

Were There Egyptian Koines?

Ferguson in a now classic article (1959a), noting many common features of most forms of contemporary Arabic which cannot be derived historically from Classical Arabic, posited as the source of these characteristics a koine. This koine, it was hypothesized, arose as the result of contact among speakers of different Arabic dialects, both those of the original seventh and eighth century invaders of the Near East and North Africa and those of subsequent migrants.

In choosing the term koine Ferguson doubtless had in mind the situation with regard to Greek in the Hellenistic period which followed the conquests of Alexander the Great. Koine is itself a Greek word meaning 'common', and its use in reference to language is an abbreviation of the phrase *koinè diálektos* 'common dialect'. Parallel to the case of Arabic we had a widespread supradialectal form of spoken Greek which contrasted with a standard classical norm.

In another major contribution (Ferguson 1959b), on the concept of diglossia, the widespread occurrence of such contrasts between L and H (i.e. 'low' and 'high') forms of the same language was discussed and analyzed. In the broader context of diglossia, the L form need not arise as a koine; it might, for example, be a Creolized form of H (e.g. Haitian) or an artificial H variety based on an earlier written standard as with the modern Greek *katharevusa* 'purified' whose contrast with *dhemotike* 'popular' is the source of the term 'diglossia', itself once more a Greek word.

A further consideration of the Hellenistic koine reveals other important points of comparison with the Arabic situation but also suggests additional factors. One obvious resemblance is that the Greek koine, like the Arabic, was used as a second language by native speakers of other languages and soon became the essential vehicle of interlinguistic communication over a large

area. The members of many of these communities eventually became first language speakers of Greek.

Unlike the Arabic koine, however, Hellenistic Greek itself became a literary language. To take one instance, the Jews of Alexandria who no longer spoke Hebrew or Aramaic translated the Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint). The Arabic koine on the contrary never became a literary language.

The relation of the Greek koine to contemporaneous and earlier Greek raises additional important questions. In the Pre-Hellenistic period Greek was spoken in the form of local dialects whose differences were in some instances considerable. The Athenian form of Attic, no doubt because of Athenian cultural preeminence as well as the importance of Athens as a military power before the Macedonian conquest, had a special position that made it the basis of the koine.

The koine was described in Moulton (1966: 34) as including important contributions from various dialects, but with Attic as the basis, although the exclusive peculiarities of Attic make but a small show in it.

This writer also notes (*ibid.*: 31) in talking of Alexander's army that in this process naturally those features which were peculiar to a particular dialect would have the smallest chance of surviving and those which most successfully combined the characteristics would be surest of a place in the resulting koine.

In the case of Greek the non-Attic dialects survived for several centuries though under strong koine influence. Indeed one of them, the Tsakonian of Sparta, is generally considered to have survived until the present day. In regard to Arabic, we know too little about the linguistic situation in the Pre-Islamic period to identify the dialectal basis of the koine. Concerning the survival of non-koine dialects, Ferguson is appropriately cautious but, as he hints, there is much to suggest that some present day varieties of peninsular Arabic, or even of Bedouin dialects outside of Arabia itself may continue many features of earlier dialects contemporary with the koine.

In the light of these considerations, we can see that in some instances the koine participates in two types of contrasts. On the one hand it is the general spoken form as opposed to a literary language of greater prestige and on the other hand it contrasts with still surviving earlier dialects. It is interesting to note that in later Greek the term *koiné* was used in these two senses. It might mean the general language as opposed to the local dialects, or it designated colloquial 'vulgar' Greek as against the literary standard.¹ Our own word 'common' also has these two meanings, 'general' as against 'particular' and 'vulgar' as distinct from 'cultivated'.

¹The Greek grammarians also use the word *koiné* in these two senses. For references see Liddell and Scott 1925-46, s.v. *koinós*.

Viewed dynamically what we have in a community which retains its linguistic identity over an extended period is the following typical course of events. An original basically unified language develops regional dialects which if unimpeded will diverge in the course of time into mutually unintelligible languages. However because of social and political factors one of the dialects, in modified form, becomes the basis of a new common language, a koine which tends to supersede the original dialects. In a community with writing the common language acquires the additional prestige which accrues to literary use. In the course of time the spoken koine will of course change while the literary form remains relatively stable. In addition the spoken koine develops local dialects so that ultimately, if linguistic unity is to be preserved, a new common language must develop on the basis of a dominant dialect of the old koine.

Thus over a long period of time a linguistic community may develop a koine a number of times. This introduces a further complication. A koine may or may not develop on the same regional basis as the previous one. For example, Old English was based on West Saxon but Middle English developed in the Midlands although with important contributions from other dialects. We may call this the succession problem and distinguish direct from collateral succession depending on whether a particular common language develops on the same regional basis as the previous one. The linguistic criteria involved in making such a judgment are considered at a later point in this discussion.

