

When Gods Speak to Men

**Divine Speech according to Textual Sources
in the Ancient Mediterranean Basin**

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CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments	VII
Abbreviations	IX
<i>Stéphanie Anthonioz, Alice Mouton, Daniel Petit</i>	
When Gods Speak to Men: Divine Speech according to Textual Sources in the Ancient Mediterranean Basin. Introduction	1
<i>Dominique Lefèvre</i>	
When Egyptian Gods Speak: Divine Discourse in Context	9
<i>Alice Mouton</i>	
Divine Speech in Hittite Dreams	21
<i>Amir Gilan</i>	
“Now See How the Mighty Storm-God My Lord is Running Before Me:” Revelation of Divine Power in Hittite Historiography	33
<i>Martti Nissinen</i>	
Oracles as Artefacts: The Material Aspect of Prophecy	49
<i>Stéphanie Anthonioz</i>	
Biblical Prophecy: Writing and Media Associated	65
<i>Claire Le Feuvre</i>	
Language of Gods, Pythian Apollo and Plato’s Cratylus	81
<i>Manfred Lesgourgues</i>	
Gods’ Secretaries: On Preserving Oracles in the Greek Oracular Shrines during Hellenistic and Roman Times	105
<i>Romain Loriol</i>	
Divine Signs in Ancient Rome—Or How to Put the Voice of the Gods into Words	121
<i>Indexes</i>	
Modern Authors	131
Ancient Authors	134
Ancient Sources	134
Biblical Texts	135
Contributors	137

WHEN EGYPTIAN GODS SPEAK:
DIVINE DISCOURSE IN CONTEXT

Dominique Lefèvre *

*Celui-ci (i.e. Aton) (...) est, à de très rares exceptions près, un dieu muet, en contraste total avec les bavardes divinités d'antan.*¹

Aside from the main exception described above, Egyptian gods are extremely talkative. For three thousand years they flooded the Nile Valley with their discourse. However, agreement has still to be reached about how to understand “divine speech;” what the gods’ means of communication are; what their language is; and how they used it / it was made use of. The term “divine speech” also prompts us to think more deeply about what hieroglyphs represent, these “divine words” (*mdw-ntr*) which are distinctive features in Egyptian art and which, by the very name, explicitly refer to the world of gods. Different perspectives may be considered. We can focus on the speakers themselves: the deities who talk to each other, but also to men, in particular to the preeminent one: Pharaoh. It is also interesting to examine the different texts in which divine speech appears and to reflect upon the reasons for its very presence in these texts.

Strictly speaking, the ancient Egyptian language doesn’t have any specific or technical term which is equivalent to the word “language.” The nearest approximation for it in Egyptian would probably be *r(ʒ)*² or *mdw/md.t*.³ The former word first refers to the mouth as well as to oral production: what comes out of the mouth.⁴ For instance, it can appear in titles of ritual acts or as an incipit of many chapters of the *Book of the Dead*, in a sentence structure which links the word to the indirect genitive followed by the infinitive (in a positive or negative sentence according to the cases). Thus Chapter 53 of *The Book of*

* University of Geneva (Switzerland). I would like to thank Elizabeth Beetles and Emilie Flouret for improving my English.

¹ M. GABOLDE, *Toutânkhamon*, Paris: Pygmalion, 2015, 56. See also E. MEYER-DIETRICH, *Auditive Räume des Alten Ägypten. Die Umgestaltung einer Hörkultur in der Amarnazeit*, Leiden: Brill (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 92), 2018, 465–470.

² A. ERMAN, H. GRAPOW (eds), *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1926-1961, II, 391; R. O. FAULKNER, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Oxford: University Press, 1962, 145.

³ A. ERMAN, H. GRAPOW (eds), *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 180–181; R. O. FAULKNER, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, 122.

⁴ It can also refer to the idea of entrance, beginning.

the Dead opens as follows: “Spell for not eating dung nor drinking urine in the god’s domain.” In only few cases *r(3)* can be translated by “language” or the word “talking” (see examples below). As for *mdw/md.t*, the term refers to articulated speech more than to syntactic sequences forming sentences – even if, here too, the context can sometimes lead to the word being translated as “language.”

