

The History of Languages

An Introduction

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6

Greek—conquest and culture

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In this part of the book, three famous languages and their expansion over large areas are described, and to some extent they are contrasted. Expansions have occurred for various reasons, and the results differ. Sometimes the languages remain very large but sometimes they contract or disappear. Towards the end of Chapter 8, some comparisons are made and a few conclusions are drawn.

6.1. Language and alphabet

The Pleiads have left the sky, and
the moon has vanished. It's midnight:
the time for meeting is over.
And me—I am lying, lonely.

This is an attempt to translate a poem written in Greek around 2,600 years ago. From the Greek text it is clear that the 'me' of the poem is a woman. The author was Sappho, a poet living on the island of Lesbos, an independent state among innumerable other small Greek states.

Here, language is used for something we have not taken much into account so far, not to organize hunting parties or the digging of canals, and not to collect tax or to pay homage to rulers and gods. The text is an artfully expressed statement about human experience, one of the first lyric poems in the Western tradition.

This book is not about poetry but about the relations between languages and history. However, in the case of the Greeks artistic language provides one of the keys to history. The Greeks did not start by creating an empire that produced a robust language and an important culture, as was the case with the Egyptians, the Chinese, and many later cultural centres. On the contrary, the Greek literary language, Greek philosophy, and Greek art were in place before this culture came to prevail in several important empires.

The remarkable history of the Greek language starts with the epic poems of Homer, which could be transmitted to posterity because of the invention of the Greek alphabet. It was modelled on Semitic scripts, with some important improvements. The poet Sappho had access to that script, devised just a couple of hundred years before her time.

The Greek alphabet is very similar to the Latin one, which is the one used for English. In fact, the Latin alphabet is derived from a variant of the Greek, and it is easy to observe the similarities. Here is the original poem, written in the Greek alphabet:

*ΔΕΔΥΚΕ ΜΕΝ Α ΣΕΛΑΝΝΑ
ΚΑΙ ΠΛΗΙΑΔΕΣ. ΜΕΣΑΙ ΔΕ
ΝΥΚΤΕΣ. ΠΑΡΑ Δ' ΕΡΧΕΤ' ΩΡΑ.
ΕΓΩ ΔΕ ΜΟΝΑ ΚΑΤΕΥΔΩ.*

And in the Latin alphabet:

*DEDUKE MEN A SELANNA
KAI PLEIADES. MESAI DE
NUKTES. PARA D' ERKHET' ORA.
EGO DE MONA KATEUDO.*

One advantage of an alphabetic script is that it provides some indication of poetic rhythm. Even someone who does not know any Greek can see that there are eight syllables in the first line. That is true for the subsequent lines too. The second, the fifth, and the seventh syllables in each line are prominent. That rhythm is imitated in the translation above.

It can be seen directly that the Greek alphabet works in the same way as the Latin one, in principle, and that many of the letters are identical, such as T, M, and N. In most other cases the difference is simply a matter of design, such as Δ that corresponds to D and Γ that corresponds to G. The letters for the vowels I, E, A, and O look just as in the Latin alphabet, and were (originally) pronounced in Greek just as in Latin, Spanish, or Italian. The English way of pronouncing these letters is quite peculiar, from the point of view of speakers of other languages, and has to do with a change in the English language. There are some more complex differences between the Greek and the Latin alphabets but they concern relatively minor issues and are not considered here.

The similarity between the Greek and the Latin alphabets is best seen when upper-case letters are used, as above. They represent the original forms of the characters. Mathematicians and others sometime use lower-case Greek letters in English texts. If the poem is written with those letters it looks rather different (in normal spelling, a number of accents and other diacritics would be added):

*δεδυκε μεν α σελαννα
και πληιαδες. μεσαι δε
νυκτες. παρα δ' ερχετ' ωρα.
εγω δε μονα κατευδω.*

The Greeks, then, had access to a script that could represent the meaning and also the pronunciation of the spoken language. In that way the writers could reproduce their own way of speaking to a reasonable extent, so that the readers could be fairly certain about which sequence of sounds was intended for each word. Hieroglyphs and Chinese script did not generally work in that way, nor did Linear B, a mainly syllabic writing system used for very early Greek. In addition, the alphabetic script was easier to learn than the previous systems, in the beginning stages particularly, and for that reason more people than just a small group of professional scribes could employ the written language.

Both aspects were important, but no doubt the most significant one was that many people did learn to read and write. Even though only a fairly small part of the total population was involved, Greek culture still became very much a written one, probably to a larger extent than any earlier culture. The first long texts, as mentioned, are the great epic poems attributed to Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which are usually dated to around 700 BC. Soon after that several other kinds of writing appeared. Sappho and others wrote lyric poetry in the seventh century, but of course one also finds administrative or formal texts such as laws, official records, and funerary inscriptions.

Around the same time Greeks started writing about science and philosophy. In the early period they were much influenced by the high cultures in Western Asia and by Egypt. That fact did not fit well with the idea of European superiority which grew more prominent in the mid-nineteenth century and was therefore for a long time played down or denied outright. However, the Greeks did advance beyond their predecessors, and as time went by they attained a standard that has in some respects never been surpassed. Authors such as Plato and Aristotle, who wrote their works in the fourth century BC, still wield an enormous influence both indirectly through all their followers and directly as they are still read by many. Only the early Chinese philosophers, such as Confucius, enjoy a similar status.

6.2. Language as creation

Due to the very fact that poets, philosophers, and scientists used Greek, the language itself changed. An original mind is often in need of a new expression, a combination of words that did not exist before, or even a new word. Greeks had a considerable number of novel thoughts, and as a consequence many new words were coined. They made use of the alphabet for reading and writing, so those new words were recorded and preserved. In that way the Greek language was enriched by words and meanings that had not existed before in any language. The authors did not only produce their own texts, they also helped to make the language more expressive and more versatile.

