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LINGUISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS

الوعي اللغوي

Sami Uljas

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The present article addresses the ancient Egyptians' level of linguistic awareness from earliest times to the Coptic Period. The degree to which the Egyptians might have understood their language as a socio-cultural medium reflective of and adapted to different contexts of communication is discussed, along with their attitude to foreign languages and perception of diachronic processes. In addition, the degree to which the speakers of Egyptian may have viewed their native language as a linguistic and grammatical system is considered in detail.

تتناول هذه المقالة مستوى الوعي اللغوي لدى المصريين من أقدم العصور حتى العصر القبطي، وتناقش مدى فهم المصريين للغتهم كوسيلة اجتماعية - ثقافية ومتوسط الانعكاس والتكيف مع السياقات المختلفة النقاش، إلى جانب موقفهم تجاه اللغات الأجنبية وتصورهم للعمليات الزمنية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تتناول المقالة بالتفصيل مدى رؤية المصرية للغتهم الأم على أنها نظام لغوي ونحوي.

In the context of ancient Egypt, the term “linguistic consciousness” may be used in reference to two separate but interconnected notions. On the one hand, it can be employed in a wide sense to denote consciousness of language as a medium of communication whose form and use are conditioned by the social and spatio-temporal context. On the other hand, linguistic consciousness may be understood as equaling awareness of language as an abstract entity that constitutes and can be treated as a system. The first of these definitions is tantamount to consciousness of language registers and socially “appropriate” use of language (sociolects) as well as of dialects, isoglosses, and differences between Egyptian and foreign languages. Also the understanding of language diachrony belongs under this heading. The second of the above definitions equates linguistic consciousness more narrowly with “grammatical” awareness, i.e., adoption of an analytic approach to language and treating or formulating it in a systematic way.

Approaching the linguistic feeling of the ancient Egyptians is hampered by lack of data in general, but particularly in what pertains to earlier times. Especially for the Dynastic Period, evidence for or an awareness of both the above types of linguistic consciousness is severely limited. Consciousness of registers and sociolects must have been a constant element of the day-to-day dealings of Egyptians generally, but it probably had greatest significance to state bureaucrats dealing with their superiors and subordinates alike. Nevertheless, explicit mentions of this are largely lacking. From early on, the common references to *mdt nfrt*, “good speech” (Grapow 1943: 163), usually equate this with refined rhetoric and largely omit the question of socio-pragmatic appropriateness of specific types of parlance. Thus, a successful official of the Old Kingdom was one who *dd nfr whm nfr*, “spoke and repeated well” (e.g., Sethe *Urk. I*: 90.12, 253.1, 263.6, cf. 198.17, 200.14, 204.5), then and later also someone who *gm tz m g3w=f*, “found the (correct) phrase when it was lacking” (e.g., CG 1666, 3 - 4; 20502, 1; Siut I, 248) in the company of his peers

and superiors, i.e., could formulate his speech in a rhetorically pleasing and persuasive manner. Such “good speech” was not necessarily the sole preserve of the elite, seeing that it “could be found among the maidservants by the millstones” (Ptahhotep 59), nor apparently strictly equal to a socially acceptable form or forms of communication. Instead, it appears to have referred to any “skilful” use of language in general, although it perhaps also meant “acculturated” communication, which in practice meant speaking Egyptian and which is argued to have later become viewed as a “nationalistic” property of civilized individuals (cf. Moers 2000 and below). Whatever the precise connotations of “good speech,” its negative counterpart “bad” or “wretched” speech (*mdt bjnt*, *mdt hst*, Ptahhotep 71, 211) characterized the *mdt nt ḥꜣw mr*, “the speech of hoi polloi” (Sethe *Urk. IV*: 120.3; cf. Guglielmi 1973: 180), and contained *sf*, “impurities” (cf. Grapow 1943: 163). It may be understood as referring not only to generally vulgar and unsophisticated speech but also to the incapability to employ language according to the social setting. As a concrete example, one might mention the 12th Dynasty official Mentuwer, who prided himself as “one who spoke according to the customary manner of the officialdom and was free from saying *pꜣw*” (MMA 12.184, 13; see Sethe 1959: 79, 17 - 18). The most common interpretation of this somewhat enigmatic statement is to view it as testimony of a social stigma attached to the use of the demonstratives *pꜣ/tꜣ/nꜣ-n* as definite articles (Loprieno 1996: 519), a tendency strongly on the rise during the mid/late Middle Kingdom (Kroeber 1970: 19 - 25). Some support for this view comes from the obvious avoidance of these elements in the Hekanakht letters when the author’s superior is addressed, which stands in stark contrast with the extensive appearance of *pꜣ/tꜣ/nꜣ-n* in the letters by the same person addressing his household that consisted of individuals of the same or lower social standing (James 1962: 107 - 108; but cf. Allen 2002: 88 for a different view). Similarly, in the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* the fictional protagonist gives free rein to his use of *pꜣ/tꜣ/nꜣ-n* when addressing his wife (Peas R, 1.1-6), but in his long petitions to a superior official only two instances of *pꜣ* occur, and both of these still clearly stand for the proximal demonstrative “this” (Peas B1, 68, 228). Similarly, in

