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ON THE ORIGIN OF THE SAHIDIC DIALECT

The question of the origin of the Sahidic dialect of Coptic has been discussed for many years, and highly controversial standpoints have been taken. For lack of time I cannot even briefly review this discussion¹. The following remarks will not so much deal with the place of origin of S² but rather with the situation and the circumstances in which S came into existence. After a new structural analysis of the pertinent linguistic data, a historical interpretation will be attempted.

Comparison³ of the consonantal systems of the Coptic dialects (fig. 1)³ results in a preliminary grouping.

Egn.	inter-dial. symbol	example (S)	attested in centuries									
			A	C	I	P	L	S	M	H	N	F
			4-5	10!	4	4	4-5	3-	5-6	9!	3-4-	4-
h, h ₁	h	ⲉⲟⲩⲛ, ⲉⲫⲟⲟⲩ	ⲉ	(ⲉ)	ⲉ	h	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	h
h ₂	h	ⲙⲟⲛⲉ	ⲉ	(ⲉ)	(ⲙ)	ⲟ	ⲙ	ⲙ	ⲙ	ⲙ	ⲙ	ⲙ
r, t, ... >	>	ⲙⲉⲉⲩⲉ	VV	VV	VV	V⊥	VV	VV	V	V	VV	V
r	r	ⲫⲁⲛ	ⲫ	ⲫ	ⲫ	ⲫ	ⲫ	ⲫ	ⲫ	ⲫ	ⲕ	ⲫ
p, t, ṭ, k		ⲛⲉ ⲧⲟ	no aspirates									asp.
ṭ, d > č, ě		ⲭⲟⲉⲓⲈ ⲭⲟ	ⲭ									ⲭ
q, k, g > k', g'		ⲃⲟ	ⲃ	→	ⲃ	K	ⲃ	→	ⲃ	ⲃ	ⲃ	ⲃ

FIG. 1 - CONSONANTS

The most conspicuous divergence can perhaps be seen in the presence of aspirates in B (ϕ, θ, σ, χ), and also in that in B ς and ⲭ differ from each other not in their articulatory basis, but rather in the presence or absence of aspiration. F, of course, is characterized by its lambdacism.

A and C, as well as I and P, but also B, have preserved the quality of Egyptian $h > h$ (including h_1), against the shift from h to h in all other dialects (L, S, M, H, N, F).

A and C are further characterized by retaining h (written ⲕ , and ⲕ , respectively), where most other dialects display a shift from h (i.e. h_2) to ⲕ (written ⲕ).

Both I and P have a special sign for this phenomenon, namely ⲕ and ⲕ , respectively. Since the former sign is graphically derived from the sign for ⲕ , ⲕ , one is tempted to assume a pronunciation similar to the latter, like [ç].⁴

No indication of the glottal stop, by means of doubling a stressed vowel (except for P where a sign of demotic origin is used), is found in dialects M, H, N, and B, and according to P. Kahle, originally in F, either.

Egn.	inter-dial. symbol	example (S)	A	C	I	P	L	S	M	H	N	F	B
			attested in centuries										
			4-6	10!	4	4	4-5	3-	5-6	9!	3-4-	4-	
* ⲁ	" ⲁ "	ⲒⲐ, ⲐⲐⲐⲐ=	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲁ	Ⲑ
	" ⲁ "	CON	ⲁ	:	Ⲑ	:	Ⲑ	:	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲁ	Ⲑ
	" ⲁ "	ⲐⲐⲁⲁⲐ	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲁ	ⲉ	:	ⲁ	:	ⲉ
* ⲁ < * ⲁ / ⲁ	" ⲁ "	Ⲑⲁⲁ, Ⲑⲁⲁ=	ⲉ	:	ⲁ	:	ⲁ	:	ⲉ	:	ⲁ	:	ⲉ
	" ⲁ "	Ⲑⲉ, Ⲑⲉⲉⲉⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲉ
	" ⲁ "	ⲐⲐⲐⲉ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	ⲉ
* Ⲑ < * Ⲑ	" Ⲑ "	ⲕⲐ, ⲐⲐⲐⲐ	ⲐⲐ	:	Ⲑ	:	Ⲑ	:	Ⲑ	:	Ⲑ	:	Ⲑ
	" Ⲑ "	ⲕⲐⲐ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ	Ⲑ
pre-stress "a"	ⲐⲁⲕⲐ ⲁⲐⲐⲐⲉ	ⲉ, ⲁ	:	ⲁ	:	ⲉ	ⲁ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲁ	ⲉ	ⲉ	ⲁ
pre-stress "e"	ⲉⲐⲐ=	ⲁ	:	ⲉ	:	ⲁ	ⲁ	:	ⲉ	ⲉ	Ⲑ	ⲉ	ⲉ

FIG. 2 - VOWELS

To this, the evidence of the vocalism (cf. fig. 2)⁵ may be added. We clearly discern a central group (M, H, N, F) which is characterized by ⲁ for "o" and "o", by ⲉ vs. ⲁ for "a" and "a", and by Ⲑ for "e" and "e" (except for M, which agrees with the left group in rendering "e" by zero).

