

Constructing word similarities in Meroitic as an aid to decipherment

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Abstract: Meroitic is the still undeciphered language of the ancient civilization of Kush. Over the years, various techniques for decipherment such as finding a bilingual text or cognates from modern or other ancient languages in the Sudan and surrounding areas has not been successful. Using techniques borrowed from information theory and natural language statistics, similar words are paired and attempts are made to use currently defined words to extract at least partial meaning from unknown words.

Keywords: Meroitic, linguistics, decipherment, similarity, information theory, archaeology

This paper addresses a technique using a combination of known words and techniques from information theory to try to decipher the meanings of additional words in the extinct and undeciphered language, Meroitic. First, I will give a short history of the language and the problems translating it and next describe the statistical techniques and their results and implications.

A Short History of Meroitic (Török 1997; Lobban 2004)

Meroitic was the written language of the ancient civilization of Kush, located for centuries in what is now the Northern Sudan. The word 'Meroitic' derives from the name of the city Meroë, which was located on the East bank of the Nile south of where the Atbara River flows off to the east. It is the second oldest written language in Africa after Egyptian hieroglyphs. It is a phonetic language with both a hieroglyph form using some adopted Egyptian hieroglyphs and a cursive form similar to Egyptian Demotic writing. The language had one innovation uncommon in ancient written languages such as Egyptian hieroglyphics or Greek in that there was a word separator, similar in function to spaces in modern scripts, that looks similar to a colon (see Table 1). Meroitic was employed starting the 2nd century BC and was continuously used until the fall of Meroë in the mid 4th century AD.

Table 1
Meroitic Cursive and Hieroglyphic words and their transliterations

[Taken from the latest font set for Meroitic Hieroglyphic and Cursive characters developed by the Meroitic scholars Claude Carrier, Claude Rilly, Aminata Sackho-Autissier, and Olivier Cabon. Web Address:

<http://www.egypt.edu/etaussi/informatique/meroitique/meroitique01.htm>]

ⲉⲚ	a	ⲛ	k	ⲓⲗ	q	ⲓⲱ	w
ⲛ	b	ⲓ	l	ⲓⲱ	r	ⲓⲓⲓ	y
ⲓ	d	ⲓ	m	ⲓ	s	:	word separator
ⲉ	e	ⲓⲛ	n	ⲓⲓⲓ	se		
ⲛ	h	ⲓ	ne	ⲓ	t		
ⲓ	h	ⲓ	o	ⲓⲗ	te		
ⲓ	i	ⲓ	p	ⲓ	to		

ⲓⲛ	a	ⲓⲛ	k	ⲓ	q	ⲓⲱ	w
ⲓⲛ	b	ⲓⲛ	l	ⲓ	r	ⲓⲓⲓ	y
ⲓⲛ	d	ⲓⲛ	m	ⲓ	s	:	word separator
ⲉ	e	ⲓⲛ	n	ⲓ	se		
ⲛ	h	ⲓⲛ	ne	ⲓ	t		
ⲓ	h	ⲓ	o	ⲓ	te		
ⲓ	i	ⲓ	p	ⲓ	to		

The script was rediscovered in the 19th and 20th centuries as Western archaeologists began investigating the ancient ruins in the Sudan. The first substantial progress in deciphering Meroitic came around 1909 when British archaeologist Francis Llewellyn

Griffith was able to use a bark stand which had the names of Meroitic rulers in Meroitic and Egyptian hieroglyphs. The Meroitic hieroglyphs were then corresponded to the Meroitic cursive script and it was then possible to transliterate Meroitic (see Table 1). Some vocabulary was later deciphered by scholars including loan words from Egyptian, gods, names, honorifics, and common items. However, the language remains largely undeciphered. The greatest hope for decipherment, a Rosetta stone type of tablet containing writing in Meroitic and a known language such as Egyptian, Greek, Latin, or Axumite, has yet to be found. Further confounding research is the confusion regarding which language family Meroitic belongs to. Cognate analysis has proceeded extremely slowly since it is disputed to which language family Meroitic properly belongs. Recent work by (Rilly, 2004) has suggested that Meroitic belongs to the North Eastern Sudanic family, however, full decipherment is still elusive.

Past Statistical and Mathematical Work on Meroitic

Meroitic was one of the earliest ancient languages to be investigated using computers (Leclant 1978; Heyler 1970, 1974, Ouellette, 1999). Much of this work was dedicated to creating an alphabetical index of Meroitic and also comparing Meroitic words to possible cognates in Nubian or other known ancient and modern languages from the region.

