Introduction: The Magic of Language(s) and Why Write It Down

Gang uz, Nesso, mi miun nessinchilinon,  
uz fonna marge in deo adra, vonna den adrun in daz fleisk,  
fonna demu fleiske in daz fel, fonna demo felle in diz tulli.

Don’t worry if you have not understood anything. It is the magic of language, precisely said a magical, more precisely an iatromagical formula, against worms to be found in a manuscript of the ninth century originating from the Tegernsee monastery in Bavaria.¹

I am sure that even German native speakers will not follow totally the meaning of the text. Thus I may give an English translation:

Go out, worm, together with nine young other worms,  
out of the marrow (of the wound) into the flesh,  
out of the flesh into the skin, out of the skin into the hoof.

I will not insist on details of the magic rite probably to be performed while reciting this formula—touching a sore wound with a hoof of an animal. We will come back to worms during this lecture and thus elucidate the connection—at least created by association—to the subject to be treated here, but for the moment some general remarks will suffice.

The first written documents of many languages are either poetry or magical formulas of the kind we heard some moments before. This is true for German. Besides the famous oaths of Straßburg²—an oath is a kind of magical formula,

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¹ For rapid information see http://de.althochdeutsch.wikia.com/wiki/Wurmsegen. It is a pagan relic written down in Old German as a marginalia in an otherwise Latin liturgical manuscript. The text has made it, by the way, into modern pop music (Band: In Extremo); see http://www.songtexte.com/songtext/in-extremo/pferdesegen-4bdc7d2.html.

² For a rapid overview see Wikipedia which offers in its different language versions inter-
it has to do with the magical power of language—there are the magical formulas for healing of Merseburg and Wessobrunn.\(^3\) This is true for Italian: some ritornelli—the indovinelli veronesi—written in vernacular on the margin of classical Latin poetry are there the oldest known documents, just to name an example.\(^4\) Poetry by form and function is intimately linked to magic and the magical power of the language. Another fact is important and repetitive: these first documents of a language hitherto not written down frequently creep, so to say, in texts of another language. The other language functions as the official written language of culture and tradition, but is different from the spoken language of the actual scribe. This second language is no longer the spoken language, or it never has been the spoken language. The first case is that of the Romance languages: starting from already widely differentiated vulgar Latin they developed till to a stage (between the 6th and 9th centuries roughly said) when written Latin had to be learned as a foreign language and was virtually no longer understandable to an illiterate native speaker. That is exactly the point where a learned scribe or author feels the gap between the linguistic culture of his mother tongue and the tradition of the written language. Writing means to him simultaneous translation for creating new texts, describing the reality of his time. In some very particular cases then he will interrupt this mental translation and let his pen write down what he really has in mind: it comes to the first written expressions of a language which cannot be but tentative with respect to orthography and other details of the use of the scripture originally conceived for another language.\(^5\)

Let me add here that the described process strictly speaking is typical only for alphabetic scriptures. A pictographic or better said ideographic script can

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\(^5\) This a simplification. Alphabetic scripts do more than render the phonemes of a given language, they can demonstrate the morphological background of words and can preserve historical stages; see e.g. Glück, H. (1987). Schrift und Schriftlichkeit. Eine sprach- und kulturwissenschaftliche Studie. Stuttgart.