

The King's French: Vernacular Standardization and the Building of the State

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Purpose

The Question: What was the impact of government policy and state-building on language standardization in the Early Modern period (1450-1650)?

Motivating Literature: The Importance of Standardization

- Leonard Dudley (2017) argues that the standardization of vernacular languages strengthened national identities and eased communication between countrymen
 - Strengthened national identities drove the rise of nationalism and smoother communication drove economic invention and innovation
- Blanc and Kubo (2022) show impact of schooling in France on the homogenization of the French language in the 19th century
 - Also demonstrate the nation-building effects: more homogenized areas were more in favor of centralized authority and more likely to participate in WWII resistance
- However, vernacular languages were in common use long before the 18th century, and states attempted to shape them from the beginning
 - Were these early state-building attempts successful?

Key Data: The Universal Short Title Catalogue

The *Universal Short Title Catalogue* (USTC) is a dataset of all known book editions printed in the first 200 years of movable-type printing

- Contains over 830,000 observations of book, pamphlet, and newspaper editions printed throughout Europe and the Americas
 - Includes all known metadata on each edition including where, when, and by whom it was printed, the title, the author, its subject, and its language
- Available online, scraped using R
- **Note:** it does not include how many copies of the edition were printed, only that at least one was produced

Language in Medieval Europe

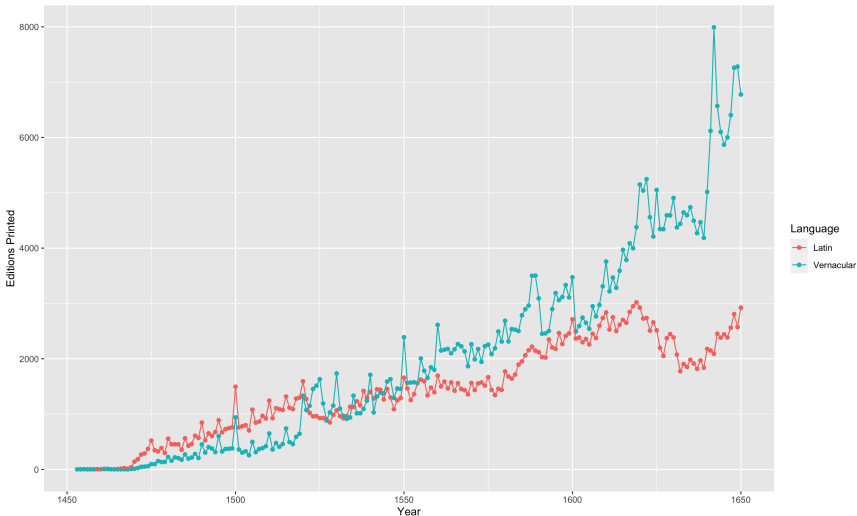
- The Vernacular vs. The *Lingua Franca*
 - Vernacular: a language or dialect spoken by people inhabiting a particular country or region
 - *Lingua Franca*: a language or dialect used to communicate between groups who do not share a common vernacular
- In Medieval Europe pre-1500, Latin was the dominant *lingua franca* used by academics, leaders of the Catholic Church, and elites
- The average peasant, in contrast, was largely illiterate and spoke only their local vernacular
- This linguistic dynamic is known as *diglossia*

The Vernacular Shift

- Vernacular languages overtake Latin in all respects by the end of the 17th century
 - First grammars for Italian, Spanish, French, Dutch, German, and English all written sometime between 1437-1586
 - States begin actively promoting the use and improvement of their vernacular language during the 16th and 17th centuries
 - France: Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts in 1539, establishment of French Academy in 1635
 - Use of Latin declines in areas it previously dominated
 - Newton publishes his 1687 *Principia* in Latin, but his 1704 *Optiks* in English

Visualizing the Vernacular Shift

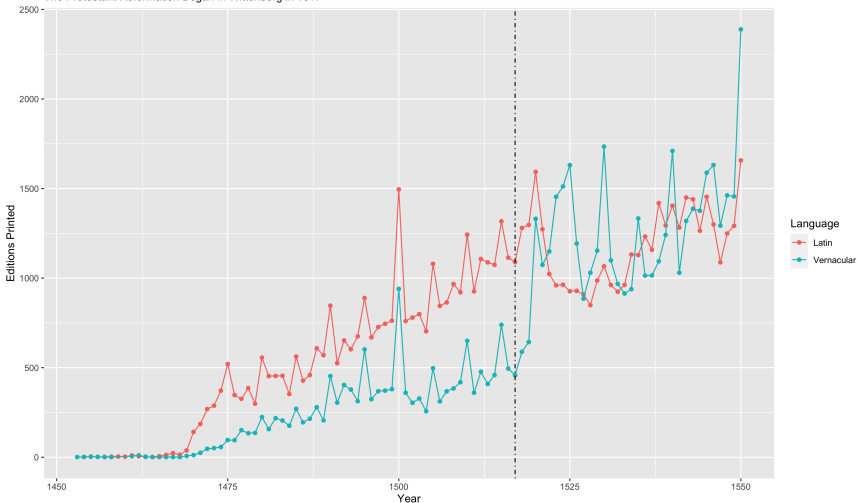
Editions of Books Printed from 1450-1650



