

Katherine McDonald

Research Fellow in Classics, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge

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*“Reconstructing Language Contact from a Fragmentary Corpus:  
Case Studies from Southern 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.

However, where sources are more limited, scholars have been more hesitant to make sweeping claims about the nature of language contact in an ancient community. Languages only attested in fragmentary epigraphic corpora have not always received a great deal of attention, despite representing a wide range of communities across the ancient Mediterranean. In the past couple of years, scholars studying different small epigraphic corpora across the ancient world have started to build up frameworks for interpreting ancient language contact from fragmentary corpora and fragmentary 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.

One of the challenges facing ancient sociolinguistics at present is the need to create models which explain the effects of language contact on written texts. Ideally, these would be applicable across a wide range of situations, and could be used diagnostically, to reconstruct the social situation from a very limited corpus of texts. This paper argues that, in developing these models, it is important to take into account the types of texts produced, and the types of texts which survive, since these may potentially have a huge impact on how we reconstruct the social and cultural contexts of the written material.

Based on my research on 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. Oscan is a sister-language to Latin, in the Sabellian branch of the Italic language family; it was spoken and written extensively over central and southern Italy from the fifth to the first century BC (and was perhaps spoken into the first century AD). Although the language died out after the Social War because of population movement and the spread of Latin as the main language of Italy, Oscan was the official written language of a large area for several centuries, and was used to write laws, dedications, funerary inscriptions, curses, and many other types of text.

Oscan's contact with Greek was multifaceted. Firstly, in Lucania, Bruttium and Sicily, Oscan was written using an adapted form of the Greek alphabet. The alphabet was not transmitted at a single point – instead, the changes in the alphabet used to write Oscan mirror the changes that were happening in the letters used to write Greek. The ongoing development of the various signs for /f/ and the use of 'extra' Greek characters like chi, theta and phi, which were not needed to represent the sounds of Oscan, can therefore be used as evidence for continual contact between the languages. But we can also see evidence of Greek/Oscan contact in the lexicon and, in some cases, morphology and syntax of inscriptions. There is also considerable Greek influence on the forms taken by different text types – for example, the use of lead sheets to write curses.

Evidence of contact varies across text types: while some types of text, such as curse tablets, show pronounced influence and borrowing from Greek, other genres such as legal or official texts show far fewer contact phenomena, even within the same community. In other instances, language contact appears to have resulted in regional linguistic developments: for example, some of the formulae used in Oscan dedicatory and funerary texts appear to be creative adaptations arising from a combination of influences from both Oscan and Greek, without fully adopting existing models from either language.

This paper stresses the importance of considering domain and text-type when reconstructing the extent of language contact from fragmentary material; Oscan is a particularly good case study for understanding domain-based variation because of the wide range of text types produced. For example, bi-version funerary inscriptions can be found in areas of high language contact, but the writing of the same or similar content in two different languages is much less likely to occur in dedicatory or official texts. In Southern Italy, funerary texts are rare, while dedications are much more common, and this should be taken into account in assessing the nature and intensity of language contact. The lack of bi-version texts in the Oscan corpus should not lead us to believe that Oscan/Greek contact was negligible, but represents a stylistic norm of the kinds of texts which survive.

Variation between different text types may also be the source of apparent regional variation in levels of contact. For example, the site at Laos does not necessarily show more intense contact between Oscan and Greek than Rossano di Vaglio based on the epigraphic evidence. Rather, the sites are of different types (habitation vs. large sanctuary), and as a result the texts from these sites belong to different genres that had different norms. We are therefore in danger of seeing regional or local variation in epigraphic practice, where in fact the difference is one of domain or genre.

The specialisation of Greek into certain domains (magic, coinage, luxury goods) is also an important consideration. It may be that the apparently high ethnolinguistic vitality of Greek in Italy is in fact an indication of the use of Greek in a number of specialised domains, and the prestige of Greek-made goods, rather than low ethnolinguistic vitality in Oscan-speaking communities. Indeed, we can see from the South Oscan situation that the prestige of Greek in some domains does not mean that Greek was prestigious in *all* domains, nor that a language shift was in progress. In fact,

the association of Greek with particular domains could be a feature of a relatively stable, language maintenance situation. Investigations of further language contact situations may of course lead to further changes and refinements.

This paper therefore stresses that the communities which wrote Oscan inscriptions developed norms about the appropriateness of borrowing from Greek in various kinds of texts. In many instances, linguistic and epigraphic borrowing from Greek in written texts seems to have been determined by individual choice and variation within these community norms. It is vital to take into account this kind of variation between domains and individuals, as well as that between different regions and time periods, if we are to understand the nature of ancient language contact.

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