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The Leipzig-Jerusalem Transliteration of Coptic

Abstract: In this article, we propose a system for transliterating Coptic, akin to those systems used for transliterating Greek, Russian, or Arabic. It is intended to serve as a standard for linguists interested in making Coptic data more accessible to non-specialists. We also discuss some questions that may arise, and provide several fully transliterated and glossed Coptic examples.

1 Introduction

In recent years, linguists working on Coptic have increasingly become interested in making the results of their research accessible to non-specialists. A major symptom of this trend is the increased transliteration and glossing of examples, even in publications in forums dedicated to Egyptian-Coptic linguistics (e.g., *Lingua Aegyptia* 19, in which transliteration and glossing were obligatory).

However, no standard transliteration system for Coptic exists, so current practice shows some idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies. In some cases, transliteration systems used are somewhere between a strict transliteration system and a phonological representation. However, transliterations are not intended to be phonological representations. In some contexts, both transliteration and phonological representation are necessary, while in others, neither is.

In this article, we propose a system for transliterating Coptic, akin to those systems used for transliterating Greek, Russian, or Arabic.

2 What's transliteration?

Transliteration is different from transcription, which aims to represent the sounds of a language. Transliteration, on the other hand, is intended to represent graphemes, units of written language. In general, the ideal transliteration system involves a one-to-one mapping of graphemes, although this is not strictly observed in all transliteration systems.

3 Why transliterate Coptic?

The first reason is that we would like linguists who are not specialists in Coptic to be able to profit from the extensive – and interesting – research being conducted on this language. Since most linguists do not read the Coptic script, it is necessary to render the Coptic text in a graphemic system that is familiar to anyone occupied with linguistics. In practice, this means a Latin-based alphabetic system. The second reason is that it is sometimes impractical to use Coptic script, e.g., when citing a Coptic example in a publication venue where Coptic fonts are not readily available, or in informal contexts such as e-mails.

Moreover, transliteration facilitates morpheme-by-morpheme glossing of examples, which aid the reader in associating parts of a text with the translation. Glosses with a morpheme breakdown are very helpful for understanding more or less how a given text works, and as such, for non-expert linguists interested in knowing something about a language. Morpheme boundaries are generally shown by hyphens, and hyphens in the Coptic script would look very peculiar.

4 Our proposal

Our proposal does not differ much from the usual practices of most Coptologists.¹ It should be kept in mind that we do not have the goal of providing an accurate phonological representation of any particular variety of Coptic. Our aim is to provide a way of consistently transliterating Coptic alphabetic signs, so that the Coptic letters can be determined from the rendering with Latin letters. The proposal concerns only letters; diacritics such as the supralinear stroke will not be represented (in line with the usual practice of transliterating Coptic).

In the following Table, we give our suggested transliteration equivalents of the Coptic graphemes. Some problematic issues are discussed afterwards (§ 5).

¹ For a summary of some transliteration practices, see Peust (1999). For an extensive discussion of the relationship between the Coptic alphabet(s) and the sounds they are thought to represent, see Kasser (1991). For two recent and systematic discussions of Coptic phonology, see Funk (2009) and Müller (2011), both of which extensively cite earlier research on Coptic phonology.

Table 1: Suggested transliteration equivalents

ⲁ	<i>a</i>	ⲙ	<i>m</i>	ⲟ	<i>ô</i>
ⲃ	<i>b</i>	ⲛ	<i>n</i>	ⲡ	<i>š</i>
Ⲅ	<i>g</i>	Ⲛ	<i>k^s</i>	ⲣ	<i>f</i>
Ⲇ	<i>d</i>	ⲟ	<i>o</i>	Ⲛ	<i>h</i>
Ⲉ	<i>e</i>	ⲡ	<i>p</i>	ⲃ	<i>x</i>
Ⲋ	<i>z</i>	ⲣ	<i>r</i>	ⲛ	<i>č</i>
Ⲍ	<i>ê</i>	ⲥ	<i>s</i>	Ⲧ	<i>c</i>
Ⲏ	<i>t^h</i>	ⲧ	<i>t</i>	ⲧ	<i>tⁱ</i>
Ⲑ	<i>i</i>	Ⲩ	<i>u</i>	Ⲛ	<i>x'</i>
Ⲓ	<i>k</i>	Ⲭ	<i>p^h</i>	Ⲭ	<i>ç</i>
Ⲕ	<i>l</i>	ⲩ	<i>p^s</i>	ⲩ	<i>ç'</i>

