

Coping with Obscurity

The Brown Workshop on
Earlier Egyptian Grammar

edited by

James P. Allen
Mark A. Collier
Andréas Stauder

Wilbour Studies



Brown University

Department of Egyptology and Assyriology

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James P. Allen

John M. Steele

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Workshop Participants	ix
WOLFGANG SCHENKEL	
Grenzen und Chancen bei der Erschliessung des älteren Ägyptisch	1
DANIEL A. WERNING	
Hypotheses on Glides and <i>Matres Lectionis</i> in Earlier Egyptian Orthographies	29
CHRIS A. REINTGES	
Marked and Unmarked Word Orders, Verbal Inflection, and the Cartography of Early Egyptian Sentence Structures	45
SAMI ULJAS	
To See an Invisible Form: Paradigms, Parallels, and Practices Once Again	97
JEAN WINAND	
The Syntax-Semantics Interface in Earlier Egyptian: A Case Study in Verbs of Cognition	109
JULIE STAUDER-PORCHET	
Earlier Egyptian Prepositions: Between Grammar and Lexicography	141
MARK A. COLLIER	
Alternatives and the Grammar of Earlier Egyptian: Negation with Low-End Indefinites and Negation with <i>n ... js</i>	151
ANDRÉAS STAUDER	
The Earlier Egyptian “Emphatic” Construction: An Alternative Analysis	169
PASCAL VERNUS	
Restricted Circulation in Old Egyptian as Mirrored in Later “ <i>Repristination von Tradition</i> ” and Revivals: The dependent pronoun <i>kw</i> ; the <i>nfr-n</i> negation; the <i>n wnt sdm=f</i> negative construction	201
Bibliography and Text Sources	225
Index of Texts Cited	257

PREFACE

JAMES P. ALLEN, MARK A. COLLIER, AND ANDRÉAS STAUDER

THE PAPERS IN THIS VOLUME were initially presented and discussed at the Brown Workshop on Earlier Egyptian Grammar, held at Brown University on March 27–29, 2013, under the auspices of the university’s Department of Egyptology and Assyriology. The impetus for the workshop came from the conference “New Directions in Egyptian Syntax,” held at the University of Liège in May, 2011 (now published as Grossman et al. 2014), at which the three of us were participants. In conversations, we identified a number of desiderata for future research, prompted in part by the presentations and discussions at the conference. First, we felt the need for an extended conversation among those of us struggling to find new models of Egyptian grammar. Second, we realized that the conversation had to be focused on Earlier Egyptian, which still has the greatest degree of opacity in its verbal system and therefore the greatest need for new approaches to grammatical analysis. And third, we determined that the participants in the conversation had to contribute not just whatever interesting subject they might happen to be working on but thoughts about the core problems of working with Old and Middle Egyptian texts—not just the interpretation of written forms but also consideration of the broader, extra-grammatical factors that can influence the production of a written form in a given text.

From the mid-1960s until recently, studies of Egyptian grammar were dominated by the “Standard Theory” model based on the work of H. J. Polotsky. The attractiveness of that approach for the Earlier Egyptian verbal system derived largely from what seemed to be the relative transparency of syntax as opposed to morphology. Earlier Egyptian relies largely on contrasts in synthetic morphology to produce different verb forms, but the nature of the writing system obscures many of these: for example, the difference between the active and passive *sdm.f*, both of which appear on the surface to be morphologically identical in many cases. Faced with this obscurity, Egyptologists have come to rely on whatever meager clues the writing system might provide to identify distinct forms, such as the different *sdm.f* forms generally supposed to underlie the distinction between pairs such as *m3.f* ~ *m33.f* “he sees,” *mr.f* ~ *mrw.f* “he wants,” and *dj.f* ~ *rdj.f* “he gives.” The “Standard Theory” afforded apparent confirmation of such distinctions by noting their affinity with certain syntactic environments. In addition, it offered a syntactic explanation for a number of visible but previously puzzling alternants such as non-“emphatic” *sdm.n.f* versus *jw sdm.n.f* (analyzed as dependent versus independent). By the late 1980s, however, some scholars had begun to doubt the validity of identifying verb forms as syntactically conditioned, and more recently, the value and genesis of certain written morphological indices have been called into question as well. At the same time, scholars increasingly began to draw attention to the influence of factors such as lexical semantics, pragmatics, and scribal practice on the textual production of verb forms and constructions, features neglected in the “Standard Theory” approach.

