

Andrea Hasznos

Graeco-Coptica

Greek and Coptic Clause Patterns

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0 Introduction

The present study joins the long line of works dedicated to the examination of the Coptic language. Quite understandably, it was self-evident in the scholarly world before the beginning of the 19th century that Egyptian philology means the study of the Coptic language as there was no access to hieroglyphic texts and their language at the time. The history of the study of Coptic, according to Étienne Quatremère, starts with Theseus Ambrosius in the 16th century¹ who studied other languages of the Near East also,² however, the beginnings thereof in Europe might be placed even to the 15th century when Bernhard von Breydenbach published the first printed Coptic alphabet in his *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctum* (1486) after his journey to the Holy Land and Egypt.³ Also quite long is the history of trying to interpret the relationship so evidently present between the last phase of the Egyptian language and Greek. Athanasius Kircher in the 17th century, studying the Coptic language tried to define this relationship and came to the rather interesting conclusion that Greek originates in Egyptian, more precisely in Coptic, an opinion he himself refuted later.⁴ Today, the study of this relationship is very intense and advanced, but still far from concluded.

However, “the era when Coptic was the only known phase of the Egyptian language and Egyptian philology was synonymous with the study of Coptic” ended in fact before Jean-François Champollion’s decipherment of the hieroglyphs, with Étienne Quatremère’s 1808 publication,⁵ which discusses the – then not completely new – theory that Coptic must be the original language of Egypt, the continuation of that of the pharaohs. After Champollion’s achievement, then, “the centre of scholarly interest moved inevitably to Ancient Egypt, (...) one must speak of a rift between Pagan and Christian Egypt”⁶ – a regrettable separation of studying ancient Egyptian and studying Coptic took place. Christian Carl Josias Bunsen, diplomat and a scholar of many interests, already warns in the first volume of his five-volume *Ägyptens Stelle in der Weltgeschichte* that “all hope of significant progress depends on the indispensable prerequisite that Egyptology shall be

1 POLOTSKY, 1987b: 5.

2 He started the study of Syriac in Europe, publishing the first printed Syriac grammar in 1539, *Introductio in Chaldaicam linguam, Syriacum atque Armenicam et decem alias linguas*, COWPER ET AL., 1858: ix.

3 As argued in IRSAY-NAGY, 2006: esp. 129-130.

4 *Quod enim Kircherus in Prodromio Copto linguam Graecam ab Aegyptia sive Copta fluxisse asserit, refutatione non eget, cum ipse a viris doctis monitus, & rei evidentia convictus, errorum hunc revocarit Ling. Copt. Restit. p. 507.* cited from August Pfeiffer’s *Critica Sacra* (1702), brought to my attention by Professor Ulrich Luft. Reference is made therein to Kircher’s *Prodromus...* and *Lingua Aegyptiaca...*, see Bibliography.

5 POLOTSKY, 1987b: 5, referring to the work entitled: *Recherches critiques et historiques sur la langue et la littérature de l’Égypte*.

6 POLOTSKY, 1987b: 5.

accompanied by an equally thorough Coptology”.⁷ According to him the event that made this separation final was the 1845 appointment of Moritz Gotthilf Schwartz Professor of Coptic Language and Literature at the University of Berlin, where Richard Lepsius was Professor *extraordinarius* of Egyptology – that created a Coptology independent of Egyptology.⁸ Bunsen’s *Koptologie* term refers to the Coptic language not to “Coptic studies in a wider sense, which did not yet exist”⁹ – and from a “language oriented”¹⁰ approach, it really is a mistake to place it outside of Egyptology. The division of Egyptology and Coptology can only be argued for from a “culture oriented”¹¹ viewpoint, as the cultural, religious and art historical studies of the two indeed require different knowledge, although it is only natural that a country of 5,000 years of recorded history should have quite different periods. The term ‘Coptic Studies’ was born in 1976 at the First International Congress of Coptology in Cairo, entitled “Colloquium on the Future of Coptic Studies”,¹² and includes the study of the Coptic language, literature, architecture and archaeology, art history, and religion; and also today, Greek-Egyptian language contact problems are an integral part of it.

