Reading Late Egyptian
Helmut Satzinger

In Late Egyptian, the absolute personal pronoun of the second and third persons is spelt in a way that would be read *mntk, etc., according to the conventions of Earlier Egyptian: 1 𓊂𓊃𓊂. But this certainly does not reflect the phonetic reality. The form is intk (*iânták) in the Pyramid Texts, it is ntk in Middle Egyptian, and in Coptic ðÌOR [n'Dsk] (S) : ÑOOr [n'rsk] (B) : ðÌTAK [n'dâk] (F. M. L. A.). The NK form cannot be far from [n'tâk].

A comparable case is the spelling of the pre-pronominal form of the preposition m, Middle Egyptian im=. In Late Egyptian it is either 𓊂𓊂 or 𓊂. The phonetic reality behind this spelling can be discerned from the historical development of im= to ðÌHO (F.M.L.A : ðÌHA ), i.e. *iâmâ= > *imâ= [zÊma-] > [mÊma-]. The loss of the vowel of the pre-stress syllable was already accomplished in the NK, cf. Zeidler (1995), and the same is probably true of the assimilation of the glottal stop to the following m. Cf. the development of mn-wn 'there is not': 𓊂𓊃 [nÊVwan] >

---

1 Actually, this transcription mntk can be found in the Late Egyptian studies of some scholars. This raises the question of what our transcriptions intend to be. Do we try to reproduce in alphabetic script the original writing (transliteration)? Or do we try to reproduce the phonetic reality of the language, necessarily restricting ourselves to the consonants? We usually do not take account of the phonetic changes that appeared at the end of the Old Kingdom, otherwise we would have to write sdm, rather than sdN, and MnTw rather than Mntk. In the tradition of German Egyptology s and z (or i and s) are distinguished even in texts that are later than the Old Kingdom. Our transcriptions also do not take account of the change of syllable-final t (including t < f) and r to a glottal stop, otherwise we would have to write rmi or rmi; rather than rmt, and swr or sw; rather than swr (zw). Sometimes writings like 𓊂𓊂 of this latter verb are transcribed swr, and the same is true in analogous cases. But note that this hieroglyphic writing combines the traditional writing zwr / swr with a phonetic hint at the shift —t Train 3 — 'v, viz. 𓊂. It is advisable to render in the transcription the consonants of an early stage of the language, viz. Old Egyptian and/or Middle Egyptian, in order to allow an identification of the lexeme, and this for all stages of hieroglyphic/hieratic writing: sdm, rmt rather than sdm and rmt or rmi, respectively, regardless of whether it is Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom or later. From this standpoint the Late Egyptian pronouns should be transcribed ntk, etc., rather than mntk, etc. But even from the standpoint of a phonetic rendering there is no reason whatsoever for this transcription.
The segmental pronunciation of the preposition \( \text{nQ} \) in Late Egyptian is \( [\text{m\'wan}] \), which, according to the F. M. L. A. pronunciation system, is represented as \( \text{nQ} \) (cf. Satzinger 1983:241). This is to say that \([\text{m\'ma-}]\) was the phonetic realisation of the Late Egyptian spellings mentioned above.

We are confronted with the paradoxical situation that pre-stress syllabic \( n- \) \([\text{n\}}\) is spelt \( m \) where-as pre-stress syllabic \( m- \) \([\text{m\}}\) is rendered by \( n \) or \( m \). This oscillation between \( m \) and \( n \) can be observed in other cases too. The most conspicuous is the pre-nominal form of the preposition \( m \) for which we often find written \( n \). In Coptic, the same applies, not only to this preposition, \(^1\) but also to other homonymous prefixes. Here, however, a ratio is discernible according to which the distribution is regulated: the form is \( \text{H} \) whenever it precedes one of the labial consonants \( \text{B, T, H} \). \(^2\) In all other cases it is \( \text{N} \). This is to say that its basic form is not, as in Old and Middle Egyptian, the variant pronounced \([\text{M}\}]\), but rather \([\text{N}\}]\); in terms of phonemics, it is /\(\text{m}\)/, not /\(\text{n}\)/. It was assimilated to a following consonant though only in respect to its point of articulation (labial, alveolar, etc.) and not in respect to its mode of articulation (oral vs. nasal; plosive, spirant, etc.); before a labial it was certainly realised as \([\text{M}\}]\), before palatals as \([\text{N}\}]\), and before post-palatals as \([\text{\eta}\}]\). But Coptic spelling only distinguishes between \( \text{H} \) and \( \text{N} \), i.e. the latter form represented also, apart from the alveolar nasal, the palatal and the velar nasals.