Vernacular and the Reformation

Editions of Books Printed from 1450-1550

The Protestant Reformation Began in Wittenberg in 1517



Vernacular & Growth

- What's the impact of general vernacular printing on economic growth?
 - Work by Dittmar (2011) has demonstrated the effects of printing on economic growth, but what about particular types of printing?
- Vernacular works would be easier for non-elites to access
 - Becoming literate in your vernacular has lower cost than learning Latin
- To test this, I run the following:

$$\ln \text{PopGrowth}_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \ln \text{Vernac}_i + \beta_2 \ln \text{Latin}_i + \mathbf{X}_i + \delta_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Data

- Data on printed book editions from the Universal Short Title Catalogue (USTC)
- City population estimates from Bairoch (1988)
- Relevant controls collected by Rubin (2014)

OLS: Vernacular & Growth

Dependent Variables:	Ln City Growth 1400-1500			Ln City Growth 1500-1600			
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<i>Variables</i>							
Printing Press by 1500	-0.0965 (0.0904)		-0.2597** (0.1085)	0.2165** (0.0971)		0.0770 (0.0963)	
Ln(1 + # of Vernacular Editions)		0.0023 (0.0581)	0.0156 (0.0542)		0.0898*** (0.0314)	0.0856*** (0.0300)	0.0291 (0.0398)
Ln(1 + # of Latin Editions)		0.0122 (0.0462)	0.0473 (0.0510)		0.00002 (0.0284)	-0.0113 (0.0287)	-0.0013 (0.0409)
University	-0.1049 (0.0973)	-0.1716 (0.1057)	-0.1687 (0.1032)	0.0947 (0.0855)	0.0622 (0.0832)	0.0614 (0.0843)	-0.0411 (0.1075)
Bishop	-0.0153 (0.0791)	-0.0573 (0.0779)	-0.0254 (0.0807)	0.0146 (0.0540)	0.0143 (0.0546)	0.0101 (0.0546)	0.0021 (0.1081)
Additional Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>							
Observations	269	269	269	460	460	460	132
R ²	0.27749	0.27394	0.29357	0.23272	0.24997	0.25163	0.18913

Clustered (territory) standard-errors in parentheses

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Beyond Mere Printing

- So we have mixed results on vernacular printing across Europe
- But what about the effectiveness of attempts to standardize vernacular languages?
- I plan to use book titles from the USTC to measure average linguistic distance between books in different cities over time

Case Studies: The French Royal Domain, and the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts (1539)

Why French?

- Important question: do printed languages homogenize before their spoken counterparts?
 - Books communicate across larger distances than spoken language in the early modern period
- Fundamental question: Were the state's attempts to promote common use successful in easing communication across its domain?
 - the French state considered use of a common French language important, and sought to promote it. Did it work?

Measuring Standardization: Levenshtein Distance

K	I	T	T	E	N
S	I	T	T	E	N

substitution

K with S

K	I	T	T	E	N
S	I	T	T	I	N

substitution

E with I

K	I	T	T	E	N	
S	I	T	T	I	N	G

insertion G

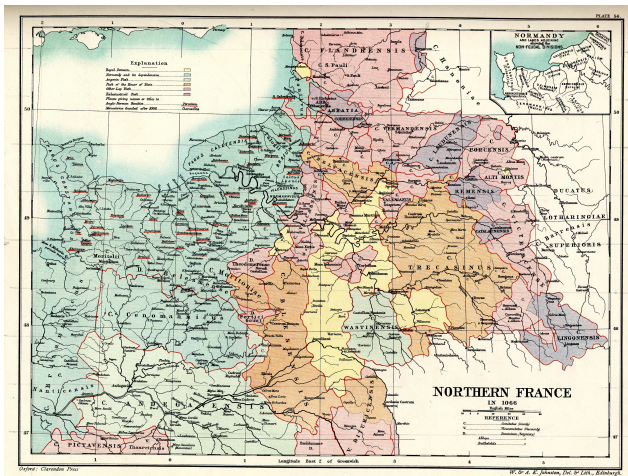
“Kitten” and “Sitting” have a Levenshtein distance of 3

Measuring Standardization: Linguistic Distance

- Levenshtein distance to linguistic distance
 - Measure levenshtein distance between words with the same definition
- Set base language (French in the Île-de-France), then calculate the average linguistic distance of books at the city level from the base language
- How do we expect this distance to change over time?
 - Any discontinuous change in presence of the French state may decrease the average distance of French printed books from the dialect of French used by the state
 - Any attempt by the French state to encourage the use of French may drive homogenization, thus decreasing average linguistic distance

Standardization and the French State

Approach 2: Time in the Royal Domain



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Approach 2: Time in the Royal Domain

- Digitize maps to determine when cities entered or exited the official holdings of the French state
- More of a passive influence than official government policy
 - Interaction with the French state and its agents may influence the French dialect in the area
- Once the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts is implemented, there may be a stronger effect from expansion of the royal domain

Conclusion

- Takeaway
 - The direct effects of vernacular printing are unclear
 - However, assessing the effectiveness of linguistic standardization efforts may help us better understand state-building at an earlier period than is typically discussed
 - If our intuition is correct, language is not as organic as it may appear
- Future Plans
 - Connect any results we find to increased state capacity or effectiveness of governance
 - Particularly important since improving legal legibility was a primary motivation of the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts
 - Expanding outside of France