Dr Katherine McDonald
Gonville and Caius College, University of Cambridge
'Greek in Italy' Project, AHRC

Oscan and Greek in Italy: Contact Phenomena and Domain

The study of language contact in the ancient world has been an area of huge growth over the past ten years. 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. However, in areas where sources are more limited, scholars have been more hesitant to make sweeping claims about the nature of language contact, even in communities where societal bilingualism is likely to have existed for many centuries.

This paper contributes to the growing methodological framework for fragmentary languages, adding perspectives from Greek/Oscan contact in Southern Italy. This paper stresses the importance of considering domain and text-type in interpreting the evidence. The writers of South Oscan inscriptions appear to have thought influence from Greek to be more appropriate to some genres than others. For example, the majority of the eight curse tablets written in South Oscan show the use of Greek code-switching or borrowing, including one curse which code-switches from Oscan to Greek and the unusual borrowing of Greek morphological endings in another. The level of contact phenomena in dedicatory texts, of which around 50 survive, is much lower and often limited to names of deities such as Apollo.

The epigraphic habit of areas such as Southern Italy should therefore be taken into account in assessing the nature and intensity of language contact – lack of evidence of contact in certain kinds of texts should not be taken as evidence that contact was limited. With this in mind, this paper proposes new models for the interpretation of language contact and bilingualism in fragmentary corpora, as well as describing the choices made by writers in the bilingual society that existed in ancient Lucania and Bruttium.