

How Multilingual was Southern Italy?

Individual and Societal Bilingualism in Italy, 800-90 BC

The study of language contact in the ancient world has been an area of huge growth over the past ten years. 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 ancient communities. 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 for many of the communities across the ancient Mediterranean. This is particularly the case for the texts found in Italy, where Latin and Greek texts have taken precedence over texts in Oscan, Messpic, Etruscan, and other languages, such that extensive contact between Greek and the languages of Italy has often been overlooked.

In particular, scholars have not always agreed whether the texts which survive were the work of a small minority of bilingual or multilingual individuals, from among the elite or itinerant craftsmen, or whether Italy was home to profoundly multilingual societies. Whether these texts are the result of individual or societal bilingualism has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of these texts, our analysis of the dynamics of language contact in pre-Roman Italy, and our historical knowledge of ancient societies. This paper argues for wider societal bilingualism than is sometimes acknowledged, using Greek/Oscan contact in the South as a particular case study. Previous scholarship has often homed in on one or two texts from a single site – and when taken in this way, the fragmentary material can be read in many contradictory ways. This paper argues, however, that when taken as a whole corpus supported by historiographical and literary material, the Oscan and Greek texts of Southern Italy give clear indications of widespread societal bilingualism.

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