

### Middle Egyptian

The written language of the Middle Kingdom (c.2040–1665 BCE) is Middle Egyptian. An early form of Middle Egyptian appears in texts from the First Intermediate Period (c.2165–2040 BCE), and a late form of it in texts from the Second Intermediate Period (c.1665–1569 BCE) and the early New Kingdom (c.1569–1502 BCE). The use of Middle Egyptian in later times is discussed at the end of the article's bibliography. Although Middle Egyptian differs in minor points from earlier Old Egyptian, the language of the Old Kingdom, they resemble each other closely. For this reason, Middle Egyptian is often classified together with Old Egyptian as Earlier or Older Egyptian.

There is a greater difference, and to a certain extent a fundamental one, between Middle Egyptian and Late Egyptian, the language of the New Kingdom. Late Egyptian and all following language phases of Egyptian and its successor Coptic have been conjointly named Later Egyptian (-Coptic). The most important difference between Middle Egyptian (or Earlier Egyptian as a whole) and Late Egyptian (or Later Egyptian [-Coptic] as a whole) is that the former is more synthetic and the latter more analytic. An example of the general tendency for the synthetic Middle Egyptian language to develop into an analytic language can be seen in the development of specification of noun gender. The older, synthetic type of language identifies gender with a suffix that is a firm part of the noun: Middle Egyptian, or Early Egyptian, feminine nouns have the ending *t*, while masculine nouns do not—e.g., *sn* "(the) brother," *snt* "(the) sister." In the analytic language that followed, gender could be indicated by an article, a separate word preceding the noun, which made redundant the *t* at the end of the noun: *p3 sn* "the brother," *t3 sn(t)* "the sister."

**Sources.** Middle Egyptian was the standard language of the Middle Kingdom and served as an acrolect (elite language) thereafter. During the Middle Kingdom, Middle Egyptian was used in monumental inscriptions and literature as well as in vernacular communication, especially in correspondence. The stylistic viability of the tradition of the late Old Kingdom's Pyramid Texts is evident in many religious texts, which thus resemble Old Egyptian texts in their language. Some learned writings (e.g., medical and mathematical texts) continue to use antiquated language. Middle Egyptian inscriptions in monumental hieroglyphs



were placed on the walls of temples, royal stelae (e.g., border stelae), the walls of tombs and memorial chapels, and statues.

Middle Egyptian literature can be divided into several genres: instructions, such as the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*, the *Instructions for Merikare*, the *Instructions of Amenemhet* (for his son Senwosret I), or the *Instructions of Khety*; tales, such as the *Story of Sinuhe*, the *Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, or the *Story of King Khufu's Court*; and hymns, such as the *Hymn to the Nile* and a cycle of hymns to Senwosret III. Other Middle Egyptian texts, which can be given a generic term only with some difficulty, are the *Prophecies of Neferti*, the *Complaints of Khakheperre-sonb*, the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, the *Dialogue of a Man and his Ba*, and the *Satire of Trades*. A considerable portion of the typologically varied Coffin Texts, which were carved on the insides of coffins, are composed in Middle Egyptian, although many of these religious texts continue in the Old Egyptian tradition.

Among the nonliterary texts in Middle Egyptian, correspondence features prominently. The Kahun Papyri, the archives of the town adjacent to the pyramid of Senwosret II near Illahun, including administrative documents; letters addressed to the dead, pleading for intercession on behalf of the living writers of the letters; and the private correspondence of the traveling businessman Hekanakhte, in which he attempts to organize all aspects of his family's life, at times in a very emotional manner.

As a result of its position as the language of literature during the Middle Kingdom, Middle Egyptian rose in status to become the classical standard language. It remained an ideal for assorted areas of practical language use until the end of hieroglyphic creative tradition. Middle Egyptian is consequently also known as Classical Egyptian. Although the Middle Egyptian of the New Kingdom has not been given a specific name that is generally accepted, the Middle Egyptian that was more intensively cultivated from the Third Intermediate Period on is generally known as Late Middle Egyptian or Neo-Middle Egyptian. A comprehensive name for the entire later use of Classical Egyptian has been achieved in the French expression *égyptien de tradition*.

