Egyptian Loan Words in Septuaginta and the Papyri∗

Following in the tracks of O. Montevcchii’s1, J. A. L. Lee’s2 and A. Passoni Dell’Acqua3’s studies on Septuagint lexical problems as compared to the evidence offered by the papyri, I should like to approach some aspects of this field, in order to make a modest contribution from the point of view of bilingualism and languages in contact.

The importance of the text of the Septuagint in the history of the Greek language is based on its constituting not only an extensive corpus of translation Greek, but also an illuminating witness of the spoken language or koiné of Ptolemaic Alexandria4. The comparison to the papyri can confirm, or alternatively, leave open the doubt about the use of constructions in Egyptian Greek.

One aspect which can thereby be opened up is the influence on Septuagint Greek of the aulic terminology, as also that of the institutions in Ptolemaic times. This field has been extensively studied, as previously mentioned, by Passoni Dell’Acqua5 and Montevcchii6. Thereafter, the popular use of the political and administrative hierarchies appears to have had an impact on the usage we find among the translators of the Old Testament.

Some examples of this usage of common terminology for administration in Ptolemaic and Roman times in the Septuagint, a circumstance proven by the papyri, can be, for example, the terms for responsible staff with the construction ὁ ἐξίτη + genitive. This expression can be found in the LXX, in Gen. 43, 16 τῷ ἐξή τῆς ἀδικίας κυτταροῦ, “the butler”. We find it in the papyri also in the hierarchy of the police forces: ὁ ἐξή τῆς ἐρήμης’.

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2 A Lexical Study of the Septuagint version of the Pentateuch, Chico 1983.


We also have as an example the use of the term ἐπιστάτης τῶν ἔργων, in Ex. 1, 11, an expression which is very frequent in the papyri for different functionaries, mainly again the ones in charge of security: ἐπιστάτης τῶν φυλακτιτῶν. These kinds of examples can show how this translation reflected the language in use and updated the text of the Vorlage via the selfsame vocabulary.

The study of the spoken language through the confrontation of these two testimonies can provide a useful survey not only of the local Greek variants, but also of the impact of language contact in Egypt. The Septuagint and the Ptolemaic papyri can make a suitable first stepping-stone in this inquiry. This is so, on account of their reflecting two different aspects of the spoken and popular language in the first period of the Greek occupation, taking into the equation the fact that the language of the Septuagint had been produced by bilingual and cultured people. Later papyri and literature such as the monastic texts provide a further, more advanced, stage of interference. The fact that a term appears in the Septuagint helps in the dating of the use of terms, as sometimes and for some of them, the evidence is very scarce and scattered throughout documentation from different periods. The Septuagint brings the loan back to the third century B.C. and may attest for the use in the spoken language.

Very few Egyptian terms have reached us through literary Greek, and for sure, more of them were certainly used and never crystallized into the written language. The earlier loan words bridge the vocabulary of the typically Egyptian products and realities, which of course had no terms or equivalents in Greek.

In spite of its literary tendency, the Septuagint, being the product of a bilingual society, can be a testimony of this interference, when compared to the papyri of the Ptolemaic period. Nevertheless, the Septuagint presents us other problems, as it is a translation, and thus the interference is double. The bilingual translators in fact made the effort to translate the Old Testament into understandable Greek, and even the words concerning Jewish realities were more or less exactly rendered into Greek. Some of these realities required the creation of neologisms, semantic extensions or shifts in meaning, and the diffusion of the text of the Septuagint confirmed these new words or new uses in the Greek language. This is of course a phenomenon of language interference, but produced by the fact that the text of the Septuagint is a translation and not the contact of languages in the same geographical area.

Such is the case of the word ἐποιμίς, which renders the Hebrew ephod. The ephod, as a special piece of the attire of the Great Priest, is worn on the tunic and the cloak and is described in Exodus (28, 6–14 and 39, 2–7). The text is full of additions, which reflect the evolution of this garment in the postexilic period.

It seems to be at first a band of gold-woven stuff, made of wool and linen and held by a belt. The shoulder straps were introduced later.

The rendering of ephod as ἐποιμίς tries to keep the relationship of the word with ‘shoulder’. The Greek term was probably chosen because of the phonetic similarity with ephod and for being from Classical times a piece of the women’s tunic analogous to it.

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8 BGU III 1004 (228 B.C.); VI 1242; P.Cair. Zen. III 59350 (244 B.C.); 59366; P.Enteux, 4, 8, (244 B.C.); 14, 2; P.Heid. VI 362 (266 B.C.).


The word has only one occurrence in the papyri (P.Oxy. LIX 3998, 38, fourth cent. A.D.), as part of a list, and thus gives no description or any detail about the kind of item that was meant. It only appears in the diminutive, which in Appian (Mith. 115) has the meaning of the straps of a horse’s harness. But the meaning of the word in the Septuagint passed on to texts like that of Philo’s De vita Mosis and thereafter easily found its way into Greek Literature.