the closing address of the Middle Kingdom *Teaching of Kagemni*, *pꜣ* is once used purportedly by a vizier (Kagemni II, 5), but the sense is very strongly deictic “this one here.”

Before the Coptic Period, evidence of dialects (let alone idiolects) in the Egyptian language is minimal (Vergote 1961: 246 - 249). In Coptic, the question of dialects in a broad sense is less controversial (Funk 1988), but Coptic texts betray relatively little indications of interest in, or any broadly “linguistic” view of, dialectal variations. Instances of literary works assumed to have been “translated” from one dialect to another are relatively numerous (e.g., the *Bohairic Life of St. Pachom*, thought to have been translated from Sahidic; see Veilleux 1980: 2), but the relationship between such versions is usually not particularly close, and in many instances one may be dealing with different recensions of a common *Urtext* rather than with translations *stricto sensu* (Müller and Uljas fc.). Earlier on the sole reasonably explicit reference to dialects (Papyrus Anastasi I 28, 6; Fischer-Elfert 1983: 157) betrays mere awareness that differences in this respect could be great—particularly between speakers from the extreme north and south of Egypt, who apparently could barely understand each other. Evidence of the Egyptians’ conception of their language vis-à-vis others is, however, rather more abundant from early on (Quack 2010; Sauneron 1960). During the Pharaonic Period, the question of the difference(s) between Egyptian and foreign languages was often addressed in terms of value-judgments (Moers 2000). In the Old Kingdom, emissaries to foreign (particularly southern) lands had their corps of *iꜣw*, “interpreters” (e.g., Sethe *Urk. I*: 102.5, 113.10). The exact meaning of this word has been much discussed (e.g., Žába 1974: 121 - 123), but at least in origin it probably represents an onomatopoeic and value-laden expression comparable to Greek *barbaros*: “those who produce *iꜣw*-noises” and cannot speak Egyptian (Bell 1976: 74 - 75 and passim). The latter, by contrast, was not only *r n kmt* or *mdt kmt*, “the language of Egypt,” which one longed to hear abroad (Sinuhe B 31 - 32; Gardiner *LES*: 75, 5), but also the actual *mdw nṯr*, “god’s words,” a divine language (as well as writing system) emanating from the god Thoth (El Bersha

II, 45; BD 68, 11/Nu and 170, 5) and which Ptah had, according to the 25th Dynasty Memphite Theology, used in his acts of creation (Shabako Stone, 56; Sethe 1928: 60). It is noteworthy that in the surviving texts there is only one example of a Pharaonic official boasting of his ability to speak or understand foreign languages (CG 20765, *ḥ wh' mdt ḥ3swt-nbt* "one who translated the languages of all foreign lands"). This seems to suggest that such knowledge was not widespread nor particularly highly regarded. Indeed, a civilized foreigner appears to have been distinguished by his ability to speak Egyptian both in the eyes of the Egyptians themselves, as suggested by the Middle Kingdom *Story of Sinuhe*, and occasionally also among foreigners with extensive contacts with the Egyptians, most notably the New Kingdom rulers of Byblos who commissioned hieroglyphic inscriptions for themselves (see Helck 1983: 19 - 20). The Egyptians' perception of foreign languages appears to have changed somewhat during the New Kingdom. Not only do loanwords from Semitic languages enter the vernacular in increasing numbers (Hoch 1994), but their use seems at times to have been a source of pride for self-conscious authors (P. Anastasi I; see Fischer-Elfert 1983; also perhaps the scribe Amunnakht at Deir el-Medina). Such foreign words were rendered in Egyptian by using a special "syllabic writing" (Schenkel 1986), whose primary idea has usually been viewed as conveying a fuller picture of the underlying vocalic structure of the lexemes, which, if true, would in turn reflect intuitive understanding of phonological principles. Alien tongues were now also seen as effective means in magico-medical practice. For example, the London Medical Papyrus from c. 1300 BCE contains a number of short Northwest Semitic spells transcribed into hieratic (Steiner 1992), and one of these (Spell 11, 4 - 6) is claimed to be "in the language of Keftiu," probably meaning Crete (Bossert 1931; Goedicke 1984: 101 - 102). Spells of comparable nature occur also, e.g., in the Ramesside Papyrus BM 10042 (Leitz 1999: 49 - 50) and perhaps ostrakon Cairo CG 25759 (Shisha-Halevy 1978), whereas in Papyrus Leiden I 343 magical spells of apparently Semitic origin have been translated into Egyptian (Müller 2008: 275 - 293). In addition, given the growing need to maintain regular diplomatic contact with foreign powers during the

