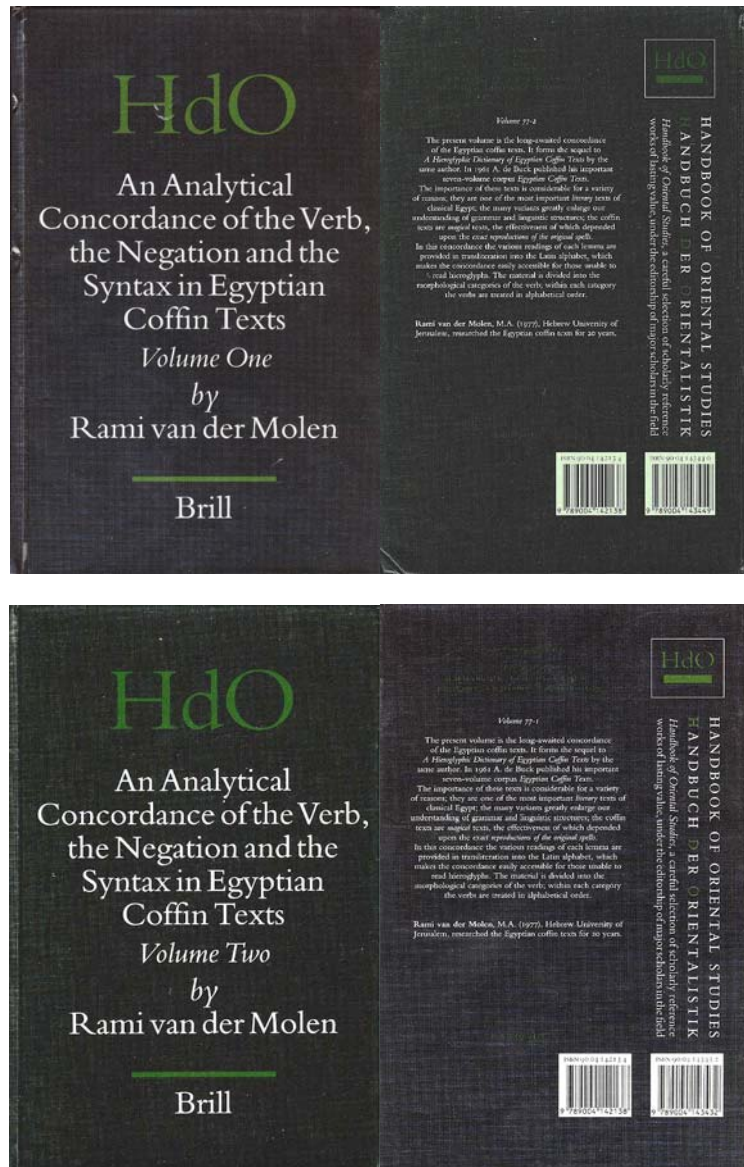


Molen, van der, R. 2005. *An analytical concordance of the verb, the negation and the syntax in Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Two volumes. – Leiden, Brill (Handbuch der Orientalistik, Section One. The Near and Middle East 77)

Book review by R. Nyord





This massive two-volume work forms the second part of a projected three-part series by Rami van der Molen dealing with the language of the Coffin Texts, the first being ‘A hieroglyphic dictionary of Egyptian Coffin Texts’ (Van der Molen, 2000), and the third a projected grammar referred to in the preface (p. xiv) of the present work as ‘Morphology, verb and syntax – a reassessment’.

After a short (5 p.) description of the aims and organisation of the work, the concordance is divided into three parts according to the elements mentioned in the title. Thus, part 1 deals with occurrences of verbal forms, part 2 with negations and part 3 with syntactical constructions. Each part is then subdivided according to the relevant grammatical categories. Part 1 is subdivided according to verbal forms, part 2 according to (verbal) negations such as *n sdm=f*, while part 3 seems to be slightly more heterogeneous, including such headings as ‘Sentences introduced by *iw*’ as well as more *ad hoc* headings such as ‘Sentences with *hrw*, *grh*, etc.’. In the first two parts, each of the headings is followed by an alphabetised list of the verbs found in each particular form, so that one can quickly find, e.g., all occurrences in the Coffin Texts of a participle of the verb *ini*, or of the verb *iri* in the negation *tm=f sdm*. The indexed words are given in transliteration, and in the cases where more than one lemma has the same transliterated appearance, a summary translation in parenthesis is used to distinguish them,

