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A NOTE ON LEARNING AND TEACHING EGYPTIAN

Leo Depuydt

*Everything interesting is a matter of
organization, not of primal substance*

Bertrand Russell

What follows are a few remarks of a general nature regarding the business of learning and teaching Egyptian. These remarks arise in part from my work on a textbook grammar of Middle Egyptian and they concern (1) a crucial principle, (2) means of implementing it, and (3) its relevance for Old and Middle Egyptian among all languages.

It is true that learning and teaching a language is mainly in the doing. But it may occasionally be useful to halt the philological treadmill for a moment of reflection in the hope of distilling more general ideas.¹

This short paper has five small parts. First is an observation on learning languages. This observation provides a context for the second part, which focuses on the above-mentioned principle. The third part discusses a difficulty students may face in becoming comfortable with this principle. The fourth part lists means to implement the principle in a textbook, as a principle is useless unless it is applied persistently. Fifth and last is the main reason why the principle is of special importance for the study of Old and Middle Egyptian.

I ON LEARNING LANGUAGES

There is, I believe, no such thing as a natural ability for languages. This is a false assumption that may turn into a prejudice and provide an incentive to sweep problems under the rug.

It is true that, in the classroom, some students appear to take more easily to a certain language than others, assuming an equal degree of commitment to time and effort on the part of all. And unfortunately, because of the cumulative type of knowledge which the learning of a language requires and the often regimented fashion in which this knowledge is imparted in larger classes, a small distance between students can grow at an alarming rate and very soon become an unbridgeable gap, a development that is only fueled by the difficulty of having to learn simultaneously a new script. It is tempting to impute any gap arising between students to a difference in natural ability for languages. However, the mere fact that we are all competent speakers of at least one language invalidates this assumption in my opinion.

It follows, then, that, if a difference arises between students in a classroom, it must be attributed to definite causes, and if these causes can be identified, they should be addressed

1 A version of this paper was read at the ARCE Annual Meeting held at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in April 1993.

in the teaching of Egyptian. I have the impression that the root cause may be insufficient awareness of an important principle.

II CONSIDERATION FOR SYSTEM

If a teacher were asked to indicate briefly the single most important thing one should pay attention to in learning languages, I believe the answer would have to be that one needs to subordinate the entire learning process to the *system* of language. The system is what matters and what has to be kept in view.

Here one could elaborate and show how increasing consideration for system has been one of the great achievements of human thinking in the twentieth century and mention the names of scholars who have been instrumental in promoting it. What matters here, however, is strategies to implement the principle. Before suggesting such, I would like to indicate a difficulty that beginning students of Egyptian may face.

III THE INTANGIBILITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Consideration for system may seem like an abstract notion. It becomes somewhat less so when one realizes that systems have two types of components, (1) elements and (2) relationships between those elements. There is an important difference between elements and relationships. Elements are tangible or visible whereas relationships are not.

An example of an element is the verb form *jw stp.n.j* "I have chosen." This verb form, taken by itself, cannot be defined and would not have any reason for existence without the relationships of contrast that connect it with other elements. These relationships are many and they exist between *jw stp.n.j* "I have chosen" and other elements, such as the following.

<i>stp.n.j</i>	"that I have chosen."
<i>jw.j stp.j</i>	"I choose."
<i>jw.j stp.kw</i>	"I (have been and therefore now) am chosen."
<i>n stp.j</i>	"I have not chosen."
<i>jw.j jj.kw</i>	"I have come."
<i>jw stp.n.j</i>	"I have chosen."

All these elements can be perceived by the senses. They can be seen. They can be touched. Their acquisition is necessary but it is mainly a burden on the memory. On the other hand, relationships cannot be observed. Yet, it is the relationships that make elements into a language. A terminology has therefore to be developed to describe the relationships. For example, one statement describing a relationship is that *n stp.j* "I have not chosen" is the negation of *jw stp.n.j* "I have chosen." The two elements therefore contract a relationship. By itself, this statement may seem trivial, but consistently thinking in this mode is not self-evident to the beginning student.

The student must therefore become accustomed to learning something that cannot be seen. A textbook grammar should pay special attention to bringing out or giving body to that which is not visible.

This is not to say that relationships are abstract. To the contrary, relationships are very concrete and real. Only, they are not tangible. To stress the point that relationships are concrete, the following analogy may be used.

Suppose a politician comes to town and is to be interviewed by a local journalist on a podium. Technicians may be asked to place two armchairs within a reasonable distance from one another. The armchairs and the people sitting in them are the elements. As to the relationship between those elements, most technicians will probably roughly agree what it means to establish *a relationship of reasonable distance* between two armchairs in which two people are to have a conversation. The relationship between the chairs is of the utmost importance to the event at hand and it is very real. Yet it is not tangible in the way that the elements themselves, the armchairs and the people, are.

It seems to me that, if one fails to see relationships as concrete realities, as real components of language, it will not be possible to give muscle to one's thinking about and learning of grammar. Manuals therefore ought to pursue relentlessly the means to bring out what cannot be seen.

This explains perhaps why students who are good at math tend to be good at language. Mathematics is the science of relationships *par excellence*, to the point that the elements themselves fade into the background. In fact, the elements are called *x* or *y*, which really means: not any element in specific. A student of mathematics will therefore be at an advantage for intuitively recognizing relationships if they are not made explicit in a grammar. Other students who, for some reason, do not make this intuitive and implicit leap, will only have a fair chance to compete if relationships are made as explicit as possible. Otherwise, a difference may arise between students and it may not even be clear why this is happening. Trying to comprehend Middle Egyptian is difficult enough. Not knowing why it is so only compounds the difficulty and mystifies the whole event of learning the language.² On the other hand, a maximum degree of explicitness will insure that teacher and student have a sense of talking about exactly the same things.

