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Translating Ancient Egyptian Literary Texts

Abstract: This paper presents the main difficulties translators encounter when translating ancient Egyptian literary texts, whether due to problems of semantics, of grammar, of expressions and metaphors, or of cultural misunderstandings. The translators' personal cultural background and sensitivities can also impact translations. These discrepancies, of which examples are given, often end up in very different translations of the same texts, showing to what extent our knowledge of Ancient Egyptian is still approximative.

Translating literary texts is generally conceived of and defined as the act of transmitting or conveying a text from its original language to another language, while taking into account cultural, regional and temporal/chronological differences between the original language and the language the text is translated into, in other words between 'source and target languages'. In addition to the difficulties met by translators translating from a Western language and culture into another Western language of a related culture, in the case of Ancient Egyptian literature, its historical period, the complexities of its language and scripts and the fact that Ancient Egypt is an 'oriental culture' with specific characteristics, and different norms for the literariness of texts, all of the above make translation even more difficult for Western scholars because, as M. Agar says, "You cannot use a new language unless you change the consciousness that is tied to the old one, unless you reach beyond the circle of grammar and dictionaries, out of the old world and into a new one."[1] However, the last part of this statement is not totally true for Ancient Egyptian where the language, scripts, and culture are so different. We really need updated dictionaries and much research in comparative Egyptian documents to establish the final text to be translated and, we would hope, the precise meaning of its words, as our current knowledge of this language is still imperfect in spite of the progress that is done daily. We could repeat here what Gardiner wrote "to sum up, the terminology adopted by us is not intended to bear too technical or too precise an interpretation".[2]

But before I begin to explain the problems of the Ancient Egyptian language and point to its difficulties, I would like to salute all translators for their efforts to transmit the treasures of Ancient Egypt to the general public, even though I do not always agree with some interpretations as translators will inevitably be affected by their respective cultural backgrounds (including political and religious considerations) and schools of thought. Because of these differences, translators who wish to modernize the texts, for example, and adapt them to their modern language and culture may lose, by doing so, the identity of the texts and the emotional feeling they convey when the translation allows the reader to appreciate its antiquity and the cultural context it reveals. These are points that I would like to present in this paper, not based on theories as much as they are based on Egyptologists' different experiences and different 'interpretations' of the same text as will be discussed below. Before doing so, I would like to clarify that I shall present in this paper examples taken from what is usually considered as *Belles Lettres*. These examples are far from exhaustive as they are only part of ongoing research.

Let me just begin with difficulties presented by the script, particularly in texts written in Hieroglyphics and in Hieratic. Because these texts are written in signs rather than in letters, the scribes have more liberty in selecting the spelling of their words as long as the phonetical result of their choice expresses the word they mean to communicate. Moreover, the determinatives or sense signs they put at the end of their words to finetune even more the nature and meaning of the word they just wrote, allow to bestow, as in other oriental languages using signs, an even more exact meaning to their words. This can provide an almost immediate apprehension of this meaning, to the extent that the reader can be hit by a visual understanding before reading the whole word and forming an intellectual appreciation of the meaning. This immediate signification, that somehow strikes the reader accustomed to this system, led J. Assmann to consider that 'It is much more evident to postulate a correlation between the iconic signs of the hieroglyphic script and the things of reality than between the words of (other) languages and the things of nature'.[3] Moreover,

1 Agar 1994, 22.

2 Gardiner 1957, 440.

3 For this and other similar comments on hieroglyphs see Assmann 2007, 15–34.

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this extraordinary power of the signs and particularly that of determinatives which can change the meaning of the word has only recently been recognized.[4]

It is this importance of the meaning given by the unpronounced determinatives that led Ancient Egyptians to consider that *seeing* a text is even more explicit than *hearing* it as this example shows:

jw mȝȝ.n ḥm(.j) sš pn nfr nfr rdj.n.k in.tw.f m stp m hrw pn nfr n snḏm ib n (ỉssỉ) mȝᶜ ḫrw mȝᶜ ḫrw... mrr.j ḥm(.j) mȝȝ sš.k pn r ḫt nb.

