Social Stratification and Language Distinctions in Early Modern Europe: A New Invention or Another Chapter in a Long History?

William E. Doody

Bill is currently a master's candidate in IUP's Department of History. He earned his BA in History and Spanish in 1998 from St. Vincent College, graduating with high honors. He then went on to complete his MAT in Social Studies Education at the University of Pittsburgh in 2000. Currently he teaches American History post-1865 at Indiana Area High School. His interests lie more in the fields of Global History, twentieth-century Spain, and Latin America. This paper was originally written for Dr. Lynn Botelho's "History of Early Modern Europe" class in the fall semester of 2001.

For a number of years, historians have identified the development of widespread and well-defined social orders and the resulting social stratification as one of the unique characteristics of Early Modern Europe. Differences and distinctions between these orders have been traced from the early modern period to the present, in areas such as pastimes and language. My focus is on the nature of language distinctions between various social orders and I argue that such distinctions are not the product of the early modern period, but are rather the result of a two millennia process. Language distinctions began in western Europe in the era of the Roman Republic and have continued to the present. This thesis refutes the accepted theory that whatever differences existed in Roman times disappeared and that the early modern societies created their own social distinctions.

The currently accepted theory of language distinctions based on social status is explained in Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Burke states that language is the most notable example of how elite and ordinary social groups pulled

away from each other during the early modern period. "This separation of upper-class and lower-class culture can be seen most clearly in those parts of Europe where their imitation of the court meant that the local upper classes literally spoke a different language from ordinary people."[1] He cites as examples of these social distinctions several regions in Europe, mostly in the north, but also as far south as France, where local elites spoke French and ordinary villagers continued to speak Occitan in the Languedoc region. Similarly in Wales, elites began to speak in English while the non-elites spoke Welsh.[2]

According to Burke, this language distinction based on social standing is a product of both cultural and social stratification. While the specific examples he presents focus on the later separation between Romance languages and regional dialects, the more general distinction was between "Latin, the language of the learned" – the language of choice for the select minority (the elite) – and the broader use of the vernacular by the majority of the population (the popular culture).[3] Both elite and ordinary members of society shared in popular culture around 1500. However, as time progressed, the elite society withdrew more and more from popular culture and used only their own distinctive cultural instruments.

Burke views the work of social anthropologist Robert Redfield, who developed a theory of the "great tradition" versus the "little tradition" as a "useful point of departure" for studying the distinctions between what Redfield terms "upper-class and lower-class culture". According to Redfield, the "great tradition", which was limited to only the elites, was the heritage of the classical tradition, scholasticism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment.[4] Burke, however, further develops Redfield's theory to make clear that there was a "crucial cultural difference in Early Modern Europe" that set it apart from earlier periods.[5] This uniqueness extended to other aspects of culture beyond language, but was most evident in that area. This description of the "great tradition," developed by Redfield and expanded by Burke, forms the basis for Burke's study of social distinction in the early modern period and early modern society in general.

Another contributor to the theory that the language distinctions of Early Modern Europe were unique and special is the historian Marc Bloch. Bloch goes so far as to say that early modern elites must be different because "there was no nobility" before the twelfth century.[6] Thus, following Bloch's argument, there could have been no differences in language during the Early Middle Ages or other similar periods because there was no difference in social order during the period before the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. Bloch's argument has been criticized heavily by those who contend that European nobility has had a much more extensive, more continuous, and earlier history.[7] As a result, that theory is not often presented to students. Still, it has had

a clear influence on theories of Burke and his supporters. Moreover, Burke's claim has been generally accepted and is widely circulated within college and university classrooms as another example of the importance and uniqueness of Early Modern Europe.

