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The Curious Origins of the Romanian Language

Sometimes, it's even hard for *me* to believe that I first stepped foot in Romania was twenty years ago.

I still have a lot of great memories from those days, I really do.

Romania was a lot *happier* of a place then.

And one thing that several people that I met on that first visit *happily* shared with me is that the Romanian language is the most Latin of all modern languages.

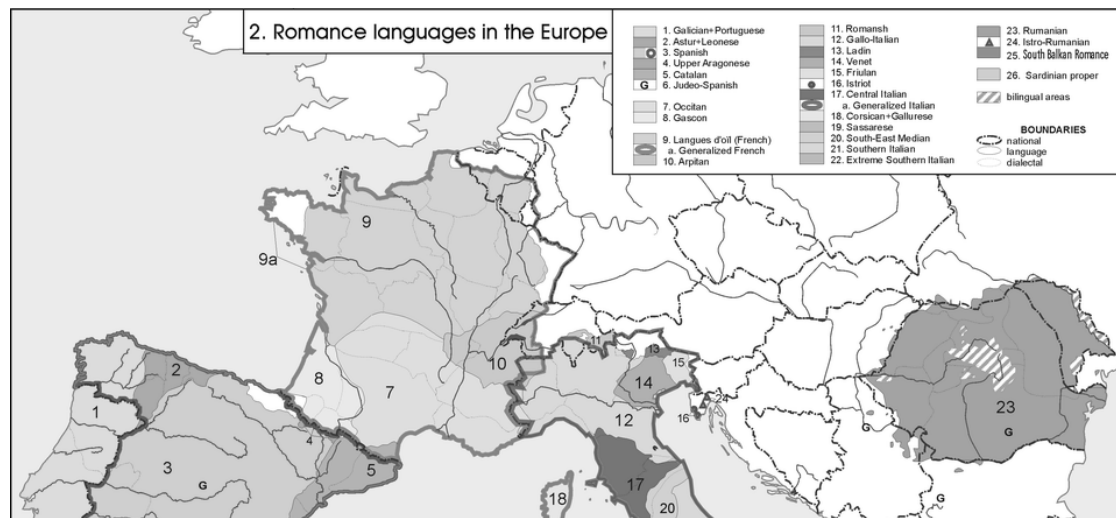
In other words, out of the dozens of Neo-Latin or Romance languages, Romanian hews closest to the original Latin.

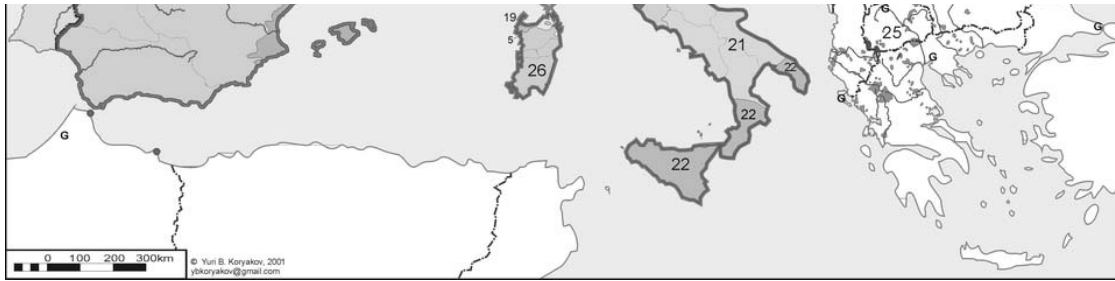
I've since been assured by multiple reliable sources, including my own wife, that this fact is, indeed, true.

And that is extremely weird, indeed.

Beltsy

Here's a map of Romance languages.





The gold part in the east (right-hand side) is the Romanian bit.

The first thing you'll notice is that there's a big gap between the Romanian part and all the others.

Linguistically, this is referred to as the gap between Western Romance languages (blue, yellow, orange, green) and Eastern Romance languages.

And there's only one Eastern Romance language: Romanian.

In this case, "Romanian" refers to a family of languages. The official language of Romania (the country) is deemed Daco-Romanian but there are others, including Aromanian.

If you look at the map closely, you'll see that there are gold dots splashed in several places. In modern terms, these "gold" areas are Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Greece, and Albania.

