

Sacred Language Ideology within the Roman Imperial Cult from the Second Century BCE to the First Century CE

This paper examines how sacred language ideology within the Roman imperial cult was shaped between the second century BCE and the first century CE. It employs Bernard Spolsky's revised language policy model, which shifts the focus of language policy from top-down approaches, government-centered frameworks to bottom-up approaches that investigate the sociopolitical activities of individual authorities.¹ In his revised model, management agencies are those with formal institutional authority who implement and enforce linguistic norms. Management advocates, on the other hand, are individuals who lack direct power but influence language use by promoting ideological agendas or cultural practices. This distinction is critical for understanding the development of sacred language ideology in the Roman imperial cult.

In particular, this study analyzes the individual authorities of civic elites, local priests, and provincial governors as key figures in the management agencies and advocates of language policy. These authorities made strategic linguistic choices in official inscriptions, liturgies, and ceremonies that reinforced the emperor's divine status. The data for this study includes: (1) Epigraphic inscriptions with divine imperial titles, (2) Numismatic evidence depicting emperors with divine iconography and inscriptions, (3) Civic decrees and administrative correspondence from provincial government to the central government of the Roman Empire, (4) Ritual texts and records from sanctuaries dedicated to the imperial cult, and (5) Ancient literary sources which document imperial cult practices and responses—both positive and resistant.

This study will demonstrate that distinct linguistic ideologies developed in each of the following three regions. First, in the eastern provinces, the imperial cult of the living emperors emerged seamlessly from the long-standing Hellenistic tradition of honoring rulers as gods, a practice that began when Alexander the Great adopted the role of divine Pharaoh in Egypt.² Even during the Roman Republic, local populations in the East honored Roman governors as deities, setting the stage for the later imperial cult. Second, in the Italian peninsula, there was resistance to the practice of worshiping living emperors as gods, which led to a compromise wherein only deceased emperors were granted the divine title, *Divus*. Third, as the Eastern practice gained increasing influence, some provincial governors in the Western provinces began to adopt and introduce these linguistic conventions to local elites.

This study shows that the early imperial cult was rooted not in a policy of Latinization or theological orthodoxy, but in a pragmatic, locally managed adaptation of Hellenistic religious-political discourse. Inscriptional evidence, along with religious and political texts, demonstrates that the widespread use of divine epithets in Greek gave rise to a decentralized sacred language ideology throughout the empire. Historical records show that this sacred language ideology was disseminated through Hellenistic culture, rather than imposed by Roman institutional mandate. In this way, the Roman imperial cult exemplifies how a sacred language ideology, shaped by sociocultural forces, could evolve into a sociopolitical framework that facilitated the rapid diffusion and expansion of linguistic practices across the empire—even in the absence of a formalized language policy.

¹ Bernard Spolsky, *Rethinking Language Policy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

² Fritz Taeger, *Charisma: Studien zur Geschichte des antiken Herrscherkultes* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1957), 1:191–208. Simon R. F. Price, "Gods and Emperors: The Greek Language of the Roman Imperial Cult." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 104 (1984): 81.

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