The language of Ancient Egypt, with the longest written tradition of any language, has been the object of careful investigation since its decipherment in the nineteenth century, but this is the first accessible account which uses the insights of modern linguistics. Antonio Loprieno traces its development from the older phase of the language ("Earlier Egyptian"), consisting of Old Egyptian in the third millennium BCE, the classical literary language of the Middle Kingdom (2000–1750 BCE) and the Late Middle Egyptian of religious texts until the Roman period, to the more recent phase ("Later Egyptian"), which emerged as a vehicle of profane literature and administration during the New Kingdom (1500–1000 BCE), and continued to be in productive use down to Coptic, the language of medieval Christian Egypt. These two main historical forms of the Egyptian language are analyzed combining, wherever possible, diachronic and synchronic viewpoints. Professor Loprieno discusses the hieroglyphic system and its cursive varieties (Hieratic and Demotic), the phonology of Classical Egyptian and Coptic, the phonology and syntax of the literary languages, and semantic and pragmatic constraints on syntax. He also looks at the genetic connections of Egyptian within the Afroasiatic family, especially with Semitic languages such as Akkadian, Arabic, and Hebrew.
Ancient Egyptian
ANCIENT EGYPTIAN

A linguistic introduction

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Preface

This book is neither a grammar of Ancient Egyptian for Egyptologists nor a handbook for the study of hieroglyphs. Rather, it has been written aiming at the needs of a multiplicity of audiences. To use a fashionable word, I wanted to address the interdisciplinary interests of linguists and Egyptologists. In order to achieve this result, I had to resort to sometimes quite diverse methodological frames and scholarly conventions, which have been and are at best indifferent to each other, and at times even in overt conflict. On the one hand, the main goal of the book is to provide the linguistic audience with an introduction to the historical grammar of Ancient Egyptian, one of the oldest and longest documented languages of mankind: from its oldest (Old Egyptian) to its most recent phase (Coptic), Ancient Egyptian remained in productive written use for more than four millennia – from about 3000 BCE to the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the book also tries to reach the numerically much smaller public of Egyptologists interested in linguistic issues, i.e. my own professional milieu, offering a global presentation of the language from a structural as well as historical point of view.

Traditionally, the study of Ancient Egyptian has been the monopoly of the latter group of scholars, who operate within the discipline called “Egyptology.” In this field of scholarship, the study of the language is necessarily rooted in philology and has been mainly pursued with the aim of editing or translating Egyptian and Coptic texts. The handbooks for the academic and individual study of Egyptian, first and foremost Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford University Press, third edn 1957), share the assumption that potential readers are Egyptologists interested primarily in acquiring the philological tools needed for their professional encounter with Ancient Egypt: Gardiner’s grammar bears the appropriate, although certainly modest subtitle *Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*. While much work has been done since then in Egyptian grammar and some of the theoretical foundations of Gardiner’s approach to Egyptian have been shaken if not damaged, a linguist interested in the strategies adopted by Egyptian as a language will experience some distress in finding the answers to his or her queries in modern secondary literature.
This distress is not due to a lack of linguistic sophistication among Egyptologists; on the contrary, the presence of Egyptological linguistics as one of the most vital components of the field of Egyptology is one of the reasons for my trying to make its discoveries available to other linguists. But I doubt that the work of the more linguistically inclined Egyptologists has been or is adequately noticed by professional linguists. For one, scholars of Egyptian linguistics tend to follow the conventions of the broader field of Egyptology in terms of attitudes to transliteration (just to quote an example: for a variety of reasons, there still is no universally accepted system for the phonetic rendition of Egyptian) and translations (which address the semantic, rather than the grammatical sphere, interlinear translations being discouraged or unknown). Secondly, over the last decades we have preferred to engage in a dialog among ourselves rather than with the broader audience of comparative and general linguists, and we have developed conceptual and terminological conventions that often appear opaque, if not downright incomprehensible to the non-initiated. This is due in part to the specific methodological frame adopted by modern students of Egyptian, the so-called “Standard theory,” in part to the ignorance of Egyptian among linguists. Only recently, thanks to a new generation of Egyptologists also trained in linguistics, has there been a shift towards an increased interest in theoretical issues. The present work is a product of this change of perspectives within my own scholarly community: although I have tried to explain unusual terms when they appear for the first time, a certain familiarity with linguistic terminology is expected from the Egyptological readership of the book; as for general linguists, while no previous Egyptological knowledge is required, I expect them to devote particular attention to the introduction and to the chapter on graphemics, where basic preliminaries on chronology, typology, and notational conventions of Egyptian are discussed at some length.

