CHAPTER 17

Greek, Coptic and the 'language of the Hijra': the rise and decline of the Coptic language in late antique and medieval Egypt[*]

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INTRODUCTION

Functional domains of languages and the difference between spoken and written language

In bi- or multilingual societies, the use of one or another language depends on a few basic parameters and a number of social variables which have been put together in the sociolinguistic concept of 'functional domains'.[1] Speakers can use, for example, one language within their families, another one in business affairs, etc.[2] Empirical studies have brought to light typical clusters of functional domains, resulting from common speaker attitudes towards their languages, which can frequently be classified within a binary scheme as 'Dominant' vs. 'Minority' languages (see Table 17.1).[3] These assumptions, reasonable as they are, have not yet been fully applied to the field of ancient bilingualism, where the use of a certain language is often simply taken as a shibboleth of a correlative personal identity. Although in some circumstances language use may indeed function as a claim of belonging to a societal group, or express a sense of identity with that group, we cannot draw conclusions from occasionally attested connections between persons and languages without taking the full range of their language options into account,[4] including their spoken medium(s) too, which usually have to be guessed, or reconstructed.

In everyday bi- or multilingual spoken communication, it is the speakers' social competence, their acquired knowledge of language behaviour, which serves as an 'intrinsic' guide to more or less appropriate

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[*] I am indebted to David Wasserstein, who took it upon himself to improve the poor English of this paper.
[1] Cf. Tsunoda 2005: 65–9.   [2] Cf. Fishman 1965: 67–88.   [3] Tsunoda 2005: 59–62.
[4] This point has been made perfectly plain by Stroumsa 2006.

Table 17.1 *Functional domains of minority vs. dominant languages (Tsunoda 2005:64)*

Minority language		Dominant language
(a) traditional life	vs.	modern life
(b) regional	vs.	national
(c) within community	vs.	with the outside world
(d) domestic, private	vs.	public
(e) inside the family	vs.	outside family
(f) informal	vs.	formal
(g) intimate	vs.	not intimate
(h) for solidarity	vs.	for power
(i) for secrecy	vs.	for non-secrecy
(j) religious	vs.	secular

language choices, similar to the way in which they would choose certain lexical and/or phraseological means belonging to different registers of a single language in order to form stylistically different utterances, simply depending on actual circumstances of speech. Language choice in the written medium, on the contrary,[5] is determined by somewhat other conditions. Its impetus is never instinctive or unintentional, but the result of prior consideration. Hence it is mainly in written or writing-based genres such as epigraphy or liturgy that practically dead languages or language varieties continue to be used, surviving the obsolescence of those languages in the realm of spoken language. In such cases, the avoidance of the linguistic means of everyday communication is highly intentional, and functions as a revealing means of expression. At any rate, whenever two or more languages are at an author's (or, as in the example of epigraphy, a patron's) disposal, language choice is meaningful and has to be interpreted with regard to both the overall implications of language contact and the specific distribution patterns of language domains within the given society.

Language change in the Egyptian-Coptic language

The current standard model concerning the evolution of the Egyptian language[6] is based on the evidence left by a dead written language: its linguistic reality as well as its historic totality are available only within the

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[5] On modal and structural differences of these two mediums of language, cf. Stubb 1980; Akinnaso 1982: 97–125; Tannen 1984; Biber 1986; Chafe and Tannen 1987; Biber 1988; Barton 1994; Jahandarie 1999; Stetter 1999; Stenström and Aijmer 2004. For the case of written vs. spoken Coptic see Richter 2006b.

[6] On Ancient Egyptian language cf. Schenkel 1990, and Loprieno 1995. Cf. the large-scale case study by Shisha-Halevy 2000. On the Coptic language, see most recently Layton 2004.

confines of a large textual corpus.[7] 'Horizontal' borders are the inevitable restrictions of any written language by standards, such as orthographic conventions, implicitly aimed at defending a given linguistic state against the diversity of ever-shifting norms – the changeability of spoken language. 'Vertical' boundaries, as it were, are formed by the spectrum of used or attested sorts of texts: far from representing the whole range of possible utterances, these genres tend to display a selection of more or less highly standardised linguistic registers closely associated with socially conditioned *Aufzeichnungs-Situationen,* that is to say, with the decorum of written language applications. If, nevertheless, language change becomes visible to us, it is not as a dynamic process – the successive shifting of single phonetic, morphological, lexical and syntactic norms driven by permanent violations of them – but rather as the linguistic diversity of attested texts from different periods which obviously mirrors shifted states of the language.

As far as the development from Old Egyptian (the written language of the Old Kingdom) down to Demotic (the written language used especially but not only in documentary texts from the mid-seventh century BCE down to Roman times) is concerned, language change does not seem to be – at least not essentially – motivated or directed by language contact.[8] By contrast, the difference between Demotic and Coptic does appear to a large extent to be the result of Greek–Egyptian language contact, which went back roughly 1,000 years[9] at the time when the Coptic writing system became standardised around 300 CE. An increasing bilingualism of Egyptian society during the time of Macedonian (332–330 BCE)[10] and Roman rule (30 BCE onwards)[11] led to the incorporation of a great many Greek loanwords of almost all grammatical and semantic categories into the Egyptian lexicon. Being almost 'invisible' in pre-Coptic stages of written Egyptian, this linguistic Hellenisation resulted in the *maintenance* of the Egyptian language, but as a strongly Hellenised idiom.[12] Emerging by the end of the third century CE, Coptic almost completely disappeared

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[7] Relevant methodological issues are addressed e.g. by Milroy 1992 and Schneider 2002. Cf. also Langslow 2002.

[8] On non-contact-induced motivations of language change, cf. Labov 1994.

[9] On the cultural background of language contact in first-millennium BCE Egypt, cf. the excellent overview by Vittmann 2003.

[10] Peremans 1964; Remondon 1964; Peremans 1983; Vergote 1984.

[11] Cf. most recently Fewster 2002, and Dieleman *Priests*: 103–10. On the use and function of Latin in Roman Egypt, cf. Rochette 1996.

[12] Cf. Reintges 2001; Reintges 2004: 2–3. Reintges would go so far as to classify Coptic as a 'mixed language', a view which does not seem completely convincing to me, cf. below, section on 'Greek loanwords in Coptic'.

about 1,000 years later. Not only its rise but its decline is deeply rooted in the contemporary language contact situation. By the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 CE, a development was starting which might have proceeded in a way similar to the former Hellenisation in its initial stage. However, it resulted in *language death*, that of Egyptian, and *language shift*, that of its speakers to Arabic. Any attempt to describe the final stage of the Egyptian language change suffers from the methodological difficulty sketched above: until the Fatimid period, when Egyptian Christians may have begun to use Arabic even within their own communities, Arabisation left only scant traces in a few types of Coptic texts. The increasing influence of Arabic on the Egyptian language, however plausible in the spoken language,[13] did not become obvious in written texts before the whole Coptic literary tradition began to be translated into Arabic from the eleventh century onwards. This advanced stage of Arabic–Coptic language contact and bilingualism marks what was but the beginning of an almost total language replacement of Coptic by Arabic.

Who spoke, and eventually wrote, Coptic?

From everything we know it must be assumed that the spoken language behind the written evidence of Coptic was usually acquired as a first language, which means as mother tongue in non-Hellenised, or non-Arabised Egyptian families, but scarcely, if at all, as a second language. Consequently, the sociolinguistic value of the native language of Egypt under Ptolemaic, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic rules seems to have been that of a minority language, with Greek (and later Arabic) as dominant language.[14] Despite Egyptian evidence for scientific writing still in Roman times[15] and the enormous resources of philosophical profundity suspected in hieroglyphic scriptures,[16] praised

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[13] Cf. Sercombe 2002: 3: 'It would seem that there is but one undisputed point about language shift: no single factor or group of factors has yet been revealed to indicate when shift might take place. On the other hand, few would now dispute that there appears to be a basic core of crucial factors that can determine language vitality or the lack of it; the foremost of these is the immediate or local context in which a language is extant, within which contact with other languages is perhaps the most significant single variable, since contact is always in evidence in a shift situation...As Fasold 1984: 240 maintains, "a virtual prerequisite for shift is bilingualism".'

[14] Cf. Thompson 1994.   [15] References are given by Osing 1998: 21.

[16] The *locus classicus* is Corpus Hermeticum 16.2, where not only the existence of Egyptian sources of wisdom (namely, the revelations of Hermes), but also the particular efficacy of the Egyptian language for appropriating them is claimed – in contrast to the weakness of Greek: 'The Greeks, O King, use empty words which produce mere displays. That is the philosophy of the Greeks: a noise of words. We do not use such a language but sounds full of power' (translated by Salaman *et al.* 2000: 74).

by a rising choir of worshippers of Egyptian cults spread all over the ancient Mediterranean (among them some highly educated intellectuals, such as Chairemon, Plutarch, Apuleius, and Iamblichus), all functional domains of any practical relevance were successively occupied by Greek, which became more and more the language of administration, the language of higher education, the language of modern sciences and philosophical thought (which even Egyptians like Chairemon preferred to use), and last but not least, the language of the economy.

Apart from its primary function as the vernacular of monolingual (or gradually bilingual, but not fully Hellenised) Egyptians, the written form of Coptic-Egyptian held out in some particular domains. Just as the latest applications of hieroglyphic writing systems had been closely connected with a distinct religious milieu – the priesthoods of Egyptian cults in rural areas, the Coptic written language too was a biased medium in terms of religious creeds from its origins shortly before 300 CE, not invented, but refined and properly put in circulation by worshippers of late antique *Buchreligionen* – Gnostics, Manichaeans and Christians (cf. sections below, 'The religious significance of Coptic' and 'Religious distribution of languages in Egypt around 300 CE'). Not only the earliest pieces of Coptic *literature* – religious texts mostly translated from Greek – but also early Coptic documentary texts bear evidence of Christian and Manichaean individuals, groups and institutions outside the urban settlements.[17]

When Egypt was conquered by 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ in 641 CE, the Arabs may have encountered a mass of monolingual Coptic speakers, a fair number of bilingualists speaking Coptic as their first language and, with more or less proficiency, Greek as their second, and even a monolingual Greek-speaking elite, now deprived of power, so that when Arabic started being spoken and written in Egypt, a basically trilingual constellation emerged. A number of functional domains formerly held by Greek, above all the administration, were partially taken over by Arabic,[18] and some textual genres belonging to the realm of private affairs by Coptic, which clearly enjoyed its widest spread during the first two centuries after the conquest: it was then that a great many private

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[17] Cf. the overview on early Coptic documentary evidence provided by Richter *Rechtssemantik*: 18–22, and recently by Choat 2006. Choat 2006, mainly dealing with private letters, also addresses the difficulty of judging the sender's or addressee's religious creeds on the mere base of epistolary phraseology which holds particularly true in the case of letters written in Greek.

