

Aspects of the morphosyntax of subjects and objects in Coptic Egyptian*

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1. Introduction

This paper presents a tentative analysis of subject and direct object syntax in Coptic Egyptian, the latest developmental stage of Ancient Egyptian (4th–14th C. CE). Coptic will turn out to be a language without subject and object agreement proper, in the sense of a feature matching procedure between the verb and its arguments. The personal inflections on various lexical and functional categories will be identified with pronominal clitics that correspond to argument positions.

In Reintges (1995), I analysed the word order of Coptic (in the construct state) as involving overt subject and object raising to the specifier positions of agreement phrases. This analysis has a number of drawbacks, however. First, since Coptic ‘agreement’ involves argument clitics, one would have to stipulate Agr-projections without ϕ -feature content, thereby complicating the phrase structure component of this language (Chomsky 1995: 350–1, 2001: 43, fn. 12). Second, the subject seems to be licensed by the head of a higher FinP, so there is no evidence for AgrS. The object seems to be licensed by the verb, so there is no evidence for AgrO either.

2. Agreement affixes or pronominal clitics?

This section addresses what might be called the affix identification problem, i.e. the proper analysis of the categorial and morphological properties of concord-marking verbal affixes. In what follows, I will argue that the person, number and gender markings on Coptic verb forms are not agreement affixes, but pronominal clitics that occupy the same syntactic position as lexical NPs. The first argument in favor of this analysis concerns the complementary distribution between lexical NPs and

synthetic (affixed) verb forms in the preverbal subject and the postverbal object position.

As (1a) shows, the verbal stem and the tense/aspect/mood (TAM) marker assume an analytic (affixless) form in the presence of a full NP, while synthetic forms are selected in the absence of a nominal subject or object, as we can see in (1b). (Full NPs and personal inflections are underlined, TAM markers and lexical verbs are given in boldface):¹

- (1) a. hən te-unu de a pe.f-las **meh ro-f**
 in def:sf-hour pcl PF def:sm.3sm-tongue fill_{CS} mouth-3sm
 ‘Immediately, his tongue filled his mouth’ (Eudoxia 38:27)
- b. **a-f-ent-əs** ehun e-t-p_{olis} rakote
 PF-3sm-bring_{CS}-3sf pcl to-def:sf-city Alexandria
 ‘It (the ship) brought her into the city (of) Alexandria’ (Mena
 4^a:10–12)

The same co-occurrence restriction between full NPs and synthetic forms holds for non-verbal categories. Table 1 illustrates the cross-categorial complementary distribution between nominal arguments and personal affixes for transitive verbs, basic prepositions and nominal possession.

Table 1. The lexical NP–affix complementarity in Coptic

	lexical NP	affix
transitive verbs	hetəḅ <u>pə-rome</u> kill _{CS} def:sm-man <i>to kill a man</i>	hətṯə- <u>f</u> kill _{CS} -3sm <i>to kill him</i>
basic prepositions	e- <u>pə-rome</u> to-def:sm-man <i>to the man</i>	erə- <u>f</u> to-3sm <i>to him</i>
nominal possession	p-εἰ əm- <u>pə-rome</u> def:sm-house of-def:sm-man <i>the house of the man</i>	pe.f-εἰ def:sm.3sm-house <i>his house</i>

Similar distributional patterns have been observed in Celtic languages (Breton, Modern Irish), where the personal markers on verbs, nouns and prepositions have been identified with ‘rich’ agreement inflection. To account for the systematic absence of synthetic forms in the context of lexical NPs, a special inflectional rule has been proposed, according to which the governee of the agreement-marking element has to be drawn from the set of empty categories (Stump 1984: 312–23, but cf. Doron 1988 for an alternative analysis).

