

ART. XI.—*The Linguistic Affinities of the Ancient Egyptian Language.* By REGINALD STUART POOLE, Esq.

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[This paper was prefaced by some observations, of which the substance is here given.]

THE importance of the relation of the ancient Egyptian language to the Semitic group will be acknowledged, if it is remembered that the late Baron Bunsen based upon this relation his theory of the derivation of the latter from the former or a closely-similar variety of speech.

It is necessary here to state briefly the reasons for the correctness of the method of interpreting hieroglyphics discovered by Dr. Young and developed by Champollion. The Rosetta Stone is the key. It is in three inscriptions, called in the third (which is Greek), sacred letters (hieroglyphics), enchorial letters, and Greek letters. Dr. Young's first step was the guess that certain signs enclosed in rings in the hieroglyphic inscription corresponded to the names of royal persons in the Greek. The alphabet he thus formed may, however, be independently obtained without any recourse to a guess. There is an enchorial papyrus in the Leyden Museum, in which certain words are transcribed in Greek characters. From these transcriptions an enchorial alphabet can be formed, by which the words enclosed in signs like parentheses in the enchorial inscription of the Rosetta Stone will be found to furnish the same names as the corresponding words enclosed in rings in the hieroglyphic inscription. We thus obtain the means of reading the two characters of ancient Egyptian. In order to interpret the language conveyed by these characters it is necessary to know that language. It has been always held that Coptic is substantially the same as ancient Egyptian. From the date of the Rosetta Stone to that of the oldest Coptic work, the translation of the Bible, not more than four or five centuries intervened, and there were no political causes that could account for any real change in the language during this

period. Coptic in this, its latest form, is essentially but little advanced beyond pure monosyllabism. But we have not to depend upon any such inferential reasoning. Ancient Greek and Latin writers have preserved to us a number of transcriptions of Egyptian words, with their meanings, which Parthey has collected in the appendices to his *Vocabularium Coptico-Latinum*, &c. The greater part of these words, if we exclude the names of plants given by Dioscorides, are easily recognisable in the Coptic dictionary, essentially unchanged in form and meaning. There can, therefore, be no doubt that ancient Egyptian, in its two dialects, the sacred and the vulgar—which cannot have differed much, if we compare the hieroglyphic and enchorial inscriptions of the Rosetta Stone—is essentially the same as Coptic. If, therefore, we can transcribe ancient Egyptian words (as has been proved possible), we have nothing further to do but to refer to the Coptic dictionary for their significations. This has been the course followed by the Egyptologists, and it has led to the recovery of enough of the ancient language to enable them to discover the general sense of any document.

Perhaps the most satisfactory confirmation of this system of interpretation is to be found in the minute and congruous nature of the information it affords as to the character of the ancient Egyptian language. A systematic grammar has never been obtained by a mere guessing interpretation, and, it may be asserted, will never be so obtained.

Before attempting to discover the characteristics of a single language, or to institute any comparison between languages, it is necessary to lay down a systematic classification of the varieties of human speech.

If we adopt what appears to be the only reasonable system, and class the languages of the simplest character lowest, and next, those more complex, gradually ascending, we obtain the following main divisions:—

a. Monosyllabic languages, such as the ancient Chinese. (Many languages, now polysyllabic, show evident traces of original monosyllabism: thus, in Turkish the accentuation and etymology of every syllable point to such an original condition.)

b. Agglutinate, as the modern Chinese. (The characteristic of agglutination may be illustrated from the formation of words in our own language, such as earring. It is observable that the absolute agglutination is often a slow operation, and in English the hyphen remains in all new words of this class, as nose-ring. We

have no instances in English of the yet-earlier condition in which each of the two words retains its separate declension, as the Latin *respublica*, *cornucopiae*.

c. Amalgamate, as all the Semitic and Indo-European languages. The words "beseech," "beseeching," and "besought," present excellent instances of amalgamation.

The great question of comparative philology, always to be kept in view, is:—Can we infer a consecutive growth of languages? in other words, were they all originally monosyllabic, whether from one origin or not?

