A few years ago, I was told the famous story about how Polotsky started reading a Danish grammar when he set sail from Israel, and was fluently speaking when he arrived in Copenhagen. Some time later, I heard the same story, with just one slight difference: according to this version, Polotsky was learning Danish during his flight to Copenhagen. Apart from the fact that Polotsky’s – at any rate – amazing ability to learn languages is of less importance for our purpose than his admirable capacity for analyzing languages and thinking about language, one may learn from the example that there is, or can be, a strong teleological impetus directing the change of oral tradition. This is not at all the case with change and shift in natural languages. Although influenced by internal as well as external factors, language change has no telos, and thus, no forseeable development; its ‘guide’ is sometimes called ‘the invisible hand’.

If processes of language change cannot possibly be predicted, they still can be described, and it is wellknown what significant insights into language change are given to us by the Egyptian-Coptic language. However, there is a serious difficulty: the main site of change is always the spoken communication, where language occurs in its ‘fluid’ form, as it were. What we have and know from written texts, however, yields evidence of written language, of language in a much more ‘solid’ state of matter, coagulated in one or several standard varieties.

A most intriguing issue concerning spoken vs. written language is their systemic relationship to each other. According to currently valid ideas, no type simply depends on the other one, rather, both spoken and written represent different modes of basically identical possibilities of the language, the ‘langue’. What differences are there? From a descriptive point of view, linguists have counted a number of ‘universal’ features, depending on the different modality of spoken vs. written language (see fig. 1) and resulting in structural differences at all levels of language use (see fig. 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPOKEN LANGUAGE</th>
<th>WRITTEN LANGUAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exists in an aural medium in real time</td>
<td>Exists visually and permanently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is accompanied by errors, hesitations, pauses, false starts, redundancy</td>
<td>Hesitations and errors have been removed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I feel obliged to confess my gratitude to Prof. Adam Jones (University of Leipzig) for improving the English of this article and to Susann Harder (University of Leipzig) and Maike Ludwig (University of Leipzig) who kindly assisted me with proof-reading!
2. Cf. e.g. Labov (1994); Milroy (1992); Chambers & al. (2002).
Features typically to be attributed to spoken language are e.g. the preference of paratactic vs. hypotactic construction, a lower variety of conjunctions and clause conjugations, the frequent occurrence of elliptic and anakolouthic constructions at the syntax level; a lower semantic variation, the frequency of semantic commonplaces and of deictic expressions referring to non-verbal contexts at the semantic level; variety in phonetic realizations, elision, reduction, assimilation etc. at the levels of phonetics and prosody, and, without direct correspondences in written language, varieties in pitch, volume, and speed of speaking.

Fig. 1: Spoken vs. written language in terms of modality (Barton 1994)

However, at least the most syntactic and semantic features are by no means distinctive. Depending on genre and function, written texts can be more or less close to spoken language (and vice versa), be it with or without intention. Some artificial dialogues in Jane Austen’s novels, for instance, are highly ‘written’ in style and may not give an idea of spoken English of that time, while the utterances of underdogs from Charles Dickens’ text-world may actually convey impressions of genuine contemporary sound. Modern literature provides famous cases of highly elaborate imitations of non-standard language within written texts, up to spoken dialects, linguistic group codes, and even the idiosyncratic, incoherent inner dialogue of human thought: just think of Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion, Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye, or Joyce’s Ulysses. However, certain most common speaker strategies and features of spoken language can hardly be reproduced in written texts without a heavy loss of comprehensibility at the reader’s end, due to the lack of the pragmatic setting (i.e., the ‘modality’ of Barton 1994) regularly surrounding spoken communication, which is indispensable for connoting meanings of speech units, or intentions of speech acts.


What about the evidence of Coptic? Can we catch a glimpse of spoken Coptic through the mirror of written texts?  

