Greek loanwords and two grammatical features of Pre-Coptic Egyptian

1. Introduction

The linguistic situation in Egypt during the period from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD (from the time of Ptolemaic rule to the emergence of Coptic script) is very complex and intriguing. While the primary written form of Egyptian language had long been the Demotic, limited uses of hieroglyphic script and certain forms of Hieratic also survived. As a consequence of Egypt’s occupation by the Greeks and its effect on the economic and political life, the Greek language has gained a comparatively great importance, and a bilingual social stratum gradually evolved primarily in the northern part of the country.

While the Demotic was the script widely used among Egyptians, the language itself was subject to strong diglossia an otherwise normal phenomenon, characteristic in every phase of the Egyptian language. Accordingly, the spoken version departed from the written form until the Demotic script itself started to decline and was finally replaced by Coptic. The linguistic relationship between Coptic and Demotic is far from being understood. It is a well-known fact that Coptic cannot be considered as the direct successor of Demotic. Although the former succeeds the latter in time, an unexpected number of lexical and grammatical differences may be detected. Demotic is characterized by a stiff resistance to foreign influences, and, at the same time, new grammatical constructions and elements appear in Coptic seemingly without any precedent, not to mention the extremely large number of Greek loanwords in the Coptic vocabulary.

The evolution of this hidden spoken Egyptian (Pre-literal or simply Pre-Coptic) will be the subject of my investigation. Even though the actual circumstances in which the borrowing of Greek words took place remain mostly unrevealed, it is, nonetheless, the way the Greek words had been integrated into the Egyptian grammatical system that certain properties of the spoken Egyptian can be understood. Two concrete cases will be examined in my paper: firstly, the productivity of the plural suffix attached also to Greek nouns, and secondly, the much debated issue concerning the borrowing of Greek verbs from a morphological point of view. My analysis will be based on the fundamental principle that it is the grammar of the borrower language that conditions in what form the loanword is to be integrated into the new linguistic environment.

2. Bilingualism and diglossia in Egypt

2.1. Bilingualism

The Egyptian-Greek contacts primarily of commercial nature can be traced back to the 2nd millennium BC, but evidence for permanent Greek presence in Egypt is available only from the 7th century BC, when Ionian (and Carian) soldiers served as mercenaries for the rulers of the Saite dynasty, and were allowed to establish settlements in the Delta region. It was the first time that they could mix with native population, though Egyptian language remained unaffected by the Greek presence until the arrival of Alexander the Great and the Macedonian conquest. From that point, however, Greek had become the language of the resident dynasty and its administration for centuries, which was accompanied by a mass immigration of Greek-

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speaking population. As a consequence of the economical and social pressure, a limited degree of bilingualism⁴ might have evolved as early as the first Ptolemies ruled over Egypt.

The need of Greek-speaking administrators for the successful centralized control on the part of the ruling class, and the advantages ensured for the existing scribal class in exchange for their collaboration – as mutual interests – reinforced each other. The Ptolemaic educational program, i.e. the great number and privileged position of school teachers (e.g. exemption from taxes) is noteworthy. Knowledge of language (in other words Greek literacy) was the clue to social status and career. Accordingly, the first essential move toward bilingualism was achieved by educated Egyptians (the members of the Egyptian literate class), who – from the 2nd century BC infiltrated even into the higher bureaucracy. The assimilation also accelerated in the regions where Greek military and civil officials had been given lands in tenure (e.g. the Fayum region) favoring the formation of a mixed population. In the first decades of the Macedonian dominion the survived official documents were written predominantly in Demotic. It is only from the reign of Ptolemy II that a growing use of Greek may be observed, but its preference over Demotic quickly increased in course of time. Demotic maintained its position mostly in lower (and local) administration.⁴

