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Language Policies in the Roman Republic and Empire

Bruno Rochette (translated by James Clackson)

Introduction

The Romans exhibited an enormous capacity for adaptation and a great flexibility in many areas, including their use of language. Latin was never imposed by force as the official language in the regions Rome conquered. Cities in the Greek-speaking half of the Roman Empire continued to use Greek as they had in the past. Wherever there was a Roman presence, Latin existed alongside languages already spoken, and was not put in their place; the Romans preferred the initiative to come from the conquered peoples. Latin was imposed per pacem societatis ("through a pact of society"), following St Augustine’s phrase (August. C.D. 19.7.18, Petersmann (1998) 94). In the speech Virgil gives to Jupiter in the first book of the Aeneid, it is mors ("customs") (A. 1.264) and iura ("laws") (A. 1.293) that the Romans give to the conquered peoples, not language. In contrast with Alexander the Great, who had wanted to extend Greek as the language of administration to his whole empire (Plut. Alex. 47.6), the Romans did not consider that the spread of their language was linked to their conquests (Petersmann (1994) 7). All the same, it is impossible to deny that Latin could represent Roman identity and power, as is shown by Virgil in a different speech given to Jupiter: sermonem Ausoniae patrium moresque tendebant... faciansque omnis uno ore Latinus (A. 12.834 and 837) "Ausonia’s sons shall keep their father’s speech and way... and I will make all to be Latins of one tongue" (trans. Rushford Fairclough).

The Republic and Early Principate

After the death of Alexander, Greek was spoken in the various successor kingdoms, but local languages were allowed to continue in use (Harris (1989) 175–190; Lewis (1993, 2001); Millar (1998a)). Roman power increased progressively in the West, but the
Romanisation of the eastern half of the Mediterranean was preceded by its inverse, the Hellenisation of Rome: Græcia capitam victorum caperit “Greece, conquered, has conquered its wild victor” (Hor. Ep. 2.1.156). Although they had gained the political upper hand over capta Greece, the Romans made no alteration to the existing customs of language use in the administration of the East. While Latin spread in the western half of the empire, Greek remained the major administrative language in the eastern half, at least until the time of Diocletian (Corbier (2008) 37).

Valerius Maximus 2.2.2

The fundamental text on language use and its circumstances in the Republic is a passage of Valerius Maximus (2.2.2). The strict rule explicitly states that Roman magistrates should only reply to foreign ambassadors in Latin, whether in the Senate or outside Rome (Kaimio (1979) 94–111; Ferrary (1988) 559–560; Gruen (1992) 235–236; Wallace-Hadrill (1998) 80–83; Clarkson and Horrocks (2007) 188–189). This was a way to preserve their own maxistas “majesty” and that of the people of Rome.

The passage of Valerius has long been wrongly interpreted to mean that Latin was the only official language of the Imperium Romanum and that Latin was obligatory everywhere in the administration. It is true that some examples of linguistic behaviour in the Republic agree perfectly with the rule presented by Valerius. From the second century BCE the Romans demanded that ambassadors of foreign nations express themselves in Latin when they had to speak on official terms, or, if they were unable to do so, that they make use of interpreters. This was the case during the embassy of the three philosophers of 156–158 BCE (Gel. 6.14.9; Plut. Cat. Mai. 22.4). Since Carneades did not know Latin, his remarks were translated for the Senate by the senator C. Aelius (Kaimio (1979) 104–105; Petersmann (1998) 91). Around a hundred years later, in 81 BCE, Apollonios Molon of Rhodes, who did not understand Roman language (Plut. Cis. 4.6) and came on an embassy to Rome, was the first to be allowed to address the Senate directly in Greek without an interpreter (V. Max. 2.2.3). But, according to Cicero (Cic. Fin. 5.89), when an audience was given to Greek-speaking envoy’s in the Senate, there was always someone who demanded an interpreter. At that time, Greek was already well established at Rome and had long been used in the eastern provinces as a lingua franca. The importance of Greek was yet further increased in the first and second centuries CE, to the extent that Juvenal complained that Rome was becoming a Greek city (3.60–61; 6.187–188).

The use of interpreters to translate Latin proclamations into Greek was of great importance for the Romans during the Republic in order to demonstrate their power. They employed interpreters to underline their superiority in regions where they had enforced military domination. During the Isthmian games of 196 BCE, after his victory over Philip V at Cyzooncephale, the consul T. Quinctius Flaminius proclaimed the liberation of Macedonia not in Greek but in Latin (Livy, 33.32.5, Petersmann (1998) 96). Some years later, in 191 BCE, Cato, as military tribune in Athens, was not willing to address the Athenians in Greek (although able to do so), but instead he delivered his speech in Latin and had it translated in Greek (Plutarch indicates that the translation was much longer than the original, Plut. Cat. Mai. 12.5, Kaimio (1979) 98–99; Gruen (1992) 64–65, 68–69, 237). L. Aemilius Paulus, in 168 BCE, questioned the Macedonian king Perseus (who clearly did not know Latin) in Greek, before conversing with his own men in Latin. Then, in 167 BCE, after his decisive victory over the Macedonians, he announced the new order to be installed in Greece. He made the proclamation in Latin, and left it to an interpreter to translate into Greek. The interpreter was the praetor Cn. Octavius: Paulus Latinus, quae senatus, quae sibi ex consili sententia una exuit, pronuntiavit. En Cn. Octavius praetor – nam et ipe aderat – interpretata sermone Graeco referebat (Livy, 45.29.3) (“Paulus announced in Latin the decisions of the senate, as well as his own, made by the advice of the council. This announcement was translated into Greek and repeated by Gnaeus Octavius the praetor – for he too was present” (trans. Schlesinger)).

