

Romanian, English and our Roman Ancestors¹

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Abstract

This essay traces the Latin origin of the Romanian language and compares it with the Latinate root of the English language. The two countries represent the westernmost extension, and respectively, the easternmost extension of the Roman Empire in Europe. While Romanian retained its Latin origin from those ancient times, English reconnected linguistically with the Roman times through the Norman occupation and then, via the French language. Consequently, both languages inherited an impressive number of Latin words, though their pronunciation is very much different and their grammar places them in two different linguistic families. The author offers a number of facts, as well as a few linguistic curiosities, and writes in an easy narrative, which hopefully makes reading it a pleasant experience.

Keyword

English, Romanian, Roman Empire, Dacia, Latin, French, Latinate roots

As most people, I remember my parents and grand parents very well. I also know something about my great grand-parents, and going back I learned a lot about my ancient ancestors, the Dacians and the Romans. However, as a native Romanian, I wanted to know more about my relatives. I learned that the French, Italians and the other Romance-speaking nations are close relatives. As more distant relatives, I learned about the Slavs, the Germans, and even about the Celts.

¹ This essay has been inspired by a number of books, articles and television programs read and viewed by this author during many years in the US. Some of these sources are referenced specifically further down. One very good book, authored by Norman Lewis, is *Word Power Made Easy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978). According to this text book modern English adopted over 50 percent of the Latin vocabulary and 30 percent of the classic Greek vocabulary. Lewis explains the origin of such words used in this essay as *dictator, emperor, legion, company, immune, bank*, and others and places them in their historical context. For an in depth study of English, readers should consult, among others, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* by David Crystal (Cambridge University Press, 1996). Most modern American and English dictionaries also offer good insights about the origin of the English words. For precise historic references, the readers should check *Encyclopedia Britannica* or *Encyclopedia Americana* on line or in print. Other good articles can be found in *The World Book Encyclopedia* and *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.

They all passed through Romania on their way going some other places. The Germanic Ostrogoths left Dacia during Roman times and settled in Northern Italy and Western Europe. Most of the Slavs also crossed Romania and settled south of the Danube [1, 342]. As for other relatives, the Bulgarians are sort of step brothers, most of them coming from the same Thracian stock, and the Hungarians are cousins through intermarriage. Then, there were scores of migratory peoples or invading tribes who crossed Romania back and forth going somewhere or nowhere. Some of them, like the Mongols, the Tatars and the Turks, are still remembered. Others have all been long gone and forgotten. They are no longer part of our common memory, but they might have left some traces in our vocabulary.

As a rule, my Romanian ancestors stayed home despite all of their life's vicissitudes. That was until the communist bubonic plague hit us. Then, the Romanians also began to leave the country and slowly they spread all over the world. Only now, I fully understand the Hindu philosophy claiming that at a universal level we are all related. I also came to understand Confucius, who said that "all people are your relatives; expect therefore troubles from them." And trouble was my life with my human relatives.

Early in my life I learned French and Latin and I was impressed by how close basic Romanian was to Latin. Later, I had to learn English and I was impressed again to see how strong the Latinate root of English is. As an American now, I feel even closer to the Romans. Although they have been gone for 1,500 years, they still control our minds with their vocabulary. That was an additional reason for me to search and discover the linguistic roots of my two current languages.

SPQR

Great as they were, the Romans did not start their glorious history as a free nation. Initially, they were under the control of their Etruscan neighbors. After overthrowing the Etruscans, the Romans opted for a public system of leadership called *Res Publica*, sort of public thing, and they entrusted their affairs to two consuls elected annually. *Senatus Populus Ques Romanus*, SPQR, became the official name of the Roman republic and it meant the Senate (Elders) and the people of Rome. The flag of the republic was a post with an eagle on top and the initial letters of the name of the country underneath. The flag was carried in all the Roman wars. They won most of their battles and they lost some, but the Romans definitely won the global linguistic battle. Most of the words used in this paragraph, for example, are Latin words from the Roman Empire.

To defend themselves, initially the Roman armies were formed by volunteers and the officers were better off citizens respected by their peers. Everything was done for the benefit of the republic and for a while it worked as expected. But power and money corrupt and beget more power. Caesar, for example, who was a gifted military leader, defeated the Gauls and wanted to be named emperor. In Latin this is *Imperator* which means just what Caesar was – a military leader. The Roman Senate, however, refused to grant him the title he cherished. Nevertheless, in 45 BC the same Senate named him dictator. The word dictator comes from the Latin *Dico-Dictus*, which means telling others what to do. According to Roman customs, the Roman leaders could be granted the power of dictators only during periods of war. A few years later in the year 30 BC the Senate appointed Octavian Augustus as *Imperator*, thus becoming the first Roman Emperor. At the beginning, only the Senate could confer this title, but later leaders imposed themselves as emperor with the help of the army [1, 13-14].

