


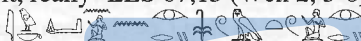
HOW GOOD WAS TJEKER-BA'Ī'S EGYPTIAN?

Mockery at foreign diction in the Report of Wenamūn*

Helmut Satzinger, Wien

Wenamūn's report on his journey to Canaan (in the XIth century BC) is one of the most attractive pieces of Late Egyptian literature. In a historical situation when Egyptian influence in Syria had practically evaporated, the High-priest of Amun at Thebes sends one of his officials to Byblos in order to obtain timber from the Lebanon for building the sacred bark of Amun of Karnak anew. The language of this witty and self-ironical piece of literature is Late Egyptian in its purest form, it seems to be deliberately styled in a truly *written-as-if-spoken* idiom.¹ Modern grammarians owe a considerable number of sentences that elucidate and illustrate structures of the Late Egyptian language to the mastership of its author. On the other hand, this clearly written text has several passages that contain severe cruces that have not yet been solved by any of the many scholars engaged in studying the text.

While reading Wenamūn in class lately, I made a strange discovery. It occurred to me that many of those passages that offer unsolvable problems to the grammarian (but also to the translator) are to be found in the direct speech of non-Egyptians, in particular in the words of Tjeker-ba'ī, prince of Byblos.


Some of the grammatical cruces are of a very basic nature. E. g., the text may have personal pronouns of a wrong paradigm. In his dispute with the prince of Byblos, Wenamūn mentions that timber had again and again been provided by the prince's ancestors. The prince replies:  *nt.w j.jr sw m m3't* 'It is they who have done it, really' LES 67,13 (Wen 2, 5-6). This sentence poses no problems. The prince continues:  *jw.k (r) djt n.j n jr sw, mtw.j jr sw* LES 67, 14-15 (Wen 2,6). The meaning is obviously 'If you pay me for doing it, I shall do it'. Of the verbal constructions involved, the second is clearly the conjunctive, 1st person sing., *mtw.j* + infinitive. The first construction is then, of all constructions that can possibly be continued by the conjunctive,² the FUTURE, viz., *jw.k* (plus *r*, which is not written) plus infinitive. Of course, the expected forms would be *jw.k (r) djt n.j n jrt.f* (Coptic ... N-ⲁⲁϣ), and *mtw.j jrt.f* (Coptic NTⲁ-ⲁⲁϣ), 'You shall give me for doing it, and I shall do it', respectively, *jr sw*, if emended *j.jr sw*, means either 'who has done it' (active participle; Late Egyptian has only the perfective participles preserved), or 'do it!' (imperative). Probably we can render the psychological effect of the substitution of *jr sw* for *jrt.f* by a translation

* Text of a paper given at the International Symposium on Linguistic and Ethno-Cultural History of Semitic Peoples, Moscow, September 20-24, 1993.

1 Cf. O. Goldwasser, On the choice of registers – Studies on the grammar of papyrus Anastasi I, in *Studies in Egyptology Presented to Miriam Lichtheim*, Jerusalem 1990, 203.

2 J. Černý and S.I. Groll, *A Late Egyptian Grammar*, 440-443.

like ‘You shall give me for *done it*, and I will *done it!*’. Notice the analogy of the participle *j.jr* in the previous sentence.

When eventually the prince had procured the timber, he said to Wenamūn: ‘Look – the commission which my ancestors used to do previously, I have done it (too), whereas you, for your part, have not done for me that which your ancestors used to do for me. See, the end of your timber has been reached, as it is lying (here). Act according to my wish and start loading it!’  *hr jn bn jw.w (r) djt sw n.k* ‘For are they not to give it to you?’ LES 72,2-3 (Wen 2,49). The form expected is *jw.w (r) djt.f* (FUTURE: Coptic ⲉⲣⲉ-ⲧⲁⲁⲩ).

Such unexpected morphological features, as a wrong paradigm of the personal pronoun, are unequivocal cases of “mistakes”, though, of course, deliberate ones. Deviations from the language standard of this kind are very unlikely to be made by a native speaker, particularly not by the author of a text like Wenamūn, and not even by someone whose linguistic instinct is not of the same high level. On the other hand, such blunders will easily happen to a foreigner whose knowledge of the native language is imperfect. This is, indeed, the reason why this kind of slip seems to be a good means of mocking foreigners, by imitating a characteristic mistake of theirs. I believe, therefore, that the author of the Wenamūn report, in perfect conformity with his irony and psychology, characterized the prince of Byblos, and probably other non-Egyptians, by making them talk in a typical foreign way – not constantly, but every now and then, as a stylistic means both to characterize the situation, to enliven the narration and to attract the attention of the audience or reader in a humorous way.