All modern ways of analysis which are related to what we call “linguistics” cannot be transferred to the Egyptian way of visualizing the reality of the world.⁵ The way Egyptians considered language and writing thus appears very different to our understanding of it. What is more, from an emic point of view, and if we only consider the divine sphere, the gods’ communication skills were not just limited to speaking. Other ways of communication existed between the divine and the human world. Deities could send signs to men, a message which had to be read and understood and, if needed, answered in an appropriate way.⁶

To continue with the oral way of communication, ancient Egyptian intellectuals seem to have regarded the Egyptian language as the only “real” human language, in the sense that it was the language of Creation, the only one existing from the “First Time” (*sp tpy*).

From an assessment of our written sources, there is indeed no perceptible difference between the language of men and the language of the gods, neither in its lexicon nor in syntax.⁷ But this situation is perhaps misleading: the Egyptians were able to translate the words of the gods into human language in a pragmatic way.⁸ Moreover, since Egyptian thought is rarely unequivocal, ancient Egyptians were able to propose other communication methods which highlighted a differentiation between the language of men and gods. Thus, the cries that accompanied the agitation of baboons “greeting” the rising of the solar god Re each morning was perceived, if not as a divine language, at least as a language understood by the gods. Gods could also understand the language

⁵ D. MEEKS, *Les Égyptiens et leurs mythes. Appréhender un polythéisme*, Paris: Musée du Louvre, Hazan (La chaire du Louvre), 2018, 194.

⁶ For example, the famous instance of the miracle of the gazelle. See *inter alios* E. JAMBON, “Calendrier et prodiges. Remarques sur la divination égyptienne d’après Hérodote II, 82,” in *Hérodote et l’Égypte. Regards croisés sur le Livre II de l’Enquête d’Hérodote. Actes de la journée d’étude organisée à la Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée – Lyon, le 10 mai 2010*, Lyon: Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée Jean Pouilloux, 2013, 156–158.

⁷ It is usually the textual genre, the expression register that synchronically governs variation in the syntax and vocabulary used. See recently S. POLIS, “Censure de l’écrit et tabous en Égypte pharaonique,” *Culture, le magazine culturel en ligne de l’Université de Liège* 1, (2013), available online at the following address: http://culture.uliege.be/jcms/prod_1378460/fr/censure-de-l-ecrit-et-tabous-en-egypte-pharaonique?

⁸ D. MEEKS, C. FAVARD-MEEKS, *La vie quotidienne des dieux égyptiens*, Paris: Hachette, 1993, 154–155.

of birds and fish.⁹ It is therefore difficult to decide whether or not one can say that there is indeed a specifically divine language. In general, it can be proposed that an inability to understand modes of communication in the earthly environment (such as the songs of birds) could be a sign that they are of divine origin.

The same multitude of explanations for a single phenomenon can be found in the Egyptians' perception of foreign languages. The Egyptians were naturally aware that there were different "human" languages, becoming acquainted with them through their contacts with the populations surrounding Egypt. While in Retenu, a location in the Syrian-Palestinian corridor, the hero of the *Tale of Sinuhe* (Middle Kingdom, 12th Dynasty) can, after spending much time outside his native country, finally have the hope of hearing his mother tongue again when the local prince tells him: "You will be well with me, for you will hear the speech¹⁰ of Egypt."¹¹

Still in the fictional register, the anti-hero Wenamon (Third Intermediate Period), in charge of fetching wood from the Levant to build the god Amon's new sacred bark, was wrecked on the island of Cyprus and was desperately seeking an interpreter:

"Is there no one among you who understands the speech¹² of Egypt?" And one of them replied, "I understand (it)."¹³

Language was therefore an important factor for Egyptians as a unifying cultural entity – distinguishing them from populations speaking other languages.¹⁴

A firmly held belief was that the Egyptian language was the only language truly effective in honouring the gods and thus implicitly the only "true" human language. Foreign languages were reduced to the rank of gibberish, whose

⁹ P. VERNUS, J. YOYOTTE, *Bestiaire des Pharaons*, Paris: A. Viénot Librairie Perrin, 2005, 25 (s.v. "Les animaux hérauts du divin").