5 Possible questions

In this section we address some questions that some readers might have about our proposed transliteration.

5.1 Why aren't IPA characters used?

We have purposely chosen to avoid characters that would evoke a feeling that a phonological transcription is being given. This means preferring the traditional *š* and *č*, for example, to *f* and *tʃ*. Transliteration is more like an orthography than like a transcription, and *š* and *č* are orthographic characters, rather than phonetic characters. This also means preferring *ê* and *ô* to *ē* and *ō* for Coptic Ⲍ and ⲟ.

5.2 Why are you using superscript letters?

Some Coptic letters cannot be readily transliterated with a single Latin letter, because there is no Latin letter with a remotely similar value. For example, <ps> and <ti> can only be transliterated by a digraph (a combination of two Latin letters). To make it clear that the two Latin letters render a single Coptic letter, the second letter is written as a superscript. This allows one to reflect the contrast

between <psi> p^s and <p.sigma> ps . Another possibility would be to use a bow, e.g., $\overline{k}s$ for z , but this is an IPA practice with a specific meaning (affricate or diphthong). Writing superscript for aspirated plosives (t^h , p^h , k^h) is a well-established practice; only t^i , p^s and k^s will need some getting used to.

5.3 Why use c and \check{x} for σ and χ ?

Copticists have a number of different practices for rendering these letters, which stand for different sounds in different dialects. We think that the transliteration c for σ is preferable to k because the latter is a digraph, and \check{x} for χ is preferable to j , even though this is used fairly frequently, because j can represent IPA j (the palatal glide) or English j (the palato-alveolar affricate).

5.4 What about abbreviations?

The Coptic script has quite a few abbreviations, usually – but not always – involving holy names, e.g., $\overline{\alpha\chi}$ ‘Christ.’ We suggest that the name be transliterated fully, with the missing letters being supplied between pointed parentheses, e.g., $\chi < \text{pictro} > c$ $k^h < \text{risto} > s$.

6 Presenting Coptic examples

The goal of the present article is not to provide a complete system for presenting Coptic examples, from the Coptic text all the way down to the translation, but here we will nonetheless give an idea of where transliteration fits into the presentation of examples.

While an ideal presentation would include maximal data from all levels of analysis, in most cases much less information is necessary. Thus, ideally six lines of data would ensure that the reader has full information of how to link a given Coptic example with its translation.

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1. The Coptic text | πρϣμε |
| 2. Transliteration | $\text{pr}\hat{o}\text{me}$ |
| 3. A phonological representation | $\text{pro:m}\bar{a}$ |
| 4. Analyzed text, with morpheme divisions | $\text{p-r}\hat{o}\text{me}$ |
| 5. Morpheme-by-morpheme glosses | ART.MSG-man |
| 6. Translation | ‘the man’ |

But of course, not all of these lines are necessary in all situations. For example, specialists in Coptic, when writing for a purely Copticist audience, might use only line 1, the Coptic text.

(1) ⲙⲡⲣϥⲱ

If, for technical reasons (e.g., in e-mails), they don't have access to the Coptic script, they might make do with line 2, a transliteration.

(2) *mprcô*

In either case, they might add line 6, a translation.

(3) ⲙⲡⲣϥⲱ
'Don't delay'

A nonspecialist would need, minimally, lines 2 and 6, a transliteration and translation, like in example (4).