So why is there a gap between West and East? And how did those gold areas come to exist?

Tenacious D

Here's where it gets tricky.

There are no written records to rely on, so we can only intuit the truth.

The official story is that the Ancient Romans, as part of their imperial expansion, conquered those gold areas militarily. This led to Latin being spoken throughout the local population.

This population enthusiastically abandoned their own language (Dacian) and embraced

Latin and swore to never speak anything else.

They had the chance to prove their commitment when the Roman Empire shrank and then collapsed.

Then there was no one to speak Latin to.

Soon, the gold areas were overrun by a succession of different peoples, including but not limited to Goths, Cumins, Slavs, Turks, Hungarians, Sarmatians, Germans, and Greeks.

Not one of those rulers spoke Latin or a Latin-based language, yet the gold areas held on to their Latin.

Meanwhile, back in the city of Rome, and the rest of Italy, and all the other places where Ancient Romans had ruled a lot longer, the local population just couldn't quite manage to hang onto their Latin.

Languages can be a really slippery fish sometimes, you know?

Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, and Switzerland were all speaking garbled Latin within just a few hundred years of the collapse of Rome.

Only the gold areas managed to preserve their Latin.

Furthermore, the gold areas managed to do so *in spite of* being ruled by foreign princes who spoke unrelated languages.

And the reason they did that is they just loved Rome and Roman stuff so gosh darn much. That's why they called themselves "Romanians" after all.

What an astounding story!

Pannonia

If you look at that linguistic map one more time, the land that forms the gap between the Western and Eastern halves was what the Ancient Romans called the province of Pannonia.

Today, it starts in western Hungary (Lake Balaton) and goes through parts of ex-Yugoslavia and Austria.

Pannonia was a very wealthy and important province for the Romans. The ruins of its capital Carnuntum are still a major tourist attraction. It was also part of the Roman empire for centuries longer than the “gold” areas on the linguistic map.

So why is there not a single remaining shred of Latin being spoken in Pannonia? Why did all of the people there give up their Latin for Hungarian, German, and Slavic languages?

You could ask the same question about Ancient Rome’s territories in North Africa. They were once the “breadbasket” of the empire and Latin made people rich. But nobody there today speaks a Romance language either.

Linguists will tell you that what happened in Pannonia is the norm. When a people get conquered, they slowly but surely adopt the language of their conquerors.

It happened in Britain. There are Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Norse, Latin, and Norman French words throughout the English language as a result of invasions.

It’s not Britain or Pannonia that are the outliers. It’s Romania that’s the anomaly.

Last In, First Out

Even stranger, modern-day Romania is where Ancient Roman rule lasted the shortest amount of time.

“Dacia Felix”, as the province was known, lasted from the year 106 CE to around 275 of the Common Era. That’s around 170 years.

Britain, on the other hand, was formally annexed in the year 43, and the end of Roman rule came in the year 410. That’s 367 years or more than double the amount of time of Roman rule in Romania.

Yet Romania clung on to its Latin identity and language when Britain couldn’t.

France, Spain, Portugal, and all the other places that now speak Western Romance

languages were also under direct Roman rule for far longer than Romania was.

But they also couldn't quite manage to maintain the purity of the language.

Very odd.

A Classical Charade

When we say "Latin" today, we're actually referring to two different languages.

They weren't known by these names by people in Ancient Rome, but today we refer to them as "Classical" Latin and "Vulgar" Latin.

Classical Latin was what was used for statues, inscriptions, imperial decrees, and laws. It's what all the artists of "high" culture used: writers, playwrights, and poets.

Vulgar Language, on the other hand, is thought of as the "people's" language, the one spoken by soldiers, bakers, cooks, tailors, and slaves.

When Ancient Rome existed, these two forms of Latin existed side by side.

Modern Romanian languages are indisputably descended from Classical Latin. But all the Western Romance languages (Spanish, Italian, French, et al) are descended from Vulgar Latin.

Babel Fish

Within just a couple of hundred years of the end of the (Western) Roman Empire, even kings and bishops were having trouble writing "correct" (Classical) Latin.

Now, it seems fairly commonsensical that once Ancient Rome had collapsed, the tongue spoken by the common people would slowly shift and evolve. The "back story" of French (of all varieties), Italian, etc. is logical.

