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in der Ägyptologie

Herausforderungen eines
kulturwissenschaftlichen Paradigmenwechsels
in den Altertumswissenschaften

Wilhelm Fink

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Teaching Ancient Egyptian

Between Linguistics and Philology

Jean Winand (Liège)

Abstract

Teaching Egyptian in the beginning of the 21st century can seem a real challenge. The very first question is perhaps not how one can do it, but *why* one should do it. In this respect, a comparison between the teaching of the classical languages (Latin and Greek) and that of ancient Egyptian is not without interest. The fact that Egyptology is a relative newcomer when compared to Classical Studies has often be seen as a disadvantage, but it also means more freedom, and less stress. For instance, Egyptology does not have a problem of legitimacy in the *cursus studiorum* as faced nowadays by Classical Studies. As regards the (basic) teaching of Egyptian, the main issue faced by Egyptologists is probably the lack of a consensus on the mechanisms underlying the grammar of Egyptian, a problem that seems inextricable so far for Classical Egyptian. Whatever the grammatical school one belongs to, one cannot overemphasize the needs of building bridges with what is happening in general linguistics, and of keeping the grammatical terminology under control.

When faced with the question proposed by the organizers – how do we teach Egyptian? –, I must confess I was at first rather puzzled. Teaching Egyptian is something I have been doing for some years, but hardly something I have put into question. As one says in French, I suppose I apply some kind of pedagogical approach, but as Mr Jourdain did with prose, without knowing it.[1] So I would firstly like to thank the organizers who prompted this reflexive attitude on employed approaches and on the reasons and methods behind them what we do, but also on the whys and the hows of it.

As it happens, I was, five years ago, part of a small team dedicated to finding out strong arguments that could be proposed for the defence of Latin in school.[2] This was a rare opportunity for me to review some basic arguments usually presented both in favour of and also against the teaching of Latin in the humanities.

It quickly appeared to me that Latin was sufficiently close to Egyptian, but also dissimilar enough to try a comparative approach.[3]

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[1] « Par ma foi, il y a plus de quarante ans que je dis de la prose sans que j'en susse rien, et je vous suis le plus obligé du monde de m'avoir appris cela » (MOLIÈRE, *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, VI, 2).

[2] See HASQUIN, H. (ed.), *Les enjeux de la querelle du latin* (2006).

[3] There is an extremely rich bibliography on the place of Latin in European education, be it from a strategical point of view, or from a more technically oriented point of view (see *e. g.* CARAVOLAS, J., *Histoire de la didactique des langues au siècles des Lumières* [2001]).

1 Teaching Latin today

1.1 Why?

Teaching Latin in school is no longer self-evident today. Latin does not enjoy any kind of supernatural legitimacy anymore. So the first question one has to answer is about the very reasons we have for maintaining Latin at school. Nowadays, advocates of Latin must persuade not only the parents of the advantages of Latin but also, which is probably more important, the political forces (in a very broad sense).

In response to the question why Latin should continue to be part of the school curriculum, two answers are usually given:

A traditional one that could be called the "cultural answer". Given the fact that Antiquity is so important for understanding our own culture, Latin has been deemed useful to give direct access to ancient written sources. Advocates of Latin are adamant in their denial of learning the values of Antiquity through translations only. This kind of response was typical of times when ancient authors were considered to be a constant source of inspiration, be it in philosophy, history or literature. This kind of unbroken continuity from Antiquity down to the modern era, which was evident for so many intellectuals of the Renaissance and the Classic and Baroque periods, and even for people of the beginning of the 20th century, is now a memory at the dawn of the third millenium. It is not the kind of argument one can press too hard.

There is also a modern answer: using Latin as a tool to have a better command of one's own language. This comes down to instrumentalizing Latin. This argument is not new in itself, but its articulation has changed in many respects. In a highly seminal text, Pierre Judet de la Combe and Heinz Wismann showed that people should master three types of languages: a logical language, a language or languages of communication, and a language or languages of culture.[4] They convincingly suggest that Latin, as a dead language, a fact they see as a formidable advantage, offers a unique opportunity to adopt a reflexive attitude towards one's own language. Studying Latin in depth is probably one of the best ways to master modern languages as languages of culture. The problem with modern day schools is that modern languages are not taught as languages of culture but as technical languages or as mere vehicles of basic communication skills. In order to fully appropriate one's own language, every student has to undergo a process of alienation from his/her own language. Centuries of teaching Latin have proved the subject's suitability for this.[5]

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[4] JUDET DE LA COMBE, P./WISMANN, H., *L'avenir des langues* (2004); for a different viewpoint, see WAQUET, F., *Le latin ou l'empire d'un signe : XVIᵉ-XXᵉ siècle* (1998).