The events of 191 and 167 follow analogous scenarios. In both cases, the Roman superior speaks in Latin before an assembly who do not understand. The translation is made after the Latin speech, and is made by a Roman subordinate, not by a Greek translator. In this way, two goals are met: the Greek translation transmits the information to Greek speakers and the preceding Latin proclamation, which cannot be understood by the audience, assumes a symbolic value – it is intended to stress the superiority of Rome, the princeps populi. Aemilius Paulus thus behaved in the manner of the official representative of victorious Roman power, even though he was a supporter of Greek culture. Note also that he had his victory over King Perseus and the Macedonians recorded in an inscription in Latin (II. LR. 323, Ferrary (1988) 566–568), just as Octavian/Augustus did, when he commemorated his victory at the Battle of Actium (Ehrenberg and Jones (1955) 57, n. 12). In the words of Levick ((1995) 396), “using Latin was not just using one language rather than another, but making a claim to status or authority.”

Other magistrates did not always appear to be aware of the rule that was given by Valerius Maximus, but used Greek directly. Indeed, this is what Aemilius Paulus did when negotiating privately with King Perseus in Greek during the Macedonian campaign (see above). The recourse to Greek, the language of the conquered, was far from being a concession, but could also appear as a sign of power. After the death of King Attalus III in 135 BCE, when he bequeathed his kingdom of Pergamum to come under Roman rule, P. L. Crassus came to Asia in 131 and announced decretum not in Latin, but in Greek without a translator, and, what is more, in all the Greek dialects spoken in the kingdom (V. Max. 8.7.6; Quint. Inst. 1.2.50). The use of Greek in this case doubtless reflects the fact that the territory had not been conquered by military force, but had come into Roman control directly through Attalus’ will.

In fact, Greek preserved its status through its use by Roman magistrates in the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire. Kaimio (1979) has shown that the rule that is given by Valerius Maximus is in fact confirmed neither by the literary sources nor by epigraphy. Greek is the official language used alongside Latin by the Roman administration in the eastern part of the empire. It seemed logical to address Greeks in Greek, as Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, the father of the Gracchi, did before the Rhodians (Cic. Brut. 79). This attitude could meet with objections: Cicero was criticised for having addressed the Syracusean senate in Greek (Cic. Ver. 2.1.147), on the grounds that it was inappropriate for a Roman to speak Greek before a Greek public (Adams (2003c) 198; Clarkson and Horrocks (2007) 188). But there had been precedents. Appian (App. Sam. 7.2) recounts that the Roman ambassadors to Tarentum in 282 communicated in Greek. Indeed, this episode may explain the rule which is given by Valerius, since several
paragraphs after he gives the rule, Valerius mentions the humiliation of one of the members of this delegation, L. Postumius Megellus, who had attempted to negotiate in Greek with the Tarentines (Kaimio (1979) 96; Gruen (1992) 229–230), and whose Greek was so bad that his speech provoked the derision of the city's inhabitants—an insult serious enough to justify a declaration of war against Tarentum. One way to explain the role that Valerius assigns to Latin, the language of Roman dignity, is to consider it a response to the humiliation of Postumius.

The first Julio-Claudians

Valerius Maximus 2.2.2 appears to imply that the rule governing the official use of Latin was no longer observed during his time, the reign of Tiberius, and it should be reinstated. He echoes a point of view current at the time of Tiberius, who, as Augustus had done before him, took up the defence of a pure Latinity as a force to unite the Empire by expunging hellenisms (Dubuisson (1986) 109–117). The linguistic scruples that Valerius attributed to a former age, may actually reflect those of the emperor Tiberius himself. Indeed, Suetonius records the care with which Tiberius controlled the correction of official texts (Suet. Tib. 71, Petersmann (1998) 97; Clackson and Horrocks (2007) 189).

Tiberius places a point of honour on the maintenance of the linguistic purity of the highest official mouthpiece of Rome, the Senate. Indeed, there are other reasons to think that the usage of Greek had become widespread at the beginning of the Empire, even in official circumstances: Augustus had his own texts translated into Greek, since his own knowledge of the language was not good enough to do it himself (Suet. Aug. 89, Best (1977)). On several occasions Tiberius took steps to restrict the use of Greek in official life. The text of Suetonius (Tib. 71) describes Tiberius' refusal to allow a soldier to reply except in Latin. However, Cassius Dio (57.15.3) reveals that Tiberius himself eventually agreed to hear a trial in which one of the parties spoke in Greek (Kaimio (1979) 106). Following Tiberius, the political defence of Latin seems to have diminished. Claudius, himself a fluent bilingual, also attempted to limit Greek, but did not show the same rigour. He responded to Greek ambassadors speaking Greek in the Senate with a coherent speech. Suetonius (Suet. Claud. 42) attributes to him a phrase which shows that he considered the two languages equally (utraque lingua “in both languages”). Addressing a stranger who conversed in both Greek and Latin he said to him “then you have our two languages”. But, on the other hand, he did not hesitate to strike from a list of jurors one of the leading citizens of the province of Greece who did not know Latin, and removed his civic rights (Suet. Claud. 16, Kaimio (1979) 134–136; Dubuisson (1982) 189 and 207–208; (1986); Inglebert (2002) 242–243; Bérenger-Badel (2004) 46–47). Likewise, Claudius removed Roman citizenship from a Lycian who did not understand Latin (Cassius Dio, 60.17.4).

