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3.4 Greek and Coptic in the Byzantine era

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3.4.1 The sociolinguistics of Greek and Coptic in Byzantine Egypt

Greek and Coptic papyrologists frequently have different experiences in confronting different kinds of documents. The Greek scholar, for instance, is usually familiar with administrative records from the middle and high levels of the administration of Byzantine Egypt, while the Coptologist does not learn anything of this except, say, the modest response given by troubled subjects down from the village. There are reasons for this. As different languages are usually valid in different segments of multilingual societies, so Greek and Coptic had different patterns of social distribution, or functional domains, in Byzantine Egyptian society.

⁵² For a succinct discussion of the guardianship of women, based on legal and papyrological sources and therefore largely concerned with Egypt, see Arjava (1996: 112–23).

Coptic was a socially delineated and functionally limited written code from its beginnings. When it came into being around or shortly before AD 300, it was a linguistic medium first and foremost centered upon *religion*, certainly not invented, but refined and properly put into circulation by Egyptian worshippers of late antique *Offenbarungsreligionen* – by Gnostics, Manichaeans, and, above all, by Christians, when their missionaries passed the boundaries of urban settlements, that is, the boundaries of linguistic hellenization, towards the countryside and its inhabitants, Egyptian native speakers. Thus the earliest evidence of Coptic comes from religious texts, mostly translations of Greek compositions, such as parts of the New Testament and the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, as well as Gnostic, Manichaean, and apocryphal writings.

Moreover, the earliest Coptic documentary texts, fourth-century AD private and business letters (e.g., *P.Kell.Copt.*, *P.Lond.* VI 1920–22; *P.NagHamm.*, *P.Neph.* 15–16, *P.Ryl.Copt.* 268–76), can be attributed to Christian and Manichaean contexts. The use of Coptic for letter-writing enabled monolingual Egyptians confined to their native language to communicate over distances without the aid of translators for the first time for centuries. This was because the earlier written form of Egyptian, the Demotic language and script, had ceased to be used in everyday written communication after the first century AD, from that time more and more becoming a linguistic register of merely religious and magical use. As Willy Clarysse (1993: 201) put it:

From about 100 AD until the introduction of Coptic, a period of more than two hundred years, an Egyptian wanting to write a letter to a fellow Egyptian had to do so in Greek, even though in many cases both writer and addressee needed a translator to understand what was written.

In the three centuries after the introduction of Coptic, the new written medium entered a few functional domains in the realms of religious and everyday language use, but a great many literary genres as well as administrative, economic, and legal matters were still treated in Greek only. For estimating the functional confines of Coptic, it is instructive to realize that Coptic was not, and never became, a language, let alone the *original* language, of higher education, contemporary sciences, and scholarship. It never served as a language of administration and justice beyond the bottom level, and only *after* the Arab conquest did Coptic become a common linguistic means of modest private representation in epigraphy and of recording legal and business matters inside Christian communities.

During the fourth, fifth, and almost the whole of the sixth century, private legal documents were recorded exclusively in Greek. For a number of reasons – governmental requirements, for example, or the desire for greatest possible security combined with a preference for traditional manners, or the advantage of using the subtle means of expression provided by Greek as a long-established and highly developed language for law's special purposes – it was probably not before the mid-sixth century that Coptic was first taken into consideration as a linguistic means of recording legally relevant and effective writings. The earliest known legal records in Coptic are documents written by the bilingual poet and notary Dioskoros of Aphrodito in the 60s and 70s of the sixth century. And it was only after the Arab conquest of Egypt in AD 641 that private legal documents drawn up in Coptic became more common and widespread for a century and a half.

Thus in terms of sociolinguistics, Coptic in Egypt was always a sort of linguistic “low variety” versus Greek, and later Arabic, as the respective “high varieties” (in conspicuous contrast to the contemporary language situation in the Christian kingdoms of Nubia, where Greek *and* Coptic functioned as “high varieties” versus the “low variety” of the Nubian vernacular). Already in Ptolemaic and Roman times, the prestige of Egypt's native language had been dropping, and this was still the case under Byzantine and, the more so, under Islamic rule, when it eventually became a minority language bound to die.

