

Coptic Noun Classes and the Morphophonology of Gender

§1. *Background.* There exists a long-standing tradition of research on Coptic [Afroasiatic; 3rd–12th century CE] noun classes, dating back to Steindorff’s (1884) dissertation. The focus of scholarly attention has been on the internal reconstruction of nominal(ized) forms in earlier stages. Due to the diachronic bias, the synchronic description of the nominal classification system is far from being complete.

§2. *Major Claims.* Akin to its Afroasiatic neighbors, Coptic has a two-term, masculine–feminine system. The traditional wisdom within the field is that gender has no morphological exponent on the nominal stem itself and must accordingly be inferred from gender agreement with pronominal definite determiners or anaphorically related pronouns (Layton 2000: 85 §105(a)). Revisiting the issue, we shall argue instead that masculine- and feminine-gendered nouns are distinguished on a morpho-phonological basis.

§3. *Sex-declinable nouns.* We shall first turn to masculine–feminine pairs of sex differentiated noun lexemes. As shown in Table 1, same-root sex declinable nouns fall into two classes. In the first class, feminine nouns are marked inflectionally by adding to the nominal stem a vowel suffix *-e*, which derives from the common Proto-Afroasiatic feminine suffix *-t* (Kramer 2015: 18–19). In the second class, masculine and feminine nouns are differentiated by distinct vocalisms. Vowel alternations can also be found in gendered-suffixed nouns of the first class.

Table 1. Same-root sex-declinable nouns

	Masculine		Feminine		
Class I: Vowel alternation plus remnant fem. gender suffix	ⲱⲃⲏⲣ	ⲑⲃⲉⲣ	ⲱⲃⲉⲣⲉ	ⲑⲃⲉ ^ʔ ⲉⲣⲉ	male/female friend
	ϥⲏⲃ	ⲑⲉⲕ ^j	ϥⲉⲉⲃⲉ	ⲑⲉ ^ʔ ⲉⲕ ^j	male/female foal
	ϥⲟⲏ	ⲑⲟⲏ	ϥⲟⲏⲉ	ⲑⲟ:ⲏⲉ	brother/sister
	ⲱⲟⲙ	ⲑⲟⲙ	ⲱⲟⲙⲉ	ⲑⲟ:ⲙⲉ	father/mother in law
Class II: Vowel alternation only	ⲣⲣⲟ	ⲉⲣⲣⲟ:	ⲣⲣⲱ	ⲉⲣⲣⲟ:	king/queen
	ⲱⲙⲙⲟ	ⲑⲙⲙⲟ:	ⲱⲙⲙⲱ	ⲑⲙⲙⲟ:	male/female foreigner
	ⲑⲗⲗⲟ	ⲏⲗⲗⲟ:	ⲑⲗⲗⲱ	ⲏⲗⲗⲟ:	male/female elderly person
	ⲑⲟϥ	ⲏⲟⲑ	ⲑϥⲱ	ⲏⲟⲑ:	male/female snake

§4. *Homophonous root nouns.* The two classes reappear in biliteral nouns derived from homophonous roots. In Class I, masculine nouns have a C₁VC₂ template with a short central vowel /a/. The gender-suffixed C₁VVC₂e template of the corresponding feminine nouns contain either a lengthened high or a mid-low front vowel /i:/ and /ɛ:/.

Table 2. Masculine and feminine-gendered nouns derived from homophonous biliteral roots

	Masculine			Feminine		
Class I: Vowel alternation plus remnant fem. gender suffix	ϥⲁϥ	saf	yesterday	ϥⲏϥⲉ	ⲑⲉ:ⲑⲉ	sword
	ⲑⲗⲙ	ham	craftsman	ⲑⲏⲙⲉ	ⲑⲉ:ⲙⲉ	fare, freight
	ⲧⲁⲡ	tap	horn	ⲧⲏⲉ	ⲧⲏ:ⲣⲉ	taste
	ⲧⲁⲃ	ⲧⲁⲕ ^j	lump	ⲧⲏⲉ	ⲧⲏ:ⲕ ^j ⲉ	gourd
Class II: Vowel alternation only	ⲑⲃⲁ	ⲏⲃⲁ:	misfortune	ⲑⲃⲱ	ⲏⲃⲟ:	covering, tent
	ⲃⲗⲁ	ⲕ ^j ⲗⲁ:	wave	ⲃⲗⲱ	ⲕ ^j ⲗⲟ:	twig, firewood
	ⲱⲡⲏⲁ	ⲑⲡⲏⲁ:	waste land	ⲕⲗⲏ	ⲕⲗⲉ:	cat
	ⲕⲗⲟ	ⲕⲗⲟ:	poison	ⲱⲡⲏⲏ	ⲑⲡⲏⲉ:	garden

§5. *Conclusions*. Although the vowel correspondences appear to be systematic, masculine- and feminine-gendered nouns formed with same or homophonous roots are not directly correlated through apophony. In this way, the Coptic noun class system defies straightforward classification in gender typology (Corbett 1991). It rather looks as if we are dealing with a noun class system, in which the obsolete status of gender inflection is compensated for by regular patterns of vowel correspondences and distributional restrictions.

References

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