

'Egyptian' Greek in the Zenon Archive

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The Greek of documentary papyri from Egypt has received an inappropriately dismissive and even derisive response from many modern editors and commentators. That of documents whose named authors are apparently indigenous Egyptians has endured a particularly bad press. The worst of 'bad Greek' has been associated with such texts, often on the basis of extreme or poorly understood examples. The problematisation of their linguistic and stylistic competence is very often linked explicitly or implicitly to issues of language contact.

This presentation will examine 'Egyptian' Greek texts found in the remarkable third-century BCE assemblage known as the Zenon Archive. I will argue that these are far from a linguistically and stylistically uniform subset within the corpus and that some exhibit a level of Greek that essentially reflects the contemporary standard. I will discuss examples mainly of this type. My specific objectives are to demonstrate the unreliability of some modern judgements on the Greek usage and to cast fresh light on the complicated questions of authorship, the role of scribes, and the ethnicity of participants involved in the composition of the documents. The overarching purpose is to test the validity of the distinction between 'Greek' and 'Egyptian' authorship of texts from lower social levels preserved in the Archive.