The Revival and Modernization of the Coptic Language

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The language is the soul of its people. It reflects their thought process, their conscious, and their culture. For the Copts, or Egyptian Christians, their language was an extension of the Ancient Egyptian language of their ancestors. Though the underlying language did not change significantly over the centuries, the script drastically changed in form. These orthographic changes are mostly a reflection of changes that Egyptians experienced in the social as well as the political arenas.

Evolution

The Egyptian language has evolved over 6000 years from rudimentary symbols to a comprehensive fully-vocalized system of uniform letters or characters. In the beginning, the Egyptians recorded their words with a picture symbol. Such a primitive approach gave way to a distinctive system of writing that assigned the primary sound value of a symbol to itself. Thus, it became able to record more words with less symbols. Henceforth Hieroglyphic script was born. This system only incorporated consonants. To record the variation of vowels in words with common consonant base, an elaborate series of non-pronounceable symbols were devised. They were called Ideograms. Thus words like *king* and *queen* were distinguished with the addition of different ideograms that marked their meaning. The hieroglyphs used were beautifully crafted and elaborately colored. Such a system was not very practical for recording business-like transactions. As a result, a system of a simplified representation of these hieroglyphs

was devised by the priests of the temples, and it is commonly known as "Hieratic." Both systems survived side-by-side through the recorded history of Ancient Egypt.

The language achieved its literary heights during the Middle Kingdom. The New Kingdom brought in a more extravagant look but the quality of literature was poorer.

With the end of the New Kingdom (750 BC), this state-sponsored writing system started to lose its literary strength, though not its magical one. A couple of centuries later (5th BC) a more simplified set of characters were devised to replace the Hieroglyphs and the Hieratic as practical means of expressing the language in writing. This system was known as Demotic. By comparison to the beautiful hieroglyphs, Demotic was rather ugly. However, it was simpler to use. It only had between 400 and 500 characters, compared with the 4,000 recognized Hieroglyphs.

The arrival of the Greeks and their notion of cultural unification (Hellenistic culture), slowly weakened the use of Demotic among the educated Egyptians. The Greek system, being composed of only 24 characters, provided a literary death-blow to the Demotic. However, through the influence of the Pagan Egyptian priests, the language continued to survive in a predominately religious context.

More than four centuries later, the successors of these Egyptian priests, realized that continuing with the Demotic is alienating (religiously) more and more of the educated and wealthy Egyptians. Their answer was to adopt this new script, Greek, to write the Egyptian language. Many Demotic characters were added to represent sounds that had no acceptable equivalents in Greek. Less than a century later, the Christians in Alexandria used a simpler system except with no extra Demotic characters, after a couple of hundred years, the new Script, known now as Coptic, had only six or seven extra characters from the Demotic. It is worthy to mention that the pagans devised Coptic to keep the Egyptians from leaving the

Old Religion, while the Christians used it to bring Egyptians into their new religion.

Coptic was distinguished from all other Egyptian scripts in its inclusion of vowels. This allowed the people to record their speech in a fully vocalized system. The result was the appearance of several Dialects and Subdialects. Eventually, Sahidic, being the neutral dialect, became the dialect of choice. Among the other dialects, only Bohairic survived the test of time, because of its use among the strong Wadi 'N Natroun monastic communities. With the move of the Patriarchal seat from Alexandria to the newly-built capital of Cairo, Bohairic gradually replaced Sahidic, until it finally vanished, in the literary sense, by the end of the 14th century AD. By that time also, Arabic was slowly weakening the literary use of Coptic in general. Eventually it was relegated to a mere liturgical language.

Early in the second half of the 19th century, the reformer Pope Cyril IV and Erian Effendi Moftah, collaborated in the new revival movement of Coptic—a revival in use primarily as a language of speech. The distinctive mark as well as its Achilles heel was the adoption of the pronunciation system of the Greek language of their time. This did not take into account that Coptic and especially new Greek had developed independently from each other. This made the new pronunciation system of Coptic deviate somewhat from its proper Egyptian roots. For the dreams of Pope Cyril IV and Mr. Moftah to be fully realized a more native system of pronunciation is first needed. This has been a bone of contention among two main Coptic factions during the past three decades. Now we will try to discuss this item as well as other significant, yet not too controversial, aspects.

A. *Choice of Dialect*

The preeminence of Bohairic during most of this millennium, would make it the more appropriate dialect to base Modern Coptic on. The study of the more uniform grammar of the Sahidic dialect will undoubtedly help us to standardize this Modern language.

B. *Pronunciation*

This element is not the most significant to the process, but the division over it has impeded progress on other elements. I will limit my discussion to consonants, and more specifically to three of them. Any sound in the language needs to satisfy two criteria: 1) reflect native sounds, and 2) reduce confusion in meaning. The characters to be examined here are: ⲇ, ⲑ, ⲟⲩ. The first one is almost always used in Greek-Loan words while the last two characters are used in native words as well as Greek-Loan words.

For Native Egyptian words, ⲇ and ⲑ should be pronounced as 'd' and 't' respectively for the following reasons:

1. The current pronunciation using the English 'th' is not of Egyptian origin, according to Dr. Georgi Sobhi *(Kitab Al-Qawad al-Lugha al-Masriya al-Qibtiya,* Reprint 1987 by Shaker Basilius p. 16-17).

