

Languages in Sicily between the Classical Age and Late Antiquity: a case of punctuated equilibrium?

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Abstract

Although late Roman Sicily is clearly represented by the ancient authors as a multilingual environment, the 20th-century scientific debate has proposed two divergent descriptions of the Sicilian linguistic landscape. While some scholars denied a deep Latinization under the Roman Empire, the increasing evidence of Latin inscriptions led others to hypothesize the decline of Greek. In the last decades, new approaches to bilingualism and linguistic contact, applied to antiquity, have demonstrated that many languages frequently coexist for a long time. Multilingualism has always characterized Sicily, but, before the Roman conquest, all minority languages had gradually disappeared, and the diatopic and dialectal variation of Greek converged towards a slightly Doric koivá.

As we can see from the epigraphic evidence, Roman Sicily was fully Greek–Latin bilingual until the end of the 5th century, and the two languages influenced each other. Latin and Greek epigraphs show similar onomastic material and phonological and morphological features, as well as a number of shared set phrases (mostly from Latin). These data are consistent with the first phase of Dixon's theory of "punctuated equilibrium", namely the equilibrium, since the two populations had a similar population, lifestyle and religious beliefs and, although Romans ruled over Sicily, Greek language and culture never lost their prestige. Even though the quantity of Greek evidence is not stable over the course of the 5th century, Sicily ultimately displays a situation of equilibrium until the end of the 5th century. Thereafter we observe a drastic decrease of Greek evidence, and, at the same time, remarkable linguistic variation both in Greek and Latin epigraphs. The most visible product of this period of language change is the rise of the Romance languages. The paper will determine whether we can analyze the Sicilian linguistic situation through Dixon's model of punctuation and equilibrium.

1 Introduction

As is well known, historical linguistics owes many concepts and models to biology, such as the family tree and the metaphor of language as an organic and living being, e.g. "dead" and "alive" languages (see Kornai 2017). There are of course problems with the integrally "biological" model for linguistics, because, as Ramat (2009: 13) argues, languages and peoples are not precisely equatable. For instance, people have two branches of ancestors, while languages usually just one.¹ Therefore, biology cannot be a direct model for linguistics, but rather a useful source for metaphors and multidisciplinary comparison.²

With these caveats, my aim is to propose and test a linguistic theory which has been originally borrowed from biology, namely the punctuated equilibrium model. This theory, originally formulated by Eldredge/Gould (1972), proposes that gradualism is a chimera of evolutionary paleontology and "[...] the norm for a species or, by extension, a community is

¹ *Contra* Thomason/Kaufman (1988).

² Among all the contributions, I recall here Cavalli Sforza (1993), the precursor of this branch of studies.

stability. Speciation³ is a rare and difficult event that punctuates a system in homeostatic equilibrium” (Eldredge/Gould 1972: 115). In other words, the gradual differentiations assumed until then by the evolutionary biologists could be an illusion, due to over-reliance on the present time. The earliest linguistic implementations of punctuated equilibrium date back to Thurston (1987) and Goodenough (1992), but these contributions focused on the progression within linguistic change. Thurston, for instance, used evidence from Papua New Guinea to suggest that gradualism is not a reliable model in linguistic change.⁴ However, the most important theoretical development of the linguistic punctuated equilibrium goes back to R.M.W. Dixon’s *The Rise and Fall of Languages* (1997). This model has been enhanced and modified in the last decades, not always with satisfying results. Amongst the most relevant modifications to the original theory, we can list here Heath (1998), which admits just monolingualism for the equilibrium phase. Dixon (2002: 32), on the other hand, acknowledges the intense exchange of linguistic features throughout equilibrium, intended as a period in which “[...] the languages can converge to a common prototype.” When two or more languages come into contact, they usually share some linguistic traits (phonetic and phonological traits, grammatical categories, and lexemes) and, if the shared elements are abundant, they can constitute what we define a linguistic area, or *Sprachbund*. The expression “linguistic area” is used here in the sense of Alexandra Aikhenvald (2002).

