Middle Egyptian Grammar

through

Literature

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One day, a group of people in a small Chinese village went to the police station. They made a formal request to change their family name. The officials were taken aback, because in China, family names go back generations and families are usually keen on preserving them.

First, the police thought the reason was that someone in the family was a criminal. Then, the family revealed that their name was 苟 (Gŏu). This word means “careless, negligent,” and the written character does not have a negative connotation. But another word 狗 (gŏu) “dog” is pronounced exactly the same way, and it just happens to be one of the curse words in Chinese. For example, 狗腿子 (gŏu tuǐ zi) is a rich person’s enforcer, a henchman, and a typical curse for a bad man is 这个狗东西 (zhè ge gŏu dōngxi). This is a bit strange since many Chinese family names are animal names. For example, 马 (mă) “horse” and 牛 (niú) “ox” are frequently occurring Chinese family names, and the “dog” also has an equal rank with them in the Chinese lunar calendar. But the children of the 苟 families were always called names in school and were haunted by it through life.

They also told the police that an old man of the 苟 family remembered that the family’s original name was not 苟, but 敬 (Jìng). The two names have the character 苟 in common and differ only by the “side radical” 文.

The police asked for evidence. The family found a local historian and after some research, he found out that there lived an emperor between 907 and 960 A.D., whose name was 石敬瑭 (Shí Jìngtáng). The middle character 敬 was the same as the old family name. The reason for the name change was that in China, one cannot bear the same name as the emperor. When the Emperor came to power, he decreed that everyone who has the 敬 name must change it. The two characters, 敬 and 苟 are very similar, and so the 敬 families changed their name to 苟. This seemed an innocent choice as a thousand years ago, “dog” was 犬 (quăn), and 苟 did not have a negative connotation.

Due to evidence the family produced, the police allowed it to change its name. When this was reported in a newspaper, the police all over China got requests from 苟 families who now wanted to change their name.

There was a 15-year old girl named 苟 who said she was so inspired by her name change that she said she was going to become a doctor. But when she did become a doctor, all the patients knew her real name was 苟 and she became known as the 狗医生 (gŏu yīshēng) “dog doctor.”

What did we learn form this story? A few Chinese customs may immediately call the reader’s attention. For example, in ancient China an ordinary citizen could not bear the

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1 Unless stated otherwise we use simplified (mainland) Chinese characters.

2 The pinyin Romanization system is used.
same name as the emperor (which is the source of all the problems in the story). This custom, more like an imperial decree, is alien to ancient Egypt, where officials of the
court and scribes could be called \( \text{imn-}\text{h}" “Amenemhat.” But
customs aside, comparing the identically sounded characters 狗 and 犬 one can see that
they are composed of a common part and an additional sign. The common part is called
the “phonetic” and the extra sign is the “radical.” The phonetic tells how the sign is
pronounced and the radical usually (but not always) points to or gives a clue for the
meaning of the word. For example, at the left side of the sign 狗 is the so-called “animal
radical” and it appears as part of a whole host of animal names, such as 猪 (zhū) “pig,”
猫 (māo) “cat,” or with related meaning 狂 (hēn) “ferocious, ruthless.” Other radicals are
not so pointed, for example, the connection of the “grass radical” on the top of the sign
苟 with the actual meaning of the word has been obscured by time. These so-called
“picto-phonetic” characters comprise about 80% of the approximately 49,000 Chinese
characters. (They came to China with the Song Dynasty c. 1500-1066 BC.) The radicals
help to distinguish in writing between characters that sound the same. For example, the
sign 古 (gǔ) “ancient” is part of the words 估 (gū) “estimate (person radical),” 姑(gū)
aunt (female radical),” 菇(gū) “mushroom (grass and female radicals),” 牦 (gǔ) “bull
(ox radical),” 故 (gù) “reason, cause (tap radical),” and 固 (gù) “firm, solid (enclosure
radical).”
The ancient Egyptians were confronted with the same problem: How to distinguish the
roughly 17,000 Egyptian short words in writing from each other? Instead of inventing the
Chinese radicals, they came up with a different solution: the system of determinatives.
These extra signs (placed usually at the end of the words) came into existence for the
same reason as the Chinese radicals. Insisting on short words and limiting the total
number of signs inevitably lead to a multitude of coincidences. Although graphically
different, the determinatives serve the same purpose; to distinguish between words that
are spelled the same way. For example, 现 “exist” is part of the words 眼 “open,” 据 “hurry,” 留 “fault, blame,” 残 “stripped off.” They are
transliterated the same way (the verbs in appropriate verb forms) \( \text{wn} \), but their meanings
are different.
We also learned from the story that adding a radical to a Chinese character can also
change its sound, for example, adding the “tap radical” to 狗 gǒu, it becomes 敬 jìng.
The radicals can also be combined with each other, for example, the person radical 人
forced into the enclosure radical 口 gives 囚 “captive, prisoner, imprison.” The
ancient Egyptians solved this problem by combining (the passive participle of) the verb
\( \text{skr} “smite, strike down” with the adjective \( \text{nh} “living, alive” to get \( \text{skr-}^\text{nh} “captive,” lit. “one who is smitten alive.” They also
made sure that the word conveys the correct meaning by inserting many determinatives
wherever possible.
As another example, in the traditional Chinese character 爱 (ài) “love” the middle part 心 (xīn) is the heart radical and the lower part is the hand radical. The composition carries the simple meaning that a person in love takes his/her heart in hand (and brings it to the loved one). The similar Middle Egyptian phrase is composed of a number of signs: 