When the basic form was still /\(\text{m}\)/ (Old and Middle Kingdoms) it was certainly also assimilated to a following consonant: before alveolar consonants \( m \) was realised as \([\text{N}\}]\), and so on. But regular hieroglyphic orthography did not take this phonetic feature into account, the spelling was always \( \text{\dot{N}} \).

The basic form of the preposition was originally \( \text{i} \) \(*\text{i} \)\( \text{m\'a} \)\(*\); in pre-nominal position this was weakened to an unstressed (pre-stress) \(*\text{\textipa{i}m\'a} \), and consequently the second vowel was elided:

---

\(^1\) The preposition \( \text{n} < \text{Middle Egyptian m} \) has been replaced in its basic function, the locative, by the compound preposition \( \text{\textipa{n\'i}} \), but has assumed other function like the marking of the object, in particular in the bi-partite scheme.

\(^2\) In particular in early Coptic texts, but also in some later ones, this assimilation is not reflected by the spelling; see Kahle (1954/vol. I:98).
*iam-. From this point on the m – now in syllable-final position – was regularly assimilated to following consonants of another articulation base. At a certain point in the development, one of these assimilation forms began to be regarded as basic, viz. [n], whereas the old basic form with [m] was conversely regarded as an assimilation form. The reason for this shift may lie in the rise of the definite article (which must have already occurred in the vernacular language of the late Old Kingdom, cf. EDEL 1956/64 § 194). Statistically, the pre-nominal form of the preposition is most often found before definite nouns, with the definite article, p'ê-, t'ê-, n', or the demonstrative pronoun, p'iyy, t'iyy, n'iyy, or the possessive pronoun, p'iyyk, p'iyyt etc., t'iyyk, t'iyyt etc., n'iyyk, n'iyyt etc. Before the masculine forms the preposition remained [m], but before the feminine and plural forms it became [n]. As the latter cases were probably slightly more numerous the [n] came to be regarded as basic.

Also the Late Egyptian basic form /n/ of the preposition m was partly assimilated to a following consonant. However, the spelling as m or n does not depend on the articulation base of the following consonant. An ë standing for itself, not being used in the spelling of a pluriconsonantal word, is, in the vast majority of cases, the rendition of the preposition in question. Phonemically, it is the Late Egyptian expression of a pre-stress syllabic /n/ (which may, of course, be assimilated to a following consonant and, before a labial, become [m]). In other words: because the preposition m has become, in its basic pre-nominal form, an /n/ the ë sign acquired the additional phonetic value of proclitic syllabic [n]. Though the preposition was also written as ëë, in numerous cases the writing as ë had the advantage of distinguishing the preposition from homonymous elements, like the preposition n and the marker of the indirect genitive. The writing as n was phonetic, the writing as m was phonemic.

A further comparable case is the spelling of the conjugation base of the Late Egyptian conjunctive, viz. ëë. The historical explanation of this form given by Gardiner (1928; cf. GARINER, Grammar § 300 OBS.; CERNY 1949) is generally accepted. Accordingly, its origin is in the transition from a construction hñ' irt ntk 'with doing on thy part' to (hñ') ntk irt 'with on thy part doing'. Although both GARDINER and CERNY reject an origin in a construction containing ntt 'that' it may be
that an *‘hnt ntf hr sdm ‘with (the fact) that he hears’ might have had some influence on the forming of the conjunctive. This could account for the fact that the first person forms are not based on *ink, *inn but are rather formed with the same base *mtw as the other persons. Note that the progressive character of *hr plus infinitive has become neutralised in Late Egyptian: *sw *hr sdm may be both ‘he is listening’ (progressive present) and ‘he hears’ (‘he uses to hear’, ‘he can hear’ etc.; aorist, or general present; cf. Satzinger 1976:124–127). Also cf. the so-called narrative, *iw sf *hr sdm, and the literary narrative forms of Late Egyptian, viz. *wn inf *hr sdm and *‘hnt sf *hr sdm, which are all non-progressive by definition: ‘then he heard’, or sim. (Satzinger 1976:250–252).

