

THE ROMANIAN LANGUAGE YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Renée Nishan
(Baruch College, retired)

Introduction

Mihail Eminescu, the 19th century Romanian poet, said that “a language is a system of measurement for the civilization of a people” and that “if a language was not to reflect the character of its people, then why were there so many languages on the earth?”

The Romanian language is an Indo-European language; it belongs to the Italic group of languages that devolved from Latin such as French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and others. The Romanian language is, however, unique in the sense that in its formation it developed a distinct phonology and a grammar system different from the other Romance languages because it preserved more closely the character of the Popular Latin that circulated through the Roman Empire. Romanian is spoken by over 24 million people mostly in Romania but also in the Republic of Moldova and around the world wherever Romanian communities are established.

When we look at the map of Romania we can see that the most eminent geographical features of the country are the Carpathian Mountains, the Danube River and the Black Sea. Ancient historical records indicate that the territory of present-day Romania as early as the 6th century BC was inhabited by Getae and Dacians. The Geto-Dacian tribes spoke the same language, had the same Thracian origin, and the same culture. They shared between them the Carpato-Danubian area; the Getae occupied mainly the Carpathian plains and the two banks of the lower Danube. The Dacians occupied the mountainous regions of Transylvania, so the Dacians were known to the Romans as a mountain people. Now let us see how and why the Romanian language was formed by examining some events of the region’s history.

History of Romanization

According to scholars the Dacian language was an Indo-European language that developed in the Carpathian region sometime between 3000-1500 BC and was probably extinct by 600 AD. It was spoken in Dacia and the surrounding territories and in Moesia, and it is believed that it was a dialect of Thracian. Strabo, the Roman imperial-era historian who wrote *Geographica* around 20 AD, recorded (VII 3, 14) that the Dacians, the Getae, the Moesians, and the Thracians spoke the same language. The Dacian language is poorly documented. Only one Dacian inscription has been found. Some Dacian names for a number of herbs and medicinal plants may survive in ancient Greek and Latin texts. What is known about the language is from toponyms (place names), hydronyms (river names) and personal names including the names of kings.

During the first century BC King Burebista around 50 BC at the height of his power, united all the Geto-Dacian tribes under his rule. Burebista’s kingdom included modern Austria, Bohemia, Serbia, parts of Hungary, Bulgaria and Basarabia, with its center in the mountains and plateau of Transylvania. There were hostilities between the Romans and the Dacians. Julius Caesar not long before his death contemplated an expedition to the Lower Danube. But after his death the civil wars that erupted postponed these plans to conquer Dacia. Meanwhile, King Burebista’s empire fell because of internal discord and once its union was dissolved Emperor Octavius was able to expel the Dacians from Thracian soil. During the first century AD the Romans consolidated their rule in Thracia and in Moesia south of the Danube and left the Dacians undisturbed on the northern bank of the river. By that time the Dacians

had a new king, Decebalus, who, they say, was a ruler of exceptional merit and a worthy opponent of Roman power.

Under Emperor Titus, hostilities again broke out between Romans and Dacians. After two Roman generals suffered serious losses, a third Roman general, Julianus, forced his way to the Dacian capital of Sarmizegethusa. But since the Roman Empire was facing attacks and defeats elsewhere, Julianus was forced to leave Decebalus and Dacia independent and also agreed to pay an annual tribute in order to purchase immunity from Dacian raids.