In the Roman period, the official language of the eastern provinces was Greek rather than Latin. The ratio of Latin to Greek papyrological documents from Egypt is approx. 1 to 100. Latin was used exclusively in the highest administration: in the army and within the affairs of the central governance. Otherwise Greek was used.⁵ During the Roman period a drastic decline of Demotic documents may be observed. Their use was limited to tax-receipts, accounts, priestly agreements (concerning their rights and duties), and by the 3rd century AD, merely to some magical texts and mummy labels.⁶ This radical decline may be ascribed to the reorganization of Egyptian administration. The Romans simply refused to accept documents written in Demotic. Thus, for much of the Roman period most Egyptians had no access to writing in their own language, which obviously promoted the bilingualism among members of the middle class.⁷

There are direct and indirect evidences for bilingualism: use of bilingual documents (synodal decrees, contracts, mummy labels, letters, tax-receipts); bilingual archives; the use of rush (the standard Demotic writing implement) for Greek records instead of reed; wrong spellings and syntactic errors suggesting the employment of bilingual scribes (incorrect

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4 For Ptolemaic administration and literacy, see D. J. Thompson, ‘Literacy and administration in early Ptolemaic Egypt’, in: J. H. Johnson (ed.), Life in a Multi-Cultural Society. Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and Beyond, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilisations 51 (Chicago, 1992), 323-326; D. J. Thompson, ‘Literacy and power in Ptolemaic Egypt’, in: A. K. Bowman – G. Woolf (eds.), Literacy and power in the ancient world (Cambridge, 1994), 67-83. A short summary of the subject: R. S. Bagnall, Egypt in Late Antiquity (Princeton, 1993), 236; Egyptian legal system was not abolished, just expanded by the Greek one (there were two separate courts for Egyptian and Greek lawsuits). However, the change in the relationship between the two systems affected language as well. A royal decree (prostagma) of 146 B.C. requires that all Egyptian contracts worked up in Demotic should be registered in Greek in an official registry-office or grapheion. Unrecorded Demotic contracts are invalid, cf. N. Lewis, ‘The demise of the Demotic document: when and why’, JEA 79 (1993), 279; D. J. Thompson, Literacy and power, 82.


7 It must not be forgotten that Demotic was steadily used for religious, magical and literary compositions (e.g. P.Insinger, Setna II, Myth of the Sun-Eye).
gender, mistaken case endings); interference (e.g. ‘Egyptianisms’ in Greek texts).\(^8\) However, the proportions of bilingualism and the degree of its permeation within the Egyptian society are unknown. Demotic seems entirely to ignore Greek language. Greek loanwords are limited to a few predictable categories.\(^9\) In case the integration of a new term was inevitable, sometimes calquing was preferred to adoption.\(^10\) This purism of Demotic (and its inclination for archaism) distorts the facts insomuch that the actual effects of bilingual speakers on Egyptian language are hardly attested only by linguistic means. In fact, the use of the different languages and writings is rather divided functionally, thus we had better speak about diglossia\(^11\) when defining the relationship between Demotic and Coptic (or, more precisely, Pre-Coptic).

2.2. Diglossia

As its name implies, Demotic is often considered as colloquial (insofar it reflects the spoken language of that time). Nevertheless, already the earliest Demotic documents are often formulaic and conservative by nature, being for the most part legal documents and official letters.\(^12\)

Coptic script developed by adopting the Greek alphabet in the course of the first centuries AD and it was essentially employed for the translation of the Holy Scriptures.\(^13\) The extremely large number of Greek words in Coptic (the one-fifth of the standard Coptic vocabulary) is often explained by the adoption of Christian religion and the influence of translation from Greek. But the latter explanation ignores the fact that also prepositions (\(\kappaατα\), \(\kappaε\)̓λογος) were used in Demotic.


\(^10\) E.g. the term \(\tau\α\πε\ς\)α (‘table’ > ‘state bank’), an institution introduced by the Ptolemies, obviously was understood by Egyptians, but in Demotic the Egyptian word \(\sigma\ς\nu\) (‘table’) was used, cf. J. D. RAY, ‘How demotic is demotic?’, in: *Acta Demotica. Acts of Fifth International Conference for Demotists. Pisa, 4th – 8th September 1993*, Egitto e Vicino Oriente 17 (Pisa, 1994), 255. See also J. VERCOTE, ‘Bilinguisme et calques en Égypte’, in: *Atti del XVII. Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia*. Vol. III. (Napoli, 1984), 1385-1389. Another example could be the term \(\rho\\i\ν\\i\rho\)\(\rho\) of the Rosetta stone for the epithet \(\theta\\i\o\ς\ έπολα\ς\) of Ptolemy V.