What Burke has neglected in his theory is the role of Latin throughout the history of Europe (at least until the 1700s) as the language of the elite and the ruling classes. In presenting the language distinctions of the early modern period as being "crucial cultural difference" unique to that era, he has shortchanged the early periods in European history and has ignored evidence to the contrary. What happens far too often in the study of modern history is that the medieval period is presented so unfavorably as to imply that it truly was a Dark Age. We now know better than to refer to that period as being without knowledge or higher level thinking. Scholarship is rapidly revising earlier, more negative perspectives of the European Middle Ages. Burke's theory on the "newness" of socio-linguistic stratification – the language division between different social groups – is another remnant of those negative perspectives that needs revising.

A more reasonable argument for the development of language separation among social groups is that while language distinction based on social order may have became more noticeable in the early modern period with the dramatic increase of regional dialects and minor Romance languages, it is a characteristic that always existed in European culture, since the time of the Romans. To prove this argument, it is necessary to first examine the language differences present in Roman society. Scholars generally have already accepted the existence of those differences. The connection that needs to be established is that between the Roman era and the early modern period. This link can be found by looking to a wider variety of sources than perhaps considered by Burke. In addition, by using a more open perspective on the culture of the medieval period than that demonstrated by many historians of modern Europe, the links can be highlighted even further.

There are several paths by which this Roman-modern connection might be shown to reach the period of the Renaissance. One possibility is to examine the role of the Catholic Church in preserving not just theological consciousness during the Middle Ages, but perhaps also a desire for language divisions within society. A second option is to consider the position of the monarchs of the medieval era as protectors of culture and learning. The third option is to explore the significance of cultural interaction with the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire during the late medieval period.

Even moving beyond the issue of the connection between the social distinctions of language in Rome and those in the modern era, one must also reexamine the nature of the social distinctions in the early modern period. What was the goal of these distinctions? Who was using Latin or a more elite form of the vernacular? For what

purpose was each language used? How were the social distinctions being enforced or maintained? These are questions that Burke does not suitably address.

Finally, there remains the significant question of why the issue of language distinction is important to historians today. In this regard, Burke was correct. The development of class, the separation between the social orders or estates, the modern notions of class warfare and division can be clearly seen in language. What this new approach shows, is that language distinction is a factor that has always been present in European society, rather than being an invention or a rediscovery on the part of early modern culture. While the distinctions may have intensified during the early modern period, they did not develop there.

Language distinctions according to social status appeared early in Roman civilization. This social distinction, known as *Latinitas*, or the Latinity of speech and the specialized style of high literature, was a prized characteristic in ancient Rome.[8] Throughout the history of Roman literature and oratory, purity of speech identified a writer or a speaker as a native of the language and gave him a special air of authority. This purity reached its pinnacle in the writings and rhetoric of Cicero, whose command of the language became the goal toward which later imitators would constantly strive. Thus, the social distinction in Rome was that of native versus non-native speakers of the language. While a non-native could perhaps enjoy many of the privileges of the Roman lifestyle, lack of proficiency with the language would forever set him apart from, and below, his counterparts.

While the Roman elites such as Cato and Cicero were polishing lofty phrases in refined classical Latin, the common citizens of the Republic, and later the Empire, were using a much different language. Very early on, Vulgar Latin appeared among the ordinary levels of society. While literature continued to be written in the classical form, everyday speech, especially among the uneducated and the increasing foreign population became further removed from the ideal of Cicero.

Indeed, some scholars who study the history of Latin and the Romance languages suggest that the vernacular languages may have begun their rise as early as the establishment of the first Roman colonies away from Italy – in places such as Spain and Northern Africa. At the very least, those scholars would argue, spoken vernacular languages were evident among non-elites in Roman colonies by the time of the empire. Nearly all language historians agree that the vernacular Romance languages were in use – even in Italy – by the fall of Rome in 476 AD. Meanwhile, Latin continued to be the language used by the elites and by the provincial government for official business.[9]

The *Latinitas* desired by the Roman aristocrats continued to be a prized possession even as the political power of the Roman Empire declined. As vernacular languages and Vulgar Latin became more and more commonplace, "the cultured man, the

educated man, was one who knew [classical] Latin, just as earlier in Rome…purity of speech" was desired.[10] Among the early Church Fathers, such as Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, there was a clear awareness that the language they used was distinct from that being used by many of the members of their church. Each of them, in various writings, distinguished between different forms of pronunciation of Latin – erudite (which they of course claimed) and rustic (which they attributed to uneducated people).[11] Thus, even as late in Roman history as the fourth century, the separation based on "purity of speech" continued to be applied for determining the "Latinity" of one's language. The question now becomes one of connecting the established distinctions present in the late stages of Rome with the distinctions found in the early modern period.

