The Ancient Egyptian Language

An Historical Study

This book, the first of its kind, examines how the phonology and grammar of the ancient Egyptian language changed over more than three thousand years of its history, from the first appearance of written documents, c. 3250 BC, to the Coptic dialects of the second century AD and later. Part One discusses phonology, working backward from the vowels and consonants of Coptic to those that can be deduced for earlier stages of the language. Part Two is devoted to grammar, including both basic components such as nouns and the complex history of the verbal system. The book thus provides both a synchronic description of the five major historical stages of ancient Egyptian and a diachronic analysis of their development and relationship.

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James P. Allen
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Preface

Ancient Egyptian offers an unparalleled opportunity to study how the phonology and grammar of a language changed over a span of thousands of years. For all but its final stage, however, its wealth of written information comes with the serious deficiency of a writing system that obscures vital phonological and morphological information. Moreover, the writing system itself was first deciphered just short of 200 years ago, and our understanding of it, and of the language it represents, is still being refined.

Partly because of these deficiencies, Egyptian has been interpreted on the basis of a number of differing theoretical models. In the realm of grammar, a model based on that of Egyptian’s Semitic relatives dominated until fifty years ago, when it gave way to one based on internal syntactic analysis. That second model, dubbed the “Standard Theory” of Egyptian grammar, has vastly improved our understanding of the language, although in the past two decades it has come under increasing attack for defects of its own.

Amid the continuing struggle to understand the grammar of ancient Egyptian, relatively little attention has been paid to how the language changed over time, except in the realm of phonology. Egyptian phonology is still largely analyzed on the basis of Semitic parallels, but the validity of this approach has also been questioned in recent years. Diachronic studies of Egyptian grammar have focused primarily on the relationship between the verbal systems of Middle and Late Egyptian, which show the greatest degree of historical change.

The present study is an attempt to view the language in its entirety, from its first coherent stage, Old Egyptian, through its last, Coptic. The study includes a new analysis of phonology – necessary not only because of the question of the value of Semitic cognates, but also because the relationship between phones, phonemes, and graphemes partly informs the understanding of written morphology. Grammar is described both synchronically and historically, in the latter case looking not only at the phenomena of historical change, but also at the processes underlying them. Insofar as possible, the data have been approached objectively, with no prior theoretical bias.

The book is intended not only for scholars familiar with the ancient Egyptian language, but also for those with broader or ancillary interests. Transcription
Preface

generally follows Egyptological conventions, but glosses as well as translations have been provided for readers from other fields; the conventions are listed on p. xi, below. Citations from ancient sources are also credited according to general Egyptological practice; these references, and the abbreviations used in them, are listed in Section 2 of the Bibliography (“Text Sources,” p. 229).

This study has benefited greatly from discussions with numerous colleagues. I am grateful particularly to Mark Collier, who first enlightened me as to the syntax of emphatic sentences, and to András Stauder and Sami Uljas, who commented on an earlier version of the book. I am particularly indebted to András Stauder for his detailed comments and suggestions and to the Press’s copy-editor, Steve Barganski, for his careful and critical review; both have made this a much better book than it would have been otherwise. This will undoubtedly not be the last word on the subject, but I hope that it will prove useful to future discussions.
Conventions

1. **Phonological conventions**

In general, this book follows the conventions standard in linguistic discussions of phonology, with the exception of an acute accent in place of pre-syllabic ḫ to indicate a stressed syllable (e.g., unā in place of u'nu). Italics are used for transcription; reconstructions (marked by *) are to be understood as phonemic, unless indicated otherwise. Egyptological conventions are used in transcribing Egyptian consonants and words. For the convenience of readers unacquainted with the latter or with the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA, used to indicate pronunciation), the less familiar symbols used in this book in transcription and discussions of phonology are listed below.

* marks a hypothetical form, construction, or phonological reconstruction
> develops into
< develops from
≈ corresponds to
[ ] enclose symbols of pronunciation: e.g., [b] as in English boy; in transcription, enclose restored text
_ unknown vowel in an open syllable
ʢ glottal glide (or stop), like Arabic ⲱ (IPA ḫ if a stop)
♭ Egyptian phoneme, originally a kind of [l] or [r], eventually realized as ḫ or unrealized
ʕ uvular glide (or stop), like Arabic ⲫ (IPA ʕ)
Egyptian phoneme, regularly ḫ but originally/dialectally a kind of [d]
β bilabial voiced fricative, like b in Spanish cabo
d “emphatic” voiced apical stop with various realizations (e.g., uvularized like Arabic ض, or ejective)
ɗ palatalized unaspirated (or voiced) apical stop (IPA ḫ)
δ voiced dental fricative, like th in English this
e Demotic grapheme representing an indeterminate vowel
ə indeterminate central vowel (“schwa”), like e in French gredin
Conventions

e open mid vowel, like e in English met

ğ palatalized [g] (or unaspirated [k]), like g in Englishague

γ voiced velar fricative (Arabic ġ)

h following a consonant, denotes aspiration (e.g., [tʰ] as in English top)