On the right (i.e. in the north) there is B (plus K, G) which has Ⲑ for "o" and "o", ⲁ for "a" and "a", and ⲉ for "e" and "e".

The left group consists of three couples of dialects: A and C, I and P, and L and S. Whereas there is full agreement for "o", "a", "e", and "e", namely Ⲑ , ⲁ , ⲉ , and zero, there are quite significant contrastive groupings for the other vowels. Thus "o" and "a" are represented in A, I, and L by ⲁ and ⲉ , respectively; in C, P, and S, however, by Ⲑ and ⲁ (as in B!). Similarly, "o" in the first group

(except for many L texts) is OY , in the second group, however, ω (as in B!). And pre-stress "a" in the first group is often ϵ , as it is in P; in C and S, however, it is always Δ (again, as in B!). In some cases there is a convergence with dialect M of the central main group: like both the first and the second group, M has zero for "e". Like the first group (A, I, L), M distinguishes "ō'" and "ō" by rendering the former by a symbol for a more closed sound: A. I (L) OY [u:] vs. M ω [o:], and A. I. L ω [o:] vs. M O [ɔ:].⁶ Pre-stress "a" is in many M words represented by ϵ , in others by Δ . In the other dialects of the central main group it is generally ϵ .

Recent recognition of dialects like I, P, C, and also M, H, N, has led to a more complex view of the position of S among the other Coptic dialects. It is not S alone among the Upper Egyptian idioms that displays the CON , PAN -vocalism⁷. The CON -form is shared with C and P, and the PAN -form is to be found in C, P, and H and N.

The localization of the individual dialects is a matter of an extremely controversial nature. Here, only a simple argument of negative evidence shall be adduced: I do not think there is any cogent *extra-linguistic* evidence to disprove the grouping together of the couples A and C, I and P, L and S, and of M and H/N. It may be assumed that these groups of dialects may in each respective case come from approximately the same areas, as is suggested especially by an analysis of the consonantal systems.

This would mean that in more or less the same area there existed both a dialect with CAN , PEN -vocalism, and another one that is practically identical with the first, except for the CON , PAN -vocalism (of B!).

Turning now to considering the chronological aspects of Coptic vocalism, we can discern two main vowel shifts in the pre-Coptic period. At a certain time between the reign of Ramessēs II (1290-1224) and the Assyrian period (VIII-VII cent. B.C.), Egyptian \bar{a} became \bar{o} , and \bar{u} and \bar{u} became \bar{e} and \bar{e} , respectively (this resulted in a merging of primary \bar{u} and \bar{i}).⁸ Neo-Babylonian transcriptions of Egyptian proper names from the beginning of the Persian period (from 525 B.C. onwards) prove a shift from \bar{e} to \bar{a} (as in B, S, and others): cf. Assyrian Puṭubišti with Neo-Babylonian Paṭuastu, etc.⁹ The shift from \bar{a} to \bar{o} (as in the word CON of B, S, and others) is assumed to have taken place at about the same period¹⁰.

Of course it was Lower Egypt, including Memphis, that played the most important role in politics and culture, and all the relevant data will be coming from this area. The above-mentioned evidence does not necessarily prove the same shifts (from \bar{e} to \bar{a} and from \bar{a} to \bar{o}) for areas further south. There is, therefore, no need to assume

that the C&N, P&N-vocalism in many Upper Egyptian idioms does not go directly back to the ancient (i.e. pre-Persian) pronunciation.

The general shift from \check{a} to \check{o} in the Persian period must not be confused with the shift from \check{a} to \check{o} before a glottal stop, which is already attested for the Amarna period, ca. 1350 B.C. (cuneiform $kuihku$ for $*koyihko < *ka\} -hir-ka\}$)¹¹.

If the CON, PAN-vocalism is a Lower Egyptian feature, and the C&N, P&N-vocalism is the original pronunciation, which was preserved in Upper Egypt, how can we, then, account for the existence of o/a-dialects (S, P, C) alongside with a/e-dialects in Upper Egypt? I venture the following suggestion. At a given time at the beginning of the Persian domination or later, the need was felt in the Thebaid to acquire knowledge of the idiom that was spoken by the ruling class of the north. The idiom of the capital - Memphis¹² - was taken over by everyone who sought to succeed in the realms of administration and politics. What was perhaps first thought to be a need may later have become a fashion.