With the foregoing considerations in mind, we turn to the history of Egyptian. At present, of course, Egypt is Arabic-speaking but Coptic, still used in the liturgy of the Coptic Monophysite Church, is the latest form of a language whose earliest records date from the very beginning of Egyptian written records (circa 3100 B.C.E.).² Even after the Arab invasion of the seventh century, Egyptian in its Coptic form continued to be spoken by a substantial majority of the people of Egypt but by the fourteenth century it is estimated that it was only spoken by a tenth of the population.³ The last report of its being spoken is that of Vansleb, a seventeenth century Dutch traveler who reported that he had encountered Coptic speakers in Upper Egypt who still employed it.

Egyptian thus has a longer recorded history than any other language, something over four thousand years. Until the coming of Arabic it had only one serious rival, Greek under the Ptolemies and in the Roman and Byzantine Empires, but even then it was not spoken as a first language by Egyptians or even as second language in most of Upper Egypt. The initial effect of the

²All dates given in this paper are in accordance with those in the Cambridge Ancient History.

³For a detailed account of Coptic after the Arab conquest, see Wiet 1927.

Arabic invasion was to strengthen Egyptian as against Greek, the language of the Byzantine Empire it succeeded. During the long period in which it was spoken Egyptian was able to assimilate linguistically numerous Libyans, Semites of Western Asia, and Nubians who had immigrated into the country.

Egyptian constitutes one of the five branches of the Afroasiatic linguistic stock, the others being Semitic, Berber, Cushitic, and Chadic. The genetic position of Egyptian will figure in an essential manner at a number of points in the following argument.

From all that we know of linguistic change, given the distance of about 750 miles from the southern apex of the Nile delta to the First Cataract at the Elephantine, the traditional southern boundary of Egypt, the Egyptian language would inevitably develop strongly differing local dialects. Without non-linguistic factors, social and political, leading to linguistic unification, the extremities of the Egyptian speech area would have in the course of four thousand years or so become at least as different as present day Hindi and Persian. The question at issue then is not whether there were koinés at different times but how many there were, when they arose, and what their basis in local speech was in each instance.

That Egyptian had at various times sharply differing local dialects is not merely a conjecture based on our general knowledge of linguistic change. One indication is a text dating from the thirteenth century before our era in which it is stated that a man from the Delta and one from the Elephantine could not understand each other (Erman 1928: 6). The second is that its latest stage, Coptic, which was written in an alphabet which for the first time indicated vowels systematically and reflected contemporary spoken language, had a number of significantly different literary dialects.

That Egyptian was not exempt from diglossia either is shown from the comment of Herodotus (II, 36) that the Egyptians had two sorts of language, 'sacred' (*hirá* the Ionic form of *hierá*) and 'common' (*dēmotiké*, cf. *dēmos* 'people'). Herodotus uses the word *grámmata* 'letters' as the modified noun so that he is probably referring to two kinds of written language generally known as Hieroglyphic and Demotic, the latter of which is historically more recent.

The same distinction is mentioned about two centuries later by Manetho, an Egyptian priest of the early Ptolemaic era who wrote a number of works in Greek which have only come down to us in excerpts from later writers. One of these was the *Aegyptiaca* whose numbering of the Egyptian dynasties is still in general use. Josephus in his *Contra Apionem* I.14.82 as part of an extended excerpt from Manetho gives the latter's interpretation of the word *Hyksos* which he glosses in Greek as 'shepherd kings'. The Hyksos constituted the 16th Dynasty (1684–1567) who ruled in the eastern Delta during part of

the period between the Middle and New Kingdom when there was no united rule over the country. Josephus identified the Hyksos with the Hebrews. Manetho in his etymology of the word says it has two parts. The first is *hyk* which means 'king' in the 'sacred language' (*hierà glōssa*) and the second is *-sos* which means 'shepherd' in the 'common speech' (*koinē diálektos*). Here the contrast between a written standard and a spoken form is clear since *diálektos* is normally spoken language in Greek and *koinē* is being used in its meaning of 'vulgar' alluded to earlier. In fact *hyk* is easily identified with the hieroglyphic *hk*? 'ruler'⁴ while *šōs* occurs in the meaning 'shepherd' in Coptic in all the dialects except Bohairic, that of the Delta. While it does have hieroglyphic antecedents it does not occur until New Egyptian as *š?s-w* but means 'Bedouins northeast of Egypt and their country' not 'shepherd' in general.

In considering the history of the Egyptian language, we may note that most writers of this topic recognize five periods which in some instances are initiated by changes in the writing system as well as in the spoken language. A few including Sethe and Grapow distinguish a sixth and earliest period exemplified chiefly in the language of the Pyramid texts. In the present context I will consider six periods as providing a richer basis for discussion. They may be rather briefly and in somewhat oversimplified fashion be characterized as follows.

