

The {i} of the beholder: a corpus approach to ancient Greek spelling

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Spelling irregularities are a major source of information on language variation and change in historical languages. For Ancient Greek, orthographic variation has traditionally been used as indirect evidence for phonological change. However, this can be problematic because of survival patterns in the material. For the Hellenistic and Roman periods, a large proportion of directly transmitted texts are papyrus documents written in Egypt under Ptolemaic and Roman rule. Long-term language contact between spoken Greek and Egyptian during this period, plus the relative scarcity of contemporary material from outside Egypt, mean that the significance of spelling interchanges in papyri can be disputed (e.g. Bubeník 1989 pp. 183-187).

The main thesis of my current PhD is that papyrus spellings can be understood more fully by looking not just at their phonological implications, but at how they are distributed as written forms across collections of text. This poster illustrates this approach by summarising the distribution of spelling interchanges between iota ({ι}, {i}) and the epsilon-iota digraph {ει} ({ei}) in a body of 200 letters from Roman-era Oxyrhynchus. By the date of the letters (150–350 AD), both {i} and {ei} were allographs of /i/ in all environments (Horrocks 2010 pp. 160–70). However, the distribution of {i} <> {ei} interchanges in the material is inconsistent with spelling choices made exclusively on the basis of phoneme representation. Spelling variants which involve grapheme-phoneme mapping tend to feature high-frequency allographs in low-frequency words (Goodman & Caramazza 1986 pp. 193–6), but the letters also show the opposite trend: substitution of less frequent {ei} for {i}, whose observed letter frequency outnumbers {ei} 5:1, in high-frequency lexical items, such as the personal pronouns ὑμεῖς (*hymeis*, YOU.2.PL.DAT), and ὑμῖν (*hymin*, YOU.2.PL.DAT).

Both these forms achieve a $\approx 25\%$ spelling variation rate ({ei} for expected {i} in *hymein*; {i} for expected {ei} in *hymis*) across all published papyri (Keersmaekers, 2018). Such a high rate is atypical, since overall only around 2% of words in published papyri are marked variant by editors (Depauw & Stolk 2015 p. 203). As {ei} is less common than {i} as an allograph of /i/, the frequency of *hymein* implies orthographic hypercorrection, with variant dative *hymein* written on analogy with regular nominative *hymeis*. The poster provides parallels with surviving grammatical papyri, and suggests that non-phonological motives for spelling variation in papyri should be given more attention than has historically been the case. In the past, papyrological scholarship has sometimes assumed an unambiguous link between non-standard spelling, phonological motivation, and poor competence in Greek (e.g. Winter, 1933) without differentiating for multiple possible influences on written forms (Evans, 2012).

References

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