1. For the purpose of comparison, it is necessary to separate a language into radical and formative elements. The radical elements are the simple roots; the formative elements, not only the additions and modifications of declension and conjugation, but all those which are employed in the formation of derivatives. The division may be illustrated by the separation of vocabulary from grammar, though the vocabulary of a language includes more than its roots, and the grammar more than its formative elements.

The mere comparison of words as we find them, whether roots or derivatives, can lead to no clear results. A language may contain an abundance of words borrowed from another language of an essentially-different nature. Thus Persian is in roots and forms essentially-different from Arabic, yet it contains a multitude of Arabic words. An unscientific comparison of Persian words with Arabic words might lead to the theory that the two languages were nearly connected, and the consequence would be the same connection with Arabic, of German, or English, which are demonstrably kindred to Persian. Few persons are aware of the extraordinary agreements, which must be generally accidental, of individual words in languages which have no real points of contact either in radical or formative elements. Thus in hieroglyphics, BET is bad, HEP a bird (comp. to hop), SER a chief, SHAF a ram. Sixty years ago such agreements would have afforded matter for grave speculation.

But it does not follow that a scientific comparison of roots with roots is not of very different value to such a chance-method as that to which I have referred. If we find the roots of two languages, for the *most part*, to agree in form and in signification, we may be sure of their close relationship, as of Greek and Sanskrit. We must, however, be careful, if such a comparison does not give us a very great number of correspondents, closely to examine such

words as may be merely imitative of sounds, as names of animals derived from their cries, which abound in some languages, as in Coptic, *krou* a frog; *ouhor*, a dog; *emou*, a cat, and the like; yet while excluding such words, we must note their presence as a class as characteristic of the language. We must also lay little stress upon certain words which may reasonably be traced to some instinctive expression of admiration, fear, or any like feeling, and to the sense of personality, and of non-personality. Thus the identity of the name of the moon in Egyptian (ΛΑΪΗ), in several modern languages, and probably in some early dialect in Greece, *lú*, may perhaps be accounted for by the supposition that it is a natural expression of wonder, and the similarity of personal pronouns in languages otherwise utterly opposed, may, perhaps, be explained—it seems otherwise inexplicable—by the supposition that they express some instinctive sense of personality or non-personality. In the first and second cases we must look for a general identity of the names of objects of the doubtful classes, in the third we must require a very close resemblance.

2. The comparison of the Egyptian with any other language, therefore, cannot be attempted without a correct knowledge of its radical and formative elements.

The radical elements or roots of Egyptian are very easily discovered. They have not, as often in our language, to be faintly traced in the common character of a multitude of descendants which preserve the traits of a long-lost ancestor. They are incontrovertibly clear.

In form Egyptian roots are all monosyllabic. I am quite prepared to meet with opposition on this point, but I feel justified in maintaining it very strongly. In the whole of the Egyptian vocabulary there are even very few words which are not obviously monosyllabic roots or derivatives readily reducible to such roots: the exceptions are too few to affect the rule. In Coptic there is a departure from monosyllabism, but it is so obvious that it should occasion no difficulty.

We must not suppose that the Egyptian roots as transcribed by us are limited to the number of the corresponding sounds that we write. It is usual to take Bunsen's vocabulary of 685 so-called roots as representing all the roots of the old language known to us. But it will be observed that these roots are written in Roman characters, and frequently correspond to more than one hieroglyphic group. Thus SIIA, "a diadem," and SIIA, "a book," are written with different characters; and no process of ingenuity

could satisfactorily trace them to a common source. Further, there are roots written with the same characters, but distinguished by ideographic signs, placed after them to determine their sense, as *HA*, "a day;" and *HA*, "an abode." There can be no reasonable doubt that these words of seemingly-identical sound, represent, at least originally, differences of pronunciation, and that, as in Chinese, so in the most primitive Egyptian, a large variety of vowel-sounds increased the utility of a consonant or consonants. I am therefore disposed to think that Bunsen's list, after the exclusion of many words carelessly repeated in slightly-different forms, and of a few derivatives, whether of known or lost roots, must be held to contain upwards of a thousand distinct roots.