[18] But Greek still remained in use in Egyptian chancelleries during the eighth century, cf. Worp 1985.

records were drawn up in Coptic, and only then did Coptic become a common medium of private expression in epigraphy.[19] But Coptic never came anywhere close to the importance of Greek or Arabic as a linguistic means for administrative, public, and representative purposes, and even its role as a language of private legal documents was temporally limited and socially restricted. Furthermore, Coptic never became a language, let alone the original language, of contemporary sciences and scholarship, with perhaps the sole exception of theology.

THE EVOLUTION OF COPTIC AS A LANGUAGE CONTACT PHENOMENON

Two conspicuous non-Egyptian features of Coptic

The term 'Coptic' refers both to a new writing system and to the corresponding rejuvenated norm of the Egyptian language. Its emergence under heavy Greek impact is obvious in the change from the traditional hieroglyph-based writing systems to the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet, augmented by six or seven letters generated from Demotic signs in order to represent distinctively Egyptian phonemes.[20] Furthermore, the evidence of language contact is to be seen in the enormous quantity of Greek loanwords in Coptic, including words of almost all semantic and grammatical categories.[21] In dealing with the rise of Coptic as a language contact phenomenon, it may be useful to trace these two obviously Greek-influenced features of Coptic: the incorporation of Greek words into the Egyptian vocabulary and the representation of Egyptian sounds by means of Greek letters.

Greek loan words in Demotic

There is indeed a small number of Greek loanwords already in pre-Coptic written Egyptian. But even Demotic,[22] the immediate predecessor of Coptic, although a variety of written Egyptian closely connected with everyday matters, does not reflect the true level of lexical borrowing that must have been attained in spoken Egyptian of the Ptolemaic and

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[19] On the age of Coptic epigraphy, cf. T. S. Richter's forthcoming entry 'Coptic Epigraphy', in *The Encyclopaedia of Early Christian Art and Architecture*, ed. Paul Corby Finney.

[20] Kasser 1991e and 1992; cf. also Kasser 1991a and Kasser 1991b.   [21] Kasser 1991d.

[22] For this stage of Egyptian see the excellent introduction by Depauw 1997; on relevant sociolinguistic issues, cf. Ray 1994. In hieroglyphic texts of that time, borrowing from Greek seems to be limited to proper names and imperial titles of Ptolemaic kings and Roman emperors; for the latter cf. Bureth 1964.

Table 17.2 *Greek loanwords in Demotic (examples from Clarysse 1987)*

εὐχάριστος	>	ʾwqrsts	*beneficent* (a royal epithet)
σωτήρ	>	swtr	*saviour* (a royal epithet)
νικηφόρος	>	nqpls	*victorious* (a royal epithet)
ἡγεμών	>	hgmn	*leader* (a title)
στρατηγός	>	sꞽtrks	*governor of a nome* (a title)
σταθμός	>	sttmꞽs	*weight* (an accounting term)
στατήρ	>	sttr	*statêr* (a coin)
σύνταξις	>	sntks	*syntaxis* (a tax)
λάγυνος	>	lkjnws	*flask* (used as measure)
πίναξ	>	pjnks	*board, plate*
χλάμυς	>	klms	*mantle, cloak*
δουξ (< lat. *dux*)	>	ṯwkse	*leader* (a title)

Roman periods. In 1987, Willy Clarysse compiled a list of Greek loan-words in Demotic texts identified thus far: a total of no more than ninety-six words over a 620-year period of time.[23] The semantic range of these words is in the main restricted to a few special types of designation like epithets of kings, titles of officials, administrative, legal and military terms, names of coins, measures and taxes (Table 17.2), while only a couple concern diverse items of daily use. Only nouns are attested, a fairly simple, unpretentious word class with regard to its internal categories and consequently easy to insert into syntactic structures, but the most important one with regard to linguistic acquisition of new things and concepts.[24] Two sources of pre-Coptic lexical borrowing from Greek were deliberately left out by Clarysse, who considered they were not typical: first, a dossier of late Demotic (late second-century CE) school exercises and private notes written on potsherds,[25] which show an astonishing laxity of linguistic decorum, permitting Greek words *written in Greek letters* to be inserted into the retrograde flow of the Demotic cursive,[26] and even attesting verb borrowing.[27] Second, a couple of late

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[23] Clarysse 1987.

[24] Cf. already Weinreich 1968: 56: 'The need to designate new things, persons, places, and concepts is, obviously, a universal cause of lexical innovation. By determining which innovations of this type are loanwords, the linguist may help to show what one language community has learned from another.'

[25] Bresciani *et al.* 1983; Menchetti 2005.

[26] Cf. Fewster 2002: 221–4; Tait 1994. The application of a mixed code with two different writing systems as sources might have been just an aim of these exercises rather than a mistake, caused by the pupils' clumsy hands or minds.

[27] The way of embedding Greek verbs is a periphrastic construction using the Egyptian verb *ir* 'to do', as is well known from the northern dialects of Coptic, and also, I understand, from many languages of the world. For a typology of verb borrowing, cf. Moravcsik 1975.

Demotic (second–third-century CE) manuscripts[28] containing medical and magical recipes with many ingredients designated by Greek names: 'In these... texts Greek words are very commonly used for all kinds of plants and products, no doubt because Greek science heavily influenced Egyptian science in matters of medicine and magic. Seen in this light, these texts form a special category that deserves special treatment.'[29] Looking at the evidence of Arabic loanwords in late Coptic texts (cf. below, 'Arabic loanwords in Coptic texts'), we shall meet quite similar patterns and exceptions.

Greek loanwords in Coptic

As mentioned above, lexical borrowing from Greek forms an important source of Coptic vocabulary.[30] However, even if the inherited Egyptian vocabulary was enlarged by Greek lexemes of almost all semantic and grammatical categories, this was realised in a way that maintained the grammatical framework of the language. Certain semantic fields, e.g. all sets of pronouns as well as the numerals, remained resistant to lexical borrowing.[31] Furthermore, if borrowability[32] applies to Greek words of almost all grammatical classes – including content morphemes (e.g. nouns and verbs) as well as function morphemes (e.g. conjunctions and particles of merely rhetorical efficacy) – it does not apply to those function morphemes working with a mechanism improper to the structure of the Egyptian language: a stop just before the 'turning point' as suggested by Carol Myers-Scotton in the Matrix Language Turnover Hypothesis

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[28] A medical papyrus from Crocodilopolis and four late Demotic collections of magical spells and receipts; for bibliographical references, cf. Depauw 1997: 109–11.

[29] Clarysse 1987: 9–10. On this sort of Greek loanwords in Demotic and their function, cf. Dieleman *Priests*: 110–20. The type has been classified linguistically as 'nomenclature' or 'terminological' vocabulary (as opposed to the 'structured' vocabulary) by Coseriu 1970: 13: 'Wichtig jedoch ist die Erkenntnis, dass innerhalb dessen, was als "Wortschatz" einer Sprache bezeichnet wird, grosse, rein "designative" Teile existieren, wo die einzig mögliche "Strukturierung" die Aufzählung ist, und andere Teile, die strukturiert sind, aber nicht vom Standpunkt der Sprache aus, nämlich dass es einen sprachlichen, strukturierten Wortschatz, und einen "nomenklatorischen" und terminologischen Wortschatz gibt.'

[30] Foerster 2002, comprises about 2,500 Greek lemmata from non-literary Coptic texts only; cf. also Kasser 1991d, and Richter 2003a: 732.

[31] Cf. Richter 2003a: 733. As for hierarchies of borrowability and domains of restricted borrowability, cf. Field 2002: 34–48; Oswalt 1975. The lack of structural borrowing in the case of Coptic has rightly been emphasised by Oréal 1999.

[32] For a general discussion of the typology of borrowability, see Hapelmath 2003; van Hout and Muysken 1994.

Table 17.3 *Matrix language turnover hypothesis according to Myers-Scotton 1998*

START: L 1: Matrix Language   L 2: Embedded Language

G
r   *Code Switching:*

a ← ← ←Content morphemes
m
m ← ← ←Function morphemes
a
t
i   *Convergence:*
c
a ← ← Structural borrowing (Grammatical calquing)
l
F
r
a
m
e
RESULT: L 1: Language Attrition   L 2: Matrix Language

Table 17.4 *First Letter of Clement 42.4 in the Achmimic dialect of Coptic (ed. Schmidt): bold set morphemes are Coptic, all others are Greek*

ⲁ-ⲩ-ⲣ̄-ⲕⲏⲣⲩⲥⲥⲉ ϭⲉ ⲕⲁⲧⲁ ⲡⲟⲗⲓⲥ ⲗⲟⲩ ⲕⲁⲧⲁ ⲭⲱⲣⲁ ⲁ-ⲩ-ⲣ̄-ⲕⲁⲧⲍⲓⲥⲧⲁ
ⲛ̄-ⲛⲟⲩ-ⲁⲡⲁⲣⲭⲏ ⲁ-ⲩ-ⲣ̄-ⲇⲟⲕⲓⲙⲁⲍⲉ ϩ̄-ⲡ-ⲡⲛ(ⲉⲩⲙ)ⲁ ⲛ̄-ⲛ̄-ⲉⲡⲓⲥⲕⲟⲡⲟⲥ
ⲙⲛ̄-ϩⲉⲛ-ⲇⲓⲁⲕⲟⲛⲟⲥ ⲛ-ⲉⲧ-ⲛⲁ-ϩ̄-ⲣ̄-ⲡⲓⲥⲧⲉⲩⲉ

'**They** preached (κηρύσσειν) **then** in (κατὰ) town (πόλις) **and** throughout (κατὰ) the land (χῶρα), **they** installed (καθιστάναι) **their** first-fruits (ἀπαρχή), **they** proved (δοκιμάζειν) **by the** (Holy) Spirit (πνεῦμα) **the** bishops (ἐπίσκοπος) **and** deacons (διάκονος), **who would** believe (πιστεύειν).'

(Table 17.3).[33] The strategy of Coptic is demonstrated in Table 17.4, an example showing an extremely high rate of Greek loanwords: all content morphemes up to prepositions are borrowed from Greek, while structure-building morphemes are Egyptian without exception.

[33] Cf. Myers-Scotton 1998. In bilingual or multilingual situations, the hypothesis claims, there is always one of two or more languages (called matrix language) which provides a speaker or a speaker community with a grammatical framework, the linguistic chassis of any utterance. The second, so-called embedded language penetrates the matrix language by code switching – the insertion of loan morphemes, realised in morphologically 'hybrid' but grammatically 'correct' utterances – and by convergence, coining patterns of the second language on morphemes of the first one. At a certain point of language attrition of the first language, the turnover starts, leading to the overtaking of the framework-building force by the second language.