'My majesty *saw* this beautiful, beautiful *writing* that you were asked to bring to the palace on this beautiful day to make happy the heart of the king Isesi, justified justified. My majesty loved *seeing* your *writing* more than anything else.'[5]

I would like to draw readers' attention to the repetition of *nfr* and of *mȝᶜ ḫrw* in this example where the repetition expresses a superlative: very beautiful and very/completely justified. Repetition to express a superlative, or to insist on a word, or even an expression is very common in the Arabid dialect of Egypt until today.

There is also a word that we often hear/read today in publications dealing with ancient Egyptian literature, namely the word 'untranslatability'. This untranslatability is usually mentioned with regard to words' determinatives that can change or emphasize the meaning of a word, as mentioned above, but it can also be due to the usage of devices unknown to western language like *jinas*, a device well known in Arabic and also used in Egyptian, as Hany Rashwan has clearly explained in his doctoral thesis and further articles.[6] It is a literary device which depends on the similarity of signs and sounds in two different words constructed from the same letters but ending up with different meanings allowing them 'to deliver their intended message creatively'.[7] This is illustrated by the following examples:

dj.s st n.j snt m dy 'She [the Goddess of love] gave her [the beloved girl] to me as a gift.'[8]

n spr. n sp ḫsy r dmj ḫry sỉ r sỉḫ tȝ 'The sinful person can never come close to the harbor, but the hindermost will reach the land.'[9]

šwyt m jr m šw 'Sun-shade, do not act like sun-light.'[10]

In these examples *jinas* is represented first by the repetition of the *s*, *t* and *d* sign in closely related words with different meanings thus expressing the message to be conveyed. The same device is applied in the next example with *s* and *x* while in the third both *jinās* words share two initial letters in their stem (S and w), in addition to using the same determinative (the sun disc) to express two contrasting meanings since they are both related to a contradictory action of the sun.

Another type of *jinas* plays with changing the determinative of a word to give a contrasting meaning as in the following example where the regular determinative of *wr*, "chieftain" with a cane as symbol of high status is replaced by the determinative of the bound enemy which destroys the image normally given by the word *wr*.

pȝy.sn wr dnḥ r-ḫȝt ssmt.f 'Their chief was pinioned before his horse.'

Moreover, this unusual determinative corresponds visually with the determinative of the main verb of the sentence (*dnḥ*, which means 'being captured as a prisoner of war'). The unusual determinative of *wr*, along with the determinative of the subsequent verb, stresses the subjugation of the foreign "chieftain".[11] Thus, *jinas* (analogy of sounds between two different words with different determinatives) may have also contributed to the Ancient Egyptian concept that 'seeing a text' can be equivalent to reading or hearing a text. Incidentally, I would like to add here that 'to see a text' for 'to read a text' is an expression still used today in Arabic.

4 The ability of determinatives to be either alternates or supplements to each other is another strand of their use that is not sufficiently addressed, cf. McDonald 2009, 357.
5 *Urk I*, 179, 13–16; Rashwan 2016, 64–65.
6 Rashwan 2019, 137–160; Rashwan 2014, 1–6.
7 Rashwan 2016, 114.
8 Rashwan 2016, 165.
9 Rashwan 2016, 280.
10 Rashwan 2016, 151.
11 Rashwan 2016, 337.

Untranslatability can also be due to the sound of words which, when used together in a specific grammatical construction uncommon to Western languages, vibrate much more strongly. An example in a description of Hatshepsut, where she is compared to the rising sun god in the morning, is most explicit. It says: "*ḫprt ḫprw mj ḫpry, ḥꜣᶜt ḥꜣᶜw mj ꜣḫty*"[12] 'She who came into being a coming into being like the god Khepry and who rises a rising like the god Akhty.' من أصبحت اصباحا مثل الصابح وا شركت اشراكا مثل المشرق