The concept of “Ancient Egyptian” is taken throughout this book in its broader scope to comprise all the stages of the language from Old Egyptian to Coptic. While focusing on Old and Middle Egyptian, i.e. on the language of classical literature, the analysis proceeds diachronically to investigate the main features of Late Egyptian and Coptic, especially when this evolution displays changes which attract the linguist’s attention. In essence, I have tried to present synchronical sketches of the main properties of classical Egyptian, Late Egyptian, and Coptic and to consider the mechanisms of linguistic change inherent in the history of the Egyptian language.

Although philological and not interlinear, the translation of Egyptian and Coptic passages provides in parentheses enough information for the
Preface

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non-specialists to allow them to recognize all the elements of the morpho-
syntactic as well as lexical structure of the sentence. Most Egyptian texts are
referred to according to the Egyptological conventions as established in the
only less commonly quoted texts are accompanied by a reference to their
edition. Notes, bibliography and indices try to blend the expectations of the
two potential readerships for which the book is intended. In the notes, whose
number had to be limited to an acceptable minimum, books and articles are
usually referred to in short title; the reference in full detail, however, is given
both at first mention and in the bibliography at the end of the volume.
While abbreviations are used in the notes, I have tried to avoid them in the
final bibliography; for the most common ones, the reader is referred to the
list provided in vols. I and IV of the LA. In the notes, I often mention only
the more recent treatments of a particular topic, even if the interpretation
offered by the authors differs from mine; this is the reason for the relative
paucity of references to older secondary literature. Modern treatments, how-
ever, usually contain abundant references to previous studies as well. The
index of Egyptian and Coptic passages and of Egyptian grammatical words is
intended mainly for the Egyptological audience, whereas the register of
topics is conceived with a linguistic public in mind.

I would like to mention and thank those friends and colleagues who in
different ways have participated in the completion of this book: first and
foremost Wolfgang Schenkel, who followed its development with particular
attention and saved me from many inaccuracies, Bernard Comrie, who acted
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sabbatical year funded by a University of California President’s Fellowship
in the Humanities (1993–94); I would like to acknowledge with sincere thanks
the help and generosity of the Office of the President for providing me with
ideal research conditions.

This book is dedicated to my wonderful daughter Victoria, who is more
often than I can bear away from my eyes, but always closest to my heart.
### MAJOR CHRONOLOGICAL DIVISIONS
OF EGYPTIAN HISTORY

<table>
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<th>Period</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
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<td>ca. 3000–2650 BCE</td>
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<td>Old Kingdom: Dyn. III–VIII</td>
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<td>Dyn. V</td>
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<td>Dyn. VI</td>
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<td>First Intermediate Period: Dyn. VII–XI</td>
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<td>Middle Kingdom: Dyn. XI–XIV</td>
<td>ca. 2040–1990</td>
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<td>Dyn. XI</td>
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<td>Dyn. XII</td>
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<td>Dyn. XIII–XIV</td>
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<td>Dyn. XV–XVI (Hyksos)</td>
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<td>Dyn. XXXI (Persians)</td>
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# Chronology

- **Greek Period**: 332–30 BCE
- **Alexander the Great**: 332–323
- **Ptolemaic Period**: 323–30 BCE
- **Roman Period**: 30 BCE – 395 CE
- **Byzantine Period**: 395–641
- **Islamic Egypt**: 641–present