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Communication and Cognition: Multidisciplinary Perspectives

McMaster University

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EDITED BY

Michael D. Kliffer
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VII

Historical Linguistics

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IN THE SERVICE OF SOUND: OLD OCCITAN ORTHOGRAPHY AS PHONETIC TRANSCRIPTION

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Abstract. The creation of early Romance orthographies was very much aided by the fact that the Latin alphabet had been redefined as a system of phonetic transcription. There are three lines of evidence to support the idea that one of these early orthographies, that of the Old Occitan of Medieval France, was used to represent speech phonetically. The multilingual descort (cf. fn. 1 and 2) of Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, written in five different Romance languages, turns out to be just an Occitan transcription of these languages. The Occitan grammar of Guilhem Molinier says little about spelling and focuses almost entirely on pronunciation, implying that the orthography of the language is phonetic. French and Italian manuscripts often transliterate Old Occitan songs into these languages, showing that these orthographies also were freely used to transcribe other languages. The conclusion is that orthographic reform often presupposes the conversion of a known orthography into a system of phonetic transcription.

Keywords: Orthography, Occitan, Romance, Troubadours, Phonetics, Medieval.

Languages: Occitan, Latin, French, Italian, Gascon, Spanish, Portuguese

Anyone who has ever tried it knows how difficult it is to use the orthography of one language to write another. It should be nearly impossible to use an orthography reflecting the phonemic and even morphophonemic structure of one language to write another with an entirely different structure. The older European orthographies, such as those of Gaelic, English or French, have developed such a complicated relationship between letter and sound that there is rarely an unambiguous way to represent the words of another language, though the producers of the Berlitz guides might be applauded for their efforts. Yet it is an unavoidable conclusion that the spread of writing systems from one language to another could have happened in no other way. In the absence of a set of universal phonetic symbols, the only raw material available to the would-be adopter of a writing system is a writing system devised for another language, hopefully a related or similar language, to make the task less daunting. It was no doubt by imagining the troubles faced by the first person who tried to write French as it was actually pronounced using Latin orthography that led Roger Wright to propose that the anonymous 9th century inventor of the first orthographic system for French must have been some kind of linguistic genius (Wright 1982:129). I would like to argue in this paper that this is a mistaken impression created by our modern immersion in old European orthographies and that the relationship between letter and sound in new orthographies is always necessarily much simpler than it will later become, making them much more suitable tools for orthographic diffusion.

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We know virtually nothing about the creation of the orthographies of the earliest modern European languages, only that writings in the languages begin to appear at certain dates, which may have been well after the invention of the systems employed to write them. Setting aside Gothic and the epigraphic runic writings of the Germanic peoples in the late Roman Empire, writings appear first in Old Irish and English during the 7th century, and in French and German not until two centuries later. According to Wright, the immediate stimulus for the French system was probably their adoption of a phonetic pronunciation of liturgical Latin which Alcuin of York and his team of Irish monks had brought to France during the early 9th century. At some point after this, the French decided to stop trying to write their language as if it were still Latin and developed a new orthography that more closely reflected pronunciation. New orthographies for other vernacular languages then began to appear at an accelerating rate in following centuries, in every case by using the orthography of one language to write another. If this process were so difficult, it should not have occurred with such seeming ease.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the ease of orthographic diffusion is that represented by an innovator whose work is well documented, the troubadour Raimbaut de Vaqueiras. The first written instances of three Romance languages, Spanish/Portuguese[1], Gascon, and Genoese Italian, have all been independently traced to a particular song of his written in the 1190's, the multilingual descort[2] "Eras quan vei verdeyar." Probably composed as a playful stunt, each verse of this song is written in a different language, except for the last verse, which changes language every two lines. In addition to the previously unrecorded languages already mentioned, there are verses in Occitan and French. This song has astounded scholars for decades because here are found fully developed orthographic renditions of three languages whose written forms would not appear otherwise for a century or more. It makes Raimbaut seem to be some sort of linguistic genius such as that envisioned by Wright as the innovator of French orthography three centuries earlier.

