WORD STRESS AND SYLLABLE STRUCTURE IN EGYPTIAN

A Review Article

BY

EBBE E. KNUDSEN

Gerhard Fecht, Wortakzent und Silbenstruktur, Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der ägyptischen Sprache. Ägyptologische Forschungen, Heft 21. J. J. Augustin, Glückstadt 1960. xv + 250 pp.

Egyptian writing did not originally indicate the presence of different vowels. It was not until the Christian period when Egyptian (Coptic) began to be written with Greek letters that vowels were systematically shown in writing. Evidence of the vocalic structure of Precoptic Egyptian is preserved in a number of words which passed into languages spoken by peoples with whom the Egyptians came into contact. In most, but not all cases, these words have been preserved in written form by languages now long dead. Egyptian loanwords are known from Semitic languages, especially Hebrew and Aramaic. Even to the present day a number of words of Egyptian origin have been preserved in Cushitic and Nubian. Finally, some words have passed through Greek into European languages. Another piece of evidence is furnished by Egyptian proper names and names of titles known especially from transcriptions into Akkadian Cuneiform and Greek. On the basis of Coptic and these Akkadian and Greek transcriptions, G. Fecht has attempted to reconstruct the early vocalisation of a number of Egyptian words and compounds. In this connection the author treats problems of stress and syllable structure in Precoptic Egyptian.

The book under review is important for this special field of study in that it gives a full and detailed list of all so-called Old

Compounds (*ältere Komposita*). The author's thorough command of Egyptological literature, which is attested throughout the book, has been of special value in the preparation of this list. Evidently the author's strong point is the philological presentation of the material. The reviewer has a number of objections to the following linguistic treatment. In several cases the expositions lead to conclusions which, in the opinion of the reviewer, are not implied by the source material. Some of these problems will be treated below. The book is well arranged. A rather detailed table of contents and a number of indexes greatly facilitate reference.

In §§ 1-6 G. Fecht gives a summary of the rules of stress and syllable formation in Precoptic as presupposed by Coptic syllabic structure. This summary is based on the work of earlier investigators, especially G. Steindorff, K. Sethe, and W. F. Edgerton. In § 3.3 the author states that the reconstructed early forms of Egyptian words show neither initial nor final consonant clusters. All initial syllables were open (of the type *cv-*), whereas all final syllables were closed (of the type *-cvc*). For final syllables this seems to have been the general principle as shown by the above mentioned rules of Precoptic syllable formation. For initial syllables it cannot be proved. The position taken by the author is unconvincing. § 3 note 8 contains the following statement: "Doch ist gewiss der vortonige Wortteil nach Analogie des kontrollierbaren nachtonigen Wortteiles zu beurteilen, zumal das im Koptischen vorliegende Wortmaterial dem nicht widerspricht". This is no valid argument, since initial consonant clusters are found at least in Saidic and Bohairic Coptic.¹ In the following note the statement is, however, somewhat modified: "Freilich kann das Gesetz des durchgehend konsonantischen Wortanlauts wohl nie exakt bewiesen werden".

The main part of the book is devoted to a discussion of the so-called Old Compounds and similar formations (pp. 5-162). This discussion has been divided into three sections:

Erster Teil: Untersuchung der „Komposita älterer Bildungsweise“ (§§ 7-217).

¹ For the Saidic evidence, see the reviewer, *Acta Orientalia* 26:39 § 4.3 (1961), and for Bohairic, H. J. Polotsky, *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 12:27f. (1949).

Zweiter Teil: Zusammensetzungen mit (einsilbigen) Enklitika (§§ 218–255).

Dritter Teil: Zusammenfassende Betrachtung und Auswertung der „Komposita älterer Bildungsweise“ (§§ 264–324).