[...] linguistic areas as the result of equilibrium situations (in the sense of Dixon 1997) involve long-term language contact with multilateral diffusion and without any relationship of dominance. In contrast, areas which were formed as a result of sudden migrations or other punctuations tend to involve dominance of one group over other(s) (though not necessarily across the whole area), and the diffusion is often unilateral. (Aikhenvald 2002: 9)

In the last decades, several scholars have been trying to determine whether it is possible to develop a general model of linguistic contact and, specifically, if there is a tendency for some elements to be more likely borrowed by one language than from another. However, most scholars have little faith in the so-called hierarchy of borrowability. Although Thomason (2001) has devised a borrowing scale, arguing that this hierarchy depends on the depth of the contact, nevertheless she notes that “[...] scale is a matter of probabilities, not possibilities. The predictions it makes can be violated, in principle and sometimes in fact (Thomason 2001: 70).” Dixon (2002) takes an even more skeptical stance, arguing that core vocabulary is not necessarily more likely to be replaced by loanword than non-core vocabulary. Also, pronouns, which are prototypically part of the core vocabulary, are subject to be borrowed (Dixon 2002: 396). On the same note, Curnow (2002) convincingly argues that “[...] the attempt to develop any universal hierarchy of borrowing should perhaps be abandoned” Curnow (2002: 434). As for Thomason (2001)’s question: “What can be adopted by one language from another?” the short answer is, “anything” (Thomason 2001: 63). Keeping in mind these theoretical premises, I am going to describe Sicily as a linguistic area and to test punctuated equilibrium theory on it. According to Dixon (1997: 68), four conditions need to be met in order to have a situation of linguistic equilibrium:

1. the existence two or more groups of political identities, with their own languages, traditions etc.

³ Speciation is “[t]he formation of new and distinct species in the course of evolution” (OED). <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/185992?redirectedFrom=SPECIATION#eid> [accessed 2018-10-8].

⁴ For more counterarguments to gradualism in linguistic change, see Nettle (1999).

2. the extent of the populations should be comparable and constant during the whole period of equilibrium.
3. technological skills, cultural and religious beliefs should be homogeneous, so that no population can overwhelm the others.
4. the differences groups should have a comparable prestige at that time.

As Dixon (2002) points out, these assumptions do not imply that no change could happen during the equilibrium phase, since “language is always changing” (Dixon 2002: 33). Instead, language change will be less severe during the equilibrium than during the punctuation phase. I argue that changes during the equilibrium phase often affect more than one language. In this sense, they lead to stability and convergence, in such a way that we can describe the former phase as ‘homoeostatic equilibrium’. In other words, these are system-preserving changes. Concerning the punctuation, as Aikhenvald (2002) states, “[t]here will be a punctuation whereby one ethnic group (and its language) expands and spreads and splits” (Aikhenvald/Dixon 2002: 9). The causes of punctuation are manifold, and they can be both natural and anthropic. Among the natural reasons, we can list famine and major hydrogeological instability. Among the anthropic, technological development, territorial acquisitions as well as massive migrations and rise of aggressive tendencies, particularly invasions.⁵ As we can see, none of these causes are of a linguistic nature.

2 Linguistic equilibrium in Sicily between the Classical Age and Late Antiquity

Before the Roman age, Sicily (see fig. 1 in the appendix) was a multicultural and multilingual island, as peoples spoke Indo-European (Italic languages – *i.e.* Oscan, Elymian and Sicel – and Greek) and non-Indo-European (Punic, the so-called “Sicanian”) languages. We can see reciprocal influence between Greeks and indigenous people and we have a few examples of shared formulae and morphological contact. As Poccetti (2012) showed, we are aware of several examples for de-aspiration in Greek personal names (Ευρύμακες for Εὐρύμαχος, Σκύτας for Σκύθας) and for some cases of deletion of nasals before voiced dentals, as we can see in indigenous name Νέδαι (dat.), attested also in its ‘Sabellic’ variant Νενδαι (Poccetti 2012: 75). The deletion of nasal before voiced stop is a rather uncommon phenomenon in Greek, but it is attested in Pamphylian and in Delphic inscriptions (Schwyzer 1939: 214, and Brixhe 1976), while the outcome of /nd/ in the Italic languages is /nn/. Linguistic formulae attest to the reciprocal influence between Greek and indigenous people. For instance, the Greek formula “χαίρε καὶ πει εἶ” becomes “πιβε” (Wachter 2004: 302) in local inscriptions and, instead of the ‘genuine’ Greek construction for possession, with the owner in the genitive case, we find evidence of dative construction both in Greek and indigenous material.

Another possible areal feature is the –αῖος (also in the form –εῖος, both derived from –i(y)o) suffix, which occurs with personal names of non-Greek origin and expresses the patronymic⁶. This feature possibly originated in the Elymian language (cf. Meiser 2012: 157) and spread through the Italic languages (cf. Italic Ματυλαῖος is attested in Italic languages, but probably stems from the Etruscan gentilicium Matulna) and Greek (e. g. Ναννελῆιος, used in a *defixio*

⁵ According Bellwood (2002), a probable trigger for punctuation in Australia, China, and the Americas was agriculture. He suggests that we can see the Indo-European family subgroups a result of agriculture dispersal.

