

CURRENT WORK ON EGYPTIAN LEXICOGRAPHY

WILFRED G. E. WATSON
Northumberland

Abstract: This is a brief survey of work, past and present, on the meanings of words in ancient Egyptian, with the emphasis on more recent projects. It includes descriptions of the dictionaries of Egyptian (including Coptic and Demotic) that are available in print and online. Particular importance is given to the study of etymology and there is also some reference to loanwords.

Keywords: Coptic, Demotic, dictionary, Egyptian, etymology, lexicon, loanwords

1. INTRODUCTION

It is obvious, right from the start, when Egyptian was first deciphered, that the meanings of Egyptian words have been extremely important. Over the years, scholars have written a considerable number of studies on texts and philological problems. These are scattered in various publications – journals, books, conference proceedings etc. – although at least one attempt has been made to collect some of them.¹ Dictionaries of Egyptian draw on these studies, but generally do not refer to them specifically² largely for lack of space, although ideally they should. This means that it is not always possible to determine how compilers of dictionaries reached their conclusions. The main emphasis of this survey

¹ D. Meeks, *Année lexicographique*, 3 vols, Paris 1980-1982.

² An exception is L. Lesko, *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian*, 2 vols, Providence 2002, 2004, which occasionally gives such references.

is on relatively recent dictionaries of ancient Egyptian and its later phases that are available now for consultation or are in preparation. For lack of space, not every dictionary that has been published can be discussed here.³

2. DICTIONARIES OF EGYPTIAN

The world famous *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* or *Dictionary of the Egyptian Language*,⁴ published in Berlin, was initiated by A. Erman in 1897. It was a massive undertaking, which first involved compiling an enormous number of text references (some 1.2 million cards) covering 5 million words that were initially arranged under 16,000 lemmata. The first five volumes of the dictionary were published between 1926 and 1931. Volume 6 came out in 1955. The corresponding five volumes of text references (*Belegstellen*) were issued between 1935 and 1953. In addition, a German-Egyptian list of words (1950) and in 1963, a reverse index (*Rückläufiges Wörterbuch*) were published. Erman had died in 1924 and the work was taken over first by one of Erman's students, K. Sethe (who did not wish to be named as an editor) and later by H. Grapow.

In 1997, a century after A. Erman had begun the project, a conference was held in Berlin with the title *Textcorpus und Wörterbuch*⁵ in order to discuss how to bring this massive dictionary of Egyptian up to date. In particular, the problem of how to use computer technology to achieve this was debated.

Besides this massive and largely handwritten dictionary, several others are also available. After the first volume of the *Wörterbuch* was

³ For a more comprehensive history of Egyptian lexicography see W. Schenkel, "Die Lexikographie des Altägyptischen-Koptischen", *Studi epigrafici e linguistici sul Vicino Oriente antico* 12 (1995): 191-203.

⁴ A. Erman / H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, vols. 1-7, Berlin 1926-1963.

⁵ S. Grunert / I. Hafemann (eds.), *Textcorpus und Wörterbuch. Aspekte zur ägyptischen Lexikographie*, Leiden / Boston / Köln 1999.

published, A. Gardiner⁶ proposed that there should be separate dictionaries for each specialist area. In response, dictionaries were prepared for medical texts,⁷ drugs,⁸ minerals,⁹ plants,¹⁰ nautical terms,¹¹ the temple,¹² etc. There are also dictionaries for Middle Egyptian (which includes texts from the Heracleopolitan period to the end of the 18th Dynasty) by R. O. Faulkner,¹³ for Late Egyptian by L. Lesko¹⁴ and for the Ptolemaic period (mainly for texts from Edfu) by P. L. Wilson.¹⁵ A more wide-ranging dictionary in a small single volume has also been prepared by R. Hannig.¹⁶ Furthermore, there are dictionaries for Demotic¹⁷ and Coptic.¹⁸

⁶ A. Gardiner, "The First Two Pages of the Wörterbuch", *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 34 (1948): 12-18.