When Trajan became emperor this tribute was rejected and the tendency of the Roman Empire to consolidate its borders to the north of the Lower Danube culminated in two fierce wars waged by Emperor Trajan in Dacia. In 101 AD hostilities broke out. Trajan crossed the Danube and after a stubborn resistance he demanded peace in the Dacian capital of Sarmizegethusa. Decebalus was allowed to retain his crown but he had to accept a Roman garrison in his territory and was given a civil adviser. In order to secure easy access and communications with the newly-conquered province, Trajan ordered the construction of a bridge across the Danube just below the cataracts of the Iron Gates, near the town that today is Turnu Severin. After five years, in 105-106 AD, war broke out again. Decebalus was eager to liberate his kingdom and made desperate efforts to shake off the Roman yoke. Trajan was informed by a personal messenger and rushed back determined to crush once and forever any attempts of resistance. He crossed the Danube, forced his way through the Carpathian passes, and after a prolonged siege conquered the Dacian capital. Decebalus was taken prisoner and committed suicide. With the overthrow of Decebalus' kingdom, Dacia was transformed into a Roman province, and because of its riches was called Dacia Felix. In order to immortalize this triumph, the Column of Trajan was erected in Rome. This column is decorated with different battle scenes and has a the bust of Decebalus.

Ptolemy's *Geographia* written a few decades after the Roman conquest of Dacia 105-106 AD defined the boundaries of Dacia. Here there is a consensus among scholars that Dacia was the region between the rivers Tisza, Danube, upper Dniester, and Siret. As a Roman province, Dacia underwent a gradual process of Romanization. The presence of the Roman military resulted in a huge influx of immigrants: soldiers and their dependents, skilled workers, craftsmen, engineers, and merchants. They came from every part of the Roman Empire and they already spoke Latin. Another factor was the incentive for young Dacian men to join the Roman army because after their military service they were granted Roman citizenship and consequently were able to become landowners. Mixed marriages between Roman soldiers and Dacian women were another factor in Romanization.

Around 275-276 AD the Roman Empire was experiencing powerful internal and external problems. There were plagues and repeated invasions by the barbaric tribes such as the Goths, the Huns, and others. The Romans decided to withdraw from Dacia. Thus after almost 170 years of occupation, Emperor Aurelian abandoned Dacia because of the barbaric invasions. In spite of all this, Romanization did not cease because when the Romans withdrew they left behind a significant Roman population that generation after generation in 170 years had established themselves in the Dacian territories. Besides, the commercial ties and dealings with the Roman world also continued so that popular Latin was spoken by more and more people, while the Dacian language by fewer and fewer.

The Romanians and Their Language

Romanization gave rise to a Romanic people, the Proto-Romanians, and as the Romanian people was formed through this amalgamation so was the Romanian language created. The Romanian language has been called by some scholars Daco-Romanian because it derived from late Latin superimposed on a Dacian sub-stratum that evolved in the Roman colony of Dacia after the Roman conquest of 106 AD.

Modern Romanian may contain as many as 150 or 170 words of Dacian origin. Some scholars say that the number is even less. Some examples of words considered to be of Dacian origin are:

child – <i>copil</i>	old man – <i>moș</i>
baby – <i>prunc</i>	fir, pine tree – <i>brad</i>
lip – <i>buza</i>	stork – <i>barza</i>
dowry – <i>zestre</i>	shore – <i>mal</i>
peas – <i>mazăre</i>	to rejoice – <i>(a) bucura</i>

The name for the capital, Bucharest, in Romanian is *București*. And it seems that this name is an example of a word formed from two different linguistic origins. “Bucur” of Dacian origin and “esti” of Latin origin from the conjugation of the verb “to be.”

In the 7th century the Croats and the Serbs arrived in the region of the Balkans. The Bulgars established themselves to the south of the Danube. In its process of formation the Romanian language in the 7th and 8th centuries incorporated a considerable number of Slavic words which have become part of the vocabulary in common use. For example:

field – <i>ogor</i>	yes – <i>da</i>
furrow – <i>brazda</i>	voice – <i>glas</i>
ruler – <i>voievod</i>	weak, thin – <i>slab</i>
nobleman, boyar – <i>boier</i>	happy – <i>vesel</i>
dart – <i>sulița</i>	dear – <i>drag</i>
sword – <i>sabie</i>	to love – <i>a iubi</i>
war – <i>război</i>	to read – <i>a citi</i>