[5] Cf. Alain's statement in his famous *Propos sur l'éducation* (1932), LXXI:
"Je sais assez de latin pour respecter un bon latiniste, et même pour le définir. C'est un homme qui n'use point de son intelligence autant qu'on pourrait le croire, ou tout au moins qui n'en use point prématurément ; et j'admire comme il va au sens d'après les règles de la grammaire et la

1.2 Problems faced by the teaching of Latin today

The teaching of Latin has experienced different scenarios in Europe, having its ups and downs as time goes on. As our culture has changed, as our views on education have changed, Latin has been challenged on many fronts. Among the many problems Latin has to face, one can pinpoint some more or less *bona fide* arguments:

- Latin is the language of the Catholic Apostolic and Roman church: this fact is of course not a problem in itself, but in some countries it is, by nature, suspect to many people;
- Latin is elitist, that is politically incorrect;
- Latin is needlessly difficult (in sharp contrast to maths that is usefully difficult).

The battles Latin has been fighting for such a long time are of course completely alien to Egyptian. This can of course be easily explained by the privileged status that Latin enjoyed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As a newcomer, and a very special one, Egyptian has never competed for a similar cultural or educational niche.

2 Egyptian is not Latin

The benefit of studying Egyptian will never be the same as is the case for Latin. One cannot advocate a utilitarian approach of Egyptian as we can with Latin. Both corpuses can be used (and are actually used) from a historical and a literary viewpoint. But as suggested above, one can also take a deep interest in Latin texts in connection with our own European history. Latin texts can be questioned in direct relation with the modern world in a way that Egyptian texts cannot. In other words, in Europe, there is a more immediate relevance in studying Latin (and Greek) literature(s). Even if the trends are changing, the Egyptian language and Egyptian civilization remain exotic when compared to classical cultures. This is especially true of the Egyptian language, which, for a European, has a status not very different from that of the Chinese or Mayan language. This is, of course, primarily due to the writing systems of Egyptian, which differ greatly from European systems.

   Considerable differences can also be pointed out as regards the status of both languages and their respective history in European culture:

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propre signification des mots. C'est une rude leçon lorsque l'intelligence, ingénieuse et ambitieuse toujours assez, est rabattue sur quelque noeud de syntaxe ; ainsi nous sommes rappelés au devoir de penser humainement, j'entends sur les signes humains et consacrés, et non point selon notre fantaisie."

- Latin is an Indo-European language. The continuum from Latin to the Romance languages is self-evident. Egyptian belongs to another family of language and has no living offsprings today.
- Knowledge of Latin has never been lost; Egyptian had to be rediscovered.
- The basic corpus of Latin texts is made up of some of the greatest literary achievements. This corpus is the result of a conscious process of selection made by the Alexandrians and the Byzantines, and later sanctified by a long academic tradition. The corpus of Egyptian is more diverse. In Late Egyptian and Demotic, for instance, the documentary texts are very important. This has an immediate impact on how we view the linguistic structure of these languages. It is doubtable that ancient Greek would still be held in such high esteem if the corpus had purely consisted of the documentary papyri from Egypt!

3 Teaching Egyptian

3.1 Teaching Egyptian is not the same as teaching Latin

The respective statuses of Latin and Egyptian largely explain why their teaching has been approached from different angles.

Latin is taught with manuals and dictionaries that benefit from a large consensus. By and large, one can say that academic grammars written one century ago are still in use today. The same can be said of the dictionaries. The best of them were conceived at the very beginning of the 20th century. Far from passing as old-fashioned, they are still considered as reference tools in the field.

Egyptian is more experimental. There is no universally accepted grammatical theory for the earlier stages of the language. Discussions like the ones surrounding the Polotskyan theory in the 80's are unthinkable in Classics. The very concept of a standard theory for Middle Egyptian has proved to be an illusion.[6] There is a much broader consensus on how the Late Egyptian language works, but a linguistic, up-to-date description of Demotic is still lacking.[7]

Of course, one cannot deny that there is room for further linguistic research in the classical languages, but I am not sure whether this would have a significant impact on academic teaching as the general agreement on basic issues is very strong.

The nature of both languages vis-à-vis general linguistics is different too: the Egyptian language (or rather languages) cannot be easily related typologically to what students are accustomed to in Indo-European studies. A positive effect of

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[6] See COLLIER, M., Grounding, Cognition and Metaphor in the Grammar of Middle Egyptian, in: *Lingua Aegyptia* 4, 1994, 57-87.