⁶ Watkins (2001: 58) suggested that the diffusion of the use of relational adjectives in –i(y)o– in Aeolic Greek might be due to linguistic contact with Luwian. If this theory is correct, in Sicily we would have an analogous case of areal diffusion of the same suffix, but *contra* see García Ramón (2011) and Hajnal (2018).

from Selinunte, see Calder (1963)). The suffix –αῖος is attested elsewhere throughout the Greek world, but it is used to derive adjectives and it is not confined to patronymics.

Further evidence of morphological contact is provided by the nominal suffixes –*elo-* and –*ānu-* and –ἴνος (Pocetti 2012: 54), which are fairly common throughout the Italic languages, and appear in Sicilian names, e.g. the ethnonyms Σικελοί and Σικανοί, and the anthroponyms Ἄπελος and Τίτελος. Furthermore, we have significant evidence for linguistic contact, namely some words for measurements, λίτρα (‘pound’), οὐγκία (‘ounce’) and νόμος (‘coin’, cf. Lat. *nummus*) attested both in Greek and in some glosses from Sicel. Some Sicel glosses derive from Italic languages (*litra*), others from Greek (νόμος). Sicilian inscriptions show the progressive acquisition of local features from the Greek texts, in which we find indigenous loanwords, such as measurements. This – at the very least – proves the existence of commercial exchanges and suggests that the populations had strong interactions. Nevertheless, indigenous linguistic evidence gradually disappears starting from the 5th century (Tribulato 2012), overwhelmed by the increasing popularity of the Greek language. It is important to highlight that even the Greek language in Sicily was not homogeneous before the Hellenistic period, because there was substantial diatopic and dialectal variation: Greek colonies were Ionic (some of which specifically Euboean) and Doric (Megarian, Rhodian–Cretan, Corinthian, see Domínguez (2006)). Therefore, at an earlier stage, we can see a clear dialectal partition in the configuration of the Sicilian area. Since we are dealing with uneven evidence, we must not overgeneralize. The Sicilian colonies were not always founded by colonists from the same region of Greece and the same dialectal group, so we have to keep in mind that in Sicily sometimes we see dialectal divergences in epigraphs from the very same place and period.

Between Doric and Ionic, there are some phonetic, morphological, and syntactic differences: the Doric varieties tend to be more conservative, while the Ionic dialects tend to innovate more. Ionic show characteristic peculiarities, both phonetically (with $\eta < \bar{\alpha}$) and morphologically (with 3rd sg. and 1st pl. verbal endings) level; on the other hand, Doric has a typical future ending (–σεω). Moreover, although the two dialects share most of their lexicon, there are still some peculiarities (e.g. the numeral for hundreds is –κάτιοι in Doric versus –κόσιοι in Ionic; ‘to want’ is expressed by λῶ in Doric and βούλομαι in Ionic; the Doric name Ἄρταμις vs. Ἄρτεμις). It is important to point out that political boundaries and linguistic boundaries do not overlap. During the 3rd century, many battles radically and rapidly changed the political borders between the Phoenicians and the Greeks, but this drastic reshaping did not necessarily cause linguistic changes. As far as we can see from the inscriptions, neither the Phoenician nor the Greek evidence shows remarkable changes in that period, so we have no reason to believe that political reshaping affected the structure of the languages.

Until the 4th century BCE, Sicily shows a clear dialectal partition (see fig. 2 in the appendix), which does not prevent a mutual understanding among Greek speakers. While epichoric features were being levelled out by the Ionic-based Κοινή during the Hellenistic period⁷, in Sicily, the Greek language slowly converged into a slightly Doric *koiné*, called Κοινά, which is also attested in originally ionic colonies.⁸ Traditionally, scholars have divided the Doric speaking area into three subgroups, based on vocalism:

- *Doris Superior* (colonies from Crete: Akragas, Gela, Butera area, Monte Saraceno, Sabucina, Terravecchia di Cuti, Montagna di Marzo, Camarina)

⁷ There are a few other cases in which the ionic κοινή did not overtake the other *koinai* after the Hellenistic age, namely in Anatolia (Bubenik 1988: 276–7), e.g. in Side and Seleukeia, Lycia and partially from the Phrygian area, as well as in some areas of Magna Graecia, e.g. Tarentum (Consani 1995: 74).

⁸ As Mimbrera (2008: 218) points out, almost all of Sicily adopted the “red” Doric alphabet, similar to what happened with the Great Attic and the Ionic alphabet.

