

# Romanization or no romanization, that is the question in search of socio-linguistic identity in the Roman provinces

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**Résumé :** Il s'agit dans cet article d'une étude sur la relation complexe entre la langue, la culture, l'identité et l'ethnicité durant l'expansion de l'Empire romain, tout en privilégiant le processus du développement linguistique dans les provinces romaines. Le concept de Romanitas a été souvent défini comme l'ensemble des particularités qui rendent une personne "romaine". Ainsi, le processus de l'expansion de la culture romaine dans les provinces romaines a-t-il été baptisé Romanisation. Bien que les modèles de l'acculturation continuent de dominer la recherche sur la Romanisation, la nature quasi naturalisée des processus du changement qui se présente unilatéralement dans cette perspective est de plus en plus remise en question. Les critiques du modèle d'acculturation demandent à reconsidérer l'orientation des courants qui s'étale des élites aux citoyens pauvres, aux ruraux pauvres et aux esclaves. Ces influences n'ont jamais été ni unilinéaires ni acceptées par le dernier groupe sans résistance. Dans ces perspectives critiques, cet article expose une interprétation plus interactive de ces influences et le besoin de considérer les relations de pouvoir dans lesquelles les courants entre les groupes sont inscrites. Le latin ayant été l'un des grands porteurs du concept Romanitas, ce débat renferme également des implications dans le domaine de la linguistique.

**Mots-clés :** Créolisation, Latin, Romanitas, Romanisation, Provinces Romaines.

**Abstract:** This paper explores the complex relationship between language, culture, identity and ethnicity during the expansion of the Roman Empire with a particular focus on the processes of language development in its provinces. The concept of Romanitas has often been seen as the carrier of all the factors that make a person "Roman". Thus the process of spreading Roman culture to the Roman provinces has been labeled Romanization. Although models of acculturation still dominate the Romanization research, the one-sided, almost naturalized nature of the processes of change, assumed in this perspective has been increasingly challenged. Critics of the acculturation model plead to rethink the assumed directionality of the flows from the elites to the urban poor, the rural poor and the enslaved. These influences were neither unilinear nor accepted by the latter group without resistance. Drawing on these critical perspectives, this article argues for a more interactive understanding of these influences, as well as for a need to consider the power relations in which the flows between the groups are embedded in. As the Latin language was one of the most important factors in spreading the concept of Romanitas this debate also bears implications for the field of linguistics.

**Keywords:** Creolization, Latin, Romanitas, Romanization, Roman Provinces.

## Introduction

A single Google search with any keywords related to language, ethnicity and identity would reveal the extensive research that has been done on their interrelations over the years. Consequently, language has commonly been accepted as one of the main carriers of culture, identity and ethnicity (Fishman, 1999). The purpose of this paper is to explore the complex relationship between language, culture, identity and ethnicity in the times of the expansion of the Roman Empire. More specifically, it concentrates on the ethnic groups, their ideologies and the social make-up of the region in question that might have influenced the development of the societies and the language situations in the Roman provinces. Ethnicity is an especially important aspect to consider when talking about language and language identity. There are three aspects that are of great significance to the questions of ethnicity that will require a closer analysis. Firstly, the link and relationship between language, identity and ethnicity has to be explored. Secondly, the concept of *Romanitas*, the carrier of Roman culture, has to be defined but it will also have to be pointed out why it is important in relationship to the Latin language. Finally it is of great importance to understand how the process of 'Romanization' in the Roman provinces has come about and what the various standpoints to this topic are in a century long debate.

