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Was Ancient Egyptian really a primitive language?

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As Egyptologists all know, everything was once done for the First Time. Language too has its origins, and a potential archaeology. Yet language is also felt to reflect mental capacity, and to be what distinguishes man from the beasts – a hominid from other primates. This invests any discussion of language evolution with sensitive cultural implications. The problem of physical capacity for language, phrased in anatomical terms, is a respectable and important part of the study of primate behaviour and the evolution of early man, but the gap between the early palaeolithic and the most "primitive" of modern man is immense. For language this missing link is a huge problem.

A crude evolutionism can assume that the older a language, or the earlier the stage of a language, the more primitive it is likely to be, so that evolutionary change might be described from historical data. This evolution would consist of diversification from an "ur-language" into individual languages, and then continuing diversification and development within each language (or language family).¹ There is an intuitive perception that primitiveness means a state of greater simplicity, and that evolutionary change is from "lower" to "higher" and more complex forms. For the evolution of language, therefore, one would have to posit a series of simple developmental equations. These are based on the assumption that language development is socially conditioned, in the context of behavioural needs:

co-operation --> naming + urging = origins of language/communication

communication --> simple sentences = primitive language

discussion --> grammar = underdeveloped language

ratiocination --> complex highly marked syntax = developed language

¹ Cf. the remarks of Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 406 stressing clearly that a genealogical model for language classification is by definition evolutionary, and that he at least took such a view of language development; cf. also p. 97.

For such equations to be of practical value there must be access to less evolved languages. These would have to be sought in "tribal" languages, or in early written languages such as Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, or Hebrew. It must then be assumed that such languages can be projected back to even more "primitive" stages. The necessary techniques would be lexical and grammatical reduction, modelled on the patterns and order of language acquisition and development in children, if this can be accepted as a parallel to true historical evolution. The result should then provide the missing link between observable origins of language in animal studies, and the structures of the "evolved" languages we can study.

The fallacy in this argument is over-simplification. Mere historical change and variation become defined as qualitative "evolution" under the influence of an underlying "diffusionist" assumption.² The disreputability lies in its pseudo-academic use to justify crude assertions of the cultural (and therefore intellectual) superiority of Western Europe, and in particular the claims to priority made for classical Greek culture and language. At best insulting and at worst racist, this over-simplification equates:

different = simpler = primitive = inferior

At a superficial level the whole argument is falsified by the simple fact that all funny "primitive" languages – indeed all natural languages – are far from simple to learn, describe or use. Criteria of linguistic complexity cannot be applied in a simple way, since even the simplest human societies have very complex social and communicative structures.³ One is compelled to the minimal assumption that truly primitive language ceased with the mesolithic, where it cannot be studied in the flesh, since the most primitive surviving peoples, and the earliest or most primitive recorded languages, are to be classed as at least neolithic.

This explicit line of argument has been distasteful to the main stream of Western liberal academic tradition for a long time. Yet the issues raised, and many of the basic perceptions remain real. If man has evolved, then language and culture have also evolved with him. In practice much work in linguistics absorbs and makes use of these perceptions in more indirect ways. Language typology and developmental linguistics flourish, without the evolutionary tag, and it is now an open question how far developments in general linguistics, and related issues in psychology and physiology, may once again make a more sophisticated form of the evolutionary hypothesis useful. For instance, the intensive modern interest in pidgin languages involves an assumption that the communicative minimum required for any one language should help to define the essence of language itself. This depends on the apparently universal way in which we try to communicate in an unfamiliar language, using only roots and intonation, without serious attempt at inflection

² Greenberg, *Essays in Linguistics*, 58-9. The fallacy is that typical of "social Darwinism", cf. Burrow's introduction (p.44-5) to Darwin, *The Origin of Species*.

³ Which is not to underestimate the complexities of social and communicative behaviour among primates.

or syntax. This is the classic origin assumed for pidgin languages, but also the way we tend to speak to small children, assuming a parallel order in the initial acquisition of language. This assumption is essentially the old definition of language evolution from the simple to the complex.

In the different ideological climate of the Soviet Union a more explicit evolutionary formulation remained on the agenda. In a recent article Chetveruchin⁴ argues that Egyptian *jn* "say(s)" should be derived from two proto-bases *j* and *n*. It is claimed that both have essentially deictic meaning, and that both lie at the root of other key Egyptian vocabulary: exclamatory *j* "Hey!"; prepositional *n* "to"; the verbal infixes *n* and *jn*; the various demonstrative and relative words beginning with *n*; but also, and crucially, the words meaning "is" – *jw* and *wn*. Behind the argument are the old assumptions about the origins of language: that some types of language are more primitive than others, and that access to the very ancient typological structure of afro-asiatic can be gained through Egyptian.⁵ His conclusion – for which he claims glotto-chronological support in the work of Diakonoff – is that "the forms in question started to diverge as early as in the mesolithic period, if not earlier", when pre-proto-Afrasian "might have possessed the pre-active typology, formally being akin to languages of the isolating type, or marginal between those of the isolating and agglutinative morphological type."⁶ He doesn't put it quite so crudely, but what he envisages is that the mesolithic "missing-link" communicated by pointing, and going "yu" (*j*) or "nu" (*n*). From these primitive afroasiatic morphemes a variety of words would evolve in different ways across the spectrum of the afroasiatic language group.

This is of limited practical use, until it is acknowledged just how deep these cultural assumptions pervade all attempts to explain rather than just describe linguistic change.⁷ For instance, within Egyptology the pose of neutrality is impressively carried off by Ariel Shisha-Halevy⁸ in his review article on Papyrus Vandier. His overt conclusion is that the text is written in early early-Demotic rather than late Late Egyptian. He displays ferocious gnomic severity in an extraordinary assembly of detail, and in this way he clarifies very

⁴ *GM* 104 (1988), 75-88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 82, summary. To look at "survivals of an utmost ancient lexico-grammatical stratum" he must turn to "a language of isolating type, preferably an old-established literary language". The comparative argument for afroasiatic languages is therefore justified by the claim that a similar evolution can be detected in Chinese. Cf. also Diakonoff, in: *Studies Jacobsen*, 116-8.

⁶ Chetveruchin, *GM* 104 (1988), 81-2. The argument belongs within an active and productive Soviet school, whose works (exemplified in his footnotes) I am neither competent nor minded to examine in detail, but the implicit intellectual foundation is the work of Schleicher, *Die Darwinistische Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft*, which is to say the foundation explicitly rejected in the West; cf. Greenberg, *Essays in Linguistics*, 58-60; Kalmár, in: *Literacy, Language and Learning*, 149.

⁷ Cf. Givón, *On Understanding Grammar*.

⁸ *JAOS* 109 (1989), 421-35.

greatly the order and timing of important linguistic changes. Yet there remains a certain hollowness about his pointed refusal to discuss this change as more than a list of objective documentable facts. Despite his observation that in dealing with diachrony "the Saussurean dualities must be replaced by the diasystemic reality"⁹, he fails to do this, and treats the diachronic flow as a series of "synchronic diasystems" and "Spezialgrammatik" snapshots rather than living frameworks for discourse. And even here a quasi-evolutionary element creeps in through the back door. In an aside, he notes Griffith's comment that "the best style of Egyptian speech was that which immediately preceded Coptic" because of its "precision", in order to qualify this with a spirited case for the superiority of early Coptic.¹⁰

The clash between synchronic and diachronic study is particularly acute for Egyptian, because the linguistic continuum exists, but synchronic evidence is always severely limited, and no single stage can be properly understood except in its historical perspective. It is difficult to exclude a degree of qualitative assessment, which naturally tends to attribute greater linguistic sophistication to later stages of the language. There is also a common assumption (or rule?) in historical linguistics: that behind syntactic change and the development of a new construction lies an older more basic construction, which has a full lexical or syntactic force. This force weakens or diversifies over time, until the new construction emerges, with its different grammatical and semantic force.¹¹ Yet Old Egyptian is clearly not just a simpler, earlier, or less evolved version of Middle Egyptian. The relationship is much more complex, between two related but in important respects different verbal systems. In many respects Old Egyptian verb forms and usage create severe difficulties for analysis of the "prehistory" of Middle Egyptian forms and syntax.¹² For instance, the Old Perfective: is it really in origin a sort of nominal sentence: *sdm.kwj* "I <am> heard"? It is equally difficult to describe the *sdm=f* without discussion of its structure. The synchronous "What?" only seems explicable in terms of the diachronic "Why?" or "How?" Yet these issues are not directly clarified by Old Egyptian usage, and problems of origin or etymology take us back into the safe but abstract territory of the prehistory of the language. Of course nobody seriously claims that it is possible to reconstruct the prehistory of a language by projection backwards from the known state. This process is no more possible than predicting its future development forwards from the known state.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 422; cf. Givón, *On Understanding Grammar*, 4.