In (Smith, 2007), many of the longest texts were analyzed by ranking words according to frequencies to verify whether the current texts we have follow the mathematical relation Zipf's Law where the word frequencies f vary with the rank z according to the relation

$$f_z = \frac{C}{z^\alpha}, \quad z = 1, 2, 3 \dots n$$

where $\alpha \approx 1$. In analyzing the Meroitic texts, though many did not fit the strict criterion of $\alpha \approx 1$, the frequency-rank distribution followed the behavior of a truncated power law distribution whose exact parameters varied by text. Some texts such as the long stela REM 1003 (REM is a text designation that stands for Répertoire d'épigraphie méroïtique, the most comprehensive catalogue of Meroitic texts) more closely fit Zipf's Law though. From these results, without knowing the meaning of the text it is clear that the statistical variations and occurrences of words in the Meroitic texts in our possession are not surprising and mirror those of other human languages. Though this may seem a trivial property at first glance, it gives us the hope of using more advanced statistical techniques to help tease some of the meaning from the unknown portions of the language.

Introduction to Statistical Techniques

At the outset, I acknowledge that no language has ever been fully deciphered using purely statistical or mathematical techniques and I am not proposing that Meroitic will be completely understood using these tools. In particular, many of the subtleties of human semantics and syntax are irregular or do not follow a consistent pattern that statistics is usually excellent at analyzing. What this paper will attempt to do is not claim to derive

the meaning, a loaded concept in the study of linguistics, of a word but rather find words which are used very similarly in the text. When two words are used very similarly with one of the words being known, we can hope to possibly infer what the other word in the pair means. In linguistics, the hypothesis that words that appear in similar contexts have similar semantics is known as the Distributional Hypothesis (Harris, 1968, 1985).

Similarity, which will be explained in more technical detail below, will be defined by looking at whether two different words share similar word neighbors for a distance of one or two words away. The steps in analyzing the similarity are five-fold. First, I combined several long Meroitic texts into one giant corpus. I separated out some common bound morphemes to help better identify particular words. Second, I used a computer program in Python to create three matrices: one showing the relative frequency of each word, one showing the frequency of a given word pair, WORD1:WORD2 for any combination of the distinct words in the text for a word distance of one, and a final array with word pair frequencies for a word distance of two. Third, for all possible pairs of different words in the texts, I used the frequency arrays to find the mutual information between every distinct word pair. I created separate arrays of the mutual information metric for the mutual information based on word distance one and mutual information based on word distance two and then calculated a blended mutual information based on weightings of the one and two word distance mutual information. Fourth, using the blended mutual information array, I used a similarity metric to find similarity between words based on if they had similar mutual information for the other words in the texts. Finally, I compared the results for high similarity word pairs to what is known about Meroitic words.

Step 1:

The long stela texts REM 1001, REM 1003, and REM 1044A-D were combined into one corpus separated by a character XXXX between the beginning and end of each text. The XXXX made sure that the last word of one text and the first word of another are not accidentally matched for either a distance one or two word pair. In addition, as in (Smith, 2007) several common and recognized bound morphemes were separated from the words by the word separator character so they would be treated as separate words. Many Meroitic verbs, as well, as some nouns, have suffixes which contain grammatical meaning. For example, it is known that the suffix *telowi* or *teli* is appended to the name of a place, such as a city, to indicate that the subject of the sentence was affiliated with this place. There is also an extremely common suffix *lowi* (“he/she/it is”) or *li* (“the”) that is appended to nouns that may denote the noun as an indirect object in the sentence. Their definitions are still tenuous, however, these bound morphemes are very common and were separated into independent words for the second Zipf plot. The six bound morphemes separated out were “qo”, “lo”, “li”, “te”, “lebkwi”, “mhe”. They were separated in the manner:

Table 2
Meroitic bound morpheme separations

qo → separated out to “*qo*”
atomhe → *ato* and *mhe*
telowi → *te* and *lo* and *wi*
li → separated out to “*li*”
qowi → *qo* and *wi*
lebkwi → *lebk* and *wi*

lw → separated out to “*lw*”
lo → separated out to “*lo*”
atmhe → *at* and *mhe*
teli → *te* and *li*
lowi → *lo* and *wi*

Step 2:

The word frequency arrays were created as follows. First, a normalized frequency of each different word in the text was calculated ranging between 0 and 1 where the total frequency of a word divided by the total number of words in a text defines the word frequency. Next to understand word pair frequency, imagine a string of words separated by the colon-like word separator character, A:B:C. B/C and A/B are distance one neighbors and A/C are distance two neighbors. This is repeated for all words throughout the text. The frequency of a word pair is the number of occurrences of that pair divided by the total number of word pairs in the text.

Step 3

Here the procedure becomes more complicated and theoretical so the appropriate background is necessary. Many statistical natural language methods for analyzing corpuses such as hidden Markov models (HMM) or neural networks require “training” with a tagged corpus that emphasizes parts of speech, grammar, etc. Since these are mostly unknown for Meroitic, we are forced to rely on techniques that make no *a priori* assumptions about the language syntax or word relationships.

