

2016

# Þjóðarspegilinn

Ráðstefna í félagsvísindum XVII

## The care for the mother tongue in mediaeval Iceland and beyond

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Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XVII. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2016

Ritrýnd grein

Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands

ISBN 978-9935-424-21-1

ISSN 1670-8725



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

# The care for the mother tongue in mediaeval Iceland and beyond

Matteo Tarsi

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In a Festschrift article from 1998, Sverrir Tómasson deals with the care for the Icelandic language (Icel. *málvöndun*) in the Middle Ages. In his short survey, Sverrir pinpoints some eminent examples of what he considers to be demonstrations of the phenomenon in the Middle Ages. His analysis focuses on few works, which nevertheless are illustrative for the Icelandic literary history *lato sensu*, the *Icelandic Homily Book*, the *First and Third Grammatical Treatises*, the Old Norse translation of Honorius Augustodunensis' *Elucidarius*, *Lárentius saga byskups*. The main aim of this article is to widen the corpus of examples given by Sverrir and to subsequently try to link this phenomenon to mainland Europe's literary tradition in the Middle Ages. In order to do so, some parallels will be offered from other, perhaps more "central", European literatures, i.e. English, German, Danish and Romance (Italy). It will be argued that the care for the mother tongue in the Middle Ages, as Sverrir describes it for what concerns Iceland, was a quite widespread phenomenon, as it was intimately connected with the flourishing of literature in the vernacular languages. The argumentations will first focus on Iceland (§ 2), and will then sail across the Ocean towards Europe (§ 3), where it will first touch upon the Germanic literary tradition (§ 3.1) and then the Romance (§ 3.2), where the written production in Italy will be taken as an illustrative example. Finally, the conclusions will be presented in a separate paragraph (§ 4).

## 2. In Iceland

In Icelandic there are three terms which are intimately related but should be nevertheless kept separated: *málvöndun*, *málrækt* and *málbreinsun*. The first two, *málvöndun* and *málrækt*, describe the care for one's own language with no ideologico-political hues, the semantic difference between the two lying in the fact that whereas *málrækt* implies a somewhat more active stand towards the language, e.g. by means of implementation of vocabulary (elaboration of function in Haugen's (1972, 292) phrase), *málvöndun* simply denotes the general process of care for the language. *Málbreinsun* is instead an ideologically and politically coloured process, being it what is usually called purism in English. The object of the following paragraphs is therefore just what in Icelandic goes under the labels *málrækt* and *málvöndun*, i.e. the care for the mother tongue, being any argumentation on purism in the Middle Ages largely anachronistic (cf. also Kristján Árnason 2004, 396-397).

In Icelandic linguistic scholarship, it has been seldom attempted to directly account for linguistic care in the Middle Ages. These attempts are, to the best of my knowledge, chiefly two: Árni Böðvarsson's (1964) article on the Icelanders' attitude

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a conference paper (*Enn um málvöndun á miðöldum*) given at the seventeenth edition of *Þjóðarspejillinn*, University of Iceland, Reykjavík on October 28<sup>th</sup> 2016.

towards their mother tongue and Sverrir Tómasson's (1998) above-mentioned Festschrift article. However, if one surveys the scholarly production revolving around mediaeval Icelandic, one stumbles not seldom upon single examples of the phenomenon (e.g. Kristján Árnason 2004, 382 and 395-396; Leonard and Kristján Árnason 2011, 91-92) or general accounts of it (e.g. Ottosson 2005, 1997-1998). The reason for such a lack of focus, being the phenomenon far from uninteresting, appears to be driven by two synergetic factors, namely the difficulty in isolating single, undisputable examples; and the pervasive nature of the phenomenon itself, being it naturally interwoven in the literary tradition in the vernacular (cf. *infra*).