\(^11\) For the linguistic notion of diglossia, see Ch. A. FERGUSON, ‘Diglossia’, *Word* 15 (1959), 325-340.


sentence particles ( akka, ḡe, ḍe) and common everyday words became adopted, which must be the result of a development of a long period and the cohabitation for centuries.\footnote{J. D. RAY, \textit{How demotic is demotic}, 256; J. D. RAY, \textit{Literacy in Egypt}, 60.}

Demotic, in turn, doesn’t reflect certain grammatical and lexical changes, which must have already characterized the spoken language: the perfect sdm.f form is suddenly replaced by the systematic use of Coptic ḡeḏer. Other examples could be the unexpected appearance of the genitive construction with ḏeḏe or the dislocation pattern with ḏeḏ. Surprisingly, some very frequent lexemes are replaced by new ones.\footnote{See J. D. RAY, \textit{How demotic is demotic}, 260-261 for this issue and further examples.} Moreover, Demotic disregards not only the foreign influences (language contact), but the local or regional differences (dialects) as well. At the same time, early Coptic texts distinguish six main dialects, thus reflecting the contemporary linguistic reality.

The paucity of Greek loanwords in Demotic and its reluctance to language change and language variation may be due to conservatism and diglossia. Consequently, Demotic gradually departed from the spoken language. The sole exception to this pattern is provided by the findings from Medinet Madi: an archive of about 1500 ostraka found in a village temple during Italian excavations at Narmouthis (Medinet Madi, Fayum).\footnote{For a general description: E. BRESCHIANI – R. PINTAUDI, ‘Textes démotico-grecs et greco-démotiques des ostraca de Medinet Madi: un problème de bilinquisme’, in: S. P. VLEEMING (ed.), \textit{Aspects of Demotic Lexicography. Acts of the Second International Conference for Demotic Studies}, Studia Demotica 1 (Leuven: 1987), 123-126; See also P. FEWSTER, \textit{Bilingualism in Roman Egypt}, 221-224. An overall bibliography on Medinet Madi can be found at: http://www.egittologia.unipi.it/pisaegypt/BibMedinet.htm} The area was inhabited by a high number of new settlers and therefore relatively Hellenized. The ostraka were written in the first half of the 2nd century AD and a considerable part of them belongs to a collection of school texts. What is particularly interesting about these texts is that, in some extent, they seem to reveal the spoken language: They contain relatively large number of Greek words (also common lexemes) written in the Greek alphabet – fitted from left to right into the Demotic text that runs from right to left. A more striking phenomenon is that Greek nouns can have a Demotic definite article and Greek verbs in the infinitive are combined with the Egyptian auxiliary ir (‘to do’) in a series of periphrastic tenses according to the later practice of certain Coptic dialects. Previously invisible grammatical constructions and sound changes are observable as well.\footnote{The consonantal change ḫ > ḡ is recognizable in the auxiliary of the praesens consuetudinis, or in the word ḫm > ım > ḡm ‘little’. At the same time, the lambdacism and the ending –i of feminine nouns let us see some dialectal peculiarities of the Fayumic dialect, cf. S. PERNIGOTTI, ‘Il “Copto” degli ostraka di Medinet Madi’, in: \textit{Atti del XVII. Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia}. Vol. II. (Napoli, 1984), 788-789. Further examples for the above mentioned linguistic phenomena: J. D. RAY, \textit{How demotic is demotic}, 257-258.} But the very best evidence for the conservatism of Demotic is Coptic itself: the 20 percent of its vocabulary derives from Greek. The proportion of Greek words is similar in translations from Greek and in original compositions. After comparing 20 pages from the gospel of Matthew with 20 pages from the texts of Pachomius (otherwise ignorant of Greek), Lefort points out that the native composition has 25 percent more Greek words than the translated text.\footnote{L. Th. LEFORT, ‘Gréco-copte’, in: \textit{Coptic Studies in Honor of Walter Ewing Crum} (Boston, 1950), 66.} Undoubtedly, Pre-Coptic spoken language had already absorbed Greek on an increasing scale by the time Coptic script emerged.\footnote{The fact that Coptic should be viewed as a parallel development to Demotic rather than as a successor was already pointed out by K. SETHE, ‘Das Verhältnis zwischen Demotisch und Koptisch und seine Lehren für die Geschichte der ägyptische Sprache’, \textit{ZDMG} 79 (1925), 290-316.}
3. The question of the morphological plural