This move is, however, theoretically unattractive, since it stipulates inde-

pendent inflectional paradigms for nominal and pronominal arguments. The complementary distribution between nominal arguments and person, number and gender marking affixes in Coptic and Celtic languages receives a natural explanation under a pronominal analysis of such personal markers: since affixes and full NPs are both arguments, they are inserted into the same structural slot. Therefore, the selection of one automatically excludes the selection of the other (Baker & Hale 1990).²

The agreement analysis of Coptic affixes not only has less conceptual appeal than the competing pronominal clitic analysis, but it also makes the wrong empirical predictions. Coptic permits a limited amount of object pro-drop, where the null object is interpreted as a free-choice pronoun, as in (2a), or as a discourse anaphor, as in (2b). The main verb assumes an analytic form, which lacks personal inflections altogether that could provide a clue for the referential content of the covert object pronoun (*pro*). The presence of an uninflected verb form in the context of object pro-drop runs counter to the predictions of the agreement analysis, according to which the synthetic form of the verb identifies and thus licenses the presence of an empty category in the object position:

- (2) a. ti-na-eḯre *pro* kata pe.k-fat^he
 (Fut1)-1s-SC-do_{as} according.to def:sm.2sm-word
 'I shall do (anything) according to your word' (V. Pachom. 93:29–30)
- b. ti-pisteue *pro* p-tʰeḯs
 (Pres1)-1s-believe_{as} def:sm-lord
 'I believe (it) (what was said previously), oh Lord' (Eudoxia 52:3–4)

It is also hard to see how the agreement analysis could handle context-dependent allomorphy in various lexical and functional categories, where morphological alternations depend on the nominal or pronominal character of the following constituent. The preposition /r/ 'to', for instance, has two surface realizations, viz. the short form *e-*, which occurs with nominal objects and the long form *er-*, which is selected in the context of pronominal reference (see, above, Table 1). Since the governee controls, so to speak, the shape of the governor, one may think of such allomorphs as agreeing elements, despite the lack of referential features. Under the agreement analysis, the pronominal allomorph as well as the personal affix would qualify as agreement morphology, implying the presence of two types of agreement inflection within the same phrase, endowed with partially overlapping referential features. Conditioned allomorphy falls into place under the cliticization analysis, where the contrast between long and short forms simply reflects the different prosodic status of the governee (free-standing NPs vs. clitic pronouns).

It generally appears, then, that Coptic lacks agreement in the traditional sense: what looks like 'rich' agreement inflection are pronominal clitics, which occupy the

same argument positions as full NPs. Cliticization is overtly reflected by morphological alternations of the governing head and is therefore indicative of syntactic dependencies.

3. Subject licensing

Coptic makes productive use of a variety of clause-initial (pre-subject) formatives for the morphological expression of various categories of verbal semantics, such as tense, aspect and mood. These clause-initial TAM markers may display morphophonological alternations in much the same way as prepositions and verbal stems (see Table 1). In the Habitual, for instance, the long form *fare* is selected in the context of a subject NP, as in (3a), while the short form *fa-* and the pronominal subject *-f* ‘he’ are both cliticized to the lexical verb, as in (3b):

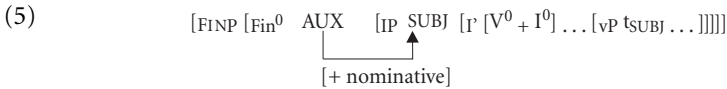
- (3) a. *fare tei-βanne tawe mantsnoux ən-lōw n-βanne kata rōmpe*
 Hab this:sf-palm yield_{CS} twelve of-bunch of-date per year
 ‘This palm yields twelve bunches of dates per year’ (B.Mar.
 208: 11–13)
- b. *awo fa-f-βok farɔ-s n-sep-snaɥ mmene*
 and Hab-3sm-go_{AS} to-3sf in-time-two daily
 ‘and he would go to her twice a day’ (Hilaria 6: 16)

In prepositions and verbs, the alternation between long and short form is indicative of the head-complement relationship (see §2 above and the discussion in §4.2 below). Since the nominal or pronominal character of the subject triggers similar allomorphic changes in several TAM markers, we conclude that the same type of local relationship is involved. Even though conditioned allomorphy is attested for a subset of TAM markers only, both variant and invariant forms show a consistent syntactic behaviour in not allowing prosodically weak function words to intervene between the TAM expression and the following subject NP:

- (4) a. *te.f-sone de ol n-ne.f-keʿes*
 PF def:sf.3sm-sister pcl gather_{AS} DO-def:p.3sm-bones
 ‘His sister gathered his bones’ (Mena 4^a: 1–2)

The postposing of enclitic rhetorical conjunctions like *de* tells us two things. First, Coptic TAM expressions are proclitic elements that are attached by the phonology to the immediately following sentence constituent, which is the subject. Second, nominative Case assignment requires adjacency between the subject and the preclausal TAM marker. I interpret this to mean that the subject is licensed in a configuration of government by the appropriate TAM expression. Apart from being

