A new dictionary of Ancient Egyptian
Jean Winand (Florence, 27th August 2015)

[This is a slightly modified version of the lecture presented during the plenary session of XIth IAE Congress. The figures are on separate file.]

0. Introduction

Since the beginning of Egyptology, scholars have felt the need of lexicographical tools. Champollion himself, the founding figure of our studies, had time enough to collect and arrange a vast amount of data that were posthumously published by his brother in 1841. Le Dictionnaire égyptien was actually conceived as an extension, or rather an exposition, of the writing system. There are interesting pages in the introduction where the merits of the system of classification found in Chinese dictionaries are discussed. Following scrupulously the draft made by his brother, Champollion-Figeac opted for a system of 18 divisions regrouped in 10 classes. This system of course reminds the organisation of the Arabo-Coptic scalae, as already noted by Champollion-Figeac, and goes ultimately back to the onomastica of the New Kingdom. The Dictionnaire is thus not arranged according to any kind of alphabetic order; in order to use it, one does not need to know how the word was pronounced, but how it was written. A second characteristic of the Dictionnaire is that it is not limited or restricted to any stage of Egyptian. Champollion considered without distinction all the material he could lay his hands on. He also constantly referred to Coptic, as he felt that Ancient Egyptian ought to be treated as a unity, and probably also because Coptic was instrumental in demonstrating the value of the ancient Egyptian words he was bringing back to light.

Since the pioneering work of Champollion, we have been witnessing the regular publication of lexicographical tools of the greatest variety. Fig. 1 shows some significant publications (without any claim of exhaustivity) that have been arranged in three categories: dictionaries sensu stricto, indices or lexica, and publications that deal with Egyptian vocabulary from different viewpoints.

Needless to say, the Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache (Wb.) whose publication started in the twenties, remains the undisputed standard so far. Fig. 2 is a quick remembering of what an enterprise it was to realize the Egyptian Wb. Under the timeline are the names of the prominent scholars who devoted much time to make the Wb. a reality. In the midst of the screen, in brown/orange, are the most relevant steps of the Verzettlung. As a matter of fact, it came to practical end by the mid 30s. In the upper part, there is a sketch of how the edition of the different parts of the Wb. unfolded over the years.

In modern times, one must also single out the ambitious project of Rainer Hannig, who does not spare his efforts to bringing close to its end his monumental Ägyptisches Wörterbuch, which is actually taking pharaonic proportions.

Since the beginning of this century, we are also witnessing the publication of new tools using information technologies. The dates mentioned on Fig. 3 mark the start of these projects or the moment they came on-line. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I here only mentioned the projects that have some content and data to show. Databases, unfortunately, are a field where dead-born or short-lived projects, for whatever reason, are not at all uncommon.
For most of us, the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae (TLA)* has become a natural reflex when looking for information. The *TLA*, which is originally a project of the *Brandenburg-Berliner Ak. d. Wissenschaften*, has over the years extended its collaboration to other institutions, in and outside Germany. As everyone knows, there are two ways of using the *TLA*, the shorter or the quick one, and the longer or the more sportive one. Most users are probably quite happy with the first page, which provides a very general idea of the meaning of the word one is looking for. As the *TLA* never made the claim to be a dictionary, it is highly advisable to browse the data that are linked to the lemma. The *TLA* gives access to two corpora of texts: the first one are the *Belegstellen* that were compiled for the production of the *Wb.*, the second one are the texts that have been encoded by the new team over the last 25 years. A simple look at the numbers quickly shows how discouraging it can be for some common words, as *g mj* “find” (Fig. 4), to go through the nearly 900 examples of the *Textkorpus* plus the 1300 card-files of the *Belegstellen*. It of course takes a hell of time, and it requires some specific skills to make something out of this, as every potential user is not necessarily a trained philologist, grammarian or linguist. In this respect, things cannot of course but go worse as the database – very fortunately – keeps increasing.

