

Eitan Grossman, Peter Dils,
Tonio Sebastian Richter & Wolfgang Schenkel (eds.)

Greek Influence on Egyptian-Coptic:
Contact-Induced Change in an Ancient African Language

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Remarks on Loan Verb Integration into Coptic

Barbara Egedi¹

1 Introduction

When we encounter Coptic for the first time (in the written sources of the 3rd–4th centuries), it already abounds in loan words coming from Greek. On a rough estimate, the proportion of words of Greek origin in Coptic is about 20 percent (Kasser 1991: 217), although this ratio may vary considerably depending on the register in which the individual texts were written or on the dialect involved. Foreign lexical influence on a larger scale than ever before can be dated back to the Ptolemaic period in Egypt, but as the Demotic texts are characterized by a strong conservatism and a stiff resistance to such influences, it remained invisible till the Coptic era.² Therefore the actual circumstances under which the borrowing of Greek words took place are mostly opaque and may only be inferred from the patterns in which they are used in the Coptic grammatical system. Analyzing the nature of the contact between the two languages and its sociolinguistic aspects in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods does not fall within the scope of this paper, but the reader is referred *inter alia* to Bagnall (1993: 236–237), Thompson (1994: 70–82), Verbeek (1991: 1166), Fewster (2002), Lewis (1993: 276–280) and Sidarus (2008).

This study will address the much debated issue of loan verb integration into Coptic, reflecting on observations already made in the literature as well as making some additional remarks about the mechanism of verbal borrowing from both a syntactic and a morphological point of view.³ Two aspects of the question will be treated here in some depth. My aim is, firstly, to determine the model form of the borrowed verbal elements, which is a matter of long-standing debate in Coptic studies (the infinitive vs. imperative discussion); and secondly, to investigate whether the dialectal variation that has long been observed with respect to the borrowing strategies might reflect a diachronic change or a kind of grammaticalization process. The analysis, at several points, will be based on the conviction that it is the grammar of the target language that conditions in what form a loanword

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2 For a detailed discussion of the written registers of Demotic and its relation to linguistic reality, see Ray (1994a: 253–261), Ray (1994b: 59–64), Clarysse (1987).

3 The issue was partly examined in my paper at the *10th International Congress of Egyptologists* (22–29 May 2008, Rhodes) that only recently appeared (Egedi 2016). Some of my assumptions will be repeated here for convenience. I owe special thanks to Andrea Hasznos whose M.A. thesis first directed my attention to the linguistic aspects of the contact between Greek and Coptic, and to Sebastian Richter for inviting me to contribute to this volume. In addition, I am very grateful to my colleague, Vera Hegedüs for checking my English.

will be integrated into the new linguistic environment. This principle will be adhered to here, although evidence for the existence of more than one borrowing strategy in one and the same language suggests that the borrowing strategy actually applied in any given case cannot be mechanically predicted from the structures of the languages in contact, as has been pointed out by Wichmann and Wohlgemuth (2008: 89).

2 Loan verbs and borrowing strategies

Borrowing from Greek concerns not only all the lexical categories but also, and more remarkably, some functional elements, such as prepositions, discourse particles and conjunction words.⁴ Verbal borrowing, however, is of particular interest since the morphological system of the two languages in contact is fundamentally different. As a consequence of the analytic nature of Coptic sentence patterns, Greek loan verbs can occur only in a single and unvarying form.

The verbal part of any Coptic conjugation pattern is traditionally referred to as *infinitive*, but essentially due to historical considerations. Admittedly, Coptic patterns originated from periphrastic constructions that really did involve the infinitival form of the verbs; but this diachronic fact is of no relevance by the time of Coptic, when one can no longer detect a true finite vs. non-finite opposition from a morphological point of view (cf. Egedi 2007). Moreover, if the Coptic verbal slot were truly reserved for infinitives, it would be logical to assume that Greek loan verbs would be adopted in their infinitival form as well. What we see instead is that different varieties of Coptic employ one of two main strategies: either they adopt a verb form which is slightly different from the Greek infinitive and resembles the imperative, or they adopt the Greek infinitive but at the same time use an auxiliary verb to accommodate the foreign element. These strategies may be dubbed the Sahidic and Bohairic strategies, respectively,⁵ after the two major literary dialects in which they have long been observed.