Case-assigning heads, these formatives are morphological representations of the finiteness feature, which syncretize temporal reference with a particular aspectual or modal value. Their pre-subject placement indicates that they are base-generated in the head position in the first functional projection dominating the IP domain, which was called the Finiteness Phrase (FINP) in Rizzi's (1997) fine structure of the left periphery. See diagram (5) for the nominative Case configurability of Coptic subjects:



A question remains with respect to the categorial status of TAM expressions: should they be analysed as inflectional morphemes or rather as auxiliary verbs? The association of these markers with nominative Case marking and finiteness provide *prima facie* evidence for their verbal character. Moreover, the clitic behavior of auxiliary verbs is not unheard of in the more familiar Slavic or Romance languages. Additional support for this analysis comes from the structural analogy with unaccusative and existential verbs that undergo verb fronting to the pre-subject position, where they are in complementary distribution with TAM markers. Since unaccusatives and TAM expressions occupy the same structural slot, they are likely to be members of the same lexical class of verbs, unaccusativity being, after all, a hallmark of auxiliary verbs:

- (6)
- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>a. nanu pe.k-na
 be.beautiful_{cs} def:sm.2sm-mercy
 ‘Your mercy is beautiful’ (PS 49:13)</p> | <p>b. wən rome əm-peḯ-ma
 be_{cs} man in-this:sm-place
 ‘Is anybody here?’ (AP 261, 80:5)</p> |
|---|--|

The compatibility of TAM markers with more than one clausal position also provides evidence in favor of an auxiliary verb analysis, given that verbs are syntactically mobile entities. In a structural variant of left-dislocation, there are two instances of one and the same TAM expression: one in front of the left-dislocated topic phrase and the other in front of the resumptive subject pronoun. Consider the following example of the prefix-doubling construction, where the Perfect marker *a* precedes and follows the topicalized NP *the people of that place*:

- (7) a ne-rome de m-p-ma etəmmau a-u-weh p-soma
PF def:p-man pcl of-def:sm-place that PF-3p-put_{cs} def:sm-body
m-p-makariōs apa mēna epeset hām p-kʾamul
of-def:sm-blessed Apa Mena down from def:sm-camel

‘The people of that place let the body of the blessed Apa Mena down from the camel’ (Mena 5^a:14–19)

The double occurrence of the TAM markers in this construction type can be accounted for immediately, if such expressions are reanalysed as auxiliary verbs that eventually undergo Aux-to-Comp raising, thereby moving around the left-dislocated topic:

- (8) $[_C^0 \text{ AUX a-}] [_{\text{FinP}} [_{\text{Topic}} \text{ ne-rome}_i [_{\text{Fin0}} [_{\text{t}_{\text{AUX}}} \text{ a-}] [_{\text{IP}} \text{ -u-}_{\text{SUBJ } i} [_{\Gamma} [-\text{weh}]_V$
 $[_{\text{AspP}} \text{ p-soma}_{\text{OB}} [_{\text{VP}} \text{ t}_{\text{SUBJ } i} \text{ t}_{\text{V}} \text{ t}_{\text{OB}}]]]]]]]]$

It looks as if the spellout of the movement trace t_{AUX} meets a morphological requirement of the resumptive subject pronoun, which must cliticize to the designated verbal host in narrow syntax. For reasons of space, I will not elaborate on this hypothesis.

4. Object licensing

Coptic has two verbal patterns for the licensing of the direct object, the construct state and the absolute state, which represent a structural accusative and an oblique Case configuration, respectively. Both objective Case patterns trigger diametrically opposite readings about the delimitedness of the event being described. Moreover, accusative and oblique Case marked direct object occupy different structural positions in that the former must raise to a higher functional projection, whereas the latter may stay in-situ in the vP-domain.