Egyptian monosyllabism is generally either biliteral or trilateral. The most common form is biliteral, the root being expressed by a consonant and a vowel; the next in order, trilateral, by a vowel between two consonants; the third, by a vowel and consonant; the fourth, by a vowel and two consonants; and so on. It is, perhaps, scarcely possible to say whether the biliteral or trilateral roots predominate. The place of the vowel also is often difficult to determine, for it is frequently omitted altogether, and it is very frequently written after two consonants, between which it must certainly in some cases have been pronounced.

The Egyptian formative syllables and words are immediately recognised as strikingly similar to the Semitic. The personal pronouns in their separate and enclitic forms and the use of the latter for the purpose of inflecting verbs and adding the possessive idea to nouns, are almost identical. It is not necessary to prove this well-recognised fact.¹ In like manner the most common form of the substantive verb is the same as the Hebrew. The prepositions and adverbs are important as possessing the forms, and in their use as nouns the significations, of the primitive nouns from which they originated, thus warning us not to place the earliest known Egyptian very far from the first condition of the language. Egyptian has the power of forming derivatives, but these do not follow one single fixed system. They are framed in such a multitude of different ways that we cannot trace any dominant idea, as we can, for instance, in the Hebrew and Arabic verbs. There is but one very common derived form of the verb, that with *S* prefixed, which is causative, but there is a reduplicated form which has a frequentative or augmentative sense, and there are traces of three other forms, respectively with *T*, *H*, and *N* prefixed. The compounds are mere agglutinations of two words, never more, as

IIAS-SBA, "a flute-player," from IIAS, "to play," and SBA, "a flute." The amalgamate stage of compounds is never reached.

3. The changes which the Egyptian language underwent in the four thousand years of which we have its records, from the day when the inscriptions in the tombs of the subjects of Cheops were engraved till the death, ninety years ago, of the last speaker of Coptic, are chiefly valuable as showing the essential character of the language. It remained during this vast period an essentially-monosyllabic form of speech, never prolific of derivatives, and to the last unable to form compounds save by the rude process of agglutination, which loosely binds words together instead of fusing them into one mass. The approaches to amalgamation are mere colloquialisms. There is probably an important change in the transposition of certain verbal formatives which are prefixes in the Coptic but suffixes in the hieroglyphic, unless indeed their being written finally in the latter is on account of their subordinate character.

4. The Egyptian language may be compared with the Semitic languages on the one hand, and the African on the other; any comparison with the Iranian family is a point of less interest and probable result. On this occasion I intend to confine myself to the first comparison, hinting only at some results of the second, which I hope more fully to discuss on a future occasion.

The comparison will be first of roots, then of formatives. As the Egyptian language is monosyllabic, the first step is to endeavour to ascertain whether the theory that Semitic was biliteral before it reached its historical trilateral condition affords any aid in the comparison. Semitic roots, as we know them, are mainly trilateral, that is to say, there are three principal letters besides vowels. Thus in Hebrew we have the verb *Ka'TaL*, "he or it killed," in Arabic *Ka'TaLa*, where, in each case, the root is of three chief letters, no more having been anciently written.

These trilateral roots are, however, frequently monosyllabic, and it has therefore been conjectured by those who consider that every language must have gone through a long course of growth that the rest were originally monosyllabic also. Fürst and Delitzsch, by a supposed philosophical law of language, derive all the Semitic trilateral roots from biliterals with prefixes or suffixes, but they do not explain how these formatives lost their power after their first use. Hupfeld supposes that the trilateral stage was developed from the biliteral. Dietrich and Boetticher hold that this process was analogous to that by which derivatives are formed from the trilateral roots, and this theory certainly has some strong internal