Latin eventually was imposed not through law, but thanks to the prestige of the conquerors. Under the Republic, the use of Latin in the public domain was presented as true privilege which the Romans gave out sparingly. In 180 BCE, the town of Cuma, which had always used Oscan as its official language, asked Rome for permission to employ Latin in public life (Livy, 40.42.13, Petersmann (1989) 423; Adams (2003a) 188–189; Clackson and Horrocks (2007) 81–82); Cumanus to anno potentiorum permisiun, ut publice Latine loquenter et praesentibus Latinae renuntiandi in eor "The Cumans that year asked and were granted the privilege of using the Latin language officially, and the auctioneers that of conducting their sales in Latin" (trans. E.T. Sage and A.C. Schlesinger). Rome agreed to this demand, and the concession of the ius Latini in 180 sanctioned the process of Romanisation. It is clear that the Cumans considered Latin the language of prestige, and that Cumae attempted to tighten its links with Rome through its language policy (Adams (2003a) 113–114, 122, 148, 152, 657).

The importance of Greek in the eastern provinces

Epigraphy confirms the importance of Greek in the eastern provinces. Even after the Roman conquest, the publication of official Roman documents (senatusconsulta, edicts, imperial rescripts, letters from emperors and magistrates) were made in Greek, with only a few exceptions (Kaimio (1979) 85–86). The use of Greek in documents addressed to Greek cities is easy to comprehend: the chief goal was to be understood (Dubuisson (1982) 192). The Romans had a pragmatic concern for effective communication. In setting up a bilingual empire, the Romans put in place an effective communication system, based on the most widespread language in the Mediterranean basin, Greek. However, the latinos and errors in Greek which are found in these Roman documents show that the originals were mostly in Latin (Lewis (1986)).

The Roman administration employed Latin in the East as the internal language of communication, whereas Greek was the external (Adamik (2006) 22–23). The Roman Empire can be characterised by what Kaimio (1979) 129–130; 319–320) calls a “bilateral monolingualism” (Adamik (2006) 24–28); it was divided into two parts, one Latin-speaking, the other Greek-speaking, by a linguistic frontier passing through the Balkan peninsula (Gerov (1980), Rizakis (1995)). This bilateral monolingualism was reinforced by a conscious linguistic policy, which was, however, never fixed in writing. The only attestation for this policy is indirect evidence, such as the coinage of Magna Graecia, which shows that this region passed from the Greek zone to the Latin zone between the reigns of Augustus and Claudius (Kaimio (1979) 68–74, 112–114). The establishment of this system can be located probably to the reign of Claudius, since it is at that moment that the post of ab epistulis “secretary” is divided between two distinct offices: ab epistulis Graecis “Greek secretary” and ab epistulis Latinis “Latin secretary” (Kaimio (1979) 117, 319–320; Millar (1977) 224–226; Petersmann (1989) 499; Mouraguès (1995) 106, 120). In 53 CE, the young Nero, in the presence of Claudius, delivered a Latin speech for the inhabitants of Bononia and a Greek speech for the inhabitants of Rhodes and Ilion (Suet. Ner. 7.2).

A recently published documentary archive enables the role played by Greek in administrative practice in the East to be measured: the Babatha Archive, comprising 650 papyri dated between 93/94 CE and August 132 CE. Babatha was a Jewish woman resident in the province of Arabia who took refuge with her family in a cave in the Judaean desert to escape Roman reprisals after the revolt of Bar-Kokhba in 132 CE. The mother tongue of the scribes of documents in the archive is Aramaic, the common language of the population of that area. However, the documents are written in Greek.
Language use in the public domain

In the western provinces, Latin was widespread with the extension of the cives Roma, although, in certain regions, local languages were retained for a fairly long time. If no law obliged the subject people to take up the language of the conquerors, Latin offered concrete advantages that could allow the conquered to obtain their own status. Latin was the language of the army and the law-courts.