**Linguistic Aspects.** An impression of the linguistic nature of texts in Middle Egyptian can be obtained by examining aspects of morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. An excerpt from the Middle Egyptian verbal paradigm follows to illustrate morphology; this is followed by a sketch of its syntax and pragmatics, on which the grammar of Middle Egyptian is based and which constitute a major research area of linguistic Egyptology. The linguistic contrasts of literary and nonliterary everyday texts are then outlined.

**Morphology.** Verbal forms are predominantly synthetic; some analytic forms also exist. Synthetic verbal

forms combine lexemes and inflectional elements in a single word form. This form is taken by verbs in the suffix conjugation (so called because of the final pronominal subject added directly to the verbal form). For example:

1. *hṭp.k*  
may-be-gracious.you  
"may you be gracious"
2. *hṭp.n nṯr(w)*  
when/that-gracious.were (the) gods  
"when/that the gods were gracious"

Apart from the suffix conjugation, peculiar to Egyptian, Middle Egyptian uses another synthetic verbal form that is inflected differently: the pseudoparticiple also called the old perfective, or stative. (This is related to the Akkadian stative and the West Semitic perfect form):

3. *hṭp(w)*  
he-is-gracious  
"he is gracious"

Analytic verbal forms consist of the infinitive preceded by one of the prepositions *hṛ* "on", *m* "in," and *r* "to":

4. *t3 hṛ mnmn*  
(the) earth (is) on trembling  
"the earth trembles"
5. *t3 r mnmn*  
(the) earth (is) to tremble  
"the earth will tremble"

It is controversial to what extent particular series of verbal forms exist for different syntactic slots. Strictly speaking, the so-called standard theory of Egyptian verbal syntax prescribes two morphologically distinct verbal forms for series such as the two presented here; one stands syntactically in nominal slots, and the other in adverbial slots, as in this example:

6. *šm.n.t, 'nh.ti*  
(that) depart.ed.you (is), being-alive.you  
"you departed alive"

The first verbal form, "that you departed," is nominal because it is syntactically equivalent to the noun phrase "your departure." The second is adverbial because "being alive" is equivalent to the prepositional phrase "in life."

Current opinion favors the existence of two series: one is nominal, as the standard theory presupposes ("that you departed"); the other, however, is not adverbial ("being alive") but rather verbal ("you live"). The translation "being" for the latter arises from the embedding of a verbal form in an adverbial slot, but not from the verbal form



itself. On the other hand, it is legitimate to argue that all verbal forms are to be interpreted verbally—that verbal forms make up a single series morphologically, but that different parts of this series are used in different syntactic slots.

**Syntax and pragmatics.** Sentence word order is strictly prescribed. The details of the rules are complex because word order depends on numerous syntactic factors, such as the type of predicate. The order in which subject, predicate, object, and adverbial phrases follow each other is, however, straightforward in virtually every case. This has led to the mistaken belief that Middle Egyptian is relatively inexpressive. On the contrary, it has a wide range of methods of expression at its disposal, which grants the language ample expressionistic flexibility.

The first source of this flexibility is the fact that a sentence can begin with a situational particle, a topic, background information, or a particle of presentation:

7. Situational particle *iw*:  
*iw: in.n.i Ddi*  
 it-is-the-case: brought.have.I Djedi  
 "I have brought (the man called) Djedi"
8. Nominal topic:  
*hk3 pf: ndnd.f hn.i*  
 ruler that: conferred.he with.me  
 "that ruler conferred with me"
9. Verbal background information:  
*hpr.n.i: hpr.n hprt*  
 come-into-existence.have.I: come-into-existence.have  
 existing-things  
 "as soon as I came into existence, being came into existence"
10. Particle of presentation *mk*:  
*mk: ph.n.n hnw*  
 look: reached.have.we home  
 "look, we have reached home"

Furthermore, various sorts of sentence construction permit the author to focus on certain parts of a sentence. Some of these are irregular with respect to basic sentence construction. The following example of a focalizing construction stresses the adverbial phrase:

11. *gm.n sw ipwtiw: hr w3t*  
 (that-)found.have him (the) messengers: on (the) road  
 "on the road the messengers found him"

This particular type of sentence is of special importance in the history of Egyptological linguistics. It was this pioneering discovery of Hans Jakob Polotsky that led to formulation of the standard theory of Egyptian verbal

syntax. Nevertheless, extension of this theory became problematic, and it is not fully, or not at all, accepted by most grammarians today.