The second project I shall here briefly touch upon is the *Ramses* project, my team is developing in Liège.\(^1\) It started later than the *TLA*, and with a more modest ambition as regards the corpus to be treated, as it focuses, as the name implies, on Late Egyptian texts. Fig. 5 displays some statistics about the number of texts already encoded (we are now close to 4,500), and the number of words already processed (a bit more than a half million now). In contrast to the *TLA*, *Ramses* presents itself as a powerful research tool for grammarians and linguists. There are in *Ramses* multiple layers of annotations that enable sophisticated requests that can take into account separately or in combination the spellings, the ecdotic annotations, morphology, and syntax. A request is by default limited to a proposition, but it can also be extended to a sequence of propositions as shown on Fig. 6. *Ramses* went online on the 27\(^{th}\) of August (see the opening page on Fig. 7).\(^2\) Although the possibilities of research have been voluntarily limited for the moment, it is fair enough to say that sophisticated researches can be directly formulated online, as illustrated on Fig. 8.

The next figure (Fig. 9) tries to capture the stronger and weaker points of the two projects. The differences do not really matter here. What is more relevant for our discussion, and this needs to be stressed, is the fact that neither can make the claim – and obviously they have never made it – to be any kind of substitute for a real dictionary. Both projects have of course a lexicon, where some information is stocked. But this is not much more than a means of identifying words; there is no semantic analysis in whatever respect.

So, the question now, as I see it, is: can we consider that times are ripe enough to make the big leap forward? Three years ago, I had a lecture (Fig. 10) at a conference in Leipzig whose topic was “*Das altägyptisches Wörterbuch und die Lexikographie der ägyptisch-koptischen Sprache*”. I strongly advocated the need I still feel we now have of a new, ambitious, up-to-date dictionary.

As might be expected, my answer was and still is “Yes!, we can”. Of course, there are many reasons to postpone it and to procrastinate. But, in my opinion, the main reason to do so is rather the lack of confidence we have of doing it.

There are four basic questions to answer when starting a project of such a scale:

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1. [http://www.egypto.ulg.ac.be/Ramses.htm](http://www.egypto.ulg.ac.be/Ramses.htm)
2. [http://ramses.ulg.ac.be](http://ramses.ulg.ac.be)

Jean Winand – Université de Liège (j.winand@ulg.ac.be)
when can we start?
for whom shall we make it? what is the potential public?
what to put in a dictionary?
and, finally, how to do it?

The rest of this paper is devoted to discuss these issues.

1. When?

The first question I have already answered. We have to begin now; all reasons that can be advocated to postpone it are in my opinion as many loopholes.

2. For whom?

The potential users of any dictionary will of course remain anyone guess, but it seems that four groups or layers can be identified (Fig. 11), with probably distinct expectations.

- The first three layers are Egyptologists. I first isolated a hard core of scholars whose field of research and expertise is the Egyptian language and texts. It is probably the smaller group, but with the higher expectations. Their needs extend far beyond the identification of a word and its basic semantic analysis. They also expect to have access to a large collection of examples and they probably will be very happy to be able to make sophisticated researches, using different types of filters for sorting out the relevant data.

- The second layer are Egyptologists who are dealing with texts for whatever purpose, maybe on a regular basis, but who are not deeply interested in the functioning of language or in the inner organisation of the lexicon. This group probably constitutes the majority of the public.

- Finally, there is a third layer, scholars whose regular business keeps them relatively far away from the texts, but who occasionally must check the meaning of a word, or simply wish to have some easy access to a text with a translation and some bibliography.

- In the last group are scholars who are not Egyptologists, but need to have access to Egyptian. These are of course linguists, engaged in comparative studies, or taking an interest in typology, lexicographers, or students dealing with complex writing systems. I suppose we all now agree that Egyptology is definitely a member of a larger international web of sciences. But it remains a difficult field, with a long and in some respect idiosyncratic tradition; so it is up to us, Egyptologists, to build bridges by facilitating the access for those who wish to visit us. I am convinced that the benefit will be mutual.

It is self evident that the new dictionary, in its conception and the presentation of the final product, must cope with the heterogeneity of these potential users. In a nutshell,

- all information relevant for the hard core group must of course be available,
- but it must remain accessible for everyone in its presentation (that is by avoiding needless jargon, while being without any concession as regards the scientific output),
one should be able to easily and quickly make a distinction between basic, primary information and complex analyses (very fortunately, IT now available offers nearly limitless possibilities),

and finally, one should keep a terminology understandable for linguists and lexicographers who happen not to be Egyptologists.