ħ unvoiced pharyngeal fricative (Arabic ħ, IPA h)

ʕ unvoiced pharyngeal fricative (Arabic ʕ)

ḫ unvoiced velar fricative (IPA x)

ḫ̱ palatalized unvoiced velar fricative (palatalized IPA x, or IPA č)

ḫ̫ unvoiced velar fricative (IPA x)

ḥ Late Egyptian and Demotic grapheme for ḥ < ḥ

j Egyptian phoneme representing a vocalic onset or ending or the hiatus between two vowels, realized as ʃ or unrealized

ḵ palatalized [k], like c in English immaculate

ḻ syllabic [l]

l̵ pharyngealized or velarized [l]

m̱ syllabic [m]

ṉ syllabic [n]

ph labial affricate, as in German Pferd

ṟ syllabic [r]

ɾ tapped [ɾ], as in Spanish pero

ɾ̪ apical approximant, like r in English rain

ʁ uvular fricative, like r in most French and German dialects

ɾ̼ trilled ɾ

ʂ unvoiced apical fricative (Hebrew ʂ), probably IPA [s]; in proto-Semitic, unvoiced lateral fricative (IPA ʃ)

ʃ “emphatic” counterpart of ʂ; in proto-Semitic, IPA ʃ

ʃ̱ “emphatic” unvoiced apical fricative, like Arabic ʕ

ʃ̱̱ unvoiced apical fricative (IPA j)

ʃ̱ unvoiced apical fricative

ʃ̱̱̱ palatalized unvoiced apical stop (IPA c)

ʃ̱̱̱̱ “emphatic” unvoiced apical stop, like Arabic ʕ

ʃ̱̱̱̱̱ Demotic grapheme representing a phonetically retained t

ˢ̱̱̱ unvoiced apical affricate, like Hebrew ʕ

θ̱ unvoiced dental fricative, like th in English think

θ̱̱ “emphatic” counterpart of θ̱, like Arabic ʕ

ʌ̱ open mid unrounded back vowel, like u in English cup

ʊ̱ closed unrounded back vowel (unrounded counterpart of IPA u)

x̱ unvoiced velar fricative, like ch in German Bach

x̱̱ palatalized unvoiced velar fricative (palatalized IPA x, or IPA č)

x̱̱̱ following a consonant, denotes palatalization (e.g., [tʰ] as in British English tune)

ẕ Egyptian phoneme, probably originally [θ], later [s]
2. Glossing conventions

For the convenience of readers who may be unfamiliar with ancient Egyptian, glosses as well as translations are provided for most examples, using a modified version of the Leipzig Glossing Rules (available online at http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/pdf/LGR08.02.05.pdf). Lexemes are indicated by lower-case correspondents, and other grammatical elements by abbreviations in small capitals: e.g., \textit{wš.tw strip.pass “be stripped.”} Personal pronouns are glossed by abbreviations indicating person, gender, and number rather than by lexemes: e.g., \textit{mrr.k want.2msg “you want.”} Grammatical features are indicated by superscripts: e.g., \textit{rmnt.k depend\textsuperscript{n/fsg}.2msg “that you depend.”}

\begin{tabular}{ll}
1 & first person \\
2 & second person \\
3 & third person \\
ABS & abstract \\
ADJ & adjective \\
ADV & adverb \\
COLL & collective \\
COMP & completion \\
CONJ & conjunctive \\
CONS & consequence \\
DEF & defined \\
DEM & demonstrative \\
DU & dual \\
IMP & imperative \\
INF & infinitival \\
INT & interrogative \\
IRR & irrealis \\
F & feminine \\
FIN & final \\
FUT & future \\
G & geminated \\
GN & gnomic \\
M & masculine \\
N & nominal \\
NEC & necessity \\
NEG & negative \\
NL & neutral \\
OPT & optative \\
PART & particle \\
PASS & passive \\
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