Table 17.5 *Greek graffito from the great temple of Abu Simbel (SB 10018), lines 1–4, early sixth century BCE: Egyptian proper names in Greek transcription*

Line 1 ΒΑΣΙΛΕΟΣ ΕΛΘΟΝΤΟΣ Ε(ι)Σ ΕΛΕΦΑΝΤΙΝΑΝ ΨΑΜΑΤΙΧΟ(υ)
After King **Psammetich**os' *(Pȝ-s-n-mṯk)* arrival at Elephantine,

Line 2 ΤΑΥΤΑ ΕΓΡΑΨΑΝ ΤΟΙ ΣΥΝ ΨΑΜΜΑΤΙΧΟΙ ΤΟΙ ΘΕΟΚΛΟ(υ)Σ
these (words) were written by those (who were) together with **Psammetich**os
(Pȝ-s-n-mṯk) son of Theoklos

Line 4... ΑΛΟΓΛΟΣΟ(υ)Σ Δ᾿ΗΧΕ ΠΟΤΑΣΙΜΤΟ ΑΙΓΥΠΤΙΟ(υ)Σ ΔΕ AMASIS
...while **Potasimto** *(Pa-di-smȝ-tȝ.wj)* was leading the foreigners, **Amas**is *('Iḥ-ms)* however the Egyptians

Early attempts to write Egyptian in Greek letters

The first attempts to transcribe Egyptian sounds by means of Greek letters obviously arose from the need to write down untranslatable Egyptian words.[34] The earliest attested example is the famous inscription left by Greek soldiers at the great *speos* of Abu Simbel during their expansion to Nubia under Pharaoh Psammetichus II in 593 BCE (Table 17.5).[35] Unlike the Egyptian toponym *Iêb*, calqued by the word *Elephantine* (line 1), the names of four persons had to be transcribed: the name of king *Psammetichus* himself (line 1), that of an officer of the same name (line 2), and the names of the two generals *Potasimto* and *Amasis* (line 4). In fact, toponyms and even names of gods can be translated both in a linguistic and in a cultural sense,[36] but a personal name, being a 'historically individualized lexeme'[37] cannot be: in its character as a personal name, its only 'meaning' is the reference to the person who bears it, and who can be referred to only by uttering the sounds forming his or her name. Hence, a translation seems to be impossible even if the name in its character as a common noun does possess an appellative meaning.[38] On the other hand, 'common

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[34] Cf. Quaegebeur 1982; on phonological implications Satzinger 2003.

[35] Yoyotte 1953: 101–06; Bernand and Masson 1957; Eide *et al.* 1994: 286–8, no. 42 (with further bibliographical references); see most recently Vittmann 2003: 200–1.

[36] So often managed e.g. by the Greek ethnographer Herodotus, dealing with the land of Egypt and the strange customs of its inhabitants in his second book.

[37] Coseriu 1970: 3.

[38] In bilingual societies with the cultural practice of bearing double names, both parts of bilingual name couples can be formed by translational equivalents of each other, cf. Rutherford 2002: 209–10. For that practice in Greek and Roman Egypt see Quaegebeur 1992. But in principle, the condition of successfully referring to a person bearing two names is just the same, and it does not at

Table 17.6 *Words from* P.Heid. *inv.* G 414, *a Greek–Egyptian word list, third (?) century BCE (ed.* Quecke 1997), *and their later equivalents in the Sahidic (Upper Egyptian) and Fayyumic (Middle Egyptian) Coptic dialects*

Greek column	Egyptian column	Meaning	Coptic equivalents
...	ΣΒΗ	*door*	S cʙe, F cʙн
ΚΛΙΝΗ	ΚΛΑΚ	*bed*	S ϭⲗoϭ, F ϭⲗⲁϭ
ΤΑΛΑΝΤΟΝ	ΚΩΡΙ	*talent* (a weight)	Demotic *krr*; S, F ϭⲓⲛϭ ⲱⲣ
ΑΞΙΝΗ	ΚΟΛΕΒΕΙΝ	*axe*	S, F ⲕⲉⲗⲉʙⲓⲛ
ΣΙΔΗΡΟΣ	ΒΕΝΙΠΙ	*iron*	S ʙⲉⲛⲓⲡⲉ, F ʙⲉⲛⲓⲡⲓ
ΜΑΧΑΙΡΑ	ΣΗΦΙ	*sword*	S cнϥe, F cнϥⲓ
ΥΠΟΠΟΔΙΟΝ	ΤΑΞ	*seat*	S ⲧoϭ c, F ⲧⲁϭ c
ΛΗΝΟΣ	...	*trough*	
ΠΕΡΙΣΤΕΡΑ	ΚΡΑΝΠΙ	*dove*	S ϭⲣooⲙⲡe, F ϭⲣⲁⲙⲡⲓ
ΜΟΣΧΟΣ	ΑΓΟΛ(?)	*calf*	(not attested)
ΟΝΟΣ	ΕΙΩ	*donkey*	S ⲉⲓⲱ, F ⲓⲱ

lexemes', that is to say linguistic signs (*signifiants*) of distinct things or concepts (*signifiés*), are translatable in principle. Thus, a Greek transcription of Egyptian words like the names of certain tools and animals attested in *P.Heidelberg* 414 (third century BCE)[39] (Table 17.6) offers evidence of an interest in acquisition and knowledge of a foreign language. The arrangement in two columns, the first one containing the Greek *lemmata*, leads to the conclusion that this glossary was intended to enable a Greek speaker to utter certain Egyptian words.[40] A graffito from Abydos[41] (Table 17.7) shows a more pretentious 'linguistic project'. It displays not only *single* Egyptian *words* in Greek letters but several words forming short phrases, that is to say *grammatical structures*. The text forms a dating formulary of Pharaoh Hor-Wenefer (*porô Yrgonofris*, line 1), an Egyptian usurper against the fifth Ptolemy, and it is datable precisely to 202/201 BCE. A similar stage of expertise in transcribing Egyptian by means of Greek letters is attested in an inscription[42] on a stela erected by priests of Thot in honour of the *strategos* of the Hermopolite nome by the end of the second century BCE. (Table 17.8). The transcription of divine epithets of Thot obviously

all depend on the same meaning of the two names (i.e. the semantic correlate of their conceptual content in their character as common nouns).
[39] Bilabel 1938; Quecke 1997.
[40] While 'common' bilingual or semi-bilingual speakers of that time are thought to have been native speakers of Egyptian, cf. Clarysse 1993.
[41] Lacau 1934; Pestman *Recueil*: I 102–5, no. 11; II 111–12.   [42] Girgis 1965: 121.

Table 17.7 *Graffito from Abydos, lines 2–4 (ed. Pestman* Recueil*): dating formulary and royal epithets of the Upper Egyptian usurper Hor-Wenefer 202/201 BCE*

2	Lє	ΠΟΡΩ	ΥΡΓΟΝΑΦΟΡ		
	ḥ3.t-sp 5	Pr-ʾ3	Ḥr-Wn-nfr		
	Reg.-year	5 of Pharaoh	Horwenefer		
3	ΜΗΙ	ΕΣΙ	ΝΟΜ	ΟΥΣΙΡΕ	ΜΗΙΕ
	mrj-	'Is.t	nm	Wsir	mrj - 'I-
	beloved	by Isis	and	Osiris,	beloved by
4	ΜΟΥΝΛΛ	ΣΟΝΤΗΡ	ΠΝΟΤΩ		
	mn - Rʿ	nswt - nṯr.w	p3 nṯr ʿ3		
	Amun-Ra,	king of gods,	the great god		

Table 17.8 *Stela in honour of a* strategos *of the Hermopolite nome (Alexandria inv. 26.050), line 4 (ed. Girgis 1965), second century BCE: epithets of the god Thot*

... οἱ ἱερεῖς τοῦ **Θωυθ ω ω ω νοβ Ζμουν**
            Ḏḥwti ʾ3 ʾ3 ʾ3 nb Ḥmnw

'... the priests of **Thot, the great, great, great, lord of Hermopolis** ...'

aimed to decode the true, thorough pronunciation of these meaningful 'surnames' of the god, an undertaking of limited success because of the difference between Greek and Egyptian phonology. The existing set of Greek alphabetic signs was inadequate to represent certain Egyptian phonemes, like /sh/ in the word Shmoun (the Egyptian name of Hermopolis), which is poorly represented by the Greek letter zeta /z/.[43]

Old-Coptic writing systems

So-called Old-Coptic manuscripts come to us from the first three centuries CE.[44] Some of them are quite extensive and show advanced and fairly standardised methods of transcription. Although their systems differ from each other, they all use sets of signs of Egyptian origin in order to resolve the problem of differences between the Greek and the Egyptian phonemic inventories, just as proper Coptic does. However, the grammar

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[43] Coptic proper has ϣ = /š/. In later Greek transcriptions of Arabic names, the Arabic phonem /š/ was represented by τζ or σζ in Greek, as in the governor's name Qurra ibn Šarīq: Κορρα βεν/υιος Τζαρικ or Σζαρικ.

[44] See in general Satzinger 1984; Kasser 1991c; Satzinger 1991.

Table 17.9 Chester Beatty Papyrus *VII: Greek Isaiah with Egyptian glosses, mid-third century CE (eds. Kenyon and Crum 1937)*

Isa. XI:5

και εσται δικαιοσυνη εϛωσμε-	ⲉⲃⲙⲏⲗ ⲛⲧⲙⲉⲉⲓ	'being girt' 'with truth
νος την οσφυν και αληθεια ει-	[ⲉⲃⲕ.]ⲇⲇⲗⲉ	being covered'
λημενος τας πλευρας και &c.		