In Middle and Late Egyptian plural is marked by the endings ".w/.wt" in writing. When treating the progressive fall of the plural endings, Loprieno claims that the loss of final vowels and semiconsonants in later Egyptian favored the emergence of new oppositions based on internal apophonic alternations between singular and plural forms. However, there is no reason to suppose that the ablaut did not exist before. Loprieno also assumes that, in certain cases, the three strokes in earlier hieroglyphic writing might have been the ideographic rather than phonetic indication of the plural, which implies that the apophonic alternation may have been sufficient in these cases to mark the singular/plural opposition already in earlier Egyptian.

The problem that concerns us here is how long the inflection of morphological plural was productive. According to the written evidence, Demotic had a real, systematic plural ending, which is in a striking contrast with the Coptic data. Morphological plurality can be observed only with a close set of Coptic nouns, therefore, on synchronic level, it can be interpreted only as irregularity; the plural suffix could not be productive any more.

Example (1) shows that Coptic nouns are not marked morphologically for grammatical gender and number, these categories become visible only by means of the agreeing determinants, or cross-reference performed by personal pronouns.

(1) ι-ΡΩΗΕ def:sg.m.-man the man Σ-ΕΨΕ def:sg.f.-field the field ι-ΡΩΗΕ/ϹΨΕ def:pl.-man/field the men/fields

Remnant plural forms show some sort of pattern, but their presence is not predictable, thus cannot be considered productive. I have to oppose the words of Shisha-Halevy that “(morphologic) countability, more or less regular, widespread but unpredictable (subject to regulation as yet obscure)”. If a phenomenon is unpredictable, it cannot be called regular.

In his grammar, Reintges summarizes how plural nouns are formed, distinguishing three different patterns:

(i) Addition of the plural suffix -ooε, e.g. ΣΒΩ ~ ΣΒΟΟΕ

24 Grammars usually list a few Coptic nouns marked for gender according to biological sex, e. g. ΣΟΝ ~ ΑΨΕ (B. LAYTON, A Coptic Grammar with Chrestomathy and Glossary. Sahidic Dialect (Wiesbaden, 2000), §107; Ch. REINTEGES, Coptic Egyptian (Sahidic Dialect) A learner’s grammar, Afrikawissenschaftliche Lehrbücher 15 (Köl n, 2004), 52-53.) There is a larger set of nouns marked for plural, e. g. ΣΟΝ ~ ΑΨΕ (LAYTON, A Coptic Grammar, §108(b); see also J. VÉRGO TÉ, Grammaire Copte. IIa. Morphologie syntagmatique. Syntaxe. Partie synchronique (Louvain, 1983), §§115-120.)
26 Ch. REINTEGES, Coptic Egyptian, 53-54, with further examples.
(ii) So called “broken plural” expressed by changes in the vowel pattern and syllable structure of the nominal stem, e.g. *eiwt* ~ *eiote*, *zto* ~ *ztuwr*

(iii) Combination of (i) and (ii), e.g. *xoeic* ~ *xicooye*

Although this plural forming does not seem to be systematic or productive any more, interestingly enough, some frequently used Greek nouns can be combined with Egyptian suffix.

