

Latin loanwords in Greek

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The lecture offers findings from a recently-completed (or at least, I hope it will have been completed before the start of the conference!), comprehensive lexicon of Latin loanwords and alleged Latin loanwords in ancient Greek up to AD 600. This project has revealed that a number of generalizations commonly made about Latin loanwords are incorrect: there were not thousands of loanwords but only 791; they did not start to appear long after the Greek loanwords in Latin but as early as the 6th century BC; the peak borrowing period was not late antiquity but the second century AD; Latin loanwords were not always written in Greek script but sometimes in the Latin alphabet; they were not primarily words in the semantic fields of law, government, and the military but mostly words connected to daily life; they were not only nouns but also adjectives and even verbs; there are not more loanwords in papyri than in literature, for even Atticist writers sometimes used large numbers of loanwords; and many more loanwords survived into Modern Greek than the traditional figure of 10%.

In this lecture we shall explore why these traditional generalizations nevertheless looked as if they were right, and what the evidence for and against them is. Then we shall look beyond the questions traditionally asked about Latin loanwords in Greek to see what else these loanwords might be able to tell us about the Greek language and its speakers. As a test case, it will be investigated whether loanwords provide information on regional variation in Roman-period Greek. It turns out that there is good evidence for the presence of local Latin loanwords in papyri, ostraca, and inscriptions from five different places in Egypt. Outside Egypt documentary texts are less numerous and therefore less helpful for this type of investigation, but literary sources (Athenaeus, Galen, and the New Testament) appear to indicate that the Greek spoken in the city of Rome was distinctive in its use of Latin loanwords. The conclusion is that Latin loanwords have much more to tell us on a wider range of topics than has previously been realized.