I show elsewhere (Hagman 2006) that this may be no more than an illusion created by the workings of the philological process. If one goes back to the actual manuscript versions of the song upon which modern editors have based their editions, one finds that in most cases one does not find these languages represented in what would later become their proper orthographies, but rather in approximations using then current Occitan orthography. The fact is that all of the song compilations containing this song were assembled long after the song was composed and their compilers tended to take advantage of orthographic representations not available in Raimbaut's time. It seems that modern editors have gravitated to the corrected versions when deciding between alternate manuscript renditions, thus creating an illusion of orthographic brilliance on Raimbaut's part.

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[1] In some manuscripts, the language is more like Spanish; in others, more like Portuguese. The two were very similar at the time. In either case, it would be the first written instance.

[2] The descort was a troubadour song form in which there was a deliberate irregularity, usually a disagreement between the nature of the melody and the words of the text. In this case, the irregularity is purely a linguistic one within the text itself.

In Appendix 1 there is a translation and language breakdown of the song, followed by two versions. The first is that of Crescini (1923), a version which has become the basis of that used in all of the modern anthologies. The second is one I constructed by selecting the most frequently occurring words and phrases in the nine extant manuscript versions (Hagman 2006). Note that, while in Crescini's version it is easy to identify the Italian, French and Gascon verses by their orthographies, this is by no means the case in the reconstructed version, which replaces the distinctive characters and letter combinations of these languages with Occitan characters that would be pronounced in a similar way. If there were an original manuscript version of this song, it would have to have been much closer to the reconstructed version than to Crescini's. Though we may for this reason have to take away Raimbaut's laurels for the invention of three orthographies, we must still credit him with considerable phonetic talents for using the orthography of his own language to represent three others. On the other hand, he may have composed and transmitted the work orally and left it to the later manuscript compilers to decide on how the languages would be represented, in which case the credit for phonetic accomplishment would pass to them.

However, we may want to consider the possibility that the whole process might not have been as difficult as one might think. The Occitan orthography that Raimbaut and his compilers were using was in many ways closer to a transcription system than to what we usually think of as an orthography. Spelling in troubadour texts is notoriously chaotic with multiple possible spellings for even simple words. For example, in the glossary of the Anthology of the Provençal Troubadours the one-syllable word meaning "I want" is listed with twelve different spellings (*vuelh*, *vuell*, *vuoil*, *vuoill*, *volh*, *vuolh*, *voilh*, *vueill*, *voill*, *voil*, *vueilh*, *vuyll*), and that represents only the instances found in this small anthology of edited works (Hill & Bergen 1973:244). There were, in fact, no conventionalized spellings, and there were so many acceptable ways of spelling a word that the only practicable way one could have written the language would have been to sound out the words and transcribe them sound-by-sound. With no strict conventionalized association of letter with sound, however, one might easily transcribe different occurrences of a word slightly differently. In fact it is not at all unusual to find two occurrences of the same word spelled differently within the same sentences even in formal manuscripts. Clearly, orthographic inconsistency was not viewed as a problem, and one never finds the spelling of a word corrected.

One receives a very striking impression of the extent to which conventionalization of spelling was foreign to Old Occitan when one consults the grammar of the language written by Guilhem Molinier and published in 1356 (Anglade 1919). This was by far the most extensive description of the language in the Middle Ages and was quite advanced in grammatical thinking for its time. However, almost no advice is given on spelling, except for three small instances scattered about its 150 or so pages (Hagman 2010:33). Everywhere Molinier talks about the grammatical forms of the language and how they should be pronounced, not how they should be written.

There is throughout the work the implication that the writing of the language directly represents its pronunciation. When there is any doubt regarding the correct pronunciation or usage of a word, his advice is to follow the practice of the most famous troubadours of the past, something one could only know from available written texts. It follows from this that if the famous troubadours seem to have pronounced a word in a variety of ways all of them must be considered correct, even though the spelling in each case may have been selected by the manuscript compiler and not by the troubadour.

