

Everyday Speech and Prestige Literacy

“When his sister, a woman of Lepcis, came to him, scarcely able to speak Latin, the emperor was very embarrassed about her, [...] and told the woman to return to her home.”

This anecdote from the *Historia Augusta* about the relationship between the Roman emperor Septimius Severus (r. 193-211 AD) and his family reveals both the linguistic heterogeneity of the Roman Empire and the hierarchy within which languages were arranged. In the Libyan port city of Lepcis, even wealthy families such as Septimius’ spoke Punic. Yet diversity did not mean equality. Upon taking the throne, Septimius entered a court world where Latin reigned supreme and provincial tongues were frowned upon as signifiers of the non-elite.

The history of written Punic further demonstrates this. Originally a prestige language with its own script, by the 1st century AD it was written with Latin characters instead and was in decline in both geographic (later material deriving solely from Tripolitania) and social terms (tombs with Latin texts on the outside and Punic ones on the urns inside suggest a retreat of the latter language from the public to the private sphere) as well as in types of usage (monumental inscriptions ceasing by the 2nd century). Inscriptions clearly evidence a social layer that looked to a Latin language of power to articulate their status, their attempts to render Latin phrases and titles into Punic verbatim often producing faulty syntax. It would be easy to draw the conclusion that the latter language was moribund by the Imperial era. However, surprisingly, the writings of Augustine repeatedly attest to its continuance in the late 4th and early 5th centuries as a vibrant vernacular in a parts of Africa where all other evidence for it disappeared centuries earlier.

In order to understand this paradox the present paper employs an interdisciplinary and comparative approach, applying the anthropological model of *universalization and localization* developed for the study of Indian village communities and their interaction with literary Sanskrit culture (Chakrabarti, Kunal (2001). *Religious Process: The Purāṇas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press). This approach lays bare the prevalence in traditional agrarian societies of local communities with dual identities that saw prestige elements (e.g. the Latin language) employed for high status activities (e.g. lapidary epigraphy) while distinct local phenomena (e.g. a vernacular) flourished for more mundane everyday usages. This prevalence allows for crucial comparisons of the Punic case to similar examples in other communities subjected to imperial rule in pre-modern Eurasia. Thus the articulation by a rural Indian community of a distinct identity that blends Sanskritic borrowings with local traditions is shown as a useful comparandum for the Punic-speaking rural communities detailed in Augustine’s writings. In turn, the comparison provides a framework for structuring the sparse and diverse, yet important evidence for perpetual, low-intensity interaction between local and prestige languages in the Roman provinces and the effect of this interaction on the formation and development of local identities.