4.1 Stem patterns as objective Case configurations

The morphological component of Coptic Egyptian is of the root-and-pattern type, where verbal stems are derived from abstract lexical representations by the superimposition of templatic patterns, each associated with strict formal and semantic definitions. Consider the absolute state/construct state pair in (9) below, involving the verb-particle construction *tʃok eβɔl* ‘to complete’. As for the morphological distinction between both stem patterns, it should be observed that the absolute state stem *tʃok* in (9a) contains the lexically specified theme vowel /o/, which must bear stress, while the corresponding construct state *tʃek* in (9b) has a default vowel /e/ instead, which can never attract stress. In the construct state, then, stress must be relocated onto the adjacent direct object, implying that both constituents form a single domain for stress assignment. Unlike the construct state, a special prepositional marker *n-* (not translatable into English) registers the presence of the direct

object relation in the absolute state. Moreover, the absolute state and the construct state are also subject to different locality conditions. As we can see in (9a), the verb particle *eβol* occupies an intermediate position between the absolute state stem and the prepositional object. By contrast, the particle follows the verb – direct object complex in the construct state, as (9b) illustrates:

- (9) a. pa-nute de e-f-e-tjok eβol ən-te.tən-khria
 def:sm:1s-god pcl Rel-3sm-to-complete_{cs} pcl Do-def:sf.2p-need
 ter-əs kata te.f-mənt-rəm-maṓ
 all-3sm according.to def:sf.3sm-nomin-man-rich
 ‘My God shall fulfil all your needs according to his richness’ (Phil.
 4:19)
- b. epeidε a-f-tjek ne.f-ʃatje ter-u eβol
 when PF-3sm-complete_{cs} def:p.3sm-word all-3p pcl
 hām maʔatje əm-p-laṓs
 in ear of-def:sm-crowd
 ‘When he finished all his words in (the) ears of the crowd’ (Lc. 7:1)


These morphosyntactic facts show that the direct object is licensed in a local head-complement relationship in the construct state. The construct state can therefore be identified with a structural accusative Case pattern, which requires strict adjacency between the Case-assigner and Case-assignee. No such adjacency requirement seems to be involved in the absolute state, whose internal argument is syntactically encoded as a prepositional object. Due to its lack of deictic content, the governing preposition *n-* does not contribute to the semantic interpretation of the prepositional object, but rather makes it visible as an argument of the preceding absolute state stem. Although the absolute state stem is an appropriate theta-role assigner, it fails to Case-mark its internal argument, which necessitates the introduction of an athematic preposition into the structure to prevent a Case filter violation.

In Reintges (1995), the conflicting Case marking patterns are derived from the categorial specification of the construct state and absolute state, respectively. Since the construct state assigns accusative Case to its object under government, it can be identified as a verb. The division of labor between theta-role assignment by the absolute state stem and oblique Case marking by a desemanticized preposition indicates that we are dealing with a non-verbal category. The main argument in favor of a nominal analysis of the absolute state are (i) the introduction of a default Case preposition in nominal possession and absolute state constructions, (ii) the formal identity between unergative- and transitive-based absolute states and the corresponding event nominal (e.g. *mʔʔje* ‘to walk’ vs. *p-mʔʔje* ‘the walk’, *sʔlsʔl* ‘to comfort s.o.’ vs. *p-sʔlsʔl* ‘the comfort’), (iii) the occurrence of absolute state stems in the direct object position of various light verb constructions (e.g. *ər hʔte* (make


fear) ‘to become afraid’, *ti pi* (give kiss) ‘to kiss s.o.’, *fi p-rɔwʃ* (carry the-care) ‘to take care’).

However, if we are correct in assuming that the absolute state has the morphological structure of a noun, how can it act as the main predicate of the clause in much the same way as the verbal construct state? In line with Hale and Keyser’s (1993) approach to argument structure, the predicative function of the absolute will be taken as indicative for a ‘hidden’ light verb configuration, which consists of a covert light verb and an event/state nominal, representing the semantic predicate. Consider the diagrams (10a) and (10b) for the oblique prepositional and structural accusative Case configurability of the absolute state and the construct state, respectively:

- (10) a. absolute state

$$[\text{vP}_1 \text{ SUBJ } \text{v}_1 [\text{vP}_2 \text{ v}_2 \text{ NP}_{\text{as}} [\text{ppP}^0 \text{ OB}]]]]$$


[oblique]
- b. construct state

$$[\text{vP}_1 \text{ SUBJ } \text{v}_1 [\text{VP}_2 \text{ V}_{2\text{cs}} \text{ OB}]]$$


[accusative]

