

2 Basic information about Egyptian

2.1 Diachronic stages of the Egyptian language

On the history of the Egyptian language in general see JUNGE (1984b), JANSEN-WINKELN (1995), and KAMMERZELL (1998b: 59-78) where further references can be found.

We can divide the history of the Egyptian language into the following stages:

2.1.1 Ca. 3100–1300BC: a single written language

The first testimonies of script in Egypt are attested from the late 4th millennium BC.³ The earliest documents are usually very short and consist of isolated names and nouns most of which technically cannot be clearly attributed to a specific language. Already from Dynasty 3 (around 2600BC), several longer texts are known.⁴

Until approximately 1300BC, basically one language was used for all purposes of writing. It can be subdivided into two stages: Old Egyptian (until ca. 2000BC) and Middle Egyptian (from ca. 2000BC on). It is difficult to estimate how much spoken and written language differed from another at that time. From the late 3rd millennium on, we know a very limited number of textual sources from informal, everyday contexts which show grammatical peculiarities reminiscent of Late Egyptian. This suggests that by this time a marked diastratic variation already existed.⁵

2.1.2 Ca. 1300–500BC: differentiation into two written languages

From about 1300BC on, remarkable linguistic differences can be observed on the synchronic level.⁶ Texts can either be written in a somewhat archaic language based on Middle Egyptian, or in a more informal language which probably reflects the contemporary spoken tongue. The former is called Neo-Middle Egyptian, the latter Late Egyptian. The gap between (Neo-)Middle Egyptian and Late Egyptian is considerable in both the grammatical and the lexical respects so as to justify a classification as two different languages. Many texts, especially those dating from 1300 to 1000BC, show various degrees of mixture between both linguistic systems. After about 1000BC, the two codes tend to be kept apart more strictly. It is possible that the

3 On the beginning of script in Egypt see DREYER (in print) and ENGEL (1997).

4 On the texts from Dynasty 3 see KAHL & KLOTH & ZIMMERMANN (1995).

5 E.g. the definite article *pʿ* which is a typical Late Egyptian feature is already found a few times in the late Old Kingdom, but only in utterances ascribed to lower class people and as parts of proper names (FECHT 1960: § 415).

6 The development of two Egyptian written languages is treated in detail by JANSEN-WINKELN (1995).