

## Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics

Review of T. V. Evans and D. D. Obbink (eds.), *The Language of the Papyri*

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Abstract: This is a review, commissioned by and written for *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, of an excellent collection of papers on the language — really, languages — found in Greek and Latin papyri and related sources from the third century B.C. to the seventh/eighth century A.D. Many of the contributions deserve a wider readership than I expect they will receive.

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This review, commissioned by and written (in August 2010) for *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, will unfortunately not be appearing in that venue. I post it here instead.

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T. V. Evans and D. D. Obbink (eds.), *The Language of the Papyri*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xxii + 362. ISBN 978-0-19-923708-1. \$130.00.

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### [Preview](#)

Many classicists lump papyrologists and linguists together: after all, both employ potentially daunting symbols and reputedly dry technical vocabulary. And yet — in part, I expect, because there are very few scholars who excel at both linguistic and papyrological analysis — “[w]hile the Greek and Latin papyri can fairly be said to have transformed our knowledge of the ancient world over the past century, one cannot make the same claim convincingly in the specific area of language study.” It is the purpose of the present volume, from the second page of whose “Introduction” by the two editors I have just quoted, to begin to demonstrate how both linguistically sophisticated papyrologists and linguists who know their way around papyri<sup>1</sup> are refining and in many ways reshaping our understanding of Greek and Latin, making both methodological and factual advances on the basis of this underutilized, regularly expanding, and — as a result of advances in both the preservation and the dissemination of papyri — ever-more-accessible body of evidence.<sup>2</sup> All 17 chapters (16 plus “Introduction”) are good and most are excellent, and everyone involved in the production of this handsome work, which sprang from the 2006 Oxford conference “Buried Linguistic Treasure: The Potential of Papyri and Related Sources for the Study of Greek and Latin,” deserves our thanks.

The simple title *The Language of the Papyri*, which may make some people believe that the volume is a more or less comprehensive handbook or companion, is potentially misleading. A few of the chapters treat media aside from papyrus (“related sources” such as ostraca), and the languages found in papyri are at any rate not restricted to the two classical tongues, with which most of the contributions are concerned (compare p. 4). In addition (and this is the most important point), the sheer number of forms of Greek and Latin recorded in the papyri (Greek: 3rd cent. B.C. - 7th/8th cent. A.D.; Latin: 1st cent. B.C. - 7th cent. A.D.<sup>3</sup>) shows that it is as wrong to think of a monolithic papyrological language as it would be unthinkingly to lump together Sappho and Pausanias. There are numerous reasons aside from time and place to expect that the same kinds of sociolinguistic complexities that apply in, say, English today held in ancient times: register, level of education, genre, etc. The destruction of the appealing but wrong-headed idea that the grammar of Latin is easy to codify is associated above all with J. N. Adams, who has not contributed a piece himself but whose influence on those who have is

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, I am not such a linguist myself, though I wish I were.

<sup>2</sup> High-quality digital imaging is increasingly important: see, e.g., [Advanced Papyrological Information System](#) (APIS), [Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri](#) (DDBDP), and [Oxyrhynchus Online](#) (compare pp. 2-3).

<sup>3</sup> But the Latin documents considered in this volume do not as a rule date to later than the 2nd century A.D.

profound (compare p. 9, with n. 19); similarly, in the case of Greek, the language on which most of the chapters concentrate, there is no simple “commonality” to Koine.

Consider, for example, the chapter “Identifying the Language of the Individual in the Zenon Archive” by one of the editors, T. V. Evans. The title of this piece — one of the best in the collection — indicates that it is not about Greek in general and not even about dialects, but rather about idiolects, the linguistic peculiarities of individuals who appear in the extensive Zenon Archive, which contains over 1,700 texts that date from 261 to 229 B.C. Taking his cue from the statement by C. C. Edgar that one Amyntas — an administrator in the household of Apollonios, the finance minister of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, who shows up in as many as 26 texts from around the year 257 — “had a weakness” for aspirating the first consonant of the perfect of the verb ἀποστέλλω (i.e., ἀφεστάλκαμεν ‘we have sent’), Evans demonstrates in 20 exceptionally clear and nicely illustrated pages how close attention to linguistic, palaeographic, and prosopographical details can yield splendid results. This paper is a model of how to build a sophisticated (and pleasingly not-overstated) argument from one small point.