The analysis of Coptic direct object syntax pursued here incorporates a revised version of the VP-internal subject hypothesis (Chomsky 1995:315–6, 352–3), according to which transitive verb constructions involve two VP layers, one for the external (vP_1) and the other for the internal (VP_2) argument. In the accusative Case configuration of the construct state (10b), the lexical verb $\text{V}_{2\text{cs}}$ raises to the covert light verb v_1 to form a complex predicate $\text{Vb} [\text{v}_1 \text{V}_{2\text{cs}} \text{v}_1]$. The oblique case configuration of the absolute state (10a), on the other hand, involves an additional light verb layer $[\text{vP}_2 \text{ v}_2 \text{NP}_{\text{as}}]$, where the covert light verb v_2 selects an event/state noun as its internal argument. Under this analysis, structural accusative Case is not discharged in a specifier-head configuration, but rather in the more local head-complement relation, mirroring theta-role assignment. A plausible hypothesis is to relate the insituness of structural accusative Case to the aspectual semantics of the case feature. Since it provides crucial information about the temporal boundness of the event or activity that is described, it represents a [+interpretable] feature that must be accessible at LF.

4.2 Objective Case distinctions and telicity

The Coptic and the much more elaborate Finnish Case system have two important properties in common. In both languages, there are two types of objective Case for the verb’s internal argument, one of which is structural accusative and the other oblique Case, the latter corresponding to Finnish partitive Case. Moreover, the selection of either objective Case affects the interpretation of the predicate as a

whole (de Hoop 1997: Ch. 2). Thus, in Finnish as well as Coptic, a verb phrase with an accusative Case-marked object imposes a bound event reading on the entire clause, while an unbound event reading is obtained when the direct object is assigned oblique Case.

Selectional restrictions in the temporal domain provide *prima facie* evidence for the aspectual nature of objective Case distinctions in Coptic. As already observed by Jernstedt (1927), the construct state is incompatible with present tense sentences, where the selection of an absolute state form is obligatory. This is shown by the following minimal pair, where the construct state verb *tʃne* ‘to examine’ in (11a) combines with the root modal *na* ‘to be going to’ to yield a future interpretation, while the corresponding absolute state *tʃnɔ* in (11b) appears in the context of present tense reference:

- (11) a. p-tʃɔɿs na tʃne p-dikaiɔs mən p-aseβes
 (Fut1)def:sm-lord_{GO} examine_{CS} def:sm-pious with def:sm-sinner
 ‘The Lord will examine the pious and the impious one’ (Ps. 10:5)
- b. ne.f-Buhe tʃnɔ ən-nə-ʃere ən-nə-rome
 (Pres)def:p-3sm-eyelid examine_{AS} DO-def:p-child of-def:p-man
 ‘His eyelids examine the children of man’ (Ps. 10:4)

To make sense of these limitations, we have to briefly consider the semantics of the present tense. In Coptic, as in many other languages, present tense sentences are associated with two types of temporal interpretations: they may locate some event at the moment of speaking or describe generic situations, which hold at all times. Under either interpretation, such sentences do not include the endpoint of situations. The exclusion of the endpoint is, however, in conflict with the aspectual semantics of Coptic accusative Case, which imposes a bound event reading on the verbal predicate. This is why the language system resorts to the absolute state in present tense sentences, which is associated with an unbound event reading.

It may very well be the case that the aspectual differences between both stem patterns may have a syntactic source in the type of complement that is selected at the lower vP2 level. Recall that in the construct state the lexical verb V2 may take a referential direct object, describing the entity that undergoes motion or a change of state and thus provides a temporal bound for the event that is described. While the referential object of the construct state qualifies as a delimiter/measuring-out argument in the sense of Tenny (1994) and related research, the absolute state nominal is a direct object itself, which is projected into the complement position of a covert light verb v2. It can never be associated with a delimiting function, simply because it constitutes the semantic predicate describing the main event. The assignment of structural accusative Case and the measuring-out of the event by the internal argument correlates with another characteristic property of this construc-

tion type, which is the synchronization of verb raising and object shift, to which we turn now.