As previously mentioned, Sverrir Tómasson's article offers a selection of mediaeval examples of care for the Icelandic language from the following works: the *Icelandic Homily Book*, the *First* and *Third Grammatical Treatises*, the Old Norse translation of the *Elucidarius* and *Lárentius saga byskups*. Although Sverrir's analysis greatly focuses on the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, his choice of significant literary works, in accordance with Árni Böðvarsson's (1964) survey, is important in the present discussion because it gives an idea of where to look for such an attitude, namely in all the extant Old Icelandic literary production, from the religious texts to those of encyclopedic and/or "scholarly" nature, viz. treatises, from the native narratives to those that have been translated and so forth. Kristján Árnason (2004, 395-396) names in this respect one more example, namely *Alexanders saga*, i.e. the Icelandic translation of Walter of Châtillon's Latin-written epic *Alexandreis*. Moreover, in the same article, Kristján (2004, 382-383) notices that a precise attitude towards the Icelandic language also emerges in Snorri Sturluson's prologue to his *Edda*, namely that the Nordic people originally came from Asia, more specifically Troy (cf. Snorri Sturluson 1975, 6-9). Although certainly debatable, Snorri's mythological account is nevertheless significant in that there was a precise mythology about the origins of the Nordic people with quite striking similarities with more than one ethnogenetic myth (cf. Gunnar Harðarson 2016, 48-49), among which is the Latin (cf. Virgil's *Aeneid*, protasis).

The interplay between Classical and native, i.e. Nordic, cultural backgrounds, and the native response to the foreign, chiefly the Classical, i.e. Latin, influence is therefore to be seen as having triggered the whole process of care for the Icelandic language, when this is seen as that process which is directed at elaborating an external cultural, and therefore linguistic, influence in order for the recipient language to adapt that influence to its own cultural, and therefore linguistic, structures. That said it is in order to go on to gather some more examples of the care for the Icelandic language in the Icelandic Middle Ages. These appear to fall under, but are not limited to, three categories: interlinear glosses and intratextual translations of Latin formulas, technical terminology and general comments about the mother tongue.

The first category, interlinear glosses and intratextual translations of Latin sentences and formulas, is well represented by religious texts. Here, examples will be taken from the *Icelandic Homily Book* (ca. 1200, ed. de Leeuw van Weenen 1993) and the Old Norse translation of the *Transitus Mariae* (14th c., ed. Widding and Bekker-Nielsen 1961). In the *Icelandic Homily Book* there appear in several *loci* interlinear glosses. These do not fall under a single typology. However, there is a number of them which appear to translate the actual content of the text either "culturally" or just linguistically, in which case they somewhat overlap, at least theoretically, with the intratextual translations with which it will be dealt later on. Interlinear glosses appear in, but are not restricted to, the following *loci*: 35v8; 68r13, 15,16-17, 18-19, 21, 21-22, 24, 31; 68v2, 3, 6, 6-7, 8-9, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21. As an exemplification, it is in order to quote the glosses on fol. 35v8 and 68r21 and 21, 22 (normalised transcription according to *Ísl.Hóm93*, glosses marked in square brackets):

(35v8) Mun eigi þú draga Leviþan [miðgarðarormur] á öngli eða bora kinnur hans með baugi.

(68r21) filium eius unicum dominum nostrum [son hans eingetinn drottinn vorn].

(68r21-22) Qui conceptus est de spiritu sancto. Natus ex Maria virgine [þann er getinn er af anda helgum, borinn frá Maríu meyjju].

Whereas the examples on fol. 68r are interlinear translations of Latin in the main text, the gloss on fol. 35v8 is possibly of a quite different nature in that it does not only give a translation of an exotic term, Leviathan, but it also, and most importantly, maps the Biblical monster onto the local set of mythological beliefs by juxtaposing the Leviathan to the Midgard Serpent. Although Marchand (1975, 333) puts little stress on this *interpretatio norræna*, it seems reasonable to consider it quite a remarkable example of cultural adaptation (cf. *infra*).

Another kind of translations appear in the *Icelandic Homily Book*, namely direct in-text translations of Latin sentences and formulas. These are in, but are not restricted to, the following *loci*: 73v33-34 and 35-36; 91v27-28. As an example, here follows the text on fol. 91v:

(91v27-28) Síðan biðjum vér og mælum: Santificetur nomen tuum. Helgist nafn þitt.

In the Old Norse translation of the *Transitus Mariæ* just the latter typology appears, often introduced by the formula *hvað svo norrænast* or *það norrænast svo* ‘which/it is translated in Norse as follows’, as in the following examples (ed. Widding and Bekker-Nielsen 1961, page numbers in brackets):

(p. 330) Deo gracias. Það norænast sua. lof ok dyrd heidr ok æra vegur ok virðing se almattigum gudi.