¹⁰ The same attitude is implicit in, e.g., Polotsky, in: *Lingua Sapientissima*, esp. 16.

¹¹ Again the assumption is evolutionary in a Darwinian sense.

¹² But, if anything, more difficulties for reconciling structural analyses of Middle Egyptian with a historically oriented approach.

Our host here, Antonio Loprieno¹³ circumvents this difficulty by an analysis that derives the Egyptian verbal system from an *afroasiatisches Sprachgut*, which is explicitly not a real ur-afroasiatic language. His theory claims to be typologically-genetic and not historic-genetic. He categorises forms as typologically (not historically) primary and secondary; earlier and later. This is of course fraudulent. It admits that the real historical forms of a real language cannot be reconstructed, but implies that the significant morphemes can. He merely avoids the pretence that individual features can be dated, whether by syntacto-chronology or by glotto-chronology. This fraud is, however, no more than the normal and necessary working hypothesis of comparative linguistics: the procedure whereby the comparable features in related languages are reduced down to their lowest common denominator, which immediately takes the study out of the documentable, and into an unknown and undocumentable "prehistory" or "deep structure". In the study of specific language groups this reduction can very easily seem to imply that an underlying ur-language consisted only of the sum of common denominators, and was therefore essentially simple, or typologically primitive.

The vice of seeking out the lowest common denominator, and classifying it as typologically primary, is not restricted to historic-genetic grammar. It is a vice of all comparative linguistics, and especially of the search for language universals¹⁴. The archaeological approach, digging for ur-forms in syntax and semantics, is not much different from digging for deep structure and the strata that connect it to surface structure.¹⁵ The question is how "historical" the evolutionary framework may be as an explanation of language change, and how properly this may be documented in the complex "surface" structure of any specific language. More likely we are dealing with powerful myths of the community of linguists, that gives a metaphorical context for discussion but are not open to literal investigation.¹⁶ In this same sense, transformational-generative grammar has more of a mythological than "objective" or "historical" truth. Both styles of linguistics provide powerful frameworks for the documentation of linguistic change, but not explanations.

¹³ *Verbalsystem*; review by Eyre, *BiOr* 45 (1988), 5-18.

¹⁴ Cf. Kalmár, in: *Literacy, Language and Learning*, 151.

¹⁵ Such an approach, typified in Egyptology by the work of Friedrich Junge, looks to define the typological simplicity (equivalent to primitiveness); and then to explain all complex constructions as transformations from these structures. For Egyptian the diagnostic feature is typically an insistence on the nominal nature of verb-forms (equivalent to a typological priority of nouns). To my mind, there is little difference in the underlying procedures or assumptions, between working from an abstract "deep structure" or abstract "primary" forms, although individual approaches are based on radically different attitudes.

¹⁶ I do not mean myth here in any loose sense, but in the sort of technical or structuralist sense a cultural anthropologist would use. Like all good myths, those of linguists are contradictory because they are partial, and not to be taken as objectively true. If treated as such they create more heat than light; cf. pCh. Beatty I, 6-9.

The concepts "typologically primary" and "typologically secondary" run very deep through our understanding of Egyptian: as deep as the basic parts of speech. The Semitic root provides too easy and too tempting a route, through reduction of grammatical and lexical structure, to a primitive simplicity of purely nominal and exclamatory forms. In Egyptian we find various encouragements. Virtually all prepositions seem to derive directly from nouns, implying that the class of preposition is "typologically secondary" to that of noun. Adverbs are a restricted and lexically unimportant class of word, again apparently secondary to nouns. We tend to view the verbs as having in origin "nominal" forms and "nominal" syntax, which then develop to include adverbial forms and syntax. This tends to go with an assumption that aspect has priority over tense, and that the marked passive voice and future tense are secondary, almost historical creations. There is also the problem of subordination, which in classical Egyptian is more an issue of "adverbial transformations" than surface marking. This all finds its syntactic focus in the general recognition of a structural identity in the patterns of verbal and non-verbal sentences.

Our obsession with non-verbal sentences can be put down to a feeling that they are the simplest – or most primitive – form of syntax. They seem to represent most clearly the most basic forms of linguistic opposition: subject and predicate; topic and comment; theme and rheme; foreground and background; focus and presupposition. The absence of the verb "to be" makes the nominal sentence look intrinsically primitive, simpler and pidgin-like. It can be taken to represent the most basic model,¹⁷ and provide the key to various procedures of substitution or transformation, which can then be claimed to explain the structure of complex syntactic patterns in Middle Egyptian. On this basis it should be possible to map out lines of historical development, from the earliest forms of Egyptian into an almost modern language in Coptic. The historical development of syntax would therefore be from purely nominal (prehistory or the very deepest of deep structure), through adverbial to verbal syntax.¹⁸ While "structuralist" grammarians of Egyptian would rightly regard this as a travesty of their approach, my case is that their practice is in fact rooted in such implicit assumptions.

An explicitly evolutionary approach to linguistic complexity is only meaningful within some wider explanatory context. In recent years attempts have been made to investigate the influence of literacy on linguistic complexity; that is, its possible role as catalyst or concomitant to evolution. The question is straightforward: "whether ... languages like English have not adapted to the appearance of writing, that is whether they have not *evolved* as a result of literacy"¹⁹. Kalmár poses this question explicitly in terms of Givón's

¹⁷ E.g., Malinowski, in: *The Meaning of Meaning*, 332.

¹⁸ Cf. Junge, "*Emphasis*" and *sentential meaning*, 39-41, but also the conclusions of Allen, *GM* 32 (1979), 7-15.

¹⁹ Kalmár, in: *Literacy, Language and Learning*, 153.

distinctions between pragmatic mode and syntactic mode in language:²⁰ a distinction that some of us have been trying in a desultory way to explore for Egyptian grammar over recent years.²¹ Pragmatic mode is defined as primary, simpler and historically earlier than syntactic mode: pidgin versus creole, child versus adult, and informal versus formal language.

To simplify: Givón envisages a basic pragmatic mode that is without morphology or syntax, and which is universal. In contrast a syntactic mode is characterised by morphology and grammar, and therefore provides wide scope for diversity and individual variation, as well as precision. Since, however, both modes are common to all known natural languages, he hesitates over whether this dichotomy reflects the actual evolution of human language, or is rather an evolutionary-like but historically cyclical and universal process of language development.²² Many of the characteristics typifying pragmatic mode²³ are of immediate interest when considering the structure of Middle Egyptian, and historical trends in Egyptian syntax. Specifically these include a predominance of topic-comment over subject-predicate structure; word order governed by pragmatic principle, and not varied to signal semantic case functions; an absence of grammatical morphology; a short and simple unit of discourse.²⁴ Finally loose conjunction is used and not tight subordination.

Kalmár turns to the Inuktitut language for his detailed exemplification. Here writing has only recently been put to a full range of uses. As yardstick for comparison, he turns to the question of whether a language has overt surface structure subordination. He is explicit²⁵ that in this context universal "deep" structure would be the equivalent to "primitive". Therefore questions of language typology can only be asked where there is marked differentiation in the surface structure. This means that semantic subordination does not count. It is not enough that we would translate with a subordinate clause, or even that subordination is intended in some way by the speaker. It must be marked by specific and exclusive features in the surface structure. With this proviso, Kalmár's definition is that

²⁰ Givón, *On Understanding Grammar*, cf. 5, applied to an explicitly evolutionary discussion, ch. 7.

²¹ Explicitly in that terminology, eg., Loprieno, *JAAL* 1 (1988), 41.

²² Givón, *On Understanding Grammar*, esp. 207-9; 232 where his hesitation about defining an evolutionary framework is related to a vision of the potentially evolutionary changes as cyclical rather than continuous in time. Pragmatic mode might also be classed as a variant definition of universal deep structure were not Chomsky a central target of Givón's polemic in this work.