Hans Jakob Polotsky was the first scholar who applied the structuralist concept of language system to Coptic, and it was through him that terms like ‘language standard’, ‘norm’, and ‘variety’ have been introduced into Coptic linguistics. In his writing about Coptic grammatical structures, Polotsky himself revealed a bias towards the Biblical standard variety of Sahidic Coptic. Apart from its high degree of regularity, it is the direct comparability to the Greek Vorlage that probably awoke Polotsky’s particular favour, for many of his carefully chosen examples receive their conclusive force just by comparison of grammatical strategies used in the Coptic target language to those employed in the Greek source laguage. Although I do not consider Coptic to be a mixed language, I do think Biblical Coptic was shaped by intentional imitation of stylistic registers of Biblical Greek as well as by unintentional choice of certain means of expressions which would not – at least not in the same frequency and distribution – be found in non-translated written texts, let alone in spoken Coptic. Such phenomena, called translationese features, are well-known to text linguists. For my purpose, however, this kind of Coptic would be most inappropriate, representing eminently written language in some regards. It was Ariel Shisha-Halevy in his exploration of Shenoute’s language who drew attention to quite another standard of Sahidic Coptic, different not so much in terms of single grammatical forms or dialectal features, but in a more general sense: Repeatedly, he points to linguistic features of an informal, colloquial style far from the Biblical standard of Sahidic and other standard varieties attested in originally written texts.

‘Spoken’ language, in its narrowest sense, is interlocutive speech, is conversation. Narrative, even in the realm of the spoken, tends to be shaped by patterns and expectations of genre which come close to written structures. So, what we are tracing should be sought and found most likely in direct speech. Are there any Coptic counterparts to those interferent examples of English literature mentioned above? Is there some evidence of direct speech passages preserving expressions from vernacular, spoken Coptic? I believe there actually are such phenomena, even though it may often be hard to estimate the level and degree of their deviation from the literary standard. Let me give you an example from a narrative exemplum within a Coptic homily on the archangel Gabriel (see Appendix, Ex. 1). The plot deals with a loan given by a pious rich man to a godless poor man, who attempts to defraud his benefactor, saying: ‘I owe you nothing. Show your document, and I will entirely satisfy you with it.’ Finally, the bad guy takes an oath within the shrine of the archangel, swearing falsely: ‘You have never given me any of

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7 On methodological implications of this question, see Cable (1990); Cummins (1994); Maynor (1988); Meurman-Solin (1999) and Schneider (2002: especially 67-68, ‘Introduction: How to Listen without Hearing’).
8 See e.g. in his ‘classical’ studies, Polostky (1944, 1960 and 1987/1990).
12 Shisha-Halevy (1986: e.g. p. 93, § 2.6.4).
these seven hundred Solidi that you are charging me for!’, and as hardly needs to be said, subsequently he gets into deep trouble. Since the *exemplum* should serve for intensifying contemporaries’ fear of the Archangel amidst their everyday life, it just deals with contemporary everyday matters, and it does so the more efficaciously, I believe, by inserting some contemporary colloquial expressions, like the verb *μυγζ* with two objects, literally ‘to fill’ somebody with something, actually meaning ‘to pay in full’,” and the Greek loan-verb *ἔδαυευ*, literally ‘induce’, actually meaning ‘to accuse somebody’. Otherwise, both expressions are strictly limited to documentary Coptic texts. But even if this case may be considered a deviation from the literary standard at the word choice level, it might still be far from spoken Sahidic. As a matter of course, linguistic norms of all literary texts including rhetoric genres always represent more or less highly standardized linguistic varieties. Non-literary Coptic texts, on the other hand, usually represent linguistic non-standard varieties. So what I have done is to collect direct speech phrases occurring in documentary texts (see a selection in the Appendix, *Ex. 2,1-46*). In order to get a homogeneous textual corpus, I restricted my research to 7th and 8th-century letters from the Theban area, were the teaching of writing was based on biblical Sahidic. Unlike direct speech in a narrative, direct speech quotations in letters are non-fictional, that means, they usually correspond to real utterances coming from living persons and actually heard by the writer. So it is significant, although not unexpected, to find the great majority of instances in overall keeping with common Sahidic structures as known from biblical texts and elsewhere, assuming that terse linguistic units such as those of *Ex. 2* permit any classification at all. Of course, some phenomena do occur, which might be less familiar to Coptologists accustomed to literary Sahidic only (*Ex. 3*). So we find the Theban future conjugation *σγλ-ευτμ* (*Ex. 3.1 to 5*), the perfect participle *πτερ-ευτμ* (*Ex. 3.6 & 7*) which likewise belongs to the Nag Hammadi subakhmimic standard, we find the omission of *+ ‘to give’* (*Ex. 3.8*) and that of the object of the same verb (*Ex. 3.9 & 10*), and we find the negative conditional *ωντελεωτμ* (*Ex. 3.11*). It must be emphasized however, that none of these phenomena occurs *exclusively in direct speech passages of letters*: they all are shared features of non-standard Theban texts of several genres, and some of them even of Upper-Egyptian literary varieties. So what happened? Obviously, almost all these originally spoken utterances must have been converted during the process of recording in keeping with the demands of written Coptic, be it even a non-standard variety, and that means a partial or total loss of their distinctive spoken language features. As for pronunciation, it is usually argued that genuine phonetic realizations of sounds are scarcely recorded as heard, i.e. by a phonological analysis *ad-hoc*, but have always been adapted to the writer’s orthographic customs, and just the same must be assumed with regard to syntactic structures and word choice: writers might have re-shaped spoken utterances which they felt unfit to be written by homonymous expressions coming up to the expectations.