Regarding the problem of language contact, we have chosen the lexical interference, although there are other elements of interest to be taken into account. The syntactic constructions reflected in Egyptian Greek, in the case of the Septuagint can be confused with the interference coming from the translated Hebrew, given the similarities between the Egyptian and Hebrew languages. It is thus difficult to say what specific interference caused an expression to come about, for instance, the case of év ῥομπαντία, “with the sword” (Num. 31, 8), using a local preposition with an instrumental usage, which is a common construction both in Egyptian and in Hebrew. This interference can be due to both influences.

The semantic domains in question are now the most popular, being the ones that designate everyday objects, clothes and similar realities, all of them domains which are the most susceptible to local variation. Names of coins, measures and the like can also appear as an interesting field of study, since they are irreplaceable in societies which are used to them.

In the latter field, that of measures, some words which appear in the Septuagint and the papyri seem to be Egyptian loan-words. The point here is to find an Egyptian origin as early as possible, in order to prove a continuity. This should trace a line of interference, not only to the Egyptian-Greek contact, but also to the interference caused in the process of translation, wherein the bilingualism of the translator combines with the influence of the surrounding stage of language.

Let us look at some terms belonging to this domain, so as to analyze the linguistic interference in each case.

One of them is κόρος, a dry measure, which appears in Num. 11, 32, translating the Hebrew term homer, and has a correspondence in the papyri. This word can be compared to Coptic Κου, and as it only appears in Egyptian contexts, it can be assumed that it is a loan-word. A late variant of this word in Greek is κορίτσι.

There are other words, like κόπος, a measure for volume, a hapax in the Septuagint: IV Kings 6, 25. The papyri confirm this use. It has been compared to Hebrew qub, which is in fact in the Vorlage. But there is an Ancient Egyptian word kap, in Coptic κάπ, for a receptacle or measure for corn, and the word has a use in Coptic in documents.

Γόμος is a load measure, and can be applied to a camel load. In the Septuagint we find it in Ex. 23, 5; and it is attested by the papyri. There is a term in Coptic, ἰχνίον, apparently from an Egyptian origin, hm.t, meaning “freight, cargo, load.” The term is, however, attested outside of Egypt in Palmyra.

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14 De vita Mosis 110, 122, etc. See G. Mayer, Index Philo theme, Berlin, New York 1974, s. v.
15 R. A. Martin, Syntaxical Evidence of Semitic Sources in Greek Documents (Septuagint and Cognate Studies 3), Missoula 1974.
16 SB 10301, 10302, 10303 (second cent. A.D.), PSI X 554, 14.
18 P.Lond. I 113, 11 (a), p. 223; BGU XII 2177, 2179, all examples come from the sixth-seventh centuries.
19 Hemmerding, Noms (n. 10), 247.
20 SB X 10301 b 3 , 10302 I and 10303, 3 (second cent. A.D.).
22 P.Ryl. II 267, P.Ryl. II 355, British Museum, Catalog of Coptic Mss. n. 1135.
25 Alcock, Terms (n. 17), 5.
27 OGI 629, 87.
More common terms, like ἀπόκρασις, which appears regularly in the papyri, have an Egyptian origin too. The Coptic word ἐρτοβ, ἐρτοβ, stems from the Egyptian demotic ṛḥ, and this ultimately stems from the Persian. It appears in the Septuagint in Is. 5, 10; and twice in Daniel.

The hin, in Greek τρυγ (τρυγ) is an Egyptian measure of capacity, known from ancient times, which appears in the Greek papyri from the third century B.C. In Coptic the term is ἥν, probably to be put in connection with ἡνω, a kind of vessel, although there is also a Hebrew term, hin. In the Septuagint, the term appears as ἠν. In spite of the fact that the term hin already exists in Hebrew for a measure and appears in the Vorlage for the Septuagint passages mentioned, the Greek term belongs to an Egyptian context and it does not seem strange to the translator, who was probably already familiar with it.

The term ὕθι, Coptic ὅποι, renders the Hebrew ἐφα in the Septuagint, perhaps as an homophonous translation. In the papyri, we find ἰπ. The term stems from the Egyptian ἰπ, participle form of ἰπ, ‘to count.’ This case shows an early attestation in Greek of a term which in the papyri only appears rather late.

The domain of measures is one to be handled with great care, as the terms in question might have passed easily from one language to another through the way of commercial contact. But the fact that the word is used in a translation addressed to the people, means that these terms are in common use. The point here is to see the possibility of a testimony for linguistic interference in one of the semantic domains where the popular local tendencies can be most evident.

The domain of clothing, which is a very popular one, has been studied by Arie van der Kooij, who recently presented in a Symposium on Lexicography of the LXX in Leiden a study of the vocabulary of Isaiah 3, 17–23 in the light of the papyri, where he proves that the translator was undoubtedly influenced by the common vocabulary in use in Egypt, as shown by the papyri.