Writing is not a necessary condition for advanced thinking. Socrates wrote nothing but was still regarded by many contemporaries as the best of philosophers. It is not insignificant, though, that Socrates did read his predecessors and adversaries within philosophy. Besides, we would know nothing about him and his ideas had not Plato portrayed him in his writings. As it is, Plato and Aristotle are still read—not just because they were writers, for thousands after them have written much and are now forgotten. But because they wrote down their groundbreaking thoughts they survived.

The written Greek language, forged by the efforts of these and other writers, included many items that have become part of Western tradition; those words and concepts are still with us, in English as well as in other European languages.

We go to school and learn history (*historia* in Greek), mathematics (*mathe-matike*) and physics (*phusike*), and we may move on to geography (*geographia*) and philosophy (*philosophia*). We can devote ourselves to politics (*politike*) as

we live in a democracy (*demokratia*), we may be engaged in our private economy (*oikonomia*) or pursue our esthetical (*aisthetika*) interests, such as theatre (*theatron*) or music (*mousike*).

In English and the other European languages there are clearly a large number of loanwords from ancient Greek. There are loans from many other languages too but the Greek ones are special. Many of them help to structure our existence by providing the categories (*kategoriai*) into which we group the phenomena (*phainomena*) of reality. The Greeks partly invented our way of understanding the world, and their designs and patterns are still alive in our language.

6.3. Are languages equal?

If Greek became so important and so truly outstanding, was it then better than other languages, or than the language it had been some centuries before? If so, how much better and in what ways? Can languages evolve as well as change? Is there a ranking order for languages, and if there is, what is it based on?

These questions are not exactly new. Ever since antiquity, people have had ideas about the relative worth of languages. Before the twentieth century most people actually took it for granted that such a ranking order exists, although the criteria for ranking varied. Some pointed to such facts as have been discussed above, a significant literature and a rich vocabulary. Others have thought it more important that a language is associated with a powerful empire and is used by many people. For a long time the question was seen as belonging to the sphere of religion, and discussion centred on what the original language was that was spoken before the confusion of tongues in Babel. On that count, Hebrew won most of the votes (but not all).

A recurrent idea was that some languages are civilized and developed while others are barbarian and primitive, and this line of thought became dominant in Europe during the nineteenth century, the era of colonialism. The languages of the colonialists, such as English and French, were of course seen as developed by definition, while the languages used by the natives of the colonies were mostly classified as primitive.

In the early part of the twentieth century, many linguists and others, for example the prominent anthropologist Franz Boas, attacked these ideas, for the good reason that they were contrary to fact. The languages spoken by 'primitive' peoples such as the 'Indians' of North America, the 'Bushmen' of southern Africa, or the 'Aborigines' of Australia turned out not to be primitive at all, in

any reasonable sense of the word. They may have more complex syntax, more intricate morphology, and more difficult sound systems than any 'developed' European language. As for the potential to express new thoughts and to form new concepts, that is inherent in the basic structure common to all human languages.

So there are no primitive languages, in the sense of languages not being suited for advanced thoughts and subtle nuances. All languages are capable of being used for such purposes. It is true that there are differences in what has to be included in an utterance for grammatical reasons and what may be left out. Languages may also map reality in very different ways through their different sets of concepts. Therefore it is not necessarily true that everything that can be said in one language is also possible to say in another. But there is absolutely no evidence that Greek, or Chinese, or English, are particularly well suited for advanced thinking because of qualities they have and other languages lack.

Modern linguists generally conclude that all languages are of equal value. In many contexts this is the only reasonable view, particularly if one happens to believe that all human beings are of equal worth. Every language is the native tongue of some people, and for every human being the first language is an important part of their personal identity. Therefore, to contend that one language is less valuable than another one is tantamount to degrading some people. Each language can be a fully adequate first language for its speakers and has to be respected accordingly.

But everyone knows that human capacities, talents, and fortunes vary, even if all human beings are equal in value. It is the same with languages. Plato or Confucius might have used any language but as it happened they used Greek and Chinese, respectively. A language can expand and be made a more versatile tool than before. In some unfortunate circumstances it may also lose functions and become more limited.

Every language is unique and must be seen as having the same intrinsic worth as every other language, but languages are not able to express everything equally well. All languages have the potential to fulfil all functions and express all thoughts but it is not true that every language can do that in all situations. Languages are like people in that not everyone can do everything.

This matter was raised previously, in the context of the vocabulary of San languages. It was pointed out there that the words in a language are the ones that are needed in the culture where the language is in use. When words are created in one language and are then taken over in many other languages, as has been the case with so many Greek words, this means that elements of the

original culture are transmitted, and often also transformed. The usual term for such transmitted words is loanwords. Actually, it is misleading: the words will never be returned to the donor, and when the transmission is complete they become integral, adapted parts of the new language and the new culture.

Is this a good thing? There are different opinions. Many people think that their own language and their own culture should be protected from outside influence as far as possible. There is something to this, of course. Each language is a distinctive achievement, and if it absorbs elements from another language, it becomes more similar to that one and to that extent less unique.

But this line of reasoning is misleading, in my opinion. If a new word is introduced in a language, that makes the language richer and more functional. If it completely replaces an old word with exactly the same meaning, the language has not gained anything; but that rarely happens. Usually, new words add to the functionality of the language.

In sum, then, languages have the same unlimited potential, but some languages harness superior means of expression because of their vocabulary (including idioms and phrases). Words and phrases can be taken over without much difficulty, and in that way languages can enhance their resources significantly. In the case of the Greek language, it has served as a donor to an exceptional extent, to the benefit of all the languages at the receiving end. Now, it is time to return to other aspects of Greek.

6.4. Alphabet and dialect

A writing system that reflects pronunciation can make life easier for readers and writers. But one consequence of such a system is that if writers speak different dialects they also write differently, provided there are no established conventions for how to write and spell.