There are also some words derived from Greek, Turkish, Hungarian, German, Italian, and French terms. Lately some words have been borrowed from English, especially words that refer to new technologies. Regardless of all these influences, the main vocabulary of the Romanian language is predominantly of Latin origin. Some examples of Latin words and their derivatives in Romanian are by dropping the last letters like us and um:

Latin	English	Romanian
<i>lupus</i>	wolf	<i>lup</i>
<i>frigus</i>	cold	<i>frig</i>
<i>clarus</i>	clear	<i>clar</i>
<i>aurum</i>	gold	<i>aur</i>
<i>argentum</i>	silver	<i>argint</i>
<i>vinum</i>	wine	<i>vin</i>
<i>periculum</i>	danger	<i>pericol</i>

Phonetic changes: the e and o add an a; the l becomes r

wax – *cera* – *ceara*
 sun – *sole* – *soare*
 salt – *sale* – *sare*

The e becomes ie or e becomes ia

iron – *ferum* – *fier*
 grass – *herba* – *iarba*

The c, k and g become p, b, m next to another consonant such as t.

eight – *octo* – *opt*
 fact – *factum* – *fapt*
 night – *noctis* – *noapte*

Ngu becomes mb and gnu becomes m

language – *lingua* – *limba*
 sign – *signum* – *semn*

Some words and phrases remain unchanged. For example, the English where is *unde* in Latin and Romanian; and they are is *sunt* in both languages. The conjugation of the Latin verb “to be” is: *sum, es, est, sumus, estis, sunt*.

The Romanian conjugation of the verb to be, *a fi*, is as follows:

Eu – sunt
Tu – ești
El, ea – este
Noi – suntem
Voi – sunteți
Ei, ele – sunt

Therefore, the Latin sentence “*Unde sunt*” is identical in Romanian in writing and in meaning with the only difference that in Romanian *sunt* could refer to the first person singular or the third person plural.

The Italian language is recognized as Romanian’s closest relative. They both share many phonetic and morphological similarities. The combination of *ci* and *ce*; *gi* and *ge*; *chi* and *che*; *ghi* and *ghe* appear also in Romanian with the same writing and the same sounds.

English	Latin	Italian	Romanian
peace	<i>pax, pacem</i>	<i>pace</i>	<i>pace</i>
sweet	<i>dulcem</i>	<i>dolce</i>	<i>dulce</i>
circus	<i>circus</i>	<i>circo</i>	<i>circ</i>
ice	<i>glacia</i>	<i>ghiaccio/a</i>	<i>gheață</i>
finger nail	<i>ungla, ungula</i>	<i>unghia</i>	<i>unghia</i>
frost	<i>gelu</i>	<i>gelo</i>	<i>ger</i>
margin	<i>marginem</i>	<i>margin</i>	<i>margin</i>
groan	<i>gemere</i>	<i>gemere</i>	<i>(a)geme</i>
to call	<i>clamare</i>	<i>chiamare</i>	<i>chemare, a chema</i>

During the Middle Ages a Cyrillic alphabet was used for the Romanian language in the principalities of Wallachia (today’s Oltenia and Muntenia) and Moldova. The oldest written text in the Romanian language using the Cyrillic alphabet, like most early Romanian writings of the Middle Ages, is a letter. It is dated June 1521, in which Neacșu of Câmpulung wrote to the mayor of Brașov about an imminent attack by the Turks. It was only in the late 18th century that some Transylvanian scholars adopted the Latin alphabet for the Romanian language. The first book of the Romanian grammar was printed in Vienna in 1780 by Samuil Micu and Gheorghe Șincai. The Cyrillic alphabet, however,

remained in use gradually decreasing until 1860 when the Romanian alphabet was finally officially regulated.

The Romanian spelling is largely phonetic and the alphabet is based on the Latin with five additional letters: *ă, â, î, ș, ț*. Example:

limba română – the Romanian language
în școală – in school
în țară – in the country

The letters *k, q, w, y*, were introduced in 1982 to spell loan words – *quasar, watts, yoga*, etc.

