

ÁFRICA ANTIGUA.

EL ANTIGUO EGIPTO,
UNA CIVILIZACIÓN AFRICANA

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Editor:

Josep Cervelló Autuori

Coeditores:

Marcelo Campagno

Montserrat Díaz de Cerio

Ancient Egyptian in the Context of African Languages

Helmut Satzinger

Kunsthistorisches Museum

Ägyptisch-orientalische Sammlung

Wien

Is Egyptian an African language? To answer this, we have to define what is the meaning of "African Language". Is it used (n° 1) in a purely geographical sense, or (n° 2) in terms of genetic language relationship, or (n° 3) in terms of typological language relationship, or (n° 4) in an anthropological or psychological sense?

N° 1 is trivial: Ancient Egyptian was exclusively spoken on African land, though in a marginal region of the continent. It is, no doubt, an African language in this respect. The same is true, more or less, for n° 2. If we follow J. Greenberg —as many scholars do at present— in recognizing four big African language families (macro-phyta), we can state that Egyptian does not belong to those that are exclusively African, viz. Niger-Kordofanian, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan, but rather to the fourth family, which —as is expressed by its name— is to be found both on the African and the Asiatic continent, viz. the Afro-Asiatic (or Hamito-Semitic) family. Thus, Egyptian is genetically related not only to the African sub-families Berber, Chadic and Cushitic —plus Omotic, whose sub-family status is not generally recognized—, but also to the very significant Semitic branch.

N° 3: Genetic relationship has also a bearing on typology. Thus we may find many structural characteristics to be common in both Egyptian and individual Semitic languages, or in Egyptian and Berber, Cushitic and Chadic sub-branches and languages, respectively, though we will also encounter many structural differences. But modern typological linguistics is more interested in structural similarities of neighbouring, though non-related languages, attesting areal contacts. In the neighbourhood of Egypt, we find several Eastern Sudanic languages (above all: Nubian), of the Nilo-Saharan family, but also —in the Kordofan mountains in the centre of the Sudan Republic— the group of the Kordofanian languages, of the Niger-Kordofanian family. Of course, we cannot be sure about the situation of languages five or six thousand years ago; it may be imagined that other members of the latter family were also found in this area, such as members of its big other branch, the Niger-Congo sub-family, of which the modern Bantu languages are just one sub-sub-branch.

As for n° 4 (anthropological or psychological aspects), we must consider the basic facts: whereas the African languages are typically attested in the living speech of both larger communities and comparably small groups, and of societies that are not particularly specialized, Egyptian is (a) several thousands of years older, (b) it is attested in written documents only, some of them of a very formal character, and (c) it is the language of one of the most splendid civilizations not only of its period, but of human history in general. We would be in a somewhat better position to deal with anthropological or psychological resemblance between Egyptian and typical modern African languages if we had access to the living speech of the ancient the Egyptian fallāḥin. As this is not possible except in a very indirect and limited way, it seems ad-

visible to deal with this issue in a very cautious and critical way and—above all—on the basis of profound anthropological experience (not at the disposal of the present author).

In the following, we will put an emphasis on some traits of Ancient Egyptian it does not share with Semitic though we can find comparable evidence in African languages. Let us first of all state that Egyptian belongs to a language type in which the dependent element is in second position in respect to the ruling element:

Verb – Subject – Object:	<i>dwʒ:k Rʿ</i> 'may you praise Rê'
Preposition – Noun:	<i>m dw</i> 'on the (desert) mountain'
Noun – Genitive	<i>sbʒ ni dwʒt</i> 'the door of the underworld'
Noun – Adjective, etc.	<i>imntt nfrt</i> 'the beautiful west'

<i>dwʒ:</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>Rʿ</i>	<i>wbn-</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>dw</i>
praise.PROSP	you.MSG	Rê	rise.AOR	he	in	mountain
may you praise Rê when he rises on the (desert) mountain						

The Egyptian genitive marker is of adjectival origin, i.e., it is attributive: *ni* 'who is in relation to' (cf. Satzinger 1986). In consequence, *ni* displays full concord with the antecedent noun, as do all other adjectives. The same is true, e.g., of the indirect genitive of Egyptian Arabic:

Singular, masculine: *nswt n(i) Kmt* 'the king of Egypt' = *il-mālik b(i)taʿ Māsr*

Singular, feminine: *dpt nt mwt* 'the taste of death'; cf. *il-ʿarabīyya b(i)taʿ(i)t il-mudīr* ('the director's car')

Plural, masculine: *wrw nw ʒbdw* 'the great ones of (the city of) Abydos' = *il-kūbara b(i)tuʿ ʿAbidūs*

Plural, feminine: *hmwt n(w)t wrw* 'the wives of the great ones'

But concord of the genitive marker is also found in the Niger-Kordofanian languages of which the Bantu languages are typical. In this type—the class languages—there is no nominal gender. Instead, they possess a characteristic system of nominal classes, numbering on average ten to twenty. Several of them are arranged in pairs of corresponding singular and plural classes. In these class languages, concord is as important as in the languages with gender classes. Here, this is exemplified by the comparison of Swahili and Middle Egyptian.

Concord In Swahili

'One little knife was sufficient'

Swahili:

<i>Ki.su</i>	<i>ki.dogo</i>	<i>ki.moja</i>	<i>ki.li.tosha</i>
CLASS 7-knife	CLASS 7-little	CLASS 7-one	SUBJ PRON.CLASS 7-PAST-suffice

Egyptian:

<i>wn</i>	<i>w^cØ</i>	<i>dsØ</i>	<i>srØ</i>	<i>mnḥ.w</i>
<i>wn</i>	<i>w^ct</i>	<i>š^ct</i>	<i>šrt</i>	<i>mnḥ.ti</i>
SITUATION.PAST	one.MASC/FEM	knife.MASC/FEM	little.MASC/FEM	be appropriate.STATIVE-3 SING.MASC/FEM

Comment: Swahili has class prefixes and class pronouns, homonymous in this case: *ki-*. The class prefix appears with the noun and each of its attributes, the class subject pronoun with the verb. For Egyptian, two synonyms have been chosen as subject, one masculine, the other one feminine. Egyptian has endings as class markers, in this case *zero* (masculine singular) and *-t* (feminine singular), respectively. The verb-form used here, the Old Perfective or "pseudo-participle", is conjugated by suffixes that are in concord with the class of the subject.

2. "The cook's long knives are enough"

Swahili:

<i>Vi.su</i>	<i>vi.refu</i>	<i>vya</i>	<i>m.pishi</i>	<i>vi.na.tosha</i>
CLASS 8 ² -knife	CLASS 8-long	GEN.CLASS 8	CLASS 1-cook	PERS PRON.CLASS 8-PROGR-suffice

Egyptian:

<i>iw</i>	<i>dsw</i>	<i>šw</i>	<i>nw</i>	<i>psw</i>	<i>mnḥ.w</i>
<i>iw</i>	<i>š^cwt</i>	<i>šw^ct</i>	<i>nwt</i>	<i>psw</i>	<i>mnḥ.ti</i>
SITUATION	knife.	long.	GENITIVE	cook	be appropriate.
	MASC/	MASC/	MASC/		STATIVE-3
	FEM.PLUR	FEM.PLUR	FEM.PLUR		MASC/FEM.PLUR

Comment: This case includes a genitival extension of the nominal subject. In Swahili the class pronoun is prefixed to the genitive marker, *-a* (*vi + a > vya*). The genitival noun has its own class marker (*m-*). In Egyptian, the genitive marker is of adjectival origin ("being in relation to..."). Therefore, concord is expressed by the class marker (masculine plural: *-w*, feminine plural: *-wt*), rather than by a pronominal marker. NB. The resemblance between *mpishi* and *psw* is not as perfectly as it might appear as the relevant Swahili verb is *pika*, not *pisa*.

3. "I have (already) answered the letter which arrived yesterday"

Swahili:

<i>Ni.me.i.jibu</i>	<i>Ø.barua</i>	<i>ili.yo.ku ja</i>	<i>jana</i>
1-PERF-OBJ PRON.CLASS 5-answer	CLASS 5-letter	SUBJ PRON.CLASS 5- PAST-REL.CLASS 5-INF- come	yesterday

Egyptian:

<i>m.k</i>	<i>wšb.n.i</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>mḏt</i>	<i>iwt</i>	<i>m šf</i>
SITUATION	answer-PAST-I ³	to (PREP)	letter.FEM	come.PARTICIPLE PERF.FEM.	...

