

Language Contact: The State of the Art
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Reconstructing Language Contact from a Fragmentary Corpus: Oscan and Greek in Italy

The study of language contact in the ancient world has been an area of huge growth over the past ten years. Ancient bilingualism is now understood through the lens of modern language contact - ancient multilinguals are now seen as managing their languages creatively and independently, often playing on the associations of each language to display a mixed or complex identity. From Cicero's letters, to Egyptian papyri, to Roman funerary epitaphs, the bilingual speakers of Latin and Greek have been explored in greater and greater detail. Landmark works in this field are the seminal volumes by Adams (2003 and 2007), but the proliferation of collected volumes – including Papconstantinou (2010), Ruiz Darasse and Luján Martínez (2011), Tribulato (2012), and Mullen and James (2012) – also reflect the depth and breadth of the interdisciplinary work which has been done on language contact in all corners of the ancient Mediterranean.

However, in areas where sources are more limited, scholars have understandably been more hesitant to make sweeping claims about the nature of language contact in an ancient community, even where societal bilingualism is likely to have existed for many centuries. Languages only attested in fragmentary epigraphic corpora have therefore not always received a great deal of attention in historical sociolinguistics, despite these texts representing our best evidence of many of the communities across the ancient Mediterranean. In response to this problem, scholars studying a range of different small epigraphic corpora across the ancient world have started to build up frameworks for interpreting ancient language contact from small or fragmentary corpora of texts.

This paper contributes to this growing methodological framework, adding perspectives from language contact in Southern Italy, with Greek/Oscan contact as a particular case study. Based on research on South Oscan and on-going work tied to the AHRC-funded "Greek in Italy" project, I suggest several refinements for interpreting fragmentary evidence of language contact from an interdisciplinary point of view. Alongside careful consideration of modern linguistic theory and archaeological context, this paper stresses the importance of considering domain and text-type. For example, funerary inscriptions are likely to include bi-version or code-switching texts in areas of intense language contact, but this is much less likely to occur in dedicatory or official texts. The epigraphic habit of areas such as Southern Italy – where funerary texts are rare – should therefore be taken into account in assessing the nature and intensity of language contact. With this in mind, this paper proposes models for the interpretation of language contact and bilingualism in fragmentary ancient corpora, as well as describing the societal and individual bilingualism that existed in ancient Lucania and Bruttium.

References

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