As opposed to Adolf Erman’s statement that Coptic is “*the only phase of the Egyptian language which we really understand*”,¹³ I would like to emphasize that we are far from understanding it fully, and there is no consensus on certain critical points among scholars; it is especially true of studying its relationship with Greek.

Focusing on that issue now, Coptic scholarship is still quite far from having an agreement on how and where the Egyptian language was affected by Greek. It is indeed an intriguing question whether outside of loanwords Greek had any influence on Coptic, and great scholars have raised that question several times: Hans-Friedrich Weiß in 1966 said “Griechische sowohl hinsichtlich des Sprachstiles und der Syntax mehr oder weniger deutliche Spuren hinterlassen hat”¹⁴ and further, Hans Jakob Polotsky in 1987: „Daß der Einfluß des Griechischen sich nicht auf den Wortschatz, und auch auf dem Gebiete der Syntax nicht auf den Gebrauch griechischer Partikeln beschränkt haben wird, ist öfters vermutet, aber nie konkret glaubhaft gemacht worden.“¹⁵ The Greek loanwords are rather clearly visible and evident traces of influence, drawing conclusions on syntactical influence, on the other hand is indeed all the more difficult as the method best applicable is not at hand. In bilingual situations when two (or even more) languages are in contact and interference is possible, it is measured by comparing the individual languages to their

7 This quotation comes from the English translation of the mentioned book (*Egypt’s Place in Universal History*, see Bunsen, 1848-67 in Bibliography), but as it was not accessible for me, I am quoting it from POLOTSKY, 1987: 12.

8 POLOTSKY, 1987b: 12.

9 POLOTSKY, 1987b: 12.

10 POLOTSKY, 1987b: 6.

11 POLOTSKY, 1987b: 6.

12 The publication thereof, WILSON, 1978.

13 In the Preface to his Grammar, quoted in Breasted’s translation, 1894: iii.

14 WEIß, 1966: 183.

15 POLOTSKY, 1987a: 158.

varieties elsewhere, where no language contact exists.¹⁶ The difficulty with measuring any influencing by Greek on Coptic is that Coptic has no variety outside of Egypt, i.e. free of Greek contact.¹⁷ Peter Nagel, when making his valuable observations on Greek influence, also points out: "Wenn man sich klarmacht, dass die koptische Schriftsprache direkt oder indirekt dem Griechischen verpflichtet ist, so ist der Einfluss der griechischen Syntax um so schwerer wägbare, als eine nichtgräzisierte, also „rein“ koptische Schriftsprache, nicht existiert."¹⁸

What is certain, however, is that after Alexander the Great had set foot on Egyptian soil, a long-lived bilingual situation came into being raising the issues of peoples in contact and languages in contact, and with the arrival of Christian Greek texts and their translations, also "texts in contact".¹⁹ The fact that Greek came 'from the above' must never be forgotten when trying to understand the motivations for its impact on the Egyptian language, the totally different nature and 'genetics' of the two languages is but a secondary factor: "it is the sociolinguistic history of the speakers, and not the structure of their language, that is the primary determinant of the linguistic outcome of language contact."²⁰

The aim of the present paper is to make observations on syntax and stylistics in translated and original Coptic literature, sifting out the syntactic patterns showing Greek influence in one or both text groups, showing how certain patterns came to be used in Coptic clearly through translations,²¹ and raising the question whether those syntactic influences which came to the Egyptian language through the bilingual situation can be detected with certainty.²² With these observations I would also like to help develop the criterium system needed to determine whether a Coptic text was written in Coptic or Greek originally. I think one such criterium was introduced by Siegfried Morenz who studied the *ἄνῃ*-construction²³ and made valuable observations on its different use in translations (word order) and original writings (emphasis or the introduction of long subjects) – Karlheinz Schüssler also adding to this, noting: "there is no doubt that the Christians introduced this word in order to be able to follow the Greek word order in translation".²⁴ Such observations do exist, however, a comprehensive work on the criteria would be very useful.