² Class 8 (*vi*) is the plural class corresponding to class 7 (*ki*), a singular class

³ Suffix pronoun: with verbs, subject expression; with nouns, possessive; with prepositions

Comment: The object of the Swahili version, *barua*, is a foreign word. This is the reason why it does not show the prefix of its nominal class, *i-*. Of the corresponding class pronoun, both the subject and the object form is *(-)li*. Subject pronouns are prefixed to tense markers (*ni-me-*, *i-li-*). Object pronouns are positioned between tense marker and verb: *me-i-jibu*. The cataphoric use of the pronoun *i* in *ni.me.i.jibu* has the effect of marking the object as definite ('the letter'; this seems to be a wide-spread East African isogloss which can be found, *i.a.*, in classical Ethiopian). The relative clause is marked by *o* with the class pronoun prefixed: *i + o > yo*. This element has the same position as the object pronoun. As the subject of the relative clause is coreferential with the antecedent (the 'letter'), there is double concord with the latter: in the relative marker *-yo-* and in the subject pronoun, *i-*. In Egyptian, it is primarily the gender/number concord that marks verb-forms as attributive (*viz.*, participles and relative forms), apart from the vocalisation patterns of the verb forms involved, which are, however, not expressed in writing.

2. Four non-Semitic syntactic features: adverbial sentence, progressive construction, clause conjugations, cleft sentences

2.1. The Adverbial Sentence

Egyptian has three basic types of sentence constructions, depending on the nature of the predicative element:⁴ nominal sentence, adverbial sentence and verbal sentence. There is a fundamental difference between nominal and adverbial predicates, a feature which Egyptian shares with many African and some Western European languages (Spanish, Portuguese, Basque, Celtic languages),⁵ though not with Semitic.

Natural sequence: Subject – Predicate

<i>lw.</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>hr.</i>	<i>i</i>	*he is with me"; "está conmigo"
SITUATION	he	with	me	

⁴ Cf. Polotsky, 1987, 1-8. Also cf. Schenkel, 1965.

⁵ Many languages compared here use an auxiliary *to be*, but not the same one for nominal and adverbial predicates:

Ewe	<i>énye</i>	<i>le</i>
Yoruba	<i>ṣé</i> (cf. "emphatic" <i>ní</i>)	<i>ṣe</i>
Hausa	<i>ne/ce</i> (pronominal)	<i>na</i>
Spanish/Portuguese	<i>ser</i>	<i>estar</i>
Basque	<i>izan</i>	<i>egon</i>
Irish	<i>is</i>	<i>tá</i>
Welsh	<i>yw</i>	<i>mae</i>
Breton	<i>eo</i>	<i>emañ</i> (relative form for Cleft Sentences)

