

Eitan Grossman, Peter Dils,  
Tonio Sebastian Richter & Wolfgang Schenkel (eds.)

Greek Influence on Egyptian-Coptic:  
Contact-Induced Change in an Ancient African Language

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# CONTENTS

PREFACE .....	vii–viii
---------------	----------

## 1 LINGUISTIC INTRODUCTION

Pieter Muysken Using Scenarios in Language Contact Studies: Linguistic Borrowing into Coptic .....	3–16
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## 2 VIEWS ON LANGUAGE CONTACT IN ROMAN AND BYZANTINE EGYPT

Roger S. Bagnall Zones of Interaction between Greek and Egyptian in Roman Egypt.....	19–26
---	-------

Joachim Friedrich Quack How the Coptic Script Came About.....	27–96
--	-------

Sofia Torallas Tovar The Reverse Case: Egyptian Borrowing in Greek .....	97–113
---	--------

Ewa D. Zakrzewska “A Bilingual Language Variety” or “the Language of the Pharaohs”? Coptic from the Perspective of Contact Linguistics.....	115–161
---	---------

## 3 BORROWING FROM GREEK INTO COPTIC: ISSUES AND FINDINGS

### *Parts of Speech*

Mathew Almond An Introduction and Overview to Greek Adjectives in Coptic .....	165–194
---	---------

Barbara Egedi Remarks on Loan Verb Integration into Coptic.....	195–206
--	---------

Eitan Grossman & Tonio Sebastian Richter Dialectal Variation and Language Change: The Case of Greek Loan-Verb Integration Strategies in Coptic.....	207–236
---	---------

Andrea Hasznos	
Syntactic Patterns Used after Verbs of Exhorting .....	237–264
Matthias Müller	
Greek Connectors in Coptic. A Contrastive Overview I .....	265–315
Elsa Oréal	
Greek Causal Discourse Markers in Coptic Letters: A Case Study in the Pragmatics of Code-Switching .....	317–333
Eitan Grossman & Stéphane Polis	
Polysemy Networks in Language Contact: The Borrowing of the Greek-Origin Preposition κατά/κατα in Coptic .....	335–367

*Borrowing and Dialectal Variety of Coptic*

Wolf-Peter Funk	
Differential Loan across the Coptic Literary Dialects.....	369–397
Nathalie Bosson	
Loanwords in Early Bohairic (B4): Problematics and Main Features .....	399–421
Anne Boud'hors	
Greek Loanwords in Fayyumic Documentary Texts.....	423–439

*Author and Genre*

Ariel Shisha-Halevy	
A Structural-Interferential View of Greek Elements in Shenoute .....	441–455
Heike Behlmer	
Differentiating Lexical Borrowing according to Semantic Fields and Text Types – A Case Study .....	457–478

4 BORROWING FROM SEMITIC LANGUAGES INTO EGYPTIAN-COPTIC

Jean Winand	
Identifying Semitic Loanwords in Late Egyptian .....	481–511
Tonio Sebastian Richter	
Borrowing into Coptic, the Other Story: Arabic Words in Coptic Texts.....	513–533

## Zones of Interaction between Greek and Egyptian in Roman Egypt

Roger S. Bagnall<sup>1</sup>

As with any other linguistic milieu known only from limited surviving written testimonies, the social setting of the interaction of the Egyptian and Greek languages under Roman rule is accessible to us only in an indirect fashion. It would be easy, and not entirely unjustified, to plead that we have no way of talking to native informants and that the case is therefore hopeless. The written record is far from a transparent window onto the society that generated it. It is profoundly shaped by a set of bureaucratic, social, economic, and archaeological processes that we can recover only to some degree.<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind I shall try to build a partly theoretical model of some sociolinguistic aspects of Roman Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The goal is to reconstruct the probable set of physical and social spaces, transactions, and personal interactions that created contact between the Greek and Egyptian languages and those who used them, and thus the framework within which Coptic came to have its substantial element of Greek vocabulary. Only to a limited extent can we test this model, and I am aware that it encounters risks of circularity at every stage. But it still seems worth trying.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently this can be done in a short paper only in an impressionistic and largely undocumented fashion. But I hope that it will be possible to make a reasonable case for some of the factors that lie behind the extremely variegated texture of Coptic prose and in particular the varying extent and nature of the Greek presence in Coptic texts. It will be obvious, I hope, that the circles of people and activities I shall be describing were not disjunctive; rather, they overlapped in various ways, so that some individuals will have been formed by membership in several of these communities.

