THE MUMMIES SPEAK

An Egyptologist Teaches Hollywood How to Talk Like Ancient Egyptians

BY DAN REANY

FOR STUART TYSON SMITH, fieldwork usually means digging in ancient Nubia. But sometimes it also means rubbing elbows with Hollywood celebrities on movie locations. Smith, an Egyptologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara, was the consultant for Stargate, The Mummy, and now The Mummy Returns, due out in theaters May 4.

His main task for the filmmakers was to recreate the lost language of the ancient Egyptians. While scholars have been able to read the language since 1822, it hasn’t been spoken for more than 500 years. Ancient Egyptian slowly disappeared after the Arab conquest of A.D. 642.

“While hieroglyphs are phonetic,” Smith said, “the written ancient Egyptian language used no vowels. Most Egyptologists simply insert a neutral e sound between consonants, which leads to completely inaccurate pronunciations and makes for a language that sounds very flat and dead,” Smith said.

Smith used a variety of methods to piece together the spoken language so the dialogue in the films could be as accurate as possible. A small group of Egyptologists, including Smith, Chris Ehret at UCLA, Antonio Lopriena at Basel, the late John Callender, Jürgen Osing, Wolfgang Schenkel, Carsten Peust, and others, has specialized in reconstructing the vocalization of ancient Egyptian. They all use the same basic approach.

Coptic (the language of a Christian community in Egypt that dates to the seventh century) is the closest-surviving language to ancient Egyptian. Spoken as a liturgical language, much as Latin is used in the Roman Catholic church, Coptic compares to ancient Egyptian roughly the way the English of Chaucer compares to modern English.

Scholars compared Coptic with Egyptian names transcribed into Akkadian cuneiform (a wedge-
shaped writing form from Mesopotamia) in diplomatic correspondences. “The nifty thing about cuneiform is that each sign stands for a syllable, usually [a] consonant [and a] vowel: ku, she, etc.,” Smith said. “So that gives us a small number of words for which the pronunciation is known. You can then make up a set of rules for the entire vocabulary and grammar based on how these words show up in Coptic.” As it happens, the diplomatic documents date to 1400-1200 B.C. — just the right time period for *The Mummy*.

Ancient Afro-Asiatic languages, such as Chadic, Ethiopian, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic, are also looked at. “They give us tips about pronunciation and grammar, masculine and feminine endings, and so on,” Smith said. “A combination of all this evidence allows us to create a set of rules to convert Coptic into ancient Egyptian of 1200 B.C. An example of reconstruction is for the name of the sun god, today often pronounced Ra or, more accurately, Re from Coptic. The vowels shift to REE—a circa 1400 B.C. from REE-uw in the time of the pyramids.” The name, he notes, was mispronounced Ra in *The Mummy*, but was used correctly in *Stargate*.

“For *Stargate*, I tried for circa 1400 B.C., with an archaic Middle Egyptian grammar and a few features from Coptic thrown in to simulate a language that had evolved in isolation.
from Egyptian — and to make it a bit trickier for the Egyptologist character, and my colleagues, to figure it out. For The Mummy, I used a contemporary Late Egyptian grammar roughly contemporary with the New Kingdom and reconstructed the pronunciation for 1200 B.C."

For all three films, Smith phonetically wrote out the translated dialogue and tape-recorded it for the actors. "It was kind of like ancient Egyptian — Berlitz-style," he says. Smith believes the languages used in the films are a fairly close approximation of ancient Egyptian. "An Egyptian of 1200 B.C. would probably understand it, but think we had a bit of an accent. For some words, though, it is very close to the original pronunciation. For example, Ramesses, whose name is a little sentence meaning "Ra bore him," was really RI-a-ma-SE-su. That pronunciation is very close to the original, since it appears in Akkadian. Other words that don't appear directly in Akkadian are a good approximation, but may be a bit off." As a professor, Smith can't help but pass out grades. "Overall, the pronunciation in Stargate is the best, with parts of The Mummy really good, especially the introductory scenes set in ancient Thebes, but there are a few parts where the actors ad-libbed their lines, like in The Mummy, when Jonathan reads from the golden book he says 'Amenophis,' which is the Greek version of Amenhotep, a popular royal name in the New Kingdom." Besides being the dialogue coach for the actors, Smith also worked on some of the Egyptological content and the feel of some scenes in the..."
films, particularly for *Stargate*'s scenes of a 10,000-year-old village, a village and catacombs on another planet, and the 1920s archaeological excavation at the beginning of the film.