3.4.2 Greek–Coptic interferences from a linguistic point of view

The emergence of Coptic around AD 300 was in some respects the result of long-lasting Greek–Egyptian language contact and a gradual cultural hellenization of Egypt. One sign of hellenization is written, as it were, in the face of Coptic: Its writing system does not depend on hieroglyphs but is based on the Greek alphabet. Even more significant is the huge number of loanwords of almost all semantic and grammatical categories borrowed into Coptic from Greek. In terms of quantity, we can only guess, since no complete dictionary is available at present. Nevertheless, some figures are provided by compilations based on large textual corpora, such as Hans Förster's dictionary of Greek words in the Coptic documentary texts (Förster 2002), comprising about 2,500 Greek lemmata, or Louis-Théophile Lefort's concordance of Greek words in the Sahidic New Testament (Lefort 1950), amounting to nearly 1,000 words. Obviously, lexical borrowings from Greek formed an important source of written

Coptic vocabulary; even small corpora and single Coptic texts yield significant numbers of them. The crucial question remains: What conclusions can be drawn from the incorporation of so many lexical items from almost all semantic fields and all but a few grammatical categories into Coptic *written* texts in terms of societal as well as individual bilingualism? Principally there are two scenarios. There was a proper “hellenization” of the *entire* language, that is, there was a deep impact on the written *as well as the spoken* language, supported by a broad base of bilingual individuals. Or the impact was superficial, limited to the uppermost linguistic registers of the *written language only*, supported by a rather small group of really bilingual individuals. Elsa Oréal (1999) has argued for the latter.

But what about the other way around? Was there also a significant Egyptian impact on the Egyptian variety of Byzantine Greek? Certainly not. Even granted a number of subtle linguistic interferences between peculiar Egyptian means of expression and certain recurrent syntactic deviations of Egyptian Greek from the Greek *koinè* norm not recognized as yet (see Gonis 2005), traces of the impact of Egyptian on Greek texts remain very limited. We find a few lexical borrowings mainly of the new-things-and-concepts type, which have at last been dealt with by Fournet (1989) and Torallas Tovar (2004b), and a number of examples for calquing that have never been systematically compiled.

A typical example of an Egyptian loanword in Byzantine Greek texts is the term (*t*)*khre* occurring in sixth-century sale documents from Syene, among them 6.6.1, where it served to designate a certain house-part somewhere beneath the staircase. Obviously, the Greek terminology for buildings and their parts did not provide a precisely appropriate designation for this particular location, so that Greek-writing notaries had recourse to *transcribing* its Egyptian name.

Some calques – words etymologically Greek although semantically coined by underlying Egyptian terms – even occur in the legal terminology of Greek documents from Egypt, mirroring interferences between the Demotic and Greek legal languages that may go back to the chancellery practice of Egyptian scribes writing Greek (Clarysse 1993). Three examples follow:

- (1) The legal meaning “to take proceedings against somebody, to take somebody to court” carried by the Demotic and Coptic verbal phrase *ei (ebol) e-*, lit. “to come (out) to somebody,” may have been transferred to the corresponding Greek term *eperchesthai*.
- (2) The conspicuous use of *epitrepein* “to authorize” and *epitropè* “authorization” occurring in Theban texts as designations,

respectively, of “to lease” and “lease document” (cf. 7.4.6) can presumably be traced to the Demotic term *s-h-n* “to lease,” literally “to entrust something to somebody,” which also survived in the local Theban variety of Sahidic Coptic (*sahne* “lease”).

- (3) Some technical meanings of the Egyptian verb *m-h* (Coptic *moukh*), literally “to fill,” as in “to pay off somebody,” or “being complete” in connection with amounts of money and crops, recur in respective uses of the verb *plêroun* “to fill” in Greek documents from Egypt.

All this notwithstanding, these and like instances cannot change the overall impression that lexical borrowing in Byzantine Egypt was far from a reciprocal, mutual relationship: it was a highly asymmetrical process with (mainly) one donor language, Greek, and (mainly) one recipient language, Egyptian.

3.4.3 Greek–Coptic interferences in Byzantine and early Islamic documentary evidence

As is well known, documentary evidence from Byzantine and early Islamic Egypt is bi- or even trilingual. In many cases we cannot treat an issue and draw conclusions on the base of a monolingual set of sources, since our body of evidence also includes documents recorded in the other languages. This is true of the evidence for many historical issues, and likewise true of the evidence for single individuals and their business affairs as attested in archives. Of course merely monolingual archives do exist. Many archives from the second to the fourth century AD, the time when Demotic had already ceased to be used as a written language for everyday purposes while Coptic was not yet in use, provide monolingual Greek (if not bilingual Greek–Latin, cf. Rochette 1996) evidence. But the great bulk of Coptic documents comes from the seventh and eighth centuries, when Greek still and Arabic already played prominent roles in everyday written communication.