As Europe moved from Roman domination, through the conquest by Germanic tribes, and on into the medieval period, Latin continued to function as the dominant language of the higher orders in society, particularly within the Church and the government. As noted before, the Church Fathers continued to use Latin in their writings, even as their followers' language drifted further and further away from the language of Cicero. Jerome, for example, was so caught up in a desire to preserve classical Latin in his own writing that he wondered from time to time if he had become a follower of Cicero, rather than a follower of Christ.[12] Even though Church writings allowed the use of some "vulgarities" (as they referred to the linguistic devices of the ordinary people) in order to reach a broader audience, the hierarchy continued to insist on the primacy of Latin as the official working language of the Church. It was during this period, as vernacular languages and Vulgar Latin became further removed from the Latin of the Catholic Church, that there first arose a distinction between the language of the liturgy and the common language of the faithful. For Church Fathers, there was nothing at all problematic in this distinction; indeed, it served to reinforce the "elite" nature of the liturgy and the sacraments. Just as the Roman nobility used a more refined language than the commoners, the Roman liturgy would use a more noble language than the common faithful.[13]

Thus, the Church becomes one possible vehicle for transmitting Latin from the Roman period to the early modern period as a language of an elite class. In order to maintain the liturgy in the Latin language, it was necessary for clergy to have training in Latin. As the ordained became the "Second Estate" of the *Ancien Regime* under development in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, their use of Latin would be one of the defining characteristics of their social status. After 1500, when Burke notes an expansion of language distinction, which he considers a new development, the reality is that the social differentiation had merely broadened beyond one level of the elite to return to the "First Estate." As had always been the case, the non-elites continued to use a language that was not considered to be on par with that of their elite brethren.

Another possible avenue for the transmission of an elite language, in particular Latin, from Roman times to the early modern period was through the East. Many historians have described the Middle Ages as a period in which learning was "lost" in the West. That assertion has been increasingly disputed in recent years. It is widely accepted, however, that the passion for learning had not disappeared in the Byzantine Empire during the same period, although perhaps it had dimmed from time to time. That passion was intensified in a precursor to the Renaissance, an often-neglected period known as the Byzantine Renaissance. This "parallel" rebirth of culture began in the 1200s under the Emperor Michael Palaeologus and intensified after the Byzantine reconquest of Constantinople in 1261.[14] The reexamination during this period of the Greek and Roman heritage in the East eventually impacted the West after a sizeable migration of scholars to Italy. The exact time of this migration is not certain; Peter Burke has placed the date in the early 1400s, while other historians argue for an earlier period.[15]

What is certain is that this migration reintroduced the study of Greek language and literature into Italy at the very beginning of the Italian Renaissance. The technical expertise of the scholars certainly would have provided a missing element for the Europeans. However, it should not be thought that they arrived in an area that had no interest in academics. Burke admits that their coming to Italy "satisfied a demand which already existed."[16] Classical Greek had maintained an elite status in the Byzantine world throughout the European Middle Ages. When those scholars reintroduced Greek to the West sometime in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, a new generation of students was led once again to desire the status of an elite, learned order. While they chose Latin as the language for that new order, they included the study of Greek authors in translation as one of the hallmarks of their new status.

The two views already presented accept the notion that the aristocracy (save for the clergy or the nobility of Byzantium) had lost language distinction as one of the characteristics to set it apart from the ordinary citizens. Both of these options work well with Bloch's argument that Europe did not have a noble order prior to the 1100s. Still, they call into question the idea presented by Burke that the use of language distinction was a new and "crucial" development of the early modern era. The third option sets aside both Burke's and Bloch's theories on the nature of the elite and argues that it indeed had existed since the Roman period.

