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Specificities of Teaching Ancient Egyptian Language in Russia and New Steps Towards Solving Current Pedagogical Problems

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Abstract

Historically Russia has enjoyed a rich Egyptological tradition, but currently suffers from a shortage of qualified scholars in this field. This is connected to a lack of modern resources for teaching Ancient Egyptian language geared towards Russian students, which means that even though Russia has impressive museum collections in the subject, the country finds it challenging to maximise their full potential. This article describes this problem, highlights why it is significant from both a cultural and a pedagogical perspective, and discusses steps towards improving the situation by creating a new Ancient Egyptian grammar in Russian.

Key Words: *Egyptology, Ancient Egyptian language, Textbook preparation, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Integration of international teaching experience in Russia.*

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Background: Russian interest in Ancient Egypt and Egyptology as an academic discipline

Russia traditionally has one of the most significant academic traditions in Egyptology, which goes back to the nineteenth century. However, nowadays a range of circumstances have formed that make it harder for Egyptology in the country to fully realise its potential. In this article, the authors briefly explain the problems in teaching that need to be tackled for a more holistic development of Russian Egyptology in the present day, with particular reference to the field of Ancient Egyptian language studies, before moving on to describe the measures being taken in this direction at the Institute of Oriental and Classical Studies (IOCS) of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE).

Russian connections to Egypt go back over a thousand years, with Grand Prince Vladimir the Great sending a delegation there as early as 1001 CE and interest in the culture steadily growing in the centuries that followed [1]. However, formation of Russian Egyptology as a distinct academic school did not occur until the 1870s. In 1874, the first Russian Egyptologist to identify as such, Vladimir Semenovitch Golenishchev (1856-1947), published his debut works [2]. These consisted of three articles published in vol. 12 of the Leipzig journal "Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde" [3]. Indeed, this proved a very significant contribution to global Egyptology, for it was V. S. Golenishchev who was the first to study two texts that proved fundamental to the later development of the field – the "Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor" and the "Moscow Mathematical papyrus". Building on this early work and the foundation of the Russian Egyptological Society in 1905, a pupil of Golenishchev named B. A. Turaev went on to establish Russian Egyptology in a university setting. In 1919, he founded the first Egyptological chair in St. Petersburg, concentrating on the history of the ancient Near East and Egyptian literature and leaving behind enthusiastic followers like V. V. Struve and N. D. Flittner. In Moscow, Egyptology first started to be taught as a university subject in 1960, spearheaded by M. A. Korostovtsev, thereby ensuring its presence in both of Russia's largest cities. This arrangement remains true to this day, and the subject also enjoys strong representation in top national museums such as the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg [4] and the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow [5]. However, despite this rich history of research and wealth of artefacts, in recent decades

Egyptology has often struggled to survive in both major cities due to administrative and financial challenges, not least those emerging from the collapse of the USSR [1].

Egyptology as an academic discipline includes the study of not only the history, religion, and culture of ancient Egypt, but also the ancient Egyptian language. Indeed, some degree of familiarity with the language is generally considered a prerequisite of Egyptological training. For most of the pharaonic period, Ancient Egyptian could be written in two main scripts: the "divine words" or *mdw nTr*, now commonly termed hieroglyphs (a sacred form of writing designed for stone), and hieratic (an everyday form of writing designed for writing with a brush on papyrus or ostraca). For the Egyptians, writing was a way of conveying the surrounding reality, to establish a connection with the afterlife and gods and – in accordance with the theoretical framework of Y. M. Lotman – to effectively create their world [6]. Therefore, deciphering hieroglyphs brings researchers closer to the ancient world, allowing us not only to reconstruct practical details of Ancient Egyptian lived experience and administration, but also to understand how the ancient inhabitants of the Nile Valley thought. Moreover, written language was used not only as a tool for communication, but as a way of shaping the materiality of objects – thus, a huge number of monuments of material culture are somehow connected with writing. The Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, stelae and numerous wall inscriptions from tombs all count as prominent examples.

Why is there a need to learn the ancient Egyptian language?

