Syllabic Consonants in Sahidic Coptic.

By W. H. Worrell.

Consonants frequently function as sonants, even in the more familiar languages. Jespersen says: "Wir haben daher zunächst Silben ohne Vokal; hier ist also ein Konsonant der Silbengipfel, und es versteht sich von selbst, daß als solcher häufiger einer aus den Klassen 4 und 5 (Nasale, l, r) als aus den anderen Klassen auftritt, die sich weniger leicht von ihrer Umgebung genügend abheben, um in Verhältnis zu ihnen als Sonoritätsgipfel gelten zu können." He cites as examples: hatten, binden, Handel, haben, sieben, denken, cotton, cottage, noble, rhythm, chasm, bottom, bacon, (Croatian) smrt, prst, srna, brk, krdò. Of course, consonants other than nasals, / and r may function as sonants: grabs, holds, logs, stops, trots, rocks. And not merely continuants, but even stop-consonants, may function as sonants: grabbed, logged, stopped, rocked. And these may so function even at the beginning of a word: (dialectic) geschwind, gesehen. In Maghribi Arabic there is great variety of double consonantism at the beginning of words: ibíst, mhlíst, mntíst, mnmdíst, ḫdar, ḫtar, ḫthíl, ḫfíst, ḫfríst, ḫšún, ḫkal, ḫdal, ḫbír, ḫbel, ḫdá, ḫdímt, kthíst, ktcíst, kfríst, ḫtaíst, ḫdá, ḫdíst, ḫgíddíst, ḫtíl. Such things then are humanly possible, even though not always individually so. Some of these combinations are similar or identical with Sahidic Coptic combinations, assuming that Sahidic was pronounced exactly as spelled, and that the supralinear stroke is only a syllable-accent:

\[
\begin{array}{llllllllll}
\text{q} \text{q} \text{s} \text{t} \text{ā} & \text{f} \text{s} \text{ə} & \text{r} & & & & & & & \\
\text{k} \text{n} \text{ō} \text{t} & \text{k} \text{b} \text{ū} \text{r} & & & & & & & & \\
& \text{q} \text{b} \text{ē} & & & & & & & & \\
& & & & & & & & &
\end{array}
\]

Unfortunately Coptic-Arabic equations can furnish little information, about Sahidic phonology, because Bohairic and Arabic phonology influenced Sahidic after about the tenth century; and Arabic loan-words in Sahidic, in so far as they remain truly Arabic, can have syllabic consonants at the end of a word only. The alchemistic text of Chassinat dates from the ninth or tenth century, and contains a considerable number of technical Arabic words, pronounced for the most part according to Egyptian vernacular. Among them are examples of syllabic consonants at the end of a word:

\[
\begin{array}{llllllllll}
\text{h} \text{v} \text{t} \text{ā} & \text{q} \text{s} \text{t} & & & & & & & & \\
\text{m} \text{i} \text{c} \text{k} & \text{m} \text{i} \text{s} \text{k} & & & & & & & & \\
& & & & & & & & &
\end{array}
\]

Since neither Classical Arabic nor Egyptian nor Egyptian vernacular Arabic introduces any helping vowel between the last two consonants of such words, it is plain that the

supralinear stroke in these words indicates not a vowel of any sort but rather the lack of one. It is hard to see any difference between ṇωτη and ܣܘܡܝ, ܓܠܐܐ and ܘܠܥܘܝ, ܡܢܦܐ and ܡܠܦܐ. All must have been pronounced with a double consonance at the end; and the supralinear stroke is the sign of the vowelless ܣܠܒܢܓܝܦܐ.

In the same text ܟܲܠܝܦ  and ܟܲܠܝܡ  occur, but they are not variant spellings of the same pronunciation. ܟܠܝܦ  is the vernacular Arabic form ܫܒܪܐ, while ܟܠܝܡ  is the Classical Arabic ܫܒܪ. On the same principle ܢܘܓܝܬܦ  would be a vernacular form ܢܘܓ݁ܕܪ, corresponding to the classical ܢܘܓ݁ܕܪ. ܟܠܝܨ  for ܟܠܫ  represents, it is true, the opposite process, the vowel being due perhaps to the slow scribal pronunciation of an unusually difficult combination.

The fact that ܟ sometimes appears instead of the supralinear stroke does not prove them to be identical. The two spellings may represent two different pronunciations. Words are not always pronounced the same. They vary under changing conditions of speed and stress. In the word ܒܠܬܕ, e. g., there is ordinarily no vowel between the ܠ and the ܬ; but, when slowly and solemnly spoken, a vowel appears there. It is very unlikely that any considerable vowel-sound would have remained unindicated in Coptic. When ܟ, or ܫ or ܐ (as in ܠܒܡܝܕܙ̣̌ s unpublished “Old-Fayyumic” texts) appears in place of the supralinear stroke, it is probably only an attempt to represent an obscure vowel which in that particular case has crept in.

Some consonantal combinations in Sahidic do indeed seem to be unpronounceable. ܟܟܘܬܟ  and ܫܛܝܐ  (for ܛܝܐ) involve only continuants in unaccented syllables, and can be pronounced with one long ܐ or ܒ; the separate identity of the first syllable thereby disappearing, to be sure, but not without audible effect in compensatory lengthening. With ܫܢܘܢܐܒܠ 2 however (supposing the stroke to be nothing but the sign of a ܣܠܒܢܓܝܦܐ), the first syllable, ܢ, must be sensibly separated from the second syllable by some change in stress or pitch, for otherwise the word would be indistinguishable from ܫܢܘܢܐܒ. The second syllable must be pronounced as a long ܢ to prevent the further confusion of ܫܢܘܢܐܒ with ܫܢܘܢܐܒ. Nevertheless, both these devices are perfectly possible.

ܫܠܐ  and ܒܠ  cannot be satisfactorily examined without their phonetic context. They appear to be shorter than the normal forms, ܫܠܐܠ and ܘܠ. But (supposing the stroke to be nothing but the syllable-sign) it is plain that ܠ and the bilabial fricative ܒ, have become syllabic, in place of ܝ. Both these consonants may easily become syllabic, especially in Coptic.

Most difficult of all are combinations such as ܫܫܘ, ܫܫܘ, ܛܘ. When preceded in phonetic context by some more sonorous sound, they can be pronounced by lengthening the period of occlusion of the initial stop-consonant. At the absolute beginning of an utterance, however, the lengthening of the occlusion would not be heard. It could only be felt by the speaker.

1) ܣܦܪܐ, ܒܠܝܫܢܦܐ  (1895), p. 332, col. 2, line 6 a. i. — 2) ܠܒܡܝܕܙ̣̌. — 3) ܒ is not ܒ, but something very much like ܕ or ܘܩ, for it is confused with these in the manuscripts.