Coping with Obscurity:

The Brown Workshop
on Earlier Egyptian Grammar

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COPING WITH OBSCURITY: THE BROWN WORKSHOP ON EARLIER EGYPTIAN GRAMMAR

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Contents

Preface

James P. Allen, Mark A. Collier, and Andréas Stauder

The papers in this volume were initially presented and discussed at the Brown Workshop on Earlier Egyptian Grammar, held at Brown University on March 27–29, 2013, under the auspices of the university's Department of Egyptology and Assyriology. The impetus for the workshop came from the conference "New Directions in Egyptian Syntax," held at the University of Liège in May, 2011 (now published as Grossman et al. 2014), at which the three of us were participants. In conversations, we identified a number of desiderata for future research, prompted in part by the presentations and discussions at the conference. First, we felt the need for an extended conversation among those of us struggling to find a new model of Egyptian grammar. Second, we realized that the conversation had to be focused on Earlier Egyptian, which has the greatest degree of opacity in its verbal system and therefore the greatest need for a new grammatical model. And third, we determined that the participants in the conversation had to contribute not just whatever interesting subject they might happen to be working on but thoughts about the core problems of working with Old and Middle Egyptian texts.

From the mid-1960s until recently, studies of Egyptian grammar were dominated by the "Standard Theory" model based on the work of H. J. Polotsky. The attractiveness of that approach for Earlier Egyptian derived largely from what seems to be the relative transparency of syntax as opposed to morphology. Earlier Egyptian relies primarily on synthetic changes in morphology to produce different verb forms, but the nature of hieroglyphic writing obscures many of these: for example, the difference between the active and passive *sḏm.f*, both of which appear on the surface to be morphologically identical in many cases. Faced with this obscurity, Egyptologists have come to rely on whatever meager clues hieroglyphic spelling might provide to identify distinct forms, such as the two *sḏm.f* forms generally supposed to underlie the distinction between pairs such as *mꜣ.f ~ mꜣꜣ.f* "he sees," *mr.f ~ mrw.f* "he wants," and *ḏj.f ~ rḏj.f* "he gives." The "Standard Theory" afforded apparent confirmation of such distinctions by noting their affinity with certain syntactic environments. In addition, it offered a syntactic explanation for a number of visible but previously puzzling alternants such as *sḏm.n.f* versus *jw sḏm.n.f* (analyzed as dependent versus independent). By the late 1980s, however, some scholars had begun to doubt the validity of identifying verb forms as syntactically conditioned, and more recently, the value and genesis of certain morphological indices have been called into question as well. At the same time, scholars increasingly began to draw attention to the influence of factors such as lexical semantics and pragmatic choices on the production of verb forms and constructions, features largely neglected in the "Standard Theory" approach.

At the Liège conference it became evident that many, if not most, of the participants regarded the "Standard Theory" model as no longer productive, in part if not whole, for the analysis of Egyptian grammar, and in particular for its earlier stages, Old and Middle Egyptian. Having cut that anchor, however, we are now faced with the task of developing consensus on a new model of Earlier Egyptian grammar to guide our research in the twenty-first century.

The Brown workshop was intended to address that concern. The editors invited seven colleagues representing the current spectrum of thinking on Earlier Egyptian grammar, from more to less traditional, to engage in a three-day discussion. We deliberately chose the term "workshop" rather than "conference" to emphasize the primacy of discussion over the presentation of research. Each participant contributed a preliminary draft of the paper in this volume beforehand and was allotted an hour and forty-five minutes at

the workshop, with presentation slated to last no longer than thirty to forty-five minutes so as to allow ample time for discussion.

To focus the contributions and discussion, participants were asked to address three areas of fundamental concern. First is the role of the textual corpus itself, the dataset that forms the basis of all research into the grammar of Earlier Egyptian. The field still lacks good grammatical descriptions of the genres within this corpus. Fundamental questions need to be addressed. What elements of linguistic form occur in actual texts? What kinds of functions do they perform, in what kinds of texts, in what frequency, and in alternation with what other elements of linguistic form? To what extent are formal features or constructions that are essentially limited to one genre applicable to the language as a whole, and if they are not broadly applicable, what determines their appearance in the genre for which they are attested?

Second is the nature of the written evidence. It is clear that the If written criteria cannot be trusted implicitly and if, as the past three decades of resarch have shown, syntactic criteria can themselves be illusory, what parameters can we establish to identify verb forms: for example, is the presence or absence of a distributionally limited and highly variable feature such as the ending *–w* formally significant or not, and how can we tell? If nominal, adverbial, or attributive function is not primary to the existence and use of verb forms and constructions, what governs their use? More broadly, how do the domains of the lexicon, morphology, syntax, and semantics interact with one another to produce particular forms or constructions?

Third is the role of pragmatics. To what extent are forms and constructions determined by extra-grammatical factors such as the speaker's choice and style? To what degree is it possible to produce a pragmatic analysis of earlier Egyptian language data (and thus to engage earlier Ancient Egyptian language data with a more cognitive and indeed rationalist take on the human contribution to language)? Do the surviving data provide a sufficient basis for such study or not?

In general, we intended the workshop as an opportunity to address the fundamental question of how we understand forms and constructions in terms of morphology, function, and (contextualized) meaning; to identify the successes and limitations of existing approaches; and to determine what productive new directions are open for future research. Each of the papers in this volume addresses these questions, some more directly than others. Consensus remains a goal rather than a reality, but it is clear that grammatical studies have set out in the "new directions" fostered by the Liège conference. To echo the title of the seminal 1986 Copenhagen conference (Englund and Frandsen 1986), the current situation may resemble "Chaos" after the (illusory) certainty of the "Standard Theory" but it is also clear that we stand on the threshold of "A New Paradigm."

Workshop Participants

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