Hieroglyphs and Meaning

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1 Introduction

This volume collects the proceedings of the international workshop *I filosofi e la scrittura egizia - Philosophers and Hieroglyphs*, held in Turin, Italy, on December 6th and 7th 2002 and organised by the local Departments of Philosophy and of Anthropological, Archaeological and Historical-territorial Sciences.

Egyptian hieroglyphic writing has fascinated philosophers since ancient times, when they considered it as the expression of an exotic civilisation and of an esoteric discipline; during the XVI and XVII century they looked upon it as a possible example of a *characteristica*; between the XVIII and XIX centuries, they described it as a necessary stage in the human intellectual development, while in the first part of the XX century it was considered the expression of a mythical form of thought, alternative to the Greek logical one. In the second part of the XX century, hieroglyphic writing inspired Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the Western concept of writing.

Conversely, scholars of ancient Egypt were often influenced by philosophical reflections on Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. This was true before Jean François Champollion's deciphering and still holds in recent times, when the knowledge and mastery of Egyptian writing, lost since its demise in the first centuries of the Christian era, is again available. Before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, the fascination with the ancient Egyptian civilisation made some scholars try to decipher its peculiar writing; but, lacking scientific ground, their translations, very imaginative if not even fanciful, were guided by heavy philosophical preconceptions. At the very beginning of the XIX century, scholars were finally supplied with a solid ground for their translations and set free from the necessity of adopting 'metaphysical' presuppositions in approaching the ancient Egyptian texts: evidence like the Rosetta Stone marked the birth of Egypto*logy*, the modern science of ancient Egypt, as opposed to the previous speculations about ancient Egypt that can be called Egypto*mania*. Nonetheless, also in the age of Egyptology, scholars studying the ancient Egyptian language are interested in the theoretical reflections produced by destructuralism and hermeneutics, philosophy of language and linguistics, and in their enquiries sometimes use tools of analysis realised by these different disciplines.

2. Western philosophical understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing: from Neoplatonism to Deconstructionism

The history of the Western understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing comes to modern Egyptology crossing two main conceptual areas, classical antiquity and the Renaissance.

In ancient times, this writing, with its peculiar signs, fascinated the Greeks and the Romans, even if they had only a superficial knowledge and mastery of it. Plato, for instance, like Pythagoras before him, highly esteemed ancient Egyptian wisdom and knowledge, and elaborated the belief that they were non-discursive signs pertaining to ideal concepts, a conception of hieroglyphs that proved very influential throughout the centuries. However, it was the Hellenistic civilisation that showed the most articulated interest in ancient Egypt and its hieroglyphics, even if at that time the use and mastery of it had become rarer and rarer, and was ultimately lost (the last hieroglyphic inscription dates back to 394 A.D.). The Neoplatonist tradition, which assessed the derivation of Greek philosophy from the Egyptian religion, expressed more or less fanciful ideas on hieroglyphs in a set of texts known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in Plotinus's *Enneades*, in the *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* attributed to Iamblichus and in Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*[1], all of which proved to be influential in their understanding until the XVIII century, and in particular the idea that they were symbolic expressions of remote religious and philosophical doctrines.

Michèle Broze (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) describes the reinterpretation of the hieroglyphic writing model during Neoplatonism in general and in Iamblichus's work in particular. Broze's aim is to show that while in the *Corpus Hermeticum* the Egyptian language and Greek philosophy are neatly differentiated (only the first contains within itself the *dunamis* and *nous* of what it says), a trace of the hieroglyphic writing model can be found in the works of Greek philosophers from Medio- and Neoplatonism. The paper centres on how Iamblichus, who described hieroglyphs as a symbolic language encoding the sublime mysteries of the ancient Egyptian sages, merged in his conceptual frame some of the characteristics of this writing model, and mainly what he understood as its distinctive functions: the demiurgical one, owing to its being a tool for linking the visible with the invisible, human with god; the imitative one, due to its being a human imitation of the gods' activity in ritual practice; and the epistemological one, namely that of being a process of validation of discourse (since they write 'divine words', hieroglyphs cannot but tell the truth).

In Scholasticism, the revaluation of Aristotle's work together with Christian speculation corresponded to a substantial drop of interest in ancient Egyptian wisdom[2]. The subject again intrigued Renaissance scholars, thanks to the revival of the Neoplatonic tradition instituted by authors such as Marsilio Ficino. Lacking any clue as to how to translate ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, knowledge of which had been lost for a thousand years at that time, the humanist

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[1] For a philosophical sketch of Horapollo's work, cf. U. Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1993, pp.158-160 and 162-168.