At the end of Section Three the author concludes the discussion with some remarks on the geographical and chronological distribution and a summary of the supposed development of the Old Compounds. The so-called Old Compounds are compounds consisting of two or more component words which may occur also separately as stress units. The author distinguishes these compounds from compounds containing an enclitic particle as their last component (§ 218). The members of these two groups of compounds share the common feature that stress never falls on the last component. In Coptic these formations are no longer considered compounds, but occur as word units. Examples of Old Compounds are: *ḥm nēr*, Precoptic attested in Akkadian transcription as *-xamnata*, *-xanate*, Coptic *honət* 'priest'; *tj rd*, Coptic *tōrət* 'staircase'. As separate stress units the component words occur as *nēr* Coptic *nūtə* 'god', *tj* Coptic *to* 'land, earth', and *rd* Coptic *rat* 'foot'. If known, the Coptic equivalent of Egyptian *ḥm* 'slave' should have been **hom*.

This series of Old Compounds G. Fecht interprets as evidence of an earlier stress system in Egyptian word compounds. Since the investigations of F. Ll. Griffith and K. Sethe, this has been the generally accepted view (§ 7 with note 18). Unlike the Old Compounds which presuppose a *regressive* stress younger compounds show a *progressive* stress as in *sti nūfə* 'good smell, perfume' and *tšə col* 'to speak lie'. The unstressed components *sti* and *tšə* correspond to stressed *stoj* 'smell' and *tšō* 'to say, speak'. In Coptic such compounds can be dissolved and the component words then occur as separate stress units. Doublet formations are, however, rare. As early as the Eighteenth Dynasty (14th century B.C.), compounds of regressive and progressive type are attested side by side in the Akkadian transcriptions: *ḥm nēr*: *-xamnata*, *-xanate* with regressive stress (cf. Coptic *honət*) and *nfrt irt*: *naptera* with progressive stress (reduction of first component). For the time prior to the Eighteenth Dynasty we have

no direct evidence of vocalisation and stress in Egyptian. The conclusion that the Old Compounds represent an earlier stress system remains a *possible* solution. This is all that can be said at present.

The author proceeds to a discussion of the development of stress in non-compound words. In this and the following section (§§ 325–437), G. Fecht advances his theory on the historical development of stress in Egyptian. According to this theory four main phases should be distinguished:

1. Free stress. Stress may fall on every syllable irrespective of its position.
2. 'Dreisilbengesetz'. Stress may fall on one of the last three syllables.
3. 'Zweisilbengesetz'. Stress may fall on one of the last two syllables. This is the phase to which Coptic belongs.
4. Disappearance of dynamic stress. This is the phase to which Late Coptic (Bi-sulsal) is said to belong.²

The phonemic position of stress in Egyptian will be discussed below.

The book is concluded by an appendix: Zur Bewertung der unbetonten Auslautvokale in den ältesten keilschriftlichen Umschreibungen (Dyn. 18 und 19) (§§ 438–450). The author uses the graphic representations of unstressed final vowels on the tacit condition that the Egyptian and Akkadian vowel systems were identical. In all probability it was not the case. Variant writings such as *-nata*, *-nate* 'god' (unstressed) probably represent a form [nathə] or [nəthə] rather than the simple sign by sign transliteration preferred by the author. So Akkadian transcriptions of Egyptian words should be used with care. Only a thorough investigation of all transcriptions can reveal the underlying phonetic facts in so far as it is possible in a dead language.

The following remarks are intended as a contribution to a discussion of some of the problems treated by G. Fecht.

² §§ 435–437. According to the standard description given by W. H. Worrell and W. Vycichl, *Popular Traditions of the Coptic Language* (University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 46 [1942]), p. 312 f. §§ 20–21 there is stress in Bi-sulsal Coptic.

Accent Features: Stress and Tone

A stress language is a language in which the distribution of stress is not conditioned by position. Stress is a phoneme (prosodeme). Similarly a tone language is a language which uses differences of pitch as distinctive features. Pitch functions as a phoneme (toneme, prosodeme). Unlike G. Fecht, the present writer does not believe that Egyptian was a stress language. For an investigation of this point, the only reliable method is to start with the Coptic evidence, since Coptic is the only stage of Egyptian in which vowels were systematically shown in writing.