(p. 331) Sicut liliū inter spinas sic amica mea inter filias. Huad sua norrænast. Suo sem lilia jmillum þyrna. suo er min vnnasta millum dætra jerusalem.

Once again, the translator appears to operate in order to make the translation somewhat more in accordance with the target, i.e. his own, language. As Gideon Toury (1995) duly notes, every translation is a target-oriented process. This of course implies that the recipient culture/language adapts the original text to its own frame of reference, and this holds both for the previously mentioned Leviathan/Midgard Serpent example as well as e.g. for the rendering of Lat. *gratia* in the Old Norse translation of the *Transitus Mariæ*.

The second category, technical terminology, is well represented by the so-called *Grammatical Treatises*, in particular by the *First*, *Second* and *Third*, where the authors had to come up with viable, i.e. target-oriented (culturally and linguistically), solutions for describing the Icelandic linguistic scenario by mediating between the mediaeval European linguistic tradition and the vernacular in which they were writing their accounts.

According to Raschellà (2004, 6-8), the Icelandic endogenous linguistic terminology, as it appears in the *Grammatical Treatises*, seems to belong to two different, albeit somewhat complementary, traditions: native and foreign. In fact — Raschellà (2004, 6-8) argues — Icelanders, as all the Germanic populations, had, before taking up the Latin script, written for centuries using the runic script, activity for which they must have had some sort of technical terminology, albeit rudimentary. This is best seen in the core of the mediaeval Icelandic linguistic terminology, e.g. in OIc. *stafr* ‘letter’ (literally

‘(wooden) stick’, cf. also OE *bōcstaf*, OHG *buohstab* and OIc. *bókstaf*), which would testify to epigraphic writing practices which cannot be otherwise interpreted than runic inscriptions (see Green 1998, 255-257 and Raschellà 2004, 8-10).

It is not the aim of the present paper that of discussing the contribution of the native grammatical terminological tradition on the one side and the learned, foreign, viz. Latin, tradition on the other to the oldest examples of linguistic discussion in Old Icelandic (see in this respect e.g. Raschellà 1998 and 2004). However, it must be noted that the fact that a specific terminological tradition exists in Old Icelandic testifies to the process of acquisition and naturalisation of a foreign terminological tradition on the one side, and on the other to the adaptation of an already-extant one for new purposes. These processes are synergetic in that they both aim at the constitution of a large-scale discussion on the relative subject, here linguistics, on which little, if anything, had been previously written. With regard to the present example, the care for the Icelandic language is mirrored in the acclimatisation of common European mediaeval theories to the autochthone world. Far from being an isolated example (cf. *infra*), this kind of literary production in Iceland is proof of how well mediaeval linguistic theory was known even in such a peripheral region, which was far from being intellectually isolated.

The third and last category comprises comments about the language itself as an object of cultural heritage, and therefore encompasses also expressions such as *vor tunga* ‘our language’, as opposed to the language of foreign populations. As an example, the following few lines of text from the *Konungs skuggsjá* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1920, normalised to modern orthography, page numbers in brackets) might be quoted:

(pp. 9-10) En þó að ég ræði nú flest um lögmál, þá verður engi maður til fulls vitur nema hann kunni góða skilning og góðan hátt á öllum síðum þar sem hann verður staddur. Og ef þú vilt verða fullkominn í fróðleik, þá nemdu allar mállýskur en allra helst latínu og valsku, því að þær tungur ganga víðast. En þó týndu eigi að heldur þinni tungu.

The *Konungs skuggsjá* is actually a Norwegian didactic treatise composed in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century for the son of king Hákon IV of Norway, Magnús, and is build up as a dialogue between father and son. In general, the work testifies to the fact that a particular learned literary genre, the *speculum principis*, had reached the North by that time. For what concerns our discourse here though, it is perhaps most important to notice that in the text quoted above it is stated that, although it is important to learn the most widespread languages, i.e. Latin and French, in order to become well-learned and wise, “you should not lose your own language”, from which it follows that one should have care for his own language.