During the first centuries of writing in Greek, both spelling and other features varied a great deal. It is not true that each author followed his or her personal whim, but each one wrote in his or her own dialect.

Greece at this time had several quite distinctive dialects, which were, however, all mutually intelligible. The early literary texts were based on a number of dialects. Sappho composed her poems in the Aeolic dialect of Lesbos, while Plato wrote in Attic as he lived in Athens in Attica.

From our perspective this is rather remarkable. It is true that there are English authors who use local dialects for literary purposes. However, this is rarely done

all the time—mostly in dialogues or possibly in a poem or short story. And everyone is supposed to write the standard language in other contexts.

But in early Greece there was no standard language. There were no school authorities, publishers, or anyone else who decided what was correct Greek. There could not be, as Greece was in no way a political unit. Those who spoke Greek lived in a large number of small independent states, and no state had sovereignty over the others. The situation was fairly similar to that in China during the period of the Zhou dynasty. However, an important difference was that China had previously been one state; in Greece, that had never been the case.

Still there was a sense of belonging together among those who called themselves *Hellenes*, the name still used by the Greeks of today to refer to themselves. (That we use the term Greeks more often than Hellenes is because we have taken up the word used by the Romans.) Those who counted as Hellenes were the ones who knew about the Greek gods and heroes, who consulted the oracle at Delphi, who participated in the Olympic games, and who spoke the Greek language, *hellenike glossa*. The others were *barbaroi*, ‘barbarians’, a Greek word for those who speak unintelligibly. The possibly word imitates the sound: people who speak a foreign tongue may be perceived to be as saying ‘bar-bar-bar’.

Thus a uniform language and a single state are not necessary for people to feel that they belong together. Nor is mutual peace, unfortunately. The Greek states had many internal wars and collaborated only a few times to fend off a common external enemy. But in spite of the conflicts they read authors from other states and even learnt their dialects.

The differences between dialects were easy enough to hear but still not always very large. For example, the word for ‘moon’ in Sappho’s Aeolic poem is *selanna*, while the form in the Attic dialect is *selene*. Sappho wrote *mona* for ‘alone’ (in the feminine form), which is *mone* in Attic. It can be seen that there is a systematic difference in that the Attic dialect has *e* as a final vowel in many cases in which Aeolic has *a*. Such things are not too hard to learn. What is remarkable is that writers sometimes actually managed to write in a dialect different from their own. For example, a tradition developed that songs performed by choirs should be presented in the Doric dialect, and so Attic and other authors wrote their lyrics for choirs in Doric. This led to an extraordinary situation in the famous Greek tragedies, written by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. All three were Athenians and wrote their plays mainly in Attic. But in the numerous songs and recitations for the choir, they use Doric (or an

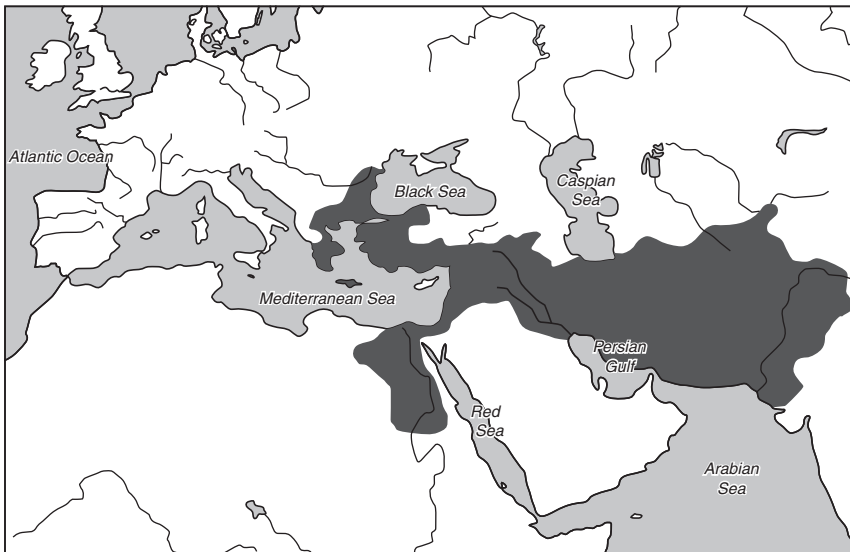
approximation to it). Thus the same author changes from one dialect to another time and again within the same work.

The Greeks had a common written language but it was not uniform; there were several written dialectal variants. As each state (*polis* in Greek) pursued its own political interests, it was natural that the language forms of different areas were equal in prestige and usability. But circumstances changed, as they always will.

6.5. From city states to empire

In the course of the fifth century BC, Athens grew more powerful at the expense of most other Greek states. Attic, the dialect of Athens, gained prestige accordingly. However, Athens soon lost much of its political clout, and a decisive change of scene took place in the 330s BC.

The Macedonians, who lived in what is now Northern Greece, expanded their empire very fast. They subdued the whole of Greece and very much more: all the countries around the eastern part of the Mediterranean, from Turkey through to Egypt, and large tracts of land to the east, modern Iraq, Iran, and for a time even Afghanistan. They reached as far as the River Indus, the border of India, on their campaigns.



Map 6.1 The empire of Alexander the Great around 324 BC

The Macedonians were not Greek, but had a language of their own, about which we know next to nothing. However, their ruling class was deeply influenced by Greek culture, and their famous king, Alexander, had received a Greek education like many prominent Macedonians. His teacher was Aristotle, the famous philosopher. Alexander and his generals introduced Greek as the language of administration throughout their enormous realm.

After Alexander's death, the empire soon disintegrated. Egypt became the kernel of one state, a large swathe of land from present-day Turkey to Iran became another one, and Macedonia with Greece formed a third political unit. But Greek remained the official language in all three countries, and the military and administrative elite spoke Greek.