1. *Earliest Egyptian*. This is chiefly the language of the Pyramid texts which appears in hieroglyphic form on the walls of the pyramids of five kings of the 5th and 6th dynasties (2494–2181) at the end of the Old Kingdom. Although their first written attestation is later than that of Old Egyptian, there is general agreement that the archaism of their language indicates an earlier linguistic stage.

2. *Old Egyptian*. This is the literary language of the Old Kingdom from the 3rd through the 6th dynasties (2688–2181). No consecutive texts are known from the two first dynasties constituting the Proto-Dynastic period and what there is is often difficult to interpret. Old Egyptian occurs written in hieroglyphics on monuments. Alongside of it there is hieratic used for writing on papyrus. Hieratic characters are written in detached form and there is an essential one-to-one correspondence between the individual characters written in each script. Hence hieratic texts are often published in hieroglyphic transcription. There are also no differences in vocabulary or grammar between the two forms.

3. *Middle Egyptian*. After the First Intermediate Period, of uncertain

⁴Hieroglyphics are transcribed in the usual manner, with the consonants only, because the vowels are not indicated, and with a dot to denote the boundary between morphemes in the word.

length and during which no central authority existed, national unity was restored under the 11th Dynasty and continued under the 12th (2233–1786). This period is called the Middle Kingdom, and the literary language which came into use in this period Middle Egyptian. There followed the Second Intermediate Period, during which there was once more no single centralized authority. The period of Hyksos rule in the eastern Delta is part of this period. National unity was once more restored under the New Kingdom (Dynasties 18, 19, and 20, 1567–1085). During the earlier part of the New Kingdom, Middle Egyptian with hardly any detectable change continued to be used as the ordinary literary language, except for a few instances to be mentioned later.

Middle Egyptian is generally considered to be the "Classical" form of the language and a grammar simply called that of Egyptian will be primarily concerned with this form of the language. Like Old Egyptian it concurrently used hieroglyphic and hieratic systems of writing.

4. *New Egyptian*. The famous religious innovator of solar monotheism Akhenaten, who reigned 1364–1347, was also an innovator in matters of language. No doubt as part of his cult of "naturalness" he introduced what was primarily the form of Egyptian that he himself spoke. It differs considerably in grammar and vocabulary from Middle Egyptian but continues to be written in the hieroglyphic script and its accompanying hieratic form. However, Middle Egyptian still enjoyed such prestige that it continued in use, however artificially, until the time of the Roman Emperor Diocletian in 296 C.E.

5. *Demotic*. There followed another period of internal Egyptian disunity, the Third Intermediate Period. This included two Dynasties of Libyan origin and several native dynasties which were partially concurrent and none of which ruled the entire country. National unity was restored under a foreign, but culturally Egyptianized ruler, Piankhi of the 25th, or Kushite, Dynasty (715–656). This was followed by the national restoration which began under the Saite or 26th Dynasty and during which the entire country was under indigenous rule. It was however interrupted by an initial period of Persian conquest (525–404) and, after a second period of native rule, by the Persian reconquest under Artaxerxes III in 341. After a brief interval there followed the conquest by Alexander the Great in 332. Thereafter Greek rule was continued under the Ptolemies until the incorporation of Egypt into the Roman Empire.

After a transitional period of "Abnormal Hieratic" (dated by Grapow [1944: 213] as occurring about 1100), there appears beginning in the Kushite period during the eighth century a highly abbreviated script involving numerous ligatures of previously separate hieratic characters and known as Demotic. It began in business but was officially adopted during the Saite restoration and

even used for monumental purposes. Demotic writing follows the same basic principles as hieroglyphic and hieratic writing, being partly ideographic and partly phonetic, but the forms, abbreviated from hieratic, have been in some instances so drastically altered that the hieratic source is uncertain.

Demotic also represents a new stage linguistically. It continued in general use until the third century of our era. It is one of the three languages of the Rosetta stone alongside Middle Egyptian and Greek.

6. *Coptic*. The last stage of the Egyptian literary language involves the use of the Greek alphabet supplemented by a few consonantal signs of Demotic origin to represent sounds not occurring in Greek. Biblical translations into Coptic began in the third century at a time when Demotic was still in active use by pagan Egyptians. However the use of the Greek alphabet to represent Egyptian antedates its employment by Christians. At least a century earlier we find the Greek alphabet used on mummy labels and in magical papyri in which it was believed that the efficacy of the spells depended on their being pronounced exactly. The language of these glosses is called Old Coptic.

