

Looking for Interpreter Zero: The Strasbourg Oaths of February 842: an early assembly

Reading Nithard's (795-844) 'Histories or On the Dissensions of the Sons of Louis the Pious' we find an acknowledgement of multilingualism that sets the scene for future translators and interpreters.

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Whether or not Nithard himself had a hand in drafting these texts, his specification of the vernaculars emphasizes the importance of total intelligibility on this occasion, for the kings' audience consisted not just of magnates but of the whole plebs, that is, the lesser aristocracy as well.[\[1\]](#)

It is widely accepted that any historical record is marked by contingency: questions relating to whose story is being told, what sources were used and who the writers and readers are, come into play in the accounts that we have of past events. In the modern era we have to deal with the complexities of multiple voices, texts and writers. When it comes to considering the medieval era, there can be a paucity of information that makes it hard to get a clear sense of developments. If this is the case when it comes to broad political, economic or social history it is all the more so when it comes to understanding language use or the history of translation and interpreting. Looking for Interpreter Zero in the era before the Norman Conquest or the Crusades can seem unpromising. There is very little material on language use at that time, which is why the record of the Strasbourg Oaths in Nithard's (795-844) *Historiae* or *De dissensionibus filiorum Ludovici pii* (*Histories* or *On the Dissensions of the Sons of Louis the Pious*) is so significant. What we get from this history is an acknowledgment of multilingualism that sets the scene for future translators and interpreters.

The combination of contingency and scarce sources is neatly illustrated by the chance survival of this manuscript, an account of the conflicts involving three grandsons of Charlemagne - Charles the Bald, Louis the German and Lothar I - after the death of their father Louis the Pious in 840. Nithard was also a grandson of Charlemagne and a follower of Charles the Bald.

Nithard's Histories survived in a single early manuscript. But it is not hard to see why such ephemera, partly unintelligible outside their immediate historical context and often by 'unknown' authors, were not thought by learned monks of later generations to have educational value and were therefore rarely copied or preserved.[\[2\]](#)

Nithard's manuscript has given scholars an insider's account of the jostling for power and influence in the Carolingian Europe as well as the campaigns led by the three rivals for power in a system of partible inheritance that did not allow for one heir to the imperial throne. Charles the Bald joined forces with Louis the German against Lothar in the summer of 841. They won the Battle of Fontenoy of June 25th, 841 but Lothar would not concede defeat. The battle was a bloody one with a shockingly high loss of life; Louis's and Charles's followers had to be convinced to remain loyal as the war dragged on despite the victory at Fontenoy.[\[3\]](#) The kings decided to gather their forces in Strasbourg to renew their alliance at an event that has come to be known as the Strasbourg Oaths.

The need to preserve a united front made the meeting a significant one, which explains the 'extraordinary' attention Nithard gives to the three stages involved.[\[4\]](#) The kings made declarations to their followers. The need for clarity was such that they used each other's regional dialects: Charles the Bald addressed Louis the German's men in their language, Old High German (or Frankish) and Louis used regional Romance (or Proto French) when he addressed Charles's followers. Nithard uses the terms *lingua Teudisca* and *lingua Romana* for the two vernaculars. These languages were used again at the meeting when each king swore to help the other and never to negotiate separately with Lothar. Louis's oath was in the *lingua Romana*:

Pro Deo amur et pro christian poblo et nostro commun saluament, d'ist di in auant, in quant Deus sauir et

podir me dunat, si saluarai eo cist meon fradre Karlo, et in adiudha et in cadhuna cosa si cum om per dreit son fradra saluar dist, in o quid il mi altresī fazet. Et ab Ludher nul plaid nunquam prindrai qui meon uol cist meon fradre Karle in damno sit. [5]

He was followed by Charles, who took his oath in the *lingua Teudisca*:

In godes minna ind in thes christiānes folches ind unsēr bēdhero gehaltnissī, fon thesemo dage frammordes, sō fram sō mir got gewizci indi mahd furgibit, sō haldih thesan mīnan brudher, sōso man mit rehtu sīnan brudher scal, in thiū thaz er mig sō sama duo, indi mit Ludheren in nohheiniu thing ne gegango, the mīnan willon imo ce scadhēn werdhēn. [6]

In the third and final part of the proceedings, each army swore to withdraw support from their king if he were to break the agreement reached in Strasbourg. The threat of losing the support of their aristocratic supporters and soldiers was to make Charles and Louis honour their commitments to each other.