The difference between the two integration strategies has been generally recognized, but opinions differ concerning the form of the loan verbs in Sahidic. In the Sahidic dialect, the morphological form of loan verbs seems to be the *imperfectum imperativi activi* both in *verba vocalia* and *contracta* (Lefort 1950: 68; see also Stern 1880: §331). Verbs ending in -μ are integrated into the thematic inflectional classes,⁶ while deponent and middle verbs are treated as active ones.⁷

4 In a series of articles (in *BSAC* from 1986 to 2001) W. A. Girgis extensively studied the question according to the different lexical categories and word classes.

5 As far as I know, these descriptive labels are used for the first time in the paper by Eitan Grossman (2010).

6 The disappearance of the athematic conjugation in Greek is one of the basic characteristics of the Hellenistic period (Papanastassiou 2007: 615). For the remodeling of the Greek verb stem in general see Gignac (1981: 271–319).

7 This is true as far as the New Testament is concerned. In documentary texts, verbs can have middle infinitive forms (Girgis 2001: 69–70 §188; Förster 2002: xviii).

(1)	ΠΙΣΤΕΥΕ	πιστεύειν	‘believe’
	ΠΛΑΝΑ	πλανᾶν	‘lead astray’
	ΑΙΤΕΙ	αἰτεῖν	‘ask’
	ΣΤΑΥΡΟΥ	σταυροῦν	‘crucify’
	ΠΑΡΑΔΙΔΟΥ	παραδιδόναι	‘deliver’
	ΑΣΠАЗΕ	ἀσπάζεσθαι	‘greet’

The Bohairic dialect adopts the Greek infinitival form (as clearly manifested by the endings -ΙΝ, -ΑΝ, -ΟΙΝ and -ΕΘΕ), but always combined with the *status nominalis* of the Coptic verb ἰρι ‘to do’ (ερ-):⁸

(2)	ΕΡ-ΕΠΙΘΥΜΙΝ	ἐπιθυμεῖν	‘desire’
	ΕΡ-ΕΤΙΝ	αἰτεῖν	‘ask’
	ΕΡ-ΑΣΠΑΖΕΘΕ	ἀσπάζεσθαι	‘greet’

According to many authors, loan verbs in Sahidic only have the *appearance* of imperatives but in reality are infinitives too. Steindorff (1951: §284) proposes that the infinitives were adopted in their late form. In this period the word-final -v was easily dropped, and the ending -ειν could be replaced by -εῖν. The same view is held by Alexander Böhlig (1954: 46–47).⁹ However, not only is this explanation problematic from a phonological point of view,¹⁰ but there are also additional arguments that the forms are imperatives. Irregular (and as such, unambiguous) imperative forms appear in Sahidic (e.g. $\chi\rho\omega$ for the verb $\chi\rho\eta\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ ‘use’), which hardly fits into a theory of infinitive-insertion. In addition, there exist a few exceptional texts where word accent is marked in writing. These data confirm that the accentuation of the borrowed verbs corresponds to that of the 2nd person imperative form in Greek (Till 1951: 18–19). For a summary and general discussion of the problem one may consult the introductory chapter of Hans Förster’s *Wörterbuch* (2002: xv–xxi.). He himself tends to prefer the infinitive theory (in agreement with Alexander Böhlig), but the arguments he adduces do not seem to be strong enough. For instance, he argues against the imperative form by raising the following question: considering that the Coptic derivational affix $\Delta\tau$ - normally combines with the infinitive of the Coptic verb, why should one assume that in case of a Greek loan verb it is followed by an imperative (Förster 2002: xx)? This line of reasoning leads us back to the issue already mentioned at the beginning of this section. The so-called ‘infinitive’ in Coptic is a kind of citation form rather than an infinitive. The native verb form appearing after $\Delta\tau$ - is the same form that appears in the verbal slot of any conjugation. Once a Greek verb was integrated into the Egyptian lexicon, it behaved in the same way as a verb of Egyptian origin, in all syntactic contexts. When debating the form of a Greek loan verb, the issue is more about the morphological shape of the *model verb* in the source language than the function it

8 For a sample of loan verbs in both dialects, consult first of all Böhlig 1954: 129–140; see also Stern 1880: §331; Hopfner 1918: 20–23; Steindorff 1951: §284, and Girgis 2001.