Coptic is divided into a number of literary dialects. There has been much discussion of the number of distinct dialects to be recognized and their localization, but something approaching a general consensus has been reached.⁵ From south to north in the Nile valley there are Achmimic, Subachmimic, Oxyrhynchus, and Saidic. In the Faiyum, that is, the area on and near Birket Qarun (the ancient Lake Moeris), and probably extending to the west bank of the lower Nile at this point, is Faiyumic. Finally there is Bohairic, the dialect of the Delta. By the fifth century Saidic had apparently replaced all the other dialects of the Nile valley but not Faiyumic. It was the vehicle of an original Christian literature, not merely translations from the Greek. Later, Bohairic assumed greater importance, and about 1000 it became the official liturgical language of the Coptic Monophysite Church and continues in this function alongside of Arabic up to the present day.

How is the relationship among these six successive stages to be envisioned? As the starting point we may take the discussion in the important paper of Sethe (1925). This study, in spite of its title (which refers to the relationship of Demotic and Coptic) and its main content (which considers the relative similarities of Demotic to New Egyptian which preceded and Coptic which followed), concludes with the first overview of the entire historical development of Egyptian. It is accompanied by a diagram which takes the following forms. The spoken language is represented as a single dotted line

⁵For a discussion of the various proposals concerning the classification of Coptic dialects see Vergote 1973, I: 88–89; II: 8–11, which includes maps.

indicating a continuous and gradual development from the Earliest Egyptian of the Pyramid texts to the last stage, that of Coptic. At intervals, as the gap between the written and spoken form became intolerable, new literary languages are introduced quite abruptly and they continue virtually unchanged until the separation between the literary and spoken language once again becomes unbearably great. There is just one exception: Sethe considers Demotic to be a direct continuation of New Egyptian in a new orthography while deemphasizing the resemblances between Demotic and Coptic which were central in the standard grammar of Demotic by Spiegelberg (1925).

Sethe's theory was dubbed "cataclysmic" by Gunn (1924: ix) since each literary language was portrayed as having a period of sudden birth from the spoken language at specific intervals. Sethe's theory is somewhat modified in Stricker (1945) who tends to see each form of the literary languages as assimilating some of the features of the spoken language over time. Stricker also takes into account the earlier occurrences of Late Egyptian forms in the literary language before the period of its official use by Akhenaten.

What strikes a linguist, however, is not that Sethe's theory is "cataclysmic" but rather that the spoken language is conceived as a single and continuous though changing entity for thousands of years. Nowhere in either Sethe's or Stricker's treatment is there any mention of dialect variation. Others, however, have taken this factor into consideration. Of these the first seems to have been Edgerton, and later others as, for example, Edel and Callender. Thus Edgerton (1951: 11) states that he considers it quite possible that Middle Egyptian and New Egyptian may represent different parts of Egypt as well as different time periods.

In what follows I shall try to present, at least in rough outline, what I consider to have been the course of development of the Egyptian language. Virtually all of the individual points have already been made by other writers who will be referred to at the appropriate points in the discussion. My own conclusions have been arrived at by an independent evaluation of the evidence. To my knowledge this is the first attempt since Stricker to give an overall view beyond the usual enumeration to successive periods of the language.

As a preliminary step it will prove useful to discuss some of the main factors and assumptions, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, which need to be taken into account in the construction of an overall theory.

One of these is the realization that Egypt, when it was politically united, which holds for most of the long period we are considering, was a highly centralized state which utilized labor on a vast scale in royal constructions and in national military expeditions and supervised a complex irrigation system. All of this required a constant flow of emissaries delivering instructions and receiving reports from provincial centers and also required a vast and

ubiquitous army of scribes. Not only was writing essential but a central language of administration was virtually indispensable. One would expect the language of the political capital to play the central even if not the exclusive role in the development of successive official languages.

A further major factor in Egyptian history that has to be taken into frequent account is the fundamental division of the country into the Nile valley (Upper Egypt) and the Delta (Lower Egypt). The beginning of the Dynastic period is marked by the conquest of Lower Egypt by Upper Egypt under the leadership of Menes. This is based on Manetho's account but has been verified by the discovery of the Narmer tablet and by other evidence.⁶ According to Breasted (1908: 119), the kings of the 5th Dynasty still felt themselves to be southerners ruling the north. The king of Egypt wore a double crown combining that of Upper and Lower Egypt, and the treasury and other departments had southern and northern divisions. Egypt was often called "the two lands," a designation which lasted until the Coptic period. The persistence of the distinction can, however, be noted in Coptic itself. It is clear that the Coptic dialects can be classified into two groups, one consisting of Bohairic alone, the speech of the Delta, and the other of the remaining dialects.

Before proceeding further one linguistic problem requires discussion, what was earlier called the succession problem. Does a particular stage in a literary language continue an earlier stage of the same dialect or does it stem from a different region and dialect? A characteristic and usually decisive phenomenon may occur when there are three successive periods, say A, B, and C when C derives from the same area as A but B has a different provenance. What we may get is an apparent reversal in historical change. A linguistic feature *x* in stage A is replaced by *y* in stage B but then reappears as *x* in stage C.