¹⁰ *Sinuhe* B31-32. The text uses the word *r(3)*. See R. KOCH, *Die Erzählung des Sinuhe*, Brussels: Éditions de la Fondation Reine Elisabeth (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca XVII), 1990, 24.

¹¹ W. K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, Third edition, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003, 57.

¹² *Wenamun*, 2,77-78. The text uses the word *md.t*. See A. H. GARDINER, *Late Egyptian Stories*, Brussels: Éditions de la Fondation Reine Elisabeth (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca I), 1932, 75.

¹³ W. K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 123.

¹⁴ See G. MOERS, "Bei mir wird es Dir gut ergehen, denn du wirst die Sprache Ägyptens hören! Verschieden und doch gleich: Sprache als identitätsrelevanter Faktor im pharaonischen Ägypten," in *Muster und Funktionen kultureller Selbst- und Fremdwahrnehmung. Beiträge zur internationalen Geschichte der sprachlichen und literarischen Emanzipation*, U.-C. Sander, F. Paul (eds), Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2000, 45–99.

existence was considered to be due to a deficiency in the organs producing speech.¹⁵

The belief in this physiological aberration is not the only linguistic theory developed by the Egyptians. A more encompassing vision regarded Thoth as the creator of the different languages spoken on earth. In the Amarna period (New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty), the hymn addressed to the god Aten reflects this particular concept:

How manifold it is, what you have made, although mysterious in the face (of humanity), o sole god, without another beside him! You create the earth according to your wish, being alone – People, all large and small animals, all things which are on earth, which go on legs, which rise up and fly by means of their wings, the foreign countries of Kharu and Kush, (and) the land of Egypt. You set every man in his place, you make their requirements, each one having his food and the reckoning of his lifetime. Their tongues differ in speech, their nature likewise. Their skins are distinct, for you have made foreigners to be distinct.¹⁶

In the magico-religious field, the stranger can represent what is hostile, and against whom one needs protection, yet when a “strange” language is used, its powerful magic can be used with profit.¹⁷

Whatever the reality of the language actually spoken by deities, oral speech is fundamental in the context of Egyptian religion because it is one of the main means by which the creative act of the demiurge takes place. The Word is creative, bringing about what is uttered. As our sources are purely in a written format, it is impossible for us to have a precise idea of the actual sound of the language of the gods.¹⁸ In any case, we have to base our understanding on the

¹⁵ A text dating from the reign of Ramesses III (20th Dynasty) mentioning Libyans settled in Egypt says about them: “They heard the speech (*mdt*) of the men (*i.e.* Egyptians), and he (*i.e.* the king) made their language (*mdt*) disappear; he turned their tongue.” R. LEPSIUS, *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopen: nach den Zeichnungen der von Seiner Majestät dem Koenige von Preussen Friedrich Wilhelm IV nach diesen Ländern gesendeten und in den Jahren 1842-1845 ausgeführten wissenschaftlichen Expedition*, Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1849-1859, Abtheilung III, 218c, lines 3-4. This passage is cited by S. SAUNERON, “La différenciation des langages d’après la tradition égyptienne,” *BIFAO* 60 (1961): 41. During the roman period, a similar idea can be found in the temple of Esna, see S. SAUNERON, *Les fêtes religieuses d’Esna aux derniers siècles du paganisme*, Le Caire: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1962, 103.

¹⁶ W. J. MURNANE, *Texts from the Amarna Period in Egypt*, Atlanta: Scholars Press (Writings from the Ancient World 5), 1995, 114.

¹⁷ The efficiency of formulas can be reinforced if they are pronounced in a foreign language. See Y. KOENIG, “La Nubie dans les textes magiques. ‘L’inquiétante étrangeté,’” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 38 (1987): 105–110; T. SCHNEIDER, “Mag. pHarris XII, 1-5: Eine kanaanäische Beschwörung für die Löwenjagd,” *Göttinger Miszellen* 112 (1989): 53–63; C. LEITZ, *Magical and Medical Papyri of the New Kingdom*, London: British Museum Press (Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum, Seventh Series), 1999, 49–50.