From this semantic domain I want to extrapolate the case of a word, λώμα, “fringe or border of a robe or cloak or string”. It is attested only in the Septuagint, and literature dependent on these passages, apart from one case of the diminutive in the Anthologia Palatina 11, 210 (Lucili). There is no satisfactory explanation for its etymology: in relation with the verb λέκω, “to cover” or ἴδε, “to turn” and thus cover; or in connection with Greek εὐλήμα, εὐλήμα.

The Coptic ὅοι, from Egyptian ῥῶδα means exactly the same as λώμα, both “edge” and “band or string”. Can we explain λώμα as a derived noun in –μα from the Egyptian term?

Finally I would like to come to two well known Egyptian loan words, attested both in the Greek papyri and in the Septuagint.

The first one, βαρος, used in one of its meanings for a kind of boat, stems from the Egyptian br or ḫrw, Coptic βαρος, βαρος. This word is attested in Greek as far back as Aeschylus (Suppl. 839) and Herodotus (II 41), who uses it for an “Egyptian boat”. It appears in very few papyri. The Septuagint has

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28 Dan LXX Bel. 2, Dan TH Bel 3.
29 Generally considered to be a diminutive (LSJ), but -τρυγ must be taken as a suffix to hellenize the Egyptian term, see Hemmerdinger, Noms (n. 10), 246; Fournet, Les emprunts (n. 10), 69.
31 PSI IV 333, 6; P.Lond. II 402, II 14, P.Eleph. 5.
32 Černy, Dict. (n. 17), 285; WB II 493, 6–13; Alcock, Terms (n. 17), 5.
33 Ex. 29, 40; Lev. 23, 13; and Num. 15, 4.
34 Alcock, Terms (n. 17), 4.
35 Lev. 5, 11 and Num. 15, 4.
36 P.Cair. Masp. II 67308, 4; 67325, I 10, 14, 23 and so on; P.Lond. V 1687, 11 (Aphroditus A.D. 523); PSI IV 284.
37 Černy, Dict. (n. 17), 121; Vyeichl, Dict. (n. 26), 155a. For the etymology of the Greek term: MacGready, Egyptian Words (n. 10), 251; Pierce, Egyptian Loan Words (n. 10), 103; Fournet, Les emprunts (n. 10), 71.
38 Ex. 28, 29; 28, 30; 36, 32; 36, 33; 36, 34; 36, 40.
41 Hemmerdinger, Noms (n. 10), 241; MacGready, Egyptian Words (n. 10), 249; Fournet, Les emprunts (n. 10), 57; F. Rodriguez-Adrados, Ambiente y léxico egipcio en Esquilo, Las Sulplicantes: βαρος (839, etc.), συνδονις (121), χαμψα (878), ἰτι (848), Eikasmos 10 (1999) 47–55: 50. On this boat, Merzagora, La navigazione (n. 23), 127–128.
42 P.Coll. Youtie I 7 (224 B.C.); P.Hib. I 100 (267/266 B.C.).
occurrences of this word in some places, of which the clearest is Lament 2, 5: κατεπόντισε τὰς βάρεις αὐτῆς, “he drowned her boats”.

The other term is βάον, “palm branch”, from Egypt. bγγ, Coptic Bδ, BΛΔ, attested in a number of papyri as βάος. The term is a hapax in I Macc. 13, 37 in a cultic context.

In synthesis, my contention is that the papyri are the most direct source to understand linguistic interference in Egypt. However, the Septuagint, being an extensive testimony of Egyptian koiné, can provide a good point of comparison and a wealth of loan-word usages at an early stage. The precautions that need to be taken stem from the fact that the Septuagint has other interferences, caused by its being a translation, and precisely the Vorlage is in a language, Hebrew, which enjoys certain common features with Egyptian.

In a wider context, I believe that further useful analysis can be achieved in the field of languages in contact. In a contemporary ambit, this has concentrated mainly on modern languages and the field work has been done in direct interviews with the speakers of those languages. In the instance of ancient languages, however, we need a new methodology, whereby the sources should be analyzed and their testimony assessed, against the backdrop of the circumstances in which they were produced and the level of language they may have ended up reflecting. A successful pursuit of this goal will ultimately enrich our own and many other fields of study.

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43 Hemmerdingen, Noms (n. 10), 245–246; MacGready, Egyptian Words (n. 10), 250; Fournet, Les emprunts (n. 10), 69.
44 WB I 446, 9–10; Vycichl, Dict. (n. 26), 24.
45 P.Oxy. IX 1211 (second cent. A.D.); BGU II 362 (A.D. 215); SB I 5637, 5 (A.D. 215); P.Lond. IV 1362 and 1378 (both eighth cent. A.D.).