One pair \bar{e}/\bar{o}

< η > and < ω > for primary long vowels and secondary compensatory lengthenings, and isovocalic contractions.

- *Doris Mitior* (colonies from Corinth and Megara: Syracuse (therefore also its colonies: Acrae and Casmenae then Camarina)

Two pairs \bar{e}/\bar{o}

< η > / ϵ :/ and < ω > / \omicron :/ for primary lengthenings

< ϵ > / e :/ and < \omicron > / o :/ for secondary lengthenings and isovocalic contractions.

- *Doris Media* (colonies from Rhodes, Megara Hyblaea, Selinunte, probably influenced by Gela and Akragas, see Arena 1989)

Two pairs \bar{e}/\bar{o}

< η > / ϵ :/ and < ω > / \omicron :/ for primary and a number of secondary lengthenings.

< ϵ > / e :/ and < \omicron > / o :/ for part of secondary lengthenings and isovocalic contractions.

After the 4th century, we find evidence of Doric dialects also in Ionic colonies, as shown by the inscriptions with Dorisms all around Sicily (see fig. 3 in the appendix). These are generally characterized both by *Mitior* vocalism and the $-\epsilon\sigma\sigma$ pl. dative ending, showing therefore not a generic “Doric” variation, but a peculiar Sicilian Greek variety. A famous example of this variety is IG XIV 316, a 2nd–3rd century CE inscription from Termini Imerese, originally an Ionic colony. This epitaph, written in verse, has both of the common Dorisms just mentioned, Sicilian features (such as the pronoun $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omega\bar{\nu}\tau\alpha$) and a false Dorism ($\pi\omicron\iota\eta\tau\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$, never attested in Doric evidence).

3 Second phase of equilibrium in Sicily. Greek and Latin in contact during the Roman Empire

After the Roman conquest, Sicily gradually underwent a ‘fluid Romanization’ (Tribulato 2012), which became more patent at the beginning of the Imperial period and, as a result, we see a radical increase in Latin epigraphic evidence in Sicily from the 1st c. CE. This increase, however, should not be interpreted as evidence for a corresponding collapse of the Greek language. Instead, the absolute number of public and private Greek inscriptions remains roughly comparable to what we have for the 2nd c. BCE, which suggests a degree of consistency.

In the last years, Lomas (2000) and Prag (2009) have argued that, when the Romans took control of the eastern part of Sicily after the Carthaginian defeat, part of the island actively resisted to the Roman conquest. In fact, many elements of the political, cultural and social life of the Greek cities maintained Greek even after the Roman conquest. When Romanization began, though, during the last centuries BCE, the Greek Sicilian élites seem to have been keen to assimilate to the Romans from a cultural point of view (*e.g.* the adoption of amphitheatres).⁹ The Catacombs in Syracuse (3rd–6th c. CE) contain more than a thousand inscriptions. According to Korhonen (2012: 339), 87% of these are in Greek and 13% in Latin. Thanks to this evidence, we can argue that during the Late Empire in Syracuse Greek was spoken with no major social differences. Catania shows a comparable ratio of Christian epitaphs, with 79% in Greek and 21% in Latin. Instead, just 18% of the imperial inscriptions from Termini Imerese and 27% from Palermo are in Greek (Korhonen 2012: 339). As Jonathan Prag rightly observes, when a place offers more Latin than Greek inscriptions, almost by rule that place will be a Roman colony (Prag 2002: 27). Therefore, the absolute number of Latin and Greek inscriptions

⁹ The structures erected were typically Greek (such as bouleuteria, the council house, gymnasia and agorai, public spaces in the Greek society) and they continued to be so for some time (Tribulato 2012: 33).

should not be considered in absolute terms, but be put into the historical context. In Sicily, in fact, locations where we have more Latin than Greek inscriptions were less prominent in terms of their pre-Roman Greek epigraphic culture, whereas in the eastern part of the island the epigraphic culture was more pronounced and so we have fewer Latin inscriptions. The Romans did not remove the pre-existing Greek culture, and they did not force the local population into any form of linguistic policy, but instead Greek and Latin identities remained comparable in terms of prestige.