Romanian grammar resembles the Latin grammatical structure so that Romanian is the only Romance language that preserved the declensions. In Romanian the nominative and the accusative cases are identical, but they have one form for the singular and another form for the plural. The genitive and the dative cases are also identical, and they have one form for the singular and another for the plural. The vocative is used only in the singular. The nouns are feminine, masculine or neuter. The definite article is a suffix of the noun, while the indefinite article precedes the noun.

Romanian dialects are spoken mainly outside Romania: Aromenian or Macedo-Romanian is spoken in small communities throughout Bulgaria, Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, and Albania. Megleno-Romanian is used by some speakers in northern Greece, while Istro-Romanian is used in Istria, in Croatia's Istrian Peninsula.

The Romanian Academy, located in the capital, is dedicated to the advancement and cultivation of the national language and literature and to the study and research of scientific literary and artistic domains. It is in charge of the official Romanian dictionary, *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*.

The Romanian language is an Indo-European language that derived from Vulgar Latin and gradually developed in the territories of ancient Dacia after the Roman conquest of 106 AD. The popular Latin by its superposition on the Dacian language gave rise to a new language called the Daco-Romanian.

Although isolated from the Western Roman world, because Romania is a country located on the Balkan Peninsula surrounded by countries where Slavonic languages are spoken, the Romanian language is predominantly Latin in origin. Moreover, the Romanian language in its formation preserved the essential Latin character in its morphology and grammatical structure. People with some classical education will find that their Latin causes them to regard Romanian easier to learn than the languages of Romania's Slavic neighbors.

Works Cited

- Boțșoman, Rodica. *Discover Romanian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture*. Columbus (OH): Ohio State University Press, 1995.
- Breban, Vasile. *Dicționar general al limbii române [General Dictionary of the Romanian Language]*. Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 1992.
- Cătănescu, Maria Cvasnîi. *Limba română::origini și dezvoltare. [Origin and Development of the Romanian Language]*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996.

- Conduiache, Emil and Constantin Davicoviciu. *Archaeologia Mundi: Romania*, eds.. Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1971.
- Coteanu, Ion. *Structura și evoluția limbii române: de la origini pînă la 1860* [*Structure and Evolution of the Romanian Language up to 1860*]. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1981.
- Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* [*Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language*], 3rd edition. Bucharest: Romanian Academy, 2009.
- Doțu, Olga. *Limba română contemporană*. Constanța: Europolis, 1999.
- Elogiu limbii române*, ed. Anatol Ciobanu. Chișinău: Litera, 2011.
- Flaișer, Mariana, ed. *Direcții în cercetarea filologică românească: lucrările simpozionului național* [*Romanian Philological Research Directions: National Symposium*]. Iași: Casa Editorială "Demiurg", 2006.
- Grauer, Alexandru. *Tendențele actuale ale limbii române* [*Current Tendencies of the Romanian Language*]. Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1968.
- Iancu, Victor. *Limbă și rostire românească, ieri și azi* [*Romanian Language and Speech, Yesterday and Today*]. Cluj Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1996.
- Lombard, Alf. *La langue roumaine: une présentation*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1974.
- Oțetea, Andrei, ed. *The History of the Romanian People*, Eugenia Farca, trans. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970.
- Pătruț, Ioan. *Nume de persoane și nume de locuri românești* [*Romanian Personal and Place Names*] Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1984.
- Rosetti, Alexandru. *Schiță de istorie a limbii române de la origini și pînă în zilele noastre* [*Notes on the History of the Romanian Language from its Origins Till Today*]. Bucharest: Albatros, 1976.
- Seton-Watson, R. W. *A History of the Romanians*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1934.
- Șincai, Gheorghe and Samuil Micu. *Elementa linguae daco-romanae sive valachicae* [*The Elements of the Daco-Roman or Wallachian Language*]. Vienna, 1780. Reprint: Cluj Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1980.