New Kingdom, the Egyptians used the contemporary *lingua franca*, Akkadian, in their correspondence. There is every reason to suppose that, for example, the Amarna letters originating in the Egyptian court as well as the Hittite treaty of Ramesses II were written by Egyptian scribes specifically trained in Akkadian. A study of this material shows that the experts at the Egyptian foreign office tended to view their medium through the prism of their own language: the texts abound, e.g., with adjectival sentences and cleft constructions alien to Akkadian syntax (Müller 2010: 341 - 343). Old habits also die hard: king Ramesses III of the 20th Dynasty appears to have forced foreign captives pressed into service in his army to learn the "language of men," i.e., Egyptian (Kitchen KRI V: 91.6-7), and in Papyrus Sallier I 8, 1 (Gardiner 1937: 85, 11), an idle scribe is ridiculed as a "gibbering Nubian" (*nḥsy 3'w*). During the Ptolemaic and Roman and Christian Periods, Greek was increasingly used side by side with Egyptian, and in the Greek texts written by Egyptian notaries there are often interesting Egyptian influences and "interlanguage" phenomena (Vierros 2011). The ubiquitous Biblical texts translated from Greek to Coptic aside, there are also numerous Greco-Coptic "dictionaries" and lexical exercises as well as some comparable studies in Latin (e.g., Ostrakon Vind. 593; Hasitzka 1990: 223). These appear to bear witness to a new, more "grammatical" conception of and approach to language and its study (see further below).

Perhaps the most explicit sort of evidence concerning the Egyptians' linguistic awareness in earlier times in particular concerns their understanding of the diachronic development of their own language. The 18th Dynasty saw the beginning of the process by which classical Middle Egyptian came to be seen as the primary medium of texts of particularly auspicious character. Initially, a state of broad diglossia appears to have existed: given, e.g., the numerous exercise copies of Middle Kingdom literary texts on New Kingdom papyri (Erman 1925), a good working knowledge of the classical works seems to have formed an essential part of the training of a state bureaucrat (Williams 1972: 217). Yet the contemporary literature itself was composed using an idiom that mixed Middle and Late Egyptian elements, and the general trend

was towards ever greater restriction of Middle Egyptian into religious contexts (Jansen-Winkeln 1996: 1). For example, the classical Middle Kingdom works do not appear to have been copied in Deir el-Medina after the reign of king Ramesses IV (Dorn 2009: 78). Yet in spite of this growing marginalization of Middle Egyptian, the authors of the many Late Period texts written in the idiom known as *Égyptien de Tradition* appear, given the quality of their work, to have been experts of the highest order (der Manuelian 1994: xxxix); the same applies to Ptolemaic temple inscriptions (cf. Kurth 2007: 454). Both represent examples of often good Middle Egyptian that betray keen awareness of the language as a developing dynamic entity, which can be studied in stages. This is in spite of the fact that the idiom used is artificial in the sense that the purpose of the texts was to (re-)create an idealized “primeval” language rather than to directly emulate a specific diachronically earlier stage of Egyptian. Similar understanding of historical linguistics is also demonstrated by the many examples of earlier texts translated into a later idiom or annotated with glosses of a similar sort (see Vernus 1996: 564; von Lieven 2007: 258 - 273). These include, e.g., the possibly 22nd Dynasty Papyrus BM 10298 containing exercises of similar sentences in both Middle and Late Egyptian (Caminos 1968) and the 26th - 27th Dynasty Papyrus BM 69574 with a text both in Middle Egyptian and early Demotic (Quack 1999). Another example is the Roman Period Papyrus Bibl. Nat. 149 with a Demotic translation of the BD Spell 125 (Stadler 2003: 30-35). Remarkable are also the 4th century BC copy of a possibly 25th or 26th Dynasty text in Papyrus BM 10252, which contains a translation into typologically highly developed Late Egyptian of a religious text written in *Égyptien de Tradition* (Vernus 1990), and Papyrus Carlsberg 180 and its related fragments (Osing 1998) that constitute a second century CE onomasticon in which an interlinear Demotic transcription was added at times to the original hieratic text along with a number of vocalized Old Coptic glosses. In principle, it could be argued that usually examples of this sort reflect precautions taken because the original script, rather than the language, was in danger of becoming unintelligible to readers. Yet during the later periods, in particular copying and translating texts

written in an earlier idiom and composing in what was by then already an ancient language will have required special expertise and training in what may justly be termed “linguistic archaeology.”