18 This is well-documented by the evidence of Coptic educational texts, cf. Cribiore (1996) and Hasitzka (1990).

19 Just the difference between ‘invented’ and ‘imagined’ according to Schneider (2002).


of a reader, a decision which modern philologists still benefit from, but a real nuisance for curious linguists! Surely, almost all first- and second-person utterances as well as utterances from more than one speaker might have been changed heavily by recording. What thus remains are third-person singular quotations. I believe that the condition of the occurrence of something like spoken Sahidic in non-fictional direct speech quotations is basically identical with the condition of deviations from literary standards in literary texts: Both depend on a writer’s particular motivation and explicit intention of doing so. Like an author who assigns idiomatic ways of speaking to his figures in order to characterize them additionally at a subtle, non-narrative level, a letter-writer may quote words of a living person ‘unplugged’, if he intends to communicate not only what was said, but also the way to put it. In any way, the result would be an internal evaluation, such as, exposing or unmasking the quoted person.

Only a few Coptic letters might actually meet this special requirement in one way or another. Some records from the realm of ecclesiastical disciplinary supervision are concerned with impudent remarks of clergymen. Sometimes the meaning of such statements escapes us. In Ex. 4, a person called Jakob has offended somebody by saying: *maa naa* *een* I won’t read ever to my father Paham*. Crum, the editor, noted: “‘read to (or for)’ seems the only possible translation; but the meaning is obscure.” I’m afraid we are in no better condition and must agree. According to Ex. 5, a monk had dared to say: *an mia noy* *naa* *naaa* A Lüt was born to the brother.’ Unfortunately, we have no idea what monster a Lüt is, but it must be horrible, since the offender has to pay a considerable fine. Ex. 6 deals with quite a disgusting guy, who is not willing to go somewhere. When his mother tried to persuade him, he rebuked her, as is explicitly told, *zaa noy* *tuc* ‘with impertinence’, saying: *to* *tup* *tup* *e* *tup* *e* *e* *tup* The meaning of this apparently highly affective utterance may be: ‘Is it really necessary that I finish you? I am not at leisure!’ The next example (Ex. 7) is perhaps the most interesting one. Belonging to the archive of Bishop Abraham of Hermonthis, the text is a formal testimony against a priest called Viktór, attested by his fellow-priest Papnute, who tells what he found himself confronted with when he entered the church on the night before Easter Sunday: *eju* *eju* *eju* *eju* *eju* *eju* *eju* ‘I approached him and found him eating and drinking. I rebuked him: Is it you being – and I (must) see (you)! – in this manner?’ I have the impression that this utterance is quite far from what we would consider usual Sahidic syntax. The anakolouthic splitting of syntactic coherence – a typical spoken language feature – occurs, a structure corresponding here to the speaker’s rage. But the reply of the caught sinner sounds even more interesting: *ko* *ko* *ko* *ko* *ko* *ko* *ko* ‘If you wish (to) perform service, do (it), (if) you don’t wish (to) perform (it), let (it) be!’ Even though easy to understand, the whole expression is full of elliptic omission, by far exceeding the usual degree of non-literary

