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Coptic
A Learning Grammar (Sahidic)

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Introduction

About this book

Initially, a French version of this book was conceived as a textbook for the course Coptic I taught at the Université Catholique de Louvain (30 hours). It should be useful as well for teaching Coptic as for learning it yourself.

The book consists of five parts. The first three are concerned with learning Coptic grammar. Part four consists of exercises to apply what you have learned in the corresponding grammatical chapters. Finally there is a selection of texts, which will allow you to gain more in-depth knowledge of the language as well as of some aspects of Coptic culture. Both the exercises and the texts have cross-references to the grammatical part of this book.

The grammatical part is conceived as a systematic synthesis of what one finds in the existing basic grammars, textbooks and some unpublished workbooks. Since this book was conceived first, the Coptic Grammar by Bentley Layton has established itself as *the* reference grammar. In order to make it easier for students to use this grammar, the same terminology has been used here. In annex, however, you will find a glossary with the equivalents of some terms used in other grammars and textbooks.

The grammatical part of this textbook consists of three main sections, elements, constructions and complex sentences. I suggest that in a teaching context, you start with the constructions and learn the elements as they show up in the constructions and the complex sentences. This will allow you to progress steadily without having too much baggage to carry along from the start. A system of cross-references makes it possible to 'commute' between both grammar parts and the exercises and texts. The elements are in way the building stones you use when learning Coptic sentence constructions. The exercises are also conceived in this way. They follow the rhythm of the constructions. If you work in this way, you will also have dealt with all the elements at the end of the constructions. The systematic presentation of elements and constructions is also conceived for later reference. This book should be useful as a basic grammar for students who have already familiarised themselves with the Coptic language.

This course is meant to familiarize the students progressively with the different kinds of Coptic sentences. This is done in the constructions part, after a first chapter on nominal articulation.

All of the examples given in this book are analysed. The separators used to distinguish all elements are ⸗ for the prepersonal bound state, ‑ for the prenominal bound state and a full stop to separate all other elements (e.g. article and noun).

There is no method to learn the Coptic vocabulary in this book. At the end you will find a glossary of all the Coptic and Greek words used in the book, in the grammatical examples as well as in the exercises and texts. It is recommended to learn the vocabulary gradually as

you find it in the examples and exercises, so you can draw up a list of the words you have encountered.

Coptic

The term 'Coptic'

The word 'Coptic' is derived from the Arabic term *qubti*, which was used by the Arabs to refer to the (mostly Christian) inhabitants of Egypt. The Arabic is on its turn a loan word from the Greek, αἰγύπτιος (*Aigyptios*). Originally the term Coptic referred to the descendants of the ancient Egyptians, to distinguish them from foreign, more recent, groups of the population. The Coptics from Antiquity referred to their language as Ⲧ.ⲘⲚ̄Ⲧ-ⲣⲘ̄.Ⲛ̄-ⲕ̄ⲎⲘⲈ (*tementremenkême*), which signifies an *abstract category* (ⲘⲚ̄Ⲧ-) in relation to *the humans* (ⲣⲘ̄) of *Egypt* (ⲕⲎⲘⲈ).

The term Coptic gradually lost its ethnic and linguistic meaning to refer specifically to the Christians of Egypt – in order to distinguish them from e.g. Muslims. The Egyptian Church played an important role in the first centuries of the Christian era. The patriarchs of Alexandria were among the most powerful. The monachism that was born on Egyptian soil with inspiring figures, such as Anthony, influenced similar movements all over the Christian world. In the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon (451) the Egyptian church was the first 'national church' to break with byzantine authority. The term 'national church' does not imply that the authority of this church was confined to the borders of Egypt. It extended to Libya (the region of Pentapolis) and Ethiopia (around Axum).

One should take care not to identify the Coptic church with the Coptic language. In Antiquity the official language of the 'Coptic' church remained Greek, even though important texts, like the Easter Letters of the Alexandrian bishops were immediately translated into Coptic for the use of the local bishops. An important part of Coptic literature of all sorts was actually translated from Greek. It was above all the monastic environment that produced a rich original Coptic literature, as it was the case with the Pachomian monasteries in Tabbenese and Pbow and the White monastery of Shenoute.