[2] Cf. U. Eco, *Laricerca della lingua perfetta*, cit., p. 157.

rediscovery of texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* proved determinant for the Renaissance understanding of hieroglyphs. Proposing two case studies dealing with the Renaissance and the Baroque mind and their conception of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, the papers of Ludwig Morenz (University of Leipzig, Germany) and Daniel Stolzenberg (Stanford University, USA) focus on the pre-understanding of it the scholars of these epochs had.

Morenz describes how, during the Italian Renaissance, the interpretation of the Egyptian hieroglyphics as a *characteristica* (namely, a universal writing with symbols readable by all learned man) led to the invention of a writing that can be called 'Neohieroglyphs'. Actually, not a *real* new language, but rather a set of new signs for encoding aphorisms, mottoes and so on allegorically and symbolically, signs mainly conceived in isolation, even if sometimes used to write (short) inscriptions as well. Highlighting the broad range of meanings of the oldest known neohieroglyph, the *winged eye* created by Leon Battista Alberti as his personal emblematic signature, Morenz shows how the very new usage of picture-writing made by the Renaissance scholars and the interpretation they gave to the new signs had their conceptual sources in Greek, Roman and Christian authors, who in their turn, without any actual knowledge of how to read hieroglyphs, bequeathed to later centuries influential ideas both about the content of ancient Egyptian wisdom and religion and about the nature of hieroglyphic signs. The perception the Renaissance scholars had of hieroglyphs was in effect mainly shaped by the plato-plotinic idea that they were Platonic ideas in visual form (in Alberti's words, an optical language of ideas[3]).

Stolzenberg then analyses the work of Athanasius Kircher, which represented in the middle of XVII century the *summa* of the long tradition of Western fascination with hieroglyphic writing and Egyptian wisdom. Stolzenberg, discussing the Jesuit scholar's translation of the Pamphilian obelisk, shows how Kircher, while sharing the Renaissance symbolic conception of hieroglyphs, departed from it in thinking it possible to build a system for generating translations of integral hieroglyphic inscriptions consisting of connected ideas expressing an articulated doctrine, not only of a set of individual symbols. The Neoplatonic conception of hieroglyphs provided the basic principle on how to make sense of them individually, namely as non discursive hierophantic symbols corresponding to the essential natures of the things they represented[4], while their meaning had to be retrieved from *symbolic literature*, that miscellaneous body of texts about the interpretations of symbols. The European emblem tradition developed in the XVI century provided the way to make sense of hieroglyphic inscriptions as a whole: like emblems, they had to be matched with appropriate texts,

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[3] Let us think about the metaphorical notion of vision meant as knowledge (cf. amongst recent works, G. Lakoff & M. Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1980.
[4] For this reason, Leibniz denied the possibility of considering Egyptian hieroglyphic writing as an example of *characteristica* (cf. the Kircher-Leibniz collected correspondence): he conceived symbols as arbitrary and abstract signs, cf. Pagano, this volume.

and could not be understood without them. Although these texts had been lost, Kircher believed that their content could be retrieved, even if in fragmentary form, in the *prisca theologia* shared by various pre-Christian civilisations. The link between the meaning of the single hieroglyphs and that of their compositions was guaranteed, in Kircher's view, by the fact that hieroglyphs were *meant* to be translated in a discursive language, so grammatical and syntactical rules had necessarily to be imposed on them, and syncategorematic expressions between them, in order to produce a comprehensible text; but none of these rules and expressions being characteristic or necessary for hieroglyphs in themselves, they could be chosen arbitrarily. Normally they belonged to the language in which the translation was performed, but the mystery and the distance of the doctrines symbolised justified in many cases the translator's choice of stringing together the inscribed symbols in an *ad hoc* manner, for the sake of coherence or in order to produce 'translations' saying what he knew they should.

In the Enlightenment era, Egyptian hieroglyphics definitively lost the status of a writing and a language synthesising hermetic truths into remote symbols. Gianbattista Vico, in his *Scienza Nuova*, while assessing that the language form used by gods was hieroglyphical or metaphorical, did not acknowledge any perfection or sacred value to it beyond the fact of being the most ancient. In the XVIII century, the idea of ancient Egyptian writing as a phase in the developing history of writing, immediately after pictography and before alphabetical writing, was definitely established[5]. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, linked ancient hieroglyphic writing to an uncouth stage in human understanding, while attributing to the alphabetical one, which does not represent but analyse what it says, the merit of being the form of expression of a more evolved society. The entries we find in the *Encyclopédie* about writing in general and about ancient Egyptian writing in particular[6] are in the same vein.