Their kind of Greek was more or less the Attic dialect. By and by, a slightly modified form of Attic established itself as the common written language throughout the whole region. It was called *koine*, meaning 'the common (language)'. This standard established itself as the official language of administration and gradually ousted the traditional dialects. These disappeared from written records after a few centuries, and it seems that they also ceased to be spoken.

In this way Greek changed from a language with several written dialectal forms in various states to a uniform official language for several large powers. Most people in those countries did not speak Greek at all, at least not in the early period. Greek was used more or less as English was in the colonial period in India and in various African states.

Greek enjoyed a very long history as an official language, although the states involved went through several transformations. Little more than a century after the conquests of Alexander, the Roman Empire began to make its influence felt around the Eastern Mediterranean. After a determined expansion that lasted for a couple of hundred years, the Romans finally amalgamated all the countries from Greece through to Egypt into their empire in the last century BC.

In the West, the Romans systematically propagated their language in the countries they conquered, but this was not their policy in the East. Greek remained the language of administration and power during the long Roman period. The Roman Empire had two official languages, Latin only in the West and mainly Greek (but Latin in a few contexts) in the East.

In the Roman period, the Greek language took on another very important role, that of the first written language of Christianity. Jesus spoke Aramaic, but the central Christian texts, which have been assembled to form the New Testament, are written in Greek, and Greek has remained the most important language for many Christians. However, early Christianity was not restricted to

the use of that language only. In the West, the language of the Church was Latin, as will be discussed later on. In the East many early communities used their own languages, among others Armenian, Syrian, and Coptic, and the important texts were translated into those languages.

The difference in language of administration, as well as in history, between the eastern and the western parts of the Roman Empire was certainly one of the reasons why the empire finally split in two. In AD 330, somewhat more than 300 years after the final conquest of the East, the Emperor Constantine consecrated the city of Constantinople by the Bosphorus and made it a second capital equal to Rome. In the year 395, the Roman Empire was finally divided into a western and an eastern part, and the eastern one, ruled from Constantinople, in practice used only Greek as its written language.

Constantine also greatly helped the Greek language in another way, for in effect he transformed the Christian faith from a religious sect among many others in the world of late antiquity into the official religion of the empire. And Greek was the preferred language of the Church in the eastern part.

The Eastern Roman Empire, also called the Byzantine Empire, was quite large in the early period, and it persisted for a very long time. Its size diminished, mainly because of the increase in Muslim power, but Constantinople remained the seat of the emperor until the final victory of the Turks in 1453. Throughout, the official written language was Greek, used largely in the same way as *koiné* in antiquity. Thus it was in use without interruption from Alexander the Great to the mid-fifteenth century, that is for more than 1,700 years.

6.6. The New Greek

The history of Greek did not end when Constantinople was taken. In Greece, the Greek language continued to be the spoken language when the country was a part of the Ottoman Empire, from the fifteenth through to the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Greece became an independent state, and the Greek language once more emerged as a written, official language.

But at this time it was no longer viable to resurrect the old written language and start using it as before. The spoken language by this time was so far removed from what it had been in antiquity that it was not realistic to use the old written form. There had been too many linguistic changes. Also, the new state was in no way a successor of the old empire. In the course of the

nineteenth century, there appeared two new and competing written language forms. One is called *dimotiki*, ‘the popular (language)’, and is reasonably close to modern spoken Greek. The other one, called *katharevousa*, ‘the purified (language)’ includes many more words and forms from classical Greek.

The two forms were rivals for a long time in literature, in schools, and in official life. The language question was at times quite controversial, and often politically loaded. Katharevousa was associated with conservative views, and dimotiki with radical opinion. The last days of glory for katharevousa (so far, at least) were the period of the military junta. Katharevousa was decreed the obligatory language of schools in 1967, but soon after the fall of the junta, in 1976, dimotiki became the sole official language form, and remains so. Katharevousa as well as dimotiki has much in common with ancient Greek, from which it originates, and it is written in the same alphabet that was introduced in antiquity, more than two and a half millennia ago.

There is an interesting difference between the Greek name for their language and the name used by others. In English one employs the phrase ‘Modern Greek’, separating this language from ancient and Byzantine Greek. In the same way, the French term is ‘grec moderne’, the German ‘Neugriechisch’, and so on. But the Greeks themselves normally use the term ‘*elliniki glossa*’, the Hellenic language, which is what the language was called in the time of Plato, 2,400 years ago. Naturally everyone is aware of the fact that the modern language is not identical to the ancient one, but the use of the same name shows the Greeks’ strong sense of continuity.

6.7. Learning from the Greeks

The long and remarkable history of the Greek language almost completes a full circle. At first, the language was used mainly in present-day Greece. Later it became the language of the states all around the Eastern Mediterranean, and remained so for more than a millennium. It disappeared again in most of the area, and for several centuries it was reduced to a tongue spoken by peasants in a corner of an empire using another main language. Then it gained vitality anew and is now an official language in the region where it first appeared 3,000 years ago. This underscores a number of things about histories of languages. First, there is no telling what will happen in the long run. If anyone had predicted, in the year 400 BC, that Greek would become the official language of half the known world 100 years later it would have been rightly regarded as a bizarre

idea. Still, that is what happened. In that way, the fortunes of languages are no different from the fortunes of states.

Further, one should note how dialects developed. Variations arise in a large language area and therefore dialects emerge. It was mentioned that the various Germanic languages, for example, were formed through the splintering of an original language into dialects, which later became separate languages as they drifted further and further apart. There have been several developments of this kind, and they are particularly well documented within the Indo-European language group. Sometimes this is seen as a typical or even inevitable process.

But the history of Greek demonstrates that this is not necessarily so. In very ancient times, more than 2,000 years ago, there were several clearly distinct Greek dialects that also had separate written forms. They did not diverge and develop into languages of their own; instead, something entirely different happened. A common form of speech and writing was established and become so prominent that it almost entirely eliminated the other dialects. These disappeared as written languages, and evidently as spoken forms too. Modern Greek has dialects, to be sure, but they have developed from the common form, *koine*, and are not related to the ancient dialects of Aeolic, Doric, and so on.