The use of the Coptic language was progressively abandoned in favour of Arabic after the muslim conquest of Egypt (642). After the 10th century, Coptic documents become very rare. From the 13th century onwards, however, there was a growing interest from Arabic scholars in the Coptic language. They published Coptic grammars in Arabic, as well as works dealing with philological, literary and cultural topics. The last important examples of Coptic as a spoken language have been attested in the 15th century[1]. Most of the Copts today speak Arabic. Only in liturgy some traces of Coptic (mixed up with Greek formulas) are preserved. The situation of Coptic in Egypt is in a way similar to that of Latin in the Christian West.

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1   Cf. J. Vergote, *Grammaire Copte*, t. Ia, 1–2.

The Coptic language

From a linguistic point of view Coptic represents the last stage of ancient Egyptian (ca. 300–1000 A.D.). Egyptian is a linguistic group in itself, which presents some affinities with Semitic languages and some African languages.

One should not confound the Coptic language and the Coptic writing (that is, the Greek alphabet with some supplementary signs). Language and writing have not evolved simultaneously in Egypt[2]. The most ancient writing systems, hieroglyphic and hieratic, were still used in later periods, up to the Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine time (332 B.C. – 641 B.C.). From the late Empire on, Middle Egyptian was at that time still used as a literary language, but it was not spoken anymore. From the New Empire onwards (ca. 1570 B.C.) New Egyptian became the dominant language, which evolved into Demotic (the 'popular' language) and eventually into Coptic in Christian times. There are, however, already before that period some attestations of Egyptian in Greek writing. Linguistically this language does not correspond with the Coptic stage, but still with Demotic, even though these texts or words are often qualified as 'Old Coptic'. Greek letters were mostly used instead of Egyptian signs where pronunciation matters. The previous Egyptian writing systems have no notation of vowels. It is thus no surprise to find 'Coptic' writing in e.g. magic texts.

Coptic is of great interest for the study of the Egyptian language. It is the first time in its history that the vowels are written. The use of a simple writing system, consisting of the Greek alphabet with some supplementary signs, made written Egyptian more accessible than it was before.

As the final stage of the Egyptian language, Coptic has also been considerably influenced by Greek, which was the official language of the Coptic church. This influence is mostly limited to the vocabulary. Greek words are not only used for technical terms or in translations. They also very often occur in orginal Coptic writings, such as the works of Shenoute. On a purely grammatical level the influences are less conspicuous. Some Greek conjunctions are used to introduce certain Coptic adverbial subordinate clauses.

Later Coptic texts can also show an influence of Arabic. This has however very few consequences for the vocabulary and was never as important as the Greek influence.

Dialects

Coptic dialectology has developed over the last decades into a discipline in itself. There was hardly any real standardisation in Coptic. Many dialects existed next to one another. Each one of these dialects has its own variants and many texts have a very mixed dialectical profile. The overview you find here is limited to the dialects mentioned in Crum's *Coptic Dictionary*.

S   Sahidic is the main southern dialect of Egypt, but it spread very quickly to the entire Nile Valley. It became the dominant literary language in the 'classical' period. The oldest Sahidic texts are dated around 300 A.D. Of all Coptic dialects Sahidic has the least particularities and the most in common with the others. It therefore offers a good introduction in Coptic.

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2   Cf. Cl. Obsomer, *Égyptien hiéroglyphique. Grammaire pratique du moyen égyptien et exercices d'application* (Langues et cultures anciennes, 1), Bruxelles 2003, 10–11.

B   Bohairic is the main northern dialect, spoken originally in the Nile Delta. It is played a predominant role from the 9th century onwards, due to the importance of the monasteries in the Wadi Natrun. Since the 11th century, Bohairic is the official language of the Coptic liturgy.

F   Fayumic is the dialect spoken in the oasis of Fayum (ⲡⲓⲟⲙ).