Forgetting Latin became such an issue that the (Catholic) Church began teaching it to priests to use for religious rituals as well as in assisting kings in writing up contracts, diplomatic letters, and treaties.

It was, therefore, during the Medieval period of Europe that it became known as Classical Latin.

Meanwhile, the “Vulgar” Latin languages continued to diverge and evolve.

By the year 1000, most people in France, Spain, and Italy could not understand what the priests were saying during the Mass, just five centuries after the Roman Empire had come to an end.

But in the Romanian-speaking lands, common people were still speaking “Classical” Latin.

In absentia lucis, tenebrae vincunt

Why would a handful of people on the remote frontier of the Roman Empire hang onto Classical Latin and not the “people’s Latin” spoken by the soldiers who settled it?

Furthermore, Romanians were (virtually) never members of the Catholic faith. Orthodox Christianity always used Old Church Slavonic (a Slavic language) or Greek in its services until modern times.

So it wasn’t the priests and the church that were preserving the “high” formal Latin of the poets and playwrights in Romania.

And nothing can seemingly explain why the local Dacians so eagerly gave up their language for (Classical) Latin and then decided that they’d never, ever, EVER adopt another language.

So where can we find some answers?

Lacunae

The first place to start is by looking at the [Dacian language](#), the one spoken by the people of “Romania” before they adopted Classical Latin.

Unfortunately, there are zero written records of it. Nobody anywhere knows what alphabet it used, if at all, or how it sounded.

Some linguists say that Dacian was a dialect or sub-language group of Thracian. But Thracian, too, has no written record, and we know almost nothing about it.

Others say that Thracian was a dialect of Dacian. Or maybe both Dacian and Thracian were descended from or related to Illyrian. But there are no records of Illyrian either.

A few Romanian scholars over the years have attempted to come up with a list of known “Dacian” (aka Illyrian or Thracian) words, but it’s an educated guess at best. And there are only a few dozen of them in use today by the Romanian language.

In other words, we know almost nothing about Dacian. We don’t even know what other language families it might belong to.

And therefore we have no idea why the locals would’ve forsaken it wholesale and adopted Latin.

And we definitely don’t know why it was Classical Latin and not the Vulgar Latin preferred literally everywhere else in the Roman Empire.

Latin’s Back Story

The Latin that was spoken in Ancient Rome also has a mysterious back story.

If you look at the documentary record, there are a few scraps of something called [Old Latin](#) nowadays.

And then, BOOM! Classical Latin appears on the scene, fully formed and ready to go.

One minute, there’s barely any writing at all in Rome, and then every statue and document is being written in perfect Classical Latin.

The conventional wisdom is that the original Romans had no alphabet so had to resort to mimicking some crude runes to write their language (Old Latin).

But then they encountered the Greeks, loved their alphabet so much that they quickly put it into use (after modifying it), so that’s why there’s an explosion of written (Classical) Latin starting around 75 BCE.

And throughout, the language was more or less the same Latin.

Of course, it is extremely odd that the other peoples living on the Italian peninsula spoke completely different languages such as Etruscan, which was spoken both to the north of Rome and south of it.

Summing it all up, Latin's official back story is that it originated in Rome, but it took a few hundred years to get an alphabet going.

Furthermore, this Latin was Classical Latin, which only a tiny minority of people used. Meanwhile, a parallel version of the language "arose" called Vulgar Latin which was used by the common people.

Classical Latin was used for writing while Vulgar Latin was almost never written down.

O U I C

Changing tack for a moment, let's further consider how weird it is that Romania used to be written "Rumania" in English.

But where that that "u" come from?

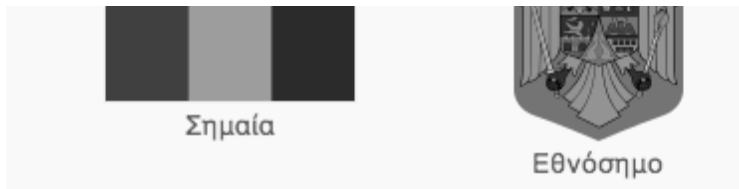
If you actually sound out how Romanians say the name of their country, the closest phonetic spelling in English would be "Romunia" because that first "a" is actually a deep "uhhh/oooh" sound.