### 3. Elsewhere in Europe

The Icelandic examples of the care for the mother tongue are not isolated in the wider context of European mediaeval culture, as Iceland was, as a matter of facts, far from being a culturally secluded community. The sole fact that echoes of European learned scholarship reverberate in the Icelandic mediaeval literary production should suffice as general proof of a “culturally globalised” Europe, in which Latin scholarship and literary trends somewhat freely circulated. This is not to diminish the merits of the Icelandic literary production by seeing it as a mere imitation of the continental production, but to inscribe it in the frame of reference it belongs to, viz. the European (see also Gísli Sigurðsson 2002, 22-33 and *passim*; Gottskálk Jensson 2004, 155).

If a line of demarcation is to be set with respect to the phenomenon under discussion that should perhaps be focused on the different periods in which the

literatures in the vernacular make their appearance. A quite sharp distinction between a Germanic and a Romance world will be adopted in this paragraph, this implying that there was a radically different weight Latin had in the two cultural worlds. This translates into two different approaches to the production in the vernacular, viz. in the elevation of the vernacular as a language of culture. These might schematically be described as follows: In the Germanic world there was no continuous tradition between the Latin production of the Classical Antiquity and the beginning of that in the vernacular, this resulting in a relatively higher degree of production of literary works in the vernacular from an earlier period. As a matter of facts, the Latin scholarship had to be imported, acquired and “digested” by the Germanic languages, and this translates into the massive adaptation and naturalisation it had to go through for it to be correctly understood and divulged.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in the Romance world, Latin was the ancestor of the actual vernaculars. This means that there was an unbroken tradition of literature in Latin, which entails that Latin had a much higher culturally-specific weight, i.e. it had a much higher sociolinguistic status than the local vernaculars. In a nutshell, this is just another manifestation of the well-known centre-periphery dichotomy, although probably the picture is not so clear-cut as other factors also come into play (cf. the discussion about Denmark in § 3.1).

### 3.1 In the Germanic world: England, Germany and Denmark

In this paragraph there will be given a concise overview of the phenomenon under discussion in three different Germanic environments: England, Germany and Denmark. These have been chosen for they show the phenomenon at slightly different times. The discussion will first deal with England, moving then to Germany, where the *Abrogans*, a Latin-Old High German glossary, will be briefly discussed, and, finally, it will touch upon Denmark, where Latin did not start to give way to the vernacular until the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century.

In England, the production in the vernacular is first to be linked to Alfred the Great in the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century for his important translations from Latin, chiefly Boethius’ *De consolazione philosophiæ* and Pope Gregory the Great’s *Cura pastoralis* (see Godden 1992, 513). These translations were part of a specific cultural programme with which Alfred laid the ground for the popularisation of the important message of the Church. In his works, the care for the mother tongue, viz. the adaptation of ideas and terminology in Latin to the West Saxon vernacular, is evident, as it is the methodology used. Alfred in fact states in the preface to the *Cura Pastoralis* (CP, 7) that he translates the Latin text *hwilum word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgiete* ‘sometimes word for word, sometimes sense

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<sup>2</sup> The relatively higher and earlier degree of literary production in the vernacular mentioned above, and the fact that in Iceland Latin appears to have been little used as a written language in the Middle Ages, have given rise to the layman’s opinion that Iceland was somewhat different in this respect, namely that the literary production in the vernacular was then held in such a high esteem that it was, right from the very beginning, untied to the tradition of Latin scholarship. Of course, this is a remnant of Romantic rhetoric and cannot be how things went. From a theoretical point of view, it is highly undesirable to have such an exception if one has to come up with a general theory for a certain field of knowledge. Here, the theory has to come up with an explanation of the, *nota bene* gradual, shift from Latin to the various vernaculars as languages of culture, and this happened in the whole of Western Europe in the period ranging throughout the whole Middle Ages. The fact that the former “barbaric” populations (Irish, English, Norse, German etc.) appear as having developed a literature in the vernacular relatively earlier than the Neo-Latin populations is best explained by a congeries of factors among which are the Christianisation and the consequent need of spreading the Sacred Word, and the different weight Latin had in different cultural environments. However, it should not be forgotten that, as Gottskålk Jenson (2004) convincingly argues, Latin was undoubtedly used by the Icelandic Church in the Middle Ages, and this fits in fact nicely in the bigger picture of mediaeval Christianity and scholarship (cf. also Walter 1971; Sverrir Tómasson 1988, 35-44; and Gísli Sigurðsson 2002, 22-33).

