

Civilization (Sophomore) Lecture 6

Topic: Language and the development of the vernaculars.

The movement from medieval culture to the early modern culture has witnessed a shift in so many aspects. One of the most important aspects is related to language. Latin was spoken all over Europe for about 1600 years. The disintegration of Latin around the Sixteenth century did not take place at once. It remained the official language and existed side by side with the vernaculars; the colloquial languages spoken in the different European kingdoms. Latin fell apart into six languages known as the Romance languages. These are: French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Roman and Catalan (spoken in North Spain until today).

The first Grammar of any European language was put by Antonio de Nebrija, the Spanish linguist. He lived in the time of Ferdinand and Isabella and saw that the unification of Spain that they started had to be consolidated by unifying the language of the kingdom. He insisted that the Spaniards must speak one language.

This was also the time of the unification of England after “The War of the Roses”. Henry the Eighth won the war separated England from the RCC (Roman Catholic Church) and created the Anglican Church of which he was the head. He unified England, hence, under his temporal and ecclesiastical power. All the previous parts of the Western Roman Empire – the fall of which marks the beginning of the middle ages – started to be unified as kingdoms which later turned into the modern states. The formation of kingdoms marks the end of the middle ages and the beginning of the early modern age. This beginning witnessed the birth of the modern worldview with all its features like modern languages, kingdoms, science and the end of medieval social system. The Feudal system, the Great Chain of Being, Absolute monarchy started to be assigned to history, sometimes by rational argument and some other times by social upheavals.

English and German were heavily influenced by Latin but they are not Romance languages. They are Germanic languages which were greatly influenced by Latin. The fact that the British started to see themselves as part of a unified European culture is evidenced by Shakespeare’s return to Plutarch’s Lives of Great Men and his reliance on Norse, Greek and Latin mythology and tales for his plays. This is different from Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales which does not see Europe as a

unified continent or as sharing a unified identity. In Chaucer, religion is the source of unity. It drives the pilgrims to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury, England. The idea of one continent can also be witnessed in Italian paintings and maps. The creation of a distinct British identity which is part of the unified European identity yet is not totally dissolved into it took place in this age. This friction can still be witnessed today in the British political struggle over exiting or remaining in the European Union known as Brexit.

More to come!