

Hebny & Abu

English and Egyptian
in perfect harmony?

*English and Egyptian might look very different on the page, but **David Lewiston-Sharpe** observes some fascinating similarities*

“We all know / That people are the

same wherever we go,” begins a verse from Paul McCartney’s song ‘Ebony and Ivory’. These lines could easily lead us to debate whether words – song lyrics or otherwise – are signs of difference or similarity among tribes, groups and peoples. The signs of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script are certainly a very different way of writing from the Roman alphabet used for English.

But are we, perhaps, united by the evolution of speech rather more than we are divided by our apparently random dispersal among countless languages and dialects? In his book *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker quotes the view (derived from Noam Chomsky) that if a hypothetical Martian visited Earth, they would hear all human languages merely as dialects of one and the same mode of speech. Chomsky has said elsewhere, in *The Architecture of Language*, that the basic properties of the language faculty are the same across our species. So when we hear differences, we are perhaps acknowledging the accretion of a millennia of subtle changes, influences, corruptions and playful neologisms that make one ‘dialect’ become seemingly another ‘language’. In the end, in terms of written language, we end up with pictograms on the one hand

(hieroglyphs) and, on the other, leaner modes of writing words with a 26-letter alphabet. These can disguise some suggestive correlations between languages divided by time and geographical location.

Take *hbny* and *abu* from the ancient Egyptian dictionary, for example, and compare their translations as ‘ebony’ and ‘ivory’. The word *hbny* resonates with an immediacy against the English word, and *abu* is not all that far from ‘ivory’ (with a softening of labial consonants, *b* to *v*, and the long, open vowel following – ‘o’).

The elaborate system of pictograms that constitute the Egyptian writing system is in stark contrast to the Greek or Phoenician characters. In its most advanced late phase, the Ptolemaic scribes boasted a full ‘alphabet’ of some 4,700 signs. Middle Egyptian – the ‘classic’ period – from the Middle Kingdom around 2100-1700 BCE, possessed a mere 800 signs. The Phoenician alphabet in contrast comprised a modest 22 characters that served their essentially functional administrative application of writing.

The Greeks had seemingly learned much from the Phoenicians concerning how to record the sounds of speech (putting aside the mysterious Minoan Linear A and B scripts). And from the Greeks we have a familiar literature that underpins our culture in the West, and a great many individual words that have made their way

into English and many other European languages, a number of which have themselves been instrumental in conveying such vocabulary into our language. But what are we to make of the more remote, alien world of the ancient Egyptian language? Once we’ve contended with the matter of deciphering the pictographic notation, can the words themselves gain some familiarity?

The search for any similarities by comparing words from Egyptian and English should carry the crucial caveat that the vowels are something of a mystery. Aside from reconstructing the complete shape of words using Coptic – the latest form of Egyptian (and one that borrows heavily from Greek) – the sound of nearly all ancient Egyptian words is on the whole unknown. The linguist Antonio Loprieno describes it as ‘elusive’, and he goes on to say that the phonology (how the language sounds, or may have sounded) is clearer for later Egyptian as a result of some words having been transcribed into Akkadian cuneiform from Mesopotamia.

Making anything of echoes apparent in *hnmmt* and ‘humanity’ may therefore seem merely to note a coincidence. But the Indo-European roots of many languages across Europe, Asia and further east demonstrate shared beginnings for words such as ‘mother’ – the Egyptian *mwt*, or *miwt*. Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Armenian and Irish

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Osiris ©Francesco Gasparetti/Wikimedia Commons

arrived at *matar*, *mater*, *mayr* and *mathair*. That humanity might find civilising origins by the Nile as well as in its very name (for English speakers in particular too, in this instance) may not be such an oddity.

After appearing in Omo Kibish in Ethiopia some 200,000 years ago, early man traced a network of paths beginning around 140,000 years later as our migrations advanced. People arrived in the Middle East region around 50,000 years ago – already many centuries and millennia before the pyramids. This was as a result of a second wave of migration, following an initial journey that had already led some to Australia before this time. But after further exploration that took mankind to the north of Europe (before the flooding of the vast plains that linked Britain with the mainland, by the North Sea), has the division of languages retained – amid the knotted strands of speech – a reverberation of the Egyptian

wat, in ‘ways’ from English? Maybe there are more things to be found in the Egyptian language than are currently dreamt of in our philosophy.

