

Taste and Experience in Egyptian Literature

According to Raymond O. Faulkner's Dictionary of Middle Egyptian, the Egyptian

verb  *dp*, meaning "taste," has an alternative translation of "experience"

in two examples from Egyptian literature. These occur in the "The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor," and "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant." This second usage of *dp* to refer to experience other than the specific sensory experience of taste, while limited in its occurrence in the literature, appears to be a stable function of the semantic category of these terms and not simply an arbitrary homonymic relationship. In "The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor" the verb is nominalized and used metaphorically to convey the idea of a profound and distinctly negative life experience, as follows:



"How joyful is the one who recounts the experience (taste) of it, when the suffering has passed."¹

Also, in "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant," the verb is used in its prospective form to convey the idea of another profound, and equally bad, experience.



"...may the waters not take you, may you not experience (taste) the evils of the river."²

The distinction that these lexemes, "taste" and "experience," are related through a shared semantic framework, rather than by a casual similarity, is important. If these two terms are related only through random homonymy, then further analysis would yield little

¹ My translation, based on hieroglyphic transliteration from Foster, page 26.

² My translation, based on hieroglyphic transliteration from de Buck, page 92.

of interest to the study of ancient Egypt. If, however, as I will show, these terms are linked semantically, this elision of taste and experience could have some important implications with respect to corporeal basis for ancient Egyptian epistemology. Specifically, this usage points to a sensory division in the Egyptian worldview in which the divine is experienced with the nose and the worldly with the tongue. My concern here is to establish that a semantic relationship exists between *dp* as “taste” and *dp* as “experience” in the Egyptian language, and to describe the mechanics of this relationship. In interpreting possibilities for this relationship, the metaphoric use of *dp* in “The Story of Sinuhe” provides some clarity.

In “The Story of Sinuhe,” a fugitive nobleman named Sinuhe becomes thirsty while fleeing across the desert and reports:



“I was parched, my throat was dry. I said, ‘This is the taste of death!’”³

Certainly Sinuhe describes a physical sensation in his mouth, but this cannot be a literal taste. This usage of the lexeme *dp* to convey the meaning of an abstract experience references the physical sense of taste more clearly than do the previous examples, but this usage is still metaphoric. Death is not literally producing a taste that is sensed by the speaker. Death is not sweet, nor salty, nor even parched and dry. In fact, this could almost as easily be translated, “this is the experience of death,” except that to experience death would be to die, an event that did not happen to Sinuhe. But the feeling of what death might be like is clearly the idea being conveyed by these words. That this feeling, this type of somatic experience of a feared state or a negative event that has been avoided or

³ My translation, based on hieroglyphic transliteration from Allen, page 71.

survived, is centered metaphorically in the mouth, the location of the sense of physical taste, points to the centrality of physical sensation to Egyptian concepts of life and to a duality in the concept of life as lived by humans and life as given by gods.

Egyptian literary descriptions of life being given by deities to humans sometimes specifically describe this process in terms of air and breath that enters the body through

the nose. The ME verb “to breathe” is Hnm, or snsн, both written with the nose determinative. A very clear example of the specific connection between noses and divine life can be seen in a passage from “The Teaching for King Merikare” from the Papyrus Carlsberg VI, where a description of the beneficent works of a god, presumably Re-Atum, toward humankind includes:



“He made breezes (air) for the heart, so that their noses might live.”⁴

Depictions from relief carvings and paintings in tombs and temples from every period of Egyptian pharaonic history demonstrate the gods offering life to a human or a king, and this is most frequently depicted using the extension of an ankh to the nose of the

recipient. The gods themselves are written using the triliteral hieroglyph *ntr*, representing a flag fluttering in the breeze, with the implication that the wind is a divine manifestation and can be seen only in its effects. Yet the human experience of the physical world, particularly its negative aspects, are consistently presented in literature as oral experiences. It is possible that this distinction marks these experiences as somehow more physically robust than the experience of scent or breath. This dichotomy of

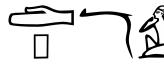
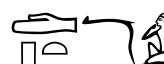
⁴ My translation, based on hieroglyphic transliteration from Allen, page 251.

divine/human, nose/mouth, breath/taste, is consistent with the dual nature of Egyptian artistic representation and the balanced ideal represented in religious and artistic concepts. That breath is a divine experience while taste is profane, and both are essential to a living human, is clearly implied by these verb usages. This insight, however, relies on the establishment of a semantic relationship between *dp* as “taste” and *dp* as “experience.”

