

# Reconsidering the Categorical Status of the Coptic Suffix and Conjugation Base\*

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## 1. Introduction

The Coptic Tripartite Conjugation Pattern – composed of the so-called conjugation base, the actor expression and the verb in the infinitive – is an essential and well-known pattern within the Coptic grammatical system. This contribution aims to provide an adequate linguistic analysis of this Coptic sentence-type and redefine the categorial status of the above-mentioned elements according to their syntactic behaviour and morphophonological properties. In fact, the unaccented pronominal pronouns – traditionally considered suffixes – will be shown to be pronominal clitics; furthermore, the clitic nature of the auxiliary-like conjugation bases will be demonstrated as well. Finally, as a result of my analysis, the term ‘conjugation’ itself will be questioned in respect of describing Coptic sentence patterns.

## 2. Problems with the traditional terminology

### 2.1. Subject and verb

Following the Polotskyan terminology the Coptic Tripartite Conjugation Pattern is composed of the so-called conjugation base (the distinctive element of any conjugation), the actor expression (noun or pronominal suffix) and the verb in the infinitive.

1	2	3
Conjugation Base	Actor expression (noun/pronoun)	Verb (infinitive)
ⲁ-	ⲡ- ⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲓ-	ⲥⲱⲧⲏ

(After Polotsky 1960 393.)

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\* I am very grateful to Zsombor Mosoni for correcting my English.

In my view, this otherwise accepted and widely used terminology is misleading and inconsistent in several respects. The word ‘actor’ is of an overly general usage of an essentially *semantic* category, and as such, superfluous. Consider the following example (1) in which the semantic (or thematic) role of the noun is *theme*, instead of *agent* or *actor*.

- (1)    **ⲁ-Υ-ϣⲁ**                      **ϣⲟⲡⲉ**  
          perf-indef.art.-festival    happen/be  
          ‘A festival was celebrated.’<sup>1</sup>

The term ‘infinitive’ for this Coptic verb form also appears very problematic: Is there any relevance of an expression ‘infinitive’ in a language in which there is no corresponding finite verb form? Although it is undoubtedly considered an infinitive historically (Cf. *jr=f-sdm* > **ⲁ-ϣ-ϣⲟⲡⲉ**), this fact is evidently irrelevant on a synchronic level.

According to Polotsky<sup>2</sup> “a verb in Coptic is a word which is capable of filling the last position in the Tripartite Conjugation Pattern”, so he himself states that this is the criterion of the verb in general and not that of a special verb form. Layton<sup>3</sup> claims something very similar: “The main actualisation form of the verb is called the ‘infinitive’. Syntactically, the infinitive can be identified as the class of morphs which occurs as the third essential constituent of non-durative conjugation.” Noticeably, Layton identifies the class ‘infinitive’ on a syntactic (distributional) ground as well, rather than by morphological criteria.

Generally speaking, finite verb forms indicate an action that has a particular tense, aspect, mood or voice, while the infinitive verb forms are used to refer to an action with no reference to any tense, mood, aspect or voice. As a matter of fact, the Coptic infinitive *can* have some kind of aspect information as clearly observable in the infinitive vs. qualitative opposition (albeit only in the Bipartite Conjugation Pattern).<sup>4</sup> Further examination of all the possible verb forms in Coptic reveals that the qualitative does not seem to be more ‘finite’ than the infinitive. Hardly any other opposition in the morphological system of the verb exists, with the exception of a few irregular imperative forms.

The finite vs. non-finite distinction is owing to the descriptive approach originating from the Greek-Latin tradition with its rich verbal morphology, which was transferred to the description of other languages, too.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, no use

1 Example after Till 1961 159 (=Z 291,2).

2 Polotsky 1960 393.

3 Layton 2000 125.

4 Reintges (2004 205) characterizes it as situation aspect, which concerns the internal temporal structure or inherent dynamism of the situation described by the verbal predicate: an eventive or dynamic reading opposed to a non-dynamic (static) reading. For further details see Reintges 2004 211–217 (Ch 6.2).