Let us return once again to the *Latinitas* of the late Roman era. Use of classical Latin had become the benchmark for judging the "Latinness" or nobility of a person. It was the lack of fluency in Latin that led the Germanic invaders to be characterized by historians of the period as "barbarians." The use of Latin remained a prized ability for the elite within the Church and away from it as well. Once the Roman Empire had

recognized the Christian Church and emperors had converted to Christianity, Latin and the Church became linked.

By the sixth century, once the Empire had fallen to internal decay and foreign invasions and classical Latin was being overtaken by Vulgar Latin and vernacular languages, joining the Christian Church was not simply a matter of professing a new faith. Christianity required a complete "*conversio* of lifestyle, culture, and manners of speech."[17] The conversion of the nobility and the desire of the slowly developing monarchies to imitate, and thus obtain for themselves, the grandeur of Rome, led to a renewed interest in learning Latin. Thus, palace, or court, schools were founded for the education of the elites. This education was limited to practical matters, chief among them the reading and speaking of Latin. Meanwhile, a more advanced training would be provided to members of the clergy.[18]

Although language scholars have wondered when people stopped speaking Latin, the reality is that the language never disappeared from the spectrum.[19] Throughout the seventh and eighth centuries, while the ordinary people of Europe abandoned Latin, there remained a "standardized written language, used by a very small literate *elite* and associated with the enormously prestigious name of Latin…."[20] This knowledge of Latin was maintained through the palace schools, and later the cathedral and monastic schools, that developed in the early medieval period. It would appear that the elite order which used Latin remained fairly large into the early ninth century. At that time, however, a decree from the Diet of Aachen ordered monastic schools closed to "outsiders". This development was clearly a setback to the continued development of an elite, aristocratic order.[21] Still, the period did see some progress in the linguistic development of the elite. Latin was refined and purified to eliminate some of the vulgarisms that had infiltrated it over the years during the ninth and tenth centuries, in the era known as the Carolingian Renaissance. While the use of classical Latin had declined, as the period of Cicero grew further removed, Latin remained the language of choice for the upper-levels of society.[22] Throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, the educated elite of Western Europe continued to use Latin. It also remained the official language of government in the early Middle Ages. Even beyond the year 1000, often seen as the beginning of a period of sharp decline, Latin was not confined only to the clergy, but to a much more widespread number of "upper groups" in medieval society.[23] This was possible, despite the earlier edict issued at Aachen in 817, because the monasteries had admitted much greater numbers of candidates to their monastic schools as members of the minor orders, which were now not limited to only those seeking priestly ordination.[24]

Burke noted as the crucial development of the 1500s, the elite turning away from the language of the ordinary people. In reality, this change can be traced to the twelfth century in some areas of southern Europe. In Italy for example, "Florentine

literati…strived to advance the vernacular…to rival classical Latin."[25] In northern Europe, the emphasis continued to be on the use of Latin for the higher orders, as seen in the development in Hamburg of "Latin schools" around 1281. "German schools" did not appear for nearly one hundred more years, and even then were subject to attempts at repression and restriction. Clearly, the northern perspective was that Latin was to remain the language of the educated class, while in southern Europe, more variation was tolerated.[26] As Burke relied primarily on sources and examples from northern Europe to support his claim that this developed only in the early modern period, it is easy to see how he might have missed two hundred years of such progress in the south.[27]

Whether it was in refined forms of the vernacular in the south or in Latin in the north, the development of the European educational system in the thirteenth century reestablished language as a defining characteristic of social status. The example of Florence may not be typical of all of Europe, but the situation in Hamburg certainly does match with other experiences. Indeed, many historians have cited this period of language development as the best example for proving the improvements made to the educational system: "The growth of the educational system from the thirteenth century is evident above all in the spread of the ability to read and write Latin…."[28]