It is perhaps ironic that scholars of Old Occitan have been proud of pointing out that while other written languages like medieval French and Italian were fragmented into dialectal forms, the Occitan language remained remarkably consistent over the region where it was used. This is referred to as the unity of Old Occitan and is looked upon as a characteristic which set this language apart from the other literary languages of its time. However, it would be more accurate to say that the language is consistently chaotic, with a variability so severe that it is impossible to assign a particular writing to a particular region. Much of this impossibility of seeing any connection between variation and geographical region is due to the fact that our knowledge of the most important literary works is based on manuscripts produced a century or more later, most of them in a foreign country.

This very last point brings us to another important illustration of the phonetic nature of these early orthographies. In some cases, compilers of troubadour songs in Italy or France would not hesitate to transcribe the songs using the orthographic conventions of their own language, thus making it easier for the people of the region to pronounce them correctly. This means that in such cases a song might not look to us like Occitan at all, though it is clearly not French or Italian either. Appendix 2 has three versions of a popular troubadour song, one from an Occitan manuscript, one from a French manuscript, and one from an Italian manuscript. While the Occitan and Italian versions are quite similar, the French version is divergent, using the letter «*e*» (pronounced as schwa) where one would expect «*a*» (*loete*, *contre*, *oblide*) and the digraph «*ou*» where one would expect «*o*» (*oublide doucor*), as well as making a few word substitutions to avoid unfamiliar Occitan words (*envide m'en pren*, *queu nies de sen*). Both the French and Italian versions use «*s*» intervocalically where Occitan has «*z*» (*jausion, desirer*), since in these languages intervocalic «*s*» would be voiced anyway. Modern editors wisely eschew such bastardized transcriptions when preparing their editions, except in the rare case where such a version is the only surviving example and they have no choice but to use it. Such freedom in the rendition of foreign words by song transcribers indicates a very flexible attitude on the part of the users of early orthographies. In the absence of set spelling conventions, sound is primary, and it is the goal of a writer to produce a document that sounds right when it is read aloud, however this goal is achieved. This can only be accomplished by using letters and combinations of letters familiar to the reader, who would only be confused by the foreign orthographic practices of the region where the song was composed.

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If we are willing to look upon the early Romance writing systems as transcription systems, rather than as orthographies proper, it is easier to see how they could spread from one language to another. Unhindered by conventionalized spellings, one can sound out and write down a foreign language nearly as well as one can sound out and write down one's own, especially if it is a closely related language, though always within the limits imposed by the adapted Latin alphabet. The important thing is to have a writing system in the first place that has some consistent relationship between letter and sound.

I would argue that the only real genius in the creation of the early medieval orthographies may have been the inventor of phonetic Latin, whoever that might have been. We take it for granted that Latin is always pronounced as it is written, but this was not the case in the ancient world. For proof of this, we need only consider the orthographic uniformity of Imperial Latin and thus its failure to represent the extensive dialectal diversity which must have existed in the late Roman Empire.[3] Though we have no direct evidence, as is typical in the Dark Ages, the likely inventors of a phonetic means of pronunciation were the Irish monks ancestral to those who taught it at the court of Charlemagne. Since the Irish spoke a language dissimilar to Latin, and the Romance speakers they encountered pronounced Latin in such a variety of ways, they had no alternative but to read Latin writings letter-by-letter, pronouncing all the letters and pronouncing each letter the same way each time it occurred. What they would have accomplished by this process would have been the conversion of Latin orthography into a phonetic alphabet. Such an alphabet could then later be used to write their own language (Old Irish), then the language of the English (Old English), and then others could use it to develop writing systems for further Romance and Germanic languages. The break they made from Latin orthographic convention, probably as early as the 7th century, may be considered comparable to the one that occurred in Europe in the 19th century culminating in the International Phonetic Alphabet, variants of which have spawned writing systems for many of the previously unwritten languages of the world in the century or so following its invention.