As Dixon (1997) states, for a condition of equilibrium it is crucial that every community has prestige (Dixon 1997: 69), and this observation is perfectly coherent in Sicilian Greek. In fact, Greek never lost its prestige for Greek peoples, but at the same time Latin became very popular and attested throughout Sicily, where bilingualism was widespread. It is hard to evaluate the extent of multilingualism in Sicily, both for the pre-Roman period and the later centuries, primarily because historical sources are contradictory. Plato (5th/4th c. BCE) seems concerned about the future of the Greek language¹⁰ and his contemporary Euphorus of Cumae describes Sicily as ἐτερόγλωσσα ‘multilingual.’¹¹ A few centuries later, at the beginning of the Roman age, Cicero implies that Sicily is fully Greek and he even considers Sicilians a subgroup of Greeks.¹² In approximately the same time, Strabo (1st c. BCE–1st c. CE) complains about the “barbarization” going on in Magna Graecia and Sicily, but many scholars have shown that his statement is hyperbolic and not to be believed (e.g. Fanciullo 2001: 73).¹³ Furthermore, onomastics is of little help. According to Lomas (2000),

[...] there is very little correlation between the language of a text and the ethnic/cultural origin and the legal status of the individual names” [...] but “it is clear from this eclectic mixture of names, languages and onomastic forms that there was little relation between perceived ethnic origin and cultural choice (Lomas 2000: 171).

Furthermore, even the presence of a Latin funerary inscription with Latin onomastics does not necessarily mean that the deceased person was a perfect bilingual. Still, as Wilson points out, a Latin tombstone should imply “at least a veneer of Romanization” (Wilson 1990: 313).

In the light of this evidence, we can say that, when Romanization took place in Sicily, the Greek identity was not eradicated.¹⁴ We have to think in terms of two identities in contact,

¹⁰ It is unlikely that the Plato referred to the endangerment of the Greek language, but instead “[w]hat it suggests is that Greek was being increasingly spoken by foreign people; and among these foreigners, nobody had an interest in learning or speaking the indigenous Sicilian languages, which had already been ousted from written usage” (Pocetti 2012: 60).

¹¹ Euphorus writes, “ἔξῃς Σικελία νῆσος εὐτυχεστάτη, ἦν τὸ πρότερον μὲν ἐτερόγλωσσα βάρβαρα λέγουσι πλήθῃ κατανέμεσθ' Ἰβηρικά [...]” (FGrH 70 F 137b).

¹² We know that, during the late Republican period, Romans used interpreters in Sicily, cf. e.g. Cicero, In Verr. III, 37. Furthermore, it is clear that Cicero considers Sicilians as Greeks in every aspect, as we read in In Verr. II, 2, 129 “Est consuetudo Sicularum ceterorumque Graecarum [...]” (“It is a custom of the Sicilians, and of the rest of the Greeks [...]”).

¹³ Strabo, Geogr. 6, 1, 2 “[οἱ] πρότερον μὲν γε καὶ τῆς μεσογαίας πολλὴν ἀφῆρηντο, ἀπὸ τῶν Τρωικῶν χρόνων ἀρξάμενοι, καὶ δὴ ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἠϋξήντο ὥστε τὴν μεγάλην Ἑλλάδα ταύτην ἔλεγον καὶ τὴν Σικελίαν· νυνὶ δὲ πλήν Τάραντος καὶ Ῥηγίου καὶ Νεαπόλεως ἐκβεβαρβαρῶσθαι συμβέβηκεν [...] καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ Ῥωμαῖοι γεγόνασιν.” (“Later on, beginning from the time of the Trojan war, the Greeks had taken away from the earlier inhabitants much of the interior country also, and indeed had increased in power to such an extent that they called this part of Italy, together with Sicily, Magna Graecia. But today all parts of it, except Taras, Rhegium, and Neapolis, have become completely barbarized, [...] they have become Romans,” trans. Horace Leonard Jone, Loeb Classical Library).

¹⁴ In the enormous debate which took place between Gerhard Rohlfs, who denied the Romanization of Sicily, and many Italian scholars (Alessio, Pagliaro, Parlàngeli and Pisani), who denied any continuity of Greek in Italy from

because Greek was probably continuously spoken until the Byzantine period. Even as a Roman Province, Sicily produced a copious body of Greek epigraphic texts, mainly private. We have hundreds of funerary inscriptions throughout the island, but also many examples of honorific decrees and curse tablets.¹⁵ More significantly, we have a conspicuous amount of Greek official inscriptions even in the western part of Sicily (as in Lilybaeum, originally Punic). Lomas (2000: 169) remarks that some examples of official Greek inscriptions appear in the late Roman Empire (4th c. CE) also in Catania, Syracuse and Tauromenion, with explicit mentions of βουλή and δῆμος, the traditional political organs in the Greek πόλεις. While the Greek language and culture were receding everywhere under Roman Empire, in Sicily we have, instead, a revival of Greek identities. Furthermore, the Greek language in Sicily has preserved, at least partially, both genuine and hypercorrected forms of Dorisms. This phenomenon has been explained by Willi as a typical colonial feature (cf. Willi 2008), and we can argue also that Sicilian Greeks have possibly used Doric as a device for “nationalistic” pride and resistance under the Romans. In the first centuries of Roman domination, Doric spread across Sicily, but, starting from the first to second centuries CE, we also see that Sicilian Greek and Latin inscriptions show some common traits. This convergence has to be explained through a situation of Greek–Latin bilingualism, which must have involved the entire island. Of course, as we should not assume that in Sicily there was bilingualism everywhere in the same way, as some areas better maintained the Greek language; for instance, the southeastern corner of Sicily remained more deeply Hellenized. Greek and Latin, because of their common Indo–European origin, share many grammatical features and a part of the lexicon, and their similarities increased because of the important political and cultural relationships that existed between Greece and Rome.