The following is an example from morphology. The oldest attested form of Ethiopian Semitic is Geez, also known as Classical Ethiopic. Various writers on comparative Semitic have either considered the present Semitic languages of Ethiopia all to have been the direct descendents of Geez (Wright 1890: 29) so that Geez is in effect Proto-Ethiopic or that Geez is the direct ancestor only of Tigrinya in the northern subgroup of Ethiopian Semitic and spoken in the same general area as Geez while the other contemporary languages descend from a sister dialect of Geez (Brockelmann 1961: I, 31). However, there is at least one feature of Geez which suggests strongly that it cannot be the direct ancestor of any present day Ethiopian Semitic language, an opinion in which I am in agreement with a leading specialist in this group of languages, W. Leslau.

⁶Egyptologists are in disagreement concerning the identity of the figure on the Narmer palette. For a discussion see Emery 1961: 14.

The Semitic verb had a derived, so-called intensive, form which involved the doubling of the second consonant in the dominant triconsonantal pattern. However it also used gemination of the same second consonant in a particular tense-aspect form, the present or continuative which only survives in Ethiopic Semitic and in Akkadian but whose Proto-Semitic status is further assured by its occurrence elsewhere in Afroasiatic (Greenberg 1952).

From this twofold function of the geminated second consonant there arises an ambiguity in that the present continuative, usually called the imperfective in grammars of Ethiopian languages, is identical in both the simple and intensive forms of the verb. This ambiguity was removed in Geez by an innovation of unknown origin; the *a* preceding the geminated consonant was replaced by *e* in the intensive form. However in all present day Ethiopian Semitic languages either the ambiguity persists or is eliminated in some other manner; nowhere outside of Geez is this *e* found. Had Proto-Ethiopic left written records it would presumably show ambiguity in these two forms. Hence we would have Proto-Ethiopic *a*, Geez *e*, and once more modern *a* and there would be an apparent reversal in the course of change.

The most powerful evidence of this kind is probably phonological. When there is a complete merger of two originally distinct sounds they cannot be unscrambled to produce the former state in the normal course of change. In Ferguson's article (1959a) on the koine he notes the merger of *dād* and *ḏā* which never have distinct reflexes in any of the koine forms of Arabic but which are distinguished in Classical Arabic. However, the dialects of the Arabian peninsula do in general retain this distinction and in the same lexical items as Classical Arabic. This is strong evidence that they are not the direct descendent of the ancestral koine language. Should the peninsular dialects ever become the basis of a new koine, an utterly improbable occurrence on sociolinguistic grounds, we would have an apparent reversal in the course of change from unmerged (Classical) to merged (present day koine languages) to unmerged in the hypothetical new koine.

With these considerations in mind we consider the six successive stages of Egyptian in their relationship to each other using both linguistic and non-linguistic evidence. The first stage is generally agreed to be Earliest Egyptian, the language of the Pyramid texts, which exhibits clearly archaic features not found in Old Egyptian. It must therefore precede Old Egyptian which, as we shall see, is to be identified with the language of the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period. Earliest Egyptian would then be Proto-Dynastic (1st and 2nd Dynasties) or, as some have thought (e.g. Sethe and Breasted), Predynastic, belonging to the period before the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. However, as Erman pointed out long ago (1891), the Pyramid texts already portray the king as wearing the double crown of Upper and

Lower Egypt. There is, however, as Erman also indicated, the possibility that the Pyramid texts are not all of the same age but, as far as I know, this question has never been subject to serious investigation.

Manetho tells us that Menes, the first king of a united Egypt, came from the Thinite nome in Upper Egypt. Its center was Abydos and it was here that the tombs of the kings of the Proto-Dynastic age were discovered. The religious and perhaps the older capital of the southern kingdom was Nekheb, called Hieraconpolis by the Greeks and the center of worship of Horus, who was always identified with kingship in Egyptian religion. Whether Abydos or Nekheb, we have in either case to do with an Upper Egyptian dialect. In a subsequent section I shall adduce certain further linguistic evidence for this identification.

By Old Kingdom times the capital had shifted to the more strategically placed Memphis on the southeastern border of the Delta and from which the Delta could be more easily controlled. Edel (1955: 11), the author of the standard grammar of Old Egyptian, commits himself, though somewhat cautiously, to the view that Old Egyptian was based on a dialect of Lower Egypt. He states that the position of Memphis as capital of the Old Kingdom and the existence of the Pyramids and of most burial sites of officials in the necropolises in the vicinity of Memphis shows that a Lower Egyptian dialect played an important role in the formation of Old Egyptian. Similarly Edgerton (1951: 11–12) states that Standard Old Egyptian was perhaps based on the local speech of the region of the Pyramids.

The degree of linguistic similarity between Old and Middle Egyptian suggests that the latter was the continuation of the former even though the political center of the Middle Kingdom was Thebes in Upper Egypt, a dialect which only much later at the time of Akhenaten attained general literary currency.

