

## It Ain't Over till It's Over. Bilingualism and language decay in Sicilian inscriptions

Inscriptions and ancient sources both indicate that Sicily has been characterized by multilingualism since before the classical period, when Greek, Punic, and indigenous languages were spoken in several areas of the island, and often coexisted in some areas. However, Sicilian indigenous languages disappeared with the end of the classical period and Punic survived only (and very scarcely) only until 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE circa. Greek, on the other hand, is the only language attested in inscriptions throughout the entire Sicily, and it remained so until the Roman conquest, when Latin spreads across the island. During the Roman period, and until the late antiquity, Greek/Latin bilingualism was common in Sicily, although with important diatopic differences: e.g., in Syracuse (Korhonen 2012) and surrounding areas Greek clearly remained the most prestigious variety until at least the imperial period, while it is likely that rural areas were predominantly Latin-speaking (Korhonen 2016). Finally, and famously, Greek must have undergone language death in western Sicily during the early Middle Ages.

While it is relatively uncomplicating determining when a language no longer appears in inscriptions, establishing when it ceased to be spoken is a rather complicated task. Even if a language is not inscribed on a stone, it might still be present in some parts (e.g., strata) of a society, and not anymore used in inscriptions because of the increasing loss of prestige, or because of political reasons. In these cases, it is sometimes possible to determine the presence of these not explicitly represented language through the presence of language contact. For giving a famous Sicilian example, it has been convincingly suggested that behind the bilingual (Greek-Latin) inscription ISic000470 there is a Punic speaker (Susini 1968; Tribulato 2011). In other words, while a language is undergoing decay, and before it completely disappears as a spoken variety, it might still be detected through language contact. For what concerns ancient Sicily, I argue that we can access this information through what I call “implicitly bilingual” inscriptions, i.e., monolingual Greek inscriptions that show phenomena of language contact.

Despite the great importance of the topic of language decay and death, there are very few works on Greek language death (e.g., JANSE 2003), and even fewer on Punic and Sicilian indigenous languages (partially, POCETTI 2012 and MARCHESINI 2012), and no-one has yet exploited bilingual inscriptions to investigate the reasons for language death and language vitality. In this paper, I will use “implicitly bilingual” inscriptions to assess the dynamics of language decay and language death between Punic and Greek and between indigenous languages and Greek, and to assess the possibility that Punic has been spoken longer than it is attested. Furthermore, I will adopt this model to analyze Latin inscriptions from Western imperial Sicily that show phenomena of language contact with Greek, in order to assess the Greek language decay in areas that we know Greek was the minority language.

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