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1 Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University (<rsb331@nyu.edu>).

2 I have discussed the ways in which the papyrological record was formed and the implications for historical investigation in *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 4–14; *Reading Papyri*; and *Everyday Writing*.

3 That it is oversimplified will be self-evident. Perhaps more troubling is that it has less diachronic development than would be desirable. I have tried to focus on the formative period for Coptic as a writing system, i.e., the second to fourth century, but linguistically these processes go back to the earliest Ptolemaic period and indeed even earlier (see Quack, this volume). My notes aim not to justify the sweeping generalizations that I present, but to guide the reader to discussions where evidence and bibliography can be found. That many of these are in my own work should be seen as a shortcut to bibliography rather than an attempt to privilege my own views, but the reader will at least be able to find where I have defended my views.

4 For an excellent survey of the linguistic situation in late Roman Egypt, see Fournet, in: Bagnall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*.

We must begin with the family, which is the circle from which originate the bulk of our Coptic letters; even most letters to and from monks are essentially family letters, in the sense that they are written in the same register as the Greek family letters of the first three to four centuries of the Roman period, concerning the same daily business and personal concerns that fill the papyri of those centuries. Many of them indeed are between monks and their families. I have argued elsewhere that for much of the extensive bilingual part of Egyptian society in the Roman period, bilingualism meant among other things a predominance of Greek in the public sphere but Egyptian inside the household.<sup>5</sup> Greek was associated with characteristically male concerns and activities, Egyptian with female. This does not mean that women could not speak, and even write, Greek. We do not have any possibility of quantifying their knowledge of Greek, and Raffaella Cribiore and I have concluded from analysis of the letters authored by women that it is only on occasion possible to tell which ones are actually in their hand. We took the view, however, that even dictated letters tend to reproduce the speech of the women sending the letters, in large part because of the strongly marked oral character of much of the language of letters. If that is correct, we are “hearing” the Greek dictated by women. But it cannot be excluded that in some cases this “Greek” is actually Egyptian, rendered into Greek by the amanuensis with a directness that preserves the oral freshness.<sup>6</sup>

If this view of the gendered nature of family language use is right, it should point to a major locus of linguistic interaction, one that would affect mainly a vocabulary connected with business matters and a variety of terms for household objects, commodities, and the entire realm of typical subjects that we find in Greek, and to a considerable extent Coptic, private letters. I imagine that even where a woman did not know Greek, someone translating orally a Greek letter – and I remind you that this is the only kind of letter that existed in this society from the first century until well into the fourth century – would have rendered it in Egyptian with a liberal admixture of terms used in the Greek for which the translator did not have an Egyptian equivalent ready (or for which he was more familiar with the Greek in any case as a result of his education). Even where an Egyptian equivalent existed, the Greek word may have been used much of the time. That sort of code-switching is probably familiar to all of us.<sup>7</sup>

A second area of importance is schooling. Cribiore has established that it is not until a fairly late period, long after the formative centuries with which I am concerned, that any distinctively Coptic educational opportunities existed.<sup>8</sup> Learning to write and read Coptic was for many years something achieved only within the framework of Greek alphabetic and literary education. Before even this bilingual schooling came into question, those

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5 See Bagnall, in: *BAB* 6<sup>e</sup> sér. 12 (2001) (reprinted in my *Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, chapter XXI).

6 The problems involved in interpreting letters are discussed in Bagnall & Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt*; fuller electronic version (2008) in the American Council of Learned Societies, Humanities E-Book Project.