Evans’s chapter is one of nine in the first of the book’s three (overlapping and thus to some extent artificial) parts, “Language Change and Diversity”; the other two are “Language Contact” (six papers) and “General,” which consists of just a single volume-ending contribution, “Building and Examining Linguistic Phenomena in a Corpus of Representative Papyri” by S. E. Porter and M. B. O’Donnell, a discussion of [OpenText.org](http://OpenText.org), a collaborative web-based initiative (of which the authors are principal partners) that uses XML to provide sophisticated linguistic — by no means just simple grammatical — analysis of the New Testament and other Hellenistic Greek texts. Porter and O’Donnell’s work merits its own section because of its potentially “equal application to analysis of change, diversity, and contact” (5), but their apologia for their method of textual annotation — performed thus far on 45 papyrus letters with a total of 3,341 words (“relatively small,” but still “the first and so far only structured, representative corpus of papyri assembled,” 293) — focuses nearly exclusively on diversity, notably of the kind on which light is shed by “register analysis” (e.g., what sorts of forms appear in letters written by what sorts of people to what sorts of other people).

As for the nine papers on change and diversity, three concentrate on diachronic questions in Greek while four (including Evans’s) take on the diversity of Greek and two that of Latin. The three papers on diachrony are the following.

— John A. L. Lee’s learned and pellucid “Auxiliary θέλω” is a masterly account of the beginnings of the grammaticalization of θέλω as a future auxiliary: first found in Aeschylus, there are, according to Lee’s (no doubt not exhaustive, but awfully impressive) catalogue, 42 examples up to 600 A.D., many of them in papyri. In addition, he has discovered at least 14 examples, almost all of them in papyri, of a hitherto unnoticed (!) further use of θέλω as an auxiliary: an imperatival form of this verb or a prohibitive subjunctive followed by an infinitive (rarely an imperative) seems to indicate a polite request and mean something like ‘(please) do(n’t).’ This observation, though presented in passing, would be a wonderful paper in itself. As for Lee’s main point, he comes to the somewhat surprising preliminary conclusion that θέλω, though “available as a future auxiliary for [as long as] 1000 years, ... was never more than sporadic until *after* Koine Greek” (22).

— Likewise very learned is Mark Depauw’s “Do Mothers Matter?: The Emergence of Metronymics in Early Roman Egypt,” which synthesizes a huge amount of material, presented in some very forbidding tables, and comes to the fascinating conclusion that there is a political cause for the dramatic shift in the use of metronymics in Egypt between the Ptolemaic and Roman periods: “very rare” in the former (120), “a DDBDP search [see n. 2] for μητρός in Greek documents dated after 30 BC results in not less than 17,493 hits” (121). Clearly something has happened, and Depauw argues — plausibly and with nuance, but in the absence of hard evidence, as far as I can see — that changes in social rights and privileges in the early Roman period (the present study concentrates on the years 30 B.C. - A.D. 100) made adding the mother’s name on official documents expedient. Among the parallels he adduces is the Spanish concept of *limpieza de sangre* (‘purity of blood’), which appears to have had the indirect result of the addition of the *apellido materno* to the *apellido paterno*.

— In “Variation in Complementation to Impersonal *verba declarandi* in Greek Papyri from the Roman and Byzantine Periods,” Patrick James presents a workmanlike account of the (limited) papyrological evidence for the impersonal forms δηλοῦται and δηλόν ἐστι. He makes a good argument for how they were lost in the Roman and early Byzantine periods in favor of the adverbs δηλαδὴ and δηλονότι, whose phonological and syntactic relationships to δηλον (δὲ) ὅτι he explores.