In the eastern provinces, the situation was more complicated owing to the prestige of Greek and its long-rooted history (Zgusta 1980; Schmitt 1983). It is possible to distinguish several different scenarios:

1 Greek is the language used for the composition of documents intended for Greek towns (senatusconsultae, edicts, imperial rescripts, letters from emperors and magistrates (Sherk 1969); Oliver 1989; Kokkinia 2003). With regard to these official texts, it is reasonable to ask whether they were written in Greek at first, or whether they are translations of Latin originals. The most likely hypothesis is the second (Kaimio 1979) 120; Martin (1982) 322–326; Lewis (1986, 1996), although one cannot exclude the possibility that some of them were composed directly in Greek (Martin 1982) 327–356. The Greek of these texts is in general an inegalitarian jargon in which traces of the original Latin can be detected. It can be conceived of as a language of power, a government jargon, of which the underlying thought is Latin (Mourges 1995) 116. Some official texts are full of formulae which belong to the Roman legal language (Mason 1974), to the extent that the Latin text can be read behind the Greek, almost as a watermark on the paper. Consider, for example, the inscription known as the “Edict of Nazareth” concerning tomb violations (Oliver 1989), no. 2; Bofó (1994) 319–333 (no. 39), esp. 331–332, n. 23; the text is replete with Latinisms, so much so that it is possible to conclude that this is a faithful and competent translation of a Latin document (Giovannini and Hirt 1999) 112). On the other hand, publication in two languages is exceptional (Kaimio 1979) 319): among the seventy-seven inscriptions collected in Sherk (1969), only three are bilingual. The edict of Sextus Soecidius Strabo Libuscidianus, governor of Galatia under Tibetrius, also gives a bilingual text (SEG XXVI 1392 = AE(1976) 653, Mitchell 1976; Corbier (2008), 34–35): the Latin version is intended for the Roman officials, whereas the Greek version is addressed to the inhabitants of Sagalassos (Levick 1995) 395–396. Indeed, it was important for the local inhabitants to know their obligations. Augustus’ Res Gestae was also published in two languages, but the Latin version had only a symbolic value in the Greek world; the Greek translation gave Greek speakers access to the text. Moreover, the Greek of the Res Gestae is not a word-for-word translation, but an adaptation which allows the text of Augustus to be made more accessible to a Greek public, who were unfamiliar with certain Roman concepts (Wittig 1982). Even the Roman army, whose official language was Latin, used Greek in its dealings with the local administration (Kaimio 1979) 153–154; Adams (2003a) 599–600).

There are several survival examples of inscriptions or papyri where the Greek text is followed by a Latin subscriptio of the governor which authorizes the promulgation of the Greek version (P.Oxy. X 1271 = Syd. Pap. 204 = C. PL. 179 [ad 246]; AE(1975) 805 = SEG XXVI 1353, Lewis (1991–1992)). Indeed, if the governor was not constrained by any rule, in general he chose to express himself in Greek, in order to be understood by the local population. The emperor himself might choose Greek. In 216, Caracalla was petitioned by the Gojarini while crossing Syria, who accused a certain Avidius Hadrinius of having usurped the priesthood of a temple at Dmeir. An inscription discovered at Dmeir in (1934) (AE(1947) 182 = SEG XVII 759) reproduces the protocol of the trial, which took place in Antioch on 27 May 216. Caracalla intervened in Greek, in the same way as the prosecution and defence lawyers (Lewis (1978); Millar (1977) 38, 42, 121, 233, 455, 535–536).

Similar conclusions can be drawn with regard to inscriptions including a local language: note, for example, the administrative documents from the Judaean desert (Cotton (1999)). Latin is nothing more than the language of the administration and the Roman army in Palestine, and is not integrated into the sociolinguistic fabric of the provincial population (Cotton (1999) 220). The Romans thus used Greek in their dealings with the local population (Millar (1995)).

A letter of Septimius Severus and Caracalla from the year 204 sets up a slightly unusual case. In this letter the two emperors let it be known that a senator populi Romani is not obliged to accept a guest at his house against his will. There are at least eight copies of this sacrae litterae, found at various towns in the provinces of Asia and Galatia (Eck (2009) 24). A Greek version has also been found in three places. The use of Latin can be explained here by the fact that these inscriptions were engraved for the benefit of travelling Roman officials and above all of soldiers, i.e. for Latin speakers (Drew Bees et al. (1977) 363).

More straightforward is the epigraphic material from Perge, the capital of the province of Lycia-Pamphilia, studied by Eck ((2000); (2009) 29–32), which gives a good example of the political reality in the Greek world. The town of Perge and its leaders used Latin when the political circumstances demanded it. Greek was sufficient for the expression of personal opinions, even under Roman domination.

2 In autonomous Greek towns, as well as towns founded by Roman emperors, the administration took place exclusively in Greek.

3 In the administration of the Greek East, the use of Latin was limited to correspondence between the central administration, i.e. the emperors, and the Roman magistrates in post in the province. The correspondence between Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, and Trajan is the clearest example. Latin is also used in communication between Roman magistrates and Roman colonists, and in the administration of the Roman colonies (Kaimio (1979) 75; Sartre (2001) 142–144). To some extent, Latin is used also in official dealings with ciui Romani (Kaimio (1979) 129; Adams (2003a) 562–571).
In summary, it is noteworthy that although Latin was the language of the Roman governors, the army and the law courts, Greek continued to hold a very important place, owing to its prestige and its spread following the Hellenistic monarchies. A Roman emperor, when he was in the Greek world, could use Greek directly, as Nero did when he proclaimed the freedom of the Greeks (IG VII 2713 = ILS II 8794 = SIG II 814, Millar (1977) 430), or he could use Latin, the official language, but with a Greek translation. Hence Septimius Severus, on his visit to Egypt, gave judgments in Latin, which were then translated into Greek (P.Oxy. LI 3614).

