

THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LANGUAGE

AN HISTORICAL STUDY
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1. ANCIENT EGYPTIAN

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN is the oldest and longest continually attested of the world's languages. Recent discoveries have demonstrated the existence of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing with phonograms as well as ideograms around 3250 BC, roughly contemporary with the comparable development in Mesopotamian cuneiform, and the last documents composed in Coptic, the final stage of the language, date to the eighteenth century AD.¹ This extraordinary lifespan of five thousand years is preserved in a wealth of written material, making it possible to trace the development of the language through at least three millennia of its history.²

A. AFFINITIES

Egyptian belongs to the Hamito-Semitic family of languages.³ It has affinities with Hamitic languages such as Beja, Berber, and Oromo, and with all the Semitic languages, including Akkadian, Arabic, and Hebrew. Common Hamito-Semitic features include consonantal root structures; lexical morphology (e.g., nouns of instrumentality with initial *m*–, verbal causatives with initial *s*–); two genders, masculine and feminine, the latter marked by a final *–t*; plural marked by final *–w/–wt*; independent and suffix forms of the personal pronouns; the stative verb form; and non-

1 Kahl 2003; see also Jiménez-Serrano 2007; Richter 2009. The Bohairic dialect of Coptic is still used in the liturgy of the Coptic church.








2 Major diachronic studies are those of Stricker 1945. Junge 1984, Loprieno 1995, Kruchten 1999, and Winand 2006. Documents before 2600 BC reveal only a few features of grammar, and developments in Coptic after the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century AD have not been studied systematically (Richter 2009).

3 Also called, less accurately, Afro-Asiatic (Arabic is both an African and an Asian Semitic language). For an overview, see Petráček 1988.

verbal sentences.⁴ Non-Hamitic features of Egyptian include a preponderance of triconsonantal roots (almost two-thirds of all verb roots in the early text corpus known as the Pyramid Texts), a dual marked by final *-wj/-tj*, some lexical cognates (e.g. *spt* “lip” ≈ Akkadian *šaptum*, Arabic *šafatun*, Hebrew *šāpā*), and the vocalization pattern of some verbal derivatives.⁵ Non-Semitic features include other lexical cognates (e.g., *jrt* “eye” ≈ Oromo *ila* versus Semitic *ʿyn*, *fdw* “four” ≈ Beja *fadhig* versus Semitic *rbʿ*); roots of two and four to six radicals, a number formed by reduplication (e.g., *sn* “kiss” ≈ *snsn* “fraternize”); a dearth of lexical verb stems other than the root and causative;⁶ and passive verb forms marked by gemination of the final radical (e.g., *nḥmm* “be taken” from *nḥm* “take,” *rḥhj* “known” from *rḥ* “learn”).

These peculiarities identify Egyptian as a distinct branch within the Hamito-Semitic language family, with no close relatives of its own—perhaps, therefore, closer to the common ancestor of Hamito-Semitic than to either of the other two branches. The value of some hieroglyphs, however, reflects an original relationship to Semitic lost in historical times:

- 4 The phonological realization of features such as the causative prefix and feminine and plural endings varies in Hamito-Semitic languages. The stative is cognate with the Akkadian form known variously as the stative or verbal adjective, and with the perfect of other Hamito-Semitic languages.
- 5 The symbol ≈ is used in this study to indicate correspondence. For verb roots in the Pyramid Texts, see Allen 1984, 541–601; Satzinger 2008. For vocalization patterns, see especially Osing 1976a and Schenkel 1983.
- 6 Egyptian has a few roots with initial *n*— that may correspond to the Semitic medial/intransitive/passive stem, such as *nḥp* “escape,” related to *ḥp* “free;”: see Vernus 2009. The existence of a factitive corresponding to the Akkadian and Arabic II or D stem (Breyer 2006) is questionable. Hieroglyphic spelling regularly shows only one of two identical radicals in contact. The meanings “perish” and “destroy” of the verb *ḥtm* could therefore represent **ḥṯm* versus **ḥṯṯm*, respectively. But it is also possible that Egyptian used a single root for both meanings, as in English *the door closed* versus *he closed the door*.

- the Egyptian word for “hand” is  *drt* (related to *ndrj* “grasp”), but the hieroglyph  (a human hand) itself has the phonemic value *d*,⁷ as in Semitic *yd* “hand” (also reflected in Egyptian *djw* “five”);
- the word for “eye” in Egyptian is  *jrt* (\approx Oromo *ila*), but the hieroglyph , variant  (a human eye, Semitic *ʿyn* “eye”) is also used in writing the word *ʿn* “beautiful”;
- the word for “ear” in Egyptian is  *msdr* (an instrumental from *sdr* “lie down”), but the hieroglyph  (a cow’s ear, Semitic *ʾōn* “ear”) is also used to write the words *jdn* “substitute” and *jdnw* “deputy.”⁸

These suggest that Egyptian may be closer in origin to Proto-Semitic than to the Hamitic branch of Hamito-Semitic.

B. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Ancient Egyptian is commonly divided into five historical stages, known as Old, Middle, and Late Egyptian, Demotic, and Coptic. Significant differences in grammar separate the first two of these from the last three, so that the stages can be grouped into two major historical phases, here designated as Egyptian I and Egyptian II. The relationship between these two phases has been a major quandary in the history of the language.

Old Egyptian can be said to begin with the first known instance of a complete sentence, from a cylinder seal of the pharaoh Peribsen, near the end of Dynasty II (ca. 2690 BC):



⁷ The phonological value of this phoneme is discussed in Chapter 5.

⁸ The IPA symbol *ð* represents the consonant sometimes transcribed in Semitic studies as *ḏ* (Arabic *ḏ* *ḏāl*). An Egyptian word *jdn* meaning “ear” is attested once (CT VII, 30k).

- [1.1] *d(m)ḡ.n.f t3wj n z3.f nswt-bjt pr-jb.snj* (Kahl 2002–2004, 229)
 He has united the Two Lands for his son, Dual King Peribsen.

Prior to this, the language is represented solely by proper names, titles, and labels. Some of the latter, however, contain phrases such as *zp dpj phrr hjpw* “first occasion of the Apis running,”⁹ demonstrating the existence of several grammatical features that characterize the later language: in this case, nisbe formation (*dpj* “first” from the preposition *dp* “atop”); adjectival modification (*zp dpj* “first occasion”); verbal nouns (*phrr* “running”); and genitival relationships expressed by direct juxtaposition, including that between a verb and its subject and consequent VS word order (*phrr hjpw* “the running of the Apis”).

The first extensive Egyptian texts are inscriptions in the tomb of Metjen, whose career spanned the end of Dynasty III and the beginning of Dynasty IV (ca. 2600 BC). These belong to the first of two sub-stages of Old Egyptian, early and late. Early Old Egyptian is represented by secular texts of the Fourth and early Fifth Dynasty (ca. 2600–2450 BC) and the Pyramid Texts of the late Fifth–Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2325–2150 BC); late Old Egyptian (ca. 2450–2100 BC) is distinguished from its predecessor mostly by the appearance of the “pseudo-verbal” constructions subject–*hr-stp* and subject–*r-stp*.¹⁰

The transition between Old and Middle Egyptian is gradual rather than sharp. Some late Old Egyptian texts contain Middle Egyptian features; conversely, some of the Coffin Texts and other early Middle Egyptian documents are marked by the retention of Old Egyptian morphological and grammatical features largely absent from later texts.¹¹ Middle Egyptian proper exhibits three major sub-stages, classical, late, and traditional.

9 Kahl 2002–2004, 291.

10 See Edel 1955/1964, §§ 12–15; Allen 1984, § 721.

11 See Edel 1955/1964, §§ 16–20; Allen 1984, § 722; Vernus 1996.

Classical Middle Egyptian is the language of most texts of the Middle Kingdom (Dynasties XI–XIII, ca. 2000–1650 BC), including the classical literature of ancient Egypt. Late Middle Egyptian, in use from the Second Intermediate Period through the New Kingdom (Dynasties XIV–XVIII, ca. 1650–1350 BC), exhibits some features of its successor, Late Egyptian. By the time the latter appeared in writing, Middle Egyptian had ceased to be a living language. Middle Egyptian was retained for monumental inscriptions and some religious texts until the end of hieroglyphic writing (in the fourth century AD), in the form known as traditional Middle Egyptian, which is primarily an artificial construct whose grammar was influenced by that of the contemporary language.

Late Egyptian began to appear in texts from the time of Akhenaten (Dynasty XVIII, ca. 1350 BC) and became the standard written language in the succeeding dynasty. It is attested in two forms, literary (retaining some features of Middle Egyptian) and colloquial. The latter exhibits some changes between its earlier and later stages, essentially Dynasties XIX–XX (ca. 1300–1100 BC) and Dynasties XX–XXVI (ca. 1100–650 BC), respectively.

Demotic, first attested in its distinctive written form about 650 BC, developed directly out of Late Egyptian. It has three major sub-stages, early (Dynasties XXVI–XXX), Ptolemaic, and Roman. For the last three centuries of its existence, until the mid-fifth century AD, it existed alongside Coptic, essentially two different written forms of the same language.

