

Vortrag

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**COPTO-GREEK ADJECTIVES:
ADJECTIVAL BORROWING INTO
AN ADJECTIVE-DEFICIENT
LANGUAGE**

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COPTO–GREEK ADJECTIVES: ADJECTIVAL BORROWING INTO AN ADJECTIVE–DEFICIENT LANGUAGE

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1. Introduction

Having emerged almost abruptly after a period of fairly advanced language shift, Coptic (Ancient Egyptian [Afroasiatic], ca. 250–1300 CE) showcases the impact of prolonged and intense contact with a high-prestige language. No Coptic scholar fails to mention the ubiquity of Greek vocabulary within the vernacular lexicon and relates this fact to the asymmetrical bilingualism in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. Almond (2017) presents a lexicographic–philological study of Copto–Greek adjectives, which also contains the following statistical findings (p.), as partially reanalyzed by Muysken (2017: 13).

Table 1. Frequency data for Greek content words in 4th– 5th century Coptic texts

Part of Speech	Types	Tokens	Token/Type Ratio
Nouns	2294	4017	1.75
Verb	656	943	1.43
Adjectives	587	707	1.20

A conspicuous feature of the Copto–Greek borrowing cline is the relatively low proportion of loan adjectives. These are outnumbered by borrowed nouns, as is cross-linguistically expected, but also by borrowed verbs, which represents the less common lexical transfer pattern. Following Muysken (2008: 177–178), such deviations should not be taken at face value as disconfirming evidence for universal tendencies in linguistic borrowing, but should rather be treated as open questions demanding language-specific explanations. The position of adjectives and verbs on a particular borrowing scale may reflect the actual distribution of these categories within the recipient language’s parts of speech system. In my talk, I shall revisit Almond’s major claim that “the native Egyptian language had no part of speech comparable to the Greek adjective, meaning that these loans constitute an entirely new concept” (p. 165). I shall argue that Coptic lines up with other African languages with very small adjectival inventories. Greek-origin adjectives are uniformly borrowed as nouns, albeit with an interesting twist in that they introduce a new two-term gender system (animate–inanimate), which is alien to both the donor and the recipient language.

2. Where Have All the Adjectives Gone?

The verb–noun dichotomy is a well-established if not a universal linguistic fact. It is far less clear whether languages also have a distinctive adjective class. Ever since Dixon’s (1982) pioneering study “Where Have all the Adjectives Gone?”, adjectives have turned out to be an elusive part of speech category, most prone to typological variation. This includes the possibility that the adjective class may be missing or be very limited. Coptic represents an exemplary case in point. The language has a three-membered set of bona fide adjectives, **nok^j** ‘great, large’, **kowi** ‘small, little’ and **ʃe:m** [MASC.SG] ~ **ʃe:me** [FEM.SG] ‘small, young’, which denote a small-size versus large-size contrast. Consider in this regard example (1).

(1) The directly modificational use of dimensional adjectives

naʃɔ: = u: emate nkⁱ **nə-ʃeire** **ʃe:m** mən **nə-ʃeere** **ʃe:me**
 be.numerous = 3 very FOC DEF.PL–boy. small. with DEF.PL–girl. small.F
 ‘Very numerous are the little boys and little girls (...)’ (Shenoute Amél. II.3, 396:13–397:1)

A vast amount of property concept lexemes appears in possessive-like attributive constructions, in which the head–modifier relation is registered by the proclitic linkage marker **ən-** and its allomorph **əm-** ‘of’. The linker itself is uninflected for gender and number concord. The two types of possessive NPs are exemplified in the following two examples.

(2) Possessive-like attributive construction with linker **ən-**

e = i kɔː ha-toot = ək əm-**pa-ɛi** **ən-βrre** tɛ:r = f
 REL = 1 put.ABS under-hand = POSS.2M. PREP-DEF.M.SG:POSS.1SG-hous LINK— entire = POSS.3M.S
 ‘I hand my entire new house over to you’ (Crum/Steindorff, Kopt. Rechtsurkunden, n° 58 183:9–10)

(3) Adnominal possessive construction with linker **əm-**

fant = ən naw ero = k əm-**p-ɛi** **əm-pə-nurte**
 TERM = 1P see.ABS PREP = 2M.S in-DEF.M.SG-house. LINK-DEF.M.SG-god.M
 ‘Until we see you in the house of God’ (Budge, Martyrdom 219:10)

Possessive modification of the kind **pa-ɛi ən-βrre** ‘my new house’ (lit. ‘my house of-new’) provides prima facie evidence for the nominal category of the dependent-marked adjective. As shown by the contrast between examples (4) and (5), the N LINK-Adj pattern seen above has a syntactic variant Adj LINK-N. This looks like an instance of dependency reversal, with the adjective surfacing as the nominal head and an entity term as the dependent possessor.

(4) Canonical N LINK-Adj possessive attributive construction

tə-**ʃeere** **ən-saβe:** na *kle:ron[om]ei* əm-pe=s-hai
 DEF.F.SG-girl.F LINK— FUT inherit.ABS PREP-DEF.M.SG = POSS.3M.SG—
 ‘The wise girl (lit. the girl of wise) shall inherit her husband.’ (Sirach 22:4)

(5) Non-canonical Adj LINK-N possessive attributive construction

fare **nə-saβe:** **ən-shime** ket hen-ɛi
 HAB DEF.PL-wise. LINK-woman. build.C INDEF.PL-house.M
 ‘Wise women (i.e. wise ones for women) build houses.’ (Proverbs 14:1)

There exists a significant form–meaning correlation between the interpretative properties of the adjective and the position it is placed in. In the Adj LINK-N pattern, the possessor-marked entity term expresses the standard of comparison or the comparison class, with respect to which the quality or property expressed by the adjectival head noun is evaluated and measured out. The adjective noun, on its part, denotes an individual embodying this specific quality. Further note that there is no compelling evidence for an elided indefinite pronoun ‘ONE’. Rather, it is the prenominal determiner alone which contributes an individual-denoting meaning to the adjectival nominal.