(2) *ψυχη* ~ *ψυχοουε* ‘souls’, *επιστολη* ~ *επιστολοουε* ‘letters’ (Reintges, 2004, 54)

Till points out that this operation is available for feminine Greek nouns only, and exclusively with the suffix -ooue.29 Observing the more extensive list of Girgis,30 it becomes clear that the form of the ending may vary in dialects (-ooue (S), -λγε (A2), -νγα (F)). Kasser gives examples from more dialects as well, and also indicates that the above-mentioned suffix can link with Copto-Greek words ending in tonic ‘-e’ like *ψυχη*, on the analogy of Coptic nouns like *τενα* ~ *τενοουε* ‘cattle’.31

Morphological plurality is neither regular, nor predictable, operating only on a closed set of nouns. It is hardly surprising, then, that Greek substantives are used invariably in nominative singular form, as there is no Greek-like declension in Coptic, either. A similar phenomenon may be observed in the case of grammatical gender: Coptic, having two genders only (masculine and feminine), integrated an originally neuter Greek substantive as masculine. In short, it is the grammar of the borrower language that conditions in what form a loanword is to be integrated. That’s why the combination of the *ψυχη*-type Greek words with an Egyptian remnant suffix is so surprising.

The key-question of such an investigation is since when the plural suffix has been unproductive. The Demotic data are problematic: Demotic writing does mark the plural ending by a vertical sign that (contrary to former hieroglyphic usage) follows feminine ending and any other determinatives.32 This may suggest that the sign itself transcribed as –w is no more than a determinative, merely signaling that the noun is perceived to be plural. It should be noted, however, that the 3rd person plural pronominal suffix was written with one and the same sign and it was necessarily pronounced (cf. its Coptic successor –ou). In addition, Simpson observes33 that regular omission of the plural marker is much less frequent than that of the feminine ending (as far as the text corpora of the decrees are concerned).

Descriptive Demotic grammars generally take it for granted that plural marking was systematically realized, in spite of the fact that its productivity all of a sudden disappears in Coptic. Whereas Williams admits34 that “it is likely that in many cases this consonant (-w) had disappeared from speech in this position.”

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27 Layton (*A Coptic Grammar*, §108(b)) lists more suffixes that seemingly have the element -γ in common. However, he also fails to mention the alternation (-ο ~ -οι) attested in ξλο – ξλοι.

28 H. SATZINGER, *Koptische Vokalphoneme* proposes a systematic derivation for the plural formation of nouns ending in tonic syllable. He assumes that a kind of metathesis is responsible for the diphthongs which can be found in the plural forms. He basically treats the subject from a diachronic point of view, and does not touch on the question of productivity, so the critical analysis of his proposal cannot be the task of the present paper.

29 W. C. TILL, *Koptische Grammatik (Saïdischer Dialekt)* (Leipzig, 1961), §86.


33 R. S. SIMPSON, *Demotic Grammar*, 50.

In my view, when Greek nouns capable of bearing Egyptian plural endings were eventually borrowed in Pre-Coptic, the suffix must have been still productive, even if limited to certain nominal classes only, characterized by the type of their vocalism or syllable structure. A group of Greek loanwords, having a quasi similar make-up, was able to pick up the appropriate suffix. Unfortunately, it is impossible to define the exact time of borrowing for the above mentioned effects of diglossia, but it certainly happened in a period when Egyptian plural forming was still a productive inflectional strategy.

The morphological process of inflection (in comparison with derivation) typically shows an unrestrained productivity since inflected forms have syntactic functions and do not create new words or concepts. Unproductive forms can be regular as well provided that they can be described by means of a rule not distinct from other rules of grammar. Yet, they remain historic relics for being unproductive by nature. Even if a phonological investigation happens to derive all the apparently irregular plural forms in Coptic and provide a systematic explanation for each and every morphological occurrence, after a certain point, the inflectional process cannot be considered productive as it does not operate on every possible input, which otherwise correspond to the formal requirements of the rule. Therefore, plural forming in Pre-Coptic exhibited certain regularity and productivity as revealed by Greek nouns in Coptic plural form, but ceased to be productive at an indefinable point since there are numerous Greek loans in Coptic ending in tonic ‘-η’ without the corresponding plural forms.