¹⁸ The reference to the hum of bees as voice of the gods in the ritual of the goddess Mut (papyrus Berlin 3063, XIII,6-8) doesn’t seem clear; see P. DERCHAIN, U. VERHOEVEN, *Le voyage de la*

written sources at our disposal. In this respect, it is necessary to consider the nature of hieroglyphs, a script emblematic of ancient Egypt. Indeed, the very term refers to the divine world. From their Egyptian name, *mdw-ntr*, “divine words,” hieroglyphs are much more than a graphic code that allows statements to be recorded and transmitted as time goes by, a writing that was simply used for practical purposes. It was a speech conveying a perception of the world. Hieroglyphic writing represents the concrete and living transcription of thoughts that are made manifest in a living way in rock, a long-lasting presence for their inscription in a physical reality. According to Dimitri Meeks,

par leur nom même, les hiéroglyphes préexistent en tant que “hiéroglyphes-paroles” dans le discours divin avant de devenir des hiéroglyphes tracés, gravés sur une surface. Le démiurge crée ce qui existe par la parole (...). L’écriture a une préexistence immatérielle et c’est sous cette forme qu’elle était en usage chez les dieux. Dans le monde des hommes, les hiéroglyphes sont l’incarnation, la matérialisation sur un support de ce qui est d’essence divine.¹⁹

The same author emphasizes the fact that hieroglyphs, as signs in written script, are imprints that convey the concept of the entire Creation:

chaque hiéroglyphe-empreinte renvoie donc à une réalité idéale englobée dans la création, le “hiéroglyphe-parole” du langage des dieux.²⁰

The successive cursive scripts developed by Pharaonic Egypt are only simplifications of this hieroglyphic system. Although they eventually evolved independently of each other, monumental writing and the various cursive writings were able to influence each other throughout much of history. To varying degrees, they each incorporate a part of this emanation of the divine into the physical world.²¹

In the light of the above, trying to detect in the texts a divine word which we could distinguish for what it is, would be pointless. If the hieroglyphs engraved/painted on the walls of temples and tombs were only the transcription

déesse libyque, Brussels: Fondation égyptologique Reine Elisabeth (Rites égyptiens V), 1985, 17–19 (F5-G1), pl. 3; A. EL SHAHAWAY, “Les ‘individus’ qui établissent l’ordre cosmique,” in *Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Egyptologists, University of the Aegean, Rhodes, 22-29 May 2008*, P. Kousoulis, N. Lazaridis (eds), *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 241 (2015): 703.

¹⁹ D. MEEKS, *Les Égyptiens et leurs mythes. Appréhender un polythéisme*, 143.

²⁰ D. MEEKS, *Les Égyptiens et leurs mythes. Appréhender un polythéisme*, 148–149; about the sign as imprint, 147.

²¹ See P. VERNUS, “Les espaces de l’écrit dans l’Égypte pharaonique,” *Bulletin de la Société française d’égyptologie* 119 (1990): 33–53; S. DONNAT, “L’écrit comme trace de rituel en Égypte ancienne. L’exemple des lettres aux morts,” *Archimède: archéologie et histoire ancienne* 1 (2014): 88–95, available on line: <<http://archimede.unistra.fr/revue-archimede/>>. <halshs-01586110>.

of spoken words – divine by definition – how could we identify what we understand to be a divine word or speech? As is so often the case, the distinction we make would probably not make sense to the ancient Egyptians because of the divine status that was assigned to hieroglyphic writing in Egyptian culture. Obviously, we have to face difficulties created by categorizations that rarely accord with ours.

The written sources at our disposal are extremely numerous and varied. Egyptian divinities speak in different types of texts: funerary and theological compositions, mythological tales, medico-magical writings, texts of royal ideology, ritual scenes and, of course, oracular consultations.