[7] This of course can be linked with the primary interest of Demoticists in editing new texts – undoubtedly an absolute priority in this subfield of Egyptology. Larger syntheses on Demotic in a more linguistically oriented perspective will surely be available at some point in the future.

our (relatively poorer) state of knowledge of Egyptian is that it prompted us to investigate language in some innovative ways. And so it turns out that Egyptian linguistics is now more closely connected with what is happening in general linguistics.

In Classics, philology and linguistics are most often kept apart. In Egyptology, philology really matters to those who study the language. And this is so for many obvious reasons:

- The corpuses of modern languages (at least the major ones) are computerized and easy to handle.
- In Latin, this is more or less the case; linguists are at least not hindered at every corner because of philological intricacies.[8]
- In Egyptian, there are no ready-to-use electronic corpuses so far, so there can be no linguistic study without gathering the data with a philological approach beforehand?[9] As everybody knows, linguistics without philology is doomed from the beginning. The difficulty of the texts, their state of preservation – too often a poor one with lacunae and scribal errors – and the difficulties in reconstructing the Egyptian encyclopaedia are among the well-known obstacles linguists face *nolens volens*.

3.2 A great variety

As for every language, those who teach Egyptian have to resolve the delicate problem of choosing a model, a theoretical frame they can be at ease with. Since its beginning, Egyptology has experienced a vast array of experiences.

The pioneers were first trained as Classicists, which is hardly surprising for the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. So they were tempted to take over the terminology used in the grammatical tradition of Latin and Greek. We still retain a lot of terminological names that go back to this epoch. As we know, names are never neutral, especially in linguistics. With them comes a halo of meanings, of implications that can reveal themselves as terribly misleading. The

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[8] Computerized corpuses of Latin texts are available *e. g.* the PHI Workplace, or the BTL (*Bibliotheca Teubneriana Latina*), which unfortunately has very limited search possibilities as words have not been lemmatized. Databases with a complete morphological analysis do exist however (see for instance what is being done by the *Laboratoire d'Analyse Statistique des Langues Anciennes*: http://www.cipl.ulg.ac.be/lsl.htm [31.3.2010]), but the number of texts encoded is still a small fraction of what exists.

[9] The only tool available so far is the *TLA* (*Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*) created under the auspices of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften (http://aaew.bbaw.de/tla/ [31.3.2010]). Its ambition is rather limited as there is neither a morphological nor a syntactic analysis, and variant spellings are not recorded. A project for encoding all the Late Egyptian material is now under way in Liège (see WINAND, J./POLIS, ST./ROSMORDUC, S., *Ramses*, in: P. Kousoulis (ed.), *Proceedings of the Xth IAE Congress* (forthcoming).

terms related to casus are a case in point. We still use terms like accusative, dative (*n* + SN), genitive, be it direct or indirect although there is no case system in historical Egyptian. In the seventies and the eighties, an appellation like "aorist" for one of the numerous (or maybe not so numerous) *sḏm.f* forms was used on a regular basis. In this particular case, the choice of aorist was dictated by a very partial analogy with the Greek aorist. Early scholars were impressed by the ability of this Egyptian form to enter patterns expressing general proverbial statements.[10] This characteristic trait of course reminded them of the Greek aorist. However, the choice of this particular label was especially unfortunate, as the Greek aorist and the Egyptian aorist belong to the opposite ends of the aspectual axis: the former is an "accompli momentané" (that is a marked pattern belonging to the realm of the perfective), the latter an "inaccompli général" (that is a pattern belonging to the imperfective).[11]

Another well-known starting point for describing earlier phases of Egyptian was Coptic. This was particularly the case for the stages of Egyptian that belong to the same subcategory as Coptic, i. e. Late Egyptian and Demotic. As a result, the terminology in Late Egyptian has become confused:

- there is a Future III, but no Future I or II (with one or two exceptions coming from the TIP),
- there is a Praesens I, but no Praesens II. In Adolf Erman's *Neuägyptische Grammatik*, there was a place for a Praesens II, although Erman immediately wrote that in some cases, the Late Egyptian Praesens II had most probably nothing to do with the Coptic Praesens II (*NÄG*, § 486), which turned out to be correct. Things became a bit more confused when Mikhail Korostovtzev suggested splitting the Praesens II into a Praesens IIa and IIb, restricting the latter label to the old perfective. In this he was consistent with how he had previously treated the Praesens I, also split into two classes according to the same criteria.[12]