Ex. 1: The Nephros archive (*P.Neph.*) and the Meletian correspondence (from *P.Lond.* VI) form part of a dossier centered around a Meletian monastery flourishing in the 30s of the fourth century AD. The Meletian community was a schismatic Christian denomination, alienated from the Alexandrian patriarch by different attitudes toward the issue of martyrdom during the persecution in the days of Diocletian. Two documents out of a total of forty-two items from the Nephros archive and three out of nine Meletian documents from

P.Lond. VI are written in Coptic, the earliest datable Coptic documentary texts of all. These altogether five Coptic texts are personal letters, as are almost all fourth-century Coptic documentary texts.

Ex. 2: The Apa Abraham dossier (around AD 600). This fascinating personality, as bishop of Hermonthis and abbot of the Theban monastery of St. Phoibammon at the time of the Alexandrian patriarch Damianos (AD 578–607), had a wide range of responsibilities, which are mirrored in great detail by the extant remains of his correspondence. The dossier consists of around 200 Coptic ostraca (kept in London, Berlin, Leipzig, and elsewhere), his correspondence, and one papyrus, *P.Lond.* I 77, the bishop's will in Greek. The complete correspondence is written in Coptic. Actually almost all late sixth- to late eighth-century documents with a Theban provenance are Coptic texts. This landscape, structured at that time by a number of small and medium-size settlements, like Djême with its 1,000 to 2,000 inhabitants, and a number of monasteries and dwelling places of single hermits, seems to have been a particularly Coptophone region; even in written communication Coptic seems to have been the preferred language. It is only here that Coptic papyrological evidence far exceeds the Greek. The bishop himself, as is clear from a passage in his Greek will, was unable to speak or even to read Greek. But why did he draw up his last will in that language? This is again an issue of functional domains: Coptic might still have been an idiom simply forbidden for recording testaments; at the very least it might have been felt inappropriate for such an important purpose or somehow unfit for the technical requirements of recording a Byzantine will. It may be worth mentioning, for appreciating the ongoing processes in the realms of literacy and written culture at that time, that the wills of Abraham's successors, the abbots of the monastery of Phoibammon in the later seventh and eighth centuries, are recorded in Coptic.

Ex. 3: Two documents from the archive of Philemon, *P.Budge*, the Coptic record of a hearing that happened in AD 646, and the Greek *dialysis*-settlement *P.BLOr.* 2017 issued in AD 647, witness two stages of a lawsuit brought by the deacon John against the farmer Philemon for the ownership of a house (see Schiller 1964 and 1968; Allam 1991). Obviously both parties were Coptic native speakers. This might have been the reason to record their hearing before the arbitration committee in Coptic, the language actually spoken and heard in the proceedings. After the decision favored Philemon, John

had to withdraw formally from his earlier claim by drawing up a *dialysis* document, and this was done now in Greek: At the time immediately after the Arab conquest, Coptic was just about to become a more common language of legal instruments (cf. 3.4.1), and we actually know a considerable number of early- to mid-eighth-century *dialysis* documents in Coptic. But in the seventh century, Greek seems still to have been preferred in such cases (see Gagos and van Minnen 1994).

Ex. 4: The large correspondence of Qurrah ibn Sharîq, early eighth century AD, consists of documents written in three languages, Arabic, Coptic, and Greek (cf. Abbott 1938; Bell in *P.Lond.* 1v; Bell 1929; Cadell 1967). At the highest administrative level, the chancellery of the governor Qurrah ibn Sharîq himself in the new capital Fustât, documents written in Arabic and also in Greek were produced. At the middle administrative level, as in the office of the pagarch of Aphrodito, Greek was used. Only at the bottom level, some local administrative bodies of the surrounding villages made use of Coptic. In communication between Arabic-speaking authorities and Coptic-speaking subjects concerning matters such as tax revenue, mustering workmen, and justice, Greek still served as a *lingua franca* into the first decades of the eighth century.