Therefore, we know that the "Rumania" spelling isn't phonetic.

It's actually from French (Roumanie) by way of Greek.

Here's how you say "Romania" in modern Greek today:





Roumania

If you had a time machine and went back to visit Constantinople during the Byzantine Empire (also known as the “Eastern Roman Empire”) and asked people in which country they lived, they would’ve said “Ρουμανία.”

Yes, that’s right. They would’ve said, “I live in Romania.”

The term “Byzantine” was made up centuries later, and no one living there contemporaneously would’ve ever called their empire that. No.

To them, the name of their empire was “Romania.” And the language they spoke was Greek, so they spelled it Ρουμανία.

Interestingly enough, this Romania (Byzantium) did not encompass any lands that compose modern-day Romania except for a tiny section in the southeast known as Dobruja.

So now you know that the modern country of Romania has a Greek name, but the people speak a Latin language.

An Interesting Hypothesis

Not everyone agrees with these origin stories for Romanian and Latin.

One interesting idea that I heard was that it’s Romanian which is the *original* language and that Classical Latin is descended from *it*.

In other words, Romanian came first, Classical Latin second.

I know that’s a really strange hypothesis, but it does resolve a lot of the nagging mysteries quite nicely.

Wait, Hear Me Out

Let's just imagine that it's true – Classical Latin came from (ancient) Romanian. How would that play out?

First, it solves the question of why Romanian speakers managed to hang onto the language after all this time.

If it's their original language, it makes sense that they'd preserve it, especially considering just how many different peoples invaded and briefly conquered Romania over the centuries. If your occupiers and their languages are always changing, it's easier to preserve your native language.

Imperative Was the Case That They Gave Me

If Romanian came first, it also explains why it preserved the “more difficult” parts of Latin grammar.

Romanian and Classical Latin share a number of similar grammar constructions that Vulgar Latin and Western Romance languages do not.

The most prominent of these is noun cases.

Romanian and Classical Latin modify nouns in a manner similar to how Spanish and English modify verbs. Nouns are “conjugated” so to speak, in order to fine-tune the order of the words in a sentence.

That's a whole extra step that Vulgar Latin and neo-Latin languages like Spanish skip right over.

Furthermore, Classical Latin doesn't use “articles” (like “the” in English or “la” in Spanish, Italian, et al) but Vulgar Latin does.

Modern Romanian does, too, after a fashion, but it's not essential in most sentence constructs. And when an article is used, it's appended to the end of a word instead of in front of it as a stand-alone word.

So if Romanian were the original version of Classical Latin, it now makes a lot more sense how illiterate peasants managed to deftly preserve it for 1,800 years.

But How Did Romanian Get to Rome?

People had been living in Rome since the Bronze Age.

So how did it grow from a couple of hills on the side of a river to a mighty empire?

Any Ancient History professor could expound upon that answer for an entire semester, but the short version is that, somewhere along the line, the people in Rome started activity encouraging immigration.

According to Virgil, this immigration started when a Greek-speaking man (Aeneas) who grew up in a city just down the road from the future Constantinople (capital of “Roumania”) arrives with some colonists in Rome.

These “merchant warriors” then started a deliberate policy of actively encouraging immigration.

This was in complete contrast to the other kingdoms on the Italian peninsula, so it wasn't long before Rome's population swelled.

Interestingly, many of the immigrants that formed that original “core” Rome came from areas that would later be formally ruled by the Roman Empire centuries later.

Within short order, the immigrant-rich city of Rome then conquered all of its neighbors and unified them under a series of kings that ruled for several hundred years.

This certainly explains how ancient Romanians could've gotten to Rome. But it doesn't explain why Romans spoke Latin instead of Greek.

Calling Zorba

There are two famous Ancient Roman sources that state that Rome was founded by Greeks. One is the aforementioned Virgil and the other is Strabo.

The story about Romulus and Remus came much later.

If you remember, Romulus and Remus were two brothers. In the story, they're raised by a

wolf but then later go onto found Rome by building a “city” (palace) on two hills.

The two brothers then fight and then Romulus murders Remus.