4.3 Object shift

Since Pollock (1989), the placement of negative elements has been used as a diagnostic for verb movement and object positioning. In (12a), the construct state verb and the direct object NP both move past the negative adverb *an* ‘not’, while the prepositional object of the absolute state in (12b) is frozen in the vP domain and does not move:

- (12) a. *ənt-a p-nute gar tənneṯ pe.f-ḵere an e-p-kōsmōs*
 Rel-PF def:sm-god pcl send_{cs} def:sm.3sm-son NOT to-def:sm-world
 ‘God has not sent his son to the world (...)’ (Jh 3:17)
- b. *e-wom de ə-mpe-k-ya toʔot-ək soʔof an əm-p-rome*
 to-eat_{as} pcl C-Neg:PF-2sm-wash_{cs} hand-2sm defile_{asNOT} DO-def:sm-
 man
 ‘To eat without having washed your hands does not defile the man’
 (Mt 15:20)

In his discussion on object shift, Chomsky (2000: 27–30) capitalizes on the fact that the semantic properties of this construction can best be explained from the resulting configuration and that surface interpretation is determined by the position of the head of the chain, the raised object. The same line of reasoning can be applied to object shift in the construct state, which serves an interpretative purpose, namely to bring about the bound event reading, which is not available if the direct object were to remain in-situ. In this respect, object shift in the construct state qualifies as a syntactic operation designed to produce a new outcome, viz. a marked aspectual interpretation. I assume, following Borer (1993), that the raised object targets the specifier position of the Aspect Phrase (AspP), where it is interpreted as a temporal bound, and where the event measurement properties of the aspectual node are activated.

To derive the surface order verb – object – negation in (12a), the Vb [_vV2_{cs} v₁] complex must be located in the head position of a functional projection higher than the AspP. Since the specifier position of that functional projection hosts the clausal subject, we seem to be dealing with the traditional I⁰-node. What is the feature content of this inflectional node? Since Coptic lacks grammatical agreement proper, the I⁰-head cannot be endowed with Agr features. It cannot contain tense features either, given that finiteness is associated with auxiliary verbs that occupy an IP-external position. Yet, there is some evidence that this position is more than just a landing site for verb movement without semantic content of its own. It hosts

various root modals like ‘to be going to’ and ‘to be able to’, to which the $Vb[V_2]_{cs}$ complex is adjoined:

- (13) $\text{əntəf de n-f-na-f-nahme-f}$ an
 HE $\text{pcl NEG(-Fut1)-3sm-GO-CAN-save}_{cs}$ -3sm NOT
 ‘(As for) him (Jesus), he won’t be able to save himself’ (Mc 15:31)

It looks as if the ϕ -featureless I^0 -node actually is a clause-internal Mood Phrase. Notice that the order MoodP > AspP > NegP is in accordance with Cinque’s (1999:106, (92)) universal hierarchy of clausal functional projections. Further research has to clarify whether verb raising and object shift operate in tandem or represent independent syntactic processes.

5. Summary and conclusions

Let us recapitulate the main results of this paper. First, what looks like ‘rich’ agreement inflection can be identified with pronominal arguments. Second, the subject and the object receive structural nominative and accusative Case in a government configuration with the verb. Thus, while the Coptic evidence generally supports recent minimalist views on the uniformity of structural Case assignment (Chomsky 1995, 2001) it also shows that the relevant structural relationship between the Case-assigner and the Case-assignee is of the more local head-complete type.

Notes

* For discussion and comments on an earlier draft of this paper, I am grateful to Sjef Barbiers, Helen de Hoop, Johan Rooryck, Rint Sybesma and the anonymous reviewer of LIN 2001. The usual disclaimers apply.

1. Abbreviations in the interlinear glosses include the following: 1, 2, 3 ‘first, second, third person’, *f* ‘feminine’, *m* ‘masculine’, *s* ‘singular’, *p* ‘plural’, *in/def* ‘in/definite article’, *DO* ‘direct object marker’, *INV* ‘subject inversion particle’, *PF* ‘Perfect’, *Pres* ‘Present Tense’, *Fut* ‘Future’, *Pret* ‘Preterite’, *Hab* ‘Habitual’, *Rel* ‘relative aspect’, *as* ‘absolute state’, *cs* ‘construct state’ (both in subscript), *pcl* ‘particle’, *NEG* ‘negation’, *Comp* ‘complementizer’, *nomin.* ‘nominalizer affix’.

2. There are some remarkable structural differences in the synthetic paradigms of Coptic and Modern Celtic languages. First, differently from Modern Irish verbal paradigms, separate affixes exist for every ϕ -feature distinction in Coptic. Second, in Breton, it is possible to construe a subject clitic with an analytic verb form or to attach a subject clitic to a co-

referential synthetic verb form (Stump 1984:219, 302; Doron 1988:216), which is an impossibility in Coptic Egyptian.

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