EXCURSUS 1

Egyptian has no specific ‘object pronoun’, nor has it a ‘subject pronoun’.³ In general, the dependent pronoun (*sw*, etc.) is used for the object, as with the “suffix conjugation” (which is actually a “suffix pronoun conjugation”) including the participles and the imperative, and with the stative (old perfective); cf. in Middle Egyptian, *jw rh.n.f sw* ‘he (has) learned it’, *rh sw* ‘he who (has) learned it’, *rh sw* ‘learn it!’, *jw.f rh.w sw* ‘he knows it’. With the infinitive, however, the suffix pronoun (*f*, etc.) is mostly used, though the object is expressed by the dependent pronoun if the agent is expressed by the suffix pronoun. When by Late Egyptian times the progressive and periphrastic constructions – both formed with the infinitive (e. g., *jw.f hr sdm*, and *j.jr.f sdm*, respectively) – began to supersede the simple constructions, the suffix pronoun gained ground at the expense of the dependent pronoun. By the time of Coptic, the dependent pronoun had disappeared, as it was replaced by the suffix pronoun even with the imperative. Late Egyptian is positioned half-way in this development, the two pronouns being used for the object to approximately the same extent – a situation that must have been rather confusing for non-Egyptians.

3 Cf. H. Satzinger, Structural analysis of the Egyptian independent personal pronoun, in: *Proceedings of the Fifth International Hamito-Semitic Congress 1987* (H.G. Mukarovsky, ed.), vol. II. Beiträge zur Afrikanistik 41, 1991, 121-135.

Apart from the suffix pronoun, Demotic has a particular object pronoun which resembles the new subject pronoun of the adverbial sentence, viz. *tw.j*,⁴ *tw.k*, *tw.t*, *s* (< *sw*, *sj*) etc. It is used with the suffix conjugation. Černý and Groll⁵ assume that a similar paradigm exists already in Late Egyptian, though with the forms *tw.f*, *tw.s*, *tw.w* for the 3rd pers., masc., fem., and pl., respectively. Borghouts⁶ has shown that most of the evidence (which is rather scanty and does not represent all forms) is pronominal objects of weak infinitives (ending in *t*); hence we are dealing with the normal suffix pronoun. (On the other hand, Borghouts offers Late Egyptian evidence for the Demotic new object pronoun, used with the suffix conjugation.)

Our case – *jr(t) sw* instead of *jrt.f* – is different from both the cases mentioned: it is neither *t(w).f* after a (weak) infinitive (which is just normal Late Egyptian spelling), nor *s(w)* after a suffix conjugation (which is Demotic). We may conclude that *jr(t) sw* instead of *jrt.f* is just *wrong*.

It is easy to judge on morphological features. It is, however, very difficult if not impossible to prove a syntactic feature of Late Egyptian to be wrong. We may organize all extant constructions in grammatical systems and find out various reasons why a particular construction has been chosen in a given passage. We may – and certainly shall – even develop a certain instinct for the language. But we will never achieve the certainty of judgement which a native speaker of a language would have. With this proviso, the following passages will be quoted as some more instances of mockery in our text.

In the long conversation in the prince's loft, he professes not to be a slave of Amun's, and he claims to be the lord of the Lebanon mountains: *jw.j () š sgp r p3-Rbrn, j.jr t3-pt wn, jw n3-ht dj h3'(ww) spt p3-jjm* LES 68, 8-10 (Wen 2, 13-14). The obvious meaning is 'It doesn't take me more than to shout to the Lebanon, and the sky will open, and the wood will lie on the ground by the sea coast.' Early translations had little difficulty; cf. Maspero⁷: 'I cry with a loud voice ..., and the heaven opens, and the wood lies ...'. Progress in Late Egyptian grammar, however, causes us to be intrigued by several facts: *jw.j () š*, being obviously in initial position, should be a FUTURE (*jw.j r š*, Coptic ⲉⲓⲙⲓⲛⲓ); there is, however, a slight possibility that it is an anticipated clause of circumstance of the PRESENT (*jw.j hr š*, Coptic ⲉⲓⲙⲓⲛⲓ)⁸. *j.jr t3-pt wn* cannot be anything but an "emphatic" form, i.e., a form that rhematizes an adverbial expression. In our case, the latter could only be a clause of circumstance, *jw n3-ht dj h3'(ww)*. A translation that accords to this analysis is nonsensical: 'I shall/will shout up to the Lebanon (or, alternatively, 'I shouting up to etc.') – it is while the wood lies on the ground by the sea coast that the sky opens.' But I am sure that

4 Usually, the preformative is transcribed *tw*, though there is no hint whatever to the existence of a consonantal element *w* after *t*; it is an affair of group writing. A transcription *t.j*, etc. would seem more appropriate.

