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Reconsidering dialect contact in Southern Italy: the case of Locri Epizephyrii

The attestation of a long-vowel system of the *severior* type (i.e. with five long vowels comprising only one mid-vowel on each axis) at Locri Epizephyrii, in Southern Italy, in late fourth- and third-century inscriptions has generally been considered as evidence for dialect contact among the colonies in this area. Having been founded by the Locrians of Greece in the seventh century, Locri Epizephyrii is in fact expected to have originally inherited a long- vowel system of the *mitior* type (i.e. with seven long vowels comprising two mid-vowels on each axis) from its motherland; the reduction of the long-vowel system to one with five long- vowels only should therefore have occurred at some later stage after the foundation of the colony. Scholars have generally assumed that this development occurred under the influence of the dialect of the Laconian colony of Taras (modern Taranto), which, on the other hand, is expected to have inherited a *severior* vocalism from its motherland. This hypothesis has relied on the fact that Taras is known to have experienced a period of military and cultural flourishing around the late fourth and early third centuries, and to have led a league of South Italian colonies in military campaigns against the Lucanians. However, Locri does not seem to have been part of this league, and evidence for contact between Locri and Taras, which would support such a hypothesis, has never been properly investigated. In fact, on closer inspection the historical evidence does not suggest any particular closeness between the two colonies that would justify any attribution of prestige to the dialect of Taras in Locri, while, at the same time, the dialects of the two colonies seem to have remained quite different in other respects, besides the vocalism. In this paper I shall therefore reconsider the question of the vocalism in Locri Epizephyrii and argue, on the basis of linguistic considerations, that an independent development in Locri is the most plausible explanation for the attestation of the *severior* long- vowel system in the inscriptions of this colony. I will then attempt a new assessment of dialect contact in Southern Italy and argue that the full array of historical and linguistic evidence should be taken into account when investigating contact among the Ancient Greek dialects.