3. What to put in a dictionary?

The next question, obviously not a mere trifle, deals with the content of the dictionary. The verb *jnj* “to bring”, as it appears in the Berlin *Wörterbuch (Wb.)* I, 90, is a good starting point (*Fig. 12*). Besides a standard transcription and a standard hieroglyphic spelling – and there will be much to say about these two apparently trivial first two points –, there are a lot of information provided in the *Wb.:

- a sample of spellings, with some rough indication of the timespan during which they were used, but as one can immediately see it, the list is rather limited, and there is of course no relation with morphology, nor with the literary genres or the type of writing;

- occasionally, some uses can be marked as belonging to a specific genre, as is the case here for the label “juristisch” attached to some phraseology;

- quite regularly, the *Wb.* added some chronological specification to some meanings. This is to be understood as the first time a given word is attested with the meaning under consideration. There is of course no statistics.

- for complex nouns, as is obviously the case for *jnj*, the different meanings have been arranged in major divisions, with occasional subdivisions (*Fig. 13*);

- there is no systematic analysis of the syntactic environment: which kind of complement can be used with *jnj*?, which preposition?, with which meaning?, and so on, but there are occasional remarks that point in that direction;

- and finally, for each meaning or sub-meaning, there are links to the *Belegstellen*.

If one now looks at what would be the desiderata for a new dictionary, I suppose that everyone will turn up with his or her own shopping list. So I came with my own (*Fig. 14*); it is of course not limitative, but one has obviously to stop somewhere. The basic intuition, which goes back to the old *Wb.* is that a dictionary must be linked to a corpus of examples. That is why the *Wb.* team put some much energy in collecting a vast material for the *Belegstellen*.

All words discussed in the dictionary should ideally come with the following elements:

- the attested spellings, not only a choice, but a systematic and exhaustive list; in this respect, a particular attention should be paid to the classifier system;

- the argument structure: this a rather technical notion; let is here simply state that one needs to know, for instance for verbs, which kind of complement they can take, together with their syntactic representation and their semantic value; for example, the verb *šm* “to go” is regularly followed by an adverbial phrase introduced by the preposition *r* for expressing direction. If this adverbial extension is lacking, the meaning of the verb is deeply modified (“to go” > “to walk”).
the collocations should also be systematically listed; for instance, for the noun jb “heart”, the adjectives that can follow it, or the verbs that have jb as their subject or object should be systematically listed and commented;

- morphology is also of special interest, once again particularly for verbs; a modern dictionary should clarify the intricate relationships between meanings and grammatical tenses; to take a very trivial example, rh “to know” precisely has this meaning with the old perfective; with other tenses belonging to the perfective aspeptual sphere (e.g. jw/j rh.n/j), it means “to get the knowledge of”; this quick review shows that the boundaries between lexicon and grammar are not so clear-cut as implied by the existence of these two traditional, but very different kinds of tools that are dictionaries and grammars;

- the semantic analysis of course remains the most wanted, but also the most difficult task. The desideratum here is to find how to organize in a principled way the different meanings of the lexemes, as the lexicon over times tends to become inherently polysemic.

The modern technology offers extraordinary, almost limitless, possibilities for extending the scope of a lexical research. On the one hand, I already stressed the necessity of having a large collection of examples associated with the words in the dictionary (Fig. 15). Actually, the modern databases offer much more than a collection of examples as they are gradually moving towards (near) exhaustivity. This is a realistic assumption considering that we are working within a close corpus (although not a closed one), which of course keeps growing thanks to new publications and discoveries, but the annual increase is ridiculously small when compared with living languages where there is a continuous and strong production of new texts. Texts that are encoded in databases like the TLA or Ramses are described with a rich set of metadata, like date, provenance, writing, genres, and so on, that can be used for classifying the data, sorting out examples, filtering complex researches, and so on.