Modern scholarship has often tended to be rather dismissive of the ancient (or particularly Pharaonic) Egyptians’ more ubiquitously “grammatical” awareness (for overviews, see Borghouts 2001; Johnson 1994), considering their consciousness of language to have been limited to mere spoken *parole* rather than the abstract *langue* (cf. Borghouts 2001: 7; Eyre 1986: 119; Junge 1977: 883; Schenkel 1984: 1173). Before the Ptolemaic Period, evidence of any obviously “grammatical” thinking among the Egyptians is sparse in the extreme. On the whole, it seems that Egyptian and foreign languages were primarily viewed merely as “different words” rather than diverging grammatical systems (Borghouts 2001: 8). In addition, most terms and lexemes that one might view as corresponding to modern grammatical notions apparently again denote rhetorical concepts. This holds particularly with expressions such as *mdt*, “word,” *tz*, a “phrase” or “verse” of several words, and *hn*, “enunciation” of a longer kind, which evidently do not refer to morpho-syntactic entities that can be isolated for study but rather to segments of spoken utterance; so too with *mdt nfrt*, “good speech,” noted above and the *tp-hsb*, “rules” of *mdt nfrt* (Ptahhotep 48) or of *mdt ntr*, “god’s words” (Peas B1, 342). Yet there exist two Ramesside ostraca on which an apprentice scribe has tried his hand on writing what appear to be examples of morpho-syntactic paradigms (cf. Gardiner 1947: 4 n.2; Venturini 2007: 1892 - 1893). On one of these, ostracon Cairo 25227 (Allam 1973: pl. 28), one finds scribbled what resembles a part of a conjugation table of some sort (*jw=s*, *mtw.tw*, *mtw=k*, *jw.tw*). Better evidence is provided by ostracon Petrie 28 (Gardiner and Černý 1957: pl. 8, n.7), on which is written the conjugation of the element *jw* with suffixed personal pronouns (*jw=j*, *jw=f*, *jw=n*, *jw=w*, *jw=sn*, *jw=t*).

Contrasting with this meager early evidence, clearly “grammatical” material from the post-Pharaonic Period is abundant (see Devauchelle 1984: 48 - 49, 53 - 55; Kaplony-Heckel 1974: 229 - 232, 244 - 246), which perhaps bears testimony to a new

perception of language following the integration of Egypt into the Hellenistic world and the introduction of Greek grammatical thought (Eyre 1986: 119; Kaplony-Heckel 1974; but see Tassier 1992: 312 - 313). There are various Ptolemaic Demotic examples of tabulated verbal paradigms, such as Papyrus Berlin 13639 (Erichsen 1948) with a set of injunctive sentences of the type *mj* + *sdm=f* with different verbs, or ostracon Berlin 12.902 with a set of negative perfects *bn-p=f sdm* first with noun subjects and then with pronominal ones, in the latter case always of the verb *gmj*, “find” (Spiegelberg 1925: 18 - 22); ostracon Vienna D 6464 similarly shows this and other Demotic paradigms (Kaplony-Heckel 1974: 244), whereas ostracon Griffith from the same period has written on it the conjugation of *p3 j.dd* + subject (Coptic *ⲡⲉⲕⲁ*) in different persons and in the passive (Reich 1924), and yet another contemporary ostracon displays a writing exercise with many causative verbs (Spiegelberg 1912: 32 - 34). Further Ptolemaic Demotic ostraca contain exercises on forming nouns with *rmt jw=f*, Coptic *ⲡⲉⲕ*- (Hess 1897: 147 - 149), and with *s3-n*, Coptic *ⲙⲁⲛ*-, “man of...” (ostracon Strasbourg 174 & 1617, unpublished, see Spiegelberg 1975: § 29). The similarly Ptolemaic Papyrus Carlsberg XII (Volten 1952) contains a series of grammatical paradigms, including a list of 1st person sg. Demotic completive tenses *šc-tw sdm=j* and the conjugation of the verbs *ph*, “reach,” and *dd*, “say,” in the perfect of the same person. In addition, the same papyrus also contains a “dictionary” of words arranged according to the first consonant, and a similar dictionary occurs on the contemporary Papyrus Gr. Heidelberg 295 (Spiegelberg 1925: 22 - 25). Indeed, it seems that around this time an organized “alphabet” was devised that remained relatively fixed for several centuries (Kahl 1991; Quack 2003).

