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Language offers rare insight into ancient Egyptians

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Long before Facebook posts and tweets, long before [letters](#) with postage stamps, ancient middle and upper-middle-class Egyptians scrawled notes on pieces of clay pots and handed them to children who ran across the village to deliver the messages.

The language these Egyptians used from about 700 B.C. to A.D. 300 is called demotic Egyptian — from the Greek *demos*, meaning tongue of the common man — and was written in a cursive script during the same period when hieroglyphs were being used to memorialize pharaohs on monuments.



University of Chicago scholar Janet Johnson, at the Oriental Institut...

[University](#) of Chicago scholar Janet Johnson recently completed a 37-year project compiling the Chicago Demotic Dictionary, which has tens of thousands of words, some of which became "ebony," "adobe" and the name "Susan," surviving the trek across several centuries and cultures.

During Johnson's research, she and her team found documents and artifacts whose words offer a rare glimpse into the lives of Egyptians who weren't pharaohs, but were fairly well-to-do.

What I found interesting was that these people weren't so different from folks today. For

For example, they paid taxes and stored receipts written on limestone chunks in their basements. Sound familiar?

Among the items studied were marriage contracts that resembled modern-day prenuptial agreements; notes that showed early animal rights activism; and documents detailing Dale Carnegie-like classes that taught young men, in essence, how to win friends and influence people.

"We're seeing the personal side of Egyptians, and that's hard to see when you're looking at the pyramids and tombs and monuments," said Johnson, 67, a professor of Egyptology at the university's Oriental Institute.

"We're getting the nitty-gritty things that make people more real."

The dictionary includes vowel-free words that flourished during a 1,000-year period spanning the rise and fall of the Persian Empire and rulers such as Alexander the Great, Ptolemy, Cleopatra and eventually the Roman Empire, beginning with Augustus Caesar.

Like the Oxford English Dictionary, the demotic dictionary gives researchers definitions, shows word uses and helps with translating texts. But it also serves as a reference guide for reconstructing and understanding ancient Egyptian culture, whether it's the nuances of **government**, commerce, politics, religion or male-female relationships.

While in graduate school in the 1970s, Johnson began the project using as a springboard a 700-page demotic glossary published in 1954. Her new version is an updated 4,500-page volume that is now only available free online (www.oi.uchicago.edu). She said it eventually will be published in book form by the University of Chicago Press.

Johnson said the Egyptians, who gave up demotic for Coptic and then Arabic, left behind **mountains** of material. She found letters that detailed a fight between two factions of priests who were warring during the Ptolemy period over who would control a shrine.

Other documents included marriage contracts. Johnson said that upper-middle-class Egyptian women often entered marriage on an even playing field with their betrothed.

"They had documents that not only guaranteed the husband would feed and clothe his wife and their **children**, but spelled out the amount of food and clothing," Johnson said. The contracts "also said that, in less wealthy families, the husband would keep providing for his wife no matter where she was living until she requested out of the marriage." And then, he had to pay her to get out.

There was even a consideration for joint **property**. Husbands got two-thirds of the property, and wives got a third. Johnson said it wasn't clear whether women had to prove their worth by first producing a child.

Upper-middle-class Egyptians used expensive papyrus primarily for **important** documents such as marriage contracts. But more mundane notes and texts, such as grocery lists and correspondence between neighbors, were drafted on fragments of pottery, or on limestone, called ostrakon.

Johnson said a note on ostrakon from an early animal activist was found near Cairo.

"The man, whose name was Hor, worked in an area where animals were used as sacred offerings to one of the deities," Johnson said. "He felt the animals weren't getting proper care, so he took notes and started a petition."

One tradition in ancient Egyptian culture was to have schoolboys copy texts that explained how they should lead their lives and negotiate relationships to get ahead. The boys were being trained to become professional scribes who worked in the temples and in government administration.

"The training might say something like, 'Don't talk at the dinner table until your boss addresses you,'" Johnson said. "Or, 'Respect women and do not try to move into their territory.' Another text might say, 'Don't tell your wife how to handle the house.'"

During the Ptolemaic period, some of the texts reflected the Egyptian traditions and culture clashes related to Greek immigrants. This was especially clear in families created from intercultural unions.

"Among Egyptians, the roles of men and women were different, but they were pretty equal," Johnson said. "But in Greek culture, women were more inferior. It's fascinating to understand how they, like people **today**, struggled with issues of identity."

She said that years from now, scholars trying to understand any of us in the 21st century **world** won't have a lot of hard copy available because we do so much on electronic devices.

It will be more difficult for our words to reveal us.

"In the old **days**, when I wrote a paper, I would type it up and then mark it up and retype it," Johnson said. "But nowadays we keep it all on the computer and delete earlier versions."

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