5 Bisang 2001 1400.

making such a distinction, as one cannot speak about a real finite versus non-finite verb form opposition in this case. The denomination ‘infinitive’ is rather traditional than linguistically motivated.

In modern linguistics the finite vs. non-finite opposition relates to the sentence level rather than the relations *within* the sentence. Infinitiveness is the property of the whole clause. In Coptic, the clause becomes infinitival by adding the preposition **ϵ-** (a kind of complementiser in this case). Accordingly, this clause will lack an overt subject. In terms of the structural or generative linguistic theory, the subject is a PRO empty element which is controlled by a noun phrase argument in the main clause (the personal pronoun in (2)).

- |                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| (2) <b>†-ΟΥΩϣ</b> | <b>ϵ-ΩΩ ἤΠΕΙΜΑ</b> |
| I want            | to stay here       |

An independent argument may be brought up, as well; namely the way of adoption of Greek verbs in Sahidic and Bohairic dialects. Had the Coptic verb system really distinguished the infinitive from other verb forms, one would expect that the Greek verbs should have been adopted in their infinitival forms, as well. Instead, such adopted Greek words in the Sahidic dialect have the form of the imperfective active imperative second person singular.

- (3) **ΠΑΛΑΝΑ, ΑΚΡΕΙ, ΜΑΣΤΙΓΟΥ, ΑΓΩΝΙΖΕ**<sup>6</sup>

Although the Bohairic dialect adopts the Greek infinitive form, it is always combined with the *status nominalis* form of the Coptic verb **ἰπῖ (ἑρ-)** ‘to do’, which seems superfluous if the Coptic verbal position needs exactly an infinitival verb form.

- (4) **ἑρεπιούμιν ἐπιθυμείν, ἑρετῖν αἰτεῖν, ἑρκανδαλλίζεσθε σκανδαλίζεσθαι**<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2. Conjugation

When defining the Egyptian sentence types it is the conjugation that seems to be always focused on. The problematic usage of this term in respect of Coptic sentence can be clearly demonstrated through a few definitions from different grammars.

In his chapter ‘*Die Präfixkonjugation*’, Till made the following statements:<sup>8</sup> “*Die Konjugation mittelst Präfixe stellt die gewöhnliche Verbalflexion dar. (...) Alle Konjugationspräfixe können mit dem Infinitiv verbunden werden.*” Such definition is problematic as these prefixes are never connected directly to the infinitive, so the verb cannot be considered to be conjugated by this conjugation prefix. Another

6 Hasznos 2000 28; Lefort 1950 68.

7 Examples from Steindorff 1951 131 after Hasznos 2000 29; see also Houghton 1959 13; Vergote 1973 81. When the imperative is to be used, the irregular form of the same verb, that is **ἁπῖ-** is used to form these composites.

8 Till 1961 153 §301.

question may arise: How can we call it ‘prefix’? What is it prefixed to? A closer examination shows that the verb never meets its supposed inflexion.

Till also claims: “*Ist das Subjekt ein Personalpronomen, so wird es in der Form der Pronominalsuffixe mit dem Konjugationspräfix verbunden.*” It is a real mystery what kind of morphological entity is generated from such a situation, that is, a prefix combined to a suffix. Is it a word of its own? And, if the pronominal suffix attaches to the preceding prefix, how come it cannot be separated from the verb by a particle? The position of the so-called second place particles is well known; the configuration shown in (6b) is impossible.