for sense'. The awareness of how Latin and Old English were to a great extent different and that the language of the translation needed therefore to be carefully crafted and that moreover it should not be a mere transposition of the Latin text, clearly emerges a century later, in the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in the writings of Ælfric, especially in his translation of the *Genesis* (see Godden 1992, 517). As an example of the care for the mother tongue, I will here limit myself to Ælfric's *Grammar*, for, as Ælfric puts it, *ðe stæfcræft is seo cæg, ðe ðæra boca andgīt unlicð* 'grammar is the key that discloses the understanding of books'.

Ælfric's *Grammar* is the first example of a Latin grammar written in vernacular (cf. though Raschellà and Ripa 1991, 8 fn. 2). Ælfric's intent was to provide beginners in Latin with a basic textbook where the vernacular would serve as a natural medium with which they would come acquainted with the study of a, as a matter of facts, foreign language.<sup>3</sup> Although the vernacular is here just a medium, it is nevertheless remarkable that it should be used for writing such a book, namely because Latin was the undisputed language of scholarship, although it was Ælfric's intention to facilitate Latin learning through the mother tongue. Ælfric's programmatic intent was due to the poor state in which the English clergy went through in his time (cf. also that Alfred, a century before Ælfric, notices a similar state of things in his translation of the *Cura Pastoralis* (cf. *CP*, 5-7). Side by side with the pedagogical importance of Ælfric's *Grammar* lies the care for the mother tongue. In the preface, Ælfric, who is lucidly aware of the difficulties that the intrinsic difference of the two tongues might cause, states that his translation would hopefully give to the user an insight not just into Latin, but also into the vernacular. This is in fact mirrored in the text, for the vernacular is often used as a basis for comparison with Latin, in order to make the reader aware of the difference between the two languages, so that this acquired knowledge would serve for the purposes of translation (see Raschellà and Ripa 1991, 26-33).

The use of the vernacular (Old High German) in Germany dates back to Charlemagne, i.e. to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In this very brief account of the care for the mother tongue in Old High German I will limit myself to one meaningful example: the *Abrogans* (8<sup>th</sup> c.).

The so-called *Abrogans*, or *German Abrogans*, is a Latin-Old High German glossary and it is considered to be the oldest preserved document in Old High German, as it is was supposedly composed during the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The name by which this important document is known is taken from the first word in the glossary, *abrogans*, of which an Old High German translation is given, *dbeomodi*. Its importance for the present discussion is clear, as such glossaries, of which the *Abrogans* is just an example, another one being Ælfric's *Glossary*, testify to the creation of a bridge between Latin and the vernacular. In fact, thanks to the translation of Latin texts into the vernacular, and therefore with the enlargement and development of its lexicon, the vernacular was, if not on a par with Latin, at least capable to convey the same meanings, thing which is of extreme significance for the development of its expressive possibilities, which lay the ground for the expansion of the literary production.

In Denmark the vernacular makes its appearance relatively late. The first document in the vernacular, the *Skånske Lov*, is from the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, whereas a production in Latin is known from the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Skautrup 1944, 198-215). At the dawn of the literary production in the vernacular, Danish was pent to very few literary genres, among which are the religious and the bureaucratic, i.e. laws and diplomata (for an overview see Wollin 2002, 1006-1011). According to Skautrup

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Dante's words in the *Convivio* (Alighieri 2014, 182) where he in fact states that the vernacular was the medium with which he was introduced to Latin.

(1947, 29), it was in fact in the bureaucratic sphere that Danish could fight its way against Latin (cf. also Wollin 2002, 1006-1007). Skautrup (1947, 29; cf. also Widmark 2005, 1214-1215) mentions the fact that, whereas in north-western Europe literacy in the vernacular appears to be more developed side by side with Latin, in the South an opposite situation is observable. In between these two groups lies Denmark. The care for the mother tongue in Denmark does not emerge in a clear-cut fashion as it does elsewhere in the Germanic world. The reasons which triggered such a state of things are complex and it will not be dealt with them here. It should be noticed however that no biblical literature is known from Denmark in the earliest period (cf. Wollin 2002, 1009), which also means that the main source for the development of the mother tongue, i.e. the adaptation of God's message, was missing. This played most surely a primary role in the late establishment of the Danish vernacular as a language of culture (cf. also the situation in Sweden, see e.g. Wollin 2002 and 2005).