The Egyptian language belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family and has in common with its Asiatic relatives a lexeme construction based on a (generally) tri radical system. Because vowels are not included in the written words, it is impossible to tell with absolute certainty what the missing vowel sounds were. However, since it is possible that these missing vowels constituted discrete phonemes, differentiating one word from another, their significance should not be overlooked. One avenue for examining the possible vowel component of words, and thus exploring semantic variation in Middle Egyptian homographs, is through an examination of these words in Coptic, as this later form of written Egyptian includes vowels.

The literary sources in which *dp* refers to types of experience other than physical taste date to the Middle Kingdom. “The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor” is preserved on only one papyrus copy, P. Leningrad 1115, and, like “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” is datable only to some time in the Middle Kingdom, from about 2040 to 1650BCE. “The Story of Sinuhe” is preserved in several fragmentary copies, of which the oldest datable copy is the P. Berlin 3022 from around 1990 to 1785BCE. The Egyptian language in use at the time these manuscripts were produced, Middle Egyptian (ME), is different in many ways from the Egyptian language written several hundred years later in Coptic. However,

the shapes and shades of meanings that emerge from these verbs as they passed into Coptic is instructive in tracing their relationships to each other and to their Middle Egyptian homographs.

The ME verb *dp* was written  for both “taste” and “experience,” and the noun *dpt* for “taste” was written . Faulkner’s dictionary lists two nominal homographs for *dpt*,  and , meaning “ship” and “loins.” The pronunciation of these words in ME cannot be securely reconstructed, but their movement into Coptic shows some spelling and phonetic differences that existed in that much later period of the language. While it is unlikely that the phonetic values in Coptic words reflect those same phonetic values in their ME ancestors, the relative amounts of phonetic variance in these terms, from the hieroglyphic to the Coptic, could be used as a weak gage for the existence and strength of semantic connection(s) between the terms. For example, the diachronic stability of homography in paired terms, as they move from ME to Coptic, could be assumed to reflect the strength of the semantic relationship between the terms, such that words that are homonyms in both versions of Egyptian may be assumed to have a stronger conceptual relationship than words that appear as homographs in ME but are written differently from each other in Coptic. Given this supposition, the ME words that share the *dp* or *dpt* base in ME, “taste (verb),” “experience (verb),” “ship,” “loins,” and “taste (noun),” exhibit suggestive relationships when examined from the perspectives of both written languages.

The ME noun *dpt* meaning “ship” becomes *joi*, or *joi*, in Coptic, deviating in several ways from the hieroglyphic original but still a phonetic derivative of the ME, as the

Coptic letters j, t, and } are derivative of the hieroglyph  . Similarly, the ME noun *dpt* meaning “taste” and also “loins” becomes }pe, or *tipe*, in Coptic and retains both meanings. However, these two terms show a stronger relationship to each other than either does to “ship,” as they are homographs in ME and also clearly homonyms in Coptic. The stability of the twinned relationship of these two terms over time points to a relatively strong semantic relationship, making it unlikely that these words are random, unrelated homonyms, and suggests that to the Egyptians these terms belonged to the same conceptual category in some way. In the same manner, the choice to write the term “ship” using j instead of t or } in Coptic, supports the interpretation that this word had a different pronunciation than its *dpt* counterparts, at least by the Coptic period, and this difference supports the interpretation that this word was related to the other *dpt* nouns purely by homography, with little or no overarching conceptual linkage. Therefore, the written Egyptian language, in two of its forms, appears to reflect the idea that the noun “taste” and the body part “loins” belong to the same semantic category, a category that does not include the noun “ship” (although a different kind of relationship is not precluded).

The ME verb *dp* meaning “taste” is clearly transitive in its usage in literature. Its intransitive form is not so clearly attested, but it is likely that this lexeme functions for both meanings. The fact that it takes on two slightly divergent forms when written in Coptic, however, suggests that this distinction may have been made in pronunciation or inflection even during the ME usage. The intransitive verb “taste” becomes *twepe*, or *toope* in Coptic, and the transitive verb “taste” in Coptic is written *jip{I* or *{ipji*, both of which can be transliterated as *jipji*. These variations suggest a conceptual distinction between the transitive and intransitive versions of the term that may have existed in ME