While the ancient nature of the subject matter inevitably raises questions about the need to study it from a utilitarian perspective (especially in an environment of limited funds), it is nonetheless important to point out that detailed knowledge of the Ancient Egyptian language can be beneficial to a range of stakeholders. These can be subdivided into three broad groups:

a) Egyptologists – For these, knowing the language is a professional necessity, as this permits texts to be read in the original. It allows them to work with material and cultural monuments, to understand why a particular saying was formulated one way and not another, to 'think like an Egyptian' (i.e. to develop emic approaches to the study of the material), to connect the history of language with the history of society, and to guarantee

the preservation of knowledge about the ancient Egyptian civilisation for future generations. It should be noted that history already knows a period of one and a half thousand years when the ability to read hieroglyphs was completely lost, and therefore it is necessary to remember that the preservation of knowledge about this language is not a foregone conclusion: action, grounded in scholarly learning, is necessary for the ability to read it to be retained in the long term.

b) Clergy, theologians, and historians of religion

– The Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt is one of the oldest Christian churches in the world and continues to use a form of Ancient Egyptian in its worship (the church has about 20 million members). This church, and hence the Coptic phase of Ancient Egyptian, continues to play a significant role both in the spiritual and cultural life of modern Egypt and in the study of the formation of early Christianity. Moreover, Egypt is the most frequently mentioned country in the Bible, so Egyptological knowledge can be very helpful to people who work in this field (e.g. in matters of studying the historicity of biblical events).

c) Other persons – Egyptian language presents a range of potential attractions to a broad range of other interested individuals. At the most general level, it gives all learners a chance to broaden their horizons and develop their language skills in a context very different to what most people know already. At a more specialised level, philologists and linguists can benefit from deep study of ancient literature and linguistic relations, while archaeologists and historians can deploy it for work with material culture with an ancient Egyptian component (indeed, the line between ancient Egyptian fine art and hieroglyphic writing is often blurred). It is also worth noting that ancient Egyptian writing, along with Mesopotamian cuneiform, is one of the oldest scripts anywhere on earth (it is more than 5000 years old) – therefore, it is at the origins of the development of writing as a key sphere of human activity, which still fundamentally affects our lives.

Specificities of studying Ancient Egyptian in Russia

Studying Ancient Egyptian in Russia involves a number of peculiarities and difficulties. First of all, at present only two educational programmes (HSE University and Saint Petersburg State University) provide in-depth Egyptological training. It should be noted that admission to the first one is made once every five years (the first intake of students was in 2022), and

to the second one every two years, which makes it much harder for all applicants interested in the subject to get a specialised education.

A feature directly stemming from this is the small number of qualified staff capable of teaching Ancient Egyptian. This is an inevitable consequence of such a scarcity of teaching programmes – if few people know Ancient Egyptian, even fewer will be able to teach it. In this regard, it is a concern that Russia is currently significantly behind virtually all other countries with a major Egyptological tradition in the pace of training new staff – for example, Britain, with a population of only 68 million, is able to hold an annual intake of seven Egyptology programmes [7], while Russia has only two programmes for a population of 146 million, and no intake takes place annually. In view of this, it is necessary to increase the efficiency of teaching Egyptology in Russia – if at present the country cannot produce numbers of experts comparable to those of rival Egyptological traditions, there should at least be a focus on providing the highest level of training for the small number of experts that do graduate. In other words, to ensure quality over quantity.

As a rule, the few Egyptologists who do work in Russia do not undertake specialist training in pedagogy, preferring to focus instead on the research outputs necessary for an academic career, and this factor combines with the general dearth of cadres to render high quality language teaching a particularly difficult task. The situation with Ancient Egyptian textbooks in Russian is especially critical – for the entire existence of the Russian Federation, not a single Ancient Egyptian textbook has been published there. The most recent textbooks in Russian belong to the Soviet period, and not even its late phase. The works in question are N. S. Petrovsky's "The Egyptian Language. Introduction to hieroglyphs, lexicon and sketch of grammar of the Middle Egyptian language" [8] and M. A. Korostovtsev's "Introduction to Egyptian philology" 1963 [9]. Both volumes, despite their weighty contribution to the development of the subject in their era, are now outdated and do not meet the academic and pedagogical standards of today. Nevertheless, they should be examined in more detail.

N.S.Petrovsky's work features an extensive introduction, summarising the different phases of the Egyptian language and providing an overview of the place of Egyptian in the genealogy of other languages of the Middle East and North Africa. The author provides

historical background on the decipherment of the language, touching upon the challenges of studying it after the initial decipherment by French researcher Jean-Francois Champollion in the early nineteenth century. The use of tables and consideration of various examples in categorising hieroglyphic characters is an effective technique to aid comprehension. The grammar section is organised in a system: noun – adjective – pronoun – numerals – verb and forms thereof. The author gives various examples, but there are no exercises or vocabulary. Moreover, the introduction of the verb only towards the end of the textbook makes it extremely awkward for classroom study, forcing the teacher to pay excessive attention to verbless sentences (which in reality do not occur in Egyptian more often than sentences with a verb).