### 3.2 In the Romance world: examples from Italy - from the *Appendix Probi* to Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and *Convivio*

As previously stated, in the Romance world Latin had a much higher status as it was from Latin that the local vernaculars developed. Latin was the language of culture, literacy, liturgy and scholarship and was therefore the language that had to be "protected" from the overwhelming influence of the local vernaculars, which was seen as threatening the crystalline nature of Latin. This attitude clearly emerges even before the fall of the Western Roman Empire, namely in the so-called *Appendix Probi* (4<sup>th</sup> c.), a normative list attributed to the grammarian Probus (cf. Kasler 1988, 349-350) where correct forms are restored according to the formula *x non y* (e.g. *aqua non acqua, vetulus non veclus, calida non calda* etc.). The *Appendix Probi* is symptomatic not just of the status of Latin in Late Antiquity, but, perhaps more importantly, of the linguistic evolution which Latin was undergoing at the time, and also of a long-lasting Latin norm as the list was allegedly copied in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. At this stage, the care for the language is not directed to the mother tongue, the spoken language, but rather to the *gramatica*, i.e. Latin. In order for the former to emerge, the vernacular had to be raised in sociolinguistic status. In Italy, this will not reach maturity before the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, with the so-called father of the Italian language, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321).

Whereas in the ten centuries in between Probus and Dante the Italian language, or more precisely the Italian vernaculars, evolved, Latin continued to be largely undisputed as language of culture. Following the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, Italy was more than once conquered by foreign populations: Ostrogoths, Byzantines, Langobards, Arabs and Normans (in Southern Italy) and Charlemagne's Franks, although these last were most probably already highly latinised in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (cf. also the *Sacramenta Argentariae*, from 842, which are thought to be the first document written in a Neo-Latin vernacular, Old French, alongside Rhine Franconian). Each of this military conquerors left its footprints in the Italian vernaculars, most often as loanwords (see Migliorini 1988, 49-58, 66-67, 78-82). Nevertheless, Latin as a written medium remained to a great extent stable, although of course the influence from the spoken sphere is appreciable both during Late Antiquity and long thereafter (see Migliorini 1988, 11-47 and 49-82). The higher status of Latin as written language is to be seen in a great deal of the literary production of the period. So high was that status that not even the Germanic conquerors, Ostrogoths and Langobards, tried to change that state of things and subsequently merged linguistically with the conquered populations. For example, the laws of the Langobards, the so-called *Edictum Rothari*, promulgated by king Rothari in 643, are in Latin but contain nevertheless some Langobardic words, mostly denoting exclusively Germanic, viz. Langobardic, legal notions (e.g. *widrigild*).



It is not before than during the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century that the vernacular timidly begins to be used as written language in Italy. The first documents to contain vernacular explicitly used as such, i.e. not due to influence from the spoken language on the written Latin standard, are three notarial deeds, the so-called *Placiti Cassinesi* (also known as *Placiti Capuani*) from 960-963. It is not possible here to go into any detail about the literary production in the vernacular from these documents to Dante. However, it should be said that in Italy the vernacular started to be regularly used as a language of culture starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century on the one hand, in prose, with the numerous translations of works in Latin into the vernacular, and on the other, in poetry, with the so-called Sicilian School at the court of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, a literary experimental milieu inspired by the French literary environment, where the two vernaculars, langue d'oïl and langue d'oc, i.e. Old French and Provençal, had begun to be used for literary purposes since the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> The legacy of the Sicilian School, which dissolved after Frederick's son Manfredi's death in 1266, was bequeathed in a completely different political environment, that of the mediaeval commune, in Tuscany, and it is here that, among others (see Migliorini 1988, 167-180 and 181-221), Dante Alighieri had his roots.

