

COMPARING LATIN IN ANCIENT WORLD AND TODAY'S ENGLISH: IS LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM A NEW PHENOMENON?

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Some scholars support the existence of a close similarity between the Latin in the Roman Empire and the English in the contemporary world as two imperialistic languages, by resorting to the assumption of a close similarity between the Roman Empire and the today's globalized world. However, an overview on the two historical phenomena shows substantial differences, especially in relation to the role played by the language. During the Roman Empire, Latin was the language of the administration, but on the whole it did not have a notable clout, since the concept of national language was unknown, there was no compulsory education, and nothing comparable to mass-media existed. In addition, it was the cultural language par excellence only in the western Mediterranean, because in the eastern part this domain was occupied by Greek. By focusing on the contemporary globalized society, we can observe that the language plays a crucial role in legitimizing the institutions, and in supporting specific economic powers. In particular, the current English linguistic imperialism is strictly bound to those economic powers that interlock with (and take advantage of) political, military, educational structures and mass-media (as significantly witnessed by the processes of mcdonaldization and coca-colonization). The comparison with the past can be useful for better understanding the negative features of today's linguistic imperialism, that is undermining cultural diversity and social stability, and can in turn suggest efforts able to tackle the overwhelming power of English. Political and economic powers existed also in Ancient Rome, but the legitimization of the state was not founded on language, and the economic actors did not profit from the spread of Latin. Therefore, it emerges clearly that, unlike the ancient times, nowadays the language is systematically used as an instrument of power.