9 But see the review of Böhlig’s monograph by Lefort in *Muséon* 67 (1954) 400–403.

10 According to Gignac (1981: 330–331), in the Roman and Byzantine periods the ending of the Greek infinitive could be -ει/-ι, -εῖν but never -ε.

fulfils in the system of the target language. Last but not least, one ought to account for the systematic correlation between Greek inflection classes and the endings that appear in Coptic. Contracted verbs in -έω show the ending -εἰ in Coptic, while non-contracted verbs in -ω have the ending -ε, which corresponds perfectly to the imperative present active endings in Greek. Simply dropping the final -v of the infinitive would not have distinguished these classes, and similarly, a hypothetical change of the infinitival ending from -εἰν to -ε (-εἰν > -εἰν > -ε) would have confused these inflectional groups.

Recently, an alternative solution has been proposed that brushes aside the conflict between the infinitive and the imperative. In his review article Ariel Shisha-Halevy (2003: 457) stresses that “in Sahidic, unlike many other dialects, we have (...) not the Greek morphological infinitive, but a Greek zero-affix form for the Coptic structural (syntactic) infinitival entity”. A similar view is held by Chris Reintges (2004: 39), who claims that Greek verbs are borrowed into Coptic as ‘bare’ (i.e. uninflected) stems. He rejects the imperative approach since “imperative verb forms have an intrinsic addressee-related reference, and are therefore construed with an implicit or explicit second person subject pronoun” (Reintges 2005: §5.3). Typological research, however, has demonstrated that imperatives as model verbs in borrowing are not unusual (Wichmann – Wohlgemuth 2008: 99 and Wohlgemuth 2009: 79–80). In many languages, imperatives are short and morphologically not complex. These typological studies also point out that the input forms show a great variation across languages; in some special cases they can even be verbs inflected for person or tense/aspect. What seems to be more relevant for form selection is the high frequency and relative prominence, to put it differently, the ease of identifiability of the possible candidates.

Reintges (2001: 196–207 and 2005: §5.3) claims that Copto-Greek verbs have the morphological structure of nouns and, as a consequence, have nominal syntax. That is why they must be inserted in the complement position of a light verb meaning ‘to do’. Light verbs have minimal semantics; it is their nominal complement that imparts the lexical meaning. According to Reintges, this light verb is overt in Bohairic, while in Sahidic it is covert.¹¹

A weak point of this explanation is that loan verbs were not equally felt as nominal in the two dialects. One should not ignore the difference between the input forms. In Bohairic, loan verbs were always treated syntactically as nouns and an auxiliary was needed to accommodate them in all environments and all sentence patterns. This was not the case, however, in Sahidic, which proves to be consistent in not applying a light verb, and this fact is supposedly not independent of the form this dialect borrowed. It should be noted that in some cases Sahidic adopted the Greek *aorist* (both as imperative and as abstract forms).¹² Forms deriving from a Greek aorist are far more unusual in Bohairic, which argues that the Bohairic dialect really treated the loan verbs as nouns.

11 The term ‘light verb’ is used by Reintges in the sense of Grimshaw – Mester (1988). This is not to be confused with the light verb strategy of Wichmann – Wohlgemuth (2008) who employ the term in a more traditional way (2008: 91), excluding a zero or covert light verb in their analysis. The latter is a theoretical construct of the generative syntactic model.

12 For a good selection of examples, see Girgis 2001: 75–79 §§197–198.

In the next section, some further dialects will be examined with regard to the distribution of integration strategies, and I will argue that some kind of correlation may be observed between the input forms and the accommodation strategies. This correlation, however, is unidirectional: i.e. if loan verbs are perceived as nominal elements (e.g. as infinitives in the donor language), then the direct insertion strategy is not available for them to function as Coptic verbs. It does not mean that a more verb-like element rejects a light verb strategy in borrowing. In some dialects, loan verbs look like the Greek imperative but are inserted with the help of an auxiliary.