Language use in the private domain

Epigraphy also allows us to detail the use of languages in the private domain. There are numerous surviving examples of bilingual inscriptions in the broad sense of the term, that is to say cases where two languages are used on the same inscription for different texts without any repetition. In some cases, there are several switches from Greek to Latin within the same text. In the East inscriptions are found which are largely in Latin, but in which brief Greek phrases have been inscribed. One inscription of this type is an epitaph from Ephesus, from the second half of the second century CE, set up by Marcellus for his son (Kearsley and Evans (2001) no. 75; Levick (1995) 393–402 (399 and n. 21); Kearsley (1999) 77–88). This inscription was erected by an imperial freedwoman, Philomene, for her husband and son. She records their lives in Greek in lines 4–17, and follows with a threat in Latin against tomb robbers in lines 18–22. The Latin part, written directly in Latin and not adapted from Greek, also mentions that the tomb will be defended by men from the chancellery of Ephesus, the colleges of her late husband. The epitaph ends in Greek (lines 23–24), with a short clause recording that Philomene had the monument erected from her own funds. Levick (1995) has interpreted this text and others of the same genre in terms of communicative need: the Latin and Greek parts are directed at different audiences.

Latin, language of prestige

Soldiers recruited into the Roman army from different regions of the empire were proud of their recently acquired Roman identity, and expressed this feeling by their use of Latin. The only exception to this is that the soldiers who came originally from Palmyra retained their language. When Palmyrene soldiers were commemorated in an epitaph, Palmyrene appeared alongside Latin. For all the other ethnic groups, Latin was considered a prestige language. In Egypt, Greek is the dominant language everywhere in inscriptions, except for soldiers’ epitaphs. It is possible to see clearly the role of the two languages in a text such as CIL III 125: Kά Κλανδαύος σοιτί (χανάκι) Θεοδόνου ληγατας προτοτε έξει ληγας ης ατος δαπάνας “Claudius Claudianus, son of Theophanes, veteran, legate pro praetore from the III Kyrenaica Legion, set up this stele at his own private expense.” The epitaph is in Greek, but the soldier’s rank and unit are in Latin. The soldier was without doubt a Greek speaker, but he wanted his position in the Roman army to be recorded in Latin (Adams (2003a) 200). A similar conclusion can be drawn with regard to a series of three inscribed stones from Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia (AE (1984) 893): a centurion is commemorated with a Latin epitaph by his wife and son, although the wife and son are in turn commemorated in Greek by the surviving daughter. The family language was Greek, but a Latin epitaph was needed to convey the romanitas of the centurion (Levick (1995) 398; Adams (2003a) 200).

The prestige of the Latin language can also be seen from monolingual documents. A good example can be found in a Latin marriage contract from Philadelphia (second century CE) (P.Mich. VII 434 and P.Rgl. IV 612 = OLA IV 249, Lewi and Halla-aho (2002); Adams (2003a) 623–629). This text was produced by Greek speakers who had only an imperfect command of the Latin language; the document is filled with linguistic interferences from Greek. The use of Latin is exceptional in this type of document; and the text may have been composed in a social milieu of soldiers and veterans, for whom Latin was a prestige language.

The attitude toward local languages

The Roman Empire comprised a mosaic of different peoples, and is impossible to say how many languages were spoken within it. In this extremely diverse setting, the Roman emperors resorted to Latin as the language of power. Latin was linked, as under the Republic, with the maiores of the Roman people. Inscriptions which record the emperor’s victories are written in Latin, even in regions where Greek was the official language. Military milestones are similarly all in Latin; the only exceptions are direction signs in Greek that needed to be understood by everyone (ILS III 5841; AE (1971) 471, Eck (2004) 6). Coin legends comprise another means by which the Romans could identify themselves as the conquerors. In Syria, even after its constitution as a Roman province, Latin coin legends are fairly numerous, although there is some representation of local languages (Burnett (2002) 118–120).