The *Pyramid Texts* (the oldest surviving religious corpus from Pharaonic Egypt which dates from the 5th Dynasty onwards sometimes include words uttered by different deities or other supernatural entities. These words, reported or empowered by recitation (even their engraving in stone), appear frequently in formulas which are intended to ensure the survival of the deceased king in the Afterlife. Thus, in the pyramid of King Unis (Old Kingdom, end of 5th Dynasty), the first king whose pyramid was engraved with these funeral formulas, the discourse of the Deified West is reported as follows:

Look, she is coming, the beautiful West, to meet you, to meet you with her beautiful tresses, and she is saying: “Welcome, you to whom I gave birth, with rising horn, eye-painted pillar, bull of the sky: your form is distinguished; pass in peace, for I have joined you,” so says the beautiful West about Unis.²²

During the Middle Kingdom, the *Coffin Texts* form a new group of funerary formulas.²³ These are not reserved for the king or members of the royal family but extend to the provincial elite. Several formulas deal with what the deceased considers an abomination. In the following, there is a debate between the gods and the deceased:

“What I doubly detest, I will not eat. Faeces is my detestation, and I will not eat (...)”
 “What will you live on?” say the gods.

²² *Pyramid Texts* § 254. Translated by J. ALLEN, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*², Atlanta: Scholars Press (Writings from the Ancient World 38), 47. For the hieroglyphic text, see K. SETHE, *Die altägyptischen Pyramidentexte nach den Papierabdrücken und Photographien der Berliner Museen*, I, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1908, 282b–284a.

²³ Some *Pyramid Texts* still occur in *Coffin Texts* and the *Book of the Dead*. See for example D. SILVERMAN, “Textual Criticism in the Coffin Texts,” in *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, W. K. Simpson (ed.), New Haven: Yale Egyptological Seminar (Yale Egyptological Studies 3), 1989, 33–34; B. MATHIEU, “La distinction entre Textes des Pyramides et Textes des Sarcophages est-elle légitime?,” in *D'un monde à l'autre: Textes des Pyramides & Textes des Sarcophages. Actes de la table ronde internationale, IFAO – 24-26 septembre 2001*, S. Bickel, B. Mathieu (eds), Le Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2004, 247–262.

“I will live on those three portions which were made for Osiris; one is for Horus, another for Seth, and another one for me, and I am their third.”

“What does Osiris live on?” say the gods.

“He lives on this green plant which is on the river-banks of *Ggws*.”²⁴

Such discussions are not uncommon. They show how the deceased takes an active part in the journey that can lead him to a new life. The speech of the gods is thus conjugated with verbs in past and present. But it can also be a speech of a time to come. The words must be pronounced by the deity for an indefinite future. By means of their oral performance, hieroglyphs become animated and brought to life from the moment they were engraved in the stone:

Seth and Nephthys, go, announce to the gods of the Nile Valley as well as their *akhs*:²⁵

“This Unis has come, an imperishable *akh*. Should he want you to die, you would die; should he want you to live, you will live.”²⁶

By putting different mythological episodes into narrative form, Egyptian literature can incorporate conversations between gods. It is from the New Kingdom onwards that these long stories appear. The stories incorporate mythological scenarios which otherwise would not be known. In reality, the adventures of the gods show many variations according to place, time and context. Several mythological tales present conflicts that disturb the tranquillity of the Egyptian pantheon. The most famous is probably the one in which Horus is in conflict with his uncle Seth for the legacy of Osiris. The story is preserved on a papyrus dating to the New Kingdom. In order to find a solution to the conflict, the gods seek advice from the goddess Neith. They write her a letter and await the answer:

Meanwhile, the dispatch from Neith, the great, Mother of the god, reached this Ennead, as they were sitting in the large hall called “Horus in front of the horns.” The dispatch was handed over to Thoth. Then Thoth read it out in front of the Lord of All and the entire Ennead. They said with one voice: “This goddess is right.” Then the Lord of All got angry with Horus and said to him: “You are weak in your flesh and this function is too heavy for you, dirty kid whose breath stinks.”²⁷

²⁴ *Coffin Texts* 187, translated by R. O. FAULKNER, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1973, 156. See A. DE BUCK, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts, III, Texts of Spells 164-267*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947, 87–90.