3. Adjectival Borrowing and the Emergence of a Novel Gender System

To fill the void left by the paucity of adjectives, Coptic borrows them extensively from Greek—a language with an open adjective class. Greek adjectives are borrowed as nouns and thus cease to be adjectives. From the contrast between examples (6) and (7), it will be noted that they can appear in both the N LINK-Adj and the Adj LINK-N pattern, where they display the same form–meaning correlations, as we have just observed for native adjectives.

(6) Canonical N LINK-Adj possessive attributive construction with Copto-Greek adjective

nim **ən-rɔime** **ən-sophos** n-et na *epithyme:* an e-r hɔ:β
 who LINK-man.M LINK— DEF.PL— FUT desire.ABS NEG to-do.CS thing.
 ‘Which wise men would not desire to work (...)? (Shenoute Amél. I.1 26:13)

- (7) Non-canonical Adj LINK-N possessive attributive construction with Copto-Greek adjective
hɔ:s sophos ən-arkhitektɔ:n a = i kɔ: ehrai ən-tə-sənte
 as wise.M.SG.NO LINK- PERF = 1S put.AB PCL PREP-DEF.F.SG-
 ‘Like a wise architect, I laid down the foundation.’ (I Corinthian 3:10)

Despite the shared nominal categorial features, loan nouns and adjectives differ from each other with respect to gender assignment. Greek has a three-gender (masculine–feminine–neuter) system, whereas Coptic has a two-gender (masculine–feminine) system. With Greek masculine and feminine nouns, the gender feature is simply copied from the source onto the target noun. There is a special alignment rule for Greek neuter nouns, which are assigned to masculine gender in Coptic (Gr. *ho áγγελos* [MASC] ~ Cop. *p-aggelos* [MASC]; Gr. *hē ekkle:sía* [FEM] ~ Cop. *t-ekkle:sia* [FEM]; Gr. *tó euaggélion* [NEUT] ~ Cop. *p-euaggelion* [MASC]). Borrowed first declension adjectives come in pairs of masculine and neuter gender–inflected forms. Kossmann (2010: 469) identifies the target gender agreement on loan adjectives as an instance of Parallel System Borrowing—a contact-linguistic process during which a paradigm is completely or partially transferred and shows up in borrowings without any significant influence on part of the recipient language system. Yet, paradigm transfer comes with an interesting twist, as the erstwhile grammatical masculine–neutral gender opposition is reanalyzed in terms of a natural gender animate–inanimate contrast. This point is illustrated by examples (8) and (9).

- (8) Semantic reanalysis of grammatical (masculine–neuter) gender as natural gender (animate–inanimate)
pə-sah ən-agathos u: p-e(t)=ti na aa=f
 DEF.M.SG- LINK- what DEF.M.SG- FUT do.PRON = 3M.SG
 ‘Good teacher, what (is) it that I shall do (...)?’ (Mark 10:17)
- (9) *ənte=tən ər howo ehɔ:n e-hɔ:β nim ən-agathon*
 CONJ = 2PL do.C more PCL to- eac LINK-good.NEUT.SG.NOM
 ‘and you do more in regard to every good work’ (II Corinthian 9:8)

Here I present a slight modification of Kossmann’s proposal. The key idea is that there are actually two gender assignment systems for Copto–Greek adjectives. One system is based on grammatical gender and involves gender copying. The other system is based on natural gender, with masculine and neuter gender expressing the in/animateness of the nominal head.

Table 2. The grammatical vs. natural gender assignment of Greek loan adjectives

	Grammatical gender-based			Natural gender-based	
	[MASC]	[FEM]	[NEUT]	[MASC]/ [ANIM]	[NEUT]/ [INANIM]
Copto–Greek common nouns	+	+	—		
Copto–Greek adjectival nouns	+	+	—	+	+

At least two facts argue in favor of a mixed gender system. First, feminine-gendered adjectives are not un common in early Coptic texts. Second, masculine inanimate nouns can trigger masculine gender agreement on the adjectival target, without there being superimposed readings of increased agency. This must therefore be an instance of grammatical gender copying.

- (10) Feminine-gendered form of Greek adjective, based on the grammatical and natural gender of the head noun
pə-ʃeire pe ən-u-shime ən-yudai ən-piste:
 DEF.M.SG- COP.M.S LINK-INDEF.SG- LINK-Jewish LINK-pious.F.SG.NOM
 ‘He (was) the son of a pious Jewish woman’ (Acts 16:1)

- (11) Neuter-gendered form of Greek adjective, solely based on the grammatical gender of head noun
 pə–*monakhos* e–**pe = f–βios** **ən–*semmos***
 DEF.M.SG– according to–DEF.M.SG = POSS.3M.SG– LINK–revered.M.SG.NOM
 ‘The monk according to his revered life’ (Shenoute Amél. II.3 368:13)

Greek adjectival borrowing is typologically interesting for two reasons. First, it provides a hitherto unnoticed case of borrowing, in which the part of speech in question is represented by an open word class in the donor language, but by a closed class in the recipient language. Without being able to give a concrete example, Matras (2009: 187, 320 note 11) holds that the possibility for such loanword integration should exist in principle. Second, by introducing a novel paradigmatic contrast, Copto–Greek adjectives are identifiable as having a foreign source. Semantic reanalysis gives rise to the morphological innovation of the gender system.

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