Whether it is justified or not to adduce an ntt construction for the origin of the conjunctive, the initial consonant of its base is *n in its origin, and not *m: phonemically, the form is */nt-/. On the phonetic level, even an /m-/ would have to be realised as [nt] because of its assimilation to the immediately following [t]. This is well illustrated by the Bohairic form: *nt-nt, *nt-nt, *nt-nt, etc. Nevertheless, Late Egyptian orthography shows constantly the spelling as *m, followed by a syllabic writing of *t plus vowel:

If the phonemic value of an initial * was /n/ we have to analyse writings like * or accordingly. We will see at once that these spellings consist of two parts: on the one hand of the * in question, on the other an element that is equivalent to the traditional spelling of the word.

phonemic writing: */n/ + traditional spelling

The words are spelt in their traditional way, but a phonetic element is added, viz. the characteristic initial sound of a syllabic nasal. Note that this does not apply to the conjunctive as there is no traditional spelling for this new form. Its first element, however, is the same phonemic rendition of */n/ as in the pronoun and the preposition.
Comparison of the spelling of the absolute personal pronoun with that of, e.g., pre-pronominal \textit{m} makes clear that it is not the spelling \textit{mn} that expresses the syllabic nasal, as \textit{ZEIDLER} (1995:228 n. 57) thought.

***

There is evidence that reading is not performed letter by letter, but rather in groups of letters, mostly word by word. This means that we do not analyse words letter by letter when reading, but rather re-recognise them as a whole. It can be shown that this also applies to hieroglyphic and hieratic writing. A pertinent phenomenon is the “abusive” stroke with determinatives, first found in the typical orthography of the First Intermediate Period. This can be explained as the substitution of the determinative by the ideographic writing of a whole word, like \( \text{蕤} \) in the place of mere \( \text{蕤} \): \( \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \) for \( \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \) (abbreviation, or ideographic spelling: \( \text{蕤} \), \( \text{蕤} \)).

Another case is the “bizarre” spellings of Late Egyptian (cf. \textit{KOROSTOVTEV} 1973:30):

\begin{itemize}
  \item LE\textsc{S} 66,8 (\textit{Wenamûn} 1,51) for \( \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \) \( \text{bd} \) ‘month’: insertion of \( \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \).
  \item L\textsc{E}M 3,7 (\textit{P. Bologna} 1094, 3,2); sim. \textit{LEM} 84,13 (\textit{P. Sallier} 7,3) for \( \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \) \( \text{wr} \) ‘to flee’: insertion of \( \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \) ‘foot’.
  \item E\textsc{H}T 33,7 (\textit{P. Anast.} I, 21,7) for \( \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \) \( \text{mst} \) ‘to march’: insertion of \( \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \text{蕤} \) \( \text{smt} \) (infinitive) ‘to walk’ (and deletion of \( \text{蕤} \)).
\end{itemize}

\(^1\) Cf. \textit{SCHENKEL} 1962.
for wdt ‘vegetable, greenery’; for mhi ‘flax’: insertion of parts of snw ‘herb’

In all these cases there is a semantic connection between the word spelt and the intrusive word (e.g. ‘to walk’, ‘leg’). In other cases words have intruded that are not semantically connected:

LES 6,14 (Doomed Prince 7,7), for iw ‘dog’: insertion of parts of iwtn ‘ground’ (or may we think of the rare im, ‘hairy’, ‘fluffy’ (?), LESKO I, 60; HANNIG, 112 ?).

* * *

These examples and arguments should demonstrate that the conventions of the Late Egyptian way of writing do not ask for a sign-by-sign decoding, but rather for “group reading” (similar to that of group-writing, though not identical with it). The phonemic and phonetic levels are often combined in a complex way.

Graphic conventions

| non-specific or lexemic rendering | e.g., im=f |
| vocalised form | e.g., *iamaf |
| graphemic rendering | e.g., m'mf |
| phonemic rendering | e.g., /máf/ |
| phonetic rendering | e.g., [m’maf] |

Bibliography

eDEL, E. 1956/64. Altägyptische Grammatik.

This spelling has misled to a reading w/d-smw, see LESKO 1982:104, who quotes inter alia JANSSEN 1966:84, n. h; JANSSEN 1975:359–364.

—— 1957. Egyptian Grammar (3rd edition)


—— 1975. Commodity Prices.


LESKO, L. E. 1982. A Dictionary of Late Egyptian I.