Perhaps it is a truism to say that it is the function of alphabetic writing to reflect the distinctive sounds of speech and that it is just a matter of how well it does so. It is certainly also true that the written form of a language can take on a life of its own, spawn words and constructions not normally used in speech, and gradually become remote from pronunciation over time as changes in spoken usage fail to affect its written form. What is lost in the process is not only ease of learning and use, but also the potential for diffusion to other languages. From what we have seen here, we might want to consider the possibility that the phonetic alphabet may have been invented not once, but many times in the course of history, whenever the requirements of orthographic diffusion had created a strong need for it.

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[3] A concise summary of the diverse types of indirect evidence we have for dialect diversity in the spoken Latin of the Roman Empire can be found in Vulgar Latin (Herman & Wright 2000).

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(APPENDICES FOLLOW)

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APPENDIX 1

"Eras quan vey verdeyar" by Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, 1190's
Translation and Language Analysis, based on Linskill (1964)

Occitan

Now when I see the meadows and orchards and woods turn green, I would begin a "discord" on love, on whose account I am distraught, for a certain lady was wont to love me, but her heart has changed, and so I produce discordance in the rhymes, melodies and languages.

Genoese

I am one who has no happiness, nor shall I ever have it, either in April or in May, if I do not have it from my lady. Certain it is that in her own language I cannot describe her great beauty, which is fresher than the gladiolus flower, and that is why I shall not part from her.

French

Fair, sweet, dear lady, I give and commit myself to you. Never shall I know perfect bliss if I have not you and you me. You are a most treacherous enemy if I die through my good faith; yet I shall in no wise depart from my obedience to you.

Gascon

Lady, I surrender to you, for you are the kindest and fairest that ever was, and joyous and worthy, if only you were not so cruel to me. Your features are most fair and your complexion fresh and youthful. I am yours, and if I possessed you, nothing would be lacking to me.

Spanish/Portuguese

But I so fear your anger that I am in complete despair. For your sake I endure pain and torture, and my body is racked. At night, as I lie in my bed, I wake again and again; and since I gain no advantage for myself thereby, I have failed in my intent.

Occitan

Fair Knight, so precious to me is your noble sovereignty

Genoese

That each day I am dismayed. Ah me! What shall I do,

French

If she whom I cherish most slays me, I know not why?

Gascon

My lady, by the faith I owe you and by the head of Saint Quiteria,

Spanish/Portuguese

You have wrested my heart from me and stolen it with your most sweet discourse.

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EDITED TEXT AND RECONSTRUCTED TEXT