²³ *Ibid.*, 223.

²⁴ On criteria distinguishing the spoken and written registers of language cf. Goody, *Interface between the Written and the Oral*, 266-72.

²⁵ Kalmár, in: *Literacy, Language and Learning*, 157-8.

"primitive languages do not have subordinate clauses; instead they use a bound morpheme, a word, or a phrase".²⁶

By this definition Egyptian participles, relative forms, circumstantial forms, or "that"-forms would not count as subordinate clauses. The Inuktitut participle is used as equivalent to an English "who" clause, in exactly the same way as the Egyptian participle, and Kalmár explicitly denies it the status of subordinate clause.²⁷ Conversely Egyptian *nty* or circumstantial *jw* are classed as "relativisations" in deep structure, on the same footing as the participles. By Kalmár's assessment they should be taken to witness the development of true subordination in Egyptian surface structure.²⁸

Other features of Inuktitut in which Kalmár claims to detect the same trend towards true subordination are of equal interest for Egyptian. They concern the ways in which a clause of complement (a "that"-clause) might develop "surface" marking. He finds this potential in structures for marking reported speech. Inuktitut makes no sharp distinction between direct and indirect speech, and the marking is by morphemes that in both meaning and use are highly reminiscent of the Egyptian use of *dd=f*, *j.n=f*, *r-dd* and so on (but not of *ntt* or *r-ntt*). He finds similar potential in the marking of a nominalised verb with accusative case, in order to use it in the role of object to a main verb.²⁹ It is said that for Inuktitut these are newly documented constructions and that syntactic trends are at issue. Kalmár suggests that the status of newly written language lies behind their evolution from an oral context where parataxis sufficed.

In an attempt to show what specific effects writing might have on language, Goody³⁰ lists a series of differences in style (both lexical and syntactic) that can be demonstrated to exist between the written and spoken registers of a language.³¹ The list has much in common with that of Givón. Goody claims that among the distinctive features of the written register there is a tendency to increased nominalisation as against a preference for verbalisation, this being related to a type of abstraction. There is a preference for elaborate syntactic and semantic structures, especially nominal constructions and complex verb structures. There is a preference for subordinate rather than co-ordinate constructions. There is a preference for subject-predicate instead of reference-proposition (i.e., topic-comment)

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 162. And note p. 163, discussion of the use of the Inuktitut participle in a construction closely comparable to that of the Egyptian adjectival sentence.

²⁸ For the comparative typology of relative clauses cf. Comrie, in: *Universals of Human Thought*.

²⁹ Kalmár, in: *Literacy, Language and Learning*, 160-62; cf. below.

³⁰ *Interface between the Written and the Oral*, ch. 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 263-4. The basic studies are mostly on English, and all on European languages.

constructions. There is a preference for passive rather than active voice, and there is a need to produce complete information or idea units, and make all assumptions explicit, so that there is in general a tidier and tighter, more deliberate, non-spontaneous structure.³²

A more polemic variation of this argument is put forward in the work of Havelock³³ on the development of literacy in Greece between Homer and Plato. Where Chetveruchin talks of primeval language in terms of deictic and performative features, on the assumption that existential verbs developed out of a deictic base,³⁴ Havelock defines the same features in terms of his "general theory of primary orality". He merely redefines as oral what earlier scholars called primitive.

To Havelock primary oral language is active, performative, behavioral and dynamic. It deals with action, not theorising. It is not reflective, propositional or static. Access to primary oral language is obtained through the poet, in particular Homer. Fully developed, that is literate language, was achieved by Plato, on the back of the relatively short history of Greek narrative writing and the literate creation of prose. Two features of this argument are of special interest. It is claimed that the additive syntax of the poets – parataxis not subordination – is a defining feature of primary orality.³⁵ This makes it one of the characteristic features of "the living body of the language", which is "a flow of sound, symbolising a river of actions, a continual dynamism, compressed in a behavioral syntax, or (if the language of modernistic philosophy is preferred) a 'performative' syntax".³⁶

Havelock argues that a restricted syntax of the verb "to be" is characteristic of this orality. That is to say, the copula "is" is not used to attach a conceptual predicate to a conceptual subject, but only "in its oral dynamic dimension, signifying presence, power, situational status, and the like".³⁷ Indeed, an active formulation is characteristic, so that descriptive definition typically uses "to behave" or "to become" instead of "to be". It uses "to do" and not "to be".³⁸ Havelock asserts that the use of the copula for stating historical "fact" is

³² As case study for feedback into the spoken language Goody (*Interface between the Written and the Oral*, 268-9) quotes the work of Reder, in: *The Psychology of Literacy* on the Vai language.

³³ Havelock, *The Greek Concept of Justice*; summarised and developed in Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, esp. 76-7; 94-6; 101-16.

³⁴ Chetveruchin, *GM* 104 (1988), esp. 82.

³⁵ Cf. Kalmár's agreement (in: *Literacy, Language and Learning*, 159) that Greek provides a typical example of the development of subordination "which hardly existed in Homer, but was well developed in the classics."

³⁶ Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, 76.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94; cf. 110.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 102; 104.

a gradual and qualitative change, that converts "oral vision" into "objective statement",³⁹ and this he expresses as the claim that "the propositional idiom with the copula which we continually fall into is precisely what Plato wished the Greek language to be converted to, and he spent his entire writing life trying to do this. When he turns against poetry it is precisely its dynamism, its fluidity, its concreteness, its particularity, that he deplors."⁴⁰

This is just the old chestnut that savages don't use abstracts,⁴¹ although more elegantly defined by Havelock as "the absence of any linguistic framework for the statement of abstract principle" under primary orality.⁴² That is to say, discourse is merely about agents, persons, things, whereas fully evolved (written) language deals with concepts. Havelock's writing is extremely polemical, ethnocentric, and partisan. His central argument is a claim to the historical priority (read superiority) of Athens, based on the claim that a key feature of language evolution is to do with the development of the Greek alphabet. The language of evolution is however avoided, for the change is presented as the deliberate and conscious development of language capacity: an achievement and not natural selection.

The question posed here is how relevant these various theories and insights might be to understanding Egyptian, or indeed whether they might be illustrated, substantiated or refuted by our knowledge of Egyptian. The underlying argument is that qualitative differentiation between spoken and written language can be viewed as a developmental process, where the development of literacy would promote the use of more complex written grammar. The habit of using more complex constructions would then feed back into more complex and organised habits in spoken grammar. This would imply that writing can be seen as the typical social context or catalyst for change from an "underdeveloped" stage of language, as attested in known "primitive" societies, into the fully developed stage we regard as a truly modern language.

Havelock's thesis represents an extreme standpoint, and its faults are obvious. His definition of primary orality is a literary one, and his argument is wholly literary, suffused with the assumption that everything worthwhile happened for the first time in Greek literature. The orality of Homer, based on a form of non-spontaneous quasi-theatrical performance, is treated as representative of orality in general, including speech. No allowance is made for the artificiality of metrical style and the artificial poetic dialect in which it is composed – a dialect in which people did not actually speak. Likewise he overstates the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴¹ Cf. the discussion of Kalmár, in: *Literacy, Language and Learning*, 150, and Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, ch. 3.

⁴² Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, 94.

importance of narrative as opposed to description⁴³ or discourse, because he regards epic as the natural poetic form. Thus he tries to justify the untenable view that "alphabetized speech" was a precondition for creating the language of ratiocination,⁴⁴ claiming that it transformed oral performance (i.e., Homer), through promoting the development of written narrative. Then, by promoting the habit of abstract thinking and expression through written argument and discourse, it finally served as catalyst for the new grammar.

"Orality" is more naturally defined as spontaneous speech, the extreme opposite of which is private reading. A more reasonable theory of literary evolution might begin from spontaneous speech, through prepared speech and rhetoric, to short texts that are memorised and reused, particularly in a ritual or quasi-ritual context. The formal rhetorical context of performance, and the value of mnemonic structures, serve as explanation for "poetical" structures in non-spontaneous texts. From this there might develop a fully blown "oral literature". The development of prose as a literary style can then be related to the development of narrative and discourse in writing, as "literature" ceases to be the private property of the "poets", and through writing becomes the property of the literate. Whether or not developments in literary style and genre might serve as the catalyst for linguistic development is a separate issue.