Evidently this is not easy to put in 'good English', so that Miriam Lichtheim, who in spite of her excellent knowledge of ancient Semitic languages, translated it "who has forms like Khepri and who rises like Harakhty",[13] losing totally the sound effect, and the energy conveyed by the Egyptian text. This is why translating was not encouraged by Egyptians, whose language was endangered after the conquests of Egypt and large parts of the ancient world by Alexander the Great, and Greek becoming gradually the lingua franca of much of the ancient word. Treatise XVI of the Corpus Hermeticum is totally adamant about that when it says:

> preserve this discourse untranslated in order that such mysteries may be kept from the Greek and that their insolent, insipid and meretricious manner of speech may not reduce to impotence the dignity and strength of our language and the cogent/coherent/clear force of the words. For all the Greeks have ... is empty speech, good for showing off; ... For our part, we use not words, but sounds full of energy ...[14]

When translating a text, using vocabulary which reflects as closely as possible the ancient vocabulary seems to me to be a must, even if the translator has to explain in footnotes the ancient context and specific aspect of the ancient culture in order to allow the text to keep its identity and the historical depth which enhances its beauty. Moreover, using words charged with meanings like the ancient text is to be faithful to the original language and to its scripts which the Egyptians considered as a gift of the Gods, in which every word and every sign carried a performative creativeness unknown to alphabetical systems of writing.[15]

Untranslatability can also result from the difficulty of the language, or from the use of metaphors the meaning of which is not evident, particularly for foreign scholars unfamiliar with modern Egyptian culture and local dialect. In order to solve this problem, after Ahmad Kamal's early unpublished attempts rejected by western scholars of the period, Prof. A. M. Bakir looked for a different approach to the language, and published in the second part of last century two grammar books covering the classical language of the Middle Kingdom[16] and the vernacular of the Ramesside Period.[17] But in spite of the fact that these books were written in English and published in England, this approach did not receive enough attention and gradually faded away. It is championed again today by a number of young Egyptian scholars like Hany Rashwan who did his PhD at SOAS, London, on comparative studies between Arabic and Ancient Egypt.[18] Although this new school is finding some support today among western scholars like R. Parkinson and S. Quirke, it is still very difficult to convince the western world that there is a more logical approach to Ancient Egyptian language and culture than the Western one used so far.

Another problem for translators of ancient languages is that ancient Egyptians use many metaphors, often emerging from the Egyptian physical and socio-cultural environment and difficult for foreigners in general to understand. Examples of these can be found in a variety of texts, for example wisdom texts like the complaints of the "Eloquent Peasant", categorized by James Allen as a discourse.[19] I shall rather bring your attention here to a few examples, less complicated or famous, which, I feel, could be better translated or at least would deserve explanatory footnotes.

In the' Shipwrecked Sailor' we read: "*jw mdw.f djf.f ṯm n.f ḥr*"[20] 'His talk causes the face to be covered for him', where the covering of the face = ستر الوجه means to "protect from shame". This however is usually translated either

12 *Urk IV*, 361, 12–13.
13 Lichtheim 2006b, 41.
14 For a less violent translation of this conversation see Sauneron 1957, 142–143, 'La toute puissance des sons et l'étymologie sacrée.'
15 Assmann 2007, 15–35; Sauneron 1957, 143.
16 Bakir 1984.
17 Bakir 1983.
18 Rashwan 2016.
19 Allen 2015, 229–325.
20 Blackman 1972, 42, 5–6.