I suppose nobody still believes that words are isolated islands; as we know, they rather belong to more or less complex archipelagos. Although it still makes sense to consider the meanings of a single word – and this is perhaps advisable for teaching –, words reveal their polyphonic values once considered in the different kinds of web(s) they belong to. The old Wb. already provided some lists where words are grouped according to semantic categories, an idea that has been followed by Hannig in his dictionary. Useful as it can be, the rationale that stands behind these lists has never been made clear, nor explicit. This of course brings with it a lot of questions that should be addressed very seriously. The obvious danger in this respect would be making lists that slavishly copy the semantic organisation found in our respective languages, without considering the emic reality of the civilisation one claims to be the focus of our study. In the same spirit, it should be interesting to have a systematic representation of synonyms and antonyms. Although Egyptology cannot boast to have the same degree or level of achievement that has been reached in Semitic studies, especially for Arabic, information concerning the root and the derivational schemes (Nominalbildung) would certainly be very useful. Among all languages, ancient Egyptian must be singled out for its fascinating systems of writing. Modern technologies now offer the possibility of presenting the vocabulary according to the structure of writing; the system of classifiers immediately comes to mind, but being able to display words that share the same logogram or, maybe more interestingly, closely associated logograms would also be useful for an in-depth study of the vocabulary.
4. How?

The next question I’d like to discuss is “how to do it?”. If one takes a look back at previous experiences, there are two possibilities. The first one, in my view, a risky one, is to go for it alone. The project of dictionary I have in mind involves too many complex issues to be properly handled by one single individual. First, the mass of data is really impressive. This project also involves a large variety of skills that would hardly be found in one person. One must also take into account the technological issues; building and managing a very sophisticated relational database, securing its production on-line are beyond the reach of a single man, even if (s)he is a genius. (The relevance of information technologies today could not be overemphasised; I suppose that this is the reason why the organisers presented this lecture as an extension of the e-Gyptology panel.)

Without too much surprise, I would favour a team enterprise, whose organisation can be roughly sketched as a tripartite one: with Egyptologists of course, specialized in texts and linguistics, IT-people, and scholars who specialised in lexicography and dictionary without being themselves Egyptologists. This last category could, in my view, bring interesting insights on how to make the best possible tool.

Very hopefully, we do not have to start from scratch. Even if all domains or aspects of Egyptian are not completely covered yet, we already have databases with a lot of annotations that can be used to extract more or less automatically, more or less easily, information we need for the dictionary.

Let’s go back once more to the verb *jn*j “to bring”, as handled in the *Wb.* (Fig. 16). There is a lot of information here, of very different kinds. On the top right, some spellings that attracted the authors’ attention; information on chronology (in orange), on the textual genres (the box in deep purple), on some syntactic constructions (the arrows in light blue), and, of course, notes referring to the *Belegstellen* (in red). All these information could be easily extracted from (or, for the last case, connected to) a modern database. The advantages would be considerable because

1) it would be quite easy to manage and easy to upgrade,

2) it would be systematic, exhaustive, which is obviously not the case with the old *Wb.* (suffice here to consider the variant spellings [only 3] that are given for this very common verb),

3) it could be expanded to other classes of annotations, like the verbal morphology for verbs, or the argument structure, and

4) it could give access to statistics, rough numbers of course, but also more refined statistics by combining several parameters (for instance, what is the chronological distribution of a particular spelling?).

On the left side, in green, is highlighted the basic semantic structure that has been adopted by the *Wb.* team. This of course cannot be done automatically. That constitutes the core business of any lexicographic study. Unfortunately, a dictionary entry cannot be reduced to a list of all possible meanings, a situation one quite surprisingly seems too often to be happy with in our field; it should rather offer a structure, organised on a principled set of rules. This means that human resources, I mean highly qualified scholars, are needed here.
4.1. Building bridges

The collective enterprise of a new Wb. cannot in my view be started immediately, but keeping this ultimate goal in mind, one is now in a situation to make significant steps. As was already stressed many times during this lecture, a new dictionary cannot be left without some kinds of links to a database of texts. One should thus keep implementing and developing existing databases with a stronger cooperative spirit, because we’ll now feel engaged in and committed to a larger project, the dictionary. In this respect (Fig. 18), I am very happy to announce here a joint project run by the TLA (Berlin-Leipzig) and the Ramses project in Liège. This collaborative five-year project (2015-2020), which is funded by the Anneliese-Maier Forschung award, under the auspices of the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung, has three main objectives:

- completely reviewing the system of metadata used by Ramses and the TLA, by producing common multilingual thesauri;
- delivering technical solutions for sharing and upgrading the thesauri;
- building a complete structured and referenced list of hieroglyphic signs, which remains a desideratum since the beginning of modern Egyptology. The list will be described functionally, and documented with references. As a result, those dealing with textual corpora in Ancient Egyptian will be able to choose a sign in accordance to its functional value rather than pick up a sign for its more or less accurate resemblance with the original spelling (or, which would be worse, with a published edition). In a remote future, such a list could be the starting point of a shared repertory of hieroglyphic signs, which is still lacking in Egyptology.