With a living language it is feasible to study the performance of ordinary spoken language. For an ancient language this is out of the question. The study has to be literary. If we try to look at Egyptian literature in the same sort of terms as Havelock, we see a range of parallels but significantly different emphases. The point I am trying to make is that we cannot expect to attain a full understanding of the realities of Egyptian grammar if we work with texts on the basis that they contain the grammatical style of modern (or Latin) written prose, nor indeed if we try to describe Egyptian as if it were an exotic spoken language such as Inuktitut. Something more is required, over and above the normal question of what features of grammar should be sought in a language, and which of these happen to be grammaticalised in Egyptian. One should raise questions about the relationship between the real language – what people actually say – and the deliberately artificial and modified nature of the literary language in which they composed and wrote; how the performance of the written or literary language might relate to the natural language of actual speech; what might be the interaction between them over time; how this might relate to linguistic change; and how important such analysis might be for linguistic description.⁴⁵

Superficially it is the character of Egyptian grammar that is at issue here, in terms of its oral or written context. At a slightly deeper level, the question is whether Egyptian texts

⁴³ In Egyptian "naming" or listing provides the more natural poetic thread, a feature that it has in common with much African oral literature.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁵ Cf. Junge, in: *Lingua Sapientissima*. Cf. the approach of Diakonoff, in: *Studies Jacobsen*.

present us with a "real", "natural" language, or whether we are not dealing with deliberately formalised or "artificial" forms of the language. The role of grammatical archaism, accurate or false, is familiar for the most prestigious literary composition of later periods of Egyptian history, as is the way this archaism conditions the choice and use of constructions. The role of literary formalism in conditioning the grammar of twelfth dynasty Middle Egyptian is something we are less explicit about.

It is necessary to focus briefly on the problem of the sentence in Egyptian texts.⁴⁶ Grammarians deal with sentences, by and large. Although we all know that we don't actually speak sentences. It is a standard "myth" that the sentence is there in deep structure, but not fully performed in surface structure. Yet we all write in sentences, and would tend to regard a general absence of sentence structure as a primitive feature similar to that of the absence of formal propositions. However, one of the most interesting features of the most formal written Egyptian is that it does not write sentences in our normal sense of the term, but writes what would more accurately be described as descriptive labels. Looked at from a literary standpoint this style can be classed as what Havelock calls "oral vision"⁴⁷ - an essentially descriptive, performative, or nominal syntax.

The archetype form of labelling description is the so-called narrative infinitive. I remember that as a beginner I was extremely puzzled reading the account of Hatshepsut's Punt expedition in de Buck's *Readingbook*, until I realised that this was not a continuous narrative at all, nor was it meant to be, since it is a set of captions: the archetype example of a text presented without its necessary context, which are the pictures it was written to accompany. The following lines label the the ships shown at the coast of Punt:

"Sailing on the sea. Making good progress(?) to the God's Land. Mooring successfully at Punt, by the expedition of the Lord of the Two Lands, according to the instruction of the Lord of Gods, Amon Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands, Foremost of Karnak, to bring to him the wonders of all lands, because of the great extent to which he loves [his daughter Hatshepsut]." (Text A)

Worse, in a way, is the annual exercise in explaining to beginners the grammar and linguistic structure of the autobiography of Ahmose son of Abana. This text is probably just a third rate provincial composition, in both literary and grammatical terms. The author strives for grandeur of effect through the use of standard forms such as the "narrative" infinitive, but also by using wholly non-standard forms such as the "narrative" *wn.hr=f*. The text is stylistically unspeakable. No doubt it could be performed with a certain uncouth rhetorical grandeur, but it hardly works as simple narrative or as good reading, and it bears very little resemblance to the way its author spoke. For example:

⁴⁶ Cf. Callender, *CdE* 58 (1983), 83-96; id., in: *Crossroad*, 71-89; Junge, in: *Crossroad*, 189-254.

⁴⁷ Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, 110.

"Then his person, l.p.h. [...]. His Person then raged⁴⁸ about it like a panther. His Person's firing his first arrow, it being stuck in the breast of that enemy. Then these [rebels]." (Text B)

Probably this is the sort of context in which the classic "narrative" verb forms of Middle Egyptian literature were developed: *sdm.jn=f*, *sdm.hr=f*, *sdm.k3=f*, *'h'.n*, *wn.jn*. Whatever their precise etymologies, it seems likely that their underlying syntax is nominal in the same sort of way as the "narrative" infinitive. They are forms that do not belong to standard speech, for their usage is deliberately formal and "literary". Even within that context, they are particularly labelling forms in the sense of descriptive, or scene-setting forms.⁴⁹ Yet, whatever view one might take about the relationship of writing to the development of literature in Egypt, it is a reasonable assumption that any text with a pretence to being literature was performable, in the sense of recitable. The use of the "narrative" infinitive can be explained in the Deir el Bahari texts as simply the written labelling of pictures, but in the autobiography of Ahmose it is a sort of descriptive scene-setting. It is a sort of narrative labelling, that can be explained as an oral rhetorical style. Labelling in this sense is not only a written style. It can also be a performative style or use of language. In this way an underlying nominal syntax can represent both written and oral styles of labelling, for its essence is formality.

It is impossible to weigh the relative influences of written as against rhetorical and performative labelling on the development of Egyptian literary style as we know it. However, one may reasonably assume a degree of oral priority; a literary style created for oral performance, and not entirely under the influence of habits of writing and reading. This has important implications for assessment of both the style and the syntax of less "narrative" or more "poetic" forms of literature. Take, for instance, the beginning of the Cannibal Spell in the Pyramid Texts. The importance here is the sequence of bare suffix conjugations, not the accuracy of my translation:

"Sky darkens; stars go out,
Vaults tremble; bones of Earth shake,
The moving (planets?) are stilled against them,
They have seen Unas, risen and numinous,
As God living on his fathers, feeding on his mothers." (Text C)

The passage is descriptive and scene setting. Compare also the description of the boat in the story of the Shipwrecked Sailor:

⁴⁸ Presumably a *sdm.jn=f* form rather than an impersonal passive or infinitive followed by *jn* + agent.

⁴⁹ Cf. Depuydt, *Orientalia* 58 (1989), 1-27.

"120 sailors (are) in it, the choice of Egypt,
 They see the sky; they see the earth,
 Their hearts are bolder than lions.
 They predict a storm before it comes; a tempest before it happens." (Text D)

The passage again is descriptive. Here we evidently have *sdm=f* forms that serve as complete utterances in themselves, parallel to complete utterances that fit our conceptions of proper sentences: a standard adverbial and a standard adjectival sentence. Any attempt to deny the independence of these *sdm=f* forms as utterances by fitting them into a larger sentence pattern – a *Wechselsatz* – breaks down, because it conflates discourse structure with syntax.

The application of discourse and contextual analysis to Egyptian texts and grammar is made more difficult by prevailing structuralist analysis of the patterns of Egyptian sentences. The "standard theory", inspired by the work of Polotsky,⁵⁰ assumes that all standard Egyptian sentence patterns can be reduced to a propositional structure of A + B, which equals subject + predicate.⁵¹ The assumed structure is, indeed, that of an identity sentence. However long or complex the actual sentence, it must be fitted to this underlying pattern by the procedures of transformation, although allowance is made for sequences of multiple predicates. The patterns themselves are uncontroversial enough, when they appear in simple or even moderately complex examples. A nominal(ised?)⁵² verb form stands as "subject", and is followed by an "adverbial" predicate:

"Now, why (PRED.) should-I-give (SUBJ.) you trouble?" (Text E)

"You-give (SUBJ.) these rations to my people, (while-)they-are-working (PRED.)"
 (Text F)

In the most sophisticated treatment of this sort, Junge⁵³ reduces the semantic force inherent in the "predication" of such sentences to a minimum. He treats the analysis as, in effect,

⁵⁰ Junge, in: *Crossroad*, 189-90; id., "Emphasis" and sentential meaning; Depuydt, *OLP* 14 (1983), 13-54.

⁵¹ And with a tendency to treat this as the standard word order in Egyptian. For the complex issues of standard word order, word order change, and the role of pragmatic and syntactic mode in such change, see Loprieno, *JAAL* 1 (1988), 26-57.

⁵² The problem with the term "nominalised" is that it implies linguistically a transformation from some non-nominal form. Although in reality this need be nothing more than the completely neutral form – the root – the term is inseparable from its structural baggage, and promotes woolly thinking.