The papers aside from Evans’s that are concerned in the first place with diversity are the following.

— Willy Clarysse’s “Linguistic Diversity in the Archive of the Engineers Kleon and Theodoros” is a dense account of linguistic variation in the archive of the mid-third-century B.C. engineers Kleon and his successor Theodoros in the Fayum. Part of the Petrie Papyri, which are on the verge of receiving a major new edition by Bart Van Beek, the letters and petitions that Clarysse discusses provide interesting evidence for diversity in such matters as particle usage; above all, he draws a (perhaps unexpectedly) fascinating picture of the stylistic difference between the conjunctions ἴνα and ὅπως.

— One of the book’s high points is R. Luiselli’s “Authorial Revision of Linguistic Style in Greek Papyrus Letters and Petitions (AD i-iv).” Providing only a few tastes of what could be — and one can hope will indeed become — a massive study, the author considers with great erudition the “phenomenon of self-correction in Greek documentary prose as evidence for awareness of style among the educated élites in Egypt” (71). What does it mean, for example, when in a private letter — N.B.: not a formal document — someone first writes ἴνα and then corrects this to ὅπως (see pp. 94f. and compare Clarysse)? Luiselli packs into his discussion commentary on corrections across a wide range of linguistic areas: forms of address, word order, verbal repetition and variation, particles, and register. All who read this chapter will want more.

— Martti Leiwo’s “Imperatives and other Directives in the Greek Letters from Mons Claudianus” opens with sobering numbers: “Approximately 6,000 ostraca have been found at Mons Claudianus in the eastern desert of Egypt. Of these 631 have so far been published” (97). Leiwo tackles the 170-80 letters among the ostraca, all of which date to the period between the emperors Trajan and Antoninus Pius, and focuses in a linguistically sophisticated fashion on

variation and also change in the imperatives and other directive expressions. Among the highlights are his account of how ἐρωτηθεῖς, the aorist passive participle of ἐρωτᾶω (a verb whose use reflects the influence of Latin *rogo*, as Eleanor Dickey demonstrates in her chapter), ends up meaning something like ‘please’ — he proposes ways in which it could have “c[o]me to be used in two different categories: ‘I was begged/asked to do something’ and ‘you are begged/asked to do something’ ” (110f.) — and how the orthography of the letters of one Petenephotēs may give us access to how morphological information was stored in this individual’s mind.<sup>4</sup>

— The Monty Python-esque title “*Romanes eunt domus!*: Linguistic Aspects of the Sub-literary Latin in Pompeian Wall Inscriptions” promises humor, and indeed, Peter Kruschwitz rarely observes his own injunction, “Beware of Attila the Pun!” (164).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, his easy style of writing makes this methodologically oriented paper, with its grab-bag of examples from *CIL* IV, a good introduction to the complexities of reading and the dangers of over-interpreting fragile and fragmentary evidence, such as what we find preserved on the walls of Pompeii. He ends with the claim, briefly illustrated, that Latin has a “technical language of consumption.” One example is the term *uenalis*, “the *uox propria* ... for the expression ‘for sale’ ” (168), the use of which at Pompeii may have something to tell us about how to read Sallust.

— Hilla Halla-aho takes on the lowest level of linguistic difference — variation in a short document by a single individual — neatly demonstrating in her fine chapter “Linguistic Varieties and Language Level in Latin Non-literary Letters” that it would be a mistake to think that a text can automatically be categorized as belonging to one or another register. Anyone who has ever received an earnest entreaty from a nervous freshman will recognize that Halla-aho has good reason to “argue that in a given letter, different levels of language organization (phonological/orthographic, morphological, and syntactic) need not, and often do not, consistently relate to one linguistic variety (register or sociolect). Even within one level, e.g. syntactic, it may be possible to identify different registers occurring next to each other” (172; footnote omitted). Under discussion are letters from *P. Oxy.*, *P. Vindob. Lat.*, and *Tab. Vindol.*

This leaves the six papers in the book’s second part on language contact. Two of these are concerned with Greco-Egyptian interaction, three with Greco-Latin, and the final one treats a glossary of “exotic” dialectal and foreign words. Four are shorter than nearly all other chapters in the volume; one is substantially longer than anything else. Brief descriptions follow.

