HISTORY OF EGYPTIAN LANGUAGE
Ancient Egyptian

Oldest and longest continually attested world language: 3250 BCE (oldest hieroglyphic writing)-1700s CE (Coptic)

Afro-Asiatic family of languages

“from Proto-Afroasiatic (PAA), Chadic was the first to break off. Omotic and Cushitic followed the example and split together, as did Egyptian, Berber, and Semitic in another group. Next, Egyptian followed by Berber split from the Semitic language” (Bomhard and Kearns 1994:24)
Afro-Asiatic Family

- Originated in the northern part of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and some islands and adjacent areas in Western Asia.
- 250 million speakers today
- AKA Hamito-Semitic, which is an obsolete term
  - there is no linguistic entity “Hamitic” to be contrasted, as a whole, to “Semitic”
  - Arguably somewhat racist
Common Afro-Asiatic features

- Pharyngeal fricatives (ħ and ‘)
- Possible evidence that PAA was a tonal language
- Root-and-pattern morphology (consonants: Meaning of the word; vowels: grammatical information)
- Number is marked for singular, dual, and plural in many languages (including Egyptian)
- 2 genders: masculine and feminine
- Independent and suffix forms of personal pronouns
Movement of Proto-Afroasiatic language family
There are interesting connections between the phonemes of PAA and PIE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAA</th>
<th>Revised PIE</th>
<th>Traditional PIE</th>
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Egyptian Language

- An extinct language of the Nile valley
Five main time periods of written Egyptian language:

1. Old Egyptian (before 3000 to ~2200 BCE)
2. Middle Egyptian (c. 2200–c. 1600 BCE)
3. Late Egyptian (c. 1550–c. 700 BCE)
4. Demotic (c. 700 BCE–c. 400 CE)
5. Coptic (c. 2nd century CE –17th century)

- The spoken dialects often differed considerably

The first two are considerably different from the last three grammatically.
A Bit About Coptic

- **Coptic** was the final stage of Ancient Egyptian before it died out
  - Written in a script based on Greek alphabet
  - A living language for 1500 years
- Only Egyptian script that shows vowels

Was unable to find a Coptic alphabet in IPA
Sound Change
Egyptian Phonology

- Egyptian must be reconstructed imperfectly
  - Egyptian scripts do not transcribe consonants exactly, and does not include vowels at all
  - Writing systems remained constant while the phonological system changed considerably
  - Coptic is 1600 years apart from Old and Middle Egyptian

- How?
  - Compare to other Afro-Asiatic languages
  - Egyptian spelling in Greek from the same time period
  - Spelling of foreign words (Greek) in Egyptian
## Consonants in Egyptian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>manner</th>
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Sound Change Old Egyptian > Coptic

- Fronting: consonants move from back of the mouth forward
  - Example: Egyptian [q] > Common Coptic [g]
  - Often included palatalization
Grammatical Features: Old Egyptian and Middle Egyptian

- primarily synthetic
- Verbs inflect for aspect, mood, dynamism (action vs. state), but not tense
- Nouns inflect for gender, number (sg, du, pl), and definition (generic, defined, undefined)
- No case system
Grammar Change Over Time: Old and Middle Egyptian to Late Egyptian

- Many inflected verb forms dropped
- Less adjectives, more prepositional phrases (example: “big brother” > “big one of brother”)

16
Grammar Change Over Time: Late Egyptian to Coptic

1. Synthetic > analytic
2. Analytic constructions turning into bound root forms
3. VSO > SVO
4. More specific verb forms for temporal and modal references
Dialect Variation

- Coptic had several notable dialects
  - Upper: Sahidic, Akhmimic, Lycopolitan
  - Lower: Bohairic, Fayyumic, Mesokemic

- Some morphological, phonetic, and lexical differences, many vary in North-South pattern.
  - Mostly vary by localised orthographic tradition, little grammatical differences.
Possible Coptic influence on Egyptian Arabic Grammar

1. Word order in interrogative sentences
   ○ Interrogative pronoun delayed in certain types of sentences, inconsistent with Classical Arabic (CA).

2. Use of demonstrative pronoun to mark subject in non-verbal sentences
   ○ No parallel in other Semitic languages, dialects of Arabic, etc.

3. Use of imperative particle/prefix mā
   ○ This particle is used in CA and other dialects of Arabic in many environments but not in imperative sentences.

4. Comparisons formed using comparative preposition after a regular adjective.
   ○ Not very odd in Semitic languages, but appears to have Coptic as a contributing factor

5. Use of ‘a + pronoun affix + verb as past tense marker
Coptic influence on Egyptian Arabic Vocabulary

- A number of Coptic lexical items have survived into Egyptian Arabic today.
- It is posited that many more remain, but are unrecognizable due to significant change, through metathesis or unpredictable sound change, or only present in small fringe communities.
- These words come from a wide variety of topics, mainly vocabulary related to everyday life (agriculture, animals, body, people, clothing, food, speech, tools, etc.)
- This being said, there are only about 100-200 confirmed loanwords from Coptic.
- Turkish left more words in Egyptian Arabic than Coptic did.

Note: Egyptian Arabic is NOT a daughter language of Ancient Egyptian/Coptic. EA only took on influence from Egyptian, much like English took influence from French.
The Writing System
**First possible hieroglyphs?**

Gerzean (3500-3200 bc.) pottery found with drawings that resemble hieroglyphic writing, aged 3500-3200 bc.

Suggests that Egyptian artistic tradition strongly influenced hieroglyph formation

Egyptian writing is thought to have come about between 3000-2900 bc.
**Writing System**

Both phonetic (including alphabetic and syllabic) and logographic characters

Like in many writing systems, evolved over time to become more abstract/conventional than iconic.
Hieroglyphs: comes from the Greek words *hieros* "sacred" + *glyphe* "carving"

- Term first recorded in English in the 1580s

3 components:

1. Logograms (representing words)
2. Phonograms (sounds)
3. Determinatives (help to clarify words’ meanings)
More on the Writing System

- Hieroglyphics (or a version) is the basis for all Egyptian scripts except Coptic (based on Greek alphabet)
- Handwritten texts used hieratic
  - Used for secular and literary texts (vs. the language of monumental descriptions)
The Decline of Hieroglyphs

- During the Ptolemaic (332-30 BCE) and the Roman Period (30 BCE-395 CE), Greek and Roman culture became highly influential.
- Christianity started replacing traditional Egyptian religion, and Christianized Egyptians developed the Coptic alphabet.
- Hieroglyphs were replaced by Coptic over time, and the language was lost until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone.
## Coptic Alphabet (First Egyptian Alphabetic writing system)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hieroglyph</th>
<th>Demotic</th>
<th>Coptic</th>
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THE ROSETTA STONE

- Found 15 July 1799
- Contains the same message (about Ptolemy V) in three scripts:
  - hieroglyphs
  - Demotic (Egyptian for daily purposes)
  - Ancient Greek
- Allowed historical linguists of the time to “crack the code” and decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs

Crawford, C. D. (n.d.).


A Description of the Afro-Asiatic (Hamito-Semitic) Language Family. Retrieved April 9, 2020, from https://linguistics.byu.edu/classes/Ling450ch/reports/afro-asiac.html