	Crescini (1923)		Hagman (2006)
1	Eras quan vey verdeyar	1	Eras quan vey verdeyar
2	pratz e vergiers e boscatges,	2	pratz e vergiers e boscatges,
3	voilh un descort comensar	3	vuelh un descort comensar
4	d’amor, per qu’ieu vauc aratges;	4	d’amor, per qu’ieu vauc aratges;
5	c’una domna·m sol amar,	5	q’una dona·m sol amar,
6	mas camjatz l’es sos coratges,	6	mas camjatz l’es sos coratges,
7	per qu’ieu fauc dezacordar	7	per qu’ieu fauc dezacordar
8	los motz e·ls sos e·ls lengatges.	8	los motz e·ls sos e·ls lenguatges.
9	Io son quel que ben non aio	9	Ieu so selh que ben non aio
10	ni jamai non l’averò,	10	ni enqueras non l’avero,
11	ni per april ni per maio,	11	ni per abril ni per maio,
12	si per madona non l’ò;	12	si per ma donna non l’o;
13	certo que en so lengaio	13	certo que en so lengaio
14	sa gran beutà dir non sò,	14	sa gran beutat dir non so,
15	çhu fresca qe flor de glaio,	15	plus fresques qe flor de glaio,
16	per qe no m·en partirò.	16	per que no m’en partiro.
17	Belle douce dame chiere,	17	Belha dousa dama chera,
18	a vos mi doin e m’otroi;	18	a vos mi don e m’autroy;
19	je n’avrai mes joi’ entiere	19	je non aurai mes joi’ entiera
20	si je n’ai vos e vos moi.	20	si no vos ai e vos moi.
21	mot estes male guerriere	21	Molt estes mala guerreya
22	si je muer par bone foi;	22	si je muer per bona foi;
23	mais ja par nulle maniere	23	e ja per nulha maneira
24	no·m partrai de vostre loi.	24	no·m partrai de vostre loi.
25	Dauna, io mi rent a bos,	25	Dauna, io mi rent a bos,
26	coar sotz la mes bon’e bera	26	quar es la mes bon’ e bera
27	q’anc hos, e gaillard’ e pros,	27	ancse es, e gaillard’ e pros,
28	ab que no·m hossetz tan hera.	28	ab que no·m fossetz tan fera.
29	mout abetz beras haissos	29	Mout abetz beras faissos
30	ab color hresqu’ e noera.	30	e color hresc’ e nouera.
31	boste son, e si·bs agos	31	Bostre son, e si·bs agos
32	no·m destrengora hiera.	32	no·m sofraisiera/destrengora fiera.
33	Mas tan temo vostro preito,	33	Mas tan temo uostre pleito,
34	todo·n son escarmentado.	34	todo·n soy escarmentado.
35	por vos ei pen’ e maltreito	35	Per vos ai pen’ e maltreito
36	e meo corpo lazerado:	36	e mei corpo lazerado:
37	la noit, can jaç’ en meu leito,	37	la neuyt, can jatz en meu leito,
38	so mochas vetz resperado;	38	soy mochas vetz resperado;
39	e car nonca m’aprofeito	39	por uos era profeito/e car nonca mi profeito
40	falid’ ei en meu cuidado.	40	falhit soy en mon cuidado
		40a	mais que falhir non cuide io.
41	Belhs cavaliers, tant es car	41	Belhs Cavaliers, tant es cars
42	lo vostr’ onratz senhoratges	42	lo uostr’ onratz senhoratges
43	que cada jorno m’esglaio.	43	que cada jorno m’esglaio.
44	oi mè lasso! que farò	44	Oi me lasso! Que faro
45	si cele que j’ai plus chiere	45	si sele que g’ey plus chera
46	me tue, ne sai por quoi?	46	me tua, no sai por quoi?
47	ma dauna, he que dey bos	47	Ma dauna, fe que dey a bos
48	ni peu cap santa Quitera,	48	ni peu cap santa Quitera,
49	mon corassô m’avetz treito	49	mon corasso m’avetz trayto
50	e, mot gen favlan, furtado.	50	e mout gen favlan furtado.

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APPENDIX 2

Versions of the song “Can vei la lauzeta mover” by Bernard de Ventadorn (1180’s)
(Akehurst 1995:154-156)

Troubadour Manuscript R – Provence 14th century

Can vei la lauzeta mover
De joi sas alas contra·l rai
Que s’oblida laissa·s chaser
Per la dossor c’al cor li vay,
Ai, las! Tal enveya m’en ve
De qui q’eu veya jauzion,
Meravilhas ai car desse
Lo cor de dezirier no·m fon.

Troubadour Manuscript W – France 13th century

Quan vei l’a loete mover
De joi ses alles contre al rai
Que s’oublide et laisse cader
Per la doucor qu’el cor li vai,
He! Tan granz envide m’en pren
De co qu’es si en jausion,
Meravill me qu’eu nies del sen
Et cor de desirier non fon.

Troubadour Manuscript G – Italy 14th century

Quan vei la laudeta mover
De joi sas alas contra·l rai
Per la dolçor q’el cor li vai
S’oblida e·s laisa cader,
Ha, las! Com grand enveia·m ve
De cui que veía jaucion,
Meraveillas ai, car dese
Lo cor de desirer no·m fon.

Translation

When I see the lark move
In joy its wings against the sun,
From the sweetness it feels in its heart
It forgets itself and lets itself fall,
Alas! What an envy I feel
Of him who feels so much happiness,
It’s a miracle that because of this
My heart does not melt from desire.

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