Meanwhile, in his work M. A. Korostovtsev considers the connection of the Egyptian language with Semito-Hamitic, Semitic and Libyan-Berber languages, in accordance with the linguistic standards of the time. He conducts a separate review of the material side (what was written on) before directly considering the writing system itself. Korostovtsev provides a table of alphabetic graphemes and devotes two paragraphs to hieratic and demotic writing. Phonetics and the various grammatical forms are treated separately. At the same time, this work is not provided with a dictionary, reference material, or any exercises. Thus, the work is well suited to the needs of people who already have a fairly thorough knowledge of Egyptian at a basic level, and want not so much to learn, but rather to delve into the phonetic and grammatical details of the language. For a student starting from scratch, comprehending this manual is essentially impossible.

The comparative table below (*Table 1*) sets out the advantages and disadvantages of the aforementioned works in a more concise form.

	Petrovsky, "The Egyptian Language" (Leningrad 1958)	Korostovtsev, "Introduction to Egyptian Philology" (Moscow 1963)
Positive features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content introduction • Short chapters convenient for studying the material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed linguistic analysis at phonetic, graphic, and syntactic level

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant examples Logical progression (noun – adjective – pronoun – numerals – verbs) 	Overview of the materiality of writing
Negative features (for both works)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No exercises or dictionary Outdated pedagogical approaches; lack of direct engagement with the reader and no opportunity for active learning 	

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of two major Russian-language works related to the teaching of Ancient Egyptian language

Consequently, Russian instructors of Egyptian currently teach on the basis of English-language textbooks, which are not originally designed for Russian students and do not reflect the peculiarities of translation into Russian. There are many such textbooks [10], but the one employed at the university of the present writers is that of James Hoch [11], which is standard at leading universities in North America and Cambridge University. The textbook by Alan H. Gardiner [12] is also used for some reference material, lists of hieroglyphs, and exercises. This textbook, although older than even the aforementioned Soviet works and offering an outdated understanding of grammar, is still unsurpassed as a source of auxiliary material for the study of individual hieroglyphic characters.

The proposed remedy: A new Egyptian textbook developed at HSE University

Due to this not entirely satisfactory situation, there is a need to delineate methodologies for studying Egyptian in the Russian-speaking context, as well as to develop their practical application in Russia. This year a project to create a new textbook on the ancient Egyptian language has been launched at the university of the present writers – National Research University Higher School of Economics Moscow (HSE). It is planned that students and professors will work together to prepare teaching materials [13]. The aim of the project is to create a textbook convenient primarily for Russian-speaking readers/students, which in turn yields promise for the further development of Egyptology as a growing discipline in Russia. In shaping the structure of the textbook, the practical experience of students and teachers (including experience of foreign pedagogical settings), will be taken into account and combined with analysis of theoretical material dealing both with new

approaches to the subject matter and best practice in the field of language pedagogy as a whole.

At present, it is considered necessary to include in the new textbook:

1. Introduction with historical background and language features

2. Structured grammatical sections, organised in a logical form with "most understandable" material near the front and "hardest to understand" material later on.

3. Exercises aimed at practicing and consolidating the grammatical content (primarily translating and analysing sentences and/or whole passages from original ancient Egyptian literature, as well as pedagogical content created by the compilers themselves with a view to working on key aspects of grammar).

4. Dictionary and list of hieroglyphs

Unlike previous works, the new textbook will endeavour to use elements of pedagogical theory widely used in the study of other languages, but still completely absent in university Egyptology (both in Russia and beyond). The most relevant here is L. S. Vygotsky's theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) [14]. The ZPD represents new knowledge, which students can reach through their own cognitive effort when deploying information already available in their minds, along with the effective support of the teacher

and/or learning material. That is, the goal of the new textbook is to transform students from a passive listener, simply receiving and memorising knowledge, into active and empowered agents of their own ancient Egyptian learning. They will be able to reach the correct understanding of new constructions in their own mind, thinking through the discoveries for themselves and therefore understanding the logical system on which the language is built.

Constructing a textbook in this way will require a smooth, step-by-step increase in the complexity of the material, without large jumps from chapter to chapter and with a large number of training texts (both ancient and specially formulated for pedagogical purposes). The Cambridge Latin Course is an effective example of this kind of work in the context of ancient language learning, and could possibly serve as a prototype pedagogical approach for the envisaged new ancient Egyptian textbook [15].

Thus, to summarise, the study of Ancient Egyptian in Russia faces a number of difficulties, including the lack of teaching materials and qualified teachers. Nevertheless, work is underway to fill the gaps, including the writing of a textbook and further development of the methodology of teaching Ancient Egyptian.

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