Isa. XVI:2–3

μη πετρα ερημος εστιν το ορος Σει	ⲥⲇⲭⲛⲓ	'take council,
ων· εση γαρ ως πετεινου ανιπτα	ⲉⲧⲃⲉ	concerning
μ]ενου [νεοσσος] αφηρημενος η θυ	ⲇⲉⲣⲙⲟ̄	Aermon,
γατ]ηρ Μ[ωαβ επι τ]αδε Αρνων πλει	ⲇⲗⲉⲏ	make
ονα βουλευου ποιε]ιτε σκεπην	ⲓⲛⲛⲟⲩ	a
πενθους αυτη δια παντος εν] μεσευβρυη	ⲥⲕⲉⲡⲏ	shelter (σκέπη)
σκοτια φευγουσιν εξ]εστρεσαν &c.	ⲓⲛⲏⲃⲓ ⲛⲉⲥ	of grief to her'

of these texts is still pre-Coptic, their vocabulary lacks Greek loanwords and their religious background is pagan. Among them one comes across such texts as an astrological horoscope,[45] magical spells[46] and a petition to the god Osiris.[47] The capacity of these Old-Coptic writing systems to display Egyptian words fully vocalised also came into play in manuscripts written in hieroglyphic scripts in order to gloss unusual words, as in late Hieratic manuscripts[48] and in Demotic magical papyri where *voces magicae* are often glossed by Old-Coptic spellings.[49]

Earliest Coptic glosses and texts

It would be hard to draw a sharp line between those Old-Coptic efforts, which were situated in the pagan milieus of Roman Egypt, and the earliest evidence of what is usually classified as Coptic, being associated with Christian milieus in a wide sense. A Greek Isaiah codex dating from the mid-third century CE[50] was glossed with Egyptian translation words and phrases (Table 17.9). They are spelled only in Greek letters, without the aid of Egyptian signs. But a Greek loanword does occur. By contrast, one early Coptic manuscript, the Old Testament book of Proverbs, *P.Bodmer* VI,[51] shows an excessive amount of Egyptian signs used

45 Cerny, Kahle and Parker 1957; Kasser 1963.
46 Crum 1942; Osing 1976; Meyer 1985; Dieleman *Priests*; Sederholm 2006.
47 Satzinger 1975; Richter 2002.   48 Cf. Osing 1998: 52–64.
49 E.g. the large manuscript edited by Griffith and Thompson 1904–9.
50 Kenyon and Crum 1937.   51 Ed. by Kasser 1960; cf. Cherix 2000 and Kasser 2003.

in addition to the Greek alphabet: instead of six or seven, the writing system of this manuscript works with no fewer than ten letters taken from Demotic, in this regard strikingly recalling the lower standardised state of Old-Coptic writing systems. But the grammar of *P.Bodmer* VI is undoubtedly Coptic, and the number of Greek loanwords holds the level of any later Coptic text.[52] At least the extensive use of Greek loanwords seems to work as a linguistic 'shibboleth' distinguishing Coptic in a narrower sense from the language of Old-Coptic as well as Demotic texts.

The religious significance of Coptic

The existence of several Coptic translations of parts of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament and of New Testament books by 300 CE marks the definite 'arrival' of Christian Holy Scriptures in the rural regions of Egypt, the peripheral area outside urban realms of Hellenistic acculturation in language and life style.[53] But not only Christian religious literature is attested in Coptic versions from that time. Gnostic manuscripts, among them thirteen codices forming part of a Gnostic library from the mid-fourth century (the so-called Nag Hammadi codices),[54] as well as a large Coptic corpus of Manichaean scriptures dating before and around 400 CE,[55] offer evidence of other late antique *Offenbarungsreligionen* making use of the new type of written Egyptian. Around the middle of the twentieth century, several scholars tried to pin down the relationship between the missionary activities of *Buchreligionen* in Egypt and the rapid spread of Coptic around 300 CE. In 1948, Louis-Théophile Lefort attempted to prove that there had been Jewish efforts to translate Septuagint books into the Coptic dialect of Upper Egypt.[56] However, his argument, based on textual criticism, has not been sustained by recent research, the more so as Egyptian Jews, to the best of our knowledge, never acquired the Egyptian language either as their mother tongue or even as a tool for recording

[52] Richter 2003a: 732.
[53] Cf. Frankfurter 1998: 248–52, 'The Holiness of Languages and the Evolution of Coptic Script', and the recent approach to the issue by Torallas Tovar 2005.
[54] Cf. recently Schenke, Bethge and Kaiser 2001–3; the extensive bibliography was collected by Scholer 1997.
[55] Schmidt and Polotsky 1933; as a recent bibliographical tool, cf. Mikkelsen 1997. The recently discovered settlement of Kellis in the Dakhla oasis provides exciting evidence of a rural Manichaean community including rich documentation of the everyday occupations, business activities and religious beliefs of early Manichaeans (the site was abandoned as early as the late fourth century CE), cf. Alcock, Funk and Gardner 1999; Alcock and Gardner 1999.
[56] Lefort 1948: 166.

written texts.[57] In 1949, immediately after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, Jean Doresse claimed that the Gnostic movement was the main protagonist in favour of the newly created written language.[58] But the linguistic varieties attested in these Gnostic texts are by no means as primitive[59] and the manuscripts not as old as Doresse presumed they were.[60] In 1950 Georg Steindorff wanted to give the palm to what he called 'orthodox Christianity'[61] – an entity however that remains difficult to define before the fifth century CE. In 1970 Siegfried Morenz brought a synthetic view to the issue: it was the synergetic efforts of all these late antique *Buchreligionen*, he argued, competing with each other in the fields of religion, but collaborating in the linguistic realm, that brought forward the new language and writing system, additionally supported by the need for fully vocalised spells in the realm of magic.[62] The model of Morenz surely comes closest to the whole spectrum of pre- and early Coptic evidence and seems to be the one that best suits the high complexity of sociolinguistic conditions and religious trends in third- to fourth-century CE Egyptian society. In 1993 this same idea was adopted by Roger Bagnall in his profound cultural history of late antique Egypt.[63] I believe, however, that the needs of everyday written communication should be emphasised a little more, at least as a catalyst accelerating the rise of the Coptic *Schrift-kultur*. As can be shown from papyrological evidence, the countdown for the decline of Egyptian writing systems actually started in the realm of everyday texts: already in the second century CE, Demotic, once the epistolographic script *par excellence*, was finally expelled by Greek from its former domain of legal, business and private correspondence and was being transformed first into a literary, and finally into a merely religious idiom.[64] From about 100 CE until the emergence of Coptic, it was nearly impossible to correspond in the Egyptian vernacular: during a period of almost 200 years, an Egyptian native speaker not conversant with Greek had to hire a translator even to write and read letters.[65]

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[57] Cf. Luisier 1998. According to a common assumption, the Septuagint Greek version of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings had ceased to be used by Jewish communities in the third century CE.

[58] Doresse 1949: 139.

[59] For the Coptic varieties in the Nag Hammadi codices, partially attesting inner-Coptic inter-dialectal translations, see Funk 1995.

[60] Papyrus pasteboards used by antique bookbinders to strengthen some of the preserved book covers of the Nag Hammadi codices contained dated documents up to the forties of the fourth century CE, cf. Barns, Browne and Shelton 1981.

[61] Steindorff 1950.   [62] Morenz 1970.   [63] Bagnall *Egypt*: 235–40.

[64] On the obsolescence of Demotic cf. Zauzich 1983; cf. also Lewis 1993; Cruz-Uribe 2002; Muhs 2005.

[65] This conclusion was drawn by Clarysse 1993.

Religious distribution of languages in Egypt around 300 CE

As soon as Coptic existed as a new written language, its use was exclusively restricted to Christian milieus in a wide sense, including also Gnostic and Manichaean communities, as already mentioned. Before the religious legislation of Emperor Theodosius the Great started to suppress pagan milieus and their public representation, several written languages with significant religious distribution were used in Egypt. Pagan Egyptians continued to use hieroglyphic writing systems. The last evidence of this is given by a memorial stela for the divine bull Buchis erected in 341 CE under the reign of Constantius II, but dated in the regnal year 59 of Diocletian, the last powerful defender of pagan cults against the rise of Christianity.[66] The last graffito at the temple of Isis at Philae written in hieroglyphs is dated (according to regnal years of Diocletian as well) to 394 CE.[67] Demotic, finally elevated to the rank of *Hiera grammata* of old Egyptian religion and magic, is still attested in four extensive magical manuals written around 300, and in a series of graffiti at Philae, the latest one[68] dated in 452 CE. The most recent Old-Coptic text copies were written by pagan contemporaries of early users of Coptic. However, the use of hieroglyphic writing systems during and after the fourth century may have been a pious and learned *Glasperlenspiel*, while the common linguistic medium of pagan communication in Egypt, both written and spoken, had long since become Greek. The latter is seen to work as a lingua franca also in religious matters. It could be used by any partisans of Greco-Roman or Egyptian pagan cults as well as by Christians of all varieties,[69] Gnostics,[70] and Manichaeans.[71]

Conclusion

To sum up: the origins of Coptic can be traced back into pre-Christian times. Greek–Egyptian cultural and linguistic contact forms the background of both the change in the writing system and the language change which particularly affected the vocabulary. A couple of extant Old-Coptic

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[66] Grenier 1983.   [67] Griffith 1937: 126–7, graffito Philae no. 436.
[68] Griffith 1937: 102–3, grafitto Philae no. 365.
[69] For the ongoing use of Greek by Copts and its importance for the liturgy of the Coptic Church, cf. Budde 2002; MacCoull 2004; and Papaconstantinou in this volume.
[70] It should be emphasised that almost all Coptic Gnostic texts from the Nag Hammadi assemblage and elsewhere are considered (and some of them can clearly be proved) to be translations from Greek originals.
[71] The most famous document is the fifth-century CE codex inv. 4780 from the Cologne papyrus collection, cf. Koenen and Römer 1985; Koenen and Römer 1988.

texts, insignificant by number but highly instructive by the fair degree of standardisation and the variety of systems which they show, provide strong evidence of a formerly broad stream of attempts to write Egyptian by means of a mixed alphabet combining Greek with Egyptian signs. By the end of the third century CE those attempts, originally developed in pagan milieus, encountered the efforts of late antique *Buchreligionen*, first of all Christianity, to transgress the linguistic borderline of a Greek-speaking audience in order to propagate their messages in the peripheral areas of Egypt. Grafting the principles of Old-Coptic onto a grammatically and lexically modern standard of the Egyptian language, the protagonists of these new religions gathered the crop of a seed which had ripened and grown for a long time in the humus of an advanced literacy embedded in a bilingual context.

WATCHING THE FINAL STAGE OF COPTIC THROUGH THE MIRROR OF WRITTEN TEXTS

What does 'final stage of Coptic' mean?

Turning from the rise of the Coptic language to its decline, there is first the need to define what should be understood by 'the final stage of Coptic'. It implies the last stage of Coptic as a living language on a stable demographic base. So-called 'last speaker' phenomena[72] like an eighty-year-old dumb man who was introduced to Jean Michel Vansleb in 1673 as allegedly having been able to speak Coptic,[73] as well as a supposed semi-speaker community in an Upper Egyptian village still discovered in the thirties of the twentieth century,[74] hence remain out of consideration here since at that time the Coptic language had contracted irreversibly both demographically and structurally. But even apart from such phenomena, the question of when the final stage of Coptic is to be fixed still remains difficult and disputed.[75]

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[72] On that cf. the classic investigations by Dorian 1981; Dorian 1999; and cf. the overview on speaker typology given by Tsunoda 2005: 118–20.

[73] Vansleb 1677: 363.   [74] Vycichl 1936; doubts have been made by Peust 1999: 31.