⁵³ In: *Crossroad*, 189-254, expanded and clarified since in id., "Emphasis" and sentential meaning. No issue is taken here with Junge's discussion of meaning and emphasis, which is extremely accurate, but only with the structuralist insistence that the patterns of discourse are to be treated as syntactic structure; cf. Eyre, in: *Crossroad*, 119-43, and the issues focussed on by Allen, *GM* 32 (1979), 7-15.

explanation of a structural peculiarity of Egyptian belonging to the "transpositional and sentential frame", since in any meaningful sense "the predicate in Egyptian is mostly represented by the semantic notion of what is called a 'verb'".⁵⁴ However, if the terms subject and predicate are to be used, there has to be the assumption of a predicative nexus of some sort between the two. For a nominal sentence this means the equivalent of the English copula "is". This assumes that the sentences have a propositional frame,⁵⁵ so that a literal representation of the structure should in English include the copula "is".⁵⁶ To show what I mean, I will quote a passage from Sinuhe, discussed by Junge.⁵⁷ The layout is Junge's, but I distort his translation to introduce the copula.

| | | |
|-------------------------------|------|----------------------------|
| <i>ḥq3 pn 'mw-s3-nns</i> | | <i>rdj.n=f wj r ḥp.t=f</i> |
| <i>'ḥ'.n</i> | | <i>jnj.n=j jḥ.t=f</i> |
| | | <i>ḥ3q.n=j mnmn.t=f</i> |
| <i>k3.t.n=f jrj.t st r=j</i> | | <i>jrj.n=j st r=f</i> |
| This ruler NN | (is) | he took me in his arms. |
| Then | (is) | I carried off his goods |
| (and) | (is) | I seized his cattle. |
| What he had meant to do to me | (is) | I did it to him. (Text G) |

Transformationally (or "transpositionally") the suffix conjugations here are considered to serve as nouns and adverbs, or noun and adverb phrases. Indeed, the basic "proof" that the suffix conjugations are "nominal"⁵⁸ in form and syntax depends on their transformational parallelism with the infinitive. As a superficial objection to this style of analysis, one might point out that the sentence structure using *sdm=f* is then difficult to distinguish from that with a narrative infinitive, as quoted above in text A. There also the explanatory adverbial adjuncts could perfectly well be declared as propositional predicates:

⁵⁴ Junge, in: *Crossroad*, 211.

⁵⁵ Havelock's (*The Muse Learns to Write*, 94) "conceptual subject attached to a conceptual predicate."

⁵⁶ This is obviously, at one level, a mere illustrative device, but the issue goes deeper than that. It is the English "literal" illustration of Junge's insistence that the underlying structure is genuinely propositional (cf. Junge, *GM* 33 [1979], 75-6). The question is that of whether such sentence patterns are based on an identity relationship; cf. Schenkel, *BiOr* 45 (1988), 282-4. One should note that the declarative sentence as such is more typical of the written register than the spoken (cf. Goody, *Interface between the Written and the Oral*, 267). The structuralist or "syntactic mode" tends very much to treat the declarative or identity patterns as basic. My argument is that by doing so it is tending to treat written and not spoken language as basic, and the distinction should not be passed over as unimportant.

⁵⁷ In: *Crossroad*, 211-2.

⁵⁸ That is to say, not fully "propositional" statements, capable of serving alone as a complete utterance.

sqd
šsp tp-w3t nfrt
dw r t3

m w3d-wr
r t3 ntr
m htp
r h3st Pwnt
jn mš' n Nb-t3wy
hft tpt-r n Nb-ntrw

| | | |
|----------------------|-------|---|
| Sailing | (was) | on the sea |
| Making good progress | (was) | to the God's land |
| Mooring | (was) | successful |
| (and) | (was) | to the land of Punt |
| (and) | (was) | by the army of the Lord of the Two Lands |
| (and) | (was) | according to the order of the Lord of Gods. |

Such an explanation would patently be ridiculous.

The difficulty is to assess the extent to which this precise sort of syntactic subject-predicate relationship, implicit in Junge's analysis, corresponds to the intention of the Egyptian speaker-writer-poet in creating each ordinary narrative or descriptive sentence. For instance, any adverbial adjunct in any sentence provides "new" information. On any semantic hierarchy of "subjectivity" or "predicativity" – "givenness" or "newness" – the adverbial adjunct is of necessity "predicative" if simply conveying "newness" is the definition of "predication".⁵⁹ The information provided is typically "new" and not "given". Where the verb form itself is classed as "adverbial" there can be no surprise that its role is "new" or "predicative" in this limited informational sense.

Junge himself makes clear that the structures he analyses as "predicative" have an essentially discourse function, and that they were not "predicated" for the purpose of "emphasis" or (emphatic) "focus". Callender⁶⁰ demonstrates even more clearly that it is just these "sentence predicates" that carry the line of discourse in a "paragraph".⁶¹ One may reasonably question the structuralist insistence that the informational frame is simply that of a propositional subject and predicate. Egyptian sentences are typically built up through the connection between "thematic" and "rhematic" phrases, and there are real advantages in treating their relationship as pragmatic and relatively unmarked: more as the "bricolage" of

⁵⁹ As, cf. Junge, *"Emphasis" and sentential meaning*.

⁶⁰ In: *Crossroad*, 71-89.

⁶¹ Although stressing that this is not necessarily true of every such "sentence predicate."

speech and performance than the abstract propositional structure of written didactic prose.⁶²

The structural approach – the "standard theory" – tacitly assumes that Middle Egyptian works in what Givón calls "syntactic mode". The approach of Gardiner described the language in something much more like "pragmatic mode". The difference between the approaches is worth exploring, not because one or the other is objectively or exclusively right, but because the very argument itself can help throw light on the historical development of Egyptian sentence patterns, and on the meaning intended by an Egyptian speaker when he used one construction in preference to another. For instance, it is fairly clear that in origin the Egyptian suffix conjugations are words (or phrases), and not independent clauses or sentences. The etymology of the *sḏm=f* is not based on a simple propositional relationship between subject and predicate. Yet it is not necessary for every grammatical utterance to consist of a syntactic, or even "logical" proposition. Nor does the non-propositional origin of a construction mean that it could not, over time, come to be used in a propositional way. That is to say, in classical Middle Egyptian the semantic interpretation of *jw sḏm=f* seems quite clear: *=f* is the subject "he"; *sḏm* is the predicate "hears"; *jw* is a "modal" marker of the "indicative" or "factual assertion".⁶³ Such is an essentially pragmatic analysis, but it seems more likely to resemble the way an Egyptian speaker thought about his utterance. A structural analysis, in which the *jw* is explained as a relatively neutral "subject", and the *sḏm=f* as an "adverbial predicate" (a circumstantial form), is clearly a more plausible attempt to explain the origin of the construction. Indeed, such an approach is probably necessary to explain the complementary distribution of forms in Middle Egyptian. Despite, however, claiming to be structural, it is an approach that is close to the historical in the way it takes explicatory refuge in an abstraction of the language, and the claim that it represents syntax.

In assessing whether syntactic or pragmatic mode is predominant in the sentence structure of classical Egyptian, a variety of features are potentially more diagnostic than mere structural patterns in discourse. Morphology is as always a difficulty, although the nominal or nominalised forms of the Egyptian verb must always be of great comparative interest. If the syntactic mode is predominant, we might expect there to be a genuine morphological differentiation of forms in different syntactic positions. Especially we might expect the clear marking of subordinate forms or constructions, and in particular the subjunctive form used as "object" of another verb, which does seem to be marked morphologically in Middle Egyptian. On the other hand, the construction *jw=sn ḥr jrjt k3t* in Text F above can be defined as a subordinate adverbial clause by the standard rules of transposi-

⁶² Cf. Eyre, in: *Crossroad*, 129-33; 140-1.

⁶³ Cf. Junge, "Emphasis" and sentential meaning, esp. 103-8. The immediate discussion goes back through Allen, in: *Crossroad*, 27-31; 33; 39 to Junge, in: *Festschrift Edel*, 263-71.

tion. If, however, we do not consider it marked as subordinate in surface structure, but merely subordinate by parataxis, then we are closer to a pragmatic mode of construction.