(5) α-ΠΡΩΜΕ ΔΕ ΣΩΤῆ

(6a) α-Ϛ-ΣΩΤῆ ΔΕ

(6b) \*α-Ϛ ΔΕ ΣΩΤῆ

Layton defines conjugation in a rather different way:<sup>9</sup> “Conjugation (...) is accomplished not by varying the form of the verb itself, but rather (i) by suffixation of the subject to a conjugation base or mutable converter, or (ii) union of the verb with the personal subject prefixes of the durative sentence, or (iii) by occurrence of the subject in the appropriate position of a conjugation pattern that contains no base.” As the last two statements are in reference to the Bipartite Conjugation Pattern, the first statement should be focused on: What is the assumption based on which it is the subject that has to be suffixed to the conjugation base? If the subject is pronominal – as pointed out above when discussing Till – it is not probable that the pronominal would be suffixed to a prefix. If it is nominal it has its own accent, and need not to be attached to anything. On the contrary, it is the conjugation base, a short, unaccented element at the beginning of the sentence that has to be ‘affixed’ or attached to whatever it may be followed by.

Layton further states<sup>10</sup> that “Base + infinitive together constitute the predicate in two discontinuous parts. The base is the syntactic nucleus of the predicate, and the infinitive expresses lexical content.” Loprieno points out a similar concept:<sup>11</sup> “the infinitive – and gradually the stative as well – become lexical indicators, the nucleus of the predication being represented by the conjugational base followed by the subject.”

Polotsky, in his work on Sentence and Clause Conjugation, words his definition in a fairly general and cautious manner:<sup>12</sup> “*Conjugation* means the various ways in which a Coptic verb can enter into grammatical construction with actor expressions in such a way as to function either as a main sentence or as a dependent clause.”

9 Layton 2000 127 §165.

10 Layton 2000 253 §325.

11 Loprieno 1995 91.

12 Polotsky 1960 392.

In summary, what I intend to conclude is that strictly speaking one cannot call sentence structure *conjugation*. The verb carries only lexical information or lexical content, while all the grammatical functions (tense, mood, aspect) are codified by the Conjugation base. There are no visible agreement operations, the Coptic sentence is extremely analytic and the word order is strictly bound. No declination can be observed. No case-marking morphemes exist either. Grammatical relations are expressed by means of prepositions.

- (7) **ⲁ-ⲓ-ⲧⲁⲁ-ⲓ ⲛⲁ-ⲓ**  
 perf.-he-give-he to-he  
 ‘He gave it to him.’

### 2.3. Inflectional morphology

The next question to be answered is whether suffixes are really suffixes, that is, can one speak about inflectional affixes at all in reference to personal pronouns. First of all, the Coptic inflectional morphology in general is to be examined. Funk summarises this subject.<sup>13</sup> According to him “in morphological terms, the conjugation system is isolated from the verb system (...) the verb-form depends on the conjugation base only in terms of syntax.” Inspecting his above statement carefully one may wonder about its sense. It is doubtful what he means by a “conjugation system isolated from the verb”. Does he intend to say that conjugation consists of the conjugation base only, excluding the verb itself? Traditionally, the term *conjugation* is used to describe inflectional types or patterns of the verb. It makes no sense to consider conjugation without a verb.

In his threefold division for the Coptic inflectional morphology, such as conjugation, verb proper, and noun, one hardly finds anything noteworthy, except some defective paradigm in nominal inflexion regarding number and gender. It is known that regularly nouns have neither grammatical endings nor case-markers. In morphological terms, the category ‘case’ doesn’t exist at all. In verbal inflexion only one grammatical category is concerned, and, therefore, indicated: the so-called ‘Aktionsart’ (*mode of action* or *aspect*) which distinguishes the infinitive from the qualitative.<sup>14</sup>

Another type of regular alternation is the ‘status’ allomorphs of the verb. Prepositions only appear in two principal forms, depending on whether they are used with nouns or pronouns, while the infinitive normally has an absolute form, and in the case of transitive verbs, a prenominal (*status nominalis*) and a presuffixal or prepronominal form (*status pronominalis*). However, these allomorphs are pure context-dependent form variations. In other words, they show a morphophonological sensitivity to the category of the neighbouring element. Verbs (and prepositions) are

<sup>13</sup> Funk 1978 108–111.

