

Language and Identity in the City of Rome

In this paper I will combine close sociolinguistic and historical analysis of two important series of bilingual inscriptions from the ancient city of Rome. I will argue that these multilingual inscriptions showcase the close but complicated relationship between language and identity at the heart of the Roman empire. It is in situations of multilingualism that the links between language and identity are most strongly cast into relief; the choice to use or avoid different languages spotlights the links between language and factors shaping identity like origin, social status, migration and imperialism.

My first case study will be the series of 25 inscriptions – in various mixtures of Palmyrene, Latin and Greek – associated with a Syrian community in the south-west of Rome (Chausson 1995 provides the full corpus). These inscriptions have often been poster children for Rome's cosmopolitan identity and high rates of migration, and for the visible link between language and identity in ancient inscriptions. Several are now prominently placed at the entrance to the Capitoline Museum's *Galleria Lapidaria*, the first glimpse that many modern visitors get of the ancient city's epigraphic landscape. However, these inscriptions were in many ways exceptional within the ancient city: the epigraphic display of local languages like Palmyrene was in general rare; and the connection between language and identity in these texts is unusually direct. A close sociolinguistic reading of these inscriptions furthermore reveals their complexities, showing the multiple different aspects and definitions of identity – ethnic, juridical, social, religious – that are being juggled within them. By situating these texts against Rome's wider linguistic and historical landscape I will show how they both conform to, and diverge from, wider patterns of language and identity within the city.

My second case study will shift focus away from language use amongst migrant communities to consider top-down, state-sponsored constructions of language and identity at Rome. I will examine in detail the series of Latin-Greek bilingual dedications by the people and kings of Asia Minor to Jupiter and the Roman people from the Capitoline Hill (*ILLRP* 174–181). There has been substantial debate about the dating of these inscriptions and the form of the monument on which they were displayed, but less attention has been paid to the content and sociolinguistics of the texts themselves. I will argue that these inscriptions clearly show the way that language was manipulated to make pointed and prominent statements about political identity and power; in particular they highlight the relationship between bilingualism and imperial identity.

Between them, these two series of bilingual texts exemplify the varied and complicated configurations of the relationship between language and identity at the heart of the Roman empire: monolingual and multilingual, top down and bottom up. I will argue that linguistic evidence both reflects and shapes wider historical structures of Roman identity: citizenship, slavery, empire, migration.

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