

Shared Romance features a product of contact-induced language change? Roman republican colonization and language contact in the ancient Italian peninsula

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Why are all of the Romance languages more structurally similar to each other than any of them are to Classical Latin? This paper proposes that radical demographic expansion and rapid Roman colonization of the Italian peninsula in the 3rd c. BC created a situation of language contact between speakers of Latin (imbibed with new social, economic, and military prestige) and native inhabitants, which spurred the creation of a contact variety of “simplified” Latin. It is hypothesized that this reduced variety was maintained in the dialect continuum of spoken Latin and was later exported to the provinces, thus explaining some of the structural features shared by all of Romance that are lacking in Classical Latin. The three objectives of the paper are:

1. Describe the socio-political facts of Roman expansion in 3rd c. BC Italy and show three social criteria (Thomason 2001) favoring contact effects are present.
2. Offer explicit, metalinguistic, and implicit evidence of these contact effects on Latin.
3. Propose a hypothetical model that contact-induced imperfect group SLA gave rise to a “simplified” Latin, the ancestor of early Romance.

First, despite the recent advances in contact linguistics, the colonial situation of the Romans in the Italian peninsula and its possible importance on the history of Latin and Romance have not been given adequate attention. New and detailed information from the fields of history and archaeology shows that the colonization scenario is comparable to those of the early modern and modern periods. Between 338 and 187 BC Rome expanded from a small area in Latium to found about fifty colonies around the peninsula (Salmon 1970) (Figure 1), resulting in an estimated population movement of 400,000 people (Pelgrom 2012) at a time when the total population of Italy is thought to be roughly 4 million (~10% percent of the total) (Scheidel 2008). Native populations used Latin to interact with their conquerors (Adams 2003). Not only was their population movement from the capital to colonies, but as the city of Rome increased in wealth and power there was widespread migration from the colonies back to Rome until 187 BC (Salmon 1955: 71). It is therefore not only possible, but extremely likely that contact effects occurred given the ideal social and demographic environment.

To prove these contact effects, we synthesize evidence of contact-induced features and changes in Latin, drawing primarily on the work of J. Adams (2003, 2007, 2013) who provides documentary evidence of contact and metalinguistic observations by Cicero and others, disparaging this “regional Latin”. Then we present indirect evidence from Romance in support of this hypothesis, building on the work of Goyette (2000), Ledgeway (2012) and others. Specifically, there is a long list of structural features absent in classical Latin that are shared by all of Romance (absence of the synthetic passive system, loss of neuter, reduction of cases, etc.). The Principle of Occam’s Razor would suggest that these features were already present in the spoken Latin that was spread around the Mediterranean, rather than each of them piecemeal completing a universal expansion across the entire Romance world.

We therefore have a situation of contact, evidence of contact, and a list of features that are likely to have existed in the contact variety. These facts and comparisons with better documented situations of language contact suggest that imperfect group SLA gave rise to a “simplified” Latin. This hypothetical contact variety is most similar to Winford’s (2003) definition of a “simplified language” arising from imperfect group SLA, a process documented

in Latin (Adams 2003: 525). This differs from other proposals of language-contact effects on Latin and proto-Romance (Leonard 1978, DeDardel & Wüest 1993, Goyette 2000) in that there is not a complete elimination of synthetic structures, nor is there any pidgin stage when the contact variety would be unrecognizable as a form of Latin. Rather, there is a reduction and simplification of the target language which facilitates its use by an indigenous population who share one substrate language. This simplified Latin existed, possibly “submerged” (Adams 2013: 860), on the dialect continuum of spoken Latin that was exported to the provinces outside Italy in later periods of colonization.

By comparing historical, demographic, and linguistic data on early Roman Italy with better-understood cases of contact variety genesis, this paper proposes that the answer to the question of why the Romance languages are all more similar to each other than any are to Latin is because the main Proto-Romance structures emerged in a “simplified” Latin resulting from imperfect group second language acquisition process in 3rd century BC Italy.

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Figure 1 - Roman and Latin colonies founded in Italy from the early Republic to the Gracchi (Pelgrom 2012: 6)