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23 For reasons of self-presentation and politeness, writers might rather not quote sub-standard utterances made by themselves or by their addressees.  
24 Because it is simply impossible to quote several utterances literally by one statement only.  
25 On the difference between internal and external evaluation in spoken conversation, cf. Labov (1972) and Tannen (1984b: 8ff.).  
26 The semantic value of *xu* *xu* *xu* *xu* *xu* *xu* (literally ‘to speak into somebody’s face’) in Theban texts seems to lie somewhere near ‘to rebuke sb.’, ‘to bark at sb.’, ‘to snap s.o.’s head’. 

texts. Also in Coptic letter-writing, writers used to say explicitlyἐγώμενεκοινωνύμενον ‘if you wish’ andἐκτιμώντες ‘if you don’t wish’ (Ex. 8). On the other hand, there is still a second instance of κοινωνύμενον-κοινωνύμενον within direct speech (Ex. 9 = O.Crum 174). The telegraphic alternative structure ‘you wish – you don’t wish’ with its strong restriction to the minimum of essential words, might thus be considered an echo of a spoken utterance.

To sum up: I could not show some broad and clear evidence of spoken language in written Coptic texts, not even in those of low standardization and linguistic prescriptivism, like personal letters from the 7th and 8th century Theban area. Admittedly, I doubt that many would have expected a large body of evidence. Polotsky’s famous remark, understood here in a more general sense, still remains true:27 “Über die Aussprache des klassischen Sahidisch befinde ich mich im Zustande völliger Unwissenheit, und ich wüßte nicht, daß Till oder sonst jemand in besserer Lage ist.” So, what’s up? Have I told a pointless story? I hope not. Despite, or shall I say, because of, the poorness of results, there is something to conclude.

There are several thoroughly investigated, well-known standard varieties of Sahidic Coptic. On the other hand, there are some linguistically almost unexplored non-standard varieties, to be found in the corpus of the so-called documentary texts. “This corpus” to use Ariel Shisha-Halevy’s words, “has had very scant attention hitherto…, and grammatical investigation of this area is still a future goal – perhaps the greatest challenge to Coptic linguistics today”.28 Furthermore, as I have tried to demonstrate, within these different varieties, there are more or less formal, rhetorical, and informal, colloquial registers interfering with each other. Finally, it is just the multiplicity of non-standard Sahidic varieties which might answer questions relating to the diachronic diversity of Coptic from its rise around 300 C.E until its obsolescence in Mamluk Egypt.29 All this would make up more than one field of really intriguing research, designated to enhance our understanding of the system, the ‘langue’ of Coptic, and therefore well suited to following in Polotsky’s footsteps. I confess, it was part of my hidden agenda to recommend these fields to a closer attention.

27 Polotsky (1957: 227).
Examples

Ex. 1: ‘Colloquial’ register in direct speech within a written narrative

BL Or 7028+, Homily on the Archangel Gabriel (ed. W.H. Worrell, The Coptic manuscripts in the Freer Collection, New York 1923, p. 25, col. ii-25, col. 1): μὴ ταῦτα λέγεις ἐφ' ἐμέ πεπράγματε ἢ τιλχήθηκες ἢ μὴ; ... ἦτε ἐὰν ἦσαν καὶ ἔτεκετε ἐπεξηγήσεις ἐμοὶ εἰρων. “I owe you nothing. Show your document, and I will entirely satisfy you with it. ... You have never given me any of these seven hundred Solidi that you are charging me for.”