At the Liège conference it became evident that many, if not most, of the participants regarded the “Standard Theory” model as no longer productive, in part if not whole, for the analysis of Egyptian grammar, and in particular for its earlier stages, Old and Middle Egyptian. Having cut that anchor, however, we are now faced with the task of developing consensus on productive avenues of approach to Earlier Egyptian grammar, to guide our research in the twenty-first century.

The Brown workshop was intended to address that concern. The editors invited seven colleagues representing the current spectrum of thinking on Earlier Egyptian grammar, to engage in a three-day

discussion. We deliberately chose the term “workshop” rather than “conference” to emphasize the primacy of discussion over the presentation of research. Each participant contributed a preliminary draft of the paper in this volume beforehand and was allotted an hour and forty-five minutes at the workshop, with presentation slated to last no longer than thirty to forty-five minutes so as to allow ample time for discussion.

To focus the contributions and discussion, participants were asked to address three areas of fundamental concern. First is the role of the textual corpus itself, the dataset that forms the basis of all research into the grammar of Earlier Egyptian. The field still lacks good grammatical descriptions of all the genres within this corpus. Fundamental questions need to be addressed. What elements of linguistic form occur in actual texts? What kinds of functions do they perform, in what kinds of texts, in what frequency, and in alternation with what other elements of linguistic form? To what extent can formal features or constructions that are essentially limited to one genre be generalized to the language as a whole, and if they are not broadly applicable, what determines their appearance in the genre for which they are attested? How do scribal, cultural, and other extra-linguistic factors determine the phenomenology of the diverse types of Earlier Egyptian as they present themselves to the modern interpreter, and how can these factors be taken into account in linguistic analysis of an often highly formal written record? Or, as one of the organizers put it, “what is it, after all, that we call Earlier Egyptian?”

Second is the nature of the written evidence. If not all written criteria can be regarded as grammatically significant and if, as the past three decades of research have shown, syntactic criteria can themselves be illusory, what parameters can we establish to identify verb forms? For example, is the presence or absence of a distributionally limited and highly variable feature such as the ending *-w* formally significant or not in a given form or environment, and how can we tell? If nominal, adverbial, or attributive function is not primary to the existence and use of verb forms and constructions, what governs their use? More broadly, how do the domains of the lexicon, morphology, syntax, and semantics interact with one another in the production of particular forms or constructions?

Third is the role of pragmatics. To what extent are forms and constructions determined by extra-grammatical factors such as the speaker’s choice and style? To what degree is it possible to produce a pragmatic analysis of earlier Egyptian language data (and thus to engage ancient Egyptian language data with a more cognitive and indeed rationalist take on the human contribution to the production of meaning in language)? Do the surviving data, and the current understanding of the ancient cultural encyclopedia, provide a sufficient basis for such study or not?

In general, we intended the workshop as an opportunity to address the fundamental question of how we understand forms and constructions in terms of morphology, function, and (contextualized) meaning; to identify the successes and limitations of existing approaches; and to determine what productive new directions are open for future research. Each of the papers in this volume addresses these questions, some more directly than others. In their diversity, the papers demonstrate a common sense of the complexity of the empirical data, of the multiplicity and interrelatedness of relevant dimensions, and of the need for renewed and explicit interpretive strategies. They are illustrative not of a unified paradigm of ongoing research but of a multiplicity of approaches to Earlier Egyptian. To echo the title of the seminal 1986 Copenhagen conference (Englund and Frandsen 1986), the current situation may resemble “Chaos” after the (illusory) certainty of the “Standard Theory” but it is also clear that we stand on the threshold of, if not “A New Paradigm,” a new understanding of Earlier Egyptian.

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