There is one interesting exception. In several villages in the Peloponnese people speak Tsakonian, a language that is not understood by other Greeks and seems to stem from the ancient Doric dialect. This demonstrates that the old dialects would most certainly have become separate languages if they had survived more generally. But as a succession of strong empires used a dominant form of the language, the original dialects withered away.

Thus there is no law of nature stating that languages have to split up into dialects that then become new languages. If people move apart and if they are not politically united a split will probably occur after some time. But if there is a common state and the state favours one particular form of the language the other dialects may be weakened and disappear. That is to say that changes in the language system are not independent of the changes that come about in the use of a language. To a considerable extent, what happens inside the language system is affected by the political and social situation.

A common written language definitely contributes to lessening dialectal differences, especially if the authority of a strong state supports it. The Greek example proves that a language may in fact exist in the same area for several thousand years without ever splitting. Something similar is true of Egypt, as was shown above, but we know much more about the dialectal situation in Greece and that allows us to draw safer conclusions.

From the recent confrontation between the two written forms, *katharevousa* and *dimotiki*, it can be seen that language is connected with politics in another way too. An archaic and conservative written form was pitted against a more modern one, closer to the spoken language. The choice is by no means simply a matter of linguistic preference. It has a lot to do with one's attitudes to preservation and innovation in other spheres of life. Linguistic conservatism and political conservatism do not always coincide, but in Greece that was the case, and there are several similar instances.

But the most important fact concerning the Greek language may be its role as the vehicle for Greek culture. Thoughts and ideas that remain fundamental to the Western tradition were first expressed in ancient Greek. The Greeks created several kinds of literature, such as epic and drama, and of course they wrote their literature in Greek. Through its use in many contexts the written form of the language developed into an extremely versatile and useful instrument of human activity, mainly because of the rich vocabulary and the large stock of existing texts of various kinds.

This was a major reason why the Macedonians chose Greek as the official language of their empire. The Romans, who were culturally very much under the influence of the Greeks from early times, allowed their language to remain the official one for the eastern part of their empire; it had prestige because of its role in culture. Those in power could not introduce anything else to match it, but preferred to utilize it for their own purposes. Later on it attained even higher status, as it became the language of the first and most important texts of Christianity.

Throughout its history, Greek has enjoyed a cultural status of its own which it has managed to retain throughout the rise and fall of several empires. In rare cases, a language can turn out to be stronger than political might.

7

Latin—conquest and order

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7.1. Empire and language

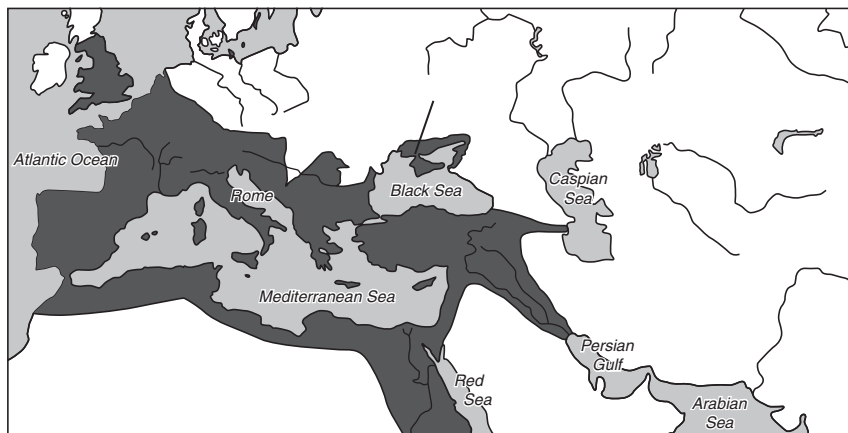
Yours is the destiny, Roman, to rule over peoples and nations!

This verse brilliantly epitomizes the overbearing attitude of official Rome. It is found in a central passage of the *Aeneid*, the national epic of the Romans, written by Virgil at the instigation of the Emperor Augustus.

The verse has been used by imperialists of later times too. I own a copy of the *Aeneid* printed in Italy in the 1930s, during the fascist era. This very line is displayed prominently on the cover.

As an empire builder, Mussolini was a bungling amateur. But also much more competent conquerors of modern times, such as Napoleon, pale in comparison with the Romans. Their conquests were usually not as swift and spectacular as those of the Corsican, but they were much more durable. One important reason was the Romans' success in propagating their own language.

Rome was at first an insignificant city-state among a multitude of similar ones in the middle of the Italian peninsula. According to tradition Rome was founded in 753 BC, and modern historians and archaeologists think that this is not very far from the truth. In the first few centuries the state did not include



Map 7.1 The Roman Empire around AD 100

much more than what is now the city of Rome. The Roman language, Latin, was at that time spoken only in Rome, even though some other small states in the vicinity probably used similar languages.

More or less from the beginning, the Romans had their minds set on capturing more land and subduing neighbour states. By so doing, their sphere of influence grew over the centuries. In the fourth century BC, they became the dominant power in the Italian peninsula, and towards the end of the following century they were the undisputed masters of Italy, including Sicily. They systematically expanded eastwards as well as westwards, and when the empire reached its maximal size, around AD 100, the Romans ruled over all of Europe west of the Rhine (except Scotland and Ireland) and south of the Danube, all of Northern Africa including Egypt, and also present-day Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Albania, and a great deal more. Thus the empire comprised everything around the Mediterranean and vast regions beyond that. This giant domain remained largely intact for another 300 years, until the fifth century AD, when the western part disintegrated.