evidence of correctness. But it may be a question whether these theories do not depend upon the strength of certain radicals and the weakness of others rather than upon any fixed system of development. It is obvious, when we see how easily the weak letters, such as the gutturals, are eliminated, and how hard it is to reduce a root consisting of three strong letters, that there may here be a confusion between change and development. Such a word as the Hebrew "yasad," "he placed," may be reasonably compared with the Sanskrit *sad*, our "sit," as the "y" is a weak letter, but is this loss of a weak letter, supposing the roots to be the same, enough to prove that the Hebrew form was originally without that letter? I should not strongly oppose theories so generally received were I not supported by the opinion of M. Renan, who, as plainly as possible, excludes them from the province of severely-correct philological inquiries. At the same time he admits that the biliteral roots of Hebrew show the greatest analogy to the roots of Indo-European languages, so that possibly the two races may have separated when their radicals were not completely developed and especially before the appearance of their grammar. But he wisely hesitates to proceed far on this dangerous path.— ("Histoire des Langues Sémitiques," i., pp. 418, seqq.)

But supposing that we can reduce the Semitic languages to a primitive monosyllabism of biliteral roots, is this the same as Egyptian monosyllabism? The Egyptian monosyllables are not always biliteral; and even if we consider the expressed vowels not to be equivalent (though they really are) to certain of the Hebrew gutturals, we have still trilateral roots of three consonants. The probability that the supposed biliteral stage of Semitic is not to be considered the only condition in which it can be compared with Egyptian, is, however, rendered a certainty by the occurrence in the ancient form of the latter language of two trilateral roots absolutely the same as Hebrew ones of the same signification. These roots are in Egyptian PTEH "to open," and SHTEM or KIITEM, the first sign corresponding to SH and KH, "to shut;" in Hebrew פתח Patah, and חָטַח Hatam. There can be no doubt whatever as to the meanings of the Egyptian words, and their relation to the Hebrew is rendered certain by their belonging to the same class in their significations. Both are found on early monuments, and PTEH is the name of the god of Memphis, and as such probably as old as the Egyptian language in its present form, certainly as old as its most ancient inscribed records. It is thus certain that, at the earliest date at which we know Egyptian,

at least 4000 years ago, it had trilateral roots, unmistakably Semitic. We must, therefore, if we follow the safer course, compare the Semitic languages in their trilateral form, not in any supposed earlier form, with the Egyptian. It may be remarked that these two roots in the Hebrew seem especially to offer themselves to the operation of reduction. In Patah, the final letter is feeble, and we accordingly find it twice changed without a change of meaning in Hebrew itself; פָּתַח, פִּתַּח, and פִּתְּחָה unused; so that Fürst unhesitatingly reduces it to a root פָּתַח with a suffix הָ. Hatam is still more easily reducible; it begins and ends with a feeble letter, but the guttural was the most likely to be additional, and therefore Fürst makes the root פָּתַח with a prefix הָ. Both these ingenious chemical operations become very doubtful when we find the words as monosyllables without any radical being dropped.

The presence in Egyptian of some words also found in Semitic must not lead us to conclude that their contact was at a time of which we have any monuments yet remaining. The Egyptian of 4000 years ago is the same as the Egyptian of the last century; and the latest Hebrew will be considered by sound criticism but little changed from the Hebrew of the patriarchal age. We cannot therefore suppose, on positive evidence, any gradual approach of the two languages. It is to be remarked that in the old Egyptian foreign Semitic words are usually written with a vowel expressed to each syllable, contrary to the usage with native words: thus, MAKATARA for Migdol, MARKABATA for merkabah (t); and that somewhat in the same manner Egyptian words cited in Hebrew are given in a Semiticized form: thus, Men-nufr (Memphis) becomes Moph and Noph; Shebek, Seva (So, A.V.). There is therefore no mutual assimilation of the two languages in the historical period.

In examining the Egyptian roots, no one can fail to notice some of biliteral form and others of trilateral with a medial vowel, which show a correspondence to Semitic roots that can scarcely be accidental. Bunsen has pointed out a few of these in the 4th volume of his *Egypt's Place*, but he left his fuller list unpublished. Some of these may, however, be equally traced in the Iranian languages to which other like roots also seem to point. But it does not appear to us that in either case there is a sufficient similarity to lead to any definite conclusion. Certainly the Arabic roots in Persian and Turkish are more important than the Semitic and Iranian possible correspondences to be traced in Egyptian.