5 Op. cit., 32 (§ 2.5).

6 J.F. Borghouts, Object pronouns of the *tw*-type in Late Egyptian, in: *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 11, 1980, 99-109.

7 G. Maspero, *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*.

8 Cf. H. Satzinger, *Neuägyptische Studien*, 102-103.

this is what the sentence sounded like to an Egyptian – the fuzziness of the boasting of a foreign local ruler.

The following seems to be of a similar character. In the same conversation, another argument of the prince's is: *mk j.jr Jmn hrw m t3-pt* ("emphatic" form), *jw dj.f Sth m rk.f* (clause of circumstance of the PERFECT TENSE, as rheme), *hr j.jr Jmn grg* ("emphatic" form) *n n3-t3w (r-)dr.w, j.jr.f grg.w* ("emphatic" form) *jw grg.f p3-t3 n Kmt p3-(j.)jw.k jm hr h3t* (clause of circumstance of the PERFECT TENSE, as rheme) LES 68,15-69,2 (Wen 2, 19-21). The meaning of the passage is probably 'Amun (the impersonation of Egypt) does not thunder in the sky unless he has allowed Seth (= the tempest, the lightning; at the same time the impersonation of the Syrian lands) to do his job (=no thunder without lightning). Now Amun has founded all the lands only after he had first founded the land of Egypt – the one that you have come from.' A "grammatical" translation would be 'See, it is after he put Seth in his realm that Amun made his (own) voice sound in the sky (as thunder). But it is all countries⁹ that Amun founded, it is, however, after he had first founded the land of Egypt – the one where you have come from – that he founded them.' Again, the author lets the prince get entangled in the difficulties of the "emphatic" form, a grammatical phenomenon that is extremely alien to native speakers of a Semitic language. He is mocking foreigners who try without success to make use of a very typical Egyptian construction.

EXCURSUS 2

The indirect complement *n n3-t3w* etc. is probably meant to have the meaning of a direct complement, 'founded all countries'. Otherwise, it could only mean 'it is for all countries that Amun founded them' which does not make much sense. A direct complement, however, is not of adverbial nature and cannot, therefore, be rhematized by an "emphatic" form. Again, we are probably dealing with another deliberate deviation from standard speech.


There is another instance of an indirect complement (with a preposition spelt *n*) where we would expect a direct complement. Beder, prince of Dor, says to Wenamūn: *hr ptr bw-jr.j m3 n t3j-w3bt j.3d.k n.j* 'Now look, I cannot understand the answer which you said to me' LES 62,12 (Wen 1,17-18).



Of course, the *n* may be a spelling for *m*: The indirect object with *n* < *m* in the place of the direct object is normal¹⁰ in the Coptic durative tenses, and possible in the non-durative tenses. In the older stages of the language, however, only a very few instances have been found.¹¹ But note that neither the instances discussed here (*j.jr ... grg*, an "emphatic"

⁹ See the short excursus after this paragraph.

¹⁰ For details see A. Shisha-Halevy, *Coptic Grammatical Categories. Structural Studies in the Syntax of Shenoutean Sahidic* (=Analecta Orientalia 53), chapter 3.

¹¹ Cf. T.G.H. James, *The Hekanakhte Papers*, 104; D.P. Silverman, An emphasized direct object of a nominal verb in Middle Egyptian, in: *Orientalia* 49, 1980, 199-203 (dealing with two sentences with "emphatic" forms); a late Egyptian instance is *wn.jn.f hr djt m3.f m p3 (j.) hr nb* 'thereupon he let him know everything that had happened' *Late Egyptian Stories* 16,14 (Orb 7,6-7); a Late Period instance can be found at H. Altenmüller, Der "Socle Béhague" und ein Statuentorso in