7 P.Haun. II 14 is the most striking testimony to letters being translated on the fly from Greek to Egyptian in being read aloud to members of a household – specifically for the benefit of the women.

8 Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students*; Cribiore, in: Emmel et al. (eds.), *Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit*.

responsible for the creation of the Coptic writing system and, I believe, much else in the character of the language must have been educated in Greek schools, the only ones that existed. It is true, of course, that some type of education still existed in the second and early third century in the temples, and we will return to this point shortly. But this was a specialized priestly training, not a general schooling that other people would have taken part in.

We can see the traces of this process in some characteristics of Coptic, notably the preservation of phonetic distinctions in Greek that were already lost in the everyday speech of the second and third centuries but that would have been known to well-educated individuals; I am thinking, for example, of the retention of aspiration in Coptic via the letter hori (Ϡ) and indications that the original nature of the Greek aspirated consonants were known to at least some Coptic writers. It would be worth pursuing this question in the domain of vocabulary. On the whole, the Greek vocabulary of Coptic documentary texts comes from the Greek of the documents (see Boud'hors, this volume); little of it is specifically literary. And the literary vocabulary of the Coptic scriptures comes mainly from the Greek scriptures, I believe (see Behlmer, this volume). But this is a domain where a systematic investigation would be interesting.

Another learned and educational milieu was the priestly. In this case we happen to have quite a lot of rather direct evidence of several types. For one thing, the administrative records of the Egyptian temples in the Roman period were largely in Greek, and the priests interacted substantially with officials who certainly used Greek in all situations. That the temples recognized the difficulty but also the importance of both being completely able to represent themselves and their staffs in a Greek public world and at the same time of preserving their traditional religious learning, which was deeply embedded in the historic forms of hieratic and demotic scripts, can be seen from the Narmouthis ostraca.<sup>9</sup> These show the two Egyptian scripts side by side with Greek. Many practice texts display rich vocabularies drawn from a number of sources, including legal proceedings. I have argued elsewhere that the erratic spelling and morphology of these texts should not lead us to underestimate the depth of knowledge of Greek shown in these texts. In many cases forms that look bizarre at first are quite explicable.<sup>10</sup> Priests educated in this milieu would certainly have spoken Egyptian in their profession and presumably in everyday life, but many were bilingual, if imperfectly so, and even those not actually bilingual would have been exposed to a considerable range of Greek. The Greek vocabulary of these texts is very extensive, even if frequently misspelled by the classical standards taught in the grammarians' schools.

Another leadership group, but at a higher level and coming into existence only at the point when Coptic seems to be already on the verge of arriving at its early stages of existence as a distinct system of expression, is the civic elite, particularly its inner circle, the membership of the city council. The *boulai*, or city councils, came into being only at the

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9 See Bagnall, in: Gabra (ed.), *Christianity and Monasticism in the Fayoum Oasis*.

10 See O.Narmouthis I and II. I discuss this subject in: Capasso & Davoli (eds.), *New Archaeological and Papyrological Researches*.

start of the third century, thanks to a decision of Septimius Severus to accord the nome capitals full municipal status.<sup>11</sup> There is almost no direct evidence for how the city councils were initially constituted or, indeed, maintained in the face of perennial pressures from reproductive failure or the consequences of partible inheritance. These stresses may not have been as dire as Rens Tacoma has recently argued, but they were still significant.<sup>12</sup> It is an easy and traditional guess that many of the councillors came not only from the families that had supplied magistrates during the previous century but from what is generally termed the metropolitan elite – those who had a reduced-tax status as Hellenes and generally a gymnasium formation.<sup>13</sup> But there is little direct evidence to support that guess, and it is far from clear that this group would have been populous enough to fill the ranks of the councils, which we may suppose in general numbered a hundred or even more.