[75] Sometimes the administrative reform under the rule of 'Abd al-Malik, the fifth Umayyad caliph, is regarded as an attempt to push, or even a reply to the advanced, Arabization of Egypt, cf. e.g. Gellens 1991: 937a–b: 'Arabization is, in fact, of crucial importance for the Islamization of Egypt, especially in contrast to, for example, Iran...In this regard, the Arabization of the administration and coinage during the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) may be seen, in the Egyptian case at least, as a harbinger of conversion. 'Abd al-Malik's decrees were a response, in part, to the increasing Arabization of the Copts, a process in no small way due to the gradual arrival of Arab tribesmen in areas once wholly Coptic and Christian.' This assumption may be true of Syria, although translations of Syriac literature into Arabic trace back to the early ninth century. In Egypt, however, the preference for Arabic in administrative writing mainly affected the

Arabic texts written by Christian authors

A significant date is provided by the emergence of Arabic texts written by Christian authors. The earliest Egyptian author known to have composed Christian theological treatises in Arabic is Sâwîrus ibn al-Muqaffa', who lived in the tenth century CE.[76] Recent research, however, no longer considers his language choice to be a simple response to the fact that by that time his Christian audience was made up mainly of Arabic speakers.[77] Rather, it is seen as his attempt to introduce Christian arguments into the theological discourse of Arabic-speaking Muslim theologians. If it was truly in this context that Coptic proved dysfunctional – namely as an intellectual tool appropriate for discussing minute theological issues and putting forward Christian apologetics – this would make a difference of some importance for estimating the actual stage of language obsolescence. But only two or three generations later, by the mid-eleventh century CE, the great process of 'translating the tradition'[78] began its initial stage, starting with some groping, provisional Arabic translations of single biblical and liturgical books and a few selected canonical and hagiographical texts, but already completed around 1300 CE with a complete revised Arabic Bible and Arabic versions of large parts of the dogmatic, patristic and canonical heritage, commentaries on biblical books, the festal calendar (the so-called Synaxarion) and the history of the patriarchs carried on in later times. From the twelfth century CE biblical manuscripts are often bilingual, combining a Coptic with an Arabic version.[79] The arrangement of two parallel text versions on one page usually shows a broad and elaborate Coptic column, while the Arabic column is kept as small as possible, looking like an unimportant marginal note. Captions of illuminations however were mostly produced in Arabic only. The thirteenth century was the time of an emerging Coptic philology, materialising in two types of tools:[80] Coptic–Arabic dictionaries (so-called *salâlim*)[81] and Coptic grammars written in Arabic (so-called

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chancelleries' routine, and even there, as can be shown from papyrological evidence, Greek (and Coptic) continued to be used.

[76] Precisely 905–87 CE, cf. Griffith 1996.

[77] Den Heijer 1999. But cf. e.g. Cannuyer 1996: 112: 'À partir du dixième siècle, la majorité des Chrétiens d'Égypte ne comprenant déjà plus le copte, leurs lettres vont se mettre à écrire en arabe.'

[78] The title of the pioneering study by Rubenson 1996; cf. Sidarus 2002.

[79] One of the earliest bilingual manuscripts is the Gospel of John in the Bodleian Library, Ms. Huntington 17 from the year 1173/4 CE.

[80] Cf. the introduction in Bauer 1972; Sidarus 1977: 27b–28a; Müller 1990.

[81] Cf. Munier 1930; Vycichl 1991b; Sidarus 1998; Sidarus 2000; Khouzam 2002.

muqaddimât).[82] The earliest compositions of such works are attributed to John Sammanûdi who worked around 1235 CE; the last contributions are due to Athanasius of Qûs, who flourished in the fourteenth century.[83]

The completion of the translation of Christian traditional literature into Arabic *grosso modo* before 1300 and the simultaneous emergence of tools for teaching and learning Coptic as a second language provide us with an approximate date for the advanced contraction of Coptic language, at least among educated Copts.

Coptic–Arabic 'Karshouni'

The evidence of an advanced stage of language loss comes also from thirteenth-century Coptic–Arabic writing experiments.[84] A manuscript containing a collection of *apophthegmata* bears witness to Coptic 'Karshouni' – the practice of writing Arabic with Coptic alphabetic signs.[85] This kind of 'hybrid' writing might have been appropriate for somebody accustomed to speaking Arabic, who nevertheless wanted (and was still able) to read and write Coptic – be it because of their education or, more likely, because of the higher prestige of the Coptic script in certain fields of Christian religious practice. On the other hand, a collection of hymns in honour of the Virgin Theotokos Mary was written in the Coptic dialect of Lower Egypt, but with Arabic letters.[86] Such an aid must have been indispensable for somebody wanting to utter Coptic words if they were educated in Arabic only.

Last texts composed in Coptic language

Biblical and liturgical manuscripts were copied – at least in the Lower Egyptian dialect – still long after the death of Coptic. However, there are some literary and semi-literary text compositions that provide us with more reliable information about how long Coptic texts could still be *produced*, not only copied and read. The most long-lived genres of Coptic texts, composed until the thirteenth and even fourteenth century in the

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[82] Cf. Bauer 1972; Vycichl 1991a; Sidarus 2001.   [83] Cf. Müller 1990: 277–8.

[84] On this phenomenon cf. generally Worrell 1934: 134–43; Satzinger 1972; and Blau 1988.

[85] A minor portion was published by Casanova 1901, the main part by Sobhy 1926; a gleaning by Burmester 1965–6. See also the linguistic studies by Blau 1988: 145–94 and Satzinger 1972.

[86] Galtier 1906. Unfortunately, there is no photograph of this manuscript, which itself is missing, so it seems impossible to give a reliable dating. For our argument here the text would be relevant only if its dating is not too long after the thirteenth century.

Upper Egyptian dialect, are scribal colophons, inscriptions and graffiti. These texts are characterised by brevity and highly standardised formulas, requiring a minimum of variable details. Moreover, in a sense they have no need for a real reader (cf. above, 'Functional domains of languages and the difference between spoken and written languages'). Their longevity strongly recalls the latest hieroglyphic and Demotic text compositions likewise attested in the medium of epigraphy (cf. above, 'Religious distribution of languages in Egypt around 300 CE').[87] However there are still examples of more extensive text compositions from that late period of Coptic. One of them, the Martyrdom of John of Phanijoit, a text most likely composed in Bohairic (the Coptic dialect of Lower Egypt), is dated to 1211 CE, the year of its protagonist's death.[88] An even more amazing phenomenon is the early fourteenth-century poem called 'Triadon' with reference to the Arabic rhyme pattern *muthallath* which it follows.[89] Its language is an intentionally 'classical' if actually archaistic and artificial Sahidic Coptic. There are but few pieces of evidence of a limited 'active' use of written Coptic even centuries later, but they cannot be considered applications of a living language.[90] If the end of the final stage of language loss of Coptic is thus roughly fixed around 1300 CE, the next question to be raised is: when did the language obsolescence start? Here Coptic documentary evidence can be helpful. Non-literary texts prove particularly important in indicating the steady progress of language change for two reasons: first, in principle, they are usually written in a language of less restricted orthography, hence assimilating current norms of the spoken language.[91] Second, the step-by-step abandonment of Coptic in non-literary types of texts provides us with significant benchmarks in a chronology and also a 'topography' of language obsolescence: the pragmatic context of these texts is so closely connected with everyday matters that language choice in these fields might suffer a strong impact from the spoken language used in daily communication. In the realm of legal affairs, a decisive break occurs as early as the mid-ninth century CE.[92] Coptic legal documents written after 800 CE

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[87] Cf. Zauzich 1983.

[88] This important text has enjoyed increasing attention in recent years and has been re-edited and commented on now by Zaborowski 2005; cf. Amélineau 1887; Takla 1999; MacCoull 2000.

[89] Von Lemm 1903b; Nagel 1983; MacCoull 1991; Helderman 1997; Helderman 2002.

[90] E.g. a Bohairic inscription at the monastery of Mâr Bolos at the Red Sea dating from year 1429 of the Martyrs = 1713 CE, ed. Wreszinski 1902; *P.Ryl.Copt.* 461, a Bohairic letter written by a bishop of Abutig near Assiut, dating from around 1800 CE.

[91] Cf. Maynor 1988; Meurman-Solin 1999; Schneider 2002.

[92] Cf. Richter *Rechtssemantik*: 154–65; Richter 2001.

are very rare. A more elaborate Coptic legal language is attested for the last time in a monastic archive of sale documents dating from 833 to 850 CE.[93] The few Coptic legal texts issued later, from the mid-ninth until the mid-eleventh century,[94] show a laconic brevity and poverty in clauses, surely to be considered a loss of function.[95] Instead, from about 900 CE even Coptic speakers seem to have used more and more Arabic legal records, like the famous tenth-century marriage contracts involving explicitly Christian parties that were published by Nabia Abbott in 1941.[96] And even *Coptic* records of this time reveal the common practice of using Arabic in legal and business affairs, since their terminology is patterned according to words and phrases of contemporary Arabic legal documents.[97] Documentary texts also bear evidence for a period of transition, indicated by the coexistence of different states of language obsolescence under nearly identical circumstances. Within the same region (the Middle Egyptian Fayyum oasis), at the same time (mid-eleventh century), a monastery's agricultural activities were recorded in a paper account book (BL Or. 13885) written in late Fayyumic Coptic, admittedly larded with Arabic loanwords,[98] while a recently discovered assemblage of Arabic papers from the Fayyumic monastery of Deir el-Naqlûn bears witness to the use of Arabic for the very same purpose.[99]

[93] Krause 1958; MacCoull 1994.

[94] The latest Coptic legal documents, belonging to the so-called Teshlot archive, are dated from 1022 to 1063, cf. Richter 2003b. Two marriage contracts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries do not provide testimony of a continuing development of Coptic legal language until that time; as their style is archaising and literary, they presumably were drawn up merely for solemnity, cf. Richter *Rechtssemantik*: 164–5. Also late Coptic letters, lists and accounts stop occurring after the eleventh century.

[95] Richter *Rechtssemantik*: 160; cf. Crystal 2000: 83: 'each loss of a domain . . . is a loss of vocabulary, discourse pattern, and stylistic range'.

[96] Abbot 1941. To the best of my knowledge, the papyrological evidence of Christians acting as drafters and addressees of Arabic documents has not been studied hitherto. But cf. Reinhardt 1897; Anawati and Jomier 1954; Frantz-Murphy 1981: 221–3; Frantz-Murphy 1993; and Björnesjö 1996. Diem 2004: 10: 'Bekanntlich unterlagen im Islam der Vormoderne Christen und Juden ihrer eigenen Gerichtsbarkeit, was auch die Beurkundung von Immobilienverkäufen einschloß. Dennoch sind Beurkundungen von Immobilientransaktionen zwischen Christen bzw. zwischen Juden durch muslimische Richter keineswegs eine Seltenheit.'

[97] Cf. e.g. Richter 2003b.