"My input on *The Mummy* was in comments on the script and, of course, the translations," he said. "This had some impact on the final film, but they didn't take all of my advice. For example, there were five instead of four canopic jars [which held the organs removed during mummification]. But they did listen to me on other things, like saying there would have been no iron or steel and no gemstones."

For *Stargate*, Smith was on the set in Yuma, Arizona, for almost half of the shoot. "A lot of the dialogue was in Egyptian, and I coached the actors directly. I also worked with the prop guys and set people on some of the scenes and met regularly with (writer/director) Roland Emmerich and (writer) Dean Devlin both in pre-production and during the filming. I was always around during the setup of a scene because James Spader (Daniel the Egyptologist) or someone might decide they needed a new line, so I'd have to do an on-the-spot translation by the time the director shouted 'Action.' One time the weather was bad, so they changed the shot to a small soundstage they'd set up on location. Spader had a line and, of course, I had to be there. So I got a call at about 10 p.m. to be at the airport by 5 a.m. to hop on one of those little commuter planes to Yuma so I could coach him in his lines. Normally Egyptology isn't an emergency service."

For *The Mummy*, I and II, Smith primarily conducted phone conversations with Director Stephen Sommers and Arnold Vosloo (Imhotep) via fuzzy cell-phone calls from Marrakech.

Smith first got into Hollywood Egyptology when he was a research associate in the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, where hefielded all of the phone inquiries about Egypt. "We got lots of calls from Hollywood. I got a call asking if I would write 'Stargate' in glyphs. They said if it flew, then they'd hire me as a consultant. So about a month later, I met with Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich and it went from there."

Smith said he thinks the films help keep people enthusiastic about Egypt. "Although the basic plot in *Stargate* — space aliens built the pyramids — was wrong, the science fiction premise was clever. And the fact that they took time to get everything else right helped the film and, hopefully, hooked people's interest in finding out more about Egypt. It's the same thing with *The Mummy*. There were some inaccuracies, but they had lots of fun with a classic monster-movie plot. Again, the fact that they took the trouble to do the language and have me look over the script both helps the film and will spark people's interest in finding out what ancient Egypt was really like."

And people the world over are clearly fascinated with ancient Egypt. "First," Smith said, "Egypt's remarkable achievements spark people's interest and admiration: gigantic pyramids, 3000 years of cultural continuity, the only one of the ancient wonders still standing, the opulence and wealth seen in sumptuous jewelry like that from King Tutankhamun's tomb, beautiful and timeless art, and remarkable preservation that's left us objects of daily life that might otherwise have perished.

![Stuart Tyson Smith (right) with Jaye Davidson (as Ra) on the set of *Stargate*.](image-url)
"And, of course, there's Egypt's remarkable historical record, from the bombastic pronouncements of kings like Ramesses II, which aren't so different from those made by today's politicians, to the intimate letters of husband to wife. This gives us a kind of direct and intimate connection with the past that is often hard to get at.

There's also the sense of adventure and discovery. Ever since the first Greek tourists arrived, people have commented on how extraordinary and unusual Egypt is, with animal-headed gods, mummies, and strange cultural and religious practices. Add that to Egypt's great wealth and extraordinary monuments, and you've got a Cecil B. DeMille production."

Smith's interest in Egypt was sparked by the story of Howard Carter's search for Tutankhamun from 'the detective story that led him to the Valley of the Kings, painstaking work and disappointments, and finally triumph. When he stepped into the tomb, Carter literally stepped back into the moment when the tomb was resealed 3,300 years ago. My favorite thing from the tomb is a little bundle of gold rings dropped by a tomb robber near the entrance, not for the objects themselves, but because of the story they told. Was the thief caught in the act and hauled off by the Necropolis police to an ugly end, or did he drop the rings in his haste to escape, warned by a lookout? This intimate connection to the past impressed me more than the gold and magnificent objects that came from the tomb and is what continues to drive my interest today."