There are some reasons to think that the gap was made up in part by wealthy residents of a less Hellenic, but now Hellenized, background. Many of these, although far from all, must have come from the villages, and it is a plausible supposition that some of these came from the priestly classes.<sup>14</sup> Even those who did not, however, will have encountered Greek in the course of dealing with civic business and probably had at least some degree of Greek education already. In their roles as councilors they often had to hold liturgical positions of administrative responsibility, to which I shall come in a moment. Even without those, however, they had regular meetings of the council, in which all public business was discussed. These matters would have ranged from tax collection to the erection and maintenance of public buildings and involved a large body of official and abstract vocabulary. Members of the council who were Egyptian-speaking would thus have been directly exposed to the vocabulary of Greek civic life in all its manifestations, as the metropoleis increasingly tried to imitate the long-autonomous cities of the rest of the Greek East.<sup>15</sup>

The offices held by members of the council, and before the creation of the councils by the metropolitan wealthier strata, covered a considerable range. Some of them undoubtedly were held mainly by people of traditional Greek background, perhaps with little ability to speak Egyptian and so of modest relevance for our subject. In this group would have been offices like gymnasiarch or exegetes. But mostly the offices were involved in one way or another with the collection and delivery of taxes or of goods requisitioned by the Roman government. To the extent that these offices were held by bilingual members of the elite, they would have encountered an even wider range of technical vocabulary of administration in the course of their work. The actual collection was in virtually all cases carried out by paid assistants, often called just that, *boethoi*, who are themselves one of the most interesting and understudied groups of the society of Graeco-Roman Egypt.<sup>16</sup>

Because the *boethoi* dealt directly with taxpayers, they were undoubtedly fluent in Egyptian; and yet they were also highly trained in the scribal arts, as we can see from the

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11 The standard work is still Bowman, *The Town Councils of Roman Egypt*.

12 Tacoma, *Fragile Hierarchies*.

13 Ruffini, in: *BASP* 43 (2006).

14 van Minnen, in: *ZPE* 62 (1986); cf. my remarks in *Reading Papyri*, 36–37.

15 Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt*, 66–69.

16 I have discussed this group in: Bastianini & Casanova (eds.), *I papiri letterari cristiani*.

professionalism of the handwriting in which almost all tax accounts are kept.<sup>17</sup> Not only that, some of them clearly had enough of a literary education to go beyond the purely professional proficiency of the clerk. The most famous example is no doubt Socrates, a tax collector at Karanis who can be studied in some detail because his house was excavated. He was responsible for the great money-tax registers from that village, in which Herbert Youtie long ago caught glimpses of a man who knew his Callimachus and liked to play with words.<sup>18</sup> I have seen the same kind of verbal playfulness in bilingual punning in a sixth-century tax register from the Hermopolite nome in the British Library, which James Keenan, Leslie MacCoull, and I recently published.<sup>19</sup> Along with the bilingual members of the council, some of the *boethoi* strike me as key figures in linguistic interaction.

A similar place in society was occupied by those who served wealthy landowners as their business agents, mediating between the owners and their tenants, whether in that landlord-tenant relationship or in the collateral one of lender and borrower. These too must have been bilingual and experienced writers, keeping accounts and producing documents like receipts; they may also have been the people who drew up many contracts like leases and loans, although the identity of the authors of these documents is rarely disclosed when they were not generated in a grapheion. These people would have been familiar with contractual language, at any rate, and a vast amount of practical and business vocabulary.

About other areas of business, we know much less. Of course there were many retail vendors, and we can make long lists of their specialties. Already in the early Ptolemaic period we know of the existence of a Greek selling beer in a village, a remarkable instance of the selling of the quintessential Egyptian beverage in a largely Egyptian milieu by what must have seemed an outsider.<sup>20</sup> But we know very little about these people and how they functioned. The fact that few accounts attributable to them have survived and that they are mostly described as illiterate when they appear in documents suggests that our chances of improving this situation from the papyri are not good.