In the formative part of Egyptian the case is wholly otherwise. In the isolated pronouns and those employed as verbal formatives as well as to give the possessive sense to nouns, there is not a similarity to Semitic, but a close relation to it. So remarkable is this relation, that in describing the Egyptian pronouns it would scarcely be incorrect to speak of them as Semitic, to use the easiest mode of explaining their character, just as it may be said of a Phœnician inscription that it is written in a Semitic character. In the derivative verbs we trace, however, a far less stable Semitic element. We can clearly determine a hiphil form and probably a niphal, respectively with H and N prefixed, but there are no other certain conjugations, save the reduplicated, common to Egyptian and Semitic. The reduplicated form has so non-Semitic an aspect that I scarcely venture to lay stress upon it. The other two forms, though traceable, seem to have lost their vitality before the time of the earliest records of Egyptian that we have. The particles have a resemblance to Semitic, but they are more primitive in being nouns still in use, or easily recognisable.

5. It must be admitted that Egyptian presents strong resemblances to Semitic, but that those resemblances are very unequal. Their discovery by Benfey, whose labours have been since carried on by Bunsen and Ewald, but more successfully by the former, has led to two theories of the place of Egyptian in relation to the Semitic family of languages.

Bunsen, firmly convinced of the single origin of language, and holding that its oldest form was purely monosyllabic, is forced to put the Egyptian further back in point of development than the Semitic. The presence of a strong Semitic element in the language makes it necessary, on his theory, that it should be an older stage of Semitic, a result which is clogged with this dilemma. The Asiatic descendant of Egyptian possesses one of its two elements, the Semitic; the African neighbours show the other, a foreign element. Why have the two thus had a separate existence for so many centuries? We can understand the continued existence of a dwarfed and unproductive offshoot of a language, as Egyptian might be thought to be of Semitic, but how are we to account for the division of a language into its two elements and the separate existence of these two elements, and of the language as a whole? Why, if Egyptian stand between pure monosyllabism and Semitism, have we no traces of Semitism in the monosyllabism of Nigritia, or in the Semitic languages of pure monosyllabism?

The cuneiform discoveries throw fresh light upon this curious

question. Sir Henry Rawlinson has shown that a monosyllabic or Turanian language, which he derives from Ethiopia, was spoken in Babylonia until supplanted by the neighbouring Semitic. Here, if anywhere, we must expect at least a trace of the supposed earlier stage of Semitic. On the contrary, the two languages, the Assyrian Chaldee and the Turanian of Babylonia, are wholly distinct, as, I believe, Semitic and Turanian always are. But upon this subject I trust Sir Henry Rawlinson will afford us clearer information than I am able to give.

I now come to the second theory, which supposes the two elements of Egyptian to be opposed, meeting like two different races in Egypt, and there intermixing. In support of this theory, which was first stated in a work edited by me, "The Genesis of the Earth and of Man,"* I must remark that no Semitic scholar of any weight has been found fully to accept the only other theory that seems possible, and, in particular, that M. Renan has brought all his ability to bear upon its refutation, I venture to think, with no little success. Semitic scholars hold that the two elements are never fused in Egyptian; that its pure monosyllabism is only mixed with the Semitic pronouns, and never could be more perfectly united. Their opponents challenge them to produce a parallel instance of a language which takes its roots from one source and its formative element in part from another. In reply, instances may be shown where the roots have wholly changed and the grammar remains the same, although no instance has been brought forward in which by borrowing, the complete set of roots of one language has been substituted for that of another.

This question is one of much broader import than would at first appear. If it be answered by the second theory I have endeavoured to state, a severe blow will have been dealt to the idea that all languages were gradually developed from the rudest beginnings. If we lose the imagined earlier stage of Semitism which Egyptian has been held to afford, we may well feel disposed to maintain the ancient theory, that civilized language, like civilization itself, was a gift of God to man, and to suppose that barbarous language sprang from a separate, perhaps a natural, source, rather than to hold that it indicates the first steps of a progress of which history affords not one corroborative instance.

* Second edition. Williams and Norgate, 1860.