The adoption of a Greek imperative form is not entirely unnatural if we look at the phenomenon from an Egyptian point of view. Assuming that the structure of the borrowing language is more likely to determine how loan verbs are integrated, the Greek imperative as a model verb form is just as eligible as, say, the infinitive if we consider the morpho-syntactic properties of Coptic. In this language, one and the same verb form (traditionally referred to as the ‘infinitive’) occurs in all the analytically structured conjugation patterns. In the absence of a real finite vs. non-finite opposition, however, a verb in Coptic (and probably also in pre-Coptic) was no longer perceived by speakers as a genuine *infinitive* but rather as a sort of basic (lexical) form of the verb, which appeared sentence-initially in its most neutral manifestation (with no conjugation base or personal pronoun attached) when it functioned as an imperative.¹³ In the period directly preceding the Coptic era, in accordance with the emergence and spreading of periphrastic constructions, the imperative as a morphological category had started to decline, as is clearly shown by examples in Roman Demotic where morphologically marked imperative forms also appear (mistakenly) in positions reserved for ‘infinitives’.¹⁴ In view of these facts, we should not reproach Coptic speakers for considering the imperative (a morphologically simple and sentence-initial form in Greek as well) as an ideal basic form of the verb when borrowing new words from a foreign language.

The possibility of the borrowing of a *root-like form* or *abstract form* (cf. Wohlgemuth 2009: 76) rather than an imperative is not to be discarded. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that since the ‘abstract form’ is claimed to be a stem that never actually occurs in the grammatical system of the donor language, its shape being a mere abstraction, this mechanism of borrowing would demand a full understanding of the morphological structure of the source language on the part of the speakers and thus presumes an intensive language contact and a high degree of bilingualism.

13 The ‘infinitive’ was the usual form to express the imperative except for a few irregular verbs, which are marked morphologically as imperatives. These verbs are listed in Layton (2000 §366).

14 Cf. Edgerton (1932: 64). Such fuzziness of category boundaries can be observed in Greek as well, where the infinitive could occasionally be used to express an imperative function (Mandilaras 1973: §756).

3 Diachronic aspects of Coptic verbal borrowing

3.1 Distribution of strategies in the minor dialects

So far we have seen the strategies of loan verb integration that occur in the two major dialects. The divergence has been determined by two main features: i) whether the dialect needs an auxiliary to accommodate the loan verb (light verb strategy vs. direct insertion), and ii) a systematic difference in the form of the borrowed items (infinitive vs. imperative). The distinction between *what* we borrow (the form of the model verb) on the one hand, and *how* we borrow (integration/accommodation strategy) on the other, will prove to be a helpful approach to the problem when we turn our attention to the minor dialects.

In Walter Till's *Dialektgrammatik* (1961b: §187) the following distribution is given. (The arrangement in the chart below and the description of the patterns in the third column are mine. Note that the form of the auxiliary verb *ep-* varies across dialects: in Akhmimic and Lycopolitan (here marked as A₂) its shape is *p̄-*, in Fayyumic *ελ-*)

Table 1

Dialect	Example	Pattern
S	πιστεγε	Ø imperative
A, A ₂	p̄πιστεγε	AUX + imperative
B	επιστεγε(ε)ιν	AUX + infinitive
F	ελπιστεγειν	AUX + infinitive

Till's list of dialects is far from being complete, nor does he mention the variation that can be observed *within* a dialect. A more fine-grained classification can be found in the encyclopedia article by Rodolphe Kasser (1991: 220; again, the table format is my own).

Table 2

Dialect	Description
S, M, W, F56	Copto-Greek verbs are fully felt as verbs
A, L, B	Copto-Greek verbs are preceded by an auxiliary
V, P	Variation: a majority of cases with auxiliary
F	Variation: 50% with auxiliary, 50% without

Summarizing the data so far, logically four possible patterns can arise along two parameters. The parameters are the input form on the one hand, and the integration strategy by means of which this form was borrowed on the other. In reality, however, only three types of combination are attested in the textual sources; the infinitival form is apparently not accessible without a light-verb (cf. *Ø infinitive in Table 3).

Table 3

	Infinitive	Imperative
Light verb strategy	AUX + infinitive	AUX + imperative
Direct insertion	* \emptyset infinitive	\emptyset imperative

However, more than one pattern turns up in a significant number of dialectal varieties.