## Romanitas

Culturally seen the Roman Empire and all Romans stand in an immediate, although not always conscious, relationship to *Romanitas*. It is the concept that represents all Roman ideologies, ideals and values; all opinions and views on the world and civilization as they were seen and felt by the Romans and as they were being acted upon by the Roman Empire. In a nutshell this concept incorporates what it meant to be a Roman. *Romanitas*, for that matter, could be seen as a nation of 'Roman-ness' (Ostler, 2007). Legal matters (Roman law), Roman values such as the concept of *gravitas*, but also the education in classical art and literature, are all characteristics that are incorporated in the concept of *Romanitas* (Ostler, 2007). In fact the aspect of education seems to have been one of the most important characteristics, since it also entailed a fluency in the Latin language. Contrary to the Latin that was spoken in daily life and on the streets, namely Vulgar Latin, the Latin used for literature and the classics was Classical Latin. Even in the early times of the Roman Empire it was not self-understood for everyone to be fluent and to be able to read and write in Classical Latin. The acquisition of Classical Latin often came together with the study of Roman literature. However it is important to note that the fluency of both Vulgar Latin and Classical Latin is of near equal relevance to *Romanitas*. What the connection between *Romanitas* to Roman Classical literature shows is the link between the characteristics of *Romanitas* and their inseparability from the Latin language. It can be argued at this point that amongst many of the aspects that characterize *Romanitas*, the Latin language is one of the most important. Hence, it becomes a marker that determines one's identification as a Roman or a non-Roman, an insider or an outsider (Janson, 2004; Ostler, 2007).

The concept of *Romanitas* is of substantial importance in relationship to the spread of the Latin language and the spread of Roman culture. The spread of *Romanitas* and the process of making inhabitants of the Roman provinces Romans is often referred to as the process of 'Romanization' (Hamilton, 1964). Generally seen the process of Romanization can be defined as the distribution and passing on of *Romanitas* to all non-

Romans under the occupation of the Roman Empire. This process obviously becomes most evident in all territories that were conquered by the Roman Empire and became Roman Provinces. Even nowadays, centuries after the decay of the Roman Empire, traces of Romanization can still be read in distant territories from Britain through France to the Iberian Peninsula to eastern areas of Asia Minor to the Danube regions of Eastern Europe and to Germany. Reminiscences of Roman culture that can still be seen are for instance Roman infrastructure and architecture or Roman institutions such as Roman baths or amphitheaters (Janson, 2004). Archaeologically however there are many more findings that point towards the presence of Romans, Roman culture and Romanization. Roman inscriptions, be it on buildings or on items of material culture, are generally seen as a noteworthy indicator of Roman presence (Webster, 2001). Moreover the implementation of Roman administration and the Roman rule were one of the first steps undertaken by the Romans after creating a new Roman province. The transition of a Roman governor, appointed by Rome, with a staff of Romans and one or more garrisons was one of the main administrative moves to control the Roman province from Rome. Moreover the use of Roman names in naming children is another aspect that has often been seen as indicating the presence and influence of Romans (Janson, 2004). Finally and most importantly for the topic of this paper is the existence of a Romance language in a Roman occupied territory. As has been illustrated earlier, there was (and even nowadays is) a intricate relationship between Roman characteristics (*Romanitas*) and the Latin language. Considering that the Romance languages have sprung and developed from Vulgar Latin, it can be said that a Vulgar Latin speaking society is a prerequisite for a European society, which in contemporary times speaks a Romance language.<sup>1</sup>

### **The debate: romanization or no romanization?**

While it is rather easy to find evidences and traces of the Roman times in former Roman provinces, it is not so easy to understand how and in which ways exactly the process of Romanization has taken place in those regions. In fact it is a century long debate that characterizes the speculations and the assumptions on this particular topic.

