

Diathesis of Coptic conjugation patterns

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The notion of transitivity as a property of verbal lexemes is highly problematic for Coptic. The extreme views of researchers differ so widely as to doubt the applicability of this notion to Coptic verbs at all (Till, Emmel), on the one hand, and to apply it to every biactant verb (Layton), on the other. Let us define transitivity in syntactic quantitative way as the most frequent and productive form of the biactant construction which in Coptic is <Infinitive + N> structure with its construct allomorphs (verbal pre-object forms). If one checks the distribution of these constructions between the two basic conjugation patterns: non-durative vs. durative tenses, one cannot but reaffirm L. Stern's conclusion: though the majority of Coptic verbs can be used both transitively and intransitively, the intransitive use of the infinitival form is with very rare exceptions confined to the non-durative tenses. Comparing this to the fact that morphologically marked forms are transitive (Status Constructus, Status Nominalis) for non-durative tenses, and intransitive (Stative) for durative ones, one obtains an interesting structural outcome: the default usage of the infinitive must have been intransitive in the non-durative and transitive in the durative tenses. This analysis makes diathesis a defining property of the Coptic conjugation patterns which to a certain extent resembles the structure of 'binyanim' in Hebrew. It also allows to single out a separate class of verbs: 'Strong Transitives', that are not used intransitively even in the non-durative tenses.

This view explains quite a few heretofore scattered and unclear Coptic lexical and grammatical facts, e.g., the usage of the periphrastic structure with the verb ŠOPE for intransitive perfective meaning. One can also trace the development of the Coptic diathesis system from the known facts of Late Egyptian grammar.

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