Therefore, the Romans can be seen to have a two-fold approach to language (Eck (2004) 5–6): on one hand, they wanted to reaffirm their superiority through language use; on the other, they kept a practical view of retaining the common language of the eastern half of the empire, Greek, the language which was understood by the largest number. Did the Romans used local languages in the same way? The realities of provincial government left little space for the language of the local population. In Egypt, the Egyptian language was hardly used: the only Demotic documents known from the Roman period are tax receipts issued on ostraca (Lewis (1993, 2001); Adams (2003c) 198). However, these dwindle in number to almost nothing around 235 CE, which clearly demonstrates that the Romans had no wish to continue them in use and that they thought Greek could be used, even if the local population did not understand it. In the whole of the Roman Empire, there are only two inscriptions which display Greek, Latin and a local language: the Titulus Crucis (inscription on the Cross), which John the Evangelist (19: 19) described as written Ἐβραϊκα, Παλαιοτατοποίη-ever in Hebrew [probably meaning Aramaic], Latin and Greek,” and the trilingual inscription of Cornelius Gallus, the first Prefect of Egypt, which was set up on 17 April 29 CE and discovered in 1896 (IGPhilae II 128 = CIL III.14147 = ILS III
8995 = OGIS II 654 = SB V 8894, Adams (2003a) 637-641; Costabile (2001)). How can these two special cases be explained? In the case of the *Titulus Crucis*, it is possible to contemplate that Pontius Pilate had made exceptional use of the local language to reach the populace directly, who were responsible for Jesus’ condemnation. The Gallus inscription is completely different, since this is a commemorative inscription and the hieroglyphic version is unrelated to the text in Greek and Latin, so this is not a true trilingual text. Moreover, the Greek version of the Gallus inscription is not a literal translation of the Latin, but an adaptation with regard to the different sensibilities of the intended audience (Adams (2003a) 637-641; Costabile (2001) 299), in the same way as the Greek version of Augustus’ *Res gestae*. The limited use made of local languages in the Roman Empire appears not to have been paralleled in other ancient empires: the Persians made use of local languages (Esther 1:22), as did the Ptolemies (note the Canopus decrees (OGI I.56) and the Rosetta stone (OGI I.90)). The Carthaginians (Livy, 28.46.16) and, in later times, Sapor I (240-271 CE) whose exploits were published in Persia, Parthian and Greek (Res gestae Divi Saporis; Rubin (2002); see also, for other examples, Miller (1998a) 159). However, Eck (2004) considers that the local languages played a greater role in the Romans’ relations with their subject people than the surviving documentation shows. Indeed, he sees it possible that many of the trilingual documents, such as the *Titulus Crucis*, have not been preserved since they were written on perishable materials. Furthermore, the presence of interpreters shows that the Romans did pay attention to local languages. They had regular recourse to their services for diplomatic transactions (Pliny Nat. 6.15; Wiette-Franz (2001) 111 and 139), in the army and in diplomacy (Peretz (2006)). In civic administration, interpreters were also active: papyri from Egypt give several examples of their intervention in law-courts and in other contexts (Peremans (1983)). There is much less evidence for interpreters outside of Egypt (Wiette-Franz (2001) 111-119); most of the attestations belong to the military sphere and concern legions stationed on the Rhine and the Danube (Henar Gallego Franco (2003)).

In every province of the empire, there must have been structures that permitted provincials who only knew their own language to have access to Roman institutions; such flexibility would have made communication easier. While Latin and Greek were the official languages of the empire, the Romans must have taken other languages into consideration with the aim of maintaining the peace of local populations. A document in the Babatha archive shows the respective roles played by Greek, Latin and the local language (Ptahlin 16, Eck (2009) 18). In it, Babatha makes a declaration of her estate for a provincial census ordered by the Roman governor; the text is in Greek, Babatha’s subscription is translated from Aramaic and Priscus’ attestation of receipt is translated from Latin (Cotton (1999) 228-231).

### The prescriptions of the jurists

The Roman jurists set down explicit prescriptions for the language required for several legal processes. They mention not just Latin and Greek, but also local languages, such as Punic, Gaulish and Aramaic (Manthe (1999)). Ulpian, the jurist who is most concerned with linguistic issues, gives a rule regarding *fidicininium*; they can be given not only in Latin and Greek, but also in Punic or Gaulish or even the language of another people (Lib. 2 *fidicininiumum* [Dig. 31.1.11], Millar (1968) 130; Honoré (1982) 19-20; Polomé (1983) 529; Bürge (1999) 577). A specifically Roman procedure of concluding a transaction with a verbal question-and-answer affirming the satisfaction of the declarant party (*stimulatio*) was also discussed by the jurists, who wondered whether languages other than Latin could be used. The answer was that they could, at least according to Gaiss (Inst. 3.93), who held that *stimulaiones* made in Greek were also valid, but he does not mention any other languages. Ulpian (Lib. 48 *ad Sabiniun* [Dig. 45.1.1.6], Bürge (1999) 57; Manthe (1999)) and Tribonian (Inst. 3.15.1) examine the issue from another angle, in considering the interaction of two parties speaking different languages (Wenskus (1995-1996)): if the question was asked in Latin and the response given in Greek, according to them, the *stimulatio* remained valid (for further references see Wacke (1992)).

### Strengthening of the position of Greek after the third century

As Latin became general in the West, in the eastern half of the empire Greek did not stop gaining strength. However, the rules for language use seem to have remained unixed. It is possible to find some indications of the position of Greek in bequests in the *Gnomon* of the Idios Logos (Egypt, around 150 CE): paragraph 8 forbids a Roman citizen from composing a will in Greek, although paragraph 34 makes an allowance for veteran soldiers. A further indirect piece of evidence comes from a will of 235 CE (SB 1.5.294) with a reference to a ruling (unknown from elsewhere) of Severus Alexander (Caesar 222-235 CE), who authorises Roman citizens to leave wills in Greek (no doubt this is a consequence of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212, cf. Beaucamp (1998) and Rochette (2000)). In terms of language use, the third century appears to have been the transition period between the Principate and the Dominate. Greek wins ground in different domains: it is used on milestones in Eastern provinces such as Thrace and Asia Minor, where earlier bilingual inscriptions or ones with Greek numbers are found to isolate distances. Kainius (1979) 83-85) has explained the tendency to use Greek in milestones as a symptom of the blurring of the dichotomy between the Latin West and the Greek East. From the beginning of the third century onwards, the linguistic split of the empire became weakened following cultural and political changes. The Greek-speaking elite were obliged to insist that provincial governors sent out to the East knew how to speak Greek, something which had earlier gone without saying; this is demonstrated by an anecdote which probably records the linguistic situation during the reign of Caracalla, in Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (5.36) (Bérenger-Badel (2004) 51-52).