The conception of ancient Egypt and its writing as a phase of human development also characterised the Romantic age, a time in which, as Maurizio Pagano (University of Trieste, Italy) writes, the interpretation of ancient Egyptian arts and religion was a privileged locus of discussion on the nature of symbol. In the same vein, Hegel often refers to the Egyptian civilisation in order to distinguish the symbolic age, characterised by the lack of balance between the content and its expression, from the classical one, in which this balance is accomplished. He recognised then that a primeval kind of arts preceded the ancient classical one, namely the symbolic one, which reached its highest realisation in Egypt, a society which, discovering the spiritual dimension, for the first time in history raised the conscience over a purely natural sphere. Ancient Egyptians tried to express the spiritual dimension in religion and in arts but, not reaching a level of pure thought, they

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[5] An idea still cherished today by many scholars, cf. R. Harris, *The Origin of Writing*, London, Duckworth, 1986, ch.3.

grasped the spirit only through natural intuition, so they could express it only symbolically. By the same token, in Hegel's view, Egyptian writing, strictly linked to arts[7], derives its peculiarity from the symbolic dimension in which it was created and plunged. Being spatial signs or figures hinting at a spiritual meaning without being able to grasp it completely, hieroglyphs show that Egypt never fully managed to understand itself in terms of thought, therefore neither did it do so in terms of language, a result reached only by that civilisation which expressed itself with alphabetic or phonetic writing, using the letters as sounds and signs of thought, namely the Greek one.

Even though with different theoretical tools, this line of thought was pursued at the beginning of the last century by a certain strand of philosophy, and mainly by Ernst Cassirer, who, in his work *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, and in particular in the volume *Das mythische Denken*, classified Egyptian culture and language as a mythical form of thought alternative to the logical one that characterised the Greek world, a conception that proved influential until the second half of the last century[8].

At the beginning of the XX century, a new strand of philosophy was also coming to life, the analytical philosophy of language, which, for logical and mathematical reasons, refreshed for a while the ideal of a *characteristica*, although different from the one pursued by Leibniz. Gottlob Frege, for instance, the founding father of this new philosophical strand, expressed in his *Begriffschrift* the need for a writing not abstract from its content and able to exploit all the spatial possibility made available by its support. In the same vein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the most well-known of Frege's pupil, refers in a particular sentence of his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* to hieroglyphic writing in order to understand the essence of proposition, adding that it is precisely from that kind of writing that the alphabetical one was born. Guido Bonino (University of Turin, Italy) explains what the philosopher meant by this peculiar remark framing it within the picture theory he proposed in the book and mainly based on the hypothesis of the possibility for propositions to have the same structure as the facts they depict. While stating that Wittgenstein's conception of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing was not updated or sophisticated but rather popular, Bonino's analysis of the *Tractatus*'s metaphor of the proposition as a hieroglyph shows that this one was not meant to attribute an ideographic or logographic character to propositions, but rather an iconic one, a hypothesis that leads to the picture theory of language stated in the *Tractatus*.

Apart from the remarks by the first Wittgenstein, analytical philosophy has never showed the slightest interest in (ancient Egyptian) hieroglyphic writing (or in writing in general); the same

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[6] Cf. U. Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta* cit., p. 180-182.
[7] A link also recognised by recent Egyptology, cf. Galgano, this volume.
[8] A basic conception for instance of the famous book by H. Frankfort et al. *Before philosophy. The intellectual adventure of ancient man. An essay on speculative thought in the ancient near East*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1951.

research into an ideography of concepts, after the *Begriffschrift* and the *Tractatus*, was no longer considered interesting. Nonetheless, in the last century analytical philosophy produced some interesting ideas about translation that could help to frame more clearly some of the logical-theoretical problems Egyptologists have to face while translating. Lucia Morra (University of Turin, Italy) discusses the idea recently advanced by the Egyptologist Erik Hornung that Egyptologists should adopt a polyvalent logic in translating hieroglyphs, framing it within the analytical reflections based on the possibility of Western translators having to adopt a logic radically different from that one in which their conceptual structure was formed.