M   Middle Egyptian or Oxyrhynchic was mainly spoken around Oxyrynchus.

A² or L Subakhmimic or Lycopolitanic was a southern dialect that was probably overshadowed by the spread of Sahidic.

A   Akhmimic is another southern dialect. It represents probably the most ancient linguistic stage of all known Coptic dialects. It is probably originary from the surroundings of the Town of Akhmim (Nord of Thebes). Like A²/L this dialect has probably been abandoned in favour of Sahidic.

Alphabet and orthography

Coptic uses the Greek alphabet with some supplementary signs taken from Demotic. The letters can also have numeral value (cf. 085). The order of the Greek alphabet is preserved. The supplementary Coptic signs are put at the end. Here is a list with the alphabet, the names of the individual letters and their English equivalents.

ⲁ	alpha	a
ⲃ	beta	b (v)
ⲅ	gamma	g
ⲇ	delta	d
ⲉ	epsilon	e
ⲍ	zeta	z
ⲏ	eta	ê
ⲑ	theta	th
ⲓ	iota	i
ⲕ	kappa	k
ⲗ	lambda	l
ⲙ	mu	m
ⲛ	nu	n
ⲝ	xi	x
ⲟ	omicron	o
ⲡ	pi	p
ⲣ	rho	r
ⲥ	sigma	s
ⲧ	tau	t
ⲩ	upsilon	u
ⲫ	phi	ph
ⲭ	khi	kh
ⲯ	psi	ps
ⲱ	oméga	ô

ϣ	shai	ch
ϥ	phai	f
ҍ	khai	kh (only in B)
ϧ	khai	kh (only in A)
ϩ	hori	h
ϫ	djandja	dj
ϭ	kjima	tch, ky (palatalyzed)
†	ti	ti

The superlinear stroke is another orthographical element. When it is written above a consonant (e.g. N̄), it indicates the existence of a muted vowel preceding this consonant. In many manuscripts the use of the superlinear stroke is not entirely consistent. Sometimes the superlinear stroke seems interchangeable with Є.

Г, Λ and Ζ only occur in words of Greek origin. In some cases Ζ is used as an equivalent of C (ΛNCHBЄ and ΛNΖHBЄ, *school*). Г can also be used instead of Κ (often after N, e.g. Г for Κ, the suffix pronoun of the 2nd pers. m. sg.).

Some letters are the equivalent of two other letters:

Θ = Τ + ϩ
Φ = Π + ϩ
Χ = Κ + ϩ
ҳ = Κ + C
Ψ = Π + C
† = Τ + Ι.

ΦΟ = Π.ϩΟ, *the face*; ΡΟΧ = ΡΟΚϩ, *to be burned*; Λωҳ = ΛωΚC, *to bite*; †ΡHNH = Τ.ЄΙΡHNH, *the peace*

In Greek words these letters usually keep their original value and they are not necessarily counted as two letters (this is important e.g. in knowing which article has to be used).

Ι and ЄΙ can both represent the phoneme [i] (ЄΙNЄ, *to bring*; CΙBΤ, *pea*) or the semivocal [j] (ЄΙωΤ, *father*; ΧΟΙ, *ship*).

ΟΥ can also function as a vowel (ΜΟΥN, *to stay*) and as semivocal (ΟΥΛ, *a, one*). The semivocal is written as a simple Υ after Λ, Є and H (NΛΥ, *to see*).

N is assimilated before Μ, Π, Ψ, Φ and becomes Μ (M̄.ΜΛΘHΤHC M̄-ΜωΥCHC, *Moses' disciples*). There is no assimilation when Μ or Π have the superlinear stroke (N.M̄CΛϩ, *the crocodiles*) or if the Μ was originally a N.

N can be completely assimilated before B, Ρ or Λ (P̄.ΡωΜЄ for N̄.ΡωΜЄ, *the humans*).

Haplography: a doubled consonant is often only written once (MN̄T̄H for M̄N̄T̄-ΤH, *fifteen*).

Dittography: more rarely a consonant is doubled for no apparent reason. This is often the case of N followed by a vowel.