europaea*; Accademia Ambrosiana)

The role of the vernaculars in the linguistic history of Europe

I will start from the analysis of the term ‘vernacular’ in the field of Language Sciences and Historical Linguistics. I will therefore deal with the complex historical- and socio-linguistic framework of contemporary Europe, understood as a geolinguistic space that goes from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural chain. I will focus, in particular, on the transition phase between the end of High Middle Ages and the beginning of the Low Middle Ages: a crucial period in the formation of the modern linguistic Europe.

Eight different Indo-European linguistic groups form part of this framework, three of which are of considerable importance (the Romance languages, the Germanic languages and the Slavic languages); the others, substantially marginal (the Celtic languages, the Baltic languages), or represented by a single language, as is the case of Modern Greek and Albanian. Within the Indo-European framework the Indo-Iranian component in Europe is limited and represented by the numerous – and very dispersed – languages of the European Gypsy communities.

But within the European linguistic framework there are other linguistic groups of non-Indo-European tradition: in the Pyrenean area – and totally independent of other linguistic traditions – is the Basque language; the Uralic language family includes the Finno-Ugric varieties represented by Estonian, Finnish, Lappish dialects and the Samoyed enclave represented by Nenets (spoken in northern Russia, in the Pechora River region).

On the eastern borders of Europe there are also languages of the Turkish family: first of all Turkish spoken in Anatolian area; and then the Gagauso, spoken in Moldavia/Bessarabia; and then Chuvasch, Crimean Tatar, Karaim, spoken by Turkish Jewish ethnic groups; finally, the Kalmuk, a language of the Mongolian family spoken in a region of the lower Volga. The only Semitic language spoken within European borders is, today, Maltese.

Contemporary Europe is therefore characterized by an extraordinary mosaic of ethno-political realities which are expressed in its national States, in the strength of their literary languages, in the variety of its religious faiths (Christianity, Islam, Judaism; and also Buddhism among the Kalmuks of the Volga). The Greek and Roman cultural heritage, the spread of Christianity, the formation of the early medieval ‘barbarian’ cultures and of the Byzantine and medieval Greek culture were powerful founding elements of the linguistic history of Europe. Alongside these elements, and only partially, in the case of the ‘Islamized’ Spain and of the Siculo-maltese area, the Arab component also acted.

In this historical-linguistic process, the ‘vernaculars’ played a notable role as they progressively joined – in different ways in the different geolinguistic European sub-areas – medieval Latin, “language without people” and Byzantine-medieval Greek “*matrix-language*”, starting from the 9th-10th centuries, of Church Slavonic (or Paleo-Slavic; or Old Bulgarian), the great supranational language for the Slavic world.

In relation to the different geolinguistic areas of the European framework, I will show the process of formation of individual European national languages referring to the first documents written in their ‘vernaculars’, the bases of their official forms.