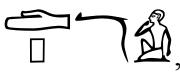
but was incapable of being addressed at that time in the written system. The intransitive twpe appears in its consonantal values to be more closely linked to the nouns “taste” and “loins” written in Coptic as }pe. While there appears to be no exact Coptic equivalent of the alternative translation of *dp* as the verb “experience” (which would correspond to the transitive version of the verb), there is a transitive verb in Coptic that comes close to this usage. It is translated by Crum to mean “feel” or “grop,” as in the actions of a blind man. This verb is written jopjp, or *jopjp*. The words for “the act of tasting,” and “feel/grop,” have very similar constituent elements, jip {I and jopjp respectively, suggesting a similar overarching semantic framework that may derive from their origins in the ME *dp*.⁵

Thus, the Coptic versions of these terms appear to show semantic relationships that are not apparent in the hieroglyphic versions and suggest that the verb “taste” was conceptualized, and possibly pronounced differently, depending on whether it was used transitively or intransitively. Many languages do not make this distinction, however contemporary colloquial Egyptian Arabic does distinguish the sensory verb “look” into a separate lexeme for the transitive versus the intransitive usage, yebos and shakl. The supposition that these versions of “taste” were distinct in ME may help contribute to a clearer understanding of the metaphorical uses of this verb, as well as of the importance placed by the Egyptians on different types of sensory experience as discrete sensations, but equally essential for life. It is important, however, to look at the use of determinatives in the ME words to establish their semantic relationships with further precision.

⁵ It may be instructive here to consider the scene from the tomb of Seti I in which the deceased king reaches out to touch the *menat*-necklace offered by the goddess Hathor. This is widely interpreted as a representation of regeneration, a giving of life, with very physical and sexual overtones and complements a similar scene in which the god Khonsu offers life to the king in the form of an ankh symbol presented to his nose.

Determinatives are iconic images that the Egyptian scribes used to provide additional semantic information about their corresponding lexemes. These graphic representations effectively classified words into categories, and thus cannot be seen as random.

According to Goldwasser, “the determinative phenomenon of the Egyptian script consists of and reflects a knowledge organization [that] is not at all arbitrary or exclusively context-bound.” (49) Therefore, if words have the same determinative, they may be assumed to have been grouped together in meaningful ways in the Egyptian worldview, even if this grouping was tenuous or abstract.

The ME verb *dp* is written , with the determinative symbols 

representing an ox tongue and , which represents a seated man pointing to his face.

The ox tongue determinative groups lexemes into a rather abstract cluster of objects, actions, and ideas, that relate generally to the tongue. The seated man pointing to his face determinative is widely used to indicate lexemes that are associated with features of the face, actions involving the face, and actions or ideas involving the emotions. The ME noun *dpt*, meaning “taste,” is written with identical determinatives as the verb. However, its homographs, “ship” and “loins,” have different determinatives. The noun “ship” has

the determinative  that classifies it in the general category of ships or boats, while the noun “loins” is written with the determinative , which represents a piece of flesh and identifies the marked lexeme as fitting a general category of body parts. Of importance here is the fact that in both usages of the verb *dp*, “taste” and “experience,” as well as the noun *dpt*, the ME hieroglyphic spelling is the same (with the exception of the final “t”), suggesting a shared conceptual niche, and that this conceptual niche is situated literally

and figuratively in the mouth. It is important to note, as Goldwasser stresses, that the determinative system in Egyptian hieroglyphic writing organizes lexemes into categories of related elements *as they were perceived by the Egyptians*. Categories are not naturally occurring relations of objects in the “real world,” rather, they should be seen as constituent of and constituting these relationships, in effect creating the “real” and, in turn, created by it. These categories are always, as Goldwasser states, “in the eye of the beholder” (50). The fact that the Egyptian scribes chose to use the same determinative for the transitive and intransitive versions of *dp*, regardless of any possible pronunciation difference, demonstrates that the concept of the physical experience of life was, to them, strongly associated with orality.⁶

In the case of the ME transitive and intransitive verbs represented by the logograph *dp*, the determinatives in hieroglyphic and the spelling variations in the Coptic support the notion that these were understood as related to the mouth and, at the same time, related to the physical, profane, experience of life. This is complementary to the notion of life as related to divine air or breath, which is represented in relation to the nose rather than the mouth. This distinction between the realms of the sacred and profane that emerge from an examination of the usage of the verb *dp* may provide insight into the corporality of Egyptian epistemology.

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⁶ This emphasis on the mouth as the site of life as physical, profane experience versus the nose as the site of life as a divinely granted, mysterious manifestation, may bear on the crucial “Opening of the Mouth” ritual, performed on funerary statues and mummies in order to enable the deceased to “live” again. This would be an interesting project to pursue.

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