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From Language Continuum to Linguistic Mosaic: European Language Communities from the Feudal Period to the Age of Nationalism

This first section of the book examines how the world was constructed linguistically before the era of nationalism and then investigates how patterns of language practice and use altered fundamentally in the Modern era, as those engaged in nation building recognised that altering the language landscape was one of the key elements for the successful accomplishment of their ambitions. The focus in this and the next chapter is Europe, because this is the continent where the concept of the nation state first took root. In Chapter 4 there is a consideration of how language has contributed to nation building on other continents.

The ideal of nationalism, that cohesive national groups should strive to have their own state, was and remains immensely problematic as a way of organising groups politically. No European country naturally matches the ideal of congruence between territory and people, except perhaps Iceland, where a small and unified cultural and linguistic group inhabits the clearly defined territory of an island. In all other situations the congruence of nation and state has only been approximated through strategies to assimilate divergent elements.

There have been two quite different ways in which political elites have attempted to achieve such congruence. In the first model, which could be designated state nation, the polity came first. The limits of a kingdom were set as a dynasty acquired land through conquest, dowry and inheritance. Thereafter, as the concept of national group developed, rulers set out to mould the populations within their borders to be cohesive on a number of continua, including language. In the second model, a group that saw itself as a cultural and linguistic entity, or at least whose leaders saw it as such, sought to acquire territory, which would be exclusively for the group. This we could term the nation state.¹

However, as we shall see below, when we come to examine these two ways of working towards the congruence of nation and state, they reveal themselves
as not very different. The national group is largely a construction, whether it is created from groups that start out as very disparate in linguistic and cultural terms or from groups that are adjacent on a linguistic and cultural continuum.

2.1 Language in Medieval Europe

This point becomes clearer if we start by examining societal organisation before the advent of the state nation and the nation state. In the Medieval period, the linguistic landscape was both more local and more ‘international’ than today.

The vast majority of Europeans were settled agriculturalists. Singman (1999) and Fossier (1970) estimate that more than 90 per cent of the population were engaged in producing food. These farmers were tied to the land, and lived and died in the villages and hamlets where they were born. This was as true of free peasants and freeholders who were materially bound to the land as it was of serfs and villeins, whose freedom to move from their birthplace or marry out of their group was limited by their legal status. Assigned a place in a rigid social order with little social mobility, members of this class rarely ventured far unless they were forced to go on military campaign by their feudal lord or were among the few to go on pilgrimage.

Living in small groups and travelling little, most would have been monodialectal, or at the most bidialectal, a language repertoire that would have been enough to satisfy their communication needs in their very restricted networks. This seems a reasonable claim although it is difficult to substantiate from contemporary evidence. As Singman notes:

Although the peasantry constituted the largest part of the medieval population they remain its most elusive component. (Singman 1999: 99)

They were not literate and, unlike other classes such as the clergy and the nobility, have left no record of themselves and their lives. However, I would argue that it is legitimate to extrapolate from the anthropological knowledge of non-literate peasant farming cultures which persist in the present time and draw parallels to build a picture of medieval peasant communities. In addition there is also a legacy of folk stories. From these two sources we can surmise that these were highly contextual societies, where knowledge came through the oral tradition, where communication was face to face, where the main preoccupations of life were food, its consumption and production, sexuality, birth and death (Rietbergen 1998). When the stories of the medieval countryside were not occupied with these matters that conditioned daily life, then the subject matter was usually what the group feared and could not understand in the natural world, and that was legion:

Indeed fear in the face of this world which presented itself as chaotic and unruly was perhaps a central emotion in this Europe. (Rietbergen 1998: 166)