

Ancient Egyptian Influences on the English Language

By Mark Taylor


It isn't very hard to find words in our language that have roots in the main two ancient languages of the Mediterranean: Greek and Latin. However, unbeknownst to many people, there are lots of words in English that do in fact come from the Ancient Egyptian language as well.





Let's start with a bit of background. Ancient Egyptian is an Afro-Asiatic language that was the dominant spoken tongue in Egypt from the beginning of the first states in the Nile Valley around 3200 BC to well after the region was conquered by the Romans in 30 BC. A form of this language, Coptic, was still the general spoken language among the Egyptian people up until the 16th Century, and is now spoken by only 300 people worldwide, used as a liturgical language by the Coptic Orthodox Church. This language, however, is only partly intelligible with its more ancient dialect, having been influenced a lot by Greek.

So, let's find some English words that have come to us from Egyptian. We will start with the obvious ones, words that seem to be quintessential parts of Ancient Egyptian culture: Pharaoh, Egypt and Sphinx. Pharaoh comes from the Egyptian word $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ (Pr ʕ3) meaning 'great house', which was used to describe the palace in which the monarch lived, and became a colloquial term for the king. The actual Egyptian word for pharaoh was $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ (Nsw). 𓂏 (Pr) in Greek was pronounced Per, and the 𓂏 (ʕ3), pronounced like a short 'a' and then a long 'a', became an 'ao' (αω) in Greek, making the word 'Perao'. You can see how that became pharaoh in English.

Egypt (and all words that come from it e.g. Egyptian, Gypsy) comes from a Mycenaean Greek corruption of $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ (Hwt k3 Pth) which was an alternate name for the city of Memphis, the long-time capital of Ancient Egypt. The Egyptian was pronounced 'oot ka peteh', and in the Mycenaean, the first two vowels, 'w' and 'ʕ', swapped around, as did some of the consonants to make it easier to say in their language, forming A-ku-pi-ti-yo. The 'k' became a 'd', with the word becoming Aiguptos in Greek and then Aegyptus in Latin, before coming into English as Egypt. The word Copt or Coptic originates from the 'k3 Pth' section of the word. Sphinx comes from the Egyptian word $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ (Šzp ʕnh) meaning sphinx, but literally meaning 'living image'. The 'z'(S), 'ʕ'(a, which became an i), 'n', and 𓂏 (kh, which became a g), came into Greek as Sphinga. The Greeks thought that this word '𓂏 𓂏' was related to their word Sphingo, meaning to join together, as to them, a sphinx was just multiple animals joined together.

While also key parts of Egyptian culture, their words for Pyramid and Mummy haven't transferred into English in the same way. Instead of coming from their word 𓂏 (Mr), Pyramid comes from the name of a Greek cake, a puramis, which was shaped like a pyramid. However, some scholars dispute this, saying that it does in fact have an Ancient Egyptian root, and that it comes from $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ (Pri-m-wsi) (Pronounced 'pery em oosy'), which was a rough measurement for the height of a pyramid. The first part of this word having noticeable links to both the

English and the Greek (Pyramida) The Egyptian word for mummy,  (Šs) (pronounced 'Shes') has come into English as our word for a piece of cloth, a sash.

Other words, such as Desert and Oasis have Egyptian roots.  (Dšrt)(Deshret) and  (Wh3)(Ooah) have both made their way into the English language, as have  (Hbny)(Hebeney) and  (3bw)(Aboo), their words for Ebony and Ivory.

Other notable Egyptian words in English include Gum, Ammonia, Barge, Ibis, Libya, Baboon, Chemistry, Pharmacy, Myth, and lily, most of which come from Coptic or Greek loanwords. Even the names Moses, Susan, and Humphrey come from this ancient language.

Ramy Mina, an Anthropologist and Philologist from Tanta University in northern Egypt, published a theory in his recent paper *'The Influence of the Ancient Egyptian Language on the European Languages'* which claimed that there were many more Egyptian words that had influenced Greek and Latin, spreading in this way into English. These include words which contains the letters 'act' (action, actor), 'fac' (factory, benefactor), 'gen' (genocide, genome), any word with the prefix 'im', 'in', or 'non', 'naut' (nautical, astronaut), 'or' (oral, orifice), 'part' (partition), 'semi', and 'via' (deviate, viable), with these coming from the Egyptian 'kat' (act), 'bak' (work), 'djenoo' (race), 'im, en and nen' (no or not), 'inoot' (sea), 'er' (mouth), 'peretch or peredj' (separate, or a part), 'sema' (half), and 'bia' (way or road), respectively. You can see how many of these words are similar, and there are many other word links in the paper. If these could be proven, then the sheer number of Egyptian loanwords in the English language would be recognised for the first time. This would not mean that the existing belief that Latin and Greek have influenced English would be wrong, only that some of their words came from Ancient Egyptian.

So, what does this actually mean. This is just one example of how languages change over time, and how we can trace back various aspects of modern speech throughout the years and through various languages. The words spoken by the ancients, in some ways, are still spoken today. And while this is not to the level that we could understand someone living 2 to 5 thousand years ago, it is to the extent that we are able to say things and remember that, somewhere in the ancient Mediterranean, someone would have been saying something very similar.