3.4.4 Greek–Coptic interferences in the legal documents

In everyday spoken communication, it is a speaker's linguistic competence and social awareness of language behavior that serve him or her in spontaneously making appropriate language choices. By contrast, language choice for written communication is less a spontaneous decision than a result of prior consideration. Moreover, using a language as a written medium does not even depend on the author's own ability in speaking, or writing, this language, provided only that he or she is able to pay a scribe. It rather depends, apart from the existence of an alphabetic code as a basic condition, on the possibility of recurring to *genres*, on the availability of linguistic means qualified to express opinions and to address issues in a way that virtually meets the recipients' expectations: appropriate terminologies, common rhetorical strategies, and literary conventions as to the relation of form and content. Such means of expressions can be generated within the development of a literary tradition of one language, or can be borrowed from a still existing literary tradition of another language. As is pointed out above (2.7), the *genre* of legal documents

was applied by later sixth-century bilingual notaries to Coptic, with the result that Greek terminology and schemes influenced and shaped the language and form of Coptic legal documents. Thus to consider Greek–Coptic interferences in legal documents means to speak about the usual appearance of those sorts of Coptic texts, that is, about normal cases.

Case 1: One papyrus, two languages

Often a single piece of papyrus bears evidence of more than one language. Commonly, this is a matter of lexical borrowing, abundantly occurring in documentary as in any Coptic texts. But what is meant here are linguistically *coherent* paragraphs, sentences, or strings of words of different languages occurring side by side in the same text or on the same papyrus.

Ex. 1: Often in Coptic legal documents, parts of the scheme to the extent of full sentences are written in Greek, especially at the beginning and ending of deeds, such as the invocation formula, the dating, and the completion note of the scribe (cf. above, 2.7).

Ex. 2: Stereotyped Greek *syntagmata* beneath the sentence level could be inserted somewhere in the Coptic text, embedded amidst Coptic syntactic structures, such as *pote kairo ê chronô* “at any moment or time,” *ek cheiros eis cheira* “(payment) from hand to hand (i.e., in cash),” *alla en pasê kalê probairesei* “but in every nice decision,” *katharos kai apokrotôs* “pure and unchangeable,” or the routine repetition of amounts (cf. below, case 4).

Ex. 3: Two languages can occur, one on the recto and one on the verso side of one papyrus. Usually papyrus documents received a registration note (docket) on the verso, a kind of summary of the text, which remained visible even when the papyrus was folded and sealed. This permitted persons to perceive the content of the text inside without breaking the seal. These *dockets* often are written in Greek even when the deed itself was drafted in Coptic. Being a second text in a sense, a paratext as we could call it, this docket belongs immediately to the text summarized by it. Nevertheless, aside from these and similar cases of obvious textual connections, recto and verso side may also contain texts not *immediately*, or not *obviously* belonging to each other, such as a Greek or Arabic verso in some way related or not related to a Coptic recto (cf., e.g., the Coptic will on the recto of the Greek–Coptic specimen forms discussed at 2.7.1). But even in such cases there must be some kind of relationship, if only from the fact of

their having been written on the same piece of writing material. Being paratexts, as it were, of the second or third degree to each other, they do bear evidence for a specific circulation of documents in a bilingual setting.

Case 2: Greek deeds in Coptic dresses

This crucial issue has already been dealt with in a more detailed way (above, 2.7) and only need be recalled here briefly. Over centuries, Greek had undivided sovereignty over written discourses in legal, business, and all everyday affairs, so that when Coptic entered the field, many Coptic schemes were simply molded on a Greek matrix. Revealing instances of this technique are the Greek and Coptic versions of the Hermopolite scheme of *misthōsis*-leases (7.4.1, 7.4.3, and 7.4.4), and the deed of sale form used by eighth-century Coptic documents from Djême (cf. 6.6.2), its Greek pattern being attested by sixth-century documents from Syene (cf. 6.6.1).

Case 3: Byzantine rhetorical style applied to Coptic speech

A kind of cross-linguistic interference often neglected, despite its being a revealing phenomenon of language contact, is the impact of one language on another at the level of rhetorical style. From the early Byzantine age, the Greek chancellery style underwent a dramatic change from a simple prose concentrating on facts to an elaborately rhetorical prose (cf. above, 2.7). A most striking feature of this new style was the excessive use of rhetorical figures of adjection (*figurae per adiectionem*). As Coptic legal documents are so closely related to Greek patterns, rendered from Greek schemes and in many cases written by scribes whose proficiency was presumably applicable also to the production of Greek documents, these rhetorical figures were introduced into the style of Coptic documentary texts in a most natural way.

Ex. 1: Monolingual tautological word pairs, consisting of Greek words, such as *kakonoia nim hikakoêtheia* (P.KRU 98, lines 35–36), “(without . . .) any wicked mind and malice.”