<sup>14</sup> Funk 1978 110.

apparently sensitive to the prosodic status of the following element: whether it has an accent of its own or not (i.e. full noun phrases are accented, while personal pronouns are not – as far as the suffixes are concerned).

If attempting to find systematically used and relatively productive affixes in this language, the only possible candidate would be a class of formatives as illustrated in (8):

(8) **ΑΤΝΑΥ ΕΡΟQ, ΑΤΜΟΥ, ΜΝΤΡ̄ΡΟ, Ρ̄ΝΟΒΕ, ΜΝΤΡΕQΡ̄ΝΟΒΕ**

Nevertheless the above are derivational affixes and not inflectional ones.

### 3. *The categorial status of the Coptic pronominal suffixes*

As far as the conjugational morphology is concerned, personal pronouns are clearly considered inflectional affixes in every grammar and are treated accordingly. Their commonly accepted name ‘suffix’ also indicates the same. (As no one would consider them derivational suffixes, they must be inflectional ones.)

In his contribution (2001a) Reintges addresses ‘The Affix Identification Problem’. Referring to recent works on Semitic and Celtic languages, he demonstrates two different approaches:

- a.) According to the agreement analysis, the endings represent subject-verb agreement proper, i.e. the spell-out of a feature-matching procedure between the clausal subject and the finite verb (a proposal for Hebrew, Arabic, Irish, Breton).<sup>15</sup>
- b.) According to the incorporation analysis the person/gender/number markers on the verbal stem are incorporated subject pronouns that have been removed from their argument position and integrated into the verbal stem (as shown for Arabic and modern Celtic languages, for example by Doron.<sup>16</sup>)

Observing the Coptic data, one will see why the latter theory seems more plausible. Noun phrases and inflectional morphemes are mutually exclusive – practically in every sentence position, be it in the subject or object position, and after prepositions.

(9a) **Α-Π-ΡΩΜΕ †-Π-ΧΩΩΜΕ Ν-ΤΕ-CΖΙΜΕ**

perf.-the-man give-the-book to-the-woman

‘The man gave the book to the woman.’

15 McCloskey and Hale (1984) analyse the complementarity of noun phrases and pronouns in Irish – which is true also for Coptic – by a surface filter that prohibits realization of both the agreement morpheme and an overt noun phrase.

16 Doron 1988 210–211.

- (9b) **α-ϣ-ταλ-ϣ** **να-ϙ**  
 perf.-he-give-he to-she  
 ‘He gave it to her.’

This distribution may be due to the fact that they occupy the same structural position in the sentence.

Between examples (10) and (11) the only difference is that in the second example the subject is plural. This fact does not trigger any agreement mechanism either on the conjugation base or on the lexical verb. The sole alteration made is the substitution of the singular masculine definite article with its corresponding plural form.

- (10) **α-** **π-ρωμε** **πωτ** **εβολ**  
 perf.- def.sg.m.-man run away  
 ‘The man ran away.’
- (11) **α-** **ḡ-ρωμε** **πωτ** **εβολ**  
 perf.- def.pl.-man run away  
 ‘The men ran away.’

Furthermore, well-formed sentences may be formed even when lacking lexical noun phrase subjects, by means of the corresponding person/number/gender marking affixes:

- (12) **α-** **ϣ-** **πωτ** **εβολ**  
 perf.- proN:3sg.m- run away  
 ‘He ran away.’
- (13) **α-** **γ-** **πωτ** **εβολ**  
 perf.- proN:3pl.- run away  
 ‘They ran away.’

