Taking Possession of the Constant Rate Hypothesis: Variation in Ancient Egyptian Possessives

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This first variationist study of ancient Egyptian examines variation between two possessive constructions in Middle (c. 2000 BC – 1350 BC) and Late (c. 1350 BC – 700 BC) Egyptian. The first is an older and socially prestigious variant, while the second is an innovative and socially stigmatized variant (Allen, 2010; Gardiner, 1957). The analysis is based on 1239 tokens from the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* corpus, extracted from letters and official texts spanning over a millennium.

Egyptological philologists have claimed that the old variant was used only for official texts while the new variant was used only for vernacular texts (Polis, 2014; Allen, 2013; Junge, 2005), and that Late Egyptian had two distinct registers: one form for official texts that retained its Middle Egyptian features, like the old possessive variant, and one form for vernacular texts that used only Late Egyptian features, including the new possessive variant (Junge, 2005; Kammerzell, 2000). Contrary to these claims, I show that both variants appear throughout official and vernacular texts during the Late Egyptian period, although the new variant is disfavoured in official texts.

An extension of the Egyptological philologists’ position also claims that these two registers are in fact different linguistic entities, and that because of this the rate of change (the rate of the spread of the new variant) in each register is different (Polis, in press; Junge, 2005). To test that claim, I modeled the data from both text types using logistic functions. The measure of the rate of change is the slope of the function; no matter how the time periods were divided – whether by broader time period or individual dynasties, I found that the slopes were the same for both text types. This supports the claim made in linguistics (Kroch, 1989) that language change occurs at the same rate across contexts – the Constant Rate Hypothesis – while contradicting the Egyptological claims that the rates of change should differ depending on the text type.

References


The spread of the new pronoun possessive construction: A variationist approach to the letters of the Middle and New Kingdom. In Possession in ancient Egyptian, ed. Grossman, Eitan and Polis, Stephane. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. Google Scholar. Hoch, James E. 1997. Middle Egyptian grammar. Mississauga: Benben. Google Scholar. Johnson, Daniel Ezra. Taking Possession of the Constant Rate Hypothesis: Variation and Change in Ancient Egyptian Possessive Constructions. S. Gardiner. Art. 2015. 4. View 1 excerpt, cites background. Save. Tutankhamun’s Armies: Battle and Conquest During Ancient Egypt’s Late Eighteenth Dynasty. J. Darnell, C. Manassa. Geography. 2007. 14. Save. Alert. The question of the race of ancient Egyptians was raised historically as a product of the early racial concepts of the 18th and 19th centuries, and was linked to models of racial hierarchy primarily based on craniometry and anthropometry. A variety of views circulated about the racial identity of the Egyptians and the source of their culture. Some scholars argued that ancient Egyptian culture was influenced by other Afroasiatic-speaking populations in North Africa or the Middle East, while others... Stature and the pattern of body proportions were investigated in a series of six time-successive Egyptian populations in order to investigate the biological effects on human growth of the development and intensification of agriculture, and the formation of state-level social organization. Univariate analyses of variance were performed to assess differences between the sexes and among various time periods. Significant differences were found both in stature and in raw long bone length measurements between the early semipastoral population and the later intensive agricultural population. The size differences were greater in males than in females.