Two relatively similar approaches relying on the Distributional Hypothesis were used in (Lankhorst, 1995) and (Lin et. al, 2003) in combination with genetic algorithms and similarity measures respectively to find relationships between words based on their distributions within a text. In (Lankhorst, 1994), a fixed number of categories is created and each word is randomly assigned a category. The mutual information among words in each category is measured and the categories are altered using a genetic algorithm with mutual information as the fitness. A maximum mutual information is asymptotically approached after a certain number of generations and the word/categories at this point typically reflect known grammatical categories. In (Lin et. al., 2003 and Pantel & Lin, 2002) word synonyms are discovered in a text by taking the similarity among words based on the mutual information between the two words and other words in the text. Those words who have the highest similarity are often semantically similar.

The approach in this paper most closely follows that of Lin et. al. in finding the mutual information amongst words in the corpus and then computing a similarity between the words based off of this. The mutual information between two words in the text, x and y , is termed I_{xy} and is defined as

$$I_{xy} = \sum_x \sum_y p_{xy} \log \frac{p_{xy}}{p_x p_y}$$

where p_{xy} is the frequency of word pair (x, y) and p_x and p_y are the frequencies of words x and y in the texts. Two different arrays of mutual information were calculated for the word distance one and two pair frequencies. Finally, a blended mutual information is calculated using different weightings of the one and two distance mutual information.

The blended mutual information, I_B , is

$$I_B = \sqrt{I_1^2 + (WI_2)^2}$$

where I_1 and I_2 are the mutual information for distance one and two word pairs respectively and the weight, W , takes a value between 0 and 1. It is difficult to find an objective value for W . The method used in the paper which will be explained more in the next section is that different values of W were tested until many known words with similar meanings had high measures of similarity. Though this could be accused of affirming the consequent, it can be considered a method of calibration based on our small current knowledge.

Step 4:

For the blended mutual information a similarity measure, S , was calculated where S is defined as

$$S_{xy} = \sum_z \frac{2I_B(x,z)I_B(y,z)}{I_B(x,z)^2 + I_B(y,z)^2}$$

where z is all words in the corpus where $z \neq x, y$.

Step 5:

The word pairs are ranked by descending similarity and the results analyzed. Since relatively infrequent words will likely give spurious or insignificant results, only word pairs where both words appeared at least three times were used in the final analysis for comparison.

Table 3
Top word pair similarities with meanings where known

Rank	Word1	Word2	Word1 Meaning	Word2 Meaning	Similarity	Word1Count	Word2Count
1	kdi	abr	woman	man	1.000	3	3
2	mk	amnp	god	Amun of Napata	0.999	7	17
3	mk	kek	god	?	0.998	7	5
4	abrsel	wwikewi	every man	?	0.996	3	3
5	qorte	agro	in the king?	?	0.986	3	3
6	amnp	seb	Amun of Napata	?	0.979	17	15
7	qes	qor	Kush	king	0.978	12	6
8	ne	pqr	?	prince	0.976	3	3
9	mk	seb	god	?	0.970	7	15

In table 3, the top word pairs by descending similarity are shown. A similarity cutoff of 0.95 was used given the clustering of words above 0.95 and the poor matching of known words and wider spread of similarity scores for word pairs with a score under 0.95. The value of W used is 0.75. This value was chosen because of the excellent and high similarity match of the first two word pairs which consist entirely of known words with similar meanings. The following words in the ranking also show promise. The word *kek* is still undecided but may likely have a religious meaning. Perhaps ‘soul’ like the Egyptian *ka* or a Meroitic deity, however, this is pure speculative. The word *seb* is well-known among Meroitic scholars to have a religious meaning but the exact meaning is still unknown. The word *abrsel* means “every man” while though *wwikewi* isn’t specifically understood, the *wwi-* morpheme indicates directional movement.

Problems & Issues

One interesting issue is a lack of “transitivity” for some of the word pairs. For example, there are strong similarities with *mk* and *amnp*, *kek*, & *seb*. However, with *amnp*, *kek*, & *seb* only *amnp* and *seb* show a high degree of similarity. Even at lower similarity scores, *amnp/kek* and *kek/seb* do not show high similarity between each other. Therefore, perhaps even if all three words have liturgical meaning, their meanings are very distinct and separate.

As stated before, I cannot claim to solve the issues related to Meroitic solely through statistical analysis. In particular, though the information such an analysis can provide is directional it is sensitive to interpretation. The choice of the weight, W , though not completely arbitrary uses *a priori* knowledge to set its value. While the results it returns are consistent with closely related known words, this may introduce bias. The cutoff for the similarity measurement, at a value of 0.95, is also arbitrary and based on a subjective analysis of the data. Therefore, despite the equations, much of this technique requires knowledge of the language and subjective interpretation to extract useful knowledge. In

the end, however, I believe this technique will help shed a light on many previously intractable problems in Meroitic and could become a valuable tool in the eventual decipherment of the language.

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