By the end of the Middle Ages, classical (i.e. Latin) literature and rhetoric was found to be in good supply. The task of "recovering" the classical texts on a comprehensive basis and the "integration of classical rhetoric within contemporary education and practice," was deemed to have been completed by 1430.[29] At that point, scholars turned their attention to the Greek influences that were brought into the west by migrants from Byzantium. As early as the 1420s, Greek writers were being translated into Latin – not the vernacular – for the further development of intellectual and elite thought and culture within Europe. That process was completed by the sixteenth century.[30] This was occurring most rapidly in the south of Europe, at the same time as the beginning of the Italian Renaissance. As is well known, the Renaissance did not spread to northern Europe until some time later. This is due to a variety of reasons, upon which historians still do not agree. One of the most obvious, however, is that it was an area that had less exposure to Roman civilization before the medieval period. Again, this calls into question Burke's reliance on examples from the north to justify his claim of the lateness of social order distinctions in all of Europe.

By the fifteenth century, the rise of universities expanded the numbers of the educated elite beyond clerics and the hereditary nobility, the Church continued to emphasize the use of the Latin language. The influx of scholars from the Eastern Roman Empire also sparked a new interest in the Greek aspects of Europe's Greco-Roman heritage. These three forces combined to prompt the new emphasis on Latin as the language of the educated elite. But, as has been shown, it was not an invention on the

part of the early modern society; it was the strengthening of a characteristic that had always been present.

In Early Modern Europe, those distinctions between the language of the elite and the language of the common people continued to be cultivated and protected, just as had been done since Roman times. The language of the Catholic Church remained Latin. Indeed, the Council of Trent, organized in response to the Protestant Reformation, decreed that the liturgy must be carried out in Latin, with no use of the vernacular permitted. Even within Protestant circles, one of the interesting features of Luther's drive to reform the educational system was the preservation of Latin as one of the languages that was required for study.[31] Although the Protestant faiths permitted the translation of religious texts into the vernacular language, they used an elite form of the language of the people – texts were translated into French or German, not into one of the many regional or even village dialects.[32]

As universities multiplied in number and accepted more and more students, Latin continued to be the language of choice for instruction: "At the university, teaching and learning were in Latin, the symbol of the learned and special culture."[33] In fact, some schools even employed students as spies on their classmates, to make sure that they were not having secret conversations in languages other than Latin.[34] Thus, "Latinity remained a prized possession…of Protestant Reformers, Jesuit educators," and many other participants in early modern culture who were, or wished to be, considered among the elite.[35] By this time, "[it] was understood that Latin was already not the natural language of the people, it was only learned 'for reason or for art.'"[36] Latin would continue as the language of choice for the "learned aristocracy" of Europe, at least into the modern period.[37]

As seen here, the currently accepted theory of social stratification, especially as applied to language distinctions in Early Modern Europe, is flawed. The theory disregards evidence that clearly indicates the continued existence of an elite order throughout the medieval period, as well as evidence that such an order continued to rely on a language distinct from that of the ordinary people of western Europe. Furthermore, by the emphasis on northern Europe, where the Renaissance occurred much later, historians have overlooked earlier achievements in Italy and nearby areas.

Even if one were not to accept the evidence explaining the direct connection between Roman elites and the elite in Early Modern Europe, two additional possibilities have been presented here, the role of the Church and clergy and the role of the Byzantine Empire. What results in the most appealing explanation is a combination of all three options. The Roman elite as represented in the ruling class and the Catholic hierarchy continued through the Middle Ages into the early modern period. During that time, it maintained its reliance on Latin as its primary language. Meanwhile, the ordinary

citizens lost the use of Latin, replacing it with vernacular Romance languages and regional and village dialects. At the same time, the Church reinforced the use of Latin by requiring it as the language of the liturgy, thus making it the language of the clergy. Finally, the influence of migration from the east in the thirteenth century renewed interest in the Greco-Roman heritage of Europe and resulted in increased study of Greek and Latin by a larger group of people. At the end of the early modern era, the various vernacular languages replaced Latin as the language f the elites, while the commoners continued to use regional "vulgar" dialects.

