

Vowel raising in a contact-linguistic and typological context: Evidence from Egyptian Greek iotacism

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Greek iotacism is a well-known example of extensive diachronic vowel raising and fronting: in less than a millennium, the Greek vowel system was reduced to five monophthongs (/i, e, a, o, u/) from seven monophthongs and six diphthongs (/i: e: ε: a: o: u: y:/, /ei, ai, oi, ou, au, eu/; Horrocks 2010: 160-170). However, Greek in Egypt had a different patterning for front vowel variation: in addition to the Greek-internal developments, it was affected by language contact with Egyptian-Coptic, which had vowel variation of its own. The nonstandard variation in Greek documentary papyri (ca. 80 000 texts mainly found in Egypt; Papyrological Navigator) that often resembles Greek iotacism is connected to the under-differentiation of Greek vowel qualities by Egyptian L2 Greek writers, who produced phonetically-based misspellings. Due to consonant-to-vowel coarticulation, vowel qualities were affected by nearby consonants, fronting and retracting them. Roman period Egyptian Greek iotacism shows a synchronic outcome of two languages' phonological systems merging in language contact.

However, in addition to examining a single language's vowel variation in a specific context in time and space, it is worthwhile to look at front vowel variation and its manifestations cross-linguistically. The Greek vowel development we know as 'iotacism' is not without counterparts in other languages; nor is the general phonological structure of the contact language, Egyptian-Coptic. Although extensive in Greek, vowel raising is a fairly common feature in languages. For example, many vowel qualities were raised during the Great Vowel Shift of English, with the process still ongoing in some varieties, such as Australian and New Zealand Englishes (Watson, Harrington and Evans 1998: 205) and Modern Scottish English (Scobbie et al. 2024)). Outside Indo-European languages, it occurs in, for example, Basaa (Schmidt 1996) and Arabic in Amman (Al-Wer 2000). Similarly, Egyptian-Coptic is not alone in having a structure that favours a consonantal phonetic/phonological bias: the same type of phonological structure is found in many languages, e.g. Alyawarra (Yallop 1977).

Recognising the ability of languages to have differing phonemic biases that cause front vowel variation to act differently cross-linguistically gives insight into a typological analysis of Greek 'iotacism'. In this paper, I give cross-linguistic examples of the phonetic and phonological phenomena that place both Greek iotacism as well as Egyptian-Coptic vowel variation in a typological context. I will also show attestations of Greek iotacism in different Koine Greek regional varieties, showing how the front vowel variation differs between the contact varieties, depending on which language Greek is in contact with – whether the variety exhibits vowel raising similar to that of Mainland Koine Greek, or whether it has vowel variation affected by consonant-to-vowel coarticulation as in Egyptian Greek. Examples will be drawn from Judeo-Palestinian, Italian, and Asia Minor Koine Greek varieties.

References

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