



## Review

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### MULTILINGUALISM IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLDS

Edited by Alex Mullen and Patrick James  
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#### ABSTRACT

*This essay reviews a collection of eleven articles discussing evidence on multilingualism from a number of Late Antique and Medieval societies, including not only the often studied multilingual members of the Mediterranean world but also examples from western Europe. Among other issues, these articles' authors touch upon the general concept of multilingualism, the categorization of its textual and archaeological evidence, its sociocultural impact, as well as its role in the power game between language communities.*

The eleven thought-provoking articles included in this volume are based on papers delivered in May 2009 at the Cambridge conference *Multilingualism from Alexander to Charlemagne: cross-cultural themes and perspectives*. All the authors come from the Anglophone world, and especially the UK. Their subject matters are wide-ranging, from Roman Egypt and the Iberian Peninsula to medieval Ireland. Multilingualism, after all, is certainly not a monolithic phenomenon that appeared only in specific parts of the ancient Mediterranean world, but rather a common (almost natural) consequence of any substantial interaction between different language groups. Thus the more case studies a student of ancient multilingualism is exposed to, the more that student becomes aware of the fluidity of multilingualism's nature, which often resists rigid patterning and single-sided interpretations, and which like a complete language system itself is maintained through constant invention and innovation.<sup>1</sup>

The eleven case studies of multilingualism presented in this volume are preceded by a lengthy, thoughtful introduction by Alex Mullen (labeled as Chapter 1), one of the volume's two editors. There Mullen first discusses a formal categorization of the textual evidence for ancient and medieval multilingualism into four groups: (1) bi-version bilingual texts, (2) texts displaying bilingual phenomena, (3) mixed-language texts, and (4) transliterated texts. In addition, he brings up a number of interesting issues pertaining to the study of multilingualism in antiquity. So for instance, he stresses the difficulties the modern scholar faces when trying to

understand the practice of *diglossia* in antiquity (pp. 24-25) and discusses the promising applications of the concept of *ethnolinguistic vitality* (pp. 26-28). By contrast to other such introductions in edited volumes, where editors simply offer (often redundant) overviews of the included chapters, Mullen approaches the eleven articles with a critical eye, not hesitating to voice his opposition to some of the authors' assumptions about multilingualism.

Chapter 2, written by James Clackson, is an ambitious discussion of cases of language maintenance and shift as consequences of the parallel spread of Latin in the western part of the Roman Empire and Greek in its eastern part. One of the most important aspects of this discussion is its solid criticism of Ramsy MacMullen's old-fashioned (yet still popular nowadays) theory that rural populations in the empire were mostly monolingual in vernacular, while urban ones were proficient in Greek or Latin. According to the author, in several parts of the empire, and especially Syria and Egypt, there is conclusive evidence for strong bilingualism in both urban and rural areas.

As Egypt and the Near East, however, were conquered by the Arab armies, this evident bilingualism came under attack, sustains Arietta Papaconstantinou, the author of Chapter 3, eventually leading to the suppression of Coptic in Egypt by the eleventh century. Using a theoretical model, originally applied to European colonialism, the author examines the correlation between types of colonized settlements and maintenance or elimination of indigenous languages, along with the ways such a theory can

explain the case of Coptic in post-Roman Egypt. She concludes that Coptic did not “fail” as a language, but “...that the wholesale adoption of Arabic by the Copts...marked the emergence of Egypt as a major independent player in the medieval Mediterranean, and the choice of the Egyptian Christians to participate fully in that phenomenon” (p. 76).

In the following chapter we are transported to the Iberian Peninsula where the vibrant multilingual environment of pre-Roman times, which included users of Iberian, Celtiberian, Lusitanian, and Aquitanian, embraced the additional uses of Phoenician, Greek, and Latin under the Roman Empire. In this chapter Oliver Simkin considers direct textual evidence, as well as indirect non-linguistic evidence (e.g. iconographic practices or economic relations), in an attempt to assess the changing nature of multilingualism in this, often overlooked, part of the empire.

Returning to Egypt, Trevor Evans revisits in Chapter 5 the famous Zenon archive, focusing on the identification of Egyptian linguistic “interference” in Greek documents. He concludes that despite the fact that several papyrologists in the past have complained about the “bad Greek” in some of these documents, “a proficient level of Greek literacy was fairly common within the indigenous community of the Fayum” (p. 122). More importantly, he urges the students of such multilingual archives, before assessing the quality of each of the languages involved, to consider diachronic changes in these languages, linguistic registers, educational levels, circumstances of composition, and even the possibilities of modern biased analysis.

In Chapter 6 Alderik Blom brings up the significant case of mixed languages in “ritual language”, which he defines as “...a specific form or marked register of language distinctively characteristic of, and reserved for, ritual, which is directly used in accomplishing the ends of the ritual operation” (p. 124). This is a fairly good example of how in some special cases the non-conventional use of certain components of a language by speakers of another language should not be considered as adequate evidence for multilingualism. Such is the case of “ritual language”, whose complexities cannot, however, be fully discussed in only one article, and thus instead the author chooses to dwell upon only four aspects: (a) its use as a form suited for the duration of a ritual,<sup>2</sup> (b) its inclusion of tag-switching rather than code-switching,<sup>3</sup> (c) its probably deliberate opaqueness in meaning, and (d) its perplexing use of voces magicae.