The process of Romanization with a substantial analysis of the process, was first coined by the British scholar Francis Haverfield in 1905. In his main writing concerning the topic, *The Romanization of Roman Britain* (Haverfield, 1912), Romanization is described as a process of complete acculturation, which entails a linear transfer of values, opinions and cultural practices. Haverfield suggests that the Roman Empire had two distinct strategies for maintaining its empire. Firstly frontier defense was organized and secondly it was aimed at ‘fostering the growth of “internal civilization” within the provinces’ (Haverfield, 1912). This internal civilization process was meant to entail the giving of a new language, material culture, art, urban lifestyle and religion, to all non-Romans in order to make them Roman. It can already be seen that Haverfield’s description of Romanization embodies the homogenization of cultures that were under the rule of the Roman Empire. Haverfield’s analysis of Romanization mainly concentrates on the elites of the to-be-Romanized territories. Haverfield argues that the romanization process was applied in a bottom-down process in which the Romans mainly aimed at spreading their Roman values among the elites of the provinces. Such a concept would have the advantage that the ruling class indeed would be unified and at the same time would operate similarly in terms of how the ruling should take place. Consequently it is described here that political and cultural assimilation were acting hand in hand, with

the final aim of leading to the creation of a unified ruling class. Moreover, considering that the times that are of relevance for the process of Romanization can be described by a hegemonic power with the dominant class being the elites, it seems that directing Romanization at the elites is indeed the most economical method with the greatest benefit. Further it has frequently been assumed that the *plebs* would follow the elites in the adoption of Roman values. Thus *Romanitas* would first be adopted by the elites and would then slowly, but surely, spread to the lower classes of the society. Contrary to this common assumption Haverfield dismisses the notion that the process of Romanization was much less successful among the peasantry whose culture and values survived at a dormant level. (Haverfield, 1912)

In the 1930's it was the scholar R.G. Collingwood, who first challenged Haverfield's model and interpretation of Romanization. As Collingwood pointed out in the case of Roman Britain, it was not a pure Roman civilization that could be found there, but rather a mixture of Roman and Celtic elements. Hence he added the idea of 'fusion' to the concept of Romanization, arguing that the civilization of Roman Britain was neither Roman, nor British, but had become Romano-British. The culture that results from such a process could be described as a hybrid. The added element of fusion, assuming that there are certain elements of the British culture that are being fused with the Roman culture to create new Romano-British elements, is indeed a rather novel one, and has left an important legacy in Romano-British studies in general. However the concept proposed by Collingwood is not without its flaws. The greatest criticism that Collingwood's theory of fusion has seen is that it assumes the fusion of Roman and British cultures to be a problem-free process at all levels of society. Also it is questionable how such a development could be studied without considering the power relations active on this fusion process. The view that advances the idea of a new problem-free, almost natural fusion of both cultures, advances the idea of an egalitarian context of power. In this respect Collingwood's reinterpretation of Romanization in the villages and the peasantry does not differ very much from the one proposed by Haverfield. Again it is being suggested that the process of Romanization among the peasantry was significantly less successful than it was among the elites. Despite the processes of fusion, the nature of the hybridization among the peasantry reveals a culture with uneven relations consisting of 5% Roman and 95% Celtic. Just like Haverfield, Collingwood has repeatedly been criticized in later years for not taking the position of the rural populations into account and of assuming that Romanization was a problem-free linear transfer of cultures without any resistance from any layers of the society. It can thus be concluded that the added element of fusion and hybrid culture proposed here by Collingwood is not as novative as it seems, since it does not represent a shift in focus from Haverfield's model.

This view has been highly criticized by the 'Nativists', who began their counterattacks in the 1970s. The rise of skepticism towards a 'given' civilization had its first origins in North Africa, which is a region that had experienced colonialism by Europeans not long ago. The Nativist model has its main novel point in introducing the notion of 'resistance'. A resistance from the side of the natives that had not found consideration in the models proposed by Haverfield and Collingwood. The British Nativist Model specifically suggests a new type of cultural exchange that should rather be called cultural pretentiousness. It assumes that 'a tactical use of the symbols of *Romanitas* took place in public, but behind closed doors, the majority of Britons declined to become Romans' (Webster, 2001). These theories of resistance are mainly based on facts such as 'the slow intake of