[98] I owe all my knowledge of this still unpublished document from the former Michaélidès collection to the late Sarah Clackson; her transcription forms the base of an edition to be published by Georg Schmelz (Mannheim/Heidelberg) and myself. The date of the text can be proved by prosopographic connections discovered by Lennart Sundelin (personal communication). According to information given by Grohmann 1954: 251, addendum to p. 158, l. 17, the paper account book BL Or. 13885 would originate from Deir el-Naqlûn too, and could be dated to 1039 CE, but the reasons for these assumptions remain unclear.

[99] This text was dealt with by Christian Gaubert at the Third Conference of the International Society for Arabic Papyrology, 'Documents in the Early Islamic World', at Alexandria, 23–6 March 2006, in his workshop 'Compatibilité au monastère de Naqlun'.

Arabic loanwords in Coptic texts

As a matter of course, the occurrence of lexical and grammatical borrowing forms an important criterion for estimating the degree of penetration of one language by another. However, to observe Coptic–Arabic language contact through the mirror of linguistic interference phenomena is simply to 'see through a glass darkly'. The language level maintained by all kinds of Coptic literary texts entirely denies the encounter with the Arabic language – lexical borrowings from Arabic do not occur at all. This is true of the proper stock of Holy Scriptures, copied by well-trained scribes with all due care, where an impact of current language change is not to be expected. But it is also true of the vast number of literary texts transmitted in a much more open tradition, like narratives of saints and martyrs, homilies, theological treatises and canonical literature. They are all subject to a linguistic decorum which demanded the denial of phonetic, grammatical and lexical innovations of language change.[100] Even some extant pieces of so-called 'Coptic folk literature'[101] – ninth- and tenth-century songs, poems and narratives outside traditional literary patterns and styles – do not show any lexical or higher level influence of Arabic, even though their language comes close to the language of non-literary texts, that is, to the vernacular. In fact, there are only two kinds of Coptic texts containing any Arabic loanwords at all: first, scientific (technical or educational) writings, and, secondly, documentary texts. At present, there is no glossary of these words, but a glossary *in statu nascendi* comprises about 400 Arabic *lemmata* from *c.* 100 Coptic texts dating from the eighth to the twelfth centuries.[102]

The vast number of Arabic loanwords comes from the first group, nearly a score of ninth- to eleventh-century manuscripts, among which we find a couple of alchemical treatises,[103] a manual providing arithmetical and

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[100] To the best of my knowledge, the only exception from this rule is the latest hagiographical composition in Coptic language, the above-mentioned late Bohairic Martyrdom of John of Panijôit from 1211 CE (cf. above, n. 88), which contains a handful of Arabic terms.

[101] Erman 1897; Junker 1910–11.

[102] Cf. Richter 2006. As far as I know, any higher level borrowings from Arabic have not been observed in Coptic texts until now. However, the issue is completely unresearched, and was properly raised for the first time, I believe, by Zaborowski 2005: 133–5.

[103] Stern 1885: 102–19 = Crum 1905: 175, no. 374 and three unpublished texts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Ms. copt. a.1, 2 and 3), of which I am about to prepare an edition, cf. my first report: 'The Master Spoke: "Take One of *the Sun* and One Measure of *Almulgam*": Hitherto Unnoticed Coptic Papyrological Evidence for Early Arabic Alchemy', paper presented at the Third Conference of the International Society for Arabic Papyrology, 'Documents in the Early Islamic World', at Alexandria, 23–6 March 2006.

Table 17.10 *Arabic loanwords in Coptic scientific manuscripts*

Astronomical terms

ⲁⲅⲓ†	(*al-ğady*)	*Capricorn*
ⲁⲥⲥⲁⲣⲁⲧⲁⲁⲛ	(*al-saraṭān*)	*Cancer*
ⲁⲥⲥⲟⲟⲩⲍⲣⲉ	(*al-zuhara*)	*Venus*
ⲥⲟⲩⲍⲁⲁⲗ	(*zuḥal*)	*Saturn*

Mathematical terms

(ⲁⲗ)ⲡⲉⲉⲡ	(*al-bāb*)	*method* (lit.: *door*)
ⲁⲗⲭⲟⲩⲥⲱⲣ	(*al-kusūr*)	*fraction*

Plants, spices

ⲁⲗⲃⲟⲩⲗⲃⲟⲩⲗ	(*al-fulful*)	*pepper*
ⲁⲗⲭⲁⲃⲱⲱⲣ	(*al-kāfūr*)	*camphor*
ⲁⲗⲭⲁⲁⲙⲙⲟⲩⲛ	(*al-kammūn*)	*cumin*
ⲁⲥⲥⲓⲛⲅ̄ⲏⲏⲗ	(*al-zinğabīl*)	*ginger*

Minerals & chemicals

ⲁⲗⲙⲟⲩⲙⲓⲉ	(*al-mūmiyā*)	*asphalt*
ⲁⲗⲭⲓⲡⲣⲓⲧ	(*al-kibrīt*)	*sulphur*
ⲁⲛⲛⲟⲩⲱⲁⲁⲧⲉⲣ	(*al-nūšādir*)	*sal-ammoniac*
ⲁⲥⲥⲉⲣⲛⲏⲍ	(*al-zirnīḥ*)	*arsenic*
ⲁⲥⲥⲓⲡⲁⲕ	(*al-zībaq*)	*quicksilver*

Diseases

ⲁⲗⲍⲱⲙⲙⲉ	(*al-ḥummaya*)	*fever*
ⲁⲛⲛⲓⲕ.ⲣⲏⲥ	(*al-niqris*)	*gout, arthritis*

metrological problems,[104] a page on astronomical constellations[105] and collections of magical[106] and medical[107] recipes. In these texts we meet Arabic designations of planets and constellations, plants and spices, minerals and chemicals, mathematical terms and names of diseases (cf. examples in Table 17.10). Their linguistic significance is hard to estimate, but there is some reason to doubt the conclusion drawn by Werner Vycichl: 'The spoken language was full of Arabic words, as one can see from a medical papyrus or a treatise on alchemy,'[108] since the vast bulk of the Arabic words occurring in these texts are technical terms that are far from vernacular vocabulary. Rather, they belong to the above-mentioned taxonomic type of vocabulary

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[104] Drescher 1948–9.   [105] Bouriant 1904; von Lemm 1903a 34–6.
[106] In particular, the manuscript edited by Chassinat 1955.
[107] In particular, the large manuscript edited by Chassinat 1921.   [108] Vycichl 1991c.

Table 17.11 *Arabic loanwords in Coptic documentary texts I: technical terms*

Taxation

ⲇⲁⲍⲁⲣⲁϭⲓ	*(al-ḫarāǧī)*	taxation year
ⲇⲁⲭⲇⲁⲏⲃ	*(al-ḫālīfa)*	revenue officer

Accounting terms

ⲇⲁⲃⲉⲓⲧ	*(al-fāʾida)*	profit
ⲇⲁⲍⲁⲥⲉⲁ	*(al-ḥaṣāʾil)*	earnings
ⲇⲁϭⲟⲩⲙⲉ	*(al-ǧummāʿ)*	amount
ⲛⲁⲃⲁⲕⲁ	*(nafaqa)*	expenses

Weights, measures and currency

ⲇⲁⲙⲁⲧⲕⲁⲗ	*(al-miṯqāl)*	(weight of one dînâr)
ⲇⲡⲣⲱⲡⲁ	*(al-rubʿ)*	quarter (a measure)
ⲁⲉⲣⲍⲁⲙ	*(dirham)*	dirham
ⲧⲁⲛⲉⲕ	*(dānaq)*	$^{1}/_{6}$ dirham

Officials, epithets and titles

ⲇⲁⲕⲁⲉⲓⲧ	*(al-qāʾid)*	commander
ⲇⲁⲭⲁⲩⲁⲉ	*(al-kauly)*	overseer
ⲇⲁⲭⲉⲑⲓⲡ	*(al-kātib)*	scribe
ⲁⲙⲓⲣⲁ	*(amîr)*	commander

Legal terms

ⲇⲁⲙⲓⲣⲉⲧ	*(al-mīrāṯ)*	heritage
ⲇⲁⲍⲁⲧ	*(al-ḥadd)*	border (of an estate)
ⲇⲁⲕⲁⲡⲉⲁⲉ	*(al-qabāla)*	tenancy
ⲁⲩⲛ	*(dayn)*	debt of money

with an internal structure of its own and special rules of borrowability (cf. above, 'Greek loanwords in Demotic'). To be sure, I do not doubt that the spoken language had been enriched by a considerable number of Arabic words at this time. But even taking this for granted, I doubt those words would have been the Arabic words attested in this kind of Coptic texts.

The second group of texts with Arabic loanwords comprises about eighty documents including letters, lists, accounts and legal records of the eighth to twelfth centuries CE.[109] Here we meet Arabic book-keeping terms, official titles, terms for taxes, weights and measures, names of coins and currencies and legal terms (see examples in Table 17.11), as well as

[109] Cf. Richter 2004.

Table 17.12 *Arabic loanwords in Coptic documentary texts II: diverse items*

Containers and vessels		
ⲁⲗⲕⲁⲣⲟⲟⲣⲉ	(*al-qārūra*)	*flask*
ⲁⲗⲕⲁⲧⲁⳅ	(*al-qadaḥ*)	*cup*
ⲁⲗⲡⲓⲕ	(*al-ʾibrīq*)	*can*
ⲁⲗⲭⲏⲣⲛⲓⲧⲧ	(*al-karnīb*)	*bowl*
ⲁⲗⲭⲟⲩⳅ	(*al-kūz*)	*jug*

Textiles and clothes		
ⲁⲗⲙⲁⳅⲁⲃⲉ	(*al-milḥafa*)	*wrap*
ⲁⲗⲙⲓⳃⲁⲣ	(*al-miʿ ǧar*)	*cap*
ⲁⲗⲭⲁⳅ	(*al-ḥazz*)	*silk fabric*
ⲁⲗⲭⲓⲙⲁⲣ	(*al-ḥimār*)	*veil*
ⲁⲗⳅⲁⲣⲏⲣⲉ	(*al-ḥarīra*)	*silk*
ⲁⲧ†ⲡⲁⳃ	(*al-dībāq*)	*brocade*
ⲁⲧⲧⲓⲣⲁⳅ	(*al-ṭirāz*)	*embroidery*
ⲙⲁⲛⲑⲏⲗⲉ	(*mandīl*)	*towel*

designations of diverse things, especially vessels, textiles and clothes (see examples in Table 17.12). Probably also these words might not match an average word selection from contemporary vernacular vocabulary. Obviously most of them were terminological as well, i.e. they could not be translated. And even words designating household articles were probably not borrowed in order to express simple concepts like flask, cup, can, bowl, jug, etc. but might have implied some distinct semantic values, like 'trademarks' referring to specific qualities of the respective articles 'flask, cup', etc. If most Arabic words attested in written Coptic had terminological meanings untranslatable in any way, their occurrence does not bear witness to a mixed language but rather has to do with certain matters of discourse which were closely connected with concepts and things that could be referred to only – or at least in the most suitable way – by Arabic terms. That means, even in the few Coptic texts containing Arabic loanwords, that the long-standing language contact between Coptic and Arabic and the beginning of the language shift left only scant traces. A comparison with pre-Coptic written Egyptian should not be ignored here. Just as the Hellenisation of the Egyptian language had been rejected by almost all kinds of hieroglyphic texts and stylistic registers, with the exception of a few special terms occurring mainly in Demotic documentary texts and in newly composed magical and medical texts when forced by semantic needs, Coptic literary registers rejected Arabic loanwords

and the few non- and semi-literary registers allowed only a few Arabic terms. We find the same grammatical class, the noun, representing the vast amount of instances, and almost the same semantic fields being borrowed from: titles, metrology, numismatics, taxes, etc. in the documents, nomenclature vocabulary in the scientific texts. But why did the contact of the Egyptian language with Greek lead to stable bilingualism and *maintenance* of the Egyptian vernacular, whereas the contact with Arabic resulted in the *death* of the Egyptian vernacular and its *replacement* by Arabic? At the moment, the reasons are largely unknown. Going on to deal with this issue, I start by quoting contemporary Christian witnesses that tell us something – although in somewhat different ways – about the process of obsolescence of the Coptic language in early medieval Egypt.