In one of the most famous ancient Egyptian stories of travel, the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor (a narrative from the 12th Dynasty), Nubia is referenced by its name of *Wawat*, as a far destination emphasising the journeying of the sailor – and the adjectival *wa* (‘far’) is contained therein. Roadways and distances are the underlying theme; the island where the sailor is shipwrecked (and where he encounters the fantastical serpent central to the story) is a ‘far off’ place. And the island is located (like the *duat*, or vision of paradise from their belief system) in no real place at all. The sailor is ‘given up onto an island by a wave of the sea’: and waves find another re-echoing in *waw*. Perhaps the result here of a play on words – responding to *Wawat* and only by extension to *wat*, or ‘roads’ and ‘ways’.

It’s all Greek to me

In a well-known text, Concerning Isis and Osiris, the 2nd-century-CE Greek priest and scholar Plutarch attempts a similar exercise to the one I’m aiming for here. He says, “For Isis is a Greek word, and so also is Typhon, her enemy [...] He tears to pieces and scatters to the winds the sacred writings, which the goddess collects and puts together and gives into the keeping of those that are initiated into the holy rites [...]” Frank Cole Babbitt, in his Loeb Classics translation of Plutarch, asserts that the author is linking Typhon with the verb *typhou* (‘puff up’). That he makes this link having already translated the god’s name Set with the Greek word Typhon perhaps puts Plutarch on the academic back foot to start with.

Plutarch concedes later that Typhon is regularly dubbed ‘Seth’. No doubt, in the post-Ptolemaic world then known to him, the Greek names held a degree of precedence.



Obelisk from the reign of Tuthmosis III set up at Kingston Lacey in Dorset, a National Trust property.

Attributes of the goddess Isis – inherent, he says, in the name – are found to have correlations with Greek words for ‘essence’ and ‘sense’ (*ousia*, *isia*). Even if the correlations are misguided (or simply untrue), the author’s claim in locating linguistic parallels embodies a two-fold intention – for which I have empathy. Plutarch seems to desire a familiarity with what might otherwise seem strange; the trappings of their beliefs and pantheons have somehow to be equated with what he knows from his world, the world of Delphi, and perhaps also of Olympus.

He would additionally aim to draw together the apparent differences between the two languages so as to show no differences at all. When he goes on to state that the name Osiris (*Wsir*, in Egyptian) possesses meanings carried by the Greek words *hosion* (‘holy’) and *hieron* (‘sacred’), such generalisations reveal an attempt at rooting out

fundamental derivations. “There is no occasion to be surprised at the revamping of these words into Greek,” writes Plutarch, “Countless other words went forth in company with those who migrated from Greece, and persist even to this day as strangers in strange lands.” He alerts us against regarding these ‘borrowings’ as barbarisms, when perhaps some degree of poetic license endorses their usage; but they can’t really be strangers in strange lands if such ‘unusual’ words disclose evidence of a loan or lexical retention.

When we consider the (initially wrong-footed) connection made between Horus and Min, and then a comparison he makes with the alternative appellation for Isis of *Muth*, his explanation that links *Muth* with *Methyer* and finally with ‘mother’ (*metera*) alights on some true origins.

Word for word

Comprehending the artistry with which writing was to be undertaken in ancient Egypt seems neatly conveyed by a correlation between the word ‘drawing’ and the Egyptian word *drwy*, ‘to paint’. This is simply an occurrence of something akin to what linguists might term a ‘false friend’. The English word ‘draw’ derives from the Old Saxon word *dragan* and even further back the Gothic *gadragan*. Though perhaps there are genealogical threads tracing a connection back some thousands of years to word stems and gestures that underlie the words *drwy* and *dragan*.

The verb ‘to violate a frontier’, or simply ‘to attack’, in Egyptian was *tkk*. The similarity to ‘attack’ is beguiling. The English word comes to us via French and Italian – but perhaps by some circuitous route through Greek or Latin – and maybe originally deriving from clashes of earlier civilisations that brought some of our cultural forefathers once again to the banks of the Nile. Through sound-similarities such as this, the remoteness of ancient Egyptian civilisation breaks through in a flash into our experience, but is at once gone. Although an echo of familiarity fills our ears for that brief moment.