Latin, the rapid demise of towns and the [apparent] Celtic revival in the later empire' (Webster, 2001). Although this model takes into account the power dynamics active in the processes of acceptance or rejection of a culture imposed on to the natives of the country, it disregards an important aspect, as Collingwood points out, namely the existence of Romano-Celtic hybrids. Nevertheless the most significant legacy that was left by the Nativist counterattacks, and that was later on picked up by the scholar Millett, is the active role of the indigenous in the constitution of a post-conquest culture. Recently, Martin Millett has reworked Haverfield's initial model and developed a renewed model of Romanization. In contrast to Haverfield's model, Millett's model offers two new advances. Its first contribution is his emphasis on the indigenous population and their active role in the hybridization process of Roman culture. The second important point he raises is that the native elites emulated Roman material culture in order to reinforce their social position. On these grounds, Millett's model is referred to as the "native-led emulation" model. Both advances are in compliance with Haverfield's assumption that the adoption of Roman symbols and *Romanitas* was firmly in the hands of the elites. Another important element that is being added to Romanization studies through Millett's model is the question whether the process of Romanization was deliberately supported by the policies of Rome and what Rome's involvement in this process was in general. Without elaborating the extensive debate on this topic, we could argue that according to Millett the process of Romanization is the 'result of accidents of social and power structures rather than deliberate actions' (Millett, 1990 in Webster, 2001). It is evident that Haverfield's model and Millett's model are similar to a great extent, since Millett's model takes Haverfield's model as a foundation. Though Millett's model gives the impression of a shift in focus, this cannot be demonstrated. The primary concerns of both models remain the same: both focus on the relationship between native elites and Rome instead of including the peasantry into this relationship, and the belief that the impetus for provincial change was an emulation of Roman culture. Woolf highlights the problems of this argument by drawing attention to the possibility of a 'strategic' use of symbols amongst the natives. 'Part of the reason why Roman culture was widely adopted by provincial elites and would-be elites might lay in the fact that 'those Roman aristocrats who had taken on themselves the burden of regulating civilization had defined Roman culture in such a way that it might function as a marker of status, not of political or ethnic identity'. This aspect of relating *romanness* to a social status rather than political or ethnic identity is a notion that can also be found in the Nativist's model. Reflecting on all these, it becomes evident that all but the Nativist model describe the Roman culture as a superior model, whose adoption would be beneficial for the indigenous population. This is a paradigm of 'Romanization as civilization' and it resonates with the later practices and policies of colonialism. The way the relationship between Romans and natives is being exemplified bears resemblance to the power relations between colonizer and colonized. Richard Higley correctly points out what the most evident and important criticism on theories of Romanization is. He asks whether or not the models of Haverfield and Millett say more about 19<sup>th</sup>-century perceptions of European colonial culture and government than they do about the Roman world? (Woolf, 1995) The answer would be 'very likely'. The beliefs and views of sociologists or anthropologists become projected onto the society and people the scholar observes. The fact that the observation is about the past, as is the case with the cultural exchange of the Romanization process, is no obstacle to such methodological fault lines. Furthermore Haverfield's model and his writings are based on his belief that the values of the Roman civilization entail and mediate the values of the modern Western world. As we know, this view is particularly

cherished by the association of ancestry with the Romans, that many European scholars share. Moreover, it should be kept in mind, that many assumptions and arguments shared by Haverfield and his followers, such as the cultural superiority and the problem-free transmission and adoption of Roman culture, should be seen in the context of those scholars' own belief systems, which in turn were very much shaped by the values and assumptions of the colonial period.

To sum up, there are three main problems within the models proposed by Haverfield, Collingwood and Millett. Primarily, the peasantry, which was exposed and covered with a thin layer of Roman civilization in hope to be Romanized, was the least Romanized stratum of all social layers. Secondly, it is being assumed repeatedly that the rustic poor did not have any choice or say in accepting or rejecting the imposed culture by the Romans. Thirdly and finally, the process of Romanization is seen as welcomed and smoothly accepted by the natives without any resistance at all.