From the Christian Period there are again many exercises of Coptic conjugation paradigms, such as Papyrus Vind. 570 with the conjugation of the 1st perfect *ⲁⲓⲥⲱⲩⲙ*, or Papyrus Vind. 16794 with the conjugation of the 2nd present *ⲉⲓⲥⲱⲩⲙ* (Hasitzka 1990: 220). Similar exercises occur also on ostraca, and sometimes one finds Greco-Coptic grammatical studies in the form of, e.g., Greek conjugations with Coptic translations (Hasitzka 1990: 221). There is also much material from the Roman Period on

Greek grammar, beginning with examples of morphological paradigms from the first and second centuries CE onwards and later including copies of the contemporary works of Greek grammarians (Cribiore 1996: 52 - 53, 263 - 269). Following the Islamic conquest, Coptic was gradually superseded by Arabic. As it was heading towards extinction in the thirteenth century CE, Coptic scholars began to write grammars of the Coptic language in Arabic (see Sidarus 2001; Vycichl 1991a). Known as *muqaddimabs*, the primary purpose of such works was to rescue Coptic ecclesiastical literature from becoming indecipherable to the faithful. The first and traditionally the most venerated *muqaddimah* is that by John of Sammanud from c. 1240 CE (Khouzam 2002: 97 - 127). His work, like those of his successors, owes much to Arabic national grammar but shows almost no influence from Greek grammatical works. Rather similar in style are, e.g., the *muqaddimabs* of Ibn ad-Duhayri (c. 1270 CE) and Ibn Butros ar-Rahib (c. 1260 CE; see Mallon 1907: 230 - 258). The last and most impressive of these early Coptic grammars is by Athanasius, the bishop of Qus from the late thirteenth century (Bauer 1972). He too uses Arabic grammar adapted for the purpose and has developed phonological discussion, verbal and nominal morphology and classification, as well as notes on the still living dialects of Coptic (Sahidic and Bohairic). In addition to the *muqaddimabs*, there are also the so-called *sullams*, which are early Copto-Arabic dictionaries (Vycichl 1991b). Of these, the *sullam* of Ibn Al-Assal is the first to be organized alphabetically (according to the last letter), whereas in the anonymous fourteenth century *Book of Steps*, the ordering of the words is partly grammatically based, starting as it does from nouns, verbal forms, particles, and prepositions (Munier 1930: 67 - 249).

Finally, a note must also be made concerning the so-called onomastic texts. These are collections of words usually organized into thematic categories such as parts of the human body, minerals, etc., as well as subcategories such as edible vs. non-edible birds, and can seldom be said to show a particularly abstract understanding of lexicography. There are, however, some partial exceptions to this generalization. For instance, in the Ramesseum Onomasticon (Papyrus Berlin 10495; Gardiner 1947: pls. I - VI) from the late Middle Kingdom, the

determinatives of the words listed are as a rule set apart from the rest of the word. The same phenomenon occurs also in a number of roughly contemporary or slightly earlier lists of people and goods such as Papyrus Reisner I, II, and IV (Simpson 1963, 1965, 1986) and many of the Lahun papyri (Collier and Quirke 2006) where the motive for this practice was apparently to help in the calculation of what was listed. Yet this explanation for the phenomenon is not applicable to the onomastic texts, whose authors appear to have had a clear conception of the special functional status of

determinatives that set them apart from the lexical items with which they were associated. An even more interesting case is a first century CE wooden tablet currently in the [Schøyen collection \(MS 189: unedited\)](#) on which is written, in very late hieratic, a set of verbs of motion. They appear to be arranged as synonyms, which seems to indicate a high level of lexicographic understanding. Rather similar in style is the onomasticon of Papyrus Carlsberg 180, where nouns are separated from verbs and the latter follow a broadly synonymic organization (Osing 1998: 67 - 95).

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Specific studies on the linguistic awareness and consciousness of the ancient Egyptians are not legion. Borghouts (2001) provides a fine overview of the more “grammatical” side of the issue, including ancient understanding of lexicography, language contacts, and ancient linguistic terminology. These and other relevant topics such as the Egyptians’ view of language registers are given in Junge (1977), whereas Schenkel (1984) and Quack (2010) offer remarks on and summaries of their conception of foreign languages and of their own mode of communication in comparison. Moers (2000) discusses the role of speech vis-à-vis identity and self-perception.

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