⁷ H. V. Deines / W. Westendorf, *Wörterbuch der medizinische Texte*, Berlin 1961-1962.

⁸ H. V. Deines / W. Westendorf, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Drogenamen*, Berlin 1959.

⁹ J. R. Harris, *Lexicographical Studies in Ancient Egyptian Minerals*, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Institut für Orientforschung, Veröffentlichung 54; Berlin 1961.

¹⁰ G. Charpentier, *Receuil de matériaux épigraphiques relatifs à la botanique de l'Égypte antique*, Paris 1981.

¹¹ D. Jones, *A Glossary of Ancient Egyptian Nautical Titles and Terms*, London / New York 1988.

¹² P. Spencer, *The Egyptian Temple: a Lexicographical Study*, London 1984.

¹³ R. O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Oxford 1962; reprinted 1972, 1976, with all the entries handwritten.

¹⁴ L. Lesko, *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian*, 2 vols, Providence 2002, 2004. This originally appeared in 5 volumes, 1982-1990.

¹⁵ P. Wilson, *A Ptolemaic Lexikon. A Lexicographical Study of the Texts in the Temple of Edfu*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 78; Leuven 1997. In this reference work, quite a number of the lemmata are interesting mini-essays. See also D. Kurth, "Lexikographische Ergebnisse aus dem Edfu-Projekt", in S. Grunert / I. Hafemann (eds.), *Textcorpus und Wörterbuch. Aspekte zur ägyptischen Lexikographie*, Leiden / Boston / Köln 1999, 299-304 and S. Rüter, "Edfu-Wortliste und Edfu-Formular", *ibid.*, 305-309.

¹⁶ R. Hannig, *Die Sprache der Pharaonen. Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch (2800-950 v. Chr.)*, Mainz 1995, 2006⁴. See also R. Hannig / P. Vomberg, *Wortschatz der Pharaonen in Sachgruppen: Kulturhandbuch Ägyptens*, Mainz 1998.

¹⁷ W. Erichsen, *Demotisches Glossar*, Copenhagen 1954.

¹⁸ W. Westendorf, *Koptisches Handwörterbuch bearbeitet auf Grund des Koptischen Handwörterbuchs von Wilhelm Spiegelberg*, Heidelberg 1965-1977; W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford 1939.

3. ETYMOLOGY

One interesting and also significant aspect of Egyptian lexicography is, of course, the etymology of its vocabulary.¹⁹ To a large extent, scholars refer to Arabic for etymologies, even though Arabic lexicography itself is far from established and requires as much work as does the Egyptian language.²⁰ They also refer to other Semitic languages such as Hebrew. In addition, since Egyptian is a Hamitic language, scholars refer to African languages such as Berber to determine the etymology of words. One such scholar is Gábor Takács. In 1994, having compiled a card index with the title “Egyptian etymological word catalogue”, which lists most of the Egyptian roots and words described in Erman and Grapow’s *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, Takács began work on his Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian. It promises to be a huge undertaking resulting in a multi-volume work. So far, three volumes have appeared. The first is an introductory volume (EDE I),²¹ dealing with such topics as the classification of Egyptian and how that language fits in with the Afro-Asiatic language family, and of course, phonology. It also provides examples of etymologies for words containing each of the consonants used in Egyptian. In the author’s words: “The most fundamental aim pursued throughout my work was to present and analyze the *external* parallels of the Egyptian lexical material, using all the new results in Afro-Asiatic comparative studies” (EDE I, p. ix). Two further volumes cover words beginning with *b-*, *p-* or *f-* (EDE II)²² and with *m-* (EDE III).²³

¹⁹ There are two completed etymological dictionaries for Coptic: J. Černý, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, Cambridge 1976, and W. Yecichl, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la langue copte*, Leuven 1983.

²⁰ One school of Egyptologists, following O. Rössler, considers Egyptian to be a Semitic language, but the matter is strongly debated.

²¹ G. Takács, *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*, Volume One: *A Phonological Introduction*, HdO I/48/1; Leiden / Boston / Köln 1999.