Next comes a chapter (written by David Langslow) on borrowing and translation practices from Greek to Latin observed in a medical papyrus of the sixth century. The author here tests the old theory by Sebastian Brock that divided translation practices into two main groups: the *sensus de sensu* type favored in the Greco-Roman world and the *verbum e verbo* connected to the Judeo-Christian ideal. One of the significant observations made in this lengthy article is that there is striking regularity in the way Latin translators rendered specific Greek grammatical forms, which shows that the translators had probably an excellent understanding of Greek grammar.

In the following two chapters the reader is transported to Ireland and the UK. In Chapter 8 Pádraic Moran examines some interesting evidence for the study of Greek in early medieval Ireland, using it as a fair example of bilingualism in literary education. Among other things, it is worth noting that since Greek was one of the three prestigious sacred languages, as the language of the New Testament, several medieval Irish authors tried to connect it, mainly etymologically, to the origins of early Irish. This was part of medieval Irish historians’ efforts “...to reconcile traditional accounts of Irish history with received Christian and classical traditions...” (p. 190).

In Chapter 9 Paul Russell’s article aims at considering the evidence for multilingualism in northwest Europe three or four centuries after the disintegration of the Roman Empire. He brings up five case studies from Britain and its environs that illustrate the complex relationship of Latin with the local languages. As the author is well-aware, each of these cases revolves around a very different linguistic situation and thus these differences would probably defy any attempts at building a general model explaining multilingualism in this part of the European continent.

The next chapter is a lengthy article by Scott Bucking revisiting the educational situation in Late Antique Egypt and challenging some of the existing theories about bilingual learning and especially its association with the physical spaces in which it took place. After reviewing the relationship of papyrology with archaeology, which, he deems, still lacks a clear set of shared methodological and theoretical principles, the author proceeds in examining a number of instances of what have been assumed to be school texts from Deir el-Bahari and Beni Hassan. One of the many innovative ideas proposed here is the possible reconsideration of alphabet graffiti found in both sites not as school texts but as ritualistic ones. The author thus concludes that a combined papyrological/archaeological approach to the corpus of educational materials from Greek and Roman Egypt “...allows for developing a spatial context for the production and use of texts by individuals – in essence, archaeologies of literacy and bilingualism – and for problematizing the function of these texts with the aid of more integrated assessment strategies” (pp. 263-264).

In Chapter 11 Andrew Wilson discusses how and why the Punic language (written in its “Neo-Punic” form – that is the script used after the sack of Carthage in 146 BCE) was employed alongside Latin in monumental inscriptions, in perspective of these inscriptions’ public setting and the interchanges between the Latin and Punic epigraphic habits. After considering a number of such bilingual or trilingual (with the addition of Greek) public inscriptions, he concludes that this case of epigraphic Punic-Latin symbiosis illustrates the tensions between an established local language and a newly arrived one that is sponsored by the powerful state and its administration. It comes as no surprise, of course, that Latin was the one that exercised the most influence, as Punic inscriptions imitated Latin style and conventions and were often visually subdued as they followed in humble fashion their Latin counterparts. However, whether this epigraphic tension also

represents linguistic tensions among the different speaking communities is an issue that cannot be resolved by only studying inscriptions.

Robin Osborne in the final chapter, which looks back at some of the theories put forth in the previous articles, poses an interesting question about whether it is possible for scholars of multilingualism to use one of their models of verbal multilingualism to understand similar practices in the domain of visual culture. To illustrate the overall difficulties in applying such rigid models onto the fluid manner in which often linguistic and cultural interactions between different communities are manifested, he uses the fascinating example of a Greek-Phoenician bilingual grave stele from Athens, in which case the owner played around, in often unpredictable ways, with both the linguistic and iconographic conventions of the two language cultures. In essence, the owner of this stele chose to display his identity in a monument that introduced alien concepts and manners into a form that otherwise conformed to the local Athenian traditions, thus illustrating well the processes of cultural hybridization that stand at the heart of multilingualism.

In general, this collection of articles offers a plethora of case studies that shed light onto different angles of the complex, multifaceted phenomenon of multilingualism in antiquity. Almost every article introduces the reader into a different sociohistorical context, with its own set of conventions and standards.<sup>4</sup> The coexistence of these articles in a single volume, I believe, stresses, among other things, the idea that multilingualism was (and still is) the natural outcome of every symbiosis between multiethnic communities, however different the circumstances surrounding that symbiosis may be. Exactly because multilingualism was often closely linked to a living coexistence of the different language groups involved, several authors in this volume emphasize the point that the study of multilingual textual material on its own cannot reflect oral multilingualism, and thus usually fails to provide an insight into the aforementioned, very important process of cultural hybridization. Thus the combination of textual evidence with material or other type of evidence is, I think, vital for allowing scholars to reconstruct some of the cultural processes that result in, and sustain, multilingualism.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Compare Robin Osborne's remarks on the impossibility of defining a language outside practice, on page 328.
- <sup>2</sup> Perhaps as a form that was deemed suitable to represent the otherworldly mode of communication used by supernatural beings.
- <sup>3</sup> The author illustrates this aspect of ritual language by examining an Arabic curse that includes the common Quranic phrase "basmala", rendered in Coptic. It should be noted that in his interpretation he does not consider the possibility that such perverse practice could have had an apotropaic value.

- <sup>4</sup> This is, unfortunately, the most challenging aspect of this volume: there is no single reader that can confidently engage with all these articles, given that no scholar or layman can have the appropriate linguistic skills, or historical knowledge, to be able to comfortably understand, for instance, the analysis of Coptic texts, Latin grammar, together with the history and nature of Iberian languages. Thus even I, as the reviewer, must acknowledge the fact that I have probably done some injustice to the articles on medieval Europe, since their subject matters do not relate to my fields of expertise.