The question of syntactic distinctions in the verbal morphology of Middle Egyptian remains obscure. The force of gemination in the *sdm=f* is clearly not syntactic in origin, and it is obscure how far it may in practice have become a marker of syntactic function by the Middle Kingdom. Likewise the suggestion that different syntactic uses of the suffix conjugation might have been marked by different case endings on the verbal root⁶⁴ remains no more than an elegant theory.⁶⁵ Subordination in surface structure is problematic in general for Middle Egyptian.⁶⁶ An adequate treatment of this issue would require, at the same time, a better analysis of the related problem of how "embedding" functioned as a process in Egyptian syntax.⁶⁷

The real context of literary Middle Egyptian is descriptive oral performance. We have to visualise the texts performed in a semi-theatrical way: ritual performance for the Pyramid Texts, and entertainment for the literary texts. The "theatrical" (or "performative") context cannot be expected to show the full propositional form that we tend to treat as the essence of the grammatical category of "sentence". This is simply a matter of degree in Egyptian literature. There is, shall we say, a relative indifference to the "sentence" as opposed to the flow of descriptive "discourse" in literature for performance. This shows in the importance of parataxis, the relative lack of marked subordination, and even perhaps the indifference to the copula "is" in Egyptian literary style. Insistence on an essentially propositional syntax is likely to distort the literary form.

In this context the letters of Hekanakhte take on a special importance. More than any other Middle Egyptian texts⁶⁸ they do seem to record actual speech. They seem to have been written to dictation; and a dictation rare in its unselfconsciousness. The scribe appears to have represented the actual flow of words without editing or normalisation. Without detailing here the case for this view, it is worth focussing on a couple of specific passages. My translation reflects of course my view of the context of their writing:

⁶⁴ Callender, *AAL* 2/6, 1975; Eyre, in: *Lingua Sapientissima*, 38; id., in: *Crossroad*, 139-40; Ray in this volume.

⁶⁵ But cf. above the discussion of Kalmár's suggestion (in: *Literacy, Language and Learning*, 160-2) that Inuktitut might be developing a "that"-form along these lines, through marking a nominalised verb with accusative case for use as a "subjunctive."

⁶⁶ For instance, there is a good case for arguing that the *n sdm=f* form, as in the quotation from the Shipwrecked Sailor, is a marked subordinate (=adverbial) form and not merely subordinate by parataxis, but in the example quoted it is clearly the nouns "storm" and "tempest" that are qualified, and the *n sdm=f* is not here "predicative" to the sentence.

⁶⁷ Loprieno, *JAAL* 1 (1988), 35-41; cf. the remarks of Givón, *On Understanding Grammar*, 222.

⁶⁸ Including other letters, documents, or the "address to the living."

"Well, anyway, I have come here, travelling south, (and) you have made the account⁶⁹ for me of the rent of the field of 13 *arura* in just barley. Be very careful. Guard against your making free with the barley, (even) a *khar*, there, as(?) one who deals with barley of his own, because you have made the rent in respect of it (financially) painful to me, in just barley; and also (there is the matter of) its seed grain. Well, anyway, as for one who deals with barley, as for 65 *khar* of barley in a field of 13 *arura* is⁷⁰ 5 *khar* in a field of 1 *arura*; well it is not a painful quota(?)." (Text H)

Hekanakhte's style is evidently spontaneous.⁷¹ However, his partner in conversation is only the scribe's reed pen, that copies but does not reply. The series of instructions and questions therefore become quite complex forms of explicit and thoughtful discourse, with an unselfconscious element of rhetoric. Particularly interesting is Hekanakhte's use of particles and conjunctions, in light of the reasonable assumption that conjunctions are associated with formal subordination and written narrative, whereas particles are associated with parataxis, speech, and oral usage.⁷² Hekanakhte makes free use of both. In this passage he uses the subordinating conjunctions *hr-ntt* and *jr* where the context and phrasing of his argument is clearly thought out and less spontaneous. He uses the paratactic particles *mk grt* where the tongue seems to be leading the mind. A second characteristic of Hekanakhte's language, that seems striking for so historically early a stage of the Egyptian, is his use of composite verb forms containing the auxiliaries *wn* and *jrj*. This allows him explicitly to mark complex forms of tense and mood. For instance, where he is complaining about the quality of the food grain sent to him:

"If you should have sent me old barley in order to conserve the new barley, what should I say? It is very proper!" (Text I)

⁶⁹ For the most recent discussion of the "syntactic" problem of sequence of tenses here see Junge, in: *Crossroad*, 216; id., "Emphasis" and sentential meaning, esp. 51-60, and cf. the similar sentence pl. 5, 4.

⁷⁰ The apparent change of construction in mid-sentence, a feature of reflective speech or of dictation where the speaker has to stop and wait for the writer to catch up is particular clear also in pl. 6 line 55.

⁷¹ Take for example Hekanakhte's use of *jrj m jt mh* "one who does with barley" in criticism of his correspondent's profligacy as consumer. Then, having the phrase in his mind, he repeats it in a slightly different sense with the *jrj* referring to the activity of the farmer. Thereby he provides the transition back to discussion of the profitability of the transaction.

⁷² Superficially this is the difference between the spoken version of this paper, for which most of the subordinating conjunctions were crossed out, and particles and gestures added in an ad hoc way as I went along, and the written version with subordinating constructions restored for the sake of precision.

It is perhaps relevant that narrative is first attested in written Egyptian in the formal context of tomb autobiography,⁷³ where it can be categorised as descriptive and labelling. A more informal "story-telling" style only appears in written literature at a later date. Yet the more relaxed style, as found in letters and stories, has in many ways a more "evolved" style of grammar, despite evidently being more colloquial. It is more up-to-date, and has less concern for the prestige of the archaic. Insofar as Egyptian develops the propositional use of a verb "to be", and as it comes to mark subordination more clearly, this is attested in the introduction of apparently colloquial forms into written prose, both narrative and discursive. In both contexts the uses of the words *jw* and *wn* are particularly diagnostic.

The problem of how the grammar of Hekanakhte relates to that of other stages of the Egyptian language is complex, but it seems to highlight the specialness of literary Middle Egyptian. I personally come more and more to believe that this "classical" Egyptian is, in origin and fact, an artificial "poetic" dialect, and not simply the written representation of some particular spoken dialect.⁷⁴ In this precise sense I view it as the "Homeric" dialect of Egyptian.⁷⁵ The grammar of Hekanakhte is neither more primitive nor simpler for being speech, in comparison to the grammar of the Eloquent Peasant or Sinuhe. Nor is it in any way "primitive", in terms of an inability or a preference against making explicit "evolved" features of language. In fact Hekanakhte makes tense and subordination more explicit than is general in literary texts, by his use of complex composite verb forms, by his extensive and clear use of conjugations and particles, and in the way he phrases propositions clearly as such. He does not have the same descriptive allusive style as literary texts, where the connection relies much more on simple juxtaposition. Indeed, in this way his sentence structure might seem more "syntactic" and less "pragmatic" than that of roughly contemporary literature.

In reality, the features discussed here involve normal distinctions between the spoken and the written register.⁷⁶ Many of the features that Goody notes as distinctive of

⁷³ Assmann, in: *Schrift und Gedächtnis*, 64-93.

⁷⁴ On the problem of "dialect" in this context cf. Loprieno, *GM* 53 (1982), 75-95; on the issue of norms, cf. Junge, in: *ZDMG. Supplement VI*, 17-34; on the relationship between dialects and norms in the specific context of writing, cf. Haugen, in: *Sociolinguistics*, esp. 109.

⁷⁵ A limited literary argument of this kind has been put forward by Foster, *RdE* 34 (1983), 27-52, but in such a trivialising way, and with such a lack of rigour, as to discredit the approach. Foster's arguments about the nature and meaning of forms depend almost entirely on what he thinks is fine as translation, rather than a production of translations depending on analysis of the structure of Egyptian grammar. The argument here is intended to illustrate an explicatory frame, in which to place the grammatical analysis, and does not rely simply on ad hoc analysis of individual passages. I should stress that I do not mean that the structures of "poetry" promote the use of grammatically "simple" constructions (as Foster seems to believe). "Pragmatic" is not meant to mean "simple", any more than structuralist analyses of the basics of deep structure imply that the manifestations of surface structure are grammatically simple.