e.g. ‘*wn* (to be)’ and ‘*wn* (to open)’. In the third part, the occurrences of the phenomena described in each heading are organised sequentially according to De Buck’s (1935–1961) volume and page numbers, rather than by individual words. In all three parts, each listed occurrence gives, in addition to the reference to De Buck’s text edition, a transliterated reproduction of the context, allowing an overview of the passage in question, including significant variations between the sources.

A ‘Vocabulary’ is included at the end of the work, which is basically an index that gives references to all the pages in the concordance on which a particular verb is dealt with, and some pages of addenda and corrigenda to the author’s ‘Hieroglyphic dictionary’ (Van der Molen, 2000).

The bulk of the work, with the printed preface as the only exception, is written in the same admirably clear handwriting as the ‘Hieroglyphic dictionary’. While most of the contents of the book (unlike the ‘Hieroglyphic dictionary’) consists of signs from the Latin alphabet, this allows for the occasional hieroglyphic addition to avoid ambiguity, e.g. whether a word transliterated as *n* is written as  or .

The work thus aims at adding a grammatical concordance to the already-existing tools for studying the language of the Coffin Texts (cf. the overview and comparison in DuQuesne, 2001), making it possible to find occurrences of particular verbal forms and other grammatical constructions in the texts. Apart from the formidable task of gathering and sorting all such occurrences of select grammatical phenomena in a corpus the size of the Coffin Texts, any work of this sort faces two main challenges. One is the current lack of a commonly accepted grammatical terminology of Middle Egyptian, and the second is the ambiguity inherent in the Middle Egyptian writing system, which often makes a definitive identification of a certain verb difficult.

The first problem has been addressed in what appears to be a rather simple way by adopting a nomenclature which is characterised as “self-evident and in keeping with the use of H.J. Polotsky” (p. xii) with the addition of the ‘Edel-form’, named after its first treatment in Edel 1955–64, §511ff (*sdmw=f*, corresponding to the ‘prospective’ in Allen, 2000: 285ff and Graefe, 2001: 87ff). Lacking a universally accepted paradigm for Middle Egyptian grammar, any choice of terminology might potentially find its critics. The adherence to the Standard Theory (ST) terminology, however, seems prudent, since its references are well established, and even its critics can be assumed to have a working knowledge of the terms used. Polotsky is mentioned without any reference to his written works, which means that the terminology employed in the concordance does not escape ambiguity entirely. One of the cornerstones of the ST, the ‘emphatic’ *sdm.n=f* (Polotsky, 1957), for instance, is missing as a distinct category, having been included in a broader category called simply ‘*sdm.n=f*’, comprising both transitive (in ST either circumstantial or ‘emphatic’) and intransitive (always ‘emphatic’) verbs that are not introduced by *iw*. Of course, the morphological identity of the emphatic and the circumstantial *sdm.n=f* forms in the ST might be an argument in favour of treating them as a single category as is the case here, but since the author states that the categorisation is based on the terminology of Polotsky, this choice seems a little surprising.

Another departure from ST, and one which is more aligned with recent criticism, is the omission of ‘circumstantial’ forms as a distinct category. In parallel with the simple ‘*sdm.n=f*’ category just mentioned, there is a single ‘*sdm=f*’ category, distinguished from the ‘prospective’, ‘relative’ and ‘emphatic’ *sdm=f* forms, but including both the Standard Theoretical ‘circumstantial’ (corresponding to the ‘imperfective’ in Allen, 2000: 263ff, who does not regard this form as essentially subordinate) and the ‘perfective’ *sdm=f*. On the other hand the ‘emphatic’ (geminating) *sdm=f* of the ST is split up into two categories, namely the ‘emphatic *sdm=f*’ including occurrences of the form in initial syntactic position, and the “‘that’ –form’ including occurrences in other syntactical environments, e.g. as object or after prepositions. These two categories contain only geminating verb-classes in which gemination is morphologically apparent, thus excluding verbs of other classes occurring in similar syntactical environments, which in the ST would be included in these categories. The same is true for the ‘Edel-form’ category in which only forms which actually show a written *-w* or *-y* ending are included, while excluding forms occurring in similar syntactical and semantic environments that do not show the ending. In sum, the main criterion for categorising the verbal forms seems to be strictly morphological with all non-diagnostic forms being lumped together in a very large generic category, but with the occasional exception, as e.g. with the distinction between the ‘emphatic *sdm=f*’ and the “‘that’ –form’, where syntactical criteria are used as well.