— Brian Muhs’s “Language Contact and Personal Names in Early Ptolemaic Egypt” is a modest effort, but clear and satisfying. The author considers the translation and transliteration of Egyptian personal names into Greek in the early Ptolemaic period: for example, a taxpayer’s name that in Demotic reads *Dḥwty-īw s ʒ P ʒ-hb* or *Dḥwty-īw P ʒ-hb* (“Thoteu (son of) Phib”) is rendered once as Θοτεὺς Φίβιος, another time as Θοτευ πα Φιβ (*pa* in Egyptian means ‘the (male) one of’). Paying attention to temporal and geographical factors, Muhs notes that the

<sup>4</sup> In his discussion of Petenephotēs, Leiwo provides readers with two SMS texts in seriously misspelled English that he received from his Egyptian downstairs neighbor (see pp. 115f.). The parallels are amusing.

<sup>5</sup> Note also, e.g., “*Corpus Inscriptionum Latrinarum*” (159), “Conan the Grammarian” (163), and “jack-acid test” (164), as well as the sentence, “One might wonder in how many instances a *futuit* has been read where there actually was just a *fuit*” (161).

“sudden diversification in the representation of Egyptian names in Greek in the reign of Ptolemy II presumably reflects a sudden increase in language contact in some parts of Egypt” and correlates the “renewed predominance of regular translations ... in the reign of Ptolemy III” with Greek educational reforms (196).

— The book’s shortest paper is I. C. Rutherford’s excellent “Bilingualism in Roman Egypt?: Exploring the Archive of Phatres of Narmuthis,” which deliberates on matters of bilingualism and bigraphism in the latest published batch (by A. Menchetti in 2005) of Demotic ostraca from Narmuthis: the archive of a scribe named Phatres (*Pϣ-ḥtr*) from ca. A.D. 200. Rutherford concludes that “scribes were caught between a sentimental attachment to Demotic and the practical need to use Greek vocabulary for administrative purposes”<sup>6</sup> and that the result is a “serious, though ultimately unsuccessful, experiment in forging a new composite script suited to the bicultural environment of Roman Egypt” (207).

— In her characteristically clear and careful “Latin Influence and Greek Request Formulae,” Eleanor Dickey argues, obviously correctly, that ἐρωτῶ in the meaning ‘I request’ (followed by an infinitive, an imperative, or a subjunctive, the last usually introduced by ἵνα) is a calque on Latin *rogo*. She suggests as well that παρακαλῶ ‘I beg’ is a calque on *oro* — if this is right, as I believe it is, then it shows Latin influence in Egypt before the Roman period since the first example is from 57-56 B.C. — and that the irreversible binomial ἐρωτῶ (...) καὶ παρακαλῶ translates *rogo atque oro*. Is it strange that the Modern Greek word for ‘please,’ παρακαλώ, should reflect Latin pragmatics on top of native morphology?

— Panagiotis Filos’s lengthy “Greek Papyri and Graeco-Latin Hybrid Compounds” betrays its origin as part of a dissertation — but evidently an impressive one.<sup>7</sup> Propelled by a clear sense of purpose, the author distills and, with the help of charts, tables, and an appendix, categorizes the evidence for hybrids, most of them nominal, attested in non-literary papyri from Egypt (1st-8th cent. A.D.): the Greco-Latin possessive compound εὐπλουμος ‘well-embroidered (*vel sim.*)’ (cf. Latin *pluma*), the Latino-Greek verbal-governing compound λωροτόμος ‘thong-cutter (?)’ (cf. Latin *lorum/-us*), etc. Filos concludes that since “we must resist the temptation to treat all these forms as a coherent group” — there simply is no one way of forming these words, some of which, furthermore, are high- while others are low-register — a “complete study must look beyond the statistics at the individual words in their context” (248).