I suggest that, within a greater context of linguistic exchange, Christianity also contributed to make Sicily linguistically more uniform. The diffusion of Christian cults, in addition to creating a common ground of shared beliefs, also favored linguistic exchanges. This situation came about because these exchanges established a new common religious lexicon. Also, one often finds shared Graeco–Latin formulae in Sicilian funerary inscriptions from the late antiquity. I mention here just a few of examples of this phenomenon, such as the Latin formula *sibi et suis*, which has a parallel in the Greek ἐαυτοῖς ἐποίησαν καὶ τοῖς ἰδίοις ‘for themselves and their family’, and ἡ μακαρίας μνήμης, calque on Latin *beatae memoriae* ‘(person) of blessed memory’. This scenario suggests that, in a situation of bilingualism, two or more populations closely genetically–related populations with similar cultures can become closer and more similar, sharing new sets of formulae and vocabulary. Dixon (1997) described a more extreme version of the equilibrium, according to which “[i]f two languages have a very similar set of grammatical morphemes and about 50% [of their] vocabulary in common, they might well merge” (Dixon 1997: 73). Of course, Greek and Latin never merged, but they surely show convergence, in a similar way as we see it happened between Greek and local languages in Sicily before the Roman period. To sum up some of the most interesting phenomena of interference between Latin and Greek, I list:

the foundation of the Doric colonies until the Middle Ages, I think that a less extreme assumption – like those proposed by Kapsomenos 1958 – could be more reliable. On this contentious topic, I refer to Wilson (1990) “Romanization certainly made progresses in some parts of the island, especially on the north and east coasts [...] but Sicily never become a fully Romanized province” (Wilson 1990: 329). See also Lomas (2000) and Korhonen (2011).

¹⁵ In favour of the authenticity of this renaissance, we can mention a group of magical texts edited by Bevilacqua/Giannobile (2000), dated to the 5th/6th c. CE, with many examples of a spoken Greek (late vocalism; suppression of the vocative; common substitution of the dative with a genitive case).

- a. graphic confusion due to the Greek writing, *e.g.* P instead of a R (cf. Nenci 1991: 811–3);¹⁶
- b. phonetic interference, as in Ἰεναρῖος, Greek form for the late Latin *Ienarius*;
- c. semantic interference, as the apposition υἰός to personal names, as a calque on Latin *filius*;
- d. formulae, such as πλῖον ἔλαττον, based on plus minus.

There is much evidence which suggests that Sicily, before the Middle Ages, went through a process of convergence between Greek and the indigenous languages, at an earlier stage, and between Greek and Latin later on. This scenario is comparable to Dixon’s phase of language equilibrium.

4 Greek and Latin in Sicily at the end of the Roman Empire. A case of punctuation?

Unfortunately, the scanty epigraphic evidence from the first centuries of the Middle Age makes it difficult to claim that the Sicilian linguistic landscape after the 5th c. CE is to be interpreted as a case of punctuation, as in Dixon’s theory. Punctuation happens when a previous equilibrium ends and “new languages develop at a steady rate” (Dixon 1997: 73). This occurs for a number of different reasons (see above), most commonly invasions and major political change. In Sicily, at the end of the Roman Empire, the Goths invaded the island, but there is very little linguistic evidence of this domination (Varvaro 1981). Starting from the 5th c. CE, Latin and Greek inscriptions drastically decrease (Prag 2009: 22) and “the surviving lapidary epigraphic evidence from Sicily is less abundant than, *e.g.*, in Central Italy or in North Africa” (Korhonen 2010: 120). We cannot argue, *e silentio*, that the languages also disappeared, but we see that the Greek language after the 5th century – and even more after the 6th c. CE – is scarcely standardized, with many vulgarisms and Latinisms. Latin inscriptions from the same phase display comparable cases of vulgarisms. The most significant event in Sicily for this period was the Gothic conquest, at the end of the 5th c. CE.