From Romans to Romania

One of the best Roman emperors was Trajan, Traianus for the Romans, Traian for Romanians, and Trajano for his native Spain. He was actually the first non-Italian emperor. Trajan wanted to put an end to a humiliating treaty between Rome and Dacia and in 101 AD attacked it with a massive force of nine legions [1, 368]. Eventually, Dacia was defeated in 106 and annexed to the Roman Empire. *Deceballus*, Decebal in Romanian, the king of Dacia, committed suicide rather than let himself be captured and dragged to Rome as a trophy. Yet, the Romans cut off his head and brought it to Rome in triumph. Now the Romanians celebrate Traian and Decebal as their venerated and lawful ancestors. Trajan returned to Rome in triumph and rebuilt the Roman forum with gold looted from Dacia. He celebrated his victory for a period of four months organizing various games and shows with 9,000 gladiators and 11,000 wild beasts. Trajan also erected a massive column which is still very well preserved these days. When modern Romanians visit Rome and see the column, they identify equally with both the victims and the conquerors and feel no contradiction in it. What a strange turn of events! As for the newly annexed country, it was renamed Dacia Felix and became a Roman imperial province.

Dacia was abandoned by the Roman administration in 270 AD. For subsequent centuries, the land was invaded by many peoples, but the native inhabitants retained their newly acquired Latin language and a new identity and in time became the Romanian nation of today. Britannia to the north-west and Dacia to the north-east represented the maximum extension of the Roman Empire in

Europe. Thus, one might say that the English and the Romanians are the most distant European Roman cousins. As a matter of fact, many Roman soldiers stationed in England were Dacians and many of the Roman Legions stationed in Dacia were English. As long as Rome was powerful and the Roman armies were strong, the frontiers of the empire were safe. When the empire began to decay and the Roman armies could no longer defend it, England and Romania were the first provinces to be abandoned. (Isn't it strange that Great Britain and Romania represent now the maximum extension of the European Union? Is this another climax of the geopolitical evolution of Europe?)

The Roman Armies

With the passing of time and the need to defend the growing empire, the Roman citizens' army was transformed into the first professional army of the world. At its peak, the Roman Army² had some 400,000 professional soldiers organized in Legions, Cohorts and Centuries. The very word legion comes from the Latin *Legio-Legere*, meaning to choose, as to choose to join the army. A Roman legion had generally 6,000 to 8,000 soldiers and became the standard for the modern military divisions. A legion also had about 10 cohorts, which were further divided into *centuria*. A century had 80 soldiers and was led by a centurion, meaning a professional officer. The century was divided into eight groups of ten soldiers and each group was quartered together in one tent. Some of the soldiers with particular skills were "*imuni*" and had "immunity" for rough drilling and other military obligations. When they did not fight, the Roman soldiers built roads and various public works. The current road signs and indications, including distance markers, for example, are of Roman origin. Everything was centered in Rome, and all roads would lead to the heart of the empire. The soldiers did not have it easy, but they were well taken care of and at the end of the service received land in one of the conquered territories. Also, all soldiers carried a short sword called *gladia* and from it we have the word gladiator. The best soldiers were promoted to the rank of centurions, something like captains today, and they were the backbones of the Roman armies.

There were two Roman legions stationed in today's Romania. One of their soldiers must have been one of my distant ancestors. I am not sure whether I was a Roman soldier or not in those days, but if I was I surely did not fall asleep on duty. If a soldier fell asleep while doing his sentry duty, he was stoned to death. And if a

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Army, accessed on May 25th, 2012.

unit would show cowardice in a war, the unit would be randomly decimated, that means that one in ten soldiers would be killed. I am sure I was not among those decimated.

The Romans were down to earth and their soldiers were practical, but they would not always understand their enemies. In Romania, for example, they conquered the local people and married the local women, but in the end they were conquered themselves and became Romanians. Otherwise, they were action oriented and would not let the abstract world of beliefs interfere with their business. And they encountered this problem in the land of Israel. After conquering Jerusalem, the Romans had a hard time controlling the Jewish people. As good Romans, they had a multitude of deities and many highly visible public statues to venerate them. After defeating the Jews, however, the Romans wondered how can one control a people that worship an invisible God? Just a few hundreds years later, the Romans themselves were conquered by an invisible God. Since those years, the world has evolved a lot, and this is the point I wanted to make with this long linguistic introduction... Evolution!