In Hornung's view the bivalent logic is linked to the religious perspective of monotheism, alien to the Egyptian mind, and for this very reason its application to Egyptian philosophical and theological thought leads to insoluble contradictions. As ancient Egyptians could not have conceived anything like monotheism, because their conceptual and linguistic structure did not admit anything like the rigid characteristics that the monotheistic conception of god unavoidably carries along, they could not have shared the logical structure that marks the Western way of thinking, based on a rigid and ontological application of the law of identity and of the principle of the excluded middle. Because their thought can not be labelled as 'illogic' or 'prelogical', we have to admit that it is built on an another kind of logic, polyvalent and not contradictory, that translators should adopt while translating the inscriptions. Analytical philosophy of language discussed precisely the possibility translators have of adopting a logic radically different from the one structuring their own conceptual scheme in order to understand another language. In Hornung's terms, the issue is: their form of thought being constrained by the bivalent logic, how could they possibly apply a polyvalent logic while translating hieroglyphs? The article briefly sketches the different answers to this problem given by Rudolf Carnap, W.V.O Quine, Donald Davidson and Michael Dummett.

This section of the book closes with two papers discussing some reflections on the Egyptian hieroglyphics produced by Jacques Derrida at the end of the XX century. Beatrice Galgano's paper (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris, France) focuses on *De la Grammatologie*, the book in which Derrida, trying to establish a science of writing, unveils the Western traditional conception of writing, which is characterised by a logocentric approach that accords a privileged status to language compared with writing, the first being nearer to sense, meaning and truth. This conception is nothing but an outcome of the practice of the phonetic alphabet, which is not *the* writing or the *telos* of all writings, but only a case or possibility of writing in general; for instance, the Egyptian hieroglyphic system does not presuppose any privileged position of language compared to writing. Through some examples of inversion in the direction of the signs, Galgano shows how hieroglyphic writing obliges us to review our conception of what writing is, and raises the question whether if

and how much it is possible to apply our conception of writing to the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, which uses *both* logographic and phonetic signs and whose iconic working retrieves functions apparently excluded from phonetic writing.

Referring also to other texts where Derrida talks about Egyptian writing, Gaetano Chiurazzi (University of Turin, Italy) points out that, while using hieroglyphs to show the non necessity of the logocentric approach in the conception of writing, the French philosopher interprets them in a new and different way. Hieroglyphs not only display contents, but show relations and tropic movements as well, namely they trace pre- or extra-iconic operations and transfers of meanings, a feature linked to their ideographic character. The possibility of tracing the meaning transfers being, in Derrida's view, the very trait that makes meaning possible, the functioning of hieroglyphs then gives access to another level of meaning that leaves aside the appointed object and turns to the operations that make it possible. Showing that the tension to meaning or *denotatum* and truth conditions of discourse is not necessarily the central feature of language, the functioning of hieroglyphic is then evidence that a different appraisal of writing as a whole is required.

3. Cognitive perspectives on hieroglyphic writing

This second section presents some of the latest reflections on the cognitive status and features of hieroglyphic writing, while showing the new interest in linguistic and pragmatic issues manifested by the recent generation of scholars. The four papers question the different pillars of Egyptolinguistics until recently, namely the primeval 'descriptive' function of hieroglyphic writing, the neat distinction between ideograms, phonograms and determinatives or classifiers and the purely iconic role of the latter. In the new perspective, Egyptian writing is no longer conceived as a mirror of language, but as something that contributes to shaping the language and that reflects thought models in evolution; furthermore, it is analysed in a way which underlines its differences from rather than its similarities to phonetic writing[9].

Alessandro Roccati (University La Sapienza, Rome, Italy) suggests that the function the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing had at the beginning had very little to do with the modern or 'post-Greek' use of the instrument of writing. Egyptian writing, born in Egypt not as a means to convey information but to secure what it represented beyond human being's temporally determined existence, had initially both a metaphysical value and a performative function. It became a cognitive or descriptive tool only later, when new socio-linguistic conditions made it a system of signs applicable to every kind of language and useful for preserving and sharing knowledge. This evolution, in which reading

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[9] It is interesting to remark that in spite of the difficult style in which they are expressed, many of the ideas developed by Derrida are present in recent Egyptolinguistic research, which empirically proved their plausibility if not their scientificity.

attained the new sense of 'saying' at the expense of the previous one of 'making' (which faded into the background), was strictly linked to the slow development of the idea of 'text'. In the first phase of this process, the text ceased to be necessarily linked to the physical medium on which it was written, but rather became linked to a specific kind of writing; later, the establishment of a new privileged link between writing and its medium (i.e., between hieroglyphs and stone and between hieratic and papyrus), allowed it to finally become a linguistically abstract unity, independent from the specific language and writing in which it is expressed.