The Latin language is found in a few inscriptions from around 600 BC. As early as that there was a written form of this language, as well as of other languages in Italy. The Romans probably acquired the idea of writing from their northern neighbours, the Etruscans, who dominated central Italy down to the fifth century BC. The Etruscans had adapted the Greek alphabet to the needs of their language, and the Romans in turn modified the Etruscan script to create the Latin alphabet, which has since been used by many peoples to write a

large number of languages. It can still be seen almost everywhere, for example in this book.

From the centuries before around 300 BC, we only have a small number of inscriptions in Latin; no long texts have survived. In fact, the Romans were mainly farmers and soldiers who probably did not write very much. From the end of the third century, however, Rome had become a place with very large economic resources, a centre for trade in close contact with Greek-speaking cities around the Mediterranean, and at that time Latin was established as a literary language.

In this respect, as in others, the Romans closely followed the Greek models to begin with. Soon, however, Roman literature had become prominent in its own right, and it reached its peak in the first century BC and the first century AD. Prose authors such as Cicero and Caesar, and poets such as Virgil and Horace produced works that are still read, and in the process they created a literary language and literary genres that have served as models for European writers for 2,000 years.

But there are great differences between the origin of Greek writing and literature and the corresponding events in Rome. In the first place all Roman writers from the very beginning used one homogeneous language. There are no dialectal differences, for the written form is based as a matter of course upon the language spoken in Rome. This reflects the fact that the city of Rome was the uncontested centre of political and intellectual activity, while the rest was mere periphery.

Secondly, Roman writers almost without exception lived in Rome, and they frequently belonged to the very uppermost strata of society. Cicero and Caesar both became leaders of the government, the historians Sallust and Tacitus were high-ranking military commanders and officials, and the philosopher Seneca was the guardian and teacher of the Emperor Nero. The poets Virgil and Horace were not powerful men, but the personal protégés of the Emperor Augustus. Men close to the very heart of power created much of Roman literature.

It might also be said, however, that those people reached distinguished positions partly because they could write and speak so well. In Rome, it was crucial to be able to deliver persuasive speeches in front of large assemblies. The children of prominent people spent a great deal of time learning to speak in public; Roman education was largely rhetorical education. Among other things, pupils read widely to enrich their language and were systematically trained to compose and deliver speeches. To master the Latin language in speech and writing was the key to success in Roman society.

There was great attention given to language, not to say obsession with it, and the norm for correct language became very well established. It was preferable that everyone should speak and write like the best speakers and writers in Rome. Masters of grammar and rhetoric taught rules about almost everything: spelling and pronunciation, forms, choice of words, and levels of style.

In Rome, then, the power of the state was closely allied to a language, Latin, and to a very strictly defined form of that language. To what extent there were other dialects and other styles we do not really know, as the preserved texts are totally dominated by the official form. Here and there, in graffiti and in rare texts mimicking everyday speech, we catch glimpses of the social variation that is bound to have existed. Not everyone can possibly have talked just as Cicero did. But there is almost no evidence that people in different parts of the empire developed dialects while Roman rule lasted. By and large the Latin language as we know it varies little.

What did ordinary people speak in the provinces outside Rome? In the beginning Latin was spoken only in the city itself, as was mentioned above. With time Latin spread, both as a written and as a spoken language. It is hard to follow the details of this development, but the main facts are clear. A few hundred years BC, there were several languages in Italy with more or less well-established written forms, and a few of them certainly had more speakers than Latin. There are extant texts in Etruscan, Oscan, Umbrian, and so on. Over the centuries the inscriptions and so on texts in those languages become less frequent, and it seems that not one of them was used in writing after around AD100. They may have been in use as spoken languages after that, but there is really no evidence that this was so. At any rate they disappeared a very long time ago, almost certainly during antiquity. No modern languages are derived from them, so evidently Latin took their place all over Italy.

The same thing happened in large parts of Western Europe. When the Romans conquered present-day France, Spain, and Portugal, and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia in the two last centuries BC, many languages were in use there. In late antiquity most people had shifted to Latin, and the overwhelming majority of those who live there now speak languages that stem from Latin. Only a couple of groups use to other languages: the Basques in Northern Spain and Southwestern France, and the Bretons in Brittany. But the Bretons are believed to be descendants of Celts who arrived from England in late antiquity, rather than a Celtic population who had kept their language intact in Roman Gaul.

How did it come about that people shifted to Latin to such a large extent? The fact that a country is conquered and politically dominated by a state using another language does not necessarily mean that people abandon their original language, even in the long run, as was pointed out previously. For instance, Welsh is still a viable language in Wales, after 700 years of English rule. History presents a large number of similar examples, and so the massive language shift in the Roman Empire needs an explanation.

One reason is certainly to be found in the style of government. The Romans did devote themselves to spectacular conquests, but once they had occupied a territory they also worked hard establishing an efficient administration. There soon appeared governors and soldiers, tax collectors, judges, surveyors, customs officers, and many others. Commerce was largely put in the hands of Roman merchants, who were given preferential treatment.

In this situation, those who wished to advance in society, or simply safeguard their position, had to learn Latin. It was necessary for almost any career, and mastery of the language entailed many advantages. Further, Rome was primarily a military power, keeping large numbers of soldiers in garrisons all over the empire. The language of the army was always Latin, so that those who chose that walk of life had to know the language. And many young men did so. As for formal education, the schools exclusively used Latin (and Greek at more advanced levels).

People in towns probably shifted to Latin within a few generations, while those in the rural areas, who naturally constituted the majority, kept their original language much longer. But eventually Latin spread in the countryside too. One reason why even the more resistant groups shifted in late antiquity may have been that Latin was so closely linked to the new religion, Christianity.

In Rome, Christianity arrived early. When the city burned in AD 64 the adherents of the new sect were accused of arson, and the Emperor Nero sent many Christians to be tortured and to their death. The gospels and other Christian texts were translated from Greek to Latin at a very early period, and the Christians in the western part of the empire consistently used Latin in their churches. Christianity increased in strength and in the fourth century, after the conversion of Constantine, it became associated with the Roman state. The Church required participation and devotion on a quite different scale to any authority of the state.