The insightful work of Eitan Grossman on dialectal variation (2010)¹⁵ encouraged me to have a closer look at these interesting data. The manuscripts I consulted to check the distribution of patterns both across and within the dialects were chosen so as not to be later than the 5th century.¹⁶ Accordingly, I ignored classical Fayyumic (F5) and classical Bohairic (B5). My results are slightly different from those in Grossman (2010) with respect to the data in two dialects (F4 and V4), and this modified the overall picture as to which patterns can co-occur in the same language variety (see *Table 4* below). I also collected a number of examples myself, but of course in most cases I used the comments and indices of the editors in the cited publications if there was any indication given as to how the loan verbs appeared in the given text. My knowledge of the relevant data has grown considerably through the accurate statistics and analysis of Mathew Almond (2010), who also provided a fine presentation of parallel Nag Hammadi manuscripts showing the inconsistent variation in the use of the auxiliary that can be observed in them. I rely on his figures for the variation (albeit minimal) in the Akhmimic *Proverbs*. It must be noted, however, that he only records the presence or absence of the auxiliary without considering possible combinations of the types listed in *Table 3*. According to my research, the following language varieties existed in Coptic between the 3rd and 5th century (*Table 4*). Variety 1 adopts the imperative-like form with a ‘direct insertion’ strategy. This method has been introduced above as the so-called Sahidic strategy, but Mesokemic (M) and Crypto-Mesokemic (W) share the same properties in borrowing. In variety 2 the input form is clearly an infinitive and a light verb is needed to accommodate the new lexical element. This strategy, named after the Bohairic dialect, is characteristic of the early Fayyumic texts as well as of the corpus of ostraca coming from Narmouthis (N).¹⁷ Variety 3 is similar to variety 2 but allows more than one accommodation strategy. Variety 4 is remarkable for its consistency in

15 Eitan Grossman kindly provided me with his manuscript even before it became publicly available on his website, for which I am very grateful.

16 The *Proverbs* in Akhmimic (Böhlig 1958), the Lycopolitan (L5) of the London *Gospel of John* (Thompson 1924), and L* of the Kellis corpus (Gardner et al. 1999), the early dialect P attested in P. Bodmer VI (Kasser 1960), C. Scheide and C. Schøyen for Mesokemic (Schenke 1981 and 2001), early Fayyumic texts, F7 and F4 (Diebner – Kasser 1989, Boud’hors 1998, Crum – Kenyon 1900), two more dialects from the so-called Middle Coptic major group, namely the dialect W of P. Mich 3521 (Husselman 1962) and V4 of P. Mich 3520 (Schenke – Kasser 2003), and finally early Bohairic (B4) of P. Bodmer III (Kasser 1958).

17 I follow Grossman (2010) in using the *siglum* N for this corpus. The ostraca are written in Demotic script but from a linguistic point of view are very close to Coptic. Unlike other Demotic sources, they contain a relatively large number of Greek words, and Greek verbs in the infinitive are combined with the Egyptian auxiliary *ir*, the ancestor of the light verb used in Coptic.

the input form: it mixes strategies (to various extents in the individual dialects), but always utilizes the imperative form.

Table 4

	Pattern(s)	Dialect
1	Ø imperative	S, M, W
2	AUX + infinitive	B4, F7, F4, N
3	AUX + infinitive var. Ø imperative	V4
4	AUX + imperative var. Ø imperative	P, L, A, S ^{NH}

It is very important that there are apparently no varieties in which ‘AUX + infinitive’ varies with ‘AUX + imperative’. As we mentioned earlier, the hypothetical fourth pattern ‘Ø infinitive’ does not arise at all. In those texts where more than one strategy can be observed, no syntactic or semantic factors condition the choice between the light verb strategy and direct insertion, as pointed out by Almond (2010: 23).¹⁸

3.2 Variation or change?

This section has been inspired first of all by the suggestions made by Eitan Grossman (2010) and Sebastian Richter (2008) (see also Grossman & Richter in this volume), which have been expanded and supported by Mathew Almond (2010). What is common in these studies is that they introduce a diachronic perspective into both interdialectal and intradialectal variation in integration strategies. Richter treats the question from a typological point of view (based on Wichmann – Wohlgemuth 2008), and is the first to examine how the ‘loan verb accommodation patterns’ apply to the various Coptic borrowing strategies. He agrees with Grossman in viewing the difference between these strategies as a process of development. According to Grossman (2010) the Bohairic strategy is diachronically earlier and “reflects a lesser degree of influence than the ‘direct insertion’ strategy characteristic of Sahidic”. The dialects that appear to mix the patterns and utilize more than one strategy are “in the midst of a diachronic process” representing different stages of grammaticalization.¹⁹ For this theory to hold, one must assume that the input form was the Greek infinitive in all the language varieties, and that, over the course of time, this infinitival form dropped the word-final -ν for reasons of economy, to avoid a double encoding of the same function – as argued for by Grossman.