⁷⁶ Cf. Goody, *Interface between the Written and the Oral*, 267.

the written register (cf. above) are also to a degree typical of formal prepared speech or recitation, and are therefore also to be found in the language of oral literature or rhetoric. The converse is that spoken sentences tend to be longer and more rambling than written sentences. Hekanakhte's letters may thus seem to be less in a performative mode than formal literature, although on the face of it they are more "oral" and spontaneous. They merely have the untidiness of spontaneous speech, as against the tidy sentence structure of non-spontaneous language. The important feature is not whether it is written or spoken. It is the explicatory, discursive, or argumentative register, compared to the labelling, descriptive, performative register of literature. The expository context, whether spoken or written, is likely to promote the use (even development) of more precise and less allusive modes of expression. A key issue, whether for spoken, recited or written language, seems to be the extent to which the "speaker" perceives himself to be creating a "sentence", and consciously gives it propositional form (= syntactic mode), or whether he is satisfied with making his utterance (= pragmatic mode).

The extent to which syntactic mode might evolve in a language, or rather the balance between the two modes, seems largely sociological: to what extent is communication limited to performative contexts, or to what extent are the merits of particular courses of action the subject of reasoned debate. That is to say, the equations quoted at the beginning of this paper, relating "co-operation", "communication", "discussion" and "ratiocination" to different types of syntax, have a degree of reality in the way they relate sentence structures to language usage in particular social contexts. The vital question is whether they have any developmental or evolutionary value, or whether they are simply stylistic variations. Thus, for instance, the changes that Kalmár detects in Inuktitut do not just relate to extensions in the use of writing. They are part of a context of social change, as the originally hunter-gatherer band becomes embroiled in the bureaucracy of modern government, with its appetite for impersonal decontextualised explication, as against highly contextual personal communication. I am saying the obvious: the more complex a society the more complex its communication is likely to be.⁷⁷ Havelock's basic argument about the role of literacy in linguistic evolution is defective, because it attributes to users of literacy an intention and consequences that relate to the whole social context within which the use of writing developed. In assessing the evidential value of his data he fails to consider properly social limitations on the sorts of language written down at different dates.⁷⁸ Yet even Goody's much more sophisticated discussion of the role of literacy pays insufficient attention to the different social contexts for language use or performance. For Egypt we are fortunate in having an apparently wider variety of types of writing for apparently more primitive stages. This means we can glimpse greater varieties of linguistic style, and so should be able to avoid the worst pitfalls of the evolutionary framework.

⁷⁷ Greenberg, *Essays in Linguistics*, 65.

⁷⁸ Cf. Goody's criticism (*ibid.*, 105-7) of the style of approach he typifies.

I am trying to argue here that things which look "primitive" or more "structured" in classical Egyptian are actually that way because they are written in a poetic and performative "dialect", which is more a style than a dialect properly speaking. That despite being "written", they seem more "typologically primitive" in their syntax or structure than the rare examples of "colloquial" writing.⁷⁹ This is because they derive from rhythmic and recitational patterns, not because they are genuinely simpler or more primitive. They may, however, seem more structured than ordinary speech, because they are formally and deliberately structured for literary purposes. In this way oral poetry may seem to relate more closely to the "syntactic" mode, which is the mode of sentence structure assumed for modern written languages,⁸⁰ than to a much looser and more pragmatic mode.

In this sense "syntactic mode" would mean little more than the deliberate structuring of sentences or utterances: an explicit consciousness of the value of structured language for clarity of communication. This is the sense in which the development of written prose – for reading not recitation – can perhaps be argued to have an influence on grammar and language use. The writing of philosophy, history, or the novel,⁸¹ but even of letters and reports, is likely to promote a different consciousness of syntactic structure, compared with the more pragmatic attitudes of natural speech. The structures of recitational poetry, while highly formal, retain something more of the pragmatic patterns of "utterances" than the syntactic patterns of "sentences".

As with Homer, so with Middle Egyptian literature,⁸² one has a poetic form; a performative style closely connected with the recitational context for which the texts were composed. This is reflected in a special "poetic" syntax and discourse structure. That is to say, the characteristic balance and parallelism in the lines of Egyptian literature are reflected very closely in the syntax of these texts. Phrase length and sentence length are structured to the short length of the "metrical" unit. The pragmatic structure of topic and comment, or the paratactic juxtaposition of utterance, is closely connected with "artistic" purpose. In other words, the features that are most "primitive" and lead us to "geometrical", algebraic, pragmatic, pidgin-like, structuralist analyses of Egyptian are probably as much to do with the "poetic" nature and style of classical Middle Egyptian as with the true syntactic structure of the Egyptian language. Thus the features classed by Havelock as "primitive orality" might be better classed as a sort of artificial step backwards in "primitiveness", to serve a poetic context. The apparent "logicality", or "geometry", or "primitiveness", that gives us an

⁷⁹ To a limited extent a similar argument can be put forward for the linguistic differences between the Pyramid Texts and the contemporary tomb autobiographies.

⁸⁰ Where the issue of prescriptive grammar certainly has a degree of influence.

⁸¹ For the claim that the invention of the novel and the prose romance can be placed in Egypt not Greece cf. Griffiths, in: *Studies Lichteim*, 360.

⁸² Which includes the Coffin and perhaps the Pyramid Texts.

excessively concrete feel for Egyptian syntax, are something of a red herring. It is more the "geometry" of a poetic literary style than an underlying "geometry" of syntax.⁸³

I am not quite sure myself, in presenting this argument, whether I have been influenced by certain rather out-of-the-way theoretical approaches,⁸⁴ or have merely been attracted to them by the desire to find meaningful context for the texts I read. My discussion is largely based on a revulsion against mechanical, quasi-mathematical or formalist-logical approaches to the analysis of Egyptian, and a conviction that at present something nearer to a form of literary criticism seems the most promising way of improving our understanding of the native use of Egyptian. By this I mean the attempt to discuss in a "pragmatic" way the strategies of the Egyptian speaker in creating sentences; what the Egyptian was trying to achieve by using a specific word order or construction, and how this helped his meaning in the context in which he used it.

I think it is fairly clear that where an Egyptian tongue began a new section of discourse with *jw* he was probably just thinking "Er – statement and off we go". When he began it with a bare *sdm.n=f* he was thinking ahead to some further argument. He makes the verbal statement firmly, clearly, sometimes perhaps emphatically or "focussed", but he makes it also as the first part of an information structure. It is a sort of "topicalisation", and in an "utterance" pattern that is incomplete without further information. An insistence on the syntactic mode of this pattern is, however, questionable and limiting. In simple terms, I am questioning whether the basic sentence pattern *sdm.n=f* + ADVERB really represents a marked syntactic structure: English "That he heard was yesterday". There remain good reasons to treat it as an essentially pragmatic structure: English "He has heard, yesterday".⁸⁵ It can help break such bounds to ask how far Egyptian texts are better dealt with in a pragmatic rather than a syntactic mode. This is regardless of whether an evolutionary hypothesis is sound. If we are going in the end to make sense of Egyptian texts, we have to think a lot harder about how and why the individual text was composed, how it was going to be "performed", and how the author chose his form according to the context of his communication.

⁸³ On the central importance of studying performance as well as text cf. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 125. For something of the background to descriptions of Egyptian as a "logical" or "geometrical" language cf. the comments of Polotsky, in: *Lingua Sapientissima*, 19-21. The same issues have arisen in discussion of Hebrew, because Biblical Hebrew has the same literary and performative background as literary Egyptian; cf. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure*, 7: "Yet one finds that an astute Semitist and a serious literary theorist agree that Hebrew, as reflected in its verse, is "highly logical" [...]. We not only do not regard Hebrew (or texts written in it) as intrinsically simpler or more logical than other languages and texts; we similarly do not expect to find them freer or more vigorous."

⁸⁴ Although these may be linguistic byways, they are byways where the scenery seems terribly familiar to the student of Egyptian texts. Cf. also the approach of Assmann, *GM* 11 (1974), 59-76.

⁸⁵ Cf. Eyre, in: *Crossroad*, 119-43.