In this way, the people of Southwestern Europe became speakers of Latin. In addition, Latin became well established in present-day Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, perhaps almost as well as in Europe. But after a few centuries North

Africa was subjected to new conquerors, the Arabs. The Arabic language was supported by Arabic political power and the Islamic religion, and Latin in due time disappeared, as will be discussed below.

In other parts of the empire Latin never prevailed. I have already mentioned the fact that the Romans used Greek as the official language in the eastern part of the empire. In England, Latin did not secure a foothold strong enough to let it survive the fall of the empire, perhaps because the country was captured late and is located far from Rome. Perhaps few Romans felt any real urge to emigrate to this northern outpost. In the absence of close contacts and long-lasting local influence, no definite shift occurred.

7.2. Language shift and language extinction

By the end of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century AD, most people in Southwestern Europe spoke Latin; only insignificant elements of other languages were left in the this area. A thousand years earlier, when Rome had just been founded, the peoples in area surely spoke a large number of languages, perhaps more than a hundred, and no language had very many speakers.

Just as in ancient Egypt and China, there was a compact of sorts between state and language. But in those countries what happened mainly was that the language did not split, while in the Roman Empire the language of the state expanded greatly. A strong central power with all its means and devices induced large parts of the population to take up Latin as their first language.

Language shift is not unique or very unusual, but has occurred repeatedly throughout history. However, there are many changes of political power in history, and by no means all of them have been accompanied by any kind of language shift.

The basic reason why people are usually not inclined to change to another tongue is that language is not merely a tool for communication but also the most important means of identifying one's group and oneself. The language a person learns from his parents forges a strong emotional bond with those who use that language. That is why people do not give up their native language except for very strong reasons.

Still people do sometimes take the leap. The causes are usually similar to those of ancient Rome: influence of a strong state and economic inducements, sometimes working in common with an official religion.

A long-range effect of the language shifts in the Roman Empire was that the number of languages diminished. As has been discussed, this has been the main trend in world history over several millennia. The usual way for a language to disappear is what probably happened in Roman times, that the speakers gradually shift from one language to another. In the first stage, families become bilingual, and in a later generation, the children start with the new language instead of learning the original language first. Later still, people stop learning the original language at all.

Is this good or bad? The answer is not obvious. When a language disappears it means that a cultural benefit is lost forever. The formation of a language with all its words and expressions, grammar and sounds is a process that takes hundreds or thousands of years. It is an ongoing, collective act of creation in which thousands or millions of people participate. Experiences and ideas of all those people are embedded in the language, and when it disappears this is irretrievably lost.

On the other hand, languages are no museum pieces. They are tools to be used, and when people shift to another tongue, it is because in the situation they are faced with they prefer the new language as the means of expression for themselves and for their children. The reasons are often similar to those of the Roman Empire as well as those of China. Education and culture, religion, contacts with important people, work, money, and power do matter. All those things are easier to come by if you speak a rich and sizeable language than if you are stuck with a small and poor one. That is why it is often to the advantage of speakers to relinquish their native tongue.

Language shifts and extinction of languages are quite frequent in modern times, so we will return to the topic on several occasions. However, the later history of Latin is an interesting example of the opposite process, the birth of a new language. That will be the theme of Chapter 9. But here, the continuing role of Latin in Europe will to be discussed.

7.3. Latin as an international language

In the fifth century, the Western Roman Empire was invaded by a number of Germanic peoples: Ostrogoths and Visigoths, Sueves and Vandals, Burgundians and Franks. Each group managed to seize power in a part of the empire, which literally fell to pieces. The last emperor in the West was deposed in 476.

This political upheaval did not bring about any important change in the linguistic situation to begin with. People continued speaking Latin in the whole area where they had done so previously. The Germanic groups, who were probably not very numerous, formed a powerful upper class, but their subjects did not embrace their languages. On the contrary, all those Germanic tongues disappeared after a time, mostly without leaving many traces. It is true that Gothic was established as a written language, mainly through a translation of parts of the Bible that is still preserved in a manuscript from the fifth century, but spoken Gothic vanished just like the languages of the other invaders. The only large area where the intruders kept their language was Britain; this will be treated later. On the continent, the Germanic conquerors did not lose their power, but after some time the new generations shifted to the speech of their subjects.

The reason was that the Germanic conquest was very different from that of the Romans a number of centuries before. The Germanic warriors were efficient, but there were no administrators, tax collectors, merchants, road engineers, or priests. There were no written forms of their languages that could replace Latin in legal and economic contexts. They could achieve a military take-over, but civilian life went on more or less as before.

In that way it might be said that Latin and Roman culture vanquished the Germanic intruders. But this was in no way a complete victory. Many things changed when the empire was dissolved into small kingdoms, and often enough into even smaller principalities and duchies. Communication and commerce were curtailed. The cities and towns lost most of their importance and were depopulated. In that process, the knowledge of how to read and write almost disappeared in many areas. Schools survived almost exclusively within monasteries and churches. The dominant economic pattern became self-subsistence, and in many areas the only political entity of any real importance was the local manor or estate. In the seventh century, Western Europe was without any strong political power and well-nigh without any organization at all apart from the Christian Church.

This of course had important consequences for language. There is not much direct testimony, as people wrote little during these centuries, but it is possible all the same to make some informed guesses about what probably happened.

Whatever was produced in writing was in Latin. Even though the empire disappeared Latin remained the only written language within the old boundaries, and even beyond them, for a long time. Throughout the sixth century there was a comparatively large output in writing, and the authors had mostly

learnt to write in the classical manner. In the seventh and eighth centuries very few texts were produced, and their language is often quite strange. The writers evidently wanted to write in the classical manner, but their lack of education made that impossible, and what they wrote down is sometimes not even comprehensible.