In the present study the final clauses, consecutive clauses, object clauses/infinitive constructions after verbs of exhorting and subject clauses/infinitive constructions will be

16 BYNON, 1997: 220.

17 An examination in the other way around, i.e. studying Greek in such an environment – although naturally has its difficulties – has its more clear-cut criteria because Greek has other varieties, as HÄGG, 1978 makes some notes on Nubian Greek, and how the influence of the native tongue can be pinpointed.

18 NAGEL, 1971: 348.

19 SHISHA-HALEVY, 1990: 100/fn.4.

20 THOMASON-KAUFMAN, 1988: 35.

21 On the importance of "umfangreiche und systematische" studies of the impact of Coptic translation activity, see FEDER, 2006: 301-303 where he lists works of Polotsky, Lefort, Mink and Funk as starting studies in this direction but so far no comprehensive study on the topic has been completed.

22 As I think also the bilingual situation might have had impact on syntax, not only on vocabulary.

23 MORENZ, 1952.

24 SCHÜSSLER, 2008: 56. Its extensive use is undoubtedly the 'product' of the Coptic language phase, however, SETHE, 1925: 295/fn.3 draws our attention to one occurrence in Demotic (in the form *n-gr*).

examined from the point of view of syntactic grecism in translations and in original Coptic texts.

Thus, summing up, translated and original Coptic writings will be examined in the chapters and sections to follow:

1. this way it may be possible to see whether there is a difference in the measure of Greek syntactical influence in the two types of text, i.e. clause patterns of translated texts exhibit a greater resemblance to Greek clause patterns, while the original Coptic sentences might exhibit resemblance to Greek to a lesser degree and of different type, and
2. these investigations may be of help in creating the criteria for distinguishing with certainty a Coptic text originally written in Coptic and a translated Coptic text originally written in Greek: to determine which constructions and syntactical elements are characteristic of the text of one or the other.

In the most fundamental grammars, Till and Layton, the text base is Coptic Biblical texts, i.e. translated, and some Coptic authors with no distinction between the two; even such syntactical phenomena as conjunctions (even Greek) plus clause patterns, which in some cases are quite different in the two text types, are handled in one group and it is not explained or even observed where some of these patterns come from. Naturally, the two text types represent the same language and separating the two cannot be an aim, but such an approach in a descriptive (and prescriptive) grammar which does not mention or try to account for certain conspicuous syntactical phenomena, especially in the case of Coptic which is laden by its relationship with Greek, is questionable.²⁵ Even with these critical remarks, I would like to emphasize that the above mentioned grammars are outstanding and still the basic grammatical reference.

It gives a much more precise picture about the language if it is made clear which syntactic patterns are the result of the contact with another language, just as it is evident from the beginning of the study of the Coptic language that Greek loanwords are and should be identified in Coptic. Why not do the same with larger syntactic units? Taking the presumption that original and translated Coptic writings will be different in (some) syntactical aspects, we can examine the two text types separately and compare them. Identifying the patterns present or more characteristic in one or the other will refine our picture of the language and will be *lehrreich* about translation techniques, and might give us a ‘handbook’ to deciding whether a text was originally written in Greek or Coptic.

It must be admitted, though, that a number of questions will still remain unanswered, as translated Coptic literature (the Bible) obviously made its influence on Coptic authors. That is why Georg Steindorff was so enthusiastic about the Coptic documentary texts edited just at his time: “Sind sie doch die einzigen uns erhaltenen, größeren koptischen Sprachdenk-

25 This objection is also raised by Glenn Snyder in her review on LAYTON’s Grammar, SNYDER: 2005, 2: „The question is not whether categories should be used, for they must be, but which categories are used, why, and for what ends. Here one has to decide between various criteria: simplicity of presentation, ability to account for complex variation (e.g., in orthography or an author’s style), translation into a target language (whose grammatical values and categories do not correspond to the translated language), and so forth.”