OBSOLESCENCE AND LOSS OF THE COPTIC LANGUAGE: CONTEMPORARY TESTIMONIES

A few contemporary considerations on the language-loss of Coptic have come down to us, each of them putting emphasis on different aspects and maintaining different attitudes towards it.[110]

First witness: Pseudo-Samuel of Qalamûn, apocalyptic

An eleventh(?)-century Arabic(!) apocalyptic work using the pseudonym of the seventh-century monk Samuel of Qalamûn claimed against his contemporaries:[111]

They are abandoning their beautiful Coptic language, in which the Holy Spirit has spoken many times through the mouths of the holy spiritual fathers, and they are teaching their children from infancy to speak the language of the Arabs... Even the priests and monks – they as well – dare to speak in Arabic... and that within the sanctuary!... O my beloved children, what shall I say in these times, when readers in the Church do not understand what they are reading, or what they are saying, because they have forgotten their language? These truly are miserable people, deserving of being wept over, because they have forgotten their language and speak the language of the *hijra*... Many books of the Church shall fall into disuse, because there shall not remain among [the Christians] anyone who is concerned with [these] books, because their hearts shall incline to the Arabic books... When Christians shall dare to speak the language of the *hijra* right

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[110] Similar testimonies (like the famous lamentations of Alvarus of Cordoba) are known from medieval Spain, raising the same difficulties of interpretation, cf. Gallego 2003; Wasserstein 1991. For a contemporary example, cf. Jocks 1998.

[111] Ziadeh 1915–17; cf. Troupeau 1993; Iskander 1998; van Lent 1998; van Lent 1999; Zaborowski 2003.

at the altar they are blaspheming against the Holy Spirit and the Trinity: seven times Woe to them![112]

It is a most remarkable feature of this testimony that Coptic is proclaimed here to be a holy language, hallowed by the Holy Spirit's utterances through the medium of Coptic-speaking saints and thus honoured to be the only authentic language of Christianity – at least in Egypt. This opinion is in striking contrast with the common Christian attitude held by missionaries in ancient and modern times (and also by Pseudo-Samuel's Egyptian contemporaries, cf. below) towards the translation of the Scriptures into the vernaculars. In fact it was due to this very attitude that the Egyptian language itself, the former idiom of those most disdained worshippers of animals,[113] had once become a Christian language. In fact, our zealot grumbling about the 'language of the *hijra*' seems to be influenced by the Islamic view on this issue: the claim of an essential connection between the true content and the authentic language of revelation which it is not possible to dissolve without a considerable loss of truth and efficacy.

Second witness: Pseudo-Sâwîrus ibn al-Muqaffa', theologian

In the foreword of an eleventh-century Arabic treatise entitled 'The Book of Illumination' (*Kitab al-Idah*), wrongly attributed to Sâwîrus ibn al-Muqaffa',[114] the author points to the increasing difficulty of speaking about the *theologoumenon* of the divine trinity:

I tell you that the reason for the concealment of this mystery from the believers at this time is their mingling with the *hunafā'* [i.e. the Muslims], and the disappearance of their language, through which they know the truth of their religion. It has come to be the case that they do not hear any mention of 'the Son of God' except in a metaphorical sense. Instead, most of what they hear is that God is *fard* [unique], *samad* [eternal], and the rest of the language that those of the *hunafā'* use. The believers have become accustomed to this, and have been raised with it, so that the mention of 'the Son of God' has come to be difficult for them; they do not know any interpretation or meaning for it.[115]

Unlike the apocalyptic approach, the claim of Coptic here is that it qualifies as a Christian language not by virtue of an ontological relationship between language and religion, but because of its inventory of

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[112] Translation according to Swanson 1998: 6.
[113] About Christian polemics against Ancient Egyptian religions, see Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1853–2000; 2337–57
[114] Cf. Swanson 1998: 8, n. 7: 'a Copt in (I believe) the 11th century'.
[115] Translation according to Swanson 1998: 8–9.

suitable means of expression that are simply missing in Arabic. This view of Coptic as a 'language for special purposes', fit for uttering genuine Christian thought due to apt words etc., is not so unlike current ideas of LSP-linguistics.[116] If the protagonists of the great eleventh- to thirteenth-century translation process were anathematised by Pseudo-Samuel's 'Sevenfold Woe!', their work should have been welcomed and justified by Pseudo-Sâwîrus, since their very genius was precisely to make the Arabic language fit for expressing Christian theological thought by creating and coining Arabic Christian terms.

Third witness: Athanasius of Qûs, language teacher

In the fourteenth century, Athanasius of Qûs, the author of *Qilādat al-taḥrīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr* 'Necklace of Writing and Art of Translation', already looks back at the shift from Coptic to Arabic. In his presentation, the loss of Coptic was a kind of *malheur* within the totality of the divine language economy. The series of events, which he put into a narrative in order to justify his own teaching efforts, starts with the creation of man (Gen. 2). God, he says, had given Adam the Syriac (i.e. the Hebrew) language to speak. When the tower of Babel, planned by seventy-two philosophers, had been destroyed, there took place the well-known separation of languages (Gen. 11).[117] Each of the twenty-five descendants of Sem, of the thirty-two descendants of Ham and of the fifteen descendants of Japhet was given his own language – a total of seventy-two (according to the account of peoples in Gen. 10), including only twenty written languages (Table 17.13). Thanks to God's revelation in Christ, this separation of peoples by their different languages could be overcome at Pentecost (Acts 20). Athanasius calls this crucial event of the language history 'the re-collection of the pearls of the necklace'. But this miraculous readjustment was realised not simply by reduction and reunion of the different languages into one universal language (i.e. on the *signifiant* level), but, much more ingeniously,[118] by preaching the *same gospel* in *every language* (thus, on the *signifié* level as it were). Later on, Athanasius writes, the Egyptians 'have forgotten their language … and it is very difficult for them to learn it'.[119]

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[116] As a general introduction to the field of Languages for Special Purposes (LSP), see Hoffmann 2004.

[117] About linguistic interpretations of Gen. 11 cf. e.g. the *opus magnum* by Borst 1957–63; Eco 1997: 21–37.

[118] Cf. Eco 1997: 28.   [119] Bauer 1972: 303–6; cf. Müller 1990.

Table 17.13 *Distribution of languages after the fall of the Tower of Babel according to Athanasius of Qûs (ed. Bauer 1972)*

	Descendants of Sem	*Descendants of Ham*	*Descendants of Japhet*
Spoken languages	25	32	15
Written languages	8	6	6
	• Syriac	• Coptic	• Greek
	• Hebrew	• Abyssinian	• Roman
	• Arabic	• Nubian	• Frankish
	• '*agami*	• Cilician	• Armenian
	• *farisi*	• Palestinian	• *gurgani*
	• Chaldaic	• *qwbly*	• Andalusi
	• Indian		
	• Chinese		

Conclusion: What is actually said?

These testimonies and some others likewise authenticated by the aura of their contemporary character have sometimes been interpreted as reliable, thorough depictions of the death of Coptic, a conclusion that is convincing only at first glance. Before drawing any conclusion, it seems important to consider what these statements bear witness to – and what not. Seen from a sociolinguistic point of view, they speak in categories that are much too imprecise and, what is even more vexing, they are silent about almost all data necessary for an appropriate description. When, for example, Athanasius says that 'the Egyptians' had forgotten 'their language' – who were these 'Egyptians' and what does 'their language' mean? Since it is simply impossible to imagine that *all* speakers of Coptic had *completely* abandoned their first language at the *same* time *all over* Egypt, we are missing crucial information about language choice and code switching in different socially marked situations, which speakers used to encounter in the twilight of language decline.[120] Just as in recent cases, investigated in empirical linguistic studies,[121] so in Egypt too, language obsolescence and language shift may have affected different domains and speaker types in different ways and at different speeds, e.g. written and spoken language, different speech situations, speakers belonging to

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[120] From the abundant literature, cf. e.g. Fishman 1965; Fishman 1972; Appel and Muysken 1987; Thomason and Kaufman 1988; Muysken 2000; Field 2002.

[121] Cf. e.g. Dorian 1981.

different social groups, genders, ages, regions[122] or types of settlements.[123] Yet there is a most conspicuous common feature among these testimonies, whether it is pointed out with a threat or merely with a gesture of pity: the obsolescence of Coptic is always charged to the Coptic speakers' own account; the Arabs are never accused of having a hand in it. Obviously, there was the common experience or overwhelming impression that Coptic speakers were willing to learn and to use Arabic on their own initiative.[124] In fact, this assumption would match the result of all studies that the decision between language maintenance and language shift essentially depends on the speakers' attitude towards their first language,[125] in other words, that the death of a language is much more often brought about by *suicide*, as it were, than by *murder*.[126]

THE LANGUAGE DEATH OF COPTIC: SOME RECENT APPROACHES

The phenomena of obsolescence and death of Coptic are matters of concern to both Arabic and Coptic studies, and research on them has been done by both Arabists and Coptologists. So far we have but few studies *in medias res*.[127] I want to sketch here a couple of the more elaborate approaches.

In his pioneering study mentioned earlier, 'Translating the Tradition: Some Remarks on the Arabisation of the Patristic Heritage in Egypt', Samuel Rubenson described the self-interpretation of Coptic tradition in Arabic and its transmission across the border of language death as a

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[122] Even the Apocalypse of Ps.-Samuel admitted a more friendly language attitude of Upper Egyptian Coptic speakers towards their language.