Nominal Sentence

Natural sequence: Predicate - Subject

NN	rn.	I	"my name is NN"; "mi nombre es NN"
NN	name	I.GEN	

2.2. The Progressive Tense

The Egyptian progressive construction is based upon the adverbial sentence. Its predicate is preposition *hr*, "on" + infinitive. In the course of time the preposition disappeared; nevertheless, the infinitive retained an adverbial status, id est it became a gerund. It is assumed that the English progressive form has the same origin (*he is on speaking* > *he is a-speaking* > *he is speaking*)⁶. It is probably mere coincidence that at about the time when the preposition *hr* disappeared in this form, the latter lost its specific progressive meaning and became a normal present. The same happened, incidentally, in spoken Welsh: the construction in question may (and must) be also employed for verbs whose meaning excludes progressive meaning, such as "to like", "to love", etc.: *mae e 'n hoffi*, "he likes" (as if "he is liking"); *mae e 'n eisiau*, "he wants" (as if "he is wanting"); just like *mae e 'n siarad* which may be either "he is speaking" or "he speaks". We may compare with the Egyptian progressive form those of other languages which can either be shown to be built on the same pattern —verbal noun in an adverbial phrase of basically local meaning: *hr sdm*, "on speaking"), as probably English, or certainly Ewe (*élè yiyim* < *élè yiyi me*, "he is in doing"; *yiyi* is the verbal noun of *yí*, "to do"), or be it Welsh (*mae e (y)n gwneud*). But we may as well compare languages that distinguish adverbial predicates (or predicative adverb phrases) from nominal predicates (or predicative noun phrases), by using different constructions and (or) different auxiliaries. Egyptian: *twf hr mdw*, "he is speaking" (cf. *twf ʿ3*, "he is here"; but *sn.i pw*, "he is my brother"); Hausa: *yanā maganā*, "he is talking" (cf. *yanā nan*, "he is here"; but *d'an' uwāna nā*, "he is my brother"); Ewe: *élè yiyim*, "he is in doing" (cf. *élè afi*, "he is here"; but *énye nɔvinyè*, "he is my brother"); Ful: *'o'don yeca*, "he is talking" ('don, "to be somewhere"; "estar"); and similarly many West African languages; but also in Western European languages, as in Spanish *está hablando* (cf. *está aquí*; but *es mi hermano*); Basque: *mintzaten dago*, "he is talking" (cf. *hemen dago*, "he is here"; but *nire anaia da*, "he is my brother"); Welsh: *mae e 'n siarad*, "he is talking" (cf. *mae e yma*, "he is here"; but *fy mrawd yw e*, "he is my brother"); etc.

2.3. The Egyptian clause conjugations

The forms of the core of the Egyptian tense system appear in two basic statuses:

1. independent and/or circumstantial;
2. nominal:
 - substantival ("that"-forms);
 - adjectival-attributive (relative forms).

⁶ The progressive construction is an innovation in English; it is not yet attested for Shakespeare's time.

The Egyptian Suffix Conjugation, Tense System⁷:

Tense:	Status: Independent and/or circumstantial	Substantival ("that"-forms)	Adjectival (relative forms) (e.g., fem. sing.)
Old Preterite	<i>sdm.f (mri.f)</i>	<i>sdm.f (mri.f)</i>	<i>sdmt.f (mrit.f)</i>
Perfect	<i>sdm.n.f</i>	<i>sdm.n.f</i>	<i>sdmt.n.f</i>
Aorist	<i>sdm.f (mri.f)</i>	<i>sdm.f (mrr.f)</i>	<i>sdmt.f (mrrt.f)</i>
Prospective	<i>sdmw.f (mriw.f)</i>	<i>sdm.w.f (mri.w.f)</i>	<i>sdmt.l.f (mrit.l.f)</i>

In the course of time, the adjectival forms disappeared, whereas the substantival forms became restricted to the so-called emphatic construction, an adverb-rhematizing construction based upon the matrix of the adverbial sentence⁸. For this see below. Whereas Semitic lacks anything like nominal conjugations —the jussive can be compared with the Egyptian subjunctive, but not with the nominal forms—, clausal conjugations can be found in several African languages. Other languages have "second tenses" or "emphatic tenses" that correspond to the use of the substantival forms in later Egyptian⁹. In the following, a short account of the Old Nubian clause forms in the framework of the tense system¹⁰.

The basic form of the Old Nubian tenses is the gerund (or "verbid") which consists of the verbal base plus *l*. The verbal base is formed by the root plus a tense marker (*Ø*, *a*, *s*, *ad/d*): *pes+Ø+l* > *pesil*, "saying", *kip+a+l* > *kipot*, "having eaten", etc. A nominal subject is expressed by the noun in the genitive (thus #noun.GEN gerund#): *till-in ir-kan*, "that God is born", "God being born" (*kan*- is the passive marker). If the subject is pronominal, the gerund is conjugated which yields the form of the "subjunctive": *pesin* (= *pes+l+n*), "that he says", *kiparu* (= *kipa+l+u*), "that we have eaten", etc.:

Clause, implicit subject: gerund (verbal base + *l*) — *pesil* (= *pes+l*), "saying", etc.

Clause, pronominal subject: "subjunctive" (conjugated gerund) — *pesin* (= *pes+l+n*), "that he says", etc.

Clause, nominal subject: noun. GENITIVE + gerund — *itin pesil* (= *it+n pes+l*), "that the man says", etc.

Main sentence, pronominal subject: "indicative" ("subjunctive".PREDICATIVE) — *pesna* (= *pes+l+n+a*), "he says".