### The Dominate

The official usage of languages in the Roman Empire altered after the accession of Diocletian in 284 CE (Rochette (1997) 118-119). The imperial administration in the East, which, until that point, had entirely used Greek, began to employ a large
amount of Latin for decrees, edicts and imperial rescripts. This increased importance of Latin in the East has been explained by a new linguistic policy with which Diocletian and his successors replaced the tolerant and passive policy that had characterised the previous period. However, specialists have increasingly begun to doubt whether there was in fact such a new approach to language: Turner (1961) demonstrated the vitality of Greek and the very narrow limits within which Diocletian sought to impose the authority of Latin, in his examination of two papyrological dossiers published in 1960, *P. Parn. 203* and the archive of Aurelius Isidorus. More recently, Adams (2003a, 635–637, 758) has energetically challenged the idea of a language reform under Diocletian, and has stressed the need for a fresh appraisal of the evidence.

A new linguistic policy?

The constitutions of the Tetrarchs were promulgated in Latin (Feissel 1995: 34; Corcoran 1996: 246). Diocletian’s *Price Edict* of 301 (Feissel 1995: no. 3) is not a bilingual text, but was drawn up in Latin and promulgated exclusively in Latin (Corcoran 1996: 230). There are local Greek versions (which differ from city to city) of the annex of tariffs to the edict from Achaia and a Greek *Katoikia* in the form of an edict of the governor of Phrygia-Caria from Aizanoi (AE 1975: 805 = SEG XXVI 1353, Lewis 1991–1992). From this period we only have a few Greek imperial constitutions, all of which are translations of Latin originals. The change of policy can also be seen in the legal transcriptions of court cases found on papyri. Although the language of the hearings and the judgment is Greek, the language of the officials is Latin (Kaimio 1979: 127–128, 143–147; Adams 2003a: 383–390). In local administration, however, Greek is dominant, as in the earlier period. The importance of Latin, which the Greek elite referred to as ἡ ἑκατέρων ἀληθείας “the language of power” (Dagron 1969), can be seen by the frequency of Latinisms in documentary Greek papyri (Dickey 2003).

The traditional view of a change in policy rests on the interpretation of a text of Libanius (Marrou 1965: 374–388). In his *Autobiography* (Or. 1.234), the rhetorician of Antioch reveals his deep disquiet over the future of Greek rhetoric. Libanius holds Roman law and the Latin language responsible for the decline of his school. But, a close reading of the text shows that he also stresses that no legal measure has been taken to impose Latin at the expense of Greek (ῥήματα μην οὐκ αὐτοῖς τούτου οὖσα ἐπιστάναι “it is not law or edicts that have brought this about”). It is the honour and power linked to the knowledge of Latin that justifies the importance of the language of Rome. Arguments εἰς σιντοὺς are always hazardous, but, if a systematic language policy had existed, there is a strong chance that Libanius, as the champion of Greek culture and language, would have mentioned it and would have argued against it in explicit terms.

If the establishment of the Tetrarchy did modify the tradition of official language use in the Roman Empire, this is not the result of a conscious change of linguistic policy, but more the consequence of a slow and complex evolution, in which several factors are concerned, including the move of the official imperial residence to the East.

Constantine the Great

Constantine’s language policy can be illustrated by the *Vita Constantini* attributed to Eusebius: the emperor demanded that his soldiers understand Latin (Eus. *Vit. Const.* 4.19), and the influence of the language in the army was at its peak at the beginning of the fourth century. During the ecumenical council of Nicaea, in 325, the emperor regularly addressed the assembled Eastern bishops in Latin, and his words were translated into Greek by an interpreter (*Vit. Const.* 3.13, Wiotte-Franz 2001: 265). At the same council, Constantine wrote a speech in Latin, and then gave it to professional interpreters to translate into Greek (*Vit. Const.* 4.32, Millar 1977: 295; Wiotte-Franz 2001: 104). Having given his speech in Latin, he was then able to debate with the Greek-speaking bishops in Greek, in his attempt to find common ground (*Vit. Const.* 3.13). However, Constantine needed to have the theological tracts which were sent to him by Eusebius translated into Latin (*Vit. Const.* 4.35). Latin and Greek therefore appear to have had different roles: Latin was the official language, which Constantine had perfect mastery over, and Greek was used for spontaneous conversation, not as a written language. This approach is confirmed by the fragmentary protocol to a trial that includes several sentences spoken respectively by a party in the case and by the emperor (*Cod. Theod.* 8.15.1, Corcoran 1996: no. 5, 259–260). Here Constantine addresses a certain Agrippina, the plaintiff, always in Latin, and she always responds in Greek, without an interpreter; this implies that the two sides could understand each other.