Pascal Vernus (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris, France) then talks about the relation between ideogram and phonogram in Egyptian writing and shows that these concepts are not as neatly distinct as has been thought for a long time in standard Egyptological linguistics. The basic assumption of this discipline, namely that the meaning of an ideogram is what it depicts, must be questioned, and the complex semantic relations between ideograms and the lexemes need to be more closely examined, because they imply specific cultural traits of the ancient Egyptian world. With the use of several examples, Vernus shows that while signs can certainly perform in distinct occurrences two diverse functions, that of ideogram or that of a phonogram (the first exploiting the clear semantic relationship held between signifier and signified, the second one denying this relationship and asserting a mere relationship of homophony between them), two intermediary stages may be defined between the two prototypic functions. Vernus presents some examples in which signs are used as ideograms, but have a phonographic origin, and others in which, while used as phonograms, the signs maintain a semantic relationship with what they depict, because they write the consonantal structure of radicals from which the name given to it was built. In Vernus's view, writing did not, as usually thought in the symbolic speculations, exploit the name given to concrete objects and beings surrounding man to create the expressions of abstract actions, but it worked the other way round, and derived the signs for both these objects and beings from those used for expressing actions, as the apposition of feminine and plural suffixes show.

Orly Goldwasser (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel) centres her paper on the role played in the Egyptian hieroglyphic system by classifiers, that is pictographic signs following a word and not used to indicate a specific object or record a phonetic value, but to define the semantic field to which the foregoing word belongs (i.e., the sign for 'house' can specify that the foregoing signs refer to buildings or premises), usually called determinatives by standard Egyptolinguistics. Never standing in an arbitrary relation to the word they classify, classifiers mark its end and trace it back to a specific category such as [QUADRUPED], [BIRD], etc. With the lexeme they follow, classifiers can also have a metonymic link ('to travel', for instance, is marked by the sign for the typical Egyptian vehicle, the Nile boat) or a metaphoric one, setting up, only in the script, alternative or

secondary classifications as regards to the taxonomic ones (for instance, usually classified as an [ACTION OF FORCE], 'to be greedy' may occasionally also take a crocodile as a classifier, creating the implicit simile 'greedy as a crocodile'). When the foregoing word has several referents, classifiers may guide the reader through the semantic ambiguity to the correct signified; in other circumstances, they may impose the socially 'correct' referent. The system of classifiers embedded in Egyptian hieroglyphic script pictures the way in which ancient Egyptians both saw and organised the word, while mirroring the map of their cognitive space, ontology or encyclopaedia. The article shows as well how the ancient Egyptian data tally with the recent cognitive approach concerning the nature of categories, no longer considered as abstract properties shared by their members. Another issue the article hints at is that the mechanisms occurring in the picture-script make cognitive processes observable in their making well before their being crystallised into language. For instance, hinting at covert taxonomic categories existing in the mind but not yet represented in language (e.g. while the sign of a sycamore tree, the most common tree in Egypt, was applied to many other kind of trees, hints to the abstract category [TREE], a word for '(generic) tree' did not exist), ancient Egyptian classifiers are evidence of how writing stimulated language to work out a progressive abstraction from the concrete tokens of the category to the abstract term for it.

Finally, Antonio Loprieno (University of Basel, Switzerland) closes the sequel of papers by showing the tension between arbitrariness and conventionality in hieroglyphic writing, focussing on some examples in which it can be said that its lexical classifiers or determinatives are chosen by the single scribe, who gives a personal and creative contribution to the meaning, rather than that prescribed by practice. The evidence of signs that cannot be easily classified as either phonograms or logograms shows that the standard Egyptological distinction between phonetic signs and lexical classifiers was only the outcome of the modern epistemological distinction between the semantic and the phonological levels, while in hieroglyphic writing the iconic combination of phonetic and semantic features makes the need for a drastic choice between 'semantocentrism' and 'phonocentrism' superfluous. This feature means hieroglyphs maintain both their function as linguistic signs standing for sounds or concepts and their connotational potential, a semiotic space open to individual interventions. The article shows for instance how the criteria for the choice between which determinatives to apply to the words obeyed conventions depending both on the historical and textual reality, and played a fundamental role in the creation of intensional meaning of the expressions. Finally, given the different statute attributed by Egyptian culture to the logographic system and the alphabetic one (only the first deserved the predicate of 'true' writing, the second one was labelled as a menomotechnical tool), the author suggests that Egyptian writing must be considered as a cultural code with multiple semiotic values, whose intensional richness is

very difficult to convey in a graphic system based on a rigid discrimination between the semantic and the phonological level of language.