The simultaneous application of the person/number/gender marking affixes and the lexical subject is however impossible, i. e. they cannot co-occur in the same syntactic unit:

- (14) \***α-** **ϣ- π-ρωμε** **πωτ** **εβολ**  
 perf.- proN- the man run away  
 ‘The man ran away.’
- (15) \***α-** **π-ρωμε ϣ-** **πωτ** **εβολ**  
 perf.- the man proN- run away  
 ‘The man ran away.’
- (16) \***α-** **γ- ḡ-ρωμε** **πωτ** **εβολ**  
 perf.- proN- the man run away  
 ‘The men ran away.’
- (17) \***α-** **ḡ-ρωμε γ-** **πωτ** **εβολ**  
 perf.- the man proN- run away  
 ‘The men ran away.’

Of course, apart from topicalisation (dislocation),<sup>17</sup> which, however, is of no concern in this analysis:

- (18) π-ρΩΜΕ ΔΕ α- ϣ- ΠΩΤ ΕΒΟΛ  
 the man prt. perf.- proN- run away  
 ‘And the man, he ran away.’

Summarising the facts, in the so-called Tripartite Conjugation Pattern, the subject is realized by either a lexical noun phrase or by the personal pronoun, and they never occur simultaneously. One may wonder if it is compulsory at all to look for agreement affixes in these pronominal elements.

Undoubtedly, in sentence types (12)-(13) the direct adjacency of the subject and the verb cannot be disrupted even by a Wackernagel particle such as the discourse marker ΔΕ. In the case of a pronominal subject, the particle follows the whole ‘conjugation base + subject + verb’ complex, which might account for the false impression of a conjugated verb form. In fact, they constitute *one* phonological word, yet they are three separate syntactical elements; the pronouns are in argument positions, and there is no morphologically realized subject-verb agreement (cf. (14)-(17)). In a certain sense, they are ‘free’ pronouns, arguments of the verb, but being unaccented, formally they always need a host which they can cliticise on. By general linguistic term, they are clitics, i.e. elements that exhibit an affix-like phonological dependency on a neighbouring word; nonetheless their syntax is word-like.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. The categorial status of the conjugation base

In an attempt to define the categorial status of the Coptic conjugation base,<sup>19</sup> the first option as far as it would be an independent word is immediately excludable as it has previously been demonstrated, that second place particles (which normally follow the first accented word in the sentence) cannot separate the conjugation base from the subject expression.

- (19a) α-π-ρΩΜΕ ΔΕ †-π-χΩΩΜΕ Ν-ΤΕ-ϢΙΜΕ  
 ‘The man gave the book to the woman.’

- (19b) \*α ΔΕ π-ρΩΜΕ †-π-χΩΩΜΕ Ν-ΤΕ-ϢΙΜΕ

17 ‘Term in extraposition’ (Layton 2000 256); ‘Hervorhebung’ (Till 1961 §384).

18 Stump 1998 19–20. To distinguish clitics from affixes, cf. the list of 6 formal criteria composed by Zwicky and Pollum 1983 503–4. Clitics usually have a prosodic definition: any prosodically weak (unaccented) element which is not a canonical inflectional or derivational affix may be called clitic. In order to be pronounced, a morpheme needs to be part of an accented unit, so the clitic must be incorporated into the accentual structure of an adjacent word or phrase. Halpern 1998 101.

19 Using the term conjugation base I refer to the whole class of this type of morphemes.



The second option could suggest that the conjugation base is an affix,<sup>20</sup> similarly to the traditional approach to personal pronouns. However, assuming that the unaccented personal pronouns are clitics, such presupposed affix nature of the conjugation base violates the F criterion of Zwicky – Pollum (1983): “Clitics can attach to material already containing clitics, but affixes not.” This contradiction can be easily resolved assuming that the conjugation base is a clitic, as well.

An additional characteristic of the conjugation base is that it appears as an auxiliary verb; its complement is a whole sentence as it is usual with auxiliaries.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, its behaviour and form correspond to most of the criteria set forth by Heine<sup>22</sup> to characterise auxiliaries of the world’s languages.

