

# Language and the Nation: The Rise of Ethnolinguistic Nationalism and its Consequences for Understanding the Monolingual Paradigm

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## 1. How have narratives shaped national identities?

Nations are sociopolitical constructions that are consciously ‘imagined’ by particular ethnic groups. Myths are essential tools in the creation and legitimisation of nations, and communities have invented mythic narratives of their historical foundation since antiquity. Such myths ‘mirror a culture to itself, giving it a history and identity’ (Flieger, 2005, p. 139), and foster a sense of an inherited lineage, communal belonging, and national pride through which nations grow.

According to one such narrative myth, Aeneas, a foreign refugee and defeated warrior of the Trojan War, founded Ancient Rome. Aeneas’ grandson Brutus, exiled for accidentally killing his father, was mythologised as the founder of Britain by Anglo-Saxon historiographers. In 1136, Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, manipulating earlier pre-Conquest sources depicting the exiled Brutus as a ‘child of death’ and ‘hated by all men’ into a brave and glorious leader and a worthy ancestor of Trojan descent (Summerfield, 2011). Geoffrey’s work functioned to resolve the political tension in post-Conquest England—a melting pot of socioculturally diverse groups, by providing a coherent narrative origin that enabled the development of cogent ideas of national statehood and created homogeneity, stability, and meaning out of a chaotic, disparate past and the seemingly contingent arbitrariness of history.



Brutus’ arrival to England from BL MS Harley 1808, fol. 30

In the eighteenth century, the development of a scientific theory of history began to debunk these myths. Nonetheless, ‘national’ ethnic groups continue to rely on the conception of states as historically self-evident and unitary to foster communal belonging and to alienate those outside the national borders. This research asks the question: what has replaced narrative origin myths?

## 2. Where do national languages come from?

‘National’ languages are a product of a modern ethnolinguistic age. Ancient Rome, believing imperial strength came from openness, considered linguistic diversity as a sign of foreign victory and multilingual dominance. In and around the eighteenth century, the confluence of Enlightenment ideals, a burgeoning romantic nationalism, and an increasing self-awareness of statehood in the eighteenth century sparked a growth in ethnolinguistic nationalism. The interaction of capitalism and the printing press further created ‘monoglot mass reading publics’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 43) by transforming the diverse dialects of pre-print Europe into limited distinct, standardised print-languages. As nations and print-languages grew isomorphic, language choice became self-conscious, politicised, and nationalised.

In 1793, during the tumult of the French Revolution, a law was passed that forbade the use of any language other than French in official documents; ‘emigration and hate of republic speak German, counter-revolutions speak Italian, fanaticism speak Basque ... citizens of a free nation should have a single language to be used by all’ (Barère cited in Ghosh, 2015, p. 60).

Ethnolinguistic nationalism supplied a framework of meaning and understanding in an early modern age of rampant sociocultural change, growth in self-awareness of nationhood, and decline in the strength of narrative myth.

## 3. The Monolingual Paradigm

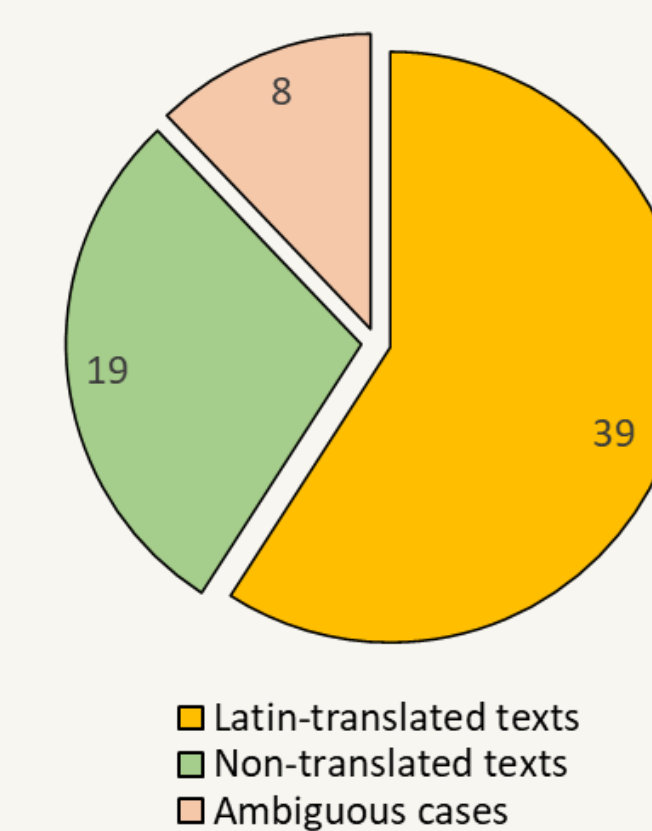
Ethnolinguistic nationalism’s greatest invention is the monolingual paradigm, a mythic conception that monolingualism is a self-evident historical constant. This paradigm implies a ‘planetary linguistic order that did not exist before the seventeenth century’ (Gramling, 2014, p. 27). With the aligning of nation-states with ‘national’ languages, monolingualism became a societal norm. National identity became associated with inheriting and speaking this naturalised language, consequently foreignising and marginalising linguistic communities often associated with minority ethnic groups. Anti-immigrant discourse exploits the misconception that monolingualism is historically self-evident; white supremacists, for example, extol Anglo-Saxon England as a time of ethnic purity and linguistic homogeneity which has been ‘polluted’ with modern migration. Minority languages across Europe are demonised in nationalist discourse as language choice grows even more emotionally and politically charged, all whilst the real needs of immigrant and diverse multilingual communities are ignored.