The focus on morphology is a practical working criterion and not inherently problematic (though as noted, it leads to very large categories of non-diagnostic forms). With the reference to Polotsky, however, the reader is led to expect the strong focus on syntax associated with the ST, and this lack of precision makes the initial work with the concordance more difficult than it had to be.

These remarks lead to the second problem, that of the ambiguity of the writing system. In the same concise manner as with the commentaries on grammatical terminology, the author makes the following statement (p. xii): “Classification is fluent: the same examples may be repeated in various classes as it is often impossible to restrict the use of a certain example to a unique form of a verb. Thus to a certain extent overlap is unavoidable”. In the concordance, such ambiguities are noted in parentheses after the transliterated passage referred to, showing the other classes in which the occurrence in question has been included in the format ‘(inf./neg. compl.?)’ to signify e.g. that the verbal form under discussion could also be regarded as an infinitive

or a negatival complement. As the author indicates in the passage just quoted, this practice is unavoidable and it seems that these comparatively rare duplications strike a good balance between a profusion of strictly conceivable but unlikely alternatives, and a definitive identification on ultimately subjective criteria. Because of the morphological approach of the author to categorisation, the tendency of the Middle Egyptian writing system *e.g.* to omit certain endings, or to leave specific verbal forms unmarked in some verb classes, is a potential problem. However, once the main criteria for the categorisation have been realised, the combination of small, morphologically marked categories with the large generic ones and the syntactical categories given in part 3 (*e.g.* ‘sentences with *n*, “because”’, and ‘preposition+*s_{dm}=f*’) will make it possible for the user to find what she/he is looking for in a limited number of attempts.

One could wish that the introductory chapter had treated these problems and considerations in a more in-depth discussion of the methodology and choices made. As it is now, the user of the book goes through a learning process which, to a certain extent, could have been avoided by adding the more thorough introduction reasonable to expect from a scholarly work. Nonetheless, after some use of the book, it becomes possible to anticipate the choices of the author and to usefully combine the categories of the three parts, making the lack of a description of the methodology less of a problem. In the end, these minor problems do little to reduce the great usability of this work for students of the grammar and contents of the Coffin Texts.

Molen, van der, R. 2005. An analytical concordance of the verb, the negation and the syntax in Egyptian Coffin Texts. Two volumes. – Leiden, Brill (Handbuch der Orientalistik, Section One. The Near and Middle East 77). 1940 pp. ISBN 90 04 14213 4, ISSN 0169-9423. Price €499.00 (casebound).

Cited literature

- Allen, J.P. 2000.** Middle Egyptian. An introduction to the language and culture of hieroglyphs. – Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Buck, de, A. 1935-1961.** The Egyptian Coffin Texts. 7 vols. – Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- DuQuesne, T. 2001.** Dictionaries and databases of Egyptian religious texts. – Discussions in Egyptology 50: 15-24.
- Edel, E. 1955-1964.** Altägyptische Grammatik. 2 Vols. – Rome, Pontificium Institutum Biblicum (=Analecta Orientalia 34/39).
- Graefe, E. 2001 [1987].** Mittelägyptisch. Grammatik für Anfänger. – Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz.
- Molen, van der, R. 2000.** A hieroglyphic dictionary of Egyptian Coffin Texts. – Leiden, Brill (Probleme der Ägyptologie 15).
- Polotsky, H.J. 1957.** The “Emphatic” *s_{dm}.n.f* Form. – Revue d’Égyptologie 11: 109–117 (reprinted as Polotsky, H.J. 1971. Collected papers. – Jerusalem, At the Magnes Press, The Hebrew University: 43-51).