The foregoing opinion is the one expressed by Callender in his grammar of Middle Egyptian (1975: 1) in which he asserts that Middle Egyptian texts are written in a language closely related to that of the Old Kingdom adorned with inherited linguistic material from Old Egyptian. He voices his suspicion that Middle Egyptian was actually the spoken language of the late Old Kingdom and of the First Intermediate Period.

It may be noted that Thebes was, as it were, an upstart city whose god Ammon was identified with the more prestigious Re in the compound form Ammon-Re. Re was the god of Heliopolis who played a special role in the rise of the 5th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom.

Linguistically New Egyptian may be considered the critical point in the long development of Egyptian in that it marks what is probably the most thorough change in its long history (Paull 1975, citing Korostovtsev's views).

It is generally agreed that its use as a spoken language long precedes its first introduction into general, including monumental use by Akhenaten. In the Carnarvon tablet, Kamose of the 17th Dynasty, whose reign ended in 1567, at least two hundred years earlier than Akhenaten, talks to his advisers about the campaign against the Hyksos, as Erman observes (1968: 2) in the "purest New Egyptian." Sometimes workmen are represented as speaking New Egyptian early in the New Kingdom, but if Kamose speaks to his closest advisers in New Egyptian he could have only spoken Classical Middle Egyptian to the gods!

A considerable body of Egyptological opinions believes that in fact New Egyptian was already the ordinary spoken language of the Middle Kingdom, e.g. Vergote (1973: II, 9) who cites Stricker (1945) approvingly to this effect. New Egyptian would then be a dialect based on that of Thebes in Upper Egypt, which was the capital during both the Middle and New Kingdom, but would not have attained general literary currency until late in the 18th Dynasty. In fact it never completely displaced Middle Egyptian, which continued to be used even into the Roman period.

The view presented here is already found in Grapow (1944: 211–12) who called the triumph of New Egyptian the breaking out of the folk language of Thebes in Upper Egypt through the crust of the old dominant high language (*Hochsprache*) of Memphis, without however completely eliminating the latter.

The next major change in the standard literary form of Egyptian takes us once more to Lower Egypt. After the Third Intermediate Period a new kind of writing, Demotic, involves with it a new stage of the Egyptian language. Piankhi, the Kushite (i.e. Nubian) king of the 25th Dynasty, established his capital at Memphis, and the Saïtes of the 26th Dynasty had their capital in the Delta. It is generally believed that the Demotic script was invented in Lower Egypt (Lloyd 1983: 333). Coptic is to be viewed simply as the linguistic continuation of Demotic in a different form of writing. This is contrary to Sethe's views, but others disagree with him. Demotic documents can often be identified as reflecting particular Coptic dialects, and Lexa (1934: 162) maintained that such dialect differences could be traced as far back as the middle Ptolemaic period during the third century before the present era.⁷ The period before this would be one in which the original Lower Egyptian koine had not yet developed sufficient differences to be observed in Demotic. Given the nature of Demotic writing it would not be surprising if they existed but could not be detected.

⁷Johnson 1972, which might add to this discussion, is an unpublished dissertation of the University of Chicago which was not available to me.

We may summarize the foregoing review of Egyptian linguistic history as follows. Four linguistic periods are posited. I. Earliest Egyptian, whose main records are the Pyramid texts, is based on an Upper Egyptian dialect and is coincident with the first two dynasties (ca. 3100–2686). II. Old and Middle Egyptian, with its linguistic basis in Lower Egypt, most probably with the dialect of Memphis playing the major role in its formation (Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period, 2686–2133). III. New Egyptian, based mainly on the dialect of Thebes in Upper Egypt, dominant as the spoken language already in the Middle Kingdom and probably lasting through the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period until the 25th (Nubian) Dynasty or the Saite Restoration (2133–ca. 750). IV. The language, of Lower Egyptian origin, which underlies written Demotic and continues as Coptic until Egyptian ceased to be a spoken language. Although there is no direct evidence for this, we conjecture from what we know of linguistic history in general that each of these was a koine rather than a local dialect which spread in pure form without any characteristics drawn from other dialects.

If the foregoing hypotheses are valid, then I and III would both be Upper Egyptian in origin, while II and IV would be Lower Egyptian. There would then be three instances of collateral rather than direct descent, the replacement of I by II, of II by III, and III by IV. We could look for the types of reversals which were discussed earlier in the sequences I–II–III and II–III–IV. These would show themselves in the recurrence in period III (New Egyptian) of some features of I (Earliest Egyptian) and missing in the intervening period of Old and Middle Egyptian. Similarly we might expect resemblances between II and IV not found in III. The first set of recurrences (I and III) would be Upper Egyptian and the second (II and IV) Lower Egyptian.