From Latin Directly or via French to English

To my amazement, ever since I began to learn English I realized that I could understand most of the words through their Latin roots. Pronunciation, however (*Pronuntare* in Romanian), was a completely different story. Later I found out that the vocabulary of a pre-school English speaker is 80 percent of Germanic origin and 20 percent of Latin origin. But, by the time he graduates college, his vocabulary is 80 percent of Latin origin and only 20 percent of Germanic origin. That speaks volumes!

The Romans still control our thinking even from their graves. How would we think or speak today without the Latin vocabulary of yesteryears? Just think about the word "Evolution" and its related family... revolution, involution, convolution, Volvo as an elegant Swedish car, revolver as an American gun, and God knows what else. It all started with the Latin *volver*, meaning to turn, but with a preceding "re" as in re-peat, it made "revolutionary" changes in our modern vocabulary. Is English the Latin of today and are the Americans the Romans of yesteryears? As an American citizen for many years and as a native Romanian with part of my roots in Rome I feel related to both.

I do not want to press the issue of genetic make up, but linguistically I have a strong point. Just think about pressing; we can press an issue, impress a teacher,

compress a statement, or repress an uprising. With a simple combination of letters and a basic Latin word we can transform everything. We can form a good sentence, can reform a system, can transform the world, and can even “terraform” an alien planet. However, we have to be careful. Im and in, as examples, represent the same thing in Latin, but we imprison a bad man and inter a good one. The same is true with Con, Com, and Col, all of them meaning “with” or together, as in confederation, common, and collective. Take the English word company, for example. Pan in Latin is bread, so company is the place where the soldiers break bread together.

Many basic words may be of Saxon (Germanic) origin, but a lot of common derivatives are Latin. Take, as examples, brother and fraternity, sister and sorority, father and paternity, and mother and matrimony. It seems that the basic vocabulary was of Germanic origin, but when more elevated notions had to be expressed, English became Latin. We may see the moon every day, but we speak of lunar phases; we may see the light at the end of the tunnel, but we refer to luminosity; and if not careful one may lose his head through decapitation. It looks like the Germans could not think beyond their immediate material world. They may have plowed the land, but what did they cultivate if they took the word cereals much later from Latin? Linguistically speaking cereals comes from Ceres, the Roman Goddess of crops. Cereals are nutritious food, but Cerealogist is a new word for those who study crop circles and their meaning. How would we speak English without these Latin words?

Starting with a single word, or commencing to speak more Latin, we have created hundreds of related words, ideas and concepts. Some of them have retained the initial meaning or nuance, but others have changed completely. They moved from annotations to ad notations and connotations. Take the word part, for another example. We can impart our knowledge to the rest of the world, or can depart totally from the meaning of the word. We can have a party and invite our friends over for a good time or we can organize a party for political participation. We can also divide ourselves with partitions or become very partisans in our attitudes. Yet, I like very much the word *Pater-Patris* because it gave us patria, as pro-patria, patriotism, patrimony, paternity, our old patriarchs, and many others. By the way, patriarch combines Latin with Greek, another language that greatly influenced our modern English.

It has been estimated that modern English has appropriated 50 percent of the basic Latin vocabulary and up to 30 percent of classic Greek vocabulary. The enrichment of the English language was done by the sages of the past who

knew several languages and who also wrote in Latin. The enrichment also occurred through French, which was the official language of England for some 200 years. By the time the modern British nation was formed, English was already the richest and most sophisticated language in the world. But it was America that took it over and made it the global language of today.

Modern American English

Eighty percent of all electronically stored information is in English, and the United States has had a crucial impact on the electronic world. There is practically no way to communicate in the era of globalization without speaking English and using Latin words. With tremendous creativity and openness of mind modern American English has appropriated thousands of words from all the languages it came in contact with. The result is that the language has now about a million words. Learning them all is an impossible challenge and I gave up after getting to recognize some 20,000 of them. How many I use is a different matter, but my dormant and recognition vocabulary is considered to be high.

Native English is spoken now by some 800 million people, but the number of non-native speakers is about three times higher. David Crystal, a modern linguist, is sure that the non-native speakers of today will shape the English language of tomorrow. That makes me glad because if in the past many native speakers smiled at my accent, in the future I will probably make fun of theirs. Well! Sometimes the conqueror becomes the conquered. If all languages are works in progress and if our vocabulary represents the depth of our knowledge, we have to keep on learning. As for the English of tomorrow, if geography tends to break us apart linguistically, instant communication and the process of globalization are drawing us together.