In other cases, it is perhaps foreign idiomatic uses that characterize the speech of the Canaanites – and that make these passages at the same time difficult for us. After Wenamūn has been robbed in the harbour of Dor, he makes a daring attempt to have Beder, the lord of the town and harbour, compensate him for the loss of the theft. The latter begins his rebuke with the words:  n dns.k, n mnḥ.k LES 62, 11 (Wen 1, 17). Egyptology has proved rather helpless in regard to this expression: ‘To thy wrath, and to thy kindness!’ (Maspero¹³); ‘Bist du böse (?), oder bist du gut?’ (Erman¹⁴); ‘Are you in earnest, or are you inventing?’ (Gardiner¹⁵); ‘Are you serious? Are you joking?’ (Lichtheim¹⁶; sim. Blumenthal¹⁷); ‘To your importance! To your excellence!’ (Goedicke¹⁸). I agree with those who assume that *dns.k* and *mnḥ.k* are verbal nouns, or abstracts, with possessive pronouns, rather than *sḏm.f* forms. As to their lexical meanings, it is probably Goedicke who has hit the mark. Nevertheless, his translation is meaningless in its context. The reason is perhaps that it is the Egyptian translation of a Canaanite idiom.

As for vocabulary, we learn a few Canaanite words, like *hbr* (i.e., *ḥabr-*) ‘business relation’, or *mrk* (i.e., **birk-?*) ‘present’.¹⁹ They are used in order to characterize the Canaanite background of the story, rather than to mock. Furthermore, we learn a greeting formula that is otherwise unknown, and untranslatable, and may either be Canaanite, or Canaan-Egyptian. Wenamūn uses it when he is received by prince Tjeker-ba‘I in his loft:  *sfty Imn* LES 66,6 (Wen 1,50). We may think of a Canaanite **šāpīti* ‘*Amān* ‘my judge (cf.  IV) is Amun’.²⁰ As the *šin* of *šofet* goes back to Sem. *t* it is appropriately rendered by <*s*> in Egyptian. It would be nicer if Sem. *t* were rendered by Egyptian <*d*>, rather than <*t*>. But <*t*> is also encountered: according to Helck²¹ it is even the normal rendering of Sem. *t* after vowels, and it may occur after consonants too. But

Wien, in: *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden* 46, 1965, 27: *m.k njs.tw jm.k m hrw pn* 'they will call you today'.

12 See last footnote.

13 G. Maspero, *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*.

14 A. Erman, *Die Literatur der Aegypter*.

15 A.H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, 307.

16 M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II.

17 E. Blumenthal, *Altägyptische Reiseerzählungen*.

18 H. Goedicke, *The Report of Wenamun*.

19 Cf. G. Vittmann, Nochmals zur Etymologie von *mrk* (Wb II, 113), in: *Göttinger Miszellen* 15, 1975, 45-46.

20 This word seems to occur as a title of a retainer of the Hyksos king Apophis on a strange monument of which two fragments have been unearthed at Tell el-Dab'a, which is in all probability ancient Avaris. See I. Hein and H. Satzinger, *Stelen des Mittleren Reiches einschließlich der I. und II. Zwischenzeit*, Teil II (Corpus Antiquitatum Aegyptiacarum Wien, no. 7), 162 (stela Vienna 8606): 'the *spt* (?) *Hr-nht*.' See also W. K. Simpson, The Hyksos Princess Tany, in: *Chronique d'Égypte* 34, 1959, 233-239.

21 W. Helck, *Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend* (=Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 5), 2nd edition, 538.

sfty could also be just a joking transmogrification of a genuine Canaanite greeting word, with the intent of making it sound like *sftw* 'butcher'.

At the time the Wenamūn report was written, Egyptians must have been used to foreigners from Canaan and their particular way of speaking Egyptian for many centuries. The author of the text – there should not be any doubt that a text of such eminent literary qualities is a piece of literature and not just a documentary report – chose a naturalistic medium for his work, i.e., a language *written-as-if-spoken*. Furthermore he chose a realistic stylistic means to model his foreign characters: he let them make exactly those slips in language that an audience or reader might expect from them, like wrong pronouns and wrong verb forms. Of course he did not tire the listener/reader by continually proceeding like this – just now and then, as a masterly artifice to catch the reader's attention and response.

In Egyptian literature, this is probably a unique case of an author characterizing foreigners by imitating typically foreign diction. It should, however, be noted that in respect to the direct speech of Egyptians a comparable device is quite normal. At least from the late Old Kingdom onwards, bilingualism existed in Egypt, in so far as a classical standard of the language – ideally that of the Old Kingdom was applied to formal utterances (in particular, to religious texts). When, however, direct speech is quoted, it appears in a more "progressive" language, i.e., in an idiom that is probably very close to the spoken language. Good examples for this are tomb inscriptions that render the conversations of workers in the manner of "balloons", noticeably in the late Old Kingdom and during the 18th Dynasty.²²