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Translation as Resilience. Religious Texts in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe.

Main aim of this paper will be to investigate the use and the function of the vernacular in the changing religious landscape of Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Challenging paradigmatic views of the exclusive focus on Latin as religious language and on repressive measures adopted by the Church of Rome in order to restrain the circulation of religious texts in the vernacular, the contribution will concentrate on strategies adopted by vernacular textual communities with aim of promoting and enhancing a process of vernacularization that had already started in the late thirteenth century. It will in particular stress the importance of “informal textual communities” in the organisation of this “linguistic resilience”.

The concept of community is of seminal importance for the reconstruction of cultural transmission and for the promotion of translation activities. As a matter of fact, “all learning takes place in some kind of community, whether it be a formal place of instruction, a lay or religious community, or simply an informal network of two or more friends” (Mews & Crossley 2010). These groups of literate laymen and women (in the double meaning of non-religious and non-Latinate), whether they comprised particular parishes, devotees of prominent preachers, members of guilds, brotherhoods and chambers of rhetoric (to cite but a few examples), were bound by religious discourses and activities shaping their personal and collective lives. Far from being passive recipients of religious messages, either written, oral or visual, they were actively engaging in a process of appropriation, transformation and translation and were dynamically expanding their discursive horizons and enlarging “the full range of texts [they could] read in print and manuscript and the 22 oral discourse in which they participated” (Narveson 2012). Through their engagement in reading, writing, performing and organising religious texts and activities, laymen and women were continuously interpreting the “religious” (in the widest sense of the word) and re-shaping it in their quest for identity in one of the most critical moments in Europe’s cultural history.

The theme discussed in this paper will be further developed in the framework of the COST Action "New Communities of Interpretation: Contexts, Strategies and Processes of Religious Transformation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe" (http://www.cost.eu/domains_actions/isch/Actions/IS1301), a collaborative research project with participation of researchers from 18 European countries.