

Egyptian Greek: A contact variety (?)

Greek went through some phonological changes from Roman period onward, but as most of the Greek material from the first centuries CE come from Egypt, language contact can be seen to contribute to the more creative spellings. The situation is in this paper observed through the Narmouthis Greek ostraca (O.Narm., 2nd-3rd c. CE), abundant with evident phonetic-based spellings. For instance, in O.Narm. 42, Egyptian-influenced underdifferentiation of /y, u/ has resulted in the replacement of the standard $\pi\rho\upsilon\omicron$ by $\pi\upsilon\rho\upsilon\upsilon$. In O.Narm. 115, on the other hand, the Egyptian stress system seems to have been transferred onto the Greek word, apparently leaving the final syllable -ov vulnerable to neutralisation to schwa.

These features are known from nonstandard spellings of Greek loanwords in Coptic, revealing Egyptian phonological transfer behind the forms (Dahlgren 2017). Many misspellings also display a tendency to consonantal coarticulation on vowels, a phonological device used in consonant-rich languages to give immediate information on consonant quality through the altered quality of vowels (e.g. Traunmüller 1999). The Afroasiatic languages have word formation based on a consonant root so distinguishing between e.g. the place of articulation of consonants is important.

This is among Weinreich's basic principles of language contact, transferring a feature that is linguistically significant for the first language but redundant in the second (Weinreich 1979: 18-19). The situation is reminiscent of other contact varieties such as Indian English or Irish English. All these contact situations were associated with conqueror (prestige) languages with remaining strong cultural attachments to own culture (maintenance of culture and religion), on the other hand, and shift (urbanisation) on the other (Thomason 2001: 15-26). In Egyptian Greek as in Indian and Irish Englishes, transfer from L1 is mostly seen on the phonological level.

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