4. The question of loan verbs

As a consequence of the analytic nature of Coptic sentence patterns, Greek loan verbs can occur only in a single and unvarying form. Coptic grammars treat the verbal part of any conjugation pattern as an infinitive – essentially for historical considerations. Accordingly, it seems logical to assume that Greek loan verbs were adopted in their infinitival form as well. In the Sahidic dialect, as well as in some minor dialects, the morphological form of these verbs, strangely enough, seems to be the imperfectum imperativi activi, instead of the infinitive.

(3) πιστεύεις πιστεύειν, πλανά πλανᾶν, λέει λέειν, μαστίγω μαστίγου, ἁγιάζει ἁγιαζέω

Opinions vary on the nature of these forms. According to Steindorff Greek infinitives were adopted in their late Greek form, which means that in active forms the word final -ν, in medium forms the ending -θαι was dropped. This hypothesis is problematic, however, in view of the Bohairic data. Bohairic dialect actually adopts the Greek infinitival form (as clearly manifested by the endings -ν and -εος), but always combined with the status nominalis of the Coptic verb ἰπ (ἐπ-) ‘to do’:

37 R. Kasser, Vocabulary, 220.
The use of an auxiliary verb seems superfluous if the Coptic verb position is reserved for the infinitive. It can be a strong argument, then, that the verbal slot was not felt nominal by the Coptic speakers. Accordingly, the ‘infinitive-adopting’ approach will not be so straightforward in Sahidic, where loan verbs are integrated in the sentence without any auxiliary verb.

Beyond the infinitive vs. imperative discussion there is a third approach to the question. In his review article Shisha-Halevy stresses that “in Sahidic, unlike many other dialects, we have (...) not the Greek morphological infinitive, but a Greek zero-affix form for the Coptic structural (syntactic) infinitival entity”. A similar view is held by Reintges who claims that Greek verbs are borrowed into Coptic as “bare” (i.e. uninflected) stems. He rejects the imperative approach since “imperatival verb forms have an intrinsic addressee-related reference, and are therefore construed with an implicit or explicit second person subject pronoun.” Reintges suggests a light-verb theory instead: Copto-Greek verbs – he says – have the morphological structure of nouns, and must be inserted in the complement position of a light verb (εἰρ-) ‘to do’. Light verbs have little or no lexical meaning at all, and it is their nominal complement that represents the semantically meaningful predicate. In Bohairic this light verb is overt, while in Sahidic it is a covert one.

It is worth mentioning that the medium and passive infinitival endings (-εσθαι) are often attested in (Sahidic) Coptic documentary texts. It is possible that the problem cannot be resolved uniformly by deriving all the Coptic forms from either the Greek infinitive/imperative or an uninflected stem. What I would like to point out here is the fact that the supposed adoption of an imperative form is not entirely inconsistent. Provided that the periphrastic conjugations had already superseded all the $slm.f$ forms as early as the Pre-Coptic phase, it seems plausible to assume that one and the same verb form (traditionally the infinitive) occurred in every possible sentence position as later in Coptic. However, in the absence of real finite vs. non-finite opposition (an issue for which I have argued elsewhere), a verb in (Pre-)Coptic was most likely not perceived by speakers as a genuine infinitive but rather as a sort of basic (lexical) form of the verb which – in its most neutral occurrence (with no conjugation base or personal pronoun attached) – appeared sentence initially, in its imperative use. Accordingly, it would not be so unnatural from a Coptic point of view to take the imperative as a basic form of the verb when borrowing new words from a foreign language.

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40 For references see n. 38 above.
42 Ch. REINTGES, Coptic Egyptian, 39.
44 H. FÖRSTER (Hrsg.), Wörterbuch, xviii. Reintges (Coptic Egyptian, 39.) also indicates that, occasionally, the full form of the Greek infinitival suffix -εσθαι is preserved in Coptic.
46 The Coptic ‘infinitive’ is the usual form to express the imperative as well, except for ten irregular verbs, which have a special imperative form. These verbs are listed in B. LAYTON, A Coptic Grammar, §366.
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