**Stylistic Differences.** Nonliterary texts such as correspondence diverge from inscriptions and literary texts principally in diction, not in grammar. Nonliterary texts are primarily illocutive, addressing the reader himself, and literary texts are predominantly delocutive, simply describing states of affairs. The illocutive nonliterary texts seek to seize the attention of the addressee and employ particles of presentation, such as the presentational *mk* "look," to this end:

12. *mk grt: p3.k pr, mk: sw rd(w) n p3 w'b Nht*  
 look now: that-of.you house—look: it is-given to the  
 priest Nakht  
 "look now, your house—look, it is sold to the priest Nakht"

Example 12 also demonstrates the gradual completion of thought typical during speech. The message opens with an illocutive *mk* "look" and the establishment of a topic ("your house, it is") and reopens with a further illocutive *mk* "look." Anacolutha—changes from one grammatical construction to another within a single sentence—also follow this pattern.

Literary texts, by contrast, are so strongly structured that they sometimes border on becoming schematic. This occurs to varying degrees. Most commonly, a type of prose poetry results, consisting of verse group formation, thought couplets, triplets, and quatrains, frequently connected by the stylistic device of parallelism of members. The verses in literature used in schools are often separated from each other by versification dots also called verse points, a method of punctuation (indicated hereafter by °; a slash indicates the end of a verse without versification dots, and verse groups end with a double slash).

The *Story of Sinuhe* presents the initial state of affairs in the following words:

13. *iw: hnw m sgr, ibw m gmw °*  
*rwti wrti htm(w) °//*  
*šnyt m tp-hr-m3st °*  
*p'wt m imw °//*  
 It-is-the-case: (the) residence (was) in silence, (and)  
 hearts (were) in mourning. °  
 (The) two-portals, (the) two-great-ones, were-shut. °//  
 (The) entourage (was) in head-upon-(the-)knee. °  
 (The) subjects (were) in grief. °//  
 "The residence was in silence, hearts were in mourning. °  
 The two portals were shut. °//  
 The entourage was bowed down. °  
 The subjects were in grief." °//



The first two lines present the situation at the residence in two statements (the use of “the two great portals” is metonymic for “residence”). The first line, again, is conventionally divided into two parts (“silence” parallel to “mourning”). The last two lines separate the people involved into two complementary groups, “the entourage” and “the subjects,” whose respective characteristics are “bowed down” and “in mourning.”

A sequence of events can also be structured in this manner, as the following passage does for the flight of the story’s hero, Sinuhe, from the Libyan camp of the royal army into foreign lands of the Near East:

14. *nmi.n.i M3’ti m h3w Nht* °  
*sm3.n.i m Tw-Snfrw* °//  
*wrš.n.i m ‘d n šht* °  
*wḏ.n.i wn hrw* °//

Come-across.have.I (lake) Maati: in (the) region (of) (village) Sycomore. °

Come.have.I: to (village) Isle-(of-)Snofru. °//

Passed-a-time.have.I: on (the) edge of (a) field. °/

Started.have.I: (it) being daylight. °//

“I went across Lake Maati in the region of Sycomore Village. °/

I came to Isle of Snofru Village. °//

I passed a time at the edge of a field. °/

I started, when it was daylight.” °//

Both of these pairs of sentences are constructed in the same syntactic pattern: in each sentence an adverbial phrase (shown in *italics*) is stressed. Although the first thought couplet is held together by the names of certain places and the second by expressions of time, albeit of different types, the two pairs of lines are not really separated from each other. The first line of the second thought couplet focuses on a place, as do both lines of the first thought couplet. One could consider adding the third line to the two preceding it to make a triplet, leaving the fourth as the beginning of what comes next. This possibility cannot be resolved here; it must suffice to appreciate that the narrative is made up of a sequence of syntactically more or less similar verse elements loosely or closely connected by parallelisms of style or content.