4. Translating and interpreting hieroglyphs

Many of the papers point to the theoretical difficulties linked to the activity of translating hieroglyphs, or discuss the role of presuppositions and pre-understandings in it and their semantic and syntactic consequences. In this section we will try to summarise the presuppositions embedded in the Western translations of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions and the misconceptions they can produce in shaping interpretation.

Almost every strand of XX century philosophy recognises that the translation activity implies a projection of the translator's conceptual scheme on the target language: he can 'understand' it because he can structure it with the aid of his scheme, but this entails projecting his scheme on the data to be structured, i.e. on the language to be translated. Expressed in different linguistic and conceptual styles, this theme recurs not only in analytical philosophy (cf. Morra, this volume), in destructuralism (cf. Chiurazzi and Galgano, this volume) and in semiotics, but was the theme *par excellence* of hermeneutics. While each of these strands recognises that a conceptual projection, at least in the beginning, is the necessary tool with which to face the translation, they debate if it *necessarily* shapes the translation performed, or, to use a famous Wittgenstein expression, it is a ladder that can be thrown away once climbed, namely once the presuppositions at its base have been unveiled.

The projection of the translator's conceptual scheme (an intertwined composition of logic, semantics and beliefs) on the target language is particularly easy to detect when the knowledge of this one is accessible only through opinions which are not first hand, as was the case with Egyptian hieroglyphic writing in the Hellenistic period, in the Renaissance and in Kircher's age. For instance, basic to the Renaissance and Baroque perception of hieroglyphic writing was the belief that hieroglyphs were ideas in visual form, a consequence of the projection of Plotinus' meta-logical semiotic concepts on a reality of which he had little or no authentic knowledge (cf. Morenz, Stolzenberg, this volume).

At any rate, the Renaissance scholars did not try a systematic translation of hieroglyphic inscriptions as a complex set of signs, but only interpreted the single units, as they corresponded to distinct ideas graspable through intuition. Kircher, on the contrary, although traditionally considering hieroglyphs non-discursive symbols in themselves, denied that they expressed that which cannot be apprehended rationally and stated they were meant to be mediated by 'normal' language, namely managed through the tools of the 'discursive reason'. They could then be

approached with a method based on the idea of a connection between the various parts of the language they expressed. Kircher pursued a rationalistic stance in his idea of building a *system* for generating translations of entire inscriptions that combined the various sources at his disposal (a theory describing the use of the hieroglyphic signs, a dictionary for their meaning and a key to the beliefs and doctrines expressed by their combination). However, his combinatory method does not comply completely with the rationalistic ideal, because it does not explain the link between these elements in a rational way: it is not *compositional* (like the 'Leibnizian' systems) and, given its presuppositions, it could not have been so. Kircher considered the hieroglyphs ambiguous in their essence, so, while considering them the expression of a language, he could not conceive them as the expression of a rational one, in which, given the absence of ambiguity, once a dictionary and a syntax were at hand, the meaning of the complex texts could come out systematically combining the meaning of their components.

The principle of compositionality, which through rationalism became one of the main assets and tools of the Western approach to language and translation, will be tackled later. Before moving away from Kircher, we would like to hint at two aspects of his method that comply with some of the things philosophy today has to say about translation. First, Kircher explicitly asserted the necessity, in order to create a 'translation' in a discursive and so understandable language, of imposing a grammatical and syntactical apparatus on hieroglyphic inscriptions (even if not rigid in order to meet the required meaning and to respect the ambiguity provoked by the lack of grammar or syntax of the symbolic language), typically that of the translator's language. Furthermore, his method asserted and respected a principle similar to that of 'charity' expressed by analytic philosophers like W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson, a principle stating the necessity of varying the translations until they can meet a sense complying with the beliefs shared by the translators and their readers. Kircher theorised in some way the necessity of choosing translations that made the greatest possible number of ancient Egyptian statements true from the *Baroque* point of view[10].