The relationship between these various stages of Egyptian is not strictly diachronic in nature. Coptic shows evidence of six major dialects and numerous sub-dialects (see Chapter 2), and these undoubtedly existed in some form in earlier stages of the language as well: a Late Egyptian text likens the task of deciphering a garbled composition to “the speech of a Delta man with a man of Elephantine” (Anastasi I 40, 3–4). Dialectal distinc-

tions are generally invisible in pre-Coptic writing. Morphological and grammatical features, however, indicate that Old and Late Egyptian are historical phases of a single dialect, or closely related ones, probably from the north, while Middle Egyptian represents a separate dialect, most likely southern in origin.¹² In the history of the language, therefore, Middle Egyptian somewhat interrupts and obscures the presumably direct evolution of Old Egyptian into Late Egyptian.

C. WRITING

The original Egyptian writing system, hieroglyphic, is the basis of the scripts used for all stages of the language except Coptic. Hieroglyphic proper, carved or painted on stone or wood, was the script of monumental inscriptions in Old and Middle Egyptian and some literary Late Egyptian texts. Hieroglyphic texts were also written with ink on papyrus, usually with simplified forms of the signs. For most handwritten texts, scribes used hieratic, a cursive form of hieroglyphic with numerous ligatures.

Old Egyptian is attested in hieroglyphic inscriptions and a few letters and accounts in hieratic. As the premier language of monumental inscriptions from the Middle Kingdom onward, Middle Egyptian too is preserved largely in hieroglyphic texts. Secular and literary texts, however, are mostly in hieratic on papyrus. To judge from school exercises, this was the script in which scribes were first instructed. Religious compositions were also written in hieratic (also carved inside Middle Kingdom coffins), although some funerary texts—notably, the “Book of the Dead”—were inscribed in simplified hieroglyphs on papyrus. Literary Late Egyptian appears both in hieratic and in some hieroglyphic inscriptions, but the colloquial language is attested

12 Edgerton 1951; Edel 1955/1964, §§ 21–22; Allen 2004; Gundacker 2010.

almost without exception in hieratic. Demotic is written almost exclusively in the script of the same name, developed from a form of hieratic with abbreviated and more cursive signs.¹³

Coptic uses a script based on the Greek alphabet, with a few characters derived from Demotic for sounds that existed in Egyptian but not in Greek (see Chapter 2). Although the earliest Coptic texts proper date to the second century AD, they are prefigured by a number of compositions of slightly earlier origin, in a script known as Old Coptic, ancestral to that of Coptic. The alphabet itself, however, reflects Greek and Egyptian phonology of the third century BC, indicating that scribes had developed this writing system some three hundred years before the first extant Old Coptic texts.¹⁴

Coptic is the only script that regularly shows vowels. The earlier writing system is consonant-based, like Hebrew and Arabic: it occasionally indicates the presence, but not necessarily the nature, of vowels by use of the graphemes transcribed *ʒ*, *j*, and *w*;¹⁵ it can also be deficient in conveying information about the consonants themselves. The resulting lack of morphological data makes it difficult, and occasionally impossible, to discern formal differences in the four stages preceding Coptic. The identification of individual grammatical forms in these stages is therefore partly educated guesswork, particularly in Old and Middle Egyptian, and the existence of some grammatical forms is a continuing subject of discussion.

13 For Demotic written in hieroglyphs, see Quack 1995.

14 Satzinger 2003, 201–213.

15 Beginning in the Old Kingdom, scribes developed a syllabic orthography known as “group writing,” primarily to transcribe foreign names and loan words. That system seems to have regularly represented the presence of vowels, though not always with consistency: see Chapter 4.

D. DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS

In common with all languages, ancient Egyptian displays historical changes in vocabulary, phonology, morphology, and syntax. The first of these includes alterations in the semantic range or meaning of words and the replacement of one word by another. An example of the former is OE–Dem. *ḥt* “belly, body” > Dem. *ḥt* “manner” > Coptic ⲕⲉ “manner.”¹⁶ The latter involves both substitutions from inside Egyptian and the adoption of words from other languages, either as replacements for existing lexemes or as neologisms: e.g., OE–Dem. *m33* versus LE–Dem. *nw* > Coptic ⲡⲁⲩ “see,” OE–LE *rwtj* and *ḥntw* versus LE–Dem. *bl* (Sem. *barra*) > Coptic ⲃⲟⲗ “outside,” LE *dphw/dphṯ* (Sem. *tappūḥa*) > Dem. *ḏph/dmph* > Coptic ⲭⲙⲡⲉⲕ “apple.” This kind of change has not been examined in detail for Egyptian and will be treated only cursorily in the present study.