More devastating was the use of the label "Second Tenses", also borrowed from Coptic, for describing earlier phases of Egyptian. This was especially true for

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[10] Cf. LOPRIENO, A., *Ancient Egyptian* (1995), 79. The term has also been used in Late Egyptian (*e. g.* FRANDSEN, P. J., *An Outline of the Late Egyptian Verbal System* [1974], § 21), in Demotic (JOHNSON, J., *The Demotic Verbal System* [1976], 132-145), and of course in Coptic (*e. g.* POLOTSKY, H. J., *Grundlagen des koptischen Satzbaus* II [1990], 175). The term seems to have less success in recent publications: for instance, it is not present in ALLEN, J. P., *Middle Egyptian* (2000). See also WINAND, J., *Temps et aspect en ancien égyptien* (2006), 177. The ambiguity of the term in Coptic grammar has been pointed out by LAYTON, B., *A Coptic Grammar* (2000), § 337.

[11] For a recent overview of the Egyptian aspectual system, see WINAND, J., *Temps et aspect en ancien égyptien*.

[12] KOROSTOVTZEV, M. A., *Grammaire du néo-égyptien* (1973).

Middle Egyptian, where an excessive and uncontrolled use of analogy had far-reaching and lasting consequences on how the grammar was to be reconstructed.[13]

Less frequently, Arabic has been a source of inspiration. As was to be expected, this has been especially the case with our Egyptian colleagues. In Late Egyptian, for instance, the best example remains Abd el-Mohsen Bakir's *Notes in Late Egyptian Grammar*, which comes with the subtitle "*A Semitic approach*". In his preface (p. ix–x), Bakir notes:

> In writing out this second part of a 'Semitic Approach' to the Egyptian language, I have become more convinced that Arabic, especially colloquial, could to a great extent serve to elucidate the grammatical patterns of this period. (…) Following the Semitic arrangement of Arabic grammar, the material falls into two main parts; Part One, the Word, and Part Two, Sentences and Clauses.

Today Egyptian linguistics is more in tune with the major trends in general linguistics: the turning point was most certainly the first Crossroad meeting, which was held in Copenhagen in 1986.[14] It had an immediate and lasting impact on the terminology used in our linguistic descriptions. New terms were directly borrowed from general linguistics (for instance, terms belonging to the realm of pragmatics, a very new field of interest for Egyptologists in the eighties), others were redefined (aspect, Aktionsart).

To sum up this section, it might be appropriate to say a few words on the problems related to terminology. It is impossible to work without having a terminology, obviously enough. But terminology is not only a question of terms, labels, and tags. With the terms come the concepts. The grammatical tradition in Egyptology is diverse. It also has a very long story. There is, so to say, a stratification of concepts that do not always combine very harmoniously. As our views of how Egyptian works changed, so did our terminology. In this respect, the Old Perfective is a good example. Several forms are still (or have been) in use: Old Perfective, Pseudo-participle, Stative, Qualitative, Permansive, Perfect. These appellations were either morpho-syntactically (Pseudo-participle) or semantically (Stative, Old Perfective) motivated, they could also be inherited from another stage of Egyptian (Qualitative < Coptic), or from the Semitic comparison (Permansive < Accadian, Perfect < West Semitic).[15] The choice for one particular label can be puzzling, at least to me. In his *Grammaire du néo-égyptien* Korostovtzev states (p. 305):

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[13] VERNUS, P., *Les parties du discours en Moyen Égyptien* (1997); WINAND, J., Les formes nominalisées en égyptien ancien, in: *Faits de langues* 30, 2007, 69-82.

[14] FRANDSEN, P. J./ENGLUND, G. (eds), *Crossroad. Chaos and the Beginning of a New Paradigm* (1986). This first conference was itself a follow up of the linguistic session held during the IVth International Congress of Egyptologists in Munich in 1985.

[15] Cf. SCHENKEL, W., *Tübinger Einführung in die klassisch-ägyptische Sprache und Schrift* (2005) 224, who opted for "Pseudo-participle" for the very reason it does not mean anything anymore.

> "Le qualitatif n.-é. est le prolongement et le descendant direct du pseudo-participe m.-é. Pour cette forme grammaticale du n.-é., le terme « qualitatif » semble convenir davantage, car du point de vue morphologique le qualitatif n.-é. serait plus proche du qualitatif copte que du pseudoparticipe m.-é."

The shift from "pseudo-participe" to "qualitatif" is thus motivated, in Korostovtzev's eyes, by morphological reasons and not semantic ones.