Some remarks, however, may be added to this line of reasoning, not aiming to refute the suggestion as a whole, but to invite caution in a few points. The typological study of Wichmann and Wohlgemuth (2008: 109) also suggests that direct insertion tends to be a later development (at least with respect to the light verb strategy) as it means a complete integration where the loan verb is treated as if it were native. Nevertheless,

¹⁸ But consider the lexically motivated exception of χαίρε (Almond 2010: 24).

¹⁹ Reintges (2005) also speculates about the possibility of a scenario in which Sahidic represents a further development of a grammaticalization process.

considering the analytic structure of Coptic, once the input form has been established, transition of verbs from the source to the target language may not have raised serious difficulty. Morphologically speaking, Coptic lacks a real conjugational system; thus the grammatical environment specifically favors the ‘direct insertion’ of a chosen input form in the same way as native verbs are inserted directly from the lexicon into the various sentence patterns.²⁰ It must be admitted that the light verb strategy preceded the direct insertion strategy in the history of the Egyptian language (as is well attested for instance with Late Egyptian borrowings), but it should be kept in mind that the structural properties of the earlier stages provided no chance for any other accommodation method to apply.

I cannot subscribe, however, to the suggestion that the input forms with the appearance of imperatives are secondary in Coptic and were always preceded by a supposed infinitival form with a final -N. The phonological facts and some additional factors already adduced in section 2 definitely do not support this view. Unfortunately, there is not much hope of getting a better insight into the real language situation in Egypt of the first centuries A.D.; but the possible existence of pre-Coptic varieties that directly chose to adopt the imperative form cannot be dismissed *a priori*. The frequently cited case of the Narmouthis ostraca, as the earliest evidence for verbal borrowing from Greek into Egyptian, is not suitable to verify the correlation of diachronic change with the strategies. This site, also known as Medinet Madi, is located in the Fayyum, and the dialect was probably subject to areal convergence with the neighboring varieties. Dialects of the same region but from later periods are equally satisfied with the infinitival input form and the light verb strategy (cf. Variety 2 in *Table 4*). On the contrary, the very early dialect of P. Bodmer VI from the Theban area (dialect P) consistently adopts and uses the imperative form.

I cannot reject out of hand the thesis that direct insertion of loan verbs may reflect a high degree of bilingualism. But an actual change in borrowing strategy can be defended only in the group of the dialects in which the ‘AUX + imperative’ varies with the ‘Ø imperative’ pattern (cf. Variety 4 in *Table 4*). In those dialects where the ‘AUX + infinitive’ pattern varies with ‘Ø imperative’, it seems more plausible to suspect the influence of the prestige dialect (Sahidic) on the local vernacular.²¹ This latter influence cannot be excluded in either of the mixed varieties. Borrowing may have taken place *between dialects* rather than directly from Greek, and in such cases the target language obviously did not bother with reconstructing the original Greek input form.

To sum up, co-occurring integration strategies can be taken as evidence for language change only with great caution. The mixed varieties of Coptic may just as well be the result of interdialectal borrowing and even the result of borrowing of the borrowing strategy

20 By way of contrast, languages with a rich inflectional morphology (like the mother tongue of the present author) would never allow a ‘direct insertion’ strategy since verbs never appear as bare, stem-like forms in the conjugation paradigms.

21 In my *Table 4* only the dialect V4 is placed in this variety, but I tentatively suggest that texts of later Fayyumic (F5) will belong to this group. The editors of P. Mich 3520 also ascribe the variation in V4 to the influence of either Mesokemic or Sahidic (Schenke – Kasser 2003: 39).

itself, motivated not only by geographical contact but also by sociolinguistic factors²² that readily foster synchronic interference between standard varieties and local idioms.

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22 One of these factors could be a conscious standardization ('Sahidicization') during the transmission of certain texts, cf. Almond (2010: 28–29) with references.

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