What follows, then, is a list of some strategies that can be employed to bring out relationships.

IV BRINGING OUT RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to making students generally aware of the importance of relationships, it is helpful to *count items*. This may seem superficial. But the constant discipline of counting items gives the student the impression that, even if the system is large, it is finite.

Examples of counted items are the *three* sets of *eight* pronouns, excluding the rare dual forms, *five* singular forms and *three* plural forms for each set (I, you [masculine], you [feminine], he, she, etc.). Other examples are the *two* types of person, gender, number inflection, i.e. stative and suffix conjugation, the *eleven* negation words, of which *four* can be followed by the negational complement, and so forth.

2 A second difficulty is that the system of language is not quite like any other system, for example, a government system or a planetary system, though there are similarities.

Second, it is useful to *study relationships independently* from the elements, in as much as this is possible. For this purpose, I have organized, in a forthcoming textbook, relationships in the verbal system into “Ten Choices.” The Ten Choices cover all the possible distinctions in the verbal system. They are part of a separate introductory lesson and are taught and practiced in exercises before the verb forms themselves are introduced. It is hoped that they will serve as a safety net for the student when, in later lessons, the verb forms are studied individually. According to the Ten Choices, each verb form can be defined fully by choosing the appropriate option under each choice. The choices, presented as options on a “ballot” or boxes in a multiple choice test, give the student a very active role in learning about relationships. A few choices are layered, that is, when a choice has been made in a certain category, a secondary choice has to be made in a subcategory, and so on.

A third means of bringing out relationships is the use of certain types of *exercises*. Indeed, an item unpracticed is an item unlearned. In addition to the usual transcription and transcription as well as translation into Egyptian,³ useful exercises for developing a sense of the system are drills focusing on paradigms. For example, the student may be asked to produce the Egyptian equivalent of “I am good,” “you are good,” “he is good,” and so on.

Another useful exercise is what I would call chain exercises. These are long strings of simple sentences in which one small change is made from one sentence to the other. The minimal vocabulary and the small changes allow the student to focus on the differences, that is, the relationships. An example of such a chain exercise is as follows. It concerns an exercise on the substantival sentence.

1. It is I.
2. It/He/This is a peasant.
3. They are peasants.
4. I am a peasant.
5. You are peasants.
6. I am a peasant of Egypt.
7. It/He/This is a peasant of Egypt.
8. They/These are peasants of Egypt.
9. That man is a peasant.
10. Those men are peasants.

V IMPORTANCE OF THE PRINCIPLE FOR THE STUDY OF OLD AND MIDDLE EGYPTIAN
Careful regard for system is more important for the study of Old and Middle Egyptian than for that of any other language in the college curriculum, including the later stages of Egyptian.

The reason is that the hieroglyphic script has transmitted to us an incomplete picture of Middle Egyptian. There are therefore far fewer facts accessible to observation and therefore fewer facts to be known. This may make the study of the system seem deceptively easy at

3 With regard to translation, it may be noted here that it would be useful to systematize in some way the distinction between literal and free translation, so as to teach students to translate on two tracks, as it were.

the outset because there is not as much to be learned as in most other languages. Yet behind the fragmentary picture of hieroglyphic writing lurks a complete system, in part concealed from the eye of the modern observer by the deficiencies of hieroglyphic writing. If something cannot be seen, it seems one should not be able to say anything about it. There are ways, however, of making certain reasonable statements about that which is not observable. But if statements cannot be made on the basis of observable facts, they must be *inferred*. Inferences are reasoned derivations from facts. Through an intricate network of inferences, grammarians have been able to reconstruct many if not most of the relationships that exist but because of the imperfection of the script, the relationships can often not be verified in a specific text. Their presence has to be the result of an inference.

What an inference is may best be illustrated by an example. Consider the phrase *pr Jmn* “house of Amon” in number four. This phrase contains two words denoting entities, a substantive and a name, *pr* “house” and *Jmn* “Amon.” Without any context, this phrase could have the following meanings.

- “the house (and) Amon”
- “the house, (namely) Amon” (apposition phrase)
- “the house of Amon” (direct genitive phrase)
- “the house is Amon” (substantival sentence)

Following common sense, the interpretation “house of Amon” seems preferable and *pr Jmn* can be identified as a direct genitival phrase. But this interpretation cannot be supported by observable facts and can therefore not be proven. In other words, that *pr Jmn* “house + Amon” means “house *of* Amon” is not a fact, but an inference. On the other hand, the translations of *pr* as “house” and of *Jmn* as “Amon” are facts, and the order in which they come are also facts. But that *pr* and *Jmn* together form a direct genitival phrase is an inference, not a fact; and this inference relies on knowledge of the system. Obviously, there seems to be no reason to doubt that, in the *spoken* language, the vowels and the accentuation must have made it clear that *pr Jmn* means “house of Amon.”

The translation of such simple phrases as *pr Jmn* does not always seem to come naturally to students. When the translation is then pointed out, it seems obvious in retrospect. However, the opportunity ought not to be missed to make explicit why the translation of such a simple phrase as “house of Amon” is not as obvious as it may seem.

This example may seem trivial, but the general problem it is meant to illustrate affects the translation of the majority of Middle Egyptian sentences, making the discipline of distinguishing between fact and inference crucial to the study of Old and Middle Egyptian, especially its verbal system.

In conclusion, it is suggested here that regard for system may occasionally be the beacon saving a ship of first year Egyptian from running aground.