The first major studies of Egyptian phonology identified the distinct consonantal phonemes of the language and, based on Coptic, reconstructed its vowels and syllable structure.¹⁷ Subsequent studies have concerned themselves primarily with the phonological value of the consonants and their historical development.¹⁸ The latter is relatively well understood, but the former is still the subject of debate, centered largely on the values proposed for a number of the consonants on the basis of Semitic cognates.¹⁹ The phonological history of Egyptian is the subject of Chapters 2–5 in the present study.

16 The symbols > (“develops into”) and < (“develops from”) are used in this study to indicate diachronic change. For the Coptic alphabet, see Chapter 2.

17 Steindorff 1894, §§ 1–46; Sethe 1899–1902, I, 3–188; Sethe 1923, 145–207. The classic synthesis is Edgerton 1947.

18 Major studies include Czermak 1931 and 1934; Worrell 1934; Vergote 1945; Loprieno 1995, 28–50; and Peust 1999a.

19 Based on Rößler 1971. For summaries of the debate, see H. Satzinger, 1997; Peust 1999a, 80–84; Müller 2011.

With the exception of verb-forms and the vocalization of nouns (see n. 5, above), the historical morphology of ancient Egyptian has not received much attention.²⁰ For nouns and pronouns, this is discussed in Chapter 6, below.

Syntax and semantics, the subject of Chapters 7–12, has been the focus of the greatest amount of study, but mostly in its synchronic dimension. Apart from Coptic, which had been known before the decipherment of hieroglyphs, the first stage of the language to be identified as a discrete entity was Demotic.²¹ Late Egyptian was described as a stage distinct from Middle Egyptian a quarter-century later, and Old Egyptian only in the middle of the last century.²² More recent studies have elucidated sub-stages of these, including early Old Egyptian, colloquial Late Egyptian, and various genres of traditional Middle Egyptian.²³

For the language as a whole, the modern understanding of its verbal system and grammar has undergone a historical evolution of its own, through three major interpretive paradigms. Initially, the various forms of the Middle Egyptian verb were interpreted largely on the analogy of Semitic grammar.²⁴ The culmination of this approach was Alan H. Gardiner's *Egyptian Grammar*, first published in 1927. Gardiner's system identified an aspectual distinction between perfective and imperfective in the Old–Middle Egyptian form known as the *stp.f* and its attributive counterparts:²⁵ for example,

20 An exception is Loprieno 1995, 51–102.

21 Brugsch 1855.

22 Erman 1880; Edel 1955 and 1964.

23 Schweizer 2005. Černý and Groll 1984. Jansen-Winkel 1996; Peust 1999b; Engsheden 2003; Kurth 2007.

24 Codified by Sethe 1899–1902.

25 See Gardiner 1957, § 438. Translations are for illustration only: the verb forms are not specific as to tense. The verb *stp* “choose” is used throughout this study in place of the more traditional *sdm* “hear,” because the latter has some formal restrictions.

	PERFECTIVE	IMPERFECTIVE
<i>stp.f</i>	<i>mr.s</i> “she wants”	<i>mrr.s</i> “she loves”
active participle	<i>mrt</i> “who wants”	<i>mrrt</i> “who loves”
passive participle	<i>mryt</i> “who is wanted”	<i>mrrt</i> “who is loved”
relative	<i>mryt.f</i> “whom he wants”	<i>mrrt.f</i> “whom he loves.”

A second analysis accepted the aspectual interpretation of the attributive system but analyzed the *stp.f* on the basis of syntactic function. This approach began with the identification of a distinct form of the *stp.f* serving as object of the verb *rdj*, labeled “dependent” (*Subjunktiv*).²⁶ The functional analysis languished under the dominance of the aspectual model, until it was revived and amplified by Hans J. Polotsky between 1944 and 1976.

Polotsky began with a ground-breaking study devoted to the problem of the “second tenses” in Coptic.²⁷ It had long been recognized that the Coptic verbal system possessed two forms of its primary tenses, styled “first” and “second”:²⁸

	FIRST	SECOND
PRESENT	ⲩⲥⲱⲧⲏⲓ	ⲉⲩⲥⲱⲧⲏⲓ
AORIST	ⲱⲗⲩⲥⲱⲧⲏⲓ	ⲉⲱⲗⲩⲥⲱⲧⲏⲓ
PERFECT	ⲗⲩⲥⲱⲧⲏⲓ	ⲛⲧⲗⲩⲥⲱⲧⲏⲓ
FUTURE	ⲩⲛⲗⲩⲥⲱⲧⲏⲓ	ⲉⲩⲛⲗⲩⲥⲱⲧⲏⲓ.

