Revisiting the “Richness of Tense Parameter”: The Case of Coptic Egyptian

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1. DERIVING VERB MOVEMENT OPTIONS. Much comparative work over the past decades has singled out “rich” agreement (i.e. the discrete representation of person and number features in finite verb paradigms) as a key factor motivating both null subjects and V–to–T movement (e.g.; Roberts 1993; Koeneman 2010). Attractive though as it may seem to relate two parameters to a single inflectional property, there is an empirical problem here, since V–to–T movement is also attested in non-null-subject languages, with French being a particularly well-known case in point (Pollock 1989). Against this background, Biberauer & Roberts (2010) (B&R) put forward an alternative proposal, which correlates the verb movement asymmetries between Germanic and Romance languages to the richness of tense marking— understood in a broad sense of the number of paradigmatic oppositions made in the language’s Tense–Aspect–Mood (TAM) system.

TABLE 1. The typology of null subject and verb raising languages (Biberauer & Roberts 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rich agreement</th>
<th>Rich tense</th>
<th>Null subjects</th>
<th>Verb–to–Tense movement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes Italian, Spanish, European Portuguese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>English, Mainland Scandinavian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes French, Middle English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No No clear examples (Icelandic?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The disentangling of the two parameters—richness of tense and agreement—accommodates fairly well the exceptional case of French. Even though B&R’s typology is based on synthetic–inflectional languages, it is flexible enough to carry over to analytic languages like Niuean. However, the parametric system fares less well with languages, showing a “mixed” analytic–synthetic behaviour. Coptic (Ancient Egyptian [Afroasiatic]; ca. 250–1200 CE) is a historical case of such a language.

2. THE PUZZLE. In the course of long-term morphosyntactic change, Ancient Egyptian shifted from an agglutinative–synthetic to a largely analytic morphological system (Reintges 2013). The analytization process has, however, never fully been completed, leaving parts of the anterior synthetic system largely intact. As a result, Coptic shows a typologically marked split between, on the one hand, an elaborate functional system of auxiliary-like TAM particles and, on the other hand, a synthetic residue of inflected infinitives and statives. In terms of B&R’s system, Coptic would qualify as non-null subject language with “rich” tense morphology. As free functional morphemes, TAM particles prevent inflected infinitives and statives from adjoining to the positions that they occupy. Lower functional heads that do not host TAM or discourse particles are still available as targets for verb movement. The resulting picture is one in which tense–rich analyticity in the functional domain blocks verb movement, while tense–poor syntheticity in the lexical domain drives it is. The Coptic situation is, in fact, the mirror image of that of B1R’s typology. This strongly suggests that residual verb movement in Coptic has functions other than the valuation of unvalued tense features.

3. THE SCOPE OF COPTIC VERB MOVEMENT. Holmberg & Roberts (2013) identify a correlation between the rise of analytic structures and the loss of verb movement, with analytic drift involving some degree of morphological simplification and erosion. And yet, in the case at hand, high analyticity in the functional domain leaves a niche for residual verb movement, due to an independently operating parameter: TAM particles occupy the first position of the clause, preceding the subject DP, which gives rise to AUX/T–S–V–O as the basic surface word order.

(1) Basic AUX/T–S–V–O of Coptic Egyptian

a tə–sophia ket u–ɛ:i na=s
PERF DEF.F.SG–wisdom build.INF INDEF.SG–house for=3F.SG
“Wisdom has built a house for herself.” (Proverbs 9, 1)
The positioning of TAM particles at the border of the clausal left periphery blocks long, V–to–C movement ("Verb Second"), while the functional space below the subject and above the vP shell is left intact. To reflect the rich tense system of TAM particles, I propose a complex functional structure for tense in this language, which adds a Mood projection between the genuine temporal projections TP₁ (deictic tense) and TP (Aspect). As shown by examples (2) and (3), both inflected infinitives and statives raise past the clause-internal negation adverb an ‘not’ to the highest inflectional head, Mood°. Crucially, residual V–to–Mood movement is synchronized with the phrasal extraction of the subject and the direct object arguments.

(2) Residual verb movement and subject raising with inflected infinitives

ant a po–nu:te gar toen:u pe=f–fe:re an e–po–kosmos
REL PERF DEF.M.SG–god PCL send.INF DEF.M.SG=3M.SG.POSS–child not to–DEF.M.SG–world

"Since God has not sent his son to the world …" (John 3, 17)

(3) Residual verb movement and Unaccusative subject raising with statives

ar:eu an po–son tct an–het an e–fat’e namma=n
perhaps NEG DEF.M.SG–brother persuade.STAT LINK–heart not to–talk.INF to=1PL

"Perhaps the brother does not agree (lit. is not persuaded of heart) to talk to us." (AP no238, 70, 21)

Phrasal extraction serves the purpose of Case-licensing in a designated Spec–Head configuration. This case is particularly clear with the Unaccusative movement of Stative subjects, as seen in (3). The “Minimal Link Condition” of Chomsky (1993: 10–13) straightforwardly captures this relation: Phrasal extraction is strictly local unless it occurs in the domain of verb movement.

(4) **Diagram 1:** Residual verb movement and phrasal extraction in Coptic Egyptian

4. **Conclusions.** Far from being peripheral to the syntax, residual verb movement plays a pivotal role as a domain-extending operation, which makes possible argument extraction and Structural Case-licensing. Even though impoverished, inflected infinitives and statives convey the relevant morphology that drives movement. Consequently, the relative “richness” of Tense cannot be directly related to the scope of verb movement operations.