However, although the Goths ruled Sicily for 50 years, the domination has left minimal evidence. In 535, Sicily was conquered by the Byzantines, who were Greek-speaking and significantly influenced by Latin inheritance with regards to government and culture. Nonetheless, their government did not assure the persistence of a linguistic equilibrium. Since Roman hegemony did not eradicate Greek language and culture, I suggest that the fall of the Roman Empire dismantled the Sicilian linguistic phase of equilibrium, because, from the 5th c. CE onwards, the epigraphic evidence (cf. the epitaph of Zoe, *infra*) suggests that there was remarkable diatopic and diachronic variation, both in Latin and in Greek. In Dixon’s theory, punctuation is triggered by traumatic events and we can surely list the fall of Roman Empire as such. The most relevant linguistic consequence has been the fragmentation of Late Latin into many different varieties of languages. Of course, the process must have started before the fall of the Empire, but the lack of a centralized power surely favored the diffusion of the Romance languages. Along with the collapse of Roman power, the linguistic unity was dismantled across the empire but this fragmentation alone is not sufficient enough to define this phase as punctuation. To determine whether we can conclusively describe the linguistic situation in Sicily at the end of the Roman Empire, we need major linguistic evidence, which for the 6th–7th c. CE is noticeably missing. Among the few extant documents, I will mention here the so–

¹⁶ Cf. the tombstones of *Cornelius Epaφruitus* (CIL X 7396) and of *Iulia Eutvχη* (CIL X 7072). CIL X 7396, which Bivona (1994: 265) considers Roman, has been correctly proved as Sicilian by Korhonen (2002: 17).

called ‘Epitaph of Zoe’, (De Vita 1961 = Manganaro 1963: 571, fig. 33 = AE 2004: 662 = ISic0815) a 5th– or 6th–century CE funerary inscription from Ragusa:

(1)
Super lo–
cellu u–
be iaceo e–
go birgo
nomi
ne zoe
anoru
cique(n)ta me
sa ζ`.
aiura–
ti per de–
u e infero–
s nemi–
nui lice–
at aperi a<r>
ce ipa–
tu.
*v(ivas) s(emper)*¹⁷

“On the tombstone, where I lie, as a virgin, with the name Zoe, fifty years and 6 months old, swear by God and the *inferi* that no one is permitted to open the coffin of my tomb. May you live forever.”

We see several vulgarisms, which we can classify into two groups. Firstly, the common ones, widespread in the entire romance world, such as loss of final *–m* (*deu* < *deum*), confusion between /b/ and /v/ and between unstressed /e/ and /i/, and degemination of the nasals (*anorum* for *annorum*). Interestingly enough, there is no consistency in the graphic conventions, as we can see from the treatment of the unstressed vowel in *ube* in comparison with what we have in *nomine*. The ending lines of this inscription have puzzled many editors, who have tried to read the final sequence as “*aperire ceipa*”, as a corruption of “*aperire cupa*” (Ferrua (1989: 137 no. 510), Manganaro (1993: 589–91) and Korhonen (2010: 132–133)), or “*aperire a<r>ce ipatu*” “*aperi arce hypaton*” (Varvaro 1981: 78–80), both meaning “to open the tomb”. The first reading would have a parallel (κοῦπα) in a Sicilian inscription from Catania (e.g. IG XIV 566), but this phonetic development is rather unparalleled. The latter, on the other hand, would be the Latin outcome of an unattested masculine noun *ῥπατος. Both hypotheses show no parallel in the latter Sicilian varieties. As Varvaro (1981: 68–70) noticed, the language of this inscription is not congruent with the posterior characteristics of Romance languages in Sicily, because there is no common lexicon or significant morphological outcome exclusively shared from these two stages of Sicilian linguistic history. An apparent contradiction could be the development /dj/ > /j/, attested in this inscription and also in medieval and modern Sicilian. This feature, though, is widespread in other southern varieties, and therefore cannot prove continuity between Late Latin and the later Romance languages in Sicily. I am not implying that Greek or Latin suddenly disappeared from Sicily, or that the modern Romance varieties in Sicily were just the result of

¹⁷ The text is from Varvaro (1981: 68–70), with some modifications.

the so-called ‘Norman colonization’ in the Middle Ages.¹⁸ Modern Sicilian has to be considered the final outcome of the local Latin language, but it is undeniable that, by the end of the Roman Empire, the linguistic stability which I have tried to analyze in terms of Dixon’s equilibrium comes to an end. I am tempted to read this discontinuity as Dixon does with an analogous case between the so-called ‘proto-Australian’ and modern languages (Dixon 1997: 89–93), interpreting it as a case of punctuation, but I am aware that we are dealing with insufficient evidence.