When he's not coaching actors on the nuances of Middle Egyptian, Smith focuses his own scholarly work on ancient Nubia, Egyptian imperialism and interactions with Nubia, the ideological, social, and economic dynamics of ancient Egypt, and death and burial in the New Kingdom. He worked with Kent Weeks in 1982 in the early days of the Theban Mapping Project. "It was pretty exciting stuff, rappelling off of cliffs into the eighteenth dynasty Queens

THE MUMMY RETURNS: A PLOT FIT FOR A (SCORPION) KING

HERE'S A SNEAK PEEK AT THE PLOT OF THE MUMMY RETURNS, straight from writer/director Stephen Sommers:

"Our heroes, Evelyn and Rick, find this bracelet. Their son [the sequel takes place 10 years after the original movie was set] puts the bracelet on and basically becomes a living map to this lost oasis. Imhotep is resurrected and the first thing he wants is to grab that kid and find the oasis, because in seven days Scorpion King is going to wake up and all hell's going to break loose. That can be a really good thing or a really bad thing, depending on who gets there first. So it's sort of a race to find this lost oasis."

The Scorpion King is played by American wrestling star Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Sommers did some digging of his own to come up with the new villain. Of the least-known rulers of ancient Egypt, Scorpion King may have been a name shared by two protodynastic rulers who preceded King Narmer, who united Upper and Lower Egypt about 3100 B.C.

"Scorpion isn't a bad choice for a menacing character," said Stuart Smith, Egyptologist and language consultant for the project. "Scorpions are, after all, a threatening creature in Egyptian magic as well as real life. The choice of 'The Rock' to play him at first sounds absurd, but when you think about it, it's somehow appropriate. Those early kings must have been pretty ruthless and in good shape if the Heb Sed was really performed, presumably with unfit kings sacrificed." The Heb Sed, described as a festival, supposedly occurred in the 30th year of a pharaoh's reign to test and renew the king's powers.

Smith also notes that Early Dynastic burials typically included human sacrifices. The Narmer Palette, an artifact that describes events from Narmer's reign, "shows some pretty grisly stuff. I particularly like the dead lapwings [people] dangling from the standards. Less subtle are all the folks with their heads cut off and placed between their legs and, of course, the appearance of the classic ritual slaying."

Smith said many movies about Egypt, especially mummy films, often focus on the country's exotic qualities at the expense of accuracy. However, some things that at first glance might seem like campy creations of Hollywood are based on fact or mythology. "Those flesh-eating scarabs from the first movie seem un-Egyptological, not to mention unnatural, but in fact the Book of the Dead has a spell against the Apshei, a nasty scarab that threatens to eat the deceased."

Smith said that while the setting for much of The Mummy Returns' action is in southern Egypt, he's not yet sure if Sommers and the others will take his suggestion to call it Nubia in the film. "Incidentally, my agent is negotiating now for me to advise for a Mummy prequel called The Scorpion King, so I may have more to tell about Scorpion sometime soon."  DR
tombs south of QV (Valley of the Queens), and acting as crew for the first hot-air-balloon flights in Luxor.

Two winters ago, he began excavations at Tombos, an Egyptian colonial cemetery. "We had a great field season. We found the pyramid tomb of a high-ranking ancient Egyptian colonial administrator, the Scribe of the Treasury and Overseer of Foreign Lands Siamun and his wife, the Mistress of the House Wenu. The names were off funerary cones, which is pretty wild since [funerary cones with names] normally occur only in the Theban Necropolis. The only other site in Nubia where they've been found is Aniba, the provincial capital, which underlines Siamun's importance. Maybe they were colonists from Thebes and wanted a touch of home. More likely it was to make a real statement about Egyptian power by creating the most elaborate tomb they could, complete with all the whistles and bells you'd find at the capital. We never got into the burial chamber of the pyramid, though. We stopped digging in the shaft at four meters. But a little distance away we found a two-chambered tomb with the remains of at least 30 burials of middle-class Egyptians or possibly Egyptianized Nubians.

"The burials themselves look very Egyptian. Most had been ripped apart by looters, but towards the bottom, we found eight intact burials with assorted grave goods, including traces of linen indicating at least basic mummification, fragments of coffins, two Ushabti figurines, scarabs, amulets, and earrings of ivory, faience, glass, jasper, and carnelian, ebony tubes and applicators for kohl eye-paint, a very cool ebony boomerang for bird hunting, and numerous pots for food offerings. There were some nifty Egyptian pots, but also two extremely rare Mycenaean jars from Greece, which were a long way from home. There were no canopies for their innards, so presumably this burial was the 'budget version.'"

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