As is clear, this project aims at finding some technical solutions to specific problems that hamper a fruitful dialogue between databases.

4.2. Verbs of movement in Late Egyptian

Parallel to this, one can also envisage some large-scale experiments with the dictionary itself. The main question here is: where to begin with? Several strategies can be considered:

- one can first follow the alphabetical order, beginning thus with aleph and ending with d; this might seem the obvious solution, perhaps because it is the manner we are accustomed to when large, multi-volume dictionaries are published; but as regards the making of the dictionary itself, this is certainly not the most efficient way of working; this first strategy can of course take different, maybe more acceptable, forms:
  - first it can be applied at a smaller scale, by progressing by temporal divisions corresponding to the major phases of the evolution of Egyptian (Old and Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, Egyptien de tradition, Demotic and Coptic);
  - another variant could be a statistical approach, dealing first with the one or two thousands most frequent items, a method that would not be without some pedagogical value;
  - a third and last variant of this overall approach would be to deal right from the beginning with the whole corpus, but in a very simplified manner, more like a glossary than a dictionary, and then expanding the glosses by adding successive layers; this method has some advantages too: for instance, one could consider that the TLA already offers something very
much alike. The feeling that all that stands on the shopping card cannot be realised immediately deserves consideration. It is obvious that some information, like the root derivation to take an clear example, could not be properly added for the moment.

- The second strategy, which is the one I finally opted for, is to focus on a group of words closely related semantically. In my opinion, this has many decisive advantages I shall now briefly discuss:
  - First of all, I suppose I do not have to stress it, it is always more profitable to stay focussed on one problem, rather than continuously moving back and forth, and switching from one question to another as would be necessarily implied by dealing sequentially with unrelated words in alphabetical order.
  - From what precedes, it is now clear that I put much emphasis on the notion of semantic web; as already stated, a word’s meaning can hardly be properly defined if considered in isolation; for instance, mAA “see” means what it means, because it is part of a larger set of words that includes ptr, nw, dgi, and the like. This small semantic web did not remain for ever stable, but changed over time, as shown by the disappearance of mAA in Late Egyptian, and by the gradual substitution of ptr by nw in Demotic.
  - Synonyms and antonyms will of course be easier to identify by restricting the scope of the study to a coherent semantic class.
  - There will also be considerable advantages to proceed as proposed here for the systematic study of the recorded spellings, especially as regards the system of classifiers.
  - Finally, the specialised bibliography will be easier to handle.

In this respect, I am quite happy to make a second announcement (Fig. 19). In October, a new four-year project supported by the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS) will start at the University of Liège (2015-2019). Entitled “A dictionary of the verbs of movement in Late Egyptian”, it presents itself as a pilot project, or a test study if one prefers, that will enable us to validate a methodology and to address some critical issues as regards the semantic study and the software still to be developed. It is of course a derivative of the larger Ramses project.

It is admittedly a small-scale project, as it considers a limited part of the lexicon (the verbs of movement) during a small period of time (Late Egyptian). But it is not ridiculously small either. Verbs of movement form a complex network of more than 250 items (in Late Egyptian alone), with a bit more than 10,000 tokens. As one might expect, the interactions with grammar (morphology and argument structure) are notoriously complex.

The definition of what is a verb of movement is not without problem of its own. This is especially interesting, because we won’t deal with a homogeneous category, close on itself, but rather with a semantic class that has obvious connections with other classes as will be clear in a moment.

As expected, trained lexicographers are used to analyse and classify words according to a reliable methodology, whatever the language under study. Parallel to this, there is a growing concern in the field to take into account the feeling of the community of speakers, what is called the emic representation of language. As is the case with most aspect of their
civilisation, ancient Egyptians did not feel the need to write about their language sensu lato, or about their lexicon. Of course, some onomastica have come down to us. They are useful as they precisely allow us a rare glimpse into the internal organisation of the vocabulary, but what has survived is unfortunately limited, and the number of words that are dealt with is quite restricted. But ancient Egypt has much more to offer in this respect. Its extraordinary writing system(s) open(s) a unique window into the organisation and structure of the language. I have here in mind more precisely logograms and classifiers. Of course, this should be taken with care: for instance, \(\text{wxA}\) “to seek” is written with the walking legs classifier, because it was originally a verb of motion (“to go here and there looking for something”). It retains this classifier in Late Egyptian, at a time where it had evolved into a cognitive verb. And it would be very difficult indeed to connect Coptic \(\text{oy\epsilon\nu}\) “desire” with some kind of movement if we did not know the whole story.