literally, or differently as "his speech makes one forgive him"[21] or 'makes leniency for him',[22] which is not exactly the same thing. In another such example ending the same tale we read: *jn mj rḏjt mw (n) ỉpd ḥḏ tỉ n zft.f dwỉ*,[23] "What is the point of giving water to a bird at the dawn of its slaughter in the morning"[24] As a matter of fact the word *mw* "water" has a wide variety of meaning in Egypt, as expected, knowing the influence of the environmental context on the creating of metaphors. One of these meanings of *mw*, according to me and based on the analogy with a similar meaning of the word water in Arabic, I believe to be 'wealth' and 'resources'. This interpretation is supported by a passage in Ipuwer's lamentations,[25] for example, in which we read *nfr js jb nj nswt jw n.f mỉꜥwt.f ḫr js … ḫỉswt nbt mw.n pw wỉḏ.n pw*, 'Well/ elated indeed is the heart of the king (because/when) offerings arrive to him for indeed (offerings of) all foreign countries, ***they are our water, they are our prosperity.***' This text makes it clear that *mw* water can be the equivalent of 'prosperity', 'resources' or 'wealth'. That being said, I suggest translating the closing question in the Shipwrecked Sailor saying: *jn mj rḏjt mw [n] ỉpd ḥḏ-tỉ n zft.f dwỉ* as: who would give wealth/ rewards to a bird (here a metaphor for any condemned creature, including humans) the dawn of the day of its condemnation? Instead of 'what is the point of giving water to a bird at the dawn of its slaughter in the morning?' as we find it in most English translations. Should this translation of *mw* be accepted, it could be used in other texts as well, context permitting. For example, in a passage from the beginning of Pap. Millingen[26] translated differently by many scholars, Amenhotep I says to his son: *Wrḥw ꜥntyw stjw mw ḫry* . Among other translations the one presented here are just samples of the variety:

- 'The one anointed with myrrh was as one who poured lowly water'[27]
- 'Those anointed with my myrrh made my way slippery before me'[28]
- G. Burkard emended *ḫry* into (*m*) *mḫry* granary and translated 'poured *water* into my granary'.[29] As for me, I totally accept this emendation and agree with this last translation on the base that pouring water is, in this context, an act of aggression meaning to wash away the wealth/resources in my granary (= poured the resources (out of) of my granary).

Another expression found in both Egyptian and colloquial Arabic today, difficult to translate though relatively clear, is *wrd jm.sn* الذين تعب فيهم that we find in Akhenaton's great hymn to the Sun God carved at the entrance of the tomb of Ay in Amarna saying:

> 'In the underworld you make a Nile
> that you may bring it forth as you wish to feed the people,
> since you make them for yourself, their utter master,
> *growing weary on their account*, lord of every land!'[30]
> or
> '*who wearies himself in their service*',[31]
> or
> '*who toils for them*'[32]

In fact the expression *wrd jm.sn* translated verbatim would be 'being tired in them' meaning that he put his energy and a lot of physical and emotional effort in making them (they being tears of his eye), which conveys much more than just 'growing weary' as translated above.

21 Lichtheim 2006a, 212.
22 Allen 2015, 12–13.
23 Blackman 1972, 48, 1–2.
24 Allen 2015, 50–52.
25 Pap. Leyde 344 recto III,12–13; Gardiner 1909, 34.
26 Pap. Millingen 4, 4; Helck 1986.
27 Quirke 2004, 127.
28 Tobin 2003a, 168; (literally poured *water* under me).
29 Burkard 1977, 213.
30 Simpson 2003, 281.
31 Foster 2001, 5.
32 Lichtheim 2006b, 98.

Sometimes passages are difficult to understand because they have no parallels in the language data at hand. This seems to be the case when Hatshepsut brags about the cutting in the Aswan quarries, transportation, decoration, gilding and erection of two obelisks in the temple of Karnak, in the following: *Wȝḥ.n js gs.sn ḥr ḫt.sn*[33] 'It was my wish to make them for him (her father) gilded with electrum'. "*Their foils (gs, literally 'side') lies on their body*" is what I expect people to say. My mouth is effective in its speech ... .[34] Lichtheim explains that *gs* could refer to the foils. But this meaning for *gs* is not attested anywhere else to my knowledge and therefore I consider that this sentence, in this particular context, would best be translated as an expression for "it is impossible", in the same vein as to "split the hair in four" as something complicated to do or the like. Similar strange sentences in Arabic occur to express impossibility as well.