In fact, and without any reference to an overall scheme of the development of Egyptian such as that presented here, Edgerton (1951) notes a number of linguistic peculiarities which occur in what he calls Old Egyptian, but which, it is clear from the context, refer to the language of the Pyramid texts, and recur in New Egyptian without appearing in the intermediate period of Old and Middle Egyptian (II). Edel (1954: 12) both modifies and amplifies Edgerton's examples. Edel's version is cited with approval by Vergote (1973: II, 9). As Edel puts it, these phenomena could be explained by assuming that the colloquial language of Upper Egypt retained some elements of the old language of the Pyramid texts which then resurfaced in New Egyptian. The two most prominent of these features are grammatical, the occurrence of a prosthetic ? in certain verbal forms and the distinction of gender and number in the demonstrative functioning as a copula which is replaced in period II by an unchanging masculine singular.

Edel (1954: 11) notes the variant forms of the word for 'master, lord'

Pyramid texts *nbw* as well as *nb* (*w* is often omitted in spelling) as against the exclusive writing *nb* in this extremely common word in Old and Middle Egyptian.⁸ This contrast seems to be reflected in the Coptic period in which the reflex of *nbw* appears in Upper Egypt while that of *nb* is seen in Bohairic, the dialect of the Delta. Parallel differences in other words with regard to final *w* in noun forms are cited in other instances (*ibid.*: 96). In fact, reconstructions based on a comparison of the non-Bohairic dialects sometimes result in forms incompatible with Bohairic, suggesting the retention of earlier dialect features in the latter. The lapse of time is of course enormous and suggests caution.

The schema presented here may, with the application of the principles of dialect geography, assist in solving what has by writers concerned with the phonological history of Egyptian been considered a strange phenomenon of "reversal." An earlier *h* (a back voiceless fricative whose exact phonetic nature is uncertain) while remaining in certain words, is replaced in others by *š* in the Pyramid texts but then is replaced again by the earlier *h* in Old and Middle Egyptian. There are two roots, however, which continue to be written with *š*, *šmm* 'to be hot' and *sš* 'scribe' and with different vocalization 'to write'. That the *š* in these two roots is merely graphic is shown by the fact that they reemerge as *x* in Bohairic and Achmimic and as *h* in the other forms of Coptic.

The apparent reversal *h* > *š* > *h* is called remarkable by Erman (1928: 46); Albright calls it "the elusive *h* problem," while Edel seeks to eliminate it as a problem altogether by calling it purely graphic (1955: 52).

In regard to this change it is important to take into account, as has been noted generally by students of the history of the Egyptian sound system, that the partial shift of *h* to *š* while *h* remains in other words is paralleled by the partial shifts of *k* to *č* and *g* to *đ*. The *č* and *đ* were probably palatalized velars which became palatalized alveolars later and then became *t* and *d* in most instances during the late Old Kingdom.

The conditioning factor for the fronting of *k* and *g* was in all probability vocalic and, as we have seen, vowels are not indicated in hieroglyphic writing. A striking indication of the vocalic factor is the second person singular masculine possessive and verb subject suffix *k* as against the feminine *č* which is found in the Earliest Egyptian and continues into later periods. These forms agree exactly with the second person singular masculine-feminine contrast in Semitic *ka* versus *ki* with similar forms in Chadic (e.g. Hausa).

Given the parallelism of the changes in the three consonants, it is clear

⁸In order to avoid the problem of representing hieroglyphics in text I have referred to them in accordance with the sign list in the appendix of Gardiner 1957 and with his accompanying description.

that we have here a general sound shift like those stated in Grimm's First and Second laws in Germanic although involving different phonetic features. In such instances we may find, as with Grimm's second sound shift, that the various sounds do not change simultaneously and that the entire shift originates in one region and is propagated to others. It is in the region of origin that the shift is carried out most completely.

For example, as part of Grimm's second sound shift $t > ts$, $p > pf$ and $k > kx$. The phonetic completeness and the order of their origin and spread are stated here with the most complete first. The shift started in the south so that, for example, Swiss German has kx where standard German has k . None of these changes spread to the northern, Low German, part of the German linguistic area. Now if the modern standard literary language had earlier been Swiss German and then were replaced by the more northern dialects of High German which underlie the present literary language we would have an apparent reversal from pre-Grimm k to Swiss kx and back to more northern k . Such a reversal would not occur with regard to the change from t to ts which had spread to all of High German.

If we hypothesize that the Egyptian palatalization affected h later than k and g and that, in accordance with the general thesis presented here, the Earliest Egyptian of the Pyramid texts which shows the $h > \xi$ shift was based on an Upper Egyptian dialect from which the palatalization spread north, we can explain the restoration of the h , which did not affect the words that had an original ξ and therefore involves the unscrambling of an earlier merger, by the development of a new standard language based mainly on Memphis in the North to which the change $h > \xi$ had never spread.

