Forschungsprojekt

Contact-Induced Language Change of Egyptian-Coptic: Loanword Lexicography in the DDGLC Project ("Database and Dictionary of Greek Loanwords in Coptic")

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Type of Project

Long term project for a database and a dictionary.

Institutional Affiliation and Participants

University of Leipzig, Egyptological Institute/Egyptian Museum – Georg Steindorff –

Tonio Sebastian Richter
Marc Brose/Dylan Burns
Joost Hagen
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Further cooperation will be established soon e.g. with scholars at the University of Heidelberg.

Description of Project

The DDGLC project, started in April 2010, intends to address a major lacuna in Coptic studies by providing a systematic description and analysis of attested loanwords.

The phonological, morphological, semantic and stylistic/ rhetorical aspects of these borrowings are to be studied, for all classes of loanwords, and for all dialectal and subdialectal corpora.

Coptic was an eminent "language in contact", mainly borrowing from two donor languages, Greek and Arabic. Over more than 1000 years, Greek functioned both as the spoken language of a courtly and urban élite, and as a written language gradually dominating administration, economy, literature, sciences, and private day-to-day correspondence. Only after the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs in the mid-7th century CE, the importance of Greek diminished. Some of its functional domains were occupied by the Egyptian native language, others by Arabic, the language of the new governors (Richter 2010). The massive Greek impact on the contemporary Egyptian idiom becomes obvious in more than 4500 Greek loanwords in Coptic, representing almost all parts of speech and semantic fields (cf. e.g. Kasser 1991a, Lefort 1934, Oréal 1999, Rahlfs 1912, Reintges 2001, 2004). Occasional Arabic loanwords occurring in 8th and 9th century CE Coptic texts indicate incipient Coptic-Arabic contact, and Coptic texts from the 10th and 11th centuries, the period in which major parts of the indigenous population of Egypt began to shift from their native language to Arabic, bear evidence of intensified borrowing from Arabic (Richter 2006, 2009b).

All in all, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Greek-Egyptian contact is the most broadly and densely attested case of language contact in antiquity. Beginning with borrowing from Greek into pre-Coptic Egyptian, prominently Demotic (Clarysse 1987, Fewster 2002), and taking borrowing from Arabic into later Coptic into account, the Egyptian-

Coptic language provides the opportunity to look over 1.500 years of contact-induced language change in a single ancient language under fairly well-known historical and sociolinguistic conditions (Schenkel 1990, Loprieno 1995, 2001). Due to the fact that the Coptic corpus does not only include a wide range of textual genres, and accordingly, of diverse language registers, but subdivides into a dozen more or less highly standardized written dialects (Funk 1988, 1991, Kasser 1991b), generalizing work on Coptic is particularly complex, but also more informative.

The exceptional wealth of language data would seem to make a thorough study of linguistic borrowing into Coptic a rewarding work. However, not at least due to this wealth, traditional lexicographical approaches to the loan vocabulary of Coptic (Böhlig 1956, Weiß 1969, Tubach 1999) failed three times during the 20th century. Since April 2010, a project entitled *Database and Dictionary of Greek Loanwords in Coptic (DDGLC)* is hosted by the *Egyptological Institute – Georg Steindorff* – at the University of Leipzig. The *DDGLC* project aims at a systematic, comprehensive and detailed lexicographical compilation and description of Greek loanwords as attested in the entire Coptic corpus through all dialects and text types. Its intended outcome shall be provided in an online database and in a printed dictionary. The core tool of the *DDGLC* project is a relational database designed to connect linguistic and extra-linguistic data concerning types and tokens of all identifiable loanwords in Coptic. The database combines, and will reveal, the relationships between multiple levels of data: At its foundational level, the database records every single instance of a foreign word used in a Coptic source (i.e. token usage); each individual attestation will provide the loanword's full textual context, an English translation, and an encoding to identify its significant grammatical characteristics. At the next level, all data from the attestation-level will be grouped according to their "type", forming a list of sublemmata, as one would see in a dictionary. Above this all stands a meta-linguistic level which categorizes the data according to their textual and manuscript source, as well as dialect, region and date in which it was written. Since autumn 2012 the *DDGLC* project is funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* as a long-term project with a foreseen lifetime up until 2024.

Literature

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Funding

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