Such a gathering with its attendant oaths was not an unprecedented event. What is exceptional is the survival of Nithard's text – and the fact that it includes the vernacular versions of the oaths, “thus providing the earliest surviving example of Romance and one of the earliest passages of Frankish.” [7] This record has proved to be a rich source for historians, literary scholars and linguists. It can be read as very early evidence of the later kingdoms of France and Germany, a reading reinforced by the Treaty of Verdun of 843 that subdivided the Empire among the three brothers, with Louis obtaining East Francia (roughly the region east of the Rhine) and Charles, West Francia (the western two thirds of France). The text in Proto French is hailed as a linguistic milestone and cited in histories of French literature – including the one I still have from my lycée days: « De la même époque (842) date premier document que nous possédions sur la langue qui allait devenir la nôtre. [8]

The Strasbourg Oaths can also be read as part of a broader acknowledgement of linguistic differences. The Council of Tours decree of 813 stipulated that priests should preach sermons in *Romanam linguam* (rustic Romance language) or *Theodiscan* (Old German), as common people could not always understand the Church's classical Latin. The medieval coexistence of Latin and Romance and Old German is a matter of complex linguistic history well beyond the scope of this piece, but the Decree is at the very least an indication that there were obviously beginning to be problems in communication between priests and linguistically diverse congregations in the churches in the archdiocese of Tours in the second decade of the ninth century. [9]

When there are problems in communication there is often a need for translation and interpreting. The fact that different languages were used for the Strasbourg Oaths can be seen as an indication that the authorities were prepared to recognise that need. This effectively makes these texts the first official translation between “French” and “German”, a Rosetta stone of sorts, a European treaty before its time [10] - bearing the name of a place that is a hub of translation and interpreting today. Practical decisions had to be made in 842 as to the working languages to use. The two kings' territories included many regions, peoples and languages: the two vernaculars chosen were spoken by both kings who were thus able to address the attendance in both of them. The *lingua Teudisca* was spoken to the east of the Rhine whereas the choice of Proto French reflected the form of Romance spoken Charles's kingdom. We don't know if there were dozens or hundreds of participants, or if everyone followed the proceedings. What we do know is that the accidental survival of Nithard's manuscript has given us a source of both wonder and speculation.

With thanks to Margie Ferguson.

You can find all chapters of *Looking for Interpreter Zero* [here](#).

References

[1] Nelson, J.L. April 1985, Public Histories and Private History in the Work of Nithard *Speculum*, Vol. 60, No. 2 The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Medieval Academy of America. pp. 251-293, p. 266.

[2] *ibid* p. 283.

[3] Goldberg, E.J. 2006. *Struggle for Empire: Kingship and Conflict under Louis the German, 817-876*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London. P 105.

[4] Nelson. p. 266.

[5] www.liquisearch.com/oaths_of_s... “For the love of God and for Christendom and our common salvation, from this day onwards, as God will give me the wisdom and power, I shall protect this brother of mine [Charles](#), with aid or

anything else, as one ought to protect one's brother, so that he may do the same for me, and I shall never knowingly make any covenant with Lothair that would harm this brother of mine Charles.”

[6] www.liquisearch.com/oaths_of_s... “For the love of God and Christendom and the salvation of us both, from this day on, as God will give me the wisdom and power, I shall protect this brother of mine, as one ought to protect one's brother, so that he may do the same for me, and I shall never go along with Lothair in anything that, by my will, would harm him.”

[7] Goldberg. p. 105

[8] Brunel, P. Ed. 1972. Histoire de la littérature française. Bordas. Paris, Bruxelles, Montréal. p. 9. « The first document we have on what was to become our language dates back to the same period (842).” (My translation)

[9] McKitterick, R. 1991 in Ed. Wright, R. Latin and Romance: an historians’ perspective. In Latin and the Romance Languages in the Early Middle Ages. Routledge. London and New York.

[10] Schnelzauer-Sontag, H. Strasbourg – a Hub of Translators and Interpreters. p. 2
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