I have tried to demonstrate that we should not be afraid of applying theories elaborated for remote linguistic areas to the “classical” languages, even if at times not all results are fully persuasive. I hope that Sicily has been a good laboratory for this linguistic experiment.

Appendix



Figure 1: Languages in Sicily before the 5th c. BCE

¹⁸ On this problem, I refer here to Fanciullo (2015). The “Norman colonization” of the 12th–13th (and maybe 14th) centuries, originated from northern Italy and the dialects imported to Southern Italy were actually varieties of Ligurian, Piedmontese, and sometimes also Provençal and Franco-Provençal (Fanciullo 2015: 134).



Figure 2: Doric and Ionic settlements in Greece in the Classical period

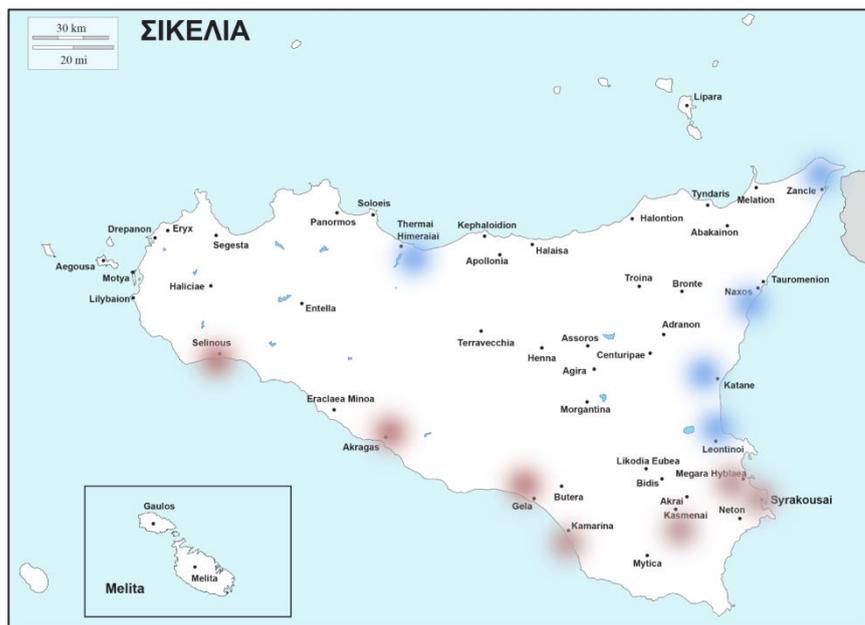


Figure 3: Dialectal distribution of the Greek colonies in Sicily before the 4th c. BCE

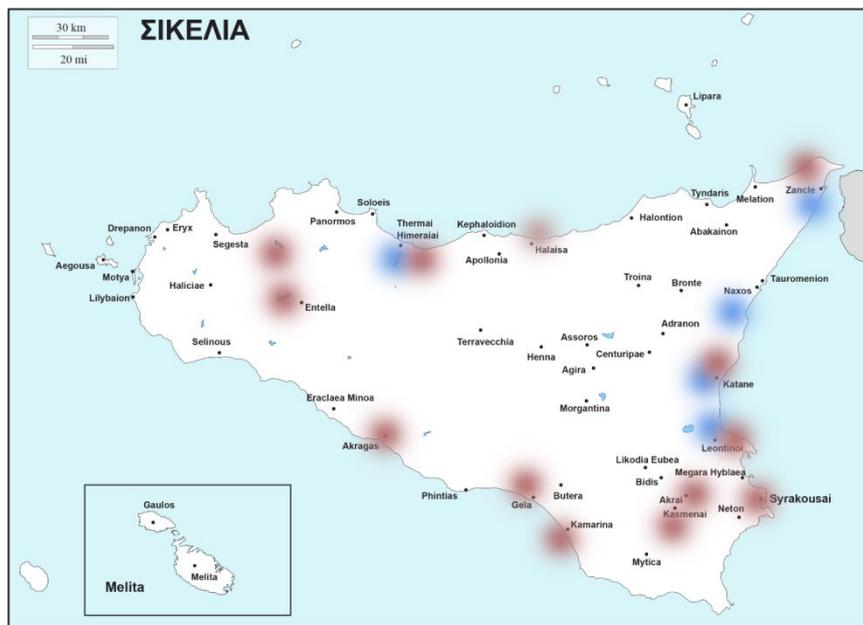


Figure 4: The spread of Doric features after the 4th c. BCE

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