

Registers of Greek on Papyrus: Orality, Literacy, and Gender in Private Correspondence

Substantial research has been done to identify the key differences between the spoken and written registers of modern languages (O'Donnell 1974, Redeker 1984, Park 2022, etc.). When trying to apply the modern linguistic methodology to ancient languages, the first barrier we encounter is, obviously, the lack of audio recordings containing authentic, spontaneous speech. The closest material we can work with for this type of research is texts that display some range of spoken features, such as inscriptions and letters. However, not all inscriptions and letters can be trusted to display characteristics of the actual spoken language, as there are many literary inscriptions (Liddel & Low 2013), and also some of the epistolography corpora we possess are in fact literary examples (see, for example, Inwood 2007: xii on Seneca's letters to Lucilius and Drago 2007 on Aristenetos). Therefore, the linguistic particularities of these texts do not include significant spoken features. Documentary papyri, on the other hand, as Knox (1968) argues, are the closest to oral speech, being the most familiar to the ancient reader. They present standardized phrases and careful layout in letters, which are also probable proof of silent reading in antiquity.

This paper investigates how papyrus letters can be used as evidence for literacy in both spoken and written Greek by analyzing their linguistic content in combination to certain paleographic elements. For this purpose: (1) syntactic analysis will be used to detect features of orality and literacy, (2) paleographic examination of the ductus will be done to assess the hand, training, and possible interventions, and (3) examination of layout and other textual features, such as spacing and punctuation, will supplement the discussion on scribal training and literacy.

Four case studies will be presented: two by female writers (P.Oxy. VI 932 and P.Oxy. VII 1067) and two by male writers (P.Mich. I 6 and P.Oxy. VII 1065). P.Oxy. VI 932 shows everyday vocabulary and unpolished syntax (Bagnall & Cribiore 2006: 297), while P.Oxy. VII 1067, though possibly mediated by a scribe (Grenfell & Hunt 1907: 221; Bagnall & Cribiore 2006: 273), conveys the female sender's voice. In contrast, the male-authored letters are closer to conventional formulas, controlled handwriting, and balanced layout (Boak 1933: 65).

Through the evaluation of these papyri within the context of authentic speech composition, this study demonstrates how they capture both the immediacy of oral language and the constraints imposed by writing conventions, literacy, and gender.

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