At a higher level of commerce, we have a remarkable dearth of documents from, for example, the wine merchants or oil merchants who moved the surpluses of one region to another and distributed them to retailers for sale. Nor are most of the productive crafts highly documented except in a few moments, like the apprenticeship contracts at the beginning of a career or the official texts in which a corporate body of craftsmen interacted with the government. This lack of knowledge is regrettable, but it may not be very important for our present purposes, precisely because it is a question of blanks in the

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17 The hand of Socrates is illustrated in P.Mich. IV and can be seen in its thousands of lines through images available in the Papyrological Navigator ([papyri.info](http://papyri.info)). The handwriting of the Temseu Skordon codex (discussed below) is illustrated in the volume (see note 19). P.Aphrod.Reg. provides another good sixth-century example. By “professionalism” I do not mean “calligraphy”; far from it. These are extremely rapid hands, produced by men who wrote every day.

18 Youtie, in: Samuel (ed.), *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress of Papyrology*; Strassi, in: Andorlini et al., *Atti del XXII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia*; van Minnen, in: *ZPE* 100 (1994).

19 P.Lond.Copt. 1075 (description only); published as Bagnall, Keenan & MacCoull, *A Sixth-Century Tax Register*; on the writer’s use of language, pp. 18–19.

20 Clarysse, in: Johnson (ed.), *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society*.

written record corresponding to other blanks in the written record. No doubt many of the merchants were bilingual and used Greek words in speaking Egyptian, but we have no access to any of this linguistic activity on either side of the transfer point.

Finally, we must take into account the world of the Christian clergy. In the formative period this was a small group in Egypt as a whole, difficult to identify except in a handful of cases. It seems that by the third quarter of the third century they already show some distinctive characteristics in their use of written Greek; for example, it has been suggested that the use of abbreviated *nomina sacra* in private letters of this period is probably a sign in most cases of a clerical author.<sup>21</sup> We have too little access to the clergy of the early and mid third century to get much insight into their origins and how these might have affected the translation of the scriptures into Coptic.<sup>22</sup> But it is not difficult to imagine that the clergy, who surely came from educated Greek-speaking backgrounds, had to deal with Egyptian in their work of reading the scriptures, preaching, and teaching catechumens. Because this last was the most interactive of major clergy functions, it seems like a probable venue for linguistic interchange.<sup>23</sup>

It is well known, of course, that the Coptic versions of the Bible contain a high percentage of Greek vocabulary, higher than what we find in private letters. This is not the time to explore that question in any detail. But it is worth remarking that even after the scriptures existed in Coptic and the translations could potentially be used in teaching catechumens – I do not know of any actual evidence that they were – the clergy probably had to do a lot of explaining of Greek terminology preserved in the Coptic text in words that their pupils would understand.

No doubt one could think of other social locations of linguistic interchange, but as in the case of the retail merchants these are unlikely to have affected the Greek vocabulary of Coptic as we perceive it in the written record – and I must stress that distinction again – in any material fashion. I turn now to try to pull together the above picture, which is drawn largely from what we know from the papyri about the society of Roman Egypt.

Over the period from the late second century to the late third century, we can see a set of what I do think we can confidently call overlapping circles: the newly acquired outer zone of the metropolitan elite, the priestly class of the Egyptian temples (even though – or perhaps because – these institutions started to decline quite seriously during the period in question), and the managerial sub-elite that made it possible for the landowner class to pursue their civic and cultural activities. These groups shared a common educational formation, at least up to a certain point; there would have been a divergence when the elites tended to get higher literary and rhetorical training, while the sub-elites moved onto a business-oriented track,<sup>24</sup> but they shared much in the earlier phases of education.

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21 Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, 57–78.

22 See Schmelz, *Kirchliche Amtsträger*; Hübner, *Der Klerus*.

23 Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, 115–118, 232–233.

24 Probably from such a milieu comes the fourth-century Greek codex containing mathematical problems, metrological texts, and model contracts, of which the majority is now in a private collection but part in the Cotsen Children's Library of the Princeton University Library. Alexander Jones and I are preparing an edition of this codex.

The result should be a body of Greek that included much from literature but even more from administration and the public sphere. And, in a somewhat broader circle of usage going beyond these more professional groups, we should find an extensive repertory of words pertaining to everyday property management and realia. This is a model of what the careful and systematic investigation of the Greek vocabulary of Coptic texts should find, and I look forward to seeing this investigation progress.

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