Finally, there has been one other model proposed by Jane Webster (Webster, 2001), taking a new stand to the topic of Romanization. The main argument of this model is that the societies that emerged in the Roman provinces should essentially not be seen and described as *Romanized* but rather as *creolized*. As already becomes evident from the terminology used, Webster here extends the concept and model of Creole language development to the study of material culture. She proposes the extension of this model saying that 'like Creole languages, Creole material culture represents not the gradual replacement of one way of life by another, but the blending of both, in a clearly non-egalitarian social context.' All the criticism given on the pre-existing models of Romanization are taken as a base for the extension and further development of the Creolization model by Webster. A particular focus is thereby given to the question of how and with what success Romanization operated at lower social levels. This of course is one of the main points of analysis that has been rather neglected by the other scholars. By taking this focus she also proposes a general shift of focus from the elites to other social groups such as the urban poor, the rural poor and even the enslaved. Moreover, she argues that it is impossible to understand what it meant to be a provincial subject of Rome without being fully aware of the social conditions of such a position. The social conditions are shaped within the context of asymmetric power relations in which the process of *Creolization* takes place. Webster uses the example of Romano-Celtic hybrid gods to illustrate her proposed model of *Creolization*. The argument that the research of Roman *Creolization* should be based on studies of the everyday material culture, which entails artifacts such as pots, clay pipes, recipes etc., shows some parallels with the way the emergence of Creole cultures in the Americas is studied.

## Conclusions

To sum up, it can be said that the debate on *Romanization* is by far not over yet. Although there are many similarities between the various standpoints of the scholars of this debate, there are also significant disagreements among them on the nature of this process. The dominant models in the research of *Romanization* are still based on the idea of a one-sided process of acculturation, despite scholars like Webster 's rightful calls for a shift of focus. This focus shift should not only be about the directionality of the influences, but also be a shift about the social group on whom the analysis concentrates. Although, evidentially, it is methodologically easier to study the elites because of the

available material and evidences, it should be kept in mind that the elites represent the smallest percentage of the population. A shift in focus to the urban poor, the rural poor and even to the enslaved could at least provide a more representative analysis of the population (Webster, 2001).

The analogy with the development model of Creole languages to material culture is however more problematic. Although it is clear what Webster means by this transfer and how she applies the linguistic model to material culturality, she is not very clear about the concrete linguistic consequences of the *Creolization* of the Roman provinces. Furthermore it is not apparent, whether or not the cultural exchange in the Roman provinces went according to the model of Haverfield, Collingwood, the Nativists, Millett or Webster. To my opinion, it is difficult to generalize one model or the other to all the provinces of the Roman Empire. It seems that every province should be taken into consideration individually with their own specific social, political and ethnic conditions and circumstances. Otherwise, it is always possible to find at least one province in the Roman Empire that would fit to each proposed model. Hence none of the models can be generalized as a fit to all provinces of the Roman Empire.

To conclude, *Romanization* debate has an important linguistic relevance. This debate addresses and deals with the cultural interaction of the natives of the Roman provinces with the Roman population and culture. One important factor expressing belongingness to *Romanitas*, the carrier of Roman culture, has always been the Latin language. The way, in which the Roman culture was being accepted, adopted, rejected or resisted, does also provide us with information about how the Latin language was viewed, accepted, rejected or resisted in the provinces. On the basis of the complex relationship between culture, ethnicity, identity and language, we could argue that the debate of *Romanization* is too important to be neglected in the linguistic analysis of the Historical Romance Linguistics of Vulgar Latin.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Most evidently it is not being argued that there are no regions in the world that speak a Romance language and did not speak Vulgar Latin before. Such territories exist in various places, one shall only consider South America, but the Romance languages in those countries are a consequence of colonialism and not a gradual development from Latin in relationship to the Roman Empire. What is being referred to here are the former Roman territories and provinces.