The ordinary speaker does not think too hard about structure, and certainly not about the history of the language, whereas the poet may and the commentator must. To refer to classic discussions within Egyptology: this involves something beyond the mere separation of literary and non-literary texts to obtain synchronic purity of the *parole* (after Černý). As Junge⁸⁶ so cogently argues, classical literary Egyptian is the central and proper sphere of study, but it needs to be dealt with at a higher level than the individual clause, and with explicit analysis of use or performance. This goes beyond the distinction between *Rede* and *Erzählung*.⁸⁷ It needs to go beyond the definition of the rules of metricality,⁸⁸ which do not in themselves constitute more than an element of literary criticism. It involves a thorough-going application of "discourse analysis",⁸⁹ that lays emphasis on the role of individual forms. This concerns syntactic patterns within both their immediate and their wider contexts,⁹⁰ but also consideration of forms and patterns in the context of their designed or expected performance.

The grammar of an Egyptian text, or group of texts, is not just the list of forms, but also their context. That is to say, grammar must include style and context, not merely form. Without sensitivity to style even the relatively straightforward becomes untranslatable in any meaningful sense. The deadness of Egyptian literature is brought home more forcefully, the more one is able to perceive a little of what was genuinely appreciated in the context to which it belonged. This means attempting to visualise the lost reality of the linguistic performance. Even though the full force of the sounds are irrecoverable, it is possible to visualise the effect of rhetorical quasi-theatrical recitation in the passage quoted above from the Pyramid Texts. Or in the passage quoted from the Shipwrecked Sailor, where the couplet begins and ends on *m3*: at the beginning "see" and at the end "lion". Without a consciousness of the performative context, any attempt to analyse the sentence structure is highly problematic. There is a serious danger of categorising "literary" style under the heading of syntactic form.

In an important sense the central task in writing Egyptian grammar is the attempt to define "Basic Egyptian" – the essential core necessary for communication with and understanding of a "Middle Egyptian". A secondary test is then whether that "Middle Egyptian" would recognise the detail of our description of his language. In practice his language was a written language, as used by a very small group. It is a formal literary "dialect" that they

⁸⁶ *Syntax*, 15-6.

⁸⁷ After Hintze, *Untersuchungen zu Stil und Sprache neuägyptischer Erzählungen*.

⁸⁸ After Fecht, "Prosodie", in: *LÄ IV*, 1127-1154.

⁸⁹ See Callender, in: *Crossroad*, 71-89.

⁹⁰ Cf. Junge, in: *Crossroad*, 189-254; id., *JEA* 72 (1986), 113-132; id., "Emphasis" and sentential meaning.

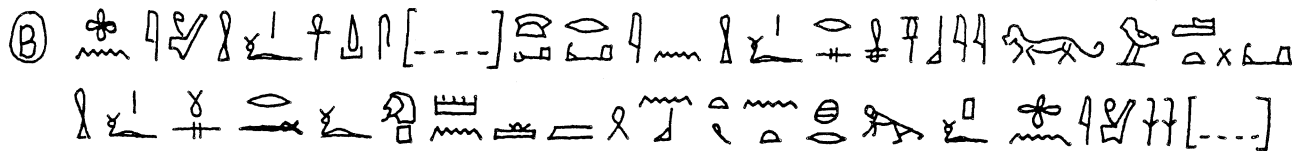
used, strongly under the influence of poetic style, because that was the form in which the classical literature was created and written. This does not represent natural speech, and it was not necessary suitable in its patterns and structure for all classes of text, and especially not for letters or documents. It does not then matter that our view of "Basic Egyptian" is defined by literary and poetic texts, since this was treated by the Egyptians as their written norm. It is, however, helpful in defining strategies for classification, and it is necessary for language typology, to make this point explicit.

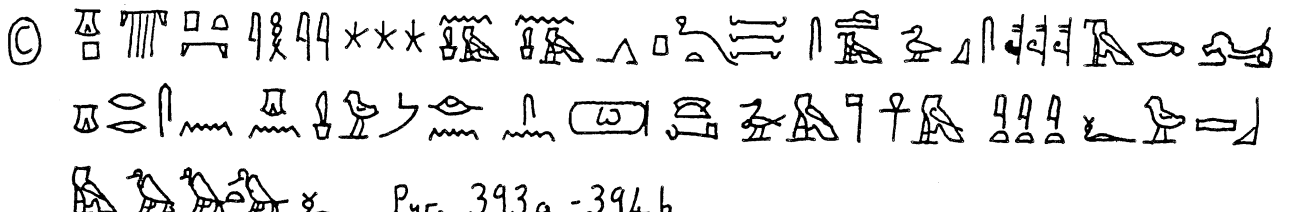
My argument here is that analysis of Egyptian grammar has never been sufficiently explicit about the nature of its texts. This has tended to lead first to an oversimplification: classifying the subject-predicate or identity structure of non-verbal sentences as a sort of universal logical-syntactic relationship underlying all sentence patterns. Then it has led to overelaboration, in order to justify this structuralist interpretation through all manifestations of surface structure and all sentence patterns. This style of analysis has been very productive for the last 30 years or so, but it now seems rather worked out. More profitable lines of enquiry now seem to lie in explicit investigations of the discourse rather than syntactic structure of Egyptian. This should examine the changing balance between parataxis and marked subordination, and the historical changes in word order that relate to new styles of verbal structure. The most interesting of these is the change from the order VSO in the suffix conjugation to that of SVO in compound verb forms.

The attempt to relate such change and variation to a putative universal evolution from "pragmatic" to "syntactic mode" provides at least an interesting framework for assessing Egyptian data within the comparative frameworks of language typology and development, and it allows this discussion to be dealt with in the framework of the relationship between language and writing. In such ways Egyptology has much to offer to linguistics, as well as much to take.⁹¹ It provides a case study, where data can be assessed for a language with a long and natural internal development that was very little influenced by outside influences, cultural or linguistic, over a very long period of time.

⁹¹ Cf. Polotsky, in: *Lingua Sapientissima*, 16.

Ⓐ 
 Urk. IV 322, 5-13

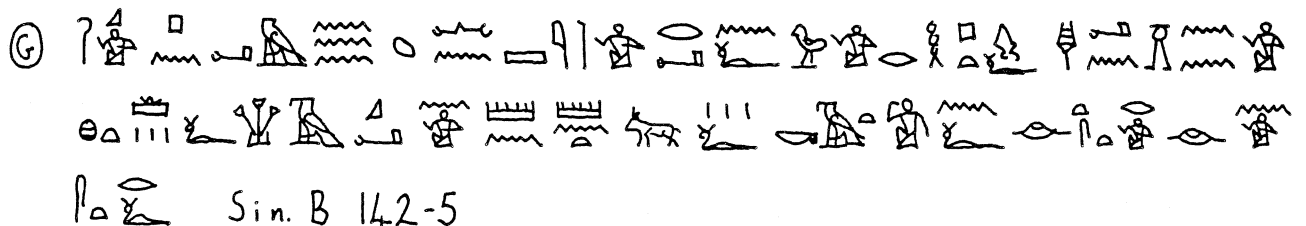
Ⓑ 
 Urk. IV 8, 11-16

Ⓒ 
 Pyr. 393a-394b

Ⓓ 
 S.S. 27-32 (= 93-8)

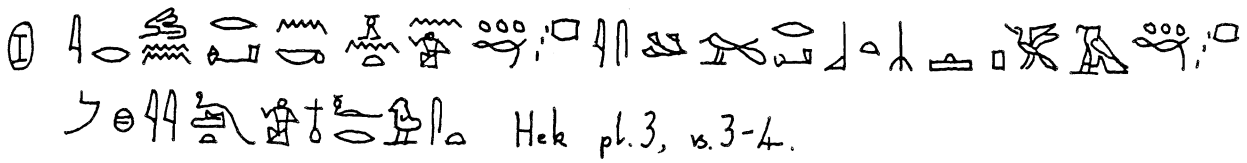
Ⓔ 
 Heb. pl. 4, vs. 15

Ⓕ 
 Heb. pl. 5, 29-30

Ⓖ 
 Sin. B 142-5

Ⓜ  Hek pl. 1-2, 9ff

This block contains a large sequence of handwritten Egyptian hieroglyphs arranged in seven horizontal rows. The symbols are drawn in black ink on a white background. The sequence includes various signs such as birds, lotus flowers, and abstract shapes, some of which are combined with other signs. The text is identified as 'Hek pl. 1-2, 9ff'.

Ⓜ  Hek pl. 3, vs. 3-4.

This block contains a smaller sequence of handwritten Egyptian hieroglyphs arranged in two horizontal rows. The symbols are drawn in black ink on a white background. The text is identified as 'Hek pl. 3, vs. 3-4.'

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