Both approaches, the scientific one, followed by lexicographers, and the internal-Egyptian one, are of course complementary. Verbs of movement usually take the walking legs classifier (or the leg combined with the walking legs, \(\text{\textit{\_/\_\_\_}}\)). On Fig. 20, verbs have been grouped according to some semantic relations; the size of the font suggests the frequency of each item.

Three important remarks need to be made:

- some verbs of movement have another type of classifier, like the boat classifier, with variants (Fig. 21);
- some verbs can take more than one classifier, even if there is a preferred one (Fig. 22);
- some verbs written with the walking-legs classifier do not belong to the class of the verbs of motion; this is the case for some well-known transitive verbs, like \(\text{h}\beta\beta\) “send” (Fig. 23); one immediately feels that such verbs are in some way connected with movement, hence the choice of this specific classifier by the Egyptians, but the modern linguist and lexicographer would undoubtedly put them in another semantic class.3

This nicely reveals how a seemingly very basic issue – the verbs of movement – opens up interesting questions that reveal the complexity of semantic networks. Fig. 24 shows that if the bulk of the verbs having the walking-legs classifier belong to a big class, that of the verbs of movement, other share properties with verbs that have a different system of classifier. On Fig. 25, I arranged classes of verbs along two axes: objecthood and telicity. The details do not of course really matter here; the point is that a figure like this one strongly suggests that classes or categories of words can also have fuzzy boundaries, like individual words. They are parts of the larger tapestry that defines the lexicon of any natural language. How the tapestry is interwoven is what makes all languages different and unique, and, of course, terribly exciting.

5. A word of conclusion

The next dictionary will of course be an online product. I do not know if we should consider a printed version (maybe a reduced version), but if so, it will be a poorly limited one.

3 In some quarters of lexical semantics, verbs like “give” or “bring” are treated like verbs of movement.
A modern dictionary should have a multiple-entry system, and allows the users to move horizontally, proceeding by association of different kinds, and vertically, that is by choosing the scale from which (s)he wants to consider the lexicon. And one should also be able to consider the whole vocabulary or parts of it, according to the some criteria one feels relevant for a specific research: limitation on date, geography, textual genres, types of writing, and so on, but also by focussing on morphology or syntactical features.

Fig. 26 tries to capture the kind of flexibility I have in mind. The lemma, in this case n*j “travel by boat”, is an obvious point of access to the dictionary, but one should also be free to take another perspective, by selecting a class or a group of elements, like a class of classifiers, a class of nouns or a semantic class. Once inside the dictionary, it is only a question of granularity. If one chooses to enter by selecting a specific word, like n*j, it will always be possible to take the helicopter point of view, or to change the perspective. In my example, I also took into account the possibility to narrow a request by using filters, like the ones that are displayed in the upper left corner (date, genre, provenance, language, type of writing). Also on the left, at mid-screen, I suggested other types of filters, selecting a syntactic configuration or a semantic class. This is of course an illustration among many other possible ones (Fig. 27 and 28).

I now come to a few words of conclusion. My hope here with this lecture is to create an impetus for a new dictionary. During the last decades, we have already gathered an impressive amount of data, with a lot of annotations. We also have the technical means to produce a dictionary that will be up to our expectations. We also have talented scholars, young students and more experienced people who are willing to move forward.

I understand that the old Wb., this monumentum aere perrenius, looks impressive, and is perhaps a bit discouraging, for it placed a really very high standard, hard to surpass or even to meet. The new dictionary will not be a copy, or a mere improved version of the old one. It will be different, not only because the technology is different, but because we have now got a different idea of what a dictionary must look like.

I hope that this long-term project will have the support of our Association. Like the Egyptological Bibliography, it will be done by a few of us for the benefit of all.