

My language, your language, our language

– Coptic interference in the verbal syntax of post-classical Greek –

By the beginning of the early Byzantine period, Greek and Egyptian had coexisted in Egypt for over a millennium already. At the turn of the fourth century, Egypt finally sees the emergence of a script for the Egyptian language after a gap of over a hundred years (Bagnall, 1993; Willy Clarysse, 1993). This changes the linguistic balance the modern researcher can perceive (Matras, 2009 for the cross-linguistic concepts) as it allows to assess what the Egyptian language was like in this period and to cross-reference this with features that seemingly deviate from the norm in our Greek sources. Contact phenomena have been described in-depth for the earlier stages of Egyptian (Demotic) (e.g. W. Clarysse, 2010; Evans, 2012; Vierros, 2012) and in the areas of phonology and the lexicon for the early Byzantine stage of Egyptian, that is Coptic (Dahlgren, 2017; Torallas Tovar, 2004a, 2004b). Syntactic contact phenomena in early Byzantine Greek are more difficult to assess than those in Ptolemaic or Roman Greek not only because we are lacking an equivalent to the rich literary sources of the New Testament that provide us with an approximate for the stage of development of the Greek language in the Roman period (e.g. Blass, 1990) but also because a complete grammar of post-classical Greek in the early Byzantine period is still a desideratum (Gignac, 1976 without a third volume). Finally, it has to be borne in mind that the Greek language did not evolve in a linear manner from the Classical age onwards (Bentein, 2017). The non-linear nature of the development makes conjectures difficult for the modern researcher.

Dahlgren (2017) advocates the view that there was an Egyptian variety of Greek at least from the Roman period onwards from a phonological point of view. Syntactic contact phenomena appear less frequently and less coherently than phonological and lexical phenomena and seem to be owing to idiolectal variation rather than dialectal one on the whole (Muysken, 2010). Furthermore, syntactic phenomena that can be accorded to the language contact situation are of various types: There are instances of direct and indirect interference from Coptic in the syntax of Greek. Direct interferences are instances of polysemy copying, that is a word by word transposition of a Coptic structure into Greek (Heine, 2005). Indirect interferences are instances of pattern replication, that is the realisation of a Coptic pattern by means of Greek morpho-syntax (Matras & Sakel, 2007). Additionally, there are numerous instances of deviating structures that seem to have resulted from the ways people acquired a language (Ellis, 2011). Contact phenomena seem to affect some areas of the verbal syntax more considerably than others. For instance, some syntactic classes of verbs appear more prone to contact phenomena.

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The present paper is based on a corpus of early Byzantine Greek letters from Egypt dating from the fourth to mid-seventh centuries, in essence the period between the emergence of the Coptic alphabet and the Arab conquest. This is a period of relatively stable bilingualism. The corpus encompasses all private letters that belong to bilingual, Greek–Coptic papyrus archives. The corpus is built in order to allow for a maximum of writers' flexibility in their use of language. The paper applies a variationist approach (Bentein, 2016; Labov, 1991; Romaine, 1982; Willi, 2003). The primary goal is to explore the types of syntactic contact phenomena in the area of verbal syntax in the selected corpus of texts, therein focusing on the argument structure and participant roles that a verb calls for. In a situation of stable bilingualism like early Byzantine Egypt, not only bilingual interference has an impact on the contact varieties that may develop but also the process of language acquisition.

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I would like to take part in the panel ‘Contact-induced change in the syntax of corpus languages’.