The significance of the distinction had defied analysis, until Polotsky demonstrated that the second tenses were used when the focus of interest was not on the verb itself but on another, usually adverbial, element of the clause or sentence. For instance, in Ex. 1.2, both the First Perfect **ⲗⲧⲉⲧⲛⲗⲗⲁⲥ** and the Second Perfect **ⲛⲧⲗⲧⲉⲧⲛⲗⲗⲁⲥ** mean “you did it,” but the latter is used because the interest of its clause lies not in the verb but in the prepositional phrase **ⲛⲗⲓ** “for me”:

26 Erman 1884.

27 Polotsky 1944.

28 For details, see Chapter 12, Section D.

[1.2] ⲉⲡⲓⲛⲟⲥⲟⲛ ⲁⲧⲉⲧⲛⲁⲁⲥ ⲛⲟⲩⲁ ⲛⲛⲉⲓⲕⲛⲏⲩⲩⲩ ⲉⲧⲥⲟⲃⲉⲕ
 ⲛⲧⲁⲧⲉⲛⲁⲁⲥ ⲛⲁⲓ (Matt. 25:40)

As long as you did it for one of these little brothers,
 you did it for me.

Based on the kinds of sentences in which the Coptic second tenses appeared, such as questions with an adverbial interrogative, Polotsky found antecedents for the second tenses in earlier stages of Egyptian, including Gardiner's imperfective *stp.f*: e.g.,

[1.3] *mrr.k wš.t ʿryt.k hr jḥ* (Gardiner and Sethe 1928, pl. 6, 4–5)
 want⁶.2MS strip.PASS portal.2MS on what
 Why do you want your portal to be stripped?

where the focus of interest is on the interrogative phrase *hr jḥ*.²⁹

Such sentences are commonly called “emphatic.” Polotsky analyzed the second tenses as nominal subjects of an adverbial predicate, on the analogy of the non-verbal sentence in which a nominal subject is followed by an adverbial predicate:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
<i>r^c</i> sun	<i>jm</i> there	“The sun is there.”
<i>pr r^c</i> emerge sun	<i>jm</i> there	“The sun emerges there.” ³⁰

He later identified an adverbial (“circumstantial”) form of the *stp.f* based on similar criteria:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
<i>r^c</i> sun	<i>pr.f</i> emerge.3MS	“The sun emerges.” ³¹

Eventually, five forms of the active *stp.f* of Old and Middle Egyptian were identified: dependent (renamed “prospective”); Polotsky's nominal and adverbial; an “indicative” form used primarily in the past/perfect negation *nj stp.f*; and a form marked by final *-w* in some verb classes.³²

29 For conventions used in the glosses, see p. 299, below.

30 Polotsky 1965, analyzing the last as “That the sun emerges is there.”

31 Polotsky 1976.

32 For the last, see Edel 1955/1964, §§ 511–31; Allen 1984, 722–23.

In the 1970s, the understanding of these forms as primarily syntactic alternants replaced Gardiner's system as the "standard theory" of Egyptian grammar, and is still widely regarded as normative.³³ Already at the end of that decade, however, some scholars had begun to question the notion of paradigmatic substitution inherent in Polotsky's system: e.g., that the "circumstantial" *stp.f* is a verb form marked for adverbial function rather than one used adverbially. This has now produced a third analytical approach, usually described as "post-Polotskyan." It has recognized the existence of the second tenses, along with the other four forms of the active *stp.f*, but argues that their use is governed by semantic and pragmatic criteria as well as syntactic ones. In a construction such as *prr r^c jm* "The sun emerges *there*," for example, the use of the verb form *prr* is understood as motivated by all three criteria:

- SYNTACTIC — serving as the predicate
- SEMANTIC — expressing a particular aspect
- PRAGMATIC — indicating that the primary interest is not in the verb itself.

Similarly, in the Coptic clause **NTATETNAAC NAĭ** "you did it for *me*," the second tense is analyzed not as a verb-phrase serving as the nominal subject of an adverbial predicate **NAĭ** but as the clausal predicate (syntactic), expressing past tense (semantic), and focusing attention on the prepositional phrase rather than on the verb itself (pragmatic).

The discussions in Chapter 9–12 follow a more recent model based in part on this last analytical approach, with equal weight given to morphology as well as syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic criteria.

33 See Depuydt 1983.