Synonymous with ‘ancient Egypt’ are the temples and tombs: the monuments. Peculiar, then, that their own word for such things is *mnw*. Again, perhaps Latin has as much to do with this as anything. We may well have an obelisk from the reign of Tuthmosis III set up at Kingston Lacey in Dorset, thanks to Giovanni Belzoni in the early 19th Century; but no such English monuments are indigenous. Nor indeed the ancient word. The monument’s claim to fame

is rather more its role in the decipherment of hieroglyphs; if such a function helps to reveal any further connections between English and Egyptian, given where it has ended up, then all the better.

Words associated with corporeal matters, such as *h3ti* for 'heart', *hqr* (or *hqrw*) for 'hunger', *sw'b* for 'clean', *šwt* for 'shadow'; or more broadly, *šw* for 'sunlight' (perhaps also simply to 'show' or even reveal by bringing into the light), *šm'* for chant or simply to sing (with a nod to French and Latin), *šmw* for the harvest season (perhaps pulled back to 'summer?') and a number of others create a concurrent counterpoint to our words. They may prove lexicographical forerunners, or simply fortunate likenesses.

English comes from the wide ranging Indo-European family of languages; ancient Egyptian was a member of the contentious Hamitic group – not far removed from the Semitic languages that include Hebrew and Arabic (as well as Syriac, Akkadian, Phoenician and perhaps ancient Sumerian). Ancient Egyptian, having more to do with Berber, Cuchitic, Chadic and, even further afield, Masai and perhaps other Nilotic languages deeper into the southern reaches of Africa, can have little directly to do with English. That's not to say that since we're all human, nothing of proto-Indo-European had carried with it remote memories of some language exceeding 6,000 years ago. This is a date given to Indo-European languages that perhaps could be regarded as edging their way towards a more familiar profile, in terms of word forms and structures.

This is to give free-rein to a level of speculation that reaches beyond the bounds of evidence.

Yet Plutarch's desire to find the familiar amid the unfamiliar is an infectious attitude of mind. While some poorly recorded ancient words (even if successfully reconstructed despite themselves) are never likely to yield to analysis, others are too suggestive to be ignored outright.

More directly traceable origins for English words are to be found, however, which appear to link back directly. The word 'ebony', for the tree or the wood derived from it, come from the Egyptian word *hbny* – which has made its way through Old English from the usual classical routes (and indeed 'roots'). This is where the echoes are, from a more scientific perspective, to be seen as having travelled a less direct route than one having remained within the language from an earlier time (and therefore not to have travelled with us on our migration routes). The word is basically a borrowing – but no less remarkable for it.

Loan words which have come to English amid the commerce and exchange of materials, and which are therefore simply labels for the commodities that have been carried around, do nothing less than reinforce a conglomeration of commonalities within both language and interactions. As for *hbny*, so also perhaps for *abu* – the word for 'elephant'. This is familiar perhaps from the name of the island in the river at modern day Aswan: Elephantine, known in ancient times as Abu. From the movement through trade routes, and as the poor old elephants' tusks were carried around, and bought and sold, so too was the name and the word. Therefore, *abu* somehow ended up as 'ivory' through circumlocutions, Chinese whisperings (or more European

sorts), misunderstandings, and attempts at translation.

In the end, whether some words have come to English later; whether they were hidden away in the language from some remote period of antiquity; or whether they are simply coincidences – might be irrelevant. What matters is that we can begin to see the people of a remote past as existing amid continually developing – and diverging – systems of communication. Despite time and the vain attempts to cheat the limitations of life (through monuments, mummification, or mastery of writing) they can speak to us too. The Old Kingdom text, the Maxims of Ptahhotep, says, "listen to my sayings ... Their memory goes on in the speech of men ... It is good to speak to posterity, It will listen."

We know that these people were basically the same as us. ¶

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Find out more

Books

- James P. Allen (2000) *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Noam Chomsky (2006) *The Architecture of Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Antonio Loprieno (1995) *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plutarch *Isis and Osiris (Moralia V)*, translated and edited by F. Cole Babbitt (1936), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richard Parkinson (1991) *Voices from Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Middle Kingdom Writings*, London: British Museum Press.