## 4. How true is this paradigm?

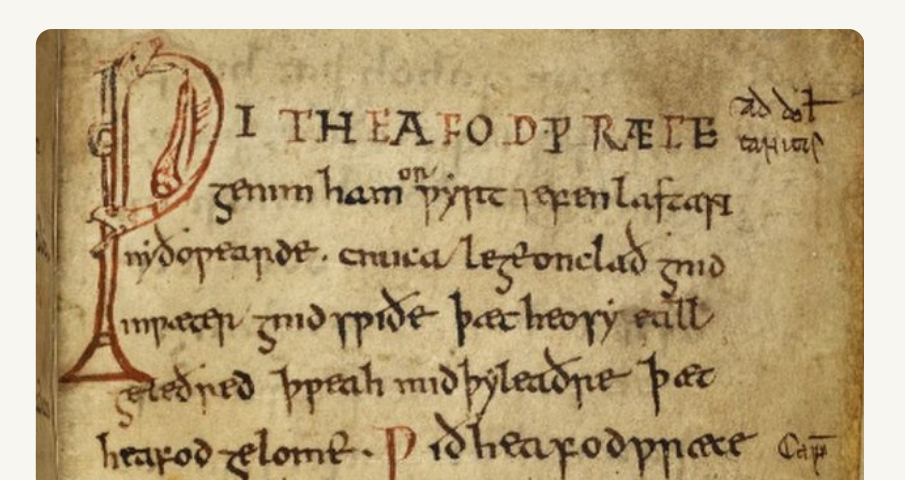
To assess the validity of this paradigm, I investigated the linguistic ecology of pre-Norman Conquest Anglo-Saxon England. The Old English language is conventionally perceived as the dominant ‘national’ language of this historical period. However, the linguistic environment was actually remarkably fluid and diverse—five languages were present on the island at this time. Old English is hypothesised to have borrowed syntactical constructions, such as recursive adjectival modification, from the superior Latin linguistic stratum (Ringe and Taylor, 2014). I employed the CorpusSearch linguistic tool to analyse the texts of the *York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (YCOE)* and determined that in the case of prenominal modification, approximately twice as many ADJ-ADJ-NOUN constructions occurred in Latin-translated texts (0.0738% of parsed nodes) in comparison to non-translated texts (0.0446%). The ‘Celtic Hypothesis’ further contends that Celtic languages had substratal influence on Old English syntax (Vennemann, 2012). Old English was therefore not a defined linguistic entity but rather a language in construction that borrowed from its surrounding linguistic strata. Emphasising English as a language with historically permeable boundaries, constantly in flux, therefore implicates and subverts the conception of the stable, defined nation created by the monolingual paradigm.

An apt illustration of the diverse multilingualism of the premodern world is the *Lacnunga* manuscript, a pentalingual Anglo-Saxon medical text composed of Old English, Latin, corrupted Old Irish, Greek, and Hebrew. *Lacnunga* was written to be comprehended and used by a community—one for which multilingualism was the overriding norm and monolingualism almost an impossibility.

Fig 1. Frequency of recursive prenominal adjectival modification in YCOE texts



*Lacnunga* incipit from BL MS Harley 585, fol. 130r



‘This boucke with letters is wrate  
Of it you cane no language make’

## 5. How has the monolingual paradigm influenced current language policy?

EU language policies and conventions promote multilingual diversity, although there are clear hierarchies in the degree to which all 24 national languages are used, with Irish only becoming an official language in 2021. Furthermore, the language conservation discourse of UNESCO abstracts minority indigenous languages as endangered ‘species’ that must be protected. Languages are romanticised, obscuring the historical, economic, and political context of their speakers. This discourse fails to recognise that language functions as a set of social resources that circulate in unequal ways in social networks and discursive spaces (Heller, 2007), rather rendering language as a bounded, constant, and essentialist phenomenon. Consequently, the real needs of language speakers and the complexity of language contact and multilingual communities are ignored. Globalist hierarchies continue to reward and naturalise the monolingual paradigm as states form language blocs to pursue linguistic agendas and global marketplaces bestow economic power upon monolingual populations who speak the lingua franca.

## 6. Conclusions for overcoming the monolingual paradigm

- National languages have replaced narrative origin myths as the foundation of our modern ‘imagined communities’.
- Ethnolinguistic nationalism has tied language use to national identity, thereby foreignising ethnolinguistic minorities and fueling xenophobic anti-immigrant rhetoric.
- The myth of monolingualism is historically inaccurate—our past is radically multilingual, languages are fluid, permeable, and open.
- Ecology metaphors in language advocacy fail to acknowledge that linguistic ideologies are always sociopolitically and historically determined.
- Nations must be reconceptualised as permeable, diverse, hybrid, and open—just as their national languages are.

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