Another difficult passage to translate, possibly due to cultural differences between Pap. Vandier and his translator,[35] reports that the king is sick and says "Pharaoh didn't restrain himself from taking a meal at night *while pharaoh's eye was very big*. Until a night happened when pharaoh *left the meal* prepared for him as usual (the food did not taste good in his mouth ...) *The eye of the enemies of pharaoh became still*. He couldn't sleep. *His clothes didn't stick to him and he was like a man coming out of a river ...*"

In this short passage, I thought about the image provided by 'big eye', 'the enemy of pharaoh' and 'like a man coming out of the river' in a similar context in Arabic and their meaning, and I reached the following translation where the word *wȝḥ* meaning here 'to add' is an homonym of 'to put aside or to leave'.[36] We also know that in ancient Egypt (and modern Egypt) people do not like to utter words they do not want to see materialize because of the creative power of the word and therefore the writer diverted the sickness here on 'the enemies of pharaoh" as magicians would do. That same attitude exists until today. To me this description seemed to correspond well with a case of strong indigestion that could prevent normal breathing and possibly lead to suffocation and maybe even death, so that I suggested the following translation: 'Pharaoh didn't restrain himself from taking a meal at night, *it being that pharaoh was insatiable (eye was very big)*; until a night happened when pharaoh *added to* the meal prepared for him as usual.(... the food did not taste good in his mouth ...) *The eye of the enemies of pharaoh became motionless*. He couldn't sleep; *his clothes did not fit him as he was sweating abundantly.*[37]

I shall end this paper with the presentation of comparative translations of love poetry texts. These texts are among the most difficult texts to translate because they present a uniqueness which applies to their beauty as well as to the fact that they have no parallels in Ancient Egypt. The disparities among the translations are due essentially to the lacunae in the texts, and to hapaxes. They also reveal the different schools of thought of their translators and their different sensitivities.

Love Poetry: Poem #1. This poem belongs to the first set of pap. Harris 500 (BM 10060) ro. 2,6–2,9:

> 'I am sailing downstream on the ferry, (guided) by the hand of the helmsman, With my bundle of reeds on my shoulder. I am bound for Ankh-Tawy,
> And I shall say to Ptah, the Lord of Ma'at, "Grant me my beloved this night."
> The river is wine,
> Ptah is its reeds,
> Sekhmet is its lotus leaf, Iadet is its lotus bud, Nefertum is its lotus flower.
> *There is rejoicing as the land brightens in its beauty*; Memphis is a bowl of mandrakes Laid before the god who is beauteous of face.'[38]

The next translation presents very few variations due the different choice of vocabulary, but the general feeling is the same. The main variation is towards the end where a lacuna after Nefertum is interpreted differently, the translator having introduced here the Goddess Hathor, whose beauty would illuminate the land:

33 Urk IV, 367, 25–26.
34 Lichtheim 2006b, 28.
35 Pap. Vandier I, 2–5; Posener 1985, 40–42.
36 *Wb* I, 254, 8; See also Posener 1985, on the meaning of *wȝḥ* and on his commentary of this passage which differs totally from my interpretation.
37 Haikal 1999, 163–169. The present translation is slightly amended.
38 Tobin 2003b, 310.

'*And the land is lit up with her (the Goddess) beauty*'[39]
Compare with
'Oh, I am bound downstream on the Memphis ferry
like a runaway, snapping all ties
with my bundle of old clothes over my shoulder.
I am going down there where the living is, going down there to that big city,
And there I'll tell Ptah (Lord who loves justice): 'Give me a girl tonight!
Look at the river! Eddying, in love with the young vegetation.
Ptah himself is the life of those reed shoots,
Lady Sekhmet of the lilies--- Yes our lady of Dew dwell among lilypads---,
and their son Nefertem, sweet boy,
Blossoms newborn in the blue lotus
Twilight is heavy with gods...
And the quiet joy of tomorrow, dawn whitening over her loveliness:
O. Memphis, my city, beauty forever!-----
you are a bowl of love's own berries, Dish set for Ptah, your god of the handsome face.'[40]

Foster totally appropriated and modernized the text and the result may be very appealing but the text has been changed, even if the erotic context suggested and supported by the offering of mandrakes in the other versions is correct. Strangely enough Foster did not use this fruit in his translation. However, I would rather keep closer to the Egyptian text and eventually explain it in footnotes. In my opinion, the brightening of the land at the end of the poem is rather caused by the presence of 'the sister' the young man dreams about in the beginning of the poem. In fact, in Arabic today we still say that a person is illuminating a place when an important/dear person visits someone else's place.[41]