Theodosius II

The empire of Theodosius II (408–450) was Roman: all the laws in *Codex Theodosianus* are in Latin; all the correspondence composed by the administration was also written in Latin (Millar 2006: 84–85, n. 2). A passage of John the Lydian (2.12.1–2 = 3.42.1–2, Trabman 1951: 53; Petersmann 1989: 409) alludes to an oracle given to Romulus, the founder of Rome, known through an antiquarian called Fonteius: if Rome forgets the language of her fathers, she will lose her Τύγχανος "good fortune." The man held responsible for the loss of Latin was an Egyptian, Cyrus, the Praetorian Prefect between 439 and 441, who may have been the first to produce decrees in Greek. The first indication of the abandoning of Latin was however a law of 9 January, 397, which authorised judges to give sentences in Greek as well as in Latin (*Cod. Inf.* 7.45.12, Petersmann 1999: 410). A novella of Theodosius II, dated to the 12 September 439 (*Nov. Theod.* 16.8), recognised the validity of wills drawn up in Greek, a ruling which is given even more clearly at *Cod. Inf.* 6.23.21.6. The custom of writing wills in Greek, as we have seen above, must however already have existed from well before this date, according to a decision of Severus Alexander. In the empire of Theodosius II, Greek remained very important; dealings with occupants of official posts took place in Greek (Millar 2006: 23, n. 51). The papyri show that the use of Latin was limited to official proceedings, whereas the governor expressed himself in Greek (*P. Oxy. XVI* 1879 = *CPL* 434, no. 11 and *Cyr. XIV* no. 12, Millar 2006 appendix B no. 10 et 11).
Justinian

The reign of Justinian (527–565) opens a new epoch in the history of language policy in the Roman Empire. The emperor attempted to reaffirm the priority of Latin as the language of law. All the legal texts had to be written in Latin: *decreta a praetoribus Latine interpunt debent* “the decrees must be issued by the praetors in Latin” (Dig. 42.1.48) and *legata Graecia scripta non salent* “legacies written in Greek are not valid” (Gaius Inst. 2.281). In the East, where Latin was no longer understood, texts had to be first read out in Latin before they could be translated into Greek or other languages (Cod. Inst. 7.45.12). With the help of the jurist Tribonian, the emperor Justinian published, between 528 and 529, his law code (*Corpus iuris civilis*) first in Latin, which he called πατρικὴ “paternal language”, and only afterwards in Greek (Nov. 7.30 [535 c.]) Petersmann (1989) 409; Yaron (1995) 663). In his attempts to keep Latin as the official language of legislation, Justinian battled against the in comprehension of the official Latin text. In order to preserve the original shape as much as possible, he authorized a word-by-word translation: this is the γενετική *step by step* translation (*Constitutiones Tauratae, Cod. Inst. 1.17.2.21, Fögen (1995) 254). However, during the reign of Justinian, Latin became a dead language even for the jurists. This is why the emperor was eventually forced to accept as valid wills which had not been written in Latin (Cod. Inst. 5.28.8).

Language policy under Justinian could be summed up as a conflict between Tribonian, supporter of Latin, and the unpopular John of Cappadocia, supporter of Greek, who eventually prevailed (Honoré (1978) 134–137). The programme for the reinstatement of Latin, which was promoted by Tribonian, was not continued for long, since the inconveniences created by the ancient practices became clear. Justinian, who already used Greek for religious matters, intervened to order the return to Greek as the language of law of the Eastern empire. In studying the relationship between the language of the codes and their intended audience, Adamik (2003) has shown that, in order to reconstruct the unity of the empire, Justinian intended to re-establish, after 535 (the date of the promulgation of the code), the bilateral monolingualism that had been characteristic of the *Republic and the Principate* (Kaimis (1979) 319–320). However, the practice after 535 contrasts with that before 284. Whereas, under the Principate, the distinction was between West and capital (Rome) = Latin, and East = Greek, after 534 the scheme was as follows: East and capital (Constantinople) = Greek, and West = Latin. With the return to bilateral monolingualism, Justinian had found a way to make Greek definitively the official language of the empire: in Byzantium, ῥωμαίις meant “speak Greek” (Inglebert (2002) 256–257).

Conclusion

While Latin can be considered as the unifying link across the whole Roman Empire, the Romans never established an official language policy ensuring that the subjects of the empire had to learn Latin, which would have been doomed to fail. The complete story of language use during Roman history can be summed up as a compromise between Latin and Greek, while leaving space for other languages, even if there is rarely sufficient evidence to specify the details. Although the Romans wanted their subjects to take an interest in Latin, they had to recognise that, in the eastern half of the empire, Greek had enough strength to impose itself. However, the conception that Latin was one of the criteria of *romanitas* was embedded in the Roman mindset. Latin had a symbolic value as the language of conquest and the language of prestige, especially in certain social contexts, such as the army.

It is difficult to say if the attitude to language use changed from one Emperor to another (Adams (2003a) 758). It is possible to distinguish, however, two different periods. The first, from roughly the second century BCE to 284 CE is characterised by the spread of Latin in the West and the use of Latin in the East confined to four domains: (1) official communication between the imperial administration and the provincial administration; (2) communication between governors and the Roman colonies; (3) the administration of colonies themselves; and (4) to some degree, the administration as it affected Roman citizens. The second period (284–439) saw the usage of Latin at every level in the East. In the East, the situation was more complex: Latin was used at the highest level for imperial administration, Greek as the language of communication and both languages in provincial administration. Finally, Justinian developed a policy to return to the situation of the first period, which had the consequence of the definitive triumph of Greek in the East.


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