What should now be clear is the need for a reexamination of the theories on social order, social stratification, and the role of language in Early Modern Europe. It is also necessary to explore new avenues of information in reopening this question. Sources from linguistics and language history should be used to supplement historical texts and thus develop a more complete picture of society during the early modern period. Historians should not shy away from using language and literature resources to develop theories. At the same time, the negative image of the medieval period, so carefully preserved and promoted for many years, needs to be reevaluated. By having a more positive perspective on the Middle Ages, historians will be able to see the early modern period not as an era of complete revolution, but one of further evolution in the gradual progression of European history from Roman times to the present.

NOTES

[1] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 272.
[2] Ibid., 272-73.
[3] Ibid., 23.
[4] Ibid., 23-24, 272.
[5] Ibid., 28.
[6] Qtd. in Hillay Zmora, *Monarchy, Aristocracy, and the State in Europe, 1300-1800* (London, 2001), 23.
[7] Zmora, *Monarchy*, 23.
[8] W. Martin Bloomer, *Latinity and Literary Society at Rome* (Philadelphia, 1997), 1.
[9] Giulano Bonfante, *The Origins of the Romance Languages*, ed. Lavissa Bonfante (Heidelberg, 1999), 141-42.
[10] Bloomer, *Latinity*, 1.
[11] Jozef Herman, "Spoken and Written Language" in Roger Wright, ed., *Latin and the Romance Languages in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1991), 34.
[12] Bloomer, *Latinity*, 2.
[13] Herman, "Spoken and Written Language," 34-36.
[14] Deno John Geanakoplos, *Constantinople and the West* (Madison, 1989), 3, n. 1.
[15] Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy, 1420-1540* (New York, 1972), 270; and Geanakoplos, *Constantinople*, 4-5.
[16] Burke, *Renaissance Italy*, 270.

[17] Markus Wriedt, "Continuity and Competition: Luther's call for educational reform in the light of medieval precedents," in Beat A. Kumin, ed., *Reformations Old and New: Essays on the socio-economic impact of religious change, c. 1470-1630* (Brookfield, VT, 1996), 172.

[18] Ibid.

[19] "A quelle époque a-t-on cessé de parler latin?" (my translation) Qtd. in Tore Janeson, "Language change and metalinguistic change," in Wright, *Latin and the Romance Languages*, 20.

[20] Italics added for emphasis. Janeson, "Language change and metalinguistic change," 20.

[21] Wriedt, "Continuity and Competition," 174.

[22] Rosamond McKitterick, "An Historian's Perspective," in Wright, *Latin and the Romance Languages*, 131.

[23] Ibid., 136, 141, 143.

[24] Wriedt, "Continuity and Competition," 172-74.

[25] Marvin B. Becker, *Medieval Italy: Constraints and Creativity* (Bloomington, 1981, 176).

[26] Wriedt, "Continuity and Competition,"176.

[27] Burke, *Popular Culture*, 272-73.

[28] Wriedt, "Continuity and Competition,"175.

[29] John Monfasani, "Humanism and Rhetoric" in *Language and Learning in Renaissance Italy* (Variorum, 1994), I:171-77.

[30] Ibid., I:179-82.

[31] Wriedt, "Continuity and Change," 178.

[32] Cf. Burke, *Popular Culture*, 272-73 on the use of the vernacular as an elite cultural marker.

[33] Burke, *Renaissance Italy*, 48.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Bloomer, 2.

[36] "Se tiene conciencia de que el latín no es ya lengua natural de un pueblo; ha de aprenderse «por razón o por arte»." (my translation), Avelina Carrera de la Red, *El «Problema de la Lengua» en el humanismo renacentista español*, (Valladolid, 1988), 56.

[37] "El cultivo del latín como instrumento cultural tendió a constituir…una aristocracia de letrados." (my translation), Ibid., 55.