Finally, we ask whether the Upper Egyptian Proto-Dynastic language was the earliest form of Egyptian concerning which we have any evidence. That such earlier forms would be spoken in Egypt is stated by Butzer (1976: 11) who asserts that there is no reason to doubt that the Predynastic peoples of the Egyptian Nile valley spoke Egyptian. He bases this conclusion both on the linguistic separateness of Egyptian within Afroasiatic and the cultural continuity revealed by the archeological record.

The Egyptian writing system itself at the earliest time that we find it gives evidence of a fairly long previous development. A blank piece of papyrus has been found in a tomb of the Second Dynasty showing that even at that time hieratic must have existed as a writing system alongside of hieroglyphic. James (1979: 464) argues that this is an indication that long texts could have been written as early as the initial part of the First Dynasty.

The most powerful indications, however, derive from the earliest hieroglyphic writing itself. Certain symbols have phonetic values which are different from the ideas they represent as expressed even in the language of

the Pyramid texts. That these phonetic readings actually expressed the sounds of words that existed in Predynastic Egyptian is shown by the fact that several of them have cognates in other branches of Afroasiatic. Among these are d 'hand' (Gardiner 1957: D 46) with which we may compare Akkadian *idu*, Arabic and Hebrew *yad*, etc., whereas throughout the historic period the word for hand was *drt* which survives with the usual phonetic changes into Coptic. Another is Gardiner F 21 'ear of ox' with the phonetic value $?dn$ cognate with Arabic $?udn$, Hebrew $?ozen$, etc. all meaning 'ear', whereas the historic word is an obvious new derivative formation *m.sdr* literally 'place of lying down or sleeping'.⁹ To these and others cited in Vycichl (1934) we may add the symbol for 'foot' (Gardiner D 58) to indicate the sound b , a probable cognate to the root *bV* 'come' or 'go' found in all other branches of Afroasiatic (Greenberg 1963: 54, no. 20 'to come'). In historic times the Egyptian word for 'foot' is *rd*.

Assuming on the basis of the foregoing indications the existence of an earlier form of Egyptian we may ask where it was spoken. Both linguistic and non-linguistic arguments suggest that the earliest form of Egyptian stems from the Delta and that it was here that the system of writing was invented. Because of the 35 feet or so of alluvium deposited in the last 6,000 years or so it is not surprising that there are no surviving Predynastic records from the Delta proper. Because of the relatively advanced nature of the latest Predynastic culture, the Gerzean or Naqada II as it has more recently been called, it is widely assumed that the Delta was more advanced culturally than Upper Egypt in the immediate prehistoric period; some even propose (e.g. Sethe) that before the unification of the country from the south by Menes there was an earlier conquest of Upper Egypt by Lower Egypt.

A further piece of linguistic evidence, already cited in Vycichl (1934) points to Lower Egypt as the region in which the writing system was invented. In Egyptian hieroglyphs there is no symbol for l . Where in the Pyramid texts and in all later forms of hieroglyphic we would expect l from Afroasiatic cognates we get r in some words and n in others. It is difficult to see why the inventors of the script would not have a symbol for l if it existed in their speech. The writing system was evidently designed by speakers of a dialect in which l had become r in some instances and n in the others. The fact that l survived in some dialects is shown by the fact that a sign was invented for it in the Demotic of the Ptolemaic period by adding a short diacritic stroke to the r and by its emergence in Coptic which used the Greek alphabet which had a sign for l . Among the words which had l in Demotic and Coptic are

⁹The consonant transcribed as $?$ is probably a semivowel and corresponds etymologically to both y and the glottal stop of Semitic.

some which have Afroasiatic cognates with *l*, e.g. the word for 'tongue' Sahidic *laš* related to forms in all other branches of Afroasiatic except Cushitic.

Vycichl already pointed out that the very name of the old religious capital of Upper Egypt, Nekheb, spelled *nxb* in hieroglyphic Egyptian, actually had an initial *l* as can be seen from the name of the present village which is on the same site, *Al-kāb*, in which the initial consonant has been reinterpreted as part of the Arabic definite article. Hence the dialect without *l* in which the writing system originated would be in Lower Egypt. There is a further indication. The word spelled *bnr* 'outside' first occurs in the New Egyptian of the 19th Dynasty which, as was seen earlier, is based on the Upper Egyptian dialect of Thebes. That the sequence *nr* was an attempt to spell *l* by using the two most similar consonants to *l* is shown by the occurrence of *bal* 'outside' in Sahidic Coptic with corresponding forms in other Coptic dialects. In the light of the foregoing evidence I consider it reasonable to posit a Predynastic form of Egyptian spoken in and near the Delta which was replaced in the Protodynastic period by a koine based on the speech of Upper Egypt.

The difficulties and uncertainties of the problems with which this paper has been concerned are obvious. It is presented simply as a set of working hypotheses in need of further corroboration or even major correction in the light of future investigation.

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