Ex. 2: Direct speech as recorded in Theban letters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker 1st p. sg.</th>
<th>Speaker 2nd p. sg. m.</th>
<th>Speaker 3rd p. sg. m.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.01 O.Crum 179</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.02 O.Crum ST 259</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.03 O.Crum Ad. 63</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.04 O.Crum VC 66</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.05 O.Crum VC 70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.06 O.Mon.Epiph. 145</td>
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<td>2.07 O.Mon.Epiph. 168</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.08 O.Vind.Copt. 152</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.09 O.Crum VC 93</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.10 O.Mon.Epiph. 336</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.11 O.Mon.Epiph. 283</td>
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<td>2.12 O.Crum ST 260</td>
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<td>2.13 O.Crum ST 256</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.14 O.Vind.Copt. 265</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.15 SBKpt. II 862</td>
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<td>2.16 O.Crum 248</td>
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<td>2.17 O.Crum 368</td>
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<td>2.18 O.Vind.Copt. 272</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.19 O.Crum VC 70</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.20 O.Mon.Epiph. 455</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.21 O.Mon.Epiph. 379</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.22 O.Vind.Copt. 195</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.23 O.Mon.Epiph. 466</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.24 O.Med.Habu 196</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.25 O.Crum ST 357</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.26 O.Mon.Epiph. 322</td>
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<td>2.27 O.Crum 289</td>
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<td>2.28 O.Crum 239</td>
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<td>2.29 O.Crum VC 97A</td>
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<td>2.30 O.Crum ST 261</td>
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<td>2.31 O.Crum ST 288</td>
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</table>

| Examples | | |
| Ex. 1: 'Colloquial' register in direct speech within a written narrative | | |
| | | |
| Ex. 2: Direct speech as recorded in Theban letters | | |

*Spoken* Sahidic. Gleanings from Non-Literary Texts
"You brought the breads into the house, you didn’t bring them into the monastery"

"Stand up and go! This is not right, that you are so arrogant"

"I do not vouch!"

"Ask him that he gives us something and we write a logos (i.e., a safe conduct) for him"

"I won’t go! Hundred men are with you!

"I will bring it to you."
Ex. 4: What happened?
O.Crum 481: *ποιμήν θητεύειν παραλίαν ενερ* ‘I won’t read ever to my father Paham!’

Ex. 5: What is a ‘Lūt’?
O.Crum 292: *μητροπιάρχη... ετερόχορη Δύσης Νούσαγότ... επιστολή... μητροπιάρχη...* ‘as we considered his word about the brother that he spoke: “A Lūt was born to the brother”, we imposed the fine ... thirty nine ... dare ...’

Ex. 6: Vehement utterances of a violent-tempered guy
O.Mon.Epiph. 455: *ΕΠΕΔΔΟΥΣΑ... ΕΠΕΧΕΙΝ ΕΥΚΑΙΡΙΩΤΗΤΑ ΕΠΕΧΕΙΝ ΕΤΟΙ...* ‘When his mother said to him: “Stand up, go, it is not right that you are so proud,” it was with impertinence that he rebuked her (lit. said into her face): “Is it really necessary that I finish(?) you(?) I am not at leisure!”’

Ex. 7: A fierce exchange recorded
O.Crum Ad. 59: *ΠΕΡΕΠΕΙΔΟΥΣΑ... ΕΠΕΧΕΙΝ... ΕΠΕΧΕΙΝ ΕΤΟΙ... ΕΠΕΧΕΙΝ...* ‘When I, just about to perform the service, went to Papnute at the evening of the Saturday of breaking (the fasting), I approached him and found him eating and drinking. I rebuked him (lit. said into his face): “Is it you being - and I (must) see (you) - in this manner?” He said to me: “(If) you wish (to) perform service, do (it), (if) you don’t wish (to) perform (it), let (it) be!”’

Ex. 8: Conditional clauses containing ουσίω in Theban documents

| 8.1 | O.Crum 386 | εκατοικεύειν έτησια παντρευτήν | ‘if you want that I go hastily’ |
| 8.2 | CO Ad. 29 | εκατοικούσα | ‘if she doesn’t wish’ |
| 8.3 | O.Crum passim | εκατοικεύειν | ‘if you want’ |
| 8.4 | O.Crum Ad. 46 | εκατοικεύειν | ‘if you don’t want’ |

Ex. 9: καταγωγή ... καταγωγή άν in direct speech
O.Crum 174: *καταγωγή εγκαταπόθεται καταγωγή εγκαταπόθεται άν* ‘(if) you want to vouch ... (if) you don’t want to vouch’
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