The twists on translation induced by the pre-understanding of hieroglyphic writing and due to the distance between the modern's mind and the presuppositions and beliefs on which it was based, are easily detectable in Kircher's work. They are not evident in modern Egyptologists' translations, because of the common and established encyclopaedia shared by the scholars. Nonetheless, a (distorting) pre-understanding is always present, because it necessarily characterises translation, as

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[10] As forced as they may have been, the translations built with Kircher's method were not implausible in the eyes of XVII century readers, because they drew on existing traditions and long-standing preconceptions, from an Egyptological point of view they are completely wrong not only because they lack rigor, but because the presuppositions on which they are based *proved* to be absurd. Nevertheless, Kircher deserves credit for having understood that the key to deciphering hieroglyphs lay in the study of Near Eastern languages, and mainly Coptic, closely related to the spoken language of the ancient Egyptians, an intuition without which even the discovery of Rosetta Stone would have proved useless.

the recent philosophical discussions about language have shown. The rationalistic assimilation of the Greek conception of language and writing, which characterises the Western conceptual scheme, also marks the contemporary approach to hieroglyphs and can imply questionable consequences on their interpretation: how indeed can the conceptual lenses with which the Western translator looks at hieroglyphs, lenses linked to the peculiarity of the phonetic alphabet, be suitable for approaching a radically different kind of writing such as the hieroglyphic one?

Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, characterised throughout four millennia by a peculiar way of creating symbols connected with what they represent[11], determined an organisation of data and a universe of discourse structurally different from those built by a phonetic system, in which the possibility of a privileged link between word and object is definitively lost, and signs, set free from what they stand for, do not ideally have any performative, symbolic, ideographic or iconic function. Phonemes record sounds, morphemes denote objects or situations, and both, arbitrarily chosen, can be thought of as a pure mnemonic aid for the spoken language to present data in a neutral way without interposition. On the contrary, while entertaining a strict interdependence with it (it was never used to transcribe other languages), hieroglyphic writing was meant to cover a field or level of expression autonomous from the spoken language. In the archaic period but not only, the function of the inscriptions was performative, not descriptive (cf. Roccati, Galgano, Loprieno, this volume), and their content was so deeply linked with how it was expressed that the very possibility of transposing it onto another language or writing was at that time impossible to conceive. Greeks and Egyptians were both aware of the differences between the two kinds of writing, as can be deduced from Plato's work and from the fact that Egyptians sometimes labelled them with two different names, restricting the Greek one to the epithet of a mnemonic aid (cf. Loprieno, this volume). The aim of hieroglyphic writing is so different from that of the phonetic one that the translation of a sentence expressed by the first into a sentence expressed with the second seems a priori misleading if not impossible.

While Neoplatonists, aware of the epistemological and performative function of hieroglyphs and of their inner validation principle, recognised that their translation in a discursive form of thought made them lose their power, namely their performativity or energy, their effectiveness (cf. Broze, this volume), Kircher's work established the idea that hieroglyphs could be translated through the tools of phonetic writing without loosing anything significant.

The belief that the two systems of writing are not only comparable, but translatable, is today a definite asset and at the same time the basic presupposition of Egyptological translations, justified,

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[11] While other hieroglyphic writings tend to a progressively crescent stylization, the Egyptian one maintained rigid contact between the signs and what they referred to until the end, even if from the beginning it was sidelined by other writing in which the iconic link is looser (Hieratic, a sort of cursive).

as it were, by a strong assimilation of the hieroglyphic writing to the alphabetic one. Champollion's deciphering succeeded because he definitively discarded the symbolic interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphics signs, recognising both their phonetic and iconic function and putting their ideographic essence into the background. 'Revaluating' this essence, recent Egyptolinguistics shows that the Egypto*logical turn* has focused too much on the functions of hieroglyphic writing which are similar to those of the phonetic one, at the risk of even considering it as a mere mirror of the spoken language.

The first step in the translation of hieroglyphs is their transliteration into phonetic symbols that carry the inscriptions to a different conceptual space or context, where they can be decomposed into 'understandable' blocks treatable with conceptual tools suited for alphabetic writing. The transliteration breaks the unity of hieroglyphic inscriptions into distinct items, thus letting the interpretation consider the single words, as in the phonetic