In Coptic, according to G. Fecht (§ 3.1), there is ultima or penultima stress. This statement can be made more explicit in the following way:³ With the exception of monosyllables stress falls on the last syllable but one. The phonemes /vowel length/, /e/, and /o/, which occur only in ultima or penultima position, and ultima /a/ (< *e) always receive stress.⁴ Accordingly stress is non-phonemic in Coptic.

The discovery that Egyptian was possibly a tone language is due to J. Vergote.⁵ Vergote argued that in a number of Coptic words plural forms are distinguished from singular forms by the presence of a glottal stop in combination with another plural element. *msah* 'crocodile', plural *mso'h* shows the two plural elements vowel change *a* → *o* and infixation of a glottal stop.⁶ In *snof* 'blood', plural *snōf* the old plural morpheme *w* has been dropped, but a trace of its earlier existence is left in the length of the vowel. Vergote compared this infixation of a glottal stop with similar phenomena in some European languages where it

³ The phonemic analysis used here was drawn up by the present writer in *Saidic Coptic Vowel Phonemes*, *Acta Orientalia* 26:29-42 (1961).

⁴ This rule applies to the material given by W. C. Till, *Betrachtungen zum Wortakzent im Koptischen*, *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 13:13-32 (1951).

⁵ *Observations sur la vocalisation de l'égyptien*, *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Orientalists* (1956), p. 79. The arguments put forward by W. C. Till, *op. cit.* 16 note 2 and W. Vycichl, *Zur Tonologie des Somali*, *Rivista di studi orientali* 31:227 (1956) are less cogent.

⁶ E. Edel, *Zur Vokalisation des Neuägyptischen*, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 2:36 f. (1954) explains *mso'h* as developed from *msoh + double affixation of the plural morpheme *w*: -*wvw* > -*jvw* > -'.

occurs in correspondence with tone. He concluded that the infixed /' / might go back to an older toneme.

There is evidence in the Old Compounds that the first component word was stressed on the same syllable whether it occurred in compounds or in free position. Because of their syllabic structure, monosyllables are inconclusive in this respect. The stressing of component words containing more than one syllable would suggest that the Coptic stress system was at work in the first component at a time when the Old Compound system was still productive in Egyptian:

mr wr (§§ 10–16): Μνησις, Μνεσις. – *mr*: μνη, μνε.⁷

wj wr (§§ 17–20): -γετου. – *wj*: γετ.

ɜx bjt (§§ 49–53): -χηβις, Χεμβις, Χεμμις. – *ɜx*: χη, χε.

tpj iħw (§§ 67–69): Coptic *tpēh*. – *tpj*: *tpē*.

ħrj iħw (§§ 127–133): Coptic *hareh*, *harēh* etc. – *ħrj*: *hare*, *harē*.

ħrj tɜ (§ 170): gloss written *pet* for *hrēt. – *ħrj*: *hrē*.

tpj ɟ (§§ 187–189): τπη-. – *tpj*: τπη.

ħmwt r (§ 233): Old Coptic *hmēr*. – *ħmwt*: *hmē*.

In all cases of [e:] vowel length is conditioned by position. As should be expected from Coptic, stress falls on ultima /e/.

gr n pt (§§ 146–149): Coptic *cro'mpə*, *cərompə*. *gr*: *cro'*, *cəro*.

As should be expected, stress falls on ultima /o/.

in m (§ 175): Coptic *nīm*.

rnpt tn (§§ 228–229): Old Coptic *rn̄potn̄*.

in m is inconclusive since *in* does not occur in free position. Unlike in other compounds, there was no possibility of sound reduction in *rnpt tn*. Accordingly a change of stress must be assumed; cf. *rnpt* 'year', Coptic *rompə*. The later sound reduction is a characteristic feature with the Old Compounds. It may not be out of the question to suppose that this is the reason for the preservation of the Old Compounds in Coptic.

⁷ G. Fecht overlooked the fact that initial *mr*- does not occur in Greek, whereas initial *mn*- is rather common. Greek *mn*- was substituted for Egyptian *mr*-.