Linguistically progressive language elements such as the article or the possessive article occur occasionally in both nonliterary texts and the more recent stylistically vernacular tales of Papyrus Westcar: for example, *p3 wḃ* “the priest” instead of *wḃ* “(the) priest”; *p3.k pr* “that-of.you house” instead of *pr.k* “house. of.you.” Although these nonliterary examples feature common linguistic elements which become evident very quickly, their grammatical system on the whole corresponds to that of the literary texts.

Conversely, literary and particularly religious texts sometimes contain expressions reminiscent of the Old Kingdom. Such archaic elements are, however, limited in number. Surprisingly, retention of the language of the Old Kingdom is apparent in the letters of Hekanakhte, which are minimally stylized and very close to colloquial speech. In this case, however, it is important to remember that the texts were possibly not written in archaic language, but in a dialect that is closer to the literary language of the Old Kingdom than to that of the Middle Kingdom. Just as in the rest of the world, we must assume the existence of dialects in pharaonic Egypt. Changes in the location of the royal residence and changes in the origin of the elite no doubt allowed various dialects to influence the character of written language at different times.

**Writing Systems.** The Middle Egyptian texts are written in monumental hieroglyphs or in cursive Hieratic. Inscriptions in stone are generally written in monumental hieroglyphs. Examples of this style are inscriptions on the walls of temples or on royal stelae and in the funerary texts of the elite. The majority of the literary and everyday texts are generally written in Hieratic script on papyrus.

Although the great wealth of Egyptian writing signs and the ease with which they can be combined gave the writer a generous choice of ways to form words and their inflections, only a small subset of the possible combinations was actually used. The variety of accepted ways of writing is not unlimited, but no orthographic norms exist either; for individual words and their inflections, certain forms were considered eugraphic, or “good.”

The manner in which signs were combined in hieroglyphic inscriptions in stone and in cursive Hieratic texts is not identical. Short, concise alternatives that minimize labor and space predominate in hieroglyphic inscriptions. They maintain their clarity in this form, for the most part. Hieratic texts in general are written with more signs. The far lower cost of the papyrus on which they were written allowed it to be used more freely, but cursive writing lacked the clarity and unambiguity of monumental hieroglyphs in stone. This in turn made it necessary to add clarifying signs on papyrus. In the Hieratic script, biconsonantal signs are regularly complemented by repetition of one or both of the component consonants. The biconsonantal sign *mn*, for instance, is regularly complemented by the monoconsonantal sign *n*, so that *mn* seems to be written *mn+n*. Monumental hieroglyphs use such complements less often than do cursive Hieratic texts.

A eugraphy (spelling convention) which can be termed “classical” became established at the onset of the twelfth dynasty. In addition to a general tendency toward regularity, the eugraphy reform affected primarily the determinatives, the signs added to a word or its inflection to clarify its semantic content. At this time, individual determina-



tives that had been associated with only one or very few words began to be replaced by classifying determinatives of a more general nature. For example, instead of complementing the name of each bird with an image of that bird, all bird names were complemented by a picture of a goose, the Egyptian bird *par excellence*. Again, the word for "livestock" is no longer classified by any one of a variety of determinatives for the common livestock—cattle, donkeys, and goats—but solely by the symbol for cattle, the most highly valued livestock. The ability to write with fewer specifying signs to which standardization gave rise was especially advantageous for writing in cursive Hieratic signs, which were not able to reproduce graphic details as well as were the more pictorial monumental hieroglyphs.

After the Ramessid period (c.1321–1076 BCE), the determinatives and logograms tend to regain their pictorial character, and their detail increases. In the Greco-Roman period (from 332 BCE on), the temple inscriptions become showcases for the celebration of pictorial intricacy and diversity. The distinctions of old pictographs are refined individually to the utmost and extended with the addition of further individual details. Ultimately, this pursuit of singularity resulted in the creation of completely new pictographs, unique in every way.

[See also Scripts, articles on Hieroglyphs and Hieratic Script.]

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