Ex. 2: Monolingual tautological word pairs, consisting of Coptic words, such as *emnsôrm ebol hisromrm shoop mmoi* (P.KRU 74, lines 38–39), “while no hallucination and confusion happened to me.”

Ex. 3: Bilingual tautological word pairs, such as *eiêtei eisops* (P.KRU 16, line 8), “while I am asking and begging”; *pros taaitêsîs toei mmin mmoi*

mnpaouôsh nhêt (P.CLT 7, lines 9–10), “according to my decision and my heartfelt desire.”

Ex. 4: Tautological strings composed of more than two homonymous words, such as *tnsttôre tnkindyneue awô tno neggyyê awô tno nenai- chesthai* (P.Lond. IV 1494, line 9), “we are warranting and we go bail and we are warrantors and we are liable.”

Ex. 5: Bipartite paraphrastic phrases (expressions somehow complementing each other) with antithetic parallelism, such as *euplêrou emnteuaposia e[may]* (P.Lond. IV 1588, line 15), “in full and without deficit”; *hnoushephshôp awô para ta[pro]sdoqia* (P.KRU 74, lines 20–21), “suddenly and against my expectation.”

Ex. 6: Bipartite paraphrastic phrases with opposite parallelism, such as *oude hanhêt oude hanarês* (OMH 88, lines 4–5), “neither in the north nor in the south” (i.e., nowhere); *kan sahêt kan sarês* (P.Bal. 188, lines 13–14), “be it in the north, be it in the south” (i.e., anywhere); *mpehow mnteoushê* (P.KRU 87, line 16), “day and night” (i.e., always); *hmpamou ê hmpaônh* (P.KRU 68, lines 77–78), “during my death or during my life” (i.e., always).

Ex. 7: Paraphrastic word pairs with *homoioteleuton* (rhyme), such as *aihitou aijitou* (P.KRU 7, line 32), “I measured them, I received them”; *aibôrize ayw aidôrize* (P.KRU 81, line 29), “I determined and donated”; *tariqopf ajn hopf* (P.Lond. IV 1528, lines 12–13), “that I catch him without hiding him”; *oude hiptoou oude hmpmoou* (BKU III 350, line 11), “neither on the mountain nor in the water” (i.e., nowhere).

Ex. 8: Complex paraphrastic strings, consisting of three and more complementary expressions, such as *eite hiptoou eite hnkême eite hntsôshe* (P.KRU 65, line 44), “be it on the mountains, be it in the Nile valley, (or) be it on the field”; *eite hntpolis Ermont eite hnpkastron eite kômê eite chôrion* (P.KRU 65, lines 57–58), “be it in the town Hermonthis, be it in the kastron (Djême), be it a village, be it an estate”; *eite kamoul eite eiô eite esoou eite baampe* (P.KRU 65, line 57), “be it a camel, be it a donkey, be it a sheep, be it a goat” (note the arrangement of the different animals obviously following the natural order *de majore ad minorem*).

Case 4: Awareness and instrumentalization of bilingual speech

Sometimes we catch a glimpse of something like awareness of bilingualism as a bilingual professional scribe might have possessed it. A revealing

example occurs in a Djême document written by the very skilled scribe Aristophanes son of John. In an otherwise routine punishment clause of a sale (*P. CLT* 7, line 53), a Coptic legal term is formally glossed by its Greek equivalent: "If anybody dares, . . . to take proceedings (Coptic: *ei ebol*, literally 'to come out') or (*êgoun*) to bring lawsuit (Greek: *enagein*) for anything concerning this room." The Greek particle *êgoun* "or even, or at least, or also, namely" is used here the same way as it occurs in philological treatises to gloss strange words, "or" as "that means," thus forming an explicit statement for the equivalence of two technical legal terms from two different languages. Similar strategies are known from medieval European documents, where vernacular glosses are usually introduced by phrases such as: *quod vulgo dicitur* "what is called in common speech," *vulgariter nuncupatum* "commonly designated," *seu* "or," and *vel* "or."

A sort of instrumentalization of bilingual writing can be found in the Coptic phraseology around the amounts in money and in kind: in Coptic documents, the chancellery tricks of fixing the amount twice in different ways also include the shift from Coptic to Greek, such as: *maab nrir gi (netai) choir(oi) 30*, "(Coptic) thirty pigs, (Greek) makes pigs 30."