Main sentence, nominal subject: noun.NOMINATIVE + "predicative" — *itil pessa* (= *it+l pes+l+a*), "the man says".

⁷ Satzinger, 1986; Schenkel, 1990, 101-102.

⁸ Satzinger, 1989, 200, n. 11; also cf. Satzinger, 1993b, 205-206.

⁹ On Hausa and the Chadic languages in general, see Jungraithmayr, 1994, who also refers to Ful (Mukarovsky, 1953) and Ewe.

¹⁰ See Browne, 1982 and 1989; Satzinger, 1995 (and printing).

	Clause conjugation	Main sentence conjugation
Infinite	Gerund: VERB-TENSE-I	Predicative: VERB-TENSE-I-CASE
Conjugation	Subjunctive: VERB-TENSE-I-NUMBER.PERSON	Indicative: VERB-TENSE-I-NUMBER.PERSON-CASE

Structure of Old Nubian verb-forms:

VERB-TENSE-I-NUMBER.PERSON (of subject)-CASE-NUMBER (of adjectival forms)

TENSE: -Ø- (PRESENT), -a- (PERFECT), -s- (PRETERITE), -ad- (FUTURE I), -d- (FUTURE II)

NUMBER.PERSON: -i- (sg. 1), -n- (sg. 2/3), -u- (pl. 1/2), -an- (pl. 3)

CASE: -a (PREDICATIVE)

For comparison, the structure of Egyptian verb-forms (suffix conjugation):

VERB(TENSE.STATUS)-GENDER/NUMBER (of adjectival forms)-TENSE-VOICE-SUBJECT

2.4. The Cleft Sentence and the "emphatic construction"

Many languages have rhematizing constructions of the Cleft Sentence structure *it is I who did it* instead of plain *I did it*, or *it is you I saw* instead of *I saw you*. In our context, we are interested in languages that dispose of clausal verb forms that are employed in the second part of the Cleft Sentences. In Egyptian, these are the participles and the relative forms. In the African languages mentioned above —except Old Nubian—, the "second tenses" (or whatever they are called) are used.

Rhematizing (or focalizing) a noun¹¹.

Matrix of the Tripartite Nominal Sentence:

#Noun_{predicate/theme/focus} —pw—Relative Clause_{subject/theme/presupposition} #

rheme or focus	theme or supposition
Middle Egyptian: <i>ink pw</i> , "It is I..."	<i>mdw</i> (participle) <i>n.k</i> ...who speaks to you"
Late Egyptian: <i>nfp3-</i> , "It is he..."	<i>(l.)wn</i> (participle) <i>im 'h'</i> ...who was standing there"

In Egyptian, the Cleft Sentence is restricted to the rhematization of nouns (including personal pronouns). For rhematizing adverbials, another pattern is used, viz. the so-called emphatic construction. It is based upon an adverbial sentence: "that I saw you is yesterday" (cf. the French Cleft Sentence "c'est hier que je t'ai vu", with a different word-order). In this construction, the substantival forms are used:

¹¹ On Coptic see Polotsky, 1962 and 1987; on Late Egyptian: Satzinger, 1981; Neveu, 1994 and 1996; Ritter, 1994; on Middle Egyptian cf. Polotsky, 1976.

theme or supposition		rheme or focus	
gmī.n.k	sw	mī	m
(find-PAST-you).NOUN	him	like	what?

Occasionally, not only the theme is a clause (a noun clause, or "that"-clause) but also the rheme; the adverb slot is filled by a clause of circumstance. A typical case is the Egyptian expression for "to find (or see) someone / something in this or that state".

gm.n.f	s	im	ḥ'w	hr mryt
(find-PAST-you).NOUN	man	there	stand up.STATIVE.3m.sg.	on landing place
"He found a man there..."			...standing on the landing place"	

In respect to the features that I have been sketched in these pages, but also to several others that I have not been mentioned here, Egyptian has little resemblance to the Semitic language type. On the other hand, it shares them with many African languages, both Afro-Asiatic and others, in particular languages of West Africa. It should be remembered that this is not an issue concerning genetic relationship but rather typological correspondence which may or may not, in the individual cases, be explained by genetic relationship or areal contacts.

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