Nevertheless the local a/e-idioms never ceased to exist. There were too many persons whose social rank excluded them from the group of the new speakers of Memphite (either as a second language or as a mother-tongue). We have to reckon with a situation of diglossy that will have prevailed from that time onward. In a certain situation - when during the ptolemaic rule a nationalist spirit arose - the a/e-idioms may even have gained the role of a traditionalists' parlance, thus rebuking the former upper class idiom.

A diglossy of many centuries will necessarily have resulted in mutual penetration of the two idioms involved. The original Upper Egyptian vernaculars must have become standardized to a certain degree, due to the common superstratum, whereas the latter will have developed numerous local variants, caused by the peculiarities of the indigenous C&N, P&N-idioms. This is exactly the situation of the Coptic dialects as they are actually attested. S, then, is the off-spring of just one local variant of the former upper class idiom of the Nile Valley, and P is another. S was developed near the area in which the ancestor of L was spoken, since S is the result of L's influence on the assumed Memphite idiom. I is, likewise, the indigenous peer of P, and the same could be true of A and C, although the latter is attested very late.

In Middle Egypt the situation may have been different. Due to the lack of an administrative and economic center like Thebes and its God's state of Amun, integration of the Memphite idiom was not achieved in the same measure as in the Thebaid. On the other hand, Memphis was not so far away that its language was totally unfamiliar to the inhabitants of the area. Yet, it remained foreign. Idioms

like H and N may be reflections of a certain integration, but they could as well have resulted from a later contact of traditional idioms (not unlike M) with classical S¹³.

It is generally accepted that S did not owe its role of an enchoric koinē in Upper Egypt to Christianity, but rather had assumed that function at a considerably earlier time. The question still arises why it was S among all Upper Egyptian o/a-idioms that gained its prominence. The answer may be sought in the often alluded "neutral character" (as it is called) of that dialect in respect to phonology and other aspects of grammar¹⁴.

The hypothesis which I have been allowed to develop here cannot claim to solve all problems involved. Further discussion may reveal weak points and inconsistencies. But I should like to offer as a challenge that we should take into consideration the historical aspects of the pre-Coptic development, more than has been the case hitherto.

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NOTES

1. See, e.g., Kahle 1954, I, 193ff.; Polotsky 1970; Nagel 1972, 16ff.; Kasser 1975, 401ff.
2. Whereas the traditional belief was that S was originally spoken at Thebes, different views have later arisen. The original home of S is thought to be in the lower Nile Valley from Oxyrhynchus northward (Worrell 1932, 68); in the area from Herakleopolis northward, including Memphis and even parts of the Delta (Vergote 1955, 175; 1961, 245; 1973/1, Ia, 2); at Alexandria (Kahle 1954, 68). Cf. Polotsky 1970, 560-561.
3. Fig. 1 is largely based on the data given by Kasser 1973, 93.
4. Vergote 1973/2, 54f.
5. Fig. 2 is largely based on the data given by Kasser 1973, 97, but also, e.g., on Osing 1976. The values of the interdialectal symbols (between quotation marks) are based on B: "o", "e", and "ö", are $O < *ä$, $E < *ë$, and $\omega < *ä$, respectively, before ancient (New Kingdom) glottal stop; "a" is $\Delta < *ä$ before ancient *Ayin, h, h, etc.
6. Quecke 1974, 88-89; cf. Schenke 1978, 90 and note 10.
7. Cf. Polotsky 1970, 561.
8. Osing 1976 I, 11; II, 375 (note 52); 454 (note 106).
9. Osing 1976 II, 376 (note 55).
10. Osing 1976 II, 360 (note 37).
11. Osing 1976 I, 11; II, 363 (note 40).
12. The idiom of Memphis is not directly attested. Vergote is of the opinion that Memphis lay in the S speaking area (cf. supra note 2), a view which is mainly based on resemblances between S and B. The idiom of Memphis can perhaps be seen in texts displaying a type of B with certain "southern" features; e.g., Browne 1979, 2ff. (found at Karanis); Preisendanz 1973, 70ff. (lines 94-154).
13. Contradictory evidence may be seen in the fact that in the Greek papyri of Middle Egypt (i.e., the Oxyrhynchite and the Hermopolite, in the main) there are 7.5 times as many occurrences of the personal name Psoi as the variant Psai (cf. for the Fayyūm: Psoi vs. Psai ca. 1:6; in Upper Egypt, ca. 1:25); see Quaegebeur 1975, 245-266. It may, however, be assumed that the inhabitants of Middle Egypt preferred proper names in the metropolitan form, whereas the Southerners preferred the traditional local a-form.
14. Worrell 1932, 73; cf. Kahle 1954, 233ff. - A similar neutrality has been assigned to L, see Worrell 1932, 74.