ib.k m 𓊏 “your heart in your hand,” and it carries a different meaning: “the presence of mind.”

In both languages there are many radicals. A Chinese dictionary lists 190-230 radicals (with the discrepancy due to different interpretations of the combined ones), and Gardiner’s Egyptian Grammar has about 108 generic radicals.

Which signs can serve as radicals and which have phonetic values (and which are ideograms)? Due to the overwhelming ratio of the picto-phonetic characters in Chinese, this is only a problem in Middle Egyptian. One of the first difficulties that a student encounters is that many signs can play both roles. For example every student of Middle Egyptian learns at the first lesson that the uniliteral the “horned viper” has the phonetic value f. Only later it turns out that this sign is also the determinative in the word iti “father.” (What is more, it is actually an ideogram for Upper-Egypt’s XIIth nome dw-fi the so-called “mountain of the horned viper.”) In case of the combined sign (a label from Tomb U-j in Abydos) it is not even clear whether it should be read as two phonetic signs or as an ideogram combined with a determinative. In the first case, according to Günther Dreyer, it should be read as ḫb-dw “Abydos,” and in the second, the elephant stands for ḫbw “Elephantine” and the determinative designates foreign land.

The Chinese story we just read raised a few basic issues in the Chinese and Middle Egyptian languages. The past 10 years of teaching an introductory course in Middle Egyptian at Rutgers University-Camden convinced the author that a profitable and rewarding way to draw the students’ interests to this subject (and to raise one of the worst retention rates in languages) is to bring into instruction as many literary works and as soon as possible. This is especially important in the study of the Middle Egyptian verbal structure, the most complex part of the language. For example, faithful translation of the six sdm.f forms not only requires the understanding of the particular sentence or clause that they appear in but also the understanding the context they are imbedded in. Reading literature in any languages however needs at least some rudimentary knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. This book is no exception. The reader is assumed to have some familiarity with Middle Egyptian writing and basic grammar, including the grammar of forming nonverbal sentences and clauses.

The focus of the book is on Middle Egyptian verbal structure by studying a variety of genres of literature. Each lesson text starts with a specific piece of literature and is followed by its own Vocabulary and Grammar Points. For the convenience of the reader, these vocabularies are assembled into a dictionary at the end of the book.

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3 [ShS. 14].
4 Lichtheim’s translation.

To focus on grammar rather than reading, the texts are written in horizontal lines from left to right. We also use spaces (rather than commas) and line breaks between logically distinguishable clauses and sentences. For greater clarity, we sometimes emend the hieroglyphs (with references in the Grammar Points). For example, in the spelling of the verb *rdi* “give, put, cause” we use the bread giving arm rather than the simplified form. In addition, we avoid large stacks of hieroglyphs, for example, instead of we will write for the other extreme, we will also try avoiding leaving flat signs alone; for example, a lonely scroll determinative will be written as.

In the vocabularies and the dictionary we usually use the first dictionary form of words regardless of how they appear in specific texts. The dictionary forms are taken from Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1988) and James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

We will give full (traditional) transliteration of the texts and point out the signs that are missing from specific spellings. Variant spellings that appear in the texts will be pointed out, for example, a variant spelling of Kush (northern Sudan) appears in the second stela of Kamose as.

The purpose of this book is to give the reader enough guidance in Middle Egyptian grammar so that he or she will be able to arrive at his or her own translation of the texts. To give complete translations would therefore defy this purpose. At the difficult passages we will not only explain more grammar points, but will also point out and discuss the often conflicting views of grammarians. Translations by well-known Egyptologists are also widely available also in books and through the Internet. Among these, the three-volume work of Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973) and William K. Simpson (Editor), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, (The American University of Cairo Press, 2005) are standard references throughout this book.

In the selection of the texts careful attention is paid to chronology. In addition, the most well-known of all the ancient Egyptian stories, the Story of Sinuhe and the Westcar Papyrus have not been chosen since their analyses are widely available.

To show the universality of the ideas and mindset of the Egyptians, the texts are accompanied by various quotes from classical pieces of literature. In finding suitable quotes Michael McClain, a former Rutgers student of Classical Studies, provided an indispensable help to the author.