

Confusion of tense and modality? Impact of L1 phonological transfer on verb semantics

Sonja Dahlgren & Martti Leiwo (University of Helsinki)
sonja.dahlgren@helsinki.fi, martti.leiwo@helsinki.fi

In the Roman period Egypt, Greek was the official language of the government, and all the official as well as most of the unofficial correspondence was written in Greek. Despite the fact that scribes were trained in Greek, texts show a vast variety of phonological and morphosyntactic non-standard variation. Some variation is due to phraseology, some to linguistic change, some to variation in genre, some is contact-induced, and some is due to a bad command of Greek in general. The data presented here consists partly of private letters from the Eastern Desert of Egypt, showing general tendencies of Egyptian phonological influence, and partly of scribal documents from the Northern part of the country, giving evidence for underdifferentiation of foreign phonological units specific to the impact of Egyptian.

Egyptian being an Afro-Asiatic language, consonants strongly affected the quality of the adjacent vowels. Underdifferentiation of foreign phonemes, as well as L1 prosody-based phonological influence, caused a misperception of Greek phonology, visible in the many non-standard graphemic variants of the Greek words. For instance, as there was no /y/ in Egyptian, there was a great deal of fluctuation between the graphemes <u> and <y>, both apparently representing some sort of rounded back vowel present in Egyptian. Another common error concerns the Egyptian tendency to reduce unstressed vowels to schwa, a phenomenon evident in the confusion of marking /a, e, o/ in Greek unstressed syllables. In Greek these were distinctive phonemes, even in unstressed syllables, and furthermore bore morphological meaning. The Egyptian phonological transfer thus indirectly produced semantically ungrammatical verb forms, the non-standard orthography inadvertently creating confusion between tense and modality. In this presentation, we show some verb constructions with seemingly causeless variation in the use of modality and tense as well as aspect, on the surface level appearing to reflect morphosyntactic confusion, assumed to result from inadequate language learning. When looked at more closely, however, the non-standard inflectional behaviour seems to be caused by misperception of Greek phonology due to the impact of the writers' L1.

Some of the verb forms have a grammatically faultless appearance but on closer inspection, they turn out to be problematic. We can take, for example, the forms *pémpson* [ˈpempson] and *pémpse* [ˈpempse] from the verb *pémpo*: [ˈpempɔ], 'send'. The editors of the texts often have difficulties in deciding which one is the intended form: sometimes *pémpse* [ˈpempse] is analysed as an imperative, sometimes as an imperative or an infinitive. If the graphemic writing forms are taken to be exact, there will be semantic confusion regarding the intended meaning of the verb. The situation might gain some clarity if we analyse the language use on a more individual level. Among the examples presented here are some verb forms used by a person called Petenephtotes, a composer of several Greek letters. His use of verb forms deviates from the Greek standard usage, but is in line with the usage of those with L1 Egyptian. If we take again the verb *pémpo*: [ˈpempɔ], we find even more variation than mentioned above: the forms *pémpse* [ˈpempse] and *pémpson* [ˈpempson] and *pémpsen* [ˈpempsen] are all used in a similar context. This variation clearly has a phonological basis, as all endings seem to blend together, apparently depicting the Egyptian-influenced phonetic form [ˈpempɔ̯]. Petenephtotes even uses *pémpσαι* [ˈpempse] in a similar context. The same phenomenon is evident in the Coptic usage of Greek loanwords, even though the written Coptic sources are from a later period than the Greek texts: in Coptic dialects, the graphemes <e> and <o> were standardly used to depict schwa. As the phenomenon not only concerned Greek unstressed syllables but stressed ones as well, it may be possible to conclude that inadvertent transference of the Egyptian stress system might have caused Greek stressed syllables to be perceived as unstressed. The confusion of /a, e, o/ visible in the verb forms might therefore be a reflection of the Egyptian writers' attempt to depict the unstressed syllable's schwa.