Although something might be said about the care for the mother tongue in many of the vernacular authors of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the main purpose here is to focus on the transition when the vernacular was raised in importance. This appears clearly in two early-fourteenth-century treatises by Dante, namely in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (= *DVE*) and in the *Convivio*. The two treatises, which were written in the period 1303-1307, are both incomplete. However, they testify to the fact that, at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the vernacular was ready to be raised to the level which, for a long time, almost exclusively belonged to Latin.

In *DVE*, which is written in Latin, Dante intends to discuss a theory of vernacular eloquence, which translates into the search for the so-called illustrious vernacular. In doing that, Dante surveys different vernaculars geographically (this is the first dialectological survey of Italy) and comes to the conclusion that the illustrious vernacular is nowhere spoken, although it might be said to be present everywhere, i.e. it is the language with which *municipalia vulgaria omnia Latinorum mensurantur et ponderantur et comparantur* (Alighieri 2011, 1336). While still adhering to the customary use of Latin in mediaeval Italy, i.e. by using Latin as language of scholarship, Dante's *DVE* testifies to the necessity of codifying the newly-gained higher status of the vernacular and might therefore be seen as an example of the care for the mother tongue. In the same period Dante begins to write also another treatise, the *Convivio*, which is instead in vernacular, being the main purpose of this treatise that of commenting some poems so that the whole text would be understandable also to those who, although sensible to the beauty of poetry, could not otherwise had understood a comment in Latin, because they did not learn it (cf. also the introduction to *Hungrvaka* and the discussion in Sverrir Tómasson 1988). In order to write such a work in vernacular, Dante feels the need of justifying himself for not having used Latin (Alighieri 2014, 126-136 and 144-146), and this proves both that a diglossic situation still existed and that the time was ripe for the vernacular to be formally risen in sociolinguistic value. What is this if not care for the mother tongue?

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<sup>4</sup> The prestige of French vernacular literature, and therefore of its language, played a major role also in northern Italy, where the French vernaculars were used during the 13<sup>th</sup> century to compose both poetry and prose (see Migliorini 1988, 119-122). In the *Convivio*, Dante openly polemicises against those who chose to write in a foreign vernacular, viz. Provençal, instead of their mother tongue (cf. Alighieri 2014, 166-175).

## 4. Conclusions

In the preceding paragraphs it has been tried to show different examples of the care for the mother tongue in the European Middle Ages. The starting point of this discussion was the account of the phenomenon given by Sverrir Tómasson (1998). For what concerns Iceland, it has been tried to widen Sverrir's corpus. This has been pursued by giving other examples of the care for the mother tongue in the Icelandic Middle Ages. The given examples have been categorised under three different typologies, namely interlinear glosses and intratextual translations of Latin formulas, technical terminology and general comments about the mother tongue. It has been argued, in accordance with Sverrir, that the care for the mother tongue appears to be multifaceted, as this attitude emerges in the literary production in more than one way. However, its key feature clearly appears to be the adaptation of foreign influences *lato sensu* to the indigenous cultural and linguistic structures, and it is therefore intimately connected with the rise of vernacular literature. In order to show this with further clarity, an overview has been given of the phenomenon in mainland Europe, where eminent examples have been chosen from different literary environments (England, Germany, Denmark, Italy). It has been argued that, when addressing the care for the mother tongue in the Middle Ages, it is of capital importance to take into account the different weight of Latin in different cultural environments, i.e. the time of appearance of vernacular literature has been put in direct relation with the importance and wealth of Latin tradition. While it is of course true that Latin was highly important in the whole of Europe throughout mediaeval times as a language of culture, it is also true that different cultural environments reacted in different ways to it. In this article it has been argued that the rise of vernacular literatures relatively early in the Germanic world is directly correlated to the absence of a long-lasting tradition of literary production in Latin. Viceversa, in Italy, the importance of the Latin written tradition somewhat prevents the flourishing of vernacular literature until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Dante's works *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Convivio*, both from the first decade of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, codify the need for the vernacular to be raised in sociolinguistic status, as it is in these works that Dante, the so-called father of the Italian language, defends the dignity of the vernacular and advocates its use for literary purposes.

The care for the mother tongue is no monogenetic phenomenon. Its nature is both polygenetic, as it is, theoretically speaking, a phenomenon that rises independently in each language, and yet extremely interwoven into the cultural and historical environment it originates in.

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