— Anastasia Maravela-Solbakk makes a small point well in “*Vina fictitia* from Latin into Greek: The Evidence of the Papyri”: an investigation that begins from documentary papyri is able to give a more nuanced picture of the spread in Greek of neuter nouns in -ᾶτον (from Latin *-atum*) for aromatic and artificial wines, a class of words otherwise known largely from medical, veterinary, and pharmacological writings from the Hippocratics through the Byzantine physician Paul of Aegina. After discussing κονδῖτον ‘mulled/spiced wine’ (from Latin *uinum conditum*),

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<sup>6</sup> Of a Demotic ostrakon that contains the embedded Greek verb βιοποριστεῖν ‘to earn a living,’ Rutherford writes, “It is perhaps a good comment on the relationship between Greek and Egyptian in this period, and the eventual success of Greek, that the very idea of ‘making a living’ is more easily expressed in Greek than in Egyptian” (201).

<sup>7</sup> “Studies in the Morphology of Latin Loanwords into Greek: Evidence from the Papyri,” Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2009 (supervised by Anna Morpurgo Davies).

which seems to have been introduced into Greek in the late third century A.D., the author goes through 11 wine-types in -ᾶτον, from ἀψιθᾶτον ‘wine flavored with wormwood’ and ῥοσᾶτον ‘rose-wine,’ both attested in papyri from the fourth century, to such later-attested varieties as κυδωνᾶτον ‘wine scented with quinces.’ Two observations are of particular interest: first, “no aromatic wine in -ίτης [e.g., ἀψιθίτης] has so far turned up in papyrus texts” (266), whereas “medical and veterinary authors as a rule vacillate between the Latin derived -ᾶτον/-ῖτον and the original Greek -ίτης term (or use the -ίτης term only)” (265); and second, two of the 11 -ᾶτον-words, including (probably) ἀψιθᾶτον, “appear to have been first created in Greek as a result of the derivation stimulus exerted by Latin, and to be subsequently ‘borrowed back’ into Latin [as, e.g., *absinthatum*]” (265). This last point, Maravela-Solbakk writes, “provides additional confirmation that the fertilization of Greek and Latin also in the late Roman and early Byzantine period was mutual—especially in the field of technical vocabulary.”

— Francesca Schironi’s “Lexical Translations in the Papyri: Koine Greek, Greek Dialects, and Foreign Languages” is a tour de force summary of her impressive book *From Alexandria to Babylon: Near Eastern Languages and Hellenistic Erudition in the Oxyrhynchus Glossary (P.Oxy. 1802 + 4812)*, published by de Gruyter already in 2009 but not yet reviewed in *BMCR*. First edited by A. S. Hunt in 1922, *P.Oxy. XV 1802* — “a bookish collection, a product no doubt of one of the most incredible libraries of the ancient world” (282) — records recherché words from Greek dialects (e.g., Rhodian μινῶδες ‘vines’) and barbarian tongues (e.g., μελύγιον ‘a Scythian beverage’); only lemmata for kappa-, lambda-, and especially mu-initial words are preserved. Schironi has re-edited the text and provides a lovely sketch of its tremendous interest, not just for linguists. Reading this paper inspired me to read her book; I expect this will be a common reaction.

Thanks to Evans and Obbink’s *Language of the Papyri*, I know rather more about Greek and Latin than I did a week ago. Many of the chapters in this aesthetic as well as intellectually stimulating collection deserve a wider readership than I expect they will receive.