The theoretical models that underlie a linguistic description can also be diverse, making it difficult for the non-specialists to make certain connections. In Late Egyptian, for instance, the theoretical frames proposed by Černý/Groll, Junge or Neveu, although quite similar in some respect by emphasizing a syntactic approach, diverge more or less deeply on the number of syntactic groupings and their labelling.[16] And those who would like to compare those three studies with the more linguistically oriented description of Ancient Egyptian made by Loprieno, will be presented with another slightly different picture.[17]

3.3 (At least) two handicaps

Teaching Egyptian in some depth often means overcoming at least two obstacles or, in other words, it means trying to gain acceptance from two kinds of public: students and scholars.

Among the students, especially the beginners, a poor, if not a total ignorance, of the Classical languages and philology is obviously not an advantage. This often means lesser skills in philology for lack of appropriate training. Unfortunately, this is generally not compensated for by a deeper understanding of what is going on in general linguistics. Also it clearly does not help either to maintain a confused terminology. What does it mean to retain terms like genitive or dative when one has to explain at the same time that there is no case system in historical Egyptian? It would certainly be better to introduce our students to a system of functional cases (semantic roles). Teachers should also adopt a strategy to elegantly handle the phenomenon of different schools in Egyptian linguistics. Even if, or rather especially if, one does not share the opinions of colleagues on the general structure of Egyptian, one should at least prepare the ground for a mutual understanding in our teaching. I was horrified at the last IAE Congress in Rhodos when I realized that some young scholars were still busy writing a thesis on language in total ignorance of what was not their teachers' school of thinking.

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[16] ČERNÝ, J./GROLL, S., *A Late Egyptian Grammar* (³1984); JUNGE, F., *Einführung in die Grammatik des Neuägyptischen* (1996); NEVEU, F., *La langue des Ramsès* (1996).
[17] LOPRIENO, A., *Ancient Egyptian*.

For many colleagues, the Egyptian language is not a field of research: it is at best a tool for making something else (literature, history, etc.).[18] As a consequence, their interest in theoretical studies is rather limited. Their primary interest, which of course is a very legitimate one, is to know if what the linguists do has an impact on the manner texts can be translated. It is up to those who are more theoretically oriented to build the bridges in an attempt to reach the non-specialists. It would be a shame to see our small community divided into those who are primarily interested in how to understand texts, and those who want to understand how Egyptian works. Especially when it comes to understanding and translating texts, it is a pity to see scholars completely ignoring some very common and widely accepted rules of Egyptian grammar.

3.4 Building bridges

Specialists in the field should explain what they do. In the eyes of other researchers, what we do is more or less subtle vagaries. I see two reasons for this:

- as a result of the absence of a unified theory, the grammatical landscape is hard to decipher. There seem to be as many theories as there are linguists. In Classics, there is at least a consensus on what an optative or an aorist is;
- colleagues fail to see the concrete impact of theoretically oriented studies. It is too often limited to how one can better translate.

Building bridges with colleagues in Egyptology who happen not to be linguists (there are quite a few) is important. This is even more so the case with linguists who are not Egyptologists (who are even more numerous). With the former group, our job is also to make it clear what they can gain by investing some time in what we do. As regards the latter, the benefit is also largely reciprocal. Egyptologists have everything to gain by bringing Egyptian into the mainstream of general linguistics. By giving access to the longest recorded language on earth, we contribute to the advance of typologically oriented studies. By taking typology into account in our research, we firmly put Egyptian on safer ground. Of course, this comes with a price: a minimal conceptual and terminological base. In this matter, I do see some hope. The last years have made it impossible to discuss in our own idiosyncratic ways topics such as negation, time, aspect, modality or pragmatics, to mention some well-known examples. The conference on Egyptian language and linguistic typology organized in Leipzig in October 2008 by our colleagues of the Egyptian department and the Max Planck Institute should undoubtedly give new impetus.

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[18] See Loprieno's remark (Egyptian grammar and textual features, in: P. J. Frandsen/G. Englund [eds], *Crossroad*, 257) *à propos* a potentially prescriptive tendancy coming from the linguist's corner.

Of course, things in general linguistics are not always as clear as what we hope for, and the terminology is sometimes conflicting. So we must maintain a delicate balance between a general accepted vocabulary and the necessity of creating our own terminology to serve our particular needs. In this, it is important to be very cautious, for, as shown by typological studies, one hardly needs to create new terms, at least it is much less common than was generally thought necessary some time ago.

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