

COMPOUND PREPOSITIONS IN SAHIDIC COPTIC

By Bentley Layton,
in *Studies Presented to Hans Jakob Polotsky*,
pages 239-268. Edited by Dwight W. Young,
Massachusetts: Pirtle & Polson,
1981

For anyone studying the Coptic language, and willing to put forth some effort to follow the complexities of Layton's project, this article is both interesting and useful. As Layton points out, there are only a few simple prepositions in the Coptic lexicon but these were combined with many other words to form compounds that functioned as prepositions and other types of words. The bewildering varieties and usages of these compound prepositions are intimidating to most students of Coptic. Many students would prefer to take the parrot approach and simply memorize an acceptable translation for each instance. In his very willingness to engage this subject, Layton shows a bravery possessed by few. His stated purpose, "to clarify the formation and use of compound prepositions in Sahidic Coptic," is a deceptively simplistic concept (239). Layton noticed that there appear to be patterns in the ways that some nouns, usually nouns that denote body parts or other inalienable characteristics, interact in compound situations. He thus set out to describe these situations and provide a set of rules that would predict and demystify these usage patterns. In the process of doing this Layton provides a thorough explanation of the compound prepositions within the larger context of compound words and the overarching process of the evolution of the Egyptian language from Middle Egyptian into Coptic. Layton's work is elegant, logical, and mind-wrenchingly complex. This is not an article for the faint of heart. It plunges the reader almost immediately into the depths of complicated grammar and doesn't provide much in the way of a life jacket.

Layton's article begins in a reader-friendly manner. He explains his topic and what he hopes to accomplish. He hopes the results of his work might be useful to other scholars interested in comparative grammar work with the Old Testament, or possibly as a framework that could be used to analyze dialect differences. He explains that his data set is limited to only the books of the New Testament so that all of his generalizations only apply to that set of writings. He justifies this choice by the fact that this body of work is very well attested and, by limiting himself in this way, he is less likely to treat unrelated evidences together. After this lucid beginning, the talk turns to grammar and quickly becomes thorny. This is not necessarily Layton's fault. His subject is exceptionally complex and he writes for a reader familiar with Sahidic Coptic and well versed in the grammatical terminology associated with this language.

Layton ultimately argues that the words that reference body parts and other inalienable properties of human bodies, such as voice, are used in compound situations as references to relative spacial positions and have no relation whatsoever to the physical body parts. When an actual body part is referenced, a word other than the one used in compounds will be employed. Layton gives examples from original texts to show how this works, in one case providing parallel sentences that incorporate the words “from the mouth” in different semantic usages to demonstrate that different words were used when the mouth was referenced as a body part as opposed to when the mouth was used as part of a compound preposition that referenced the body part in a non-literal way (what Layton refers to as a relative position to describe the location in physical space of the action being conveyed by the preposition).

Layton is very helpful in providing several different analytical perspectives (direct comparisons from parallel usages in original texts, tables and charts, and translations from Greek to Coptic, for examples) to demonstrate his argument that, although body part words are used in compound prepositions, these terms reference relative locations of actions and not, in even the weakest metaphorical sense, the actual body part. Layton’s denial of even a weak reference to the body seems untenable, as a special referencing system based on the human body is, by default, referencing the body as body, thus it surely must have at least a metaphorical relationship. Layton’s explanation for his insistence that these words have no relation to the body part they once referenced is, however, another complex reminder to the reader of his authority with respect to this language. He explains that during the late Egyptian-into-Coptic time period, the adoption of a marking system of specific articles to show whether a noun is definite or indefinite (including the use of the zero-determination) allowed the retention of some nouns from Middle Egyptian whose form permitted them to be used in meaningful ways within this new system. These nouns are the “inalienables” and this new system stripped them of their old associations.

The strength of Layton’s work is his absolute command of the subject and the multiple angles he takes in his approach to communicating this knowledge. He truly understands the grammar and is obviously in his element in discussing it. It is only because he does understand his subject so well, that he is able to communicate the mechanics of prepositions in Coptic grammar in spite of his wordy and often difficult prose style. The only problems with this piece, aside from the mindboggling complexity of the subject itself, are likely the result of the reader’s lack of preparation. Layton assumes a proficiency in Greek on the part of the reader, as many of his examples are given in Greek as well as Coptic and he often fails to provide translations. For the non-Greek-reading Coptic student, this is a drawback. He also fails to adequately define his terminology and abbreviations, although these are standard linguistic terms. For a readership of linguists this may not be problematic, but for an audience of Egyptology students, this gets confusing. Overall, however, for those willing to brave the murky depths of Coptic compound prepositions, this article is well worth the discomfort.