(4) *mprcô*
'Don't delay'

But in order to appreciate how the two are related, line 5, morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, is very helpful. In many typologically-oriented works, linguists use combinations of 2, 5 and 6, or 4, 5 and 6, or a combination of 2 and 4 plus 5 and 6.

(5) Russian

2 *piši* *otcu!*
5 write-IMPV father.DAT
6 'Write to the father!'

(6) Russian

4 *piš-i* *otc-u!*
5 write-IMPV father-DAT
6 'Write to the father!'

6.1 If the transliteration allows an adequate construction of the Coptic text, why bother giving the Coptic text in the examples?

It's true that in many cases, linguists don't provide the original script. If the transliteration is precise, the original can be reconstructed on its basis, so it is redundant. However, specialists will want to see the original script, and since this is becoming easier and easier from a technological point of view, there is no reason not to cite this as well.

6.2 How does the morpheme-by-morpheme glossing work when a single letter represents sounds in two different morphemes, e.g., $\phi\omega\beta$ $p^h\hat{o}b$ 'the thing'?

Morpheme-by-morpheme translation generally presupposes linear segmentability. Where this is not possible (e.g., in the case of ablaut, e.g., $s\hat{o}tp$ 'choose' vs. $sotp$ 'chosen'), the glosses of the two morphemes need to be combined with a special symbol (e.g., choose\STAT for $sotp$). Where a single letter represents two sounds that belong to two different morphemes, the same problem arises. But here, an additional line (or two) for the phonological representation² can be used to clarify the matter, e.g.

(7a)	$\phi\omega\beta$	(1)	(7b)	$\phi\omega\beta$	(1)
	$p^h\hat{o}b$	(2)		$p^h\hat{o}b$	(2)
	$p-ho:b$	(3–4)		$p-ho:b$	(3)
	ART.MSG-thing	(5)		$p-ho:b$	(4)
	'the thing'	(6)		ART.MSG-thing	(5)
				'the thing'	(6)

However, it might be simpler and more elegant in such cases to gloss a string like $\phi\omega\beta$ $p^h\hat{o}b$ as the\thing (or as $p^h\hat{o}b$ the-thing).

² For an idea of what phonological representations of Coptic are actually thought to look like, the reader is referred to the sources mentioned in the previous footnote.

7 Some examples

The following examples present the transliteration and presentation of Coptic examples from several dialects, in order to illustrate some of the issues raised above.³

(8) Sahidic

παϣηρε	εκϣανχι	nnϣαχε
<i>pašêre</i>	<i>ekšanči</i>	<i>nnšače</i>
<i>pa-šêre</i>	<i>e-k-šan-či</i>	<i>n-n-šače</i>
POSS1SG.MSG-son PROT1-2SGM-PROT2-take ACC-ART.PL-word		
‘My son, if you accept the words		

NTAENTOLH	NGHOPOY	ΞATHK
<i>ntaentolê</i>	<i>nghopou</i>	<i>hatêk</i>
<i>n-ta-entolê</i>	<i>n-g-hop-ou</i>	<i>hatê-k</i>
of-POSS1SG.FSG-commandment CONJ-2SGM-hide-3PL within-2SGM		
of my commandment and hide them within you...’ (Proverbs 2:1).		

(9) Akhmimic

παϣηρε	ακϣαχι	nnϣεχε
<i>pašêre</i>	<i>akšači</i>	<i>nnšeče</i>
<i>pa-šêre</i>	<i>a-k-ša-či</i>	<i>n-n-šeče</i>
POSS1SG.MSG-son PROT1-2SGM-PROT2-take ACC-ART.PL-word		
‘My son, if you accept the words		

NTAENTOLH	KHAPOU	ΞAHTHK
<i>ntaentolê</i>	<i>khapou</i>	<i>x’ahâtêk</i>
<i>n-ta-entolê</i>	<i>k-hap-ou</i>	<i>x’ahâtê-k</i>
of-POSS1SG.FSG-commandment CONJ\2SGM-hide-3PL within-2SGM		
of my commandment, and hide them within yourself...’ (Proverbs 2:1).		