Poem #2. This poem is from the first set of poems inscribed on the Deir el Medina Vase, 3rd poem lines 9–11:

'My desire is to descend and to bathe in your presence,
That I may let you look upon my beauty
In a *tunic of finest royal linen Besprinkled with perfume*.
[...] I shall go down into the water with you,
And I shall come out to you bearing a red fish Firmly held in my fingers,
And I shall lay it before you [...].
My beloved, come! Look upon me!'

Or

'My desire is to go down to bathe before you so I may cause you to
see my beauty in a *robe of finest linen* permeated with
camphor oil .....
I come out for you with *a red carp lively on my fingers* ....'

It is clear here that the young girl wants her beloved to see her with her wet robe clinging to her body while she is holding a red fish, an erotic symbol, emphasizing her figure molded by the wet robe she is wearing, thus encouraging her beloved's imagination and his erotic dreams.

Compare with:

'My desire is to descend and to bathe in your presence,
That I may let you look upon my beauty
In a *tunic of finest royal linen*
Besprinkled with perfume.
[...] I shall go down into the water with you,
And I shall come out to you bearing a red fish

39 Lichtheim 2006b, 189.
40 Foster 2001, 47.
41 Haikal 1997, 81–83.

Firmly held in my fingers,
And I shall lay it before you [...].
My beloved, come! Look upon me!'[42]

Compare this oriental tantalizing scene with the modernized modern American appropriation that follows:

'Love, how I'd love to slip down to the pond,
bathe with you close by on the bank.
Just for you I'd wear my new *Memphis swimsuit*,
made of sheer linen, fit for a queen –
Come see how it looks in the water!
Couldn't I coax you to wade in with me?
Let the cool creep slowly around us?'[43]

Poem #3 from Pap. Chester Beatty I, 2nd set, II,1–II,10. This poem ends with a metaphor reflecting an Egyptian gesture of thanks giving which does not seem to have been properly understood by translators in general:

'Would that you might come in haste to (your) beloved,
Like a gazelle bounding across the desert.
Its feet move swiftly, and its limbs are weary, ...
You must make your way right up to her gateway
That your hand may be kissed four times,
For you are pursuing the affections of your beloved,
And it is the Golden Goddess who has destined her for you.'

In this poem however, there is a cultural misunderstanding and the translation of line 5 should be: "That you may kiss your hand four times".[44] In fact, kissing one's own hand four times, is a gesture of giving thanks still done in Egypt meaning that the lover should thank God for his safe arrival and reaching his beloved by the favors of the goddess.

Because of the difficulties of translation just presented, I would tend to agree with Parkinson' opinion that "Philology needs to be complemented by beauty and feeling",[45] as long as it does not lose the identity of the original text. After all, literary texts and poetry in particular should be a way to happiness and free dreaming!

I would like to conclude my paper with few words from J. Foster whose modernizing interpretations of Egyptian poetry I presented in the paper:

> The works of ancient Egyptian literature and their authors are less well known than the works of art and architecture ... in trying to read, he or she must also try to visualize the images and culture conveyed in the text – which is no easy thing to do. At any rate, far from appearing in their rightful place at the fountainhead of world literature, the classics of Egypt remain out of the mainstream, covered in darkness ... It is, even now, a rich literature, despite the fact that it lies before us in ruins. Enough remains for us to insist flatly that its masterpieces belong at the beginning of our traditions of world literature – as the fountainhead – preceding the contributions of Greece and Israel.[46]

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42 Tobin 2003b, 317. Other translations are close to this one except that of Foster here presented.
43 Foster 2001, 23.
44 Tobin 2003b, 329. See also Haikal 1998, 291–292.
45 Parkinson 2014.
46 Foster 2001, xx.

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Abbreviated literature

Urk I = Sethe 1933.
Urk IV = Sethe 1961.
Wb I = Erman/Grapow 1982.