²⁵ *Akh*: deceased person.

²⁶ *Pyramid Texts* § 217, translated by J. ALLEN, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*², 36. See K. SETHE, *Die altägyptischen Pyramidentexte nach den Papierabdrücken und Photographien der Berliner Museen*, 153a-c.

²⁷ *Horus and Seth*, 3,5-3,8. Cf. W. K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 94.

This tale is full of speeches and conversations like this one, but other texts exist with less clear mythological references which include divine discourse. One format can be an element of literary dramatization, like the sad prediction of the seven Hathors who declare the destiny of a prince at birth in a tale called *The Doomed Prince*:

Once upon a time, there was a king and no son had been born to him. [But when His Majesty asked] for himself a son from the gods of his time, they ordered a birth to be granted him. He slept with his wife during the night [...] pregnant. She completed the months of childbearing, then a son was born. The (goddesses) Hathors came to determine a fate for him, saying: "He shall die through the crocodile, the snake or the dog." So the people who were beside the child heard and reported it to His Majesty. His Majesty's heart became very very sad.²⁸

The end of the text is lost, so we don't know how the prince died. Nevertheless, it is clear that the prediction of the seven Hathors was heard by the human audience.

From the same period, the *Tale of the Two Brothers* relates the violent conflict between two brothers whose names refer to the divine sphere: Inepu and Bata.²⁹ Both characters seem to live in a human environment which incorporates elements that can be described as "fantastical." So, when Bata, the younger brother, has his herd of cattle enter the stable one evening, the first cow warns him that his older brother Inepu is waiting behind the door, ready to kill him. Probably elaborated from several different stories, the tale as it appears in the extant papyrus involves the gods speaking several times. Having fled the anger of his older brother, Bata went into exile abroad, probably on the Levantine coast. He made his life anew and built a new house. One morning, coming out of his house, he had a strange meeting on the beach:

(One day), he (the younger brother) went out from his house and encountered the Ennead, as they were walking (along) administering the entire land. Then the Ennead spoke to him in unison: "O Bata (...), are you alone here, having left your home because of the wife of Inepu, your elder brother?"³⁰

Bata doesn't answer. It is like a monologue. But they create a wife for Bata because they want him to be happy. Here, by means of the words pronounced by the gods, the scribe uses an ingenious device to take a new step in the story.

²⁸ *Doomed Prince*, 4,1-4,5. See for example W. K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 76.

²⁹ Inepu is the Egyptian name of Anubis while Bata refers to a god of the 17th-18th nomes of Upper Egypt.

³⁰ For the translation of the text, see W. K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 85.

The conversation of the gods is a pure literary device and does not seem to have any significant value in itself.

Apart from these seemingly banal conversations the gods speak in various places and contexts. When visiting Egyptian temples nowadays, it is possible to read/hear the conversations between the king and various divinities, the *mdw-ntr* “divine words” which have been carved on the walls. As an indispensable intermediary between gods and men, the Pharaoh, the priest *par excellence*, is always shown as the one who faces the gods during the ritual acts of daily divine worship and certain religious ceremonies. A litany of juxtaposed scenes thus depicts the king presenting an offering to different deities with the appropriate gestures, instruments and words. In return, the god grants benefits to the sovereign and through him to Egypt as a whole. These benefits are uttered directly by the god in a speech that is usually placed above his face. Examples are innumerable.³¹

Some texts regarding royal ideology contain words or speeches spoken by the gods. For example, the text on a stela of Thutmosis III (New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty) appears as a poem uttered by the god Amon, praising the king. It starts as follows: “Thus speaks Amun-Re, Lord of the thrones of the Two Lands.”³²

In the Israel Stela (New Kingdom, 19th Dynasty, reign of Merenptah), there is also a short text spoken by the god to the king:

Ptah said, regarding the Libyan enemy: “Collect all his crimes to be turned back upon his head. Place him in the hand of Merenptah-hetephimaat that he may cause him to disgorge what he has swallowed like a crocodile.”³³

One of the places where Pharaoh and the gods can meet is in a dream. Several texts exist which tell of the god appearing in the night and addressing the king. The speech of a god in a dream is preserved on the so-called “Dream Stela,” a stela more than three meters high which is located between the legs of the sphinx at Giza. The text explains the predestination of prince Thutmose – the next king Thutmose IV – to sit on the throne of Egypt. Here the divine election is not linked with the dynastic god Amun but with the stone figure of the sphinx. During the New Kingdom the sphinx was recognised as an image of the god Harmachis, Greek transcription of the Egyptian expression “Hore-

³¹ Concerning the semantic evolution of this motive, see P. DERCHAIN, “Pharaon dans le temple ou l’illusion sacerdotale,” in *Les moyens d’expression du pouvoir dans les sociétés anciennes*, Leuven: Peeters (Lettres orientales 5), 1996, 91–99.

³² For the translation of the text, see W. K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 352–355.

³³ W. K. SIMPSON (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, 359.

makhet,” that is to say, “Horus in the horizon,” and associated with the Semitic god Houroun. The story takes place in the Memphite region, where princes of the royal family were often educated:

One of these days, the king’s son Thutmose walked about at the time of midday. He had a rest in the shadow of this great god and sleep took him when the sun was at his zenith. He found the Majesty of this noble god speaking with his own mouth as a father speaks to his son, saying: “Look at me, regard me, my son, Thutmose! I am your father, Horemakhet-Khepri-Re-Atum; (I) will give you kingship upon earth at the head of the living people. You shall wear the white crown and the red crown on the throne of the god Geb (...).

My face is yours, my heart is yours, (and) you belong to me. Behold, my condition is like one in illness, all my limbs being ruined. The sand of the desert, upon which I used to be, faces me (aggressively); and it is in order to cause that you do what is in my heart that I have waited. For I know that you are my son and my protection.” (...)

Thereupon this king’s son stared astonished when he heard these [words ...]. He understood the words of this god, but he put silence in his heart.³⁴

The end of the text, which has many lacunas in the lower part of the stela because of its poor state of preservation, allows us to understand that the king wakes up astonished and probably begins to act for the god. Even if this part of the text is extremely damaged, it can be assumed that Thutmose began work to remove the sand and restore the monument. In fact, actual restorations around the sphinx date to this period.

This kind of dream is not reserved for the king. Thus, the overseer of fowlingers Djehutyemhab (New Kingdom, 19th Dynasty) reported in his tomb an extraordinary dream he experienced:

You are one who has spoken to me yourself, with your own mouth:

“I am the beautiful Hely,³⁵ my shape being that of (goddess) Mut. I have come in order to instruct you: Consider your place – take hold of it, without travelling north, without travelling south.”

While I was in a dream, while the earth was in silence, in the deep of the night.³⁶

In the same tomb, there is also a long speech by goddess Hathor on another wall.³⁷ In a different context, some magical or medico-magical formulas may

³⁴ W. HELCK, *Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums, IV. Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1956, 1542,11–1543,16. See B. M. BRYAN, *The Reign of Thutmose IV*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, 145–146.

³⁵ Another name of goddess Hathor.

³⁶ K. M. SZPAKOWSKA, *Behind Closed Eyes: Dreams and Nightmares in Ancient Egypt*, Swansea: University of Wales, Egypt Centre, 2003, 196; K.-J. SEYFRIED, *Das Grab des Djehutiemhab (TT 194)*, Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philip von Zabern (Theben VII), 1995, 71, pl. XXXV.