As for the vocabulary, the most commonly used English words are still of Germanic origin, but once we depart from the root we start to speak English using a multitude of Latin words. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, the most common word in English is “a” as a man or a woman. Otherwise, the definite article “the” is the most common word. Other than that, the most frequent content words are “say” and “man,” with man representing both genders. From another point of view, nouns account for 26 percent of all English words while verbs account for 18 percent. Verbs are extremely important. They give life to our inner thoughts, express action and articulate our ideas. We cannot really speak without moving around our verbs. Interestingly, one of the Romanian words for language is

“*limba*”, as limb, which means tongue. Another interesting Romanian word is *vorba* (word) which comes from the Latin *verba* (verb). Well! Try to speak without verbs (*vorbe*) and without moving your tongue.

From another perspective, it has been estimated that one needs to know about 3,000 words to reasonably understand 80 percent of modern English texts. Nevertheless, Charles K. Ogden, a 20th Century American linguist, claimed that he could express virtually everything with only 850 words. This is pushing the linguistic envelope. Actually, it is compressing it. One of the most common books in English is the Bible. King James Bible is written with 6.000 words and the reader does not miss any thought or idea because of limited vocabulary. Then, the “richest” English writer is William Shakespeare, who used about 34,000 words. It has been calculated that current writers use around 15,000 to 20,000 words. The rest of the American English dictionary is either dormant or is made up of specialized vocabulary.

Modern English uses countless words borrowed from other languages and at the same time it coins continuously new words. For example, if as physical beings we have fingerprints, as spiritual beings we should have “*soulprints*”, and I coined a new word. Some of the new words are short lived, but others stay in use for ages. When we “telephone” someone we may not speak Greek, but we surely call the device by a Greek name which in translation means distant sound. If we go to a concert and listen to a philharmonic orchestra, we hear the music through the Greek words that is “love of music”. It may sound Greek to us, but not if we learn the basic Greek words. And if we read the Bible, we actually read a... book. The list is almost endless and it covers a lot of ground especially in science and in medicine. But we use Greek words in our everyday language as well. A hippopotamus is a river horse and a rhino is a big nose-horn. Then, there are the prefixes that like their Latin counterparts change everything. We take something normal, change it into “*para*” normal, and end up in “*meta*” physics. What a language!

Modern American dictionary encompasses words from all over the world. Coffee³, for example, comes from *Kafa*, the Ethiopian province where coffee originated. I can vouch for it because I was there. The very word bank, apparently the most American institution, come from the Italian *banca*, the harbor benches on which the Genovese businessmen sat down while waiting for customers. Strangely, when I visited Genoa the ad-hoc bankers were no longer there. Maybe they changed their business. Or, they might sit now inside on a divan, which is Turkish

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coffee>, accessed on June 1st, 2012.

for sofa, or somewhere outside on a hammock, which is an inviting device of Amazonian origin.

Other foreign words have changed their meaning. Baroque, for instance, is now a style, but in Portuguese it means unpolished stone. We do not like satraps, but in Farsi or Persian it simply means governor. And what about the Gaelic word glamour? It is something that dazzles us, but few people know that it is a transformation of the word grammar.

As for Romanian words I only found *Hora* in English, which is definitely of old Thracian origin although some dictionaries claim it is a Jewish word. And I would like to add a final linguistic note regarding the origin of some Romanian words. *Suflet*, for instance (soul in English) is probably closer to its natural meaning than in any other Latin-root language. Indeed, God blew (*a suflat*) in Adam to bring him to life. *Inima* (heart in English) is also a beautiful Romanian word because in Latin “Anima” means movement, which is a life essential. And *Barbat* (sort of beard bearer) is also a unique Latin-root Romanian word. On the other hand, I was struck by some other linguistic curiosity as well. In Spanish, for example, *muneca* means doll, somehow similar to *maneca* in Romanian, which is the arm of a shirt. And I remember people making dolls of such shirts’ arms. Another Spanish word, *boca chica* (meaning small mouth), is very similar to the Romanian *bucatica*, a small bit. And what is the origin of the Romanian word *Perna*? In Spanish *pierna* means the upper part of the leg, a soft part of the body that could be used as a pillow by your partner. Well, I do not want to challenge the origin of the Romanian vocabulary. Etymology is the linguists’ domain.

As an amateur linguist though, on many occasions when I did not have much to do in Africa, I passed the time by reading the dictionary. It is a fascinating undertaking, albeit a difficult one. I figured out that it would take me over a hundred years to absorb the English-American dictionary. That will be well passed December 2012. Definitely, I am going to ask God for an extension of this deadline. We have so many things to do, to see, and to learn here on earth that there is no reason to hurry to go anywhere else.

References

Specific Sources:

- 1 *The World Book Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, vol. 8, vol. 19. Chicago: Scott Fetzer Company, 2012.