³ Abbreviations used in glosses (other than those found in the Leipzig Glossing Rules (<http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>): CONJ – conjunctive, PROT – protasis.

(10) Bohairic

ⲡⲁⲩⲉⲣⲓ	ⲉⲃⲱⲡⲓ ⲁⲕⲁⲩⲁⲛⲉⲓ	ⲛⲛⲁⲕⲁⲩⲁ
<i>pašêri</i>	<i>ešôp akšanci</i>	<i>nnasači</i>
<i>pa-šêri</i>	<i>ešôp a-k-šan-ci</i>	<i>n-na-sači</i>

POSS1SG.MSG-son COND PROT1-2SGM-PROT2-take ACC-POSS1SG.PL-word
 ‘My son, if you accept my words

ⲛⲧⲉⲛⲁⲉⲛⲧⲟⲗⲏ	ⲛⲧⲉⲕⲕⲟⲡⲟⲩ	ⲛⲧⲉⲧⲕ
<i>ntenaentolê</i>	<i>ntekk^hopou</i>	<i>nxêtk</i>
<i>n-te-na-entolê</i>	<i>n-te-k-k^hop-ou</i>	<i>nxêtk</i>

of-POSS1SG.PL-commandment CONJ-2SGM-hide-3PL within-2SGM
 of my commandments, and hide them within yourself...’ (Proverbs 2:1)

(11) Sahidic

ⲟⲩⲥⲁⲣⲫⲥ ⲡⲉ
ousark^ε pe
ou-sark^ε=pe
 ART.INDEF-flesh=SBJ.MSG
 ‘It is flesh’ (John 3:6)

(12) Sahidic

ⲕⲁⲧⲁ	ⲑⲉ	ⲉⲛⲧⲁⲙⲱⲩⲥⲏⲥ	ⲩⲓⲕⲉ	ⲙⲫⲟⲩ
<i>kata</i>	<i>t^he</i>	<i>entamôousês</i>	<i>čise</i>	<i>mp^hof</i>
<i>kata</i>	<i>t-he</i>	<i>ent-a-môousês</i>	<i>čise</i>	<i>m-p-hof</i>

according_to ART.FSG-way REL-PST-Moses raise ACC-ART.MSG-snake
 ‘As Moses raised the snake’ (John 3:14).

(13) Bohairic

ⲙⲫⲣⲏⲧ	ⲉⲧⲁⲙⲱⲩⲥⲏⲥ	ⲥⲉⲥⲡⲓⲱⲩ
<i>mp^hrêti</i>	<i>etamôusês</i>	<i>cespihof</i>
<i>mp^hrêti</i>	<i>et-a-môusês</i>	<i>ces-pi-hof</i>

like REL-PST-Moses raise-ART.MSG-snake
 ‘As Moses raised the snake’ (John 3:14).

(14) Sahidic

ⲁⲓⲥⲃⲟⲩ	ⲛⲁⲩ
<i>afⁱsbô</i>	<i>nau</i>
<i>a-fⁱ-sbô</i>	<i>na-u</i>
PST-3SG.M-give-instruction to-3PL	
‘He taught them’ (Matthew 5:2).	

8 Final comments

We cannot stress enough that the sole aim of this transliteration system is to provide a standard that those who wish to use a standard system for rendering the Coptic letters can choose to adhere to. It is not an alternative to a phonological representation, but can be supplemented by one when a Copticist would like to make a point about phonology, or for some other reason.

We hope that this system will be adopted by Copticists who are interested in communicating the results of their research on this fascinating language to a more general audience, and also in other contexts where it is cumbersome to use Coptic letters.

9 References

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Part II: Studies