During these centuries something crucial must have happened to the spoken language. The previously strong influence from the central power of Rome had evaporated. The army was not there any more, the schools had closed down, and no merchants brought ideas and expressions from one part of the empire to another. Each little nook was left to itself, and external contacts were reduced to a minimum. In a way this meant reverting to the situation before the conquests of Rome.

The consequences for language were those that might be expected. The forms of speech in different parts of the old Roman Empire diverged rapidly. Each region formed its own speech habits. Latin had shown little or no dialectal variation while the empire lasted, but within a few centuries after its fall, the homogeneous imperial language was transformed into a multitude of regional and local dialects. The linguistic changes were not kept in check any longer.

We know this because of what happened afterwards, and because there are some written reports about speech in various parts of the former empire. However, no new written languages appeared for a long time. Those very few who wrote anything at all in the seventh and eighth centuries always used Latin as best they could. Almost without exception, they were clergymen or monks.

Around 800 the situation changed. The schools of the Church were reformed and improved, and more people learnt to read and write Latin. By the twelfth century Latin was used very extensively in writing all over Europe, including several countries that had never belonged to the Roman Empire, such as present-day Germany, Poland, and Denmark. It was the dominant written language everywhere, and in many countries no other language was written at all. Although it was by this time definitely no one's native language, Latin was spoken in many contexts, particularly among people of the Church, who had to learn both to speak and to write it in school.

For several centuries Latin remained the common written language of Europe. With time, competition from other written languages increased, but it held its own. Only very slowly did it lose ground, as will be discussed in more detail later on.

In the Church, Latin prevailed until the time of the reformation in the early sixteenth century, when the Protestant churches introduced national languages

in the divine service. Within the Catholic Church, Latin was used more tenaciously than anywhere else. Until the 1960s the language was still spoken at the altars of Catholic churches all over the world.

In the world of science and higher education, Latin also remained a written and spoken language for a very long time. It became acceptable to write scientific and scholarly texts in other languages as late as the eighteenth century. The great thinkers of the previous century, such as the Frenchman Descartes, the Englishman Newton, and the German Leibniz, all wrote their pioneering works in Latin.

Thus Latin did not disappear as a written language or as a learned language when it was no longer in use as a native tongue. For many centuries it was the written medium of people speaking an array of native languages, and was superseded gradually in a slow decline over an additional number of centuries. It is still used to some extent both in the Catholic Church and in some areas of science, mainly as the language of international terminology in medicine and biology.

For a long period, then, all educated Europeans (including Englishmen, of course) were at least bilingual. They had a native language, and in school they had learnt to write and speak Latin. In fact, that was what school was mostly about, which was of course a problem. On the other hand, when one had learnt Latin one was able to communicate with other people all over Europe, both in writing and orally. In our time, English is taking on a similar role in large parts of the world, as will be discussed later. But so far at least, English is not nearly as well established as an international language as Latin was in Europe six or seven centuries ago.

The Latin language could reach this height in Europe largely on account of the Church. For many centuries, the Christian faith was the unquestioned cornerstone of societal life, and the Christian Church was the predominant organization. From the very beginning the Western Church had chosen Latin, and this continued. The Church was responsible for most formal education during the better part of a millennium, which was crucial, as those who are in charge of schools also determine the written languages.

Thus a society need not use a written language that is based upon the language people speak. Children learn written languages in school at an age when they have already been able to speak for a long time. It is quite possible to pick up a completely different language and never learn to write the first spoken tongue. That was the case in Europe during much of the Middle Ages. Hundreds of million people today in Africa and Asia are in a similar situation, except that their school language is not Latin but English, French, or Portuguese.

7.4. The influence of Latin

As Latin was in use to such an extent and for so long, it has affected all main European languages. Those languages have a large vocabulary in common, and it consists mainly of Latin words, including Greek items that were first taken up in Latin and then transmitted further. The English words have very often taken a route via French.

The verse from Virgil that introduced this chapter runs like this in Latin:

Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento!

A literal translation is: ‘You, Roman, remember to rule the peoples in empire!’ Each single word in the sentence forms the basis of one or more English words. *Regere* ‘govern’ is the origin of English words such as *regent* and *regiment*, and its participle *rectus* ‘governed’ forms the stem of words such as *correct* and *direct*. English ‘reign’ is from a closely connected Latin word *regnare*. *Imperio* has yielded English ‘empire’ as well as a number of other words, such as *imperialism* and *imperialist*. *Populos* ‘peoples’ has been introduced into English via French in the form *people*, but the same Latin word has also been a more direct model for terms such as *population* and *populist*. *Romane* ‘Roman’ goes with the name of the city, *Roma* in Latin. In English, there are also other words derived directly or indirectly from the name, such as *romance* and *Romania*. *Memento* ‘remember!’ is sometimes used without change in English, in the sense of ‘reminder’. The root from which it is formed is also found in such English words as *memory*, *memorize*, and *remember*.

In sum, each single word in the Latin verse is connected with several normal, everyday English words. All are borrowed either directly from Latin or through French, or more rarely via some other modern European language such as Italian. The exception is the first word in the verse, *Tu*. There is indeed an English (somewhat obsolete) counterpart, *thou*, but this is a case of common heritage. Both the Latin and the English form have been inherited via their respective predecessors from Proto-Indo-European.

Latin has provided English with many of its words, through direct or indirect borrowings. The Latin words are more often abstract concepts than designations of common things, as can be seen from the examples. Latin and Greek have supplied both words and conceptual frameworks that can be used to describe and understand reality. Without concepts the world remains chaotic.

On the other hand, concepts may attribute to reality a coherence that may not exist anywhere else than in the concepts themselves. For better or for worse, the European vocabulary, based on Latin and Greek, has provided us with the spectacles through which we can observe and discern the features of what exists.