Well-founded as it seems to consider the conjugation base as an auxiliary and its phonological behaviour clitic-like, the categorial status of the Coptic conjugation base shall be defined as proclitic auxiliary.

## 5. Historical considerations

There is evidence that the personal pronouns called suffixes behaved clitic-like also in the earlier stages of the Egyptian language and the grammatical term ‘suffix’ inherited from pre-Coptic Egyptian may also be inaccurate regarding these previous stages.<sup>23</sup> The following phenomena should be taken into consideration:

- 1.) The complementary distribution between the full noun phrase and the pronominal suffix revealed in section 3 for Coptic holds also in earlier phases.
- 2.) The pre-existence of the different *status* types, namely the morphophonological sensitivity to the nominal or pronominal character of the subsequent element (primarily the *status pronominalis*) may be traced back as early as Middle Egyptian.<sup>24</sup> Since this morphological alternation depends on the prosodic status of the subsequent constituent, it directly reflects the phonological incorporation i.e. the cliticisation.
- 3.) The Middle Egyptian alternative word orders with certain negative words, depending on the category of the subject: the sequence *tm sdm sš* (negative

20 More exactly a prefix. Cf. Till 1961 §301.

21 Reintges 2001a 100. This idea had its precedents: Steindorff (1951 144–145): ‘Hilfszeitwort’; Layton (2000 190): ‘nexus morph’. Historically, the antecedents of the various conjugation bases were indeed auxiliary verbs or they derive from the fusion of an auxiliary verb with some sentence-initial element (Cf. *ⲱⲗ-ⲱⲗⲣⲉ-*). However, since on synchronic level this morpheme never functions as main verb in Coptic, the more general term auxiliary is preferred to auxiliary verb.

22 Heine 1993 22–24.

23 As the Coptic set of conjugation bases had developed into a uniform system gradually, there is no point of a similar investigation.

24 Gardiner 1957 61 §78 for Middle Egyptian; Cf. also Junge 1996 §2.1.2 and §2.2.3.1 for Late Egyptian.

verb + lexical verb + nominal subject) is equivalent to *tm=f sdm* with suffix adjoining the negative verb directly.<sup>25</sup> This type of “wandering” is more characteristic of clitics than of affixes.

## 6. Conclusion

Reintges has already brought up the clitic analysis for suffixes.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, in his new Coptic grammar, he used the term ‘clitics’ only in reference to the unstressed counterparts of the independent pronouns (*ⲁⲛⲓ* ~ *ⲁⲛⲟⲕ*).<sup>27</sup> As for the suffixes, he categorises them as bound pronouns (grouped into the same class as the prefixes of the First Present).<sup>28</sup> Reintges has also pointed out the proclitic behaviour of Coptic TAM markers (i.e. the conjugation bases as in his own terminology), yet fails to break with the tradition of considering them inflection words.<sup>29</sup> My analysis has aimed to renew the description of the whole sentence structure.

In view of the above demonstrated arguments my suggestion is to avoid the traditional use of such category terms as suffix, infinitive and inflection or conjugation in the Coptic language. It would be more adequate to utilise such expressions as weak pronouns or clitic pronouns, absolute, prenominal, etc. forms of the verb without referring to any kind of finiteness, instead. Finally, bearing in mind the extremely analytic nature of the Coptic sentence itself, it seems sufficient merely to refer to sentence patterns rather than conjugation. I am convinced that with further studies the above terminology may be partly applied also to the earlier phases of the language. Perhaps it is time to say good-bye to the suffix for always.

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25 A similar construction may be observed with *jmj*: *jmj sdm ss* vs. *jmj=f sdm*. Cf. Gardiner 1957 §342; Allen 2000 §19.11.2–3

26 Reintges 2001a; Reintges 2001b.

27 Reintges 2004 75.

28 Reintges 2004 71–74.

29 “inflection words, which are morphologically independent of the verb” Reintges 2004 246.

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