2. This sound is a difficult one for Copts to pronounce, as a result they pronounce it many times as an 's' sound which can change the meaning completely.

For ⲟⲩ, when contracted ⲁⲩ or ⲉⲩ, it should be pronounced as a 'u'. I would make this argument for one simple reason and that is this contractions or diphthongs, when present in Coptic they are mostly used in conjugation of verbs in the 3rd person plural. If the current neo-Greek pronunciation of 'v' is used, it would sound pretty much like an 'f' sound which would make it refer to 3 rd person masculine instead.

For Greek Loan Words, we are faced with one of two choices. The first to pronounce the word in the way it was pronounced by its own native speakers, and the second is to make conform to Coptic pronunciation rules. I would lean toward using Coptic rules for such words but it is not critical either way.

C. Word Division

Coptic script was native to hand-written productions, i.e. manuscripts, up until the late 19th century. This is almost three centuries after such mode of writing disappeared from Europe. In these manuscripts, the scribes used continuous script with no word division or even regards for it at the end or the beginning of lines. With the advent of bilingual liturgical manuscripts (in Coptic and Arabic), more paragraph divisions were included to simplify the use. The first attempt to divide the words was probably done by the scholars in Europe as early as the 17th and 18th centuries. Foremost among them is the Copt Raphael al-Tukhi, residing in the Vatican. Eventually the same system was employed by Copts when they published the first printed texts during the days of Pope Cyril IV or shortly after. The following are some of my suggestions for uniform word division:

    a. Definite and indefinite articles should be prefixed to the following nouns.

    b. Possessive adjectives and near-object demonstrative adjectives should also be prefixed to the word they modify.

    c. Relative particles such as ⲉ, ⲉⲧ, ⲉⲧⲉ are to be treated as prefixes.

    d. Prepositions longer than one character are to be written separately.

    e. Copula ⲡⲉ, ⲧⲉ, ⲛⲉ to be written separately.

    f. All construct form(s) of verbs are to be written separately from the following object, except for ⲉⲣ-.

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   h. Dependent personal pronouns used with prepositions or verbs are to be attached in typical verbal conjugation, in pronominal forms of the verbs, and in pronominal forms of the prepositions. The only exception is the auxiliary ⲑⲏⲛⲟⲩ used in some forms of the second person plural.

   i. Compound interrogative pronouns should be written separately, e.g. ⲉⲑⲃⲉ ⲫⲁⲓ, ⲉⲑⲃⲉ ⲟⲩ.

   j. All adverbs are to be written separately, ⲉⲃⲟⲗ, ⲉϧⲟⲩⲛ, etc.

   k. Particles such as ⲛ, ⲙ should be written as prefixes.

   l. Particles such as ⲙⲉⲧ, ϫⲓⲛ should be written as prefixes.

D. *Orthography*

Coptic texts were published in different dialects and different scripts. Scholarly works tended to be less concerned with appearance. German works were written differently from French works and even more different from those published by the Vatican. The most appropriate would be the Vatican script of the second half of the 19th century. Other aspects of the writing to be standardized are as follows:

   a. The use of the accent mark or djinkim should be limited to clarifying the meaning and indicating the syllables in a word.

   b. European capitalization rules are inappropriate in Coptic. Instead, the original rule of writing important words in abbreviated format should be retained.

   c. The notation for question mark is ";"

E. *Vocabulary Sources*

Coptic by virtue of its struggle to survive during the past several centuries has suffered from lack of development. This became more and more significant in the past two centuries

with the exponential technological advances. As a result, a sound methodology is sorely needed to allow for standard adoption of new vocabulary in the language. I propose the following sources for such a task, arranged in the order of precedence:

     a. Fixing the meaning of current Bohairic words.

     b. Using regular Bohairic compound to achieve new forms.

     c. Integrating unique Sahidic vocabulary, written in Bohairic form.

     d. Integrating unique vocabulary from other dialects, written in Bohairic form.

     e. Adoption of foreign words, first from Greek and then from other languages. This is especially applicable to new scientific, medical, and computer terms.

f. Teaching methodologies

Curricula for teaching Modern Coptic should include ones to teach reading comprehension via translation, writing, and speech. Comprehensive programs need to be developed in all these areas. The study of other dialects is also needed to support the other aspects of the modernization process.

g. The Responsibility of the Modernization Process

Throughout the past century and a half, the modernization process was mainly pursued individually within a small circle. In other words, the work was more done privately rather publicly. This caused duplication and inefficient use of resources. What is needed is an overseeing entity to coordinate, regulate, and approve such work. Such an organizing body would include members from the clergy, the laity, and the academia. How this body will conduct the business it is designed for, is an interesting question and is yet to be resolved.

h. The Future

There is nothing more important to the revival process than to form and empower a governing body for this modernization process. I personally see three major tasks that such group will have to coordinate, and they are as follows:

1. The standardization of the language.
2. The development of a Modern Dictionary of the language.
3. The development of literary and non-literary, non-ecclesiastical compositions in Coptic.

From my personal experience, the last two tasks, though monumental in scope, are much easier to accomplish than the first one. But we all can hope.