[123] Cf. the overview on speaker classification by Tsunoda 2005: 117–33.

[124] Of course, already soon after the conquest of Egypt, the knowledge of Arabic might have held a 'door-keeper' position admitting only Arabic speakers to certain offices and institutions, but even this would not have hindered the use and maintenance of Coptic, e.g., within private domains.

[125] Grenoble and Whaley 1998b: 22–54, esp. 22; Bradley 2001; Tsunoda 2005: 59–62.

[126] Cf. Denison 1972; Campbell and Muntzel 1989; Aitchison 1993: 198–209; Crystal 2000: 76–88. The term and concept of language suicide have been challenged by Tsunoda 2005: 74–5: 'This term is misleading, the people in question do not really have choices in this regard. Also, this term has an unfair connotation of blaming the victim.' But this seems to be an inappropriate generalisation of colonial structures applying repressive language policies (dominant language pressure 'top-down', as called by Crystal: 'Pressure that can come from political, social, or economic sources...in the form of incentives, recommendations, or laws introduced by a government') and an underestimation of what Crystal called dominant language pressure 'bottom-up', working through 'fashionable trends or peer group pressures from within the society' (Crystal 2000: 78). The difference between these two ways resembles that of extortion vs. bribery, and the denunciation of languages, such as Arabic and English, as 'killer languages' is none the less unfair; cf. Versteegh 2001 and Crystal 2004.

[127] From the Arabists' side, cf. Anawati 1975; Garcin 1987; Décobert 1992; Rubenson 1996; from the Coptologists' side, cf. Simon 1936; MacCoull 1985; MacCoull 1989; Müller 1990; Helderman 1997 and Horn 1999.

most successful manoeuvre and a crucial step in maintaining cultural identity: 'The change of language for an entire culture and its heritage is an extremely important process and in this case a rather fast one, and it deserves much more attention from historians, theologians and linguists.'[128] In a more pessimistic vein, Leslie MacCoull did not attach any value to this Arabic continuation of Coptic tradition. In her eyes, translation was simply insufficient to save the culture, and the language shift was nothing other than, in the words of Jean-Pierre Péroncel-Hugoz, 'génocide culturel', since 'language was the carrier of the culture'.[129] Calling as her chief witness Pseudo-Samuel of Qalamûn, she said:[130] 'Formulations like those... surely speak against any hypothetical "cultural affinity" between conquerors and conquered.' But this argument seems to be inconsistent, because it was precisely this affinity that provoked Pseudo-Samuel's apocalyptic fury. In a second approach in 1989, entitled 'The Strange Death of Coptic *Culture*' even though it dealt with *language* death as well, MacCoull took a further step in the direction of Pseudo-Samuel, adopting his attitude fully and joining in his reproach against his people: 'There is much anthropological writing on the phenomenon of language death', she wrote,

but none of the theories I have ever encountered seems to fit what happened to Coptic: dialectal unintelligibility; restriction to a purely practical and rote-memorized monastic sphere of use; simple laziness... What did happen was that, for reasons which remain both unclear and unexplored, learning never became a holy act in Coptic culture. Learning for its own sake never became a thing of positive value. The comparison with Syriac and Armenian is sad.[131]

Leslie MacCoull's philippic surely rings true insofar as the decision between language maintenance or death does depend on the speakers' attitudes a great deal. However, her explanation may be too fixed upon literacy and intellectual applications of language, features which actually form only a small segment of language use. There is clear evidence that language maintenance is very possible in cases of merely *spoken* languages, and there is recent linguistic discussion on whether the existence of a written literature supports language maintenance or not, or, under

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[128] Rubenson 1996: 14.
[129] MacCoull 1985: 61. For a similar view from the perspective of language ecology and language activism within recent *LMLS* linguistics, see, e.g., Woodbury 1993; Tsunoda 2005: chapter 10 and especially 10.4 (161–7), and authorised by his own experience, Jocks 1998: 230–3.
[130] MacCoull 1985: 66.   [131] MacCoull 1989: 42.

certain conditions, might even be a point of destabilisation for endangered languages.[132]

Christian Décobert's 1992 study 'Sur l'arabisation et l'islamisation de l'Égypte médiévale' provides the most extensive and thorough research on the issue under discussion. He, too, chose Pseudo-Samuel's apocalyptic composition as a starting point, but his aim was to describe sociolinguistic motivations which might have caused Egyptian Christians to abandon their native tongue. Directed by Pseudo-Samuel's denunciations, Décobert located a Christian milieu attracted by the culture and lifestyle of the Arabs. In the end, Décobert shares the view of his source, that Islamisation was the other side of Arabisation.

EXCURSUS: LANGUAGE DEATH FROM A SOCIOLINGUISTIC POINT OF VIEW

Since the 1980s, linguistic interest in the typology of genetics of language(s), language change and language contact has increased rapidly.[133] Consequently, as it were, language death and language shift emerged in the research of the 1990s.[134] Both the empirical data and the explosive force of the subject came not least from the current mass destruction of minority languages caused by globalisation. The hope was that a universal theory could work somehow as an instrument of early recognition and revitalisation of endangered languages.[135] As a matter of course, the refinement of linguistic description and analysis is of benefit also to merely written data from ancient evidence.[136]

The opportunities and limits of a sociolinguistic approach are mirrored by a set of thirty-three issues (Table 17.14) which displays the correlation of variable cultural data related to language change (categorisation A) with categories forming its invariable social framework (categorisation B). This model was suggested by John Edwards in 1992 and has been improved by Leonore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley, who have added some more subdivisions and made attempts to rank the variables involved, concluding that *economic factors* possibly cannot be overestimated.[137]

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[132] Cf. Grenoble and Whaley 1998b: 31–42; Mühlhaüsler 1990.
[133] From the abundant literature cf. e.g. Appel and Muysken 1987 and Thomason and Kaufman 1988.
[134] Cf. e.g. Dorian 1989; Brenzinger 1992; Aitchison 1993; Croft 2000; Crystal 2000; Janse, Tol and Hendriks 2003.
[135] Cf. e.g. Williamson 1991; Fase, Jaspaert and Kroon 1992; Grenoble and Whaley 1998a; and most recently Tsunoda 2005.
[136] Cf. most recently Adams, Janse and Swain *Bilingualism*.
[137] Edwards 1992; Grenoble and Whaley 1998b: 22–54. Cf. the overview on 'External setting of language endangerment' by Tsunoda 2005: 49–56.

Table 17.14 *Variables of language change (Edwards 1992; Grenoble and Whaley 1998a)*

Categorisation A		*Categorisation B*	
	Speaker	*Language*	*Setting*
Demography	1	2	3
Sociology	4	5	6
Linguistics	7	8	9
Psychology	10	11	12
History	13	14	15
Politics/Law	16	17	18
Geography	19	20	21
Education	22	23	24
Religion	25	26	27
Economics	28	29	30
Technology	31	32	33

SOME PROVISIONAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONCLUSIONS

Unable to treat here even a few of these thirty-three issues and to provide a complex and thorough suggestion concerning the language death of Coptic, I restrict myself to something much more modest: to applying Décobert's socio-historical approach to the above-mentioned evidence of Arabic loanwords in Coptic texts. The idea is that even a small quantity of loanwords, if analysed with attention to their sociolinguistic implications, may indicate certain typical speaker attitudes towards the culture which was carried by the source language. Here are some provisional assumptions drawn from this evidence:

1. The conspicuous incorporation of Arabic nomenclature vocabulary in Coptic astronomical, mathematical, alchemical and medical manuscripts indicates nothing but a *high esteem for Arabic natural science* current in educated circles of Egyptian Christian society. This was surely the same interest that we find also in the well-known medieval translations of Arabic scientific texts into Latin.

2. The borrowing of Arabic legal terms, phrases and clauses in late Coptic legal records seems to reflect *common commercial intercourse* between wealthy Arabic and Coptic speakers.

3. The above-average borrowing of Arabic words for vessels, textiles and clothes, which were thought above to be designations of particular qualities like 'trademarks', possibly points towards a common *need for Arabic luxury articles* in wealthy Christian houses.

To conclude: it seems to me that few of the reasons for the language death of Coptic are to be sought in the difference and interrelationship of religions. The language shift from Egyptian to Arabic did not 'override' the Christian tradition, but was accompanied, if not stimulated, by Christian scholars who themselves spoke and wrote Arabic as a second language. It is true that certain Christian religious practices, in particular the liturgy, were kept free from the use of Arabic, and little by little they became the last refuge for the Coptic (and also the Greek) language. But this development might justly be considered as a phenomenon of folklorisation, i.e. the restriction of an obsolescent language to certain domains not too closely connected with practical purposes and the matters of everyday life.[138] In the end, I believe that among all the factors forming part of the specific *setting* of the language shift from Coptic to Arabic, it was the increasing material and intellectual prosperity of Arabic culture which played a role that cannot be overestimated. In the perception of a majority of Christian elite representatives in medieval Egypt, Arabic may have figured not only as the language of the *Hijra*, but also – if not predominantly – as the language of *science*, the language of *advanced civilisation* and the language of *material wealth*.

In the preceding lines, I have tried to approach two crucial periods of contact-induced linguistic change in Egypt, keeping an eye on contemporary developments in the fields of religion. The Hellenisation of Egypt during Ptolemaic and Roman times, linguistically resulting in stable bilingualism and the maintenance of a last stage of the Egyptian language, the Coptic idiom, still needs much research. The same is true of the Arabisation of Egypt with its two aspects, the obsolescence and death of Coptic and the translation of Coptic literature into Arabic. In both cases, there is the same close weave of sociolinguistic patterns and patterns of religious change and conversion. All I have been able to do here is to lay out some relevant sources and issues and to sketch some recent approaches to interpreting and explaining relevant phenomena. My suggestions are merely provisional and remain to be tested by further evidence and future investigation.[139]

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[138] Cf. Tsunoda 2005: 65–9. The term 'folklorisation', meaning the ousting of endangered languages from relevant and important functional domains under the impact of emerging bilingualism, was used by Fishman 1987.

[139] Postscript: A. Papaconstantinou's '"They Shall Speak the Arabic Language and Take Pride in it": Reconsidering the Fate of Coptic After the Arab Conquest', *Le Muséon* 120 (2007), 273–99, appeared too late for its conclusions to be incorporated into the present chapter. Papaconstantinou's close reading of relevant passages from the apocalypse of (Pseudo-)Samuel of Qalamun dealt with above (pp. 426–7) leads her to the conclusion that Pseudo-Samuel's complaints should be 'inserted in the context of a rift within the medieval Coptic church over the question of language choice, and beyond this, over that of accommodation with the Muslims', triggered by 'the use of Arabic by the episcopal church of Misr and by some prominent figures around it' (ibid. p. 299), in the last quarter of the 10th century.

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