³⁷ E. FROOD, *Biographical Texts from Ramesside Egypt*, Atlanta: Scholars Press (Writings from the Ancient World 25), 2007, 93–94.

be accompanied by a reminder of a situation or event that has taken place in the divine world. This reminder creates a kind of precedent that the physician or magician will re-enact by word and gesture, thus bringing greater efficacy to the operation performed. He will extract from mythology the episode that will echo the present situation. For example, Formula 499 of the Ebers Medical Papyrus discusses the treatment of a burn. The patient's recovery will require the recitation of a dialogue between an anonymous entity and the goddess Isis, unnamed but easily recognized by the mention of her son:

Other (remedy) and conjuration for a burned place on the first day:

"Your son Horus was burned in the desert! Is there water (there)? There is no water (there). But there is water in my mouth and a Nile between my thighs. I will go extinguish the fire!"

Words to say on milk of a woman having given birth to a male child, gum, ram hair. To be placed on the burned place.³⁸

Another context in which the divine word is involved is the oracle. From the New Kingdom onwards, Egyptians increasingly called upon the gods to solve various problems in their daily lives. It is unlikely that actual spoken oracles existed in Egypt before the Late Period.³⁹ The evidence for this is debated or contested. There exists a technical terminology for the god's answer to "a" question asked of him. Yet, Egyptian texts, where this interaction occurs, often use the verb "to say" when they refer to the god's answer. This is clearly a transposition, with the Egyptians expressing the sense of the oracle, which was not an audible reality. One of the oracular techniques used comprised presenting two versions of the same case to the god. It was then left to the deity to identify the one that corresponded to the truth, through the movement of his statue or his processional bark. Such oracular petitions show the following pattern: "concerning the case opposing X to Y, the god said: X is right," the second text indicating that "concerning the case opposing X to Y: Y is right." Even if the decision of the god is introduced by the verb "to say", it is impossible to confirm whether the answer was given orally. The Egyptians transpose into script a mode of conversation that may have been devoid of any oral exchange. This state of affairs thus makes equivocal the way in which the Egyptians understood the nature of a discourse emanating from the divine sphere. Undoubtedly their way of understanding the reality of the world was entirely different from ours today.

Personal names like *dd*-god's name-*iw=f/s-nh* "God N said: he/she will live" – for example Djedkhonsuifankh "(god)-Khonsu-said-he-will-live" – at-

³⁸ Papyrus Ebers, § 499. See T. BARDINET, *Les papyrus médicaux de l'Égypte pharaonique*, Paris: Fayard, 1995, 323.

³⁹ A. VON LIEVEN, "Divination in Ägypten", *Altorientalische Forschungen* 26 (1999): 83.

tested from New Kingdom onwards, are probably related to prayers or oracular consultations at the time of the birth of a new-born. The positive destiny of the child is thus ensured by the divine will in a spoken format.⁴⁰ As we have observed, the gods could address everyone: other deities, individuals from the – at least from our point of view – imaginary world, the deceased, the king and living human beings. Short extracts from complete myths are sometimes taken to form a god's speech in order to transfer their power to medical and magical formulas. This causes them to be decontextualized, but they grant us glimpses of the richness of those Egyptian myths that are now lost.

The fact remains that the Egyptian deities did not stop speaking for three millennia. Their words were “collected” by theologians and written down by Egyptian scribes, without commenting on how they conceived or felt about this abundance of divine discourse that surrounded them. The words of the god were not insignificant, but neither were they uncommon. The worshipper walking in the courtyard of the temple could see Pharaoh and the gods talking to each other; the patient consulted a doctor/magician who occasionally recited divine words to reinforce the effectiveness of his actions, the literature lover could read or listen to adventures featuring the gods quarrelling. The voice of the gods seems to have been part of the daily environment of the ancient Egyptians.

Abstract

This contribution offers a reflection about the nature of divine speech in Ancient Egyptian sources. From these, there seems to be no perceptible difference between the language of men and that of gods, neither in lexicon nor in syntax. However, this situation is perhaps misleading. Indeed, Egyptians could use many communication methods, thus highlighting a differentiation between the language of men and that of gods. Therefore, different types of texts are analyzed in order to bring to light these strategies of communication: funerary and theological compositions, mythological tales, medico-magical writings, texts of royal ideology, ritual scenes and, of course, oracular consultations.

⁴⁰ See A. VON LIEVEN, “Divination in Ägypten”, 91 with reference.