²² G. Takács, *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*, Volume Two: *b-, p-, f-*, HdO I/48/2; Leiden / Boston / Köln 2001.

²³ G. Takács, *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*, Volume Three: *m-*, HdO I/48/3; Leiden / Boston / Köln 2008.

4. LOANWORDS

Also of significance for Egyptian lexicography is the problem of identifying loanwords, i.e. words borrowed from other languages and used or even assimilated by Egyptian. Study of loanwords goes back almost to the decipherment of that language. A brief collection of such loanwords was prepared by D. Sivan and Z. Cochavi-Rainey in 1992.²⁴ The most recent and also the most extensive survey of words borrowed from Semitic languages was compiled by J. E. Hoch.²⁵ Loans from other languages, including Hurrian, Hittite and various African languages, are discussed in a work edited by T. Schneider.²⁶ Of course, borrowing can also go the other way, with loans being taken from Egyptian, which makes Egyptian important for non-Egyptian languages.²⁷

5. REVERSE DICTIONARIES

For the convenience of scholars wishing to determine the semantic spread of Egyptian and the gaps in its vocabulary, as well as for students wishing to translate exercise texts into Egyptian, reverse dictionaries of Egyptian have been prepared. A very early one was compiled as an appendix to volume 6 of the Erman/Grapow *Wörterbuch*.²⁸ More recently, D. Shenum made an index to Faulkner's *Concise Dictionary*.²⁹

²⁴ D. Sivan / Z. Cochavi-Rainey, *West Semitic Vocabulary in Egyptian Script of the 14th to the 10th Centuries BCE*, Beer-Sheva vol. 6; 1992.

²⁵ J. E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period*, Princeton 1994.

²⁶ T. Schneider, *Das Ägyptische und die Sprachen Vorderasiens, Nordafrikas und der Agäis*, Münster 2004.

²⁷ Y. Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic*, SBLDS 173; Atlanta 1999.

²⁸ "Zusammenstellung der Wörter in begrifflich geordneten Sachgruppen". See also paragraph 2, above.

²⁹ D. Shenum, *English-Egyptian Index of Faulkner's Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Malibu 1977.

6. OUTLOOK

There are several ongoing projects relating to Egyptian lexicography which should eventually result in a reliable set of dictionaries. R. Hannig is completing a version of his one-volume dictionary which will also include text-references.³⁰ G. Takács will continue to prepare his volumes on etymology, but it remains a long-term venture since, in effect, only four of the twenty-three letters of the alphabet have been dealt with so far. Erichsen's dictionary of Demotic is in the process of being extended and updated.³¹ The Berlin project of bringing Erman/Grapow's *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* up to date is still coping with the twofold problem of collecting and editing the texts and preparing the lemmata. Even with the help of computers, this will take many more years. Meanwhile, besides Erman/Grapow's classic dictionary, which is now available online as part of the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (TLA),³² we have at least four general and reliable dictionaries of Egyptian by Faulkner, Hannig, Lesko and Wilson.³³

³⁰ R. Hannig, "Belegwörterbuch – Bedeutungswörterbuch", in S. Grunert / I. Hafemann (eds.), *Textcorpus und Wörterbuch. Aspekte zur ägyptischen Lexikographie*. Leiden / Boston / Köln 1999, 271-282.

³¹ See J. H. Johnson, "The Chicago Demotic Dictionary Project", in S. Grunert / I. Hafemann (eds.), *Textcorpus und Wörterbuch. Aspekte zur ägyptischen Lexikographie*, Leiden / Boston / Köln 1999, 243-257. 20 volumes of J. H. Johnson (ed.), *The Demotic Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago 2001) are now available online, in a preliminary version as pdf files.

³² <http://aaew.bbaw.de/tla>. The TLA is easy to consult, with a range of available data (including texts and lemmata) and search tools.

³³ Angus Graham (Sunderland University) was kind enough to read through and comment on an earlier draft of this survey.