This story seems to parallel a real case of two brothers, one named Flavius Valens and the other Valentinian.

Valens was the Emperor of the eastern (Byzantine) half of the Roman Empire and Valentinian was the Emperor of the western half. Although they didn't murder one another, they did rule at a time when the empire was being torn between the eastern Greek part and the western Latin part.

In Latin, “Valens” means “strong” or “courageous”. In Greek, this is “romos.” And *romos* is the root word for both “Rome” and “Romanian” in Greek.

The story of Romulus and Remus was first recorded by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek man who was writing in Greek. The story was then translated into Latin, but the names weren't.

Balkan Sprachbund

Linguists term it the Balkan Sprachbund, which refers to a collection of grammatical and syntactical features shared in common spoken by people in the Balkans today.

The languages in the “sprachbund” include Romanian (all versions, including Aromanian), Greek, Macedonian, Bulgarian, and Albanian.

Albanian has its own interesting origin story that I don't have time to get into, but just like Dacian, nobody is quite sure where it came from.

One consensus is that Albanian is a version of Illyrian, the language that is related to (or identical to) Thracian and Dacian.

And we know for a fact that Romanian speakers can still be found today in parts of Albania. The same is true for Macedonia and Bulgaria as well as Greece.

So what if they're all, at least partly, descended from the same source language?

It's certainly possible. They're all Proto-Indo-European languages after all.

Two Parallel Systems

But what explains Classical Latin versus Vulgar Latin?

If we presuppose that Latin came from the Balkans, why were there two concurrent versions of it?

If you've ever seen an Ancient Roman inscription in (Classical) Latin, you'll notice that there are a heck of a lot of abbreviations.



Furthermore, even if you write out all the letters in the words, a Latin sentence will typically use far fewer letters (and spaces) than a sentence in a modern Romance language.

The abbreviations, the numbering system, and the use of noun cases and not articles mean that you can write Classical Latin a lot faster than you can Vulgar Latin.

Therefore, Classical Latin is easier to write (to record information), but Vulgar Latin is

easier to speak.

This leads to the theory that Classical Latin was used by literate traders (who had to keep records) while Vulgar Latin was the language spoken by people who bought and sold goods to/from those traders.

Trade was a huge business in the Ancient World, and people were sailing for thousands of kilometers to conduct it, so it's possible that the founders of Rome were Greek traders looking to expand their territory. This jibes perfectly with Virgil and Strabo's stories.

But where does Romania come into all that?

The Blue Danube Waltz

I think the answer is the [Danube River](#).

It's the second-largest river in Europe. And it runs right through countries that were once part of the Roman Empire.

In fact, the Danube River generally served as the border of the Ancient Roman Empire.

Geographically, the Danube connects the Black Sea to the interior of Europe.

In an era where nearly all heavy goods were transported by ship, this meant that Greek traders (from the islands as well as Anatolia) were using the Bosphorus to get to the Black Sea and then the Danube to move their goods to and from inner Europe.

The Roman province of Dacia Felix was situated along this river as well, the land where the "original" Romanians come from.

It makes perfect sense that Dacians were well situated to participate in regional trade that all moved between the west and east.

Linguistically, moving from Greece through Romania, an ancient shared language could've evolved from a Balkan sprachbund into a trading-customized language (Romanian/Classical Latin).

Continuing to moving west and north along the Danube, these Romanian/Classical Latin speakers could have then passed along the simpler version of the language that became Vulgar Latin to their customers.



red = Danube River

Furthermore, if you look at a map of the Danube River, you'll see that it serves all the "outer" parts of the Roman Empire that couldn't be served either by sea or by rivers originating in Italy.

It's possible then that Classical Latin then incorporated elements of Etruscan and koine Greek to diverge from the ancient and original form of Romanian.

A few hundred years later, Vulgar Latin then splintered into a dozen other languages which later become French, Spanish, Italian, etc.

Modern Romanian then becomes the linguistic oddity that it is today, its true origins puzzling even the greatest linguistic experts.

Conclusion

Absolutely nothing I've said here today is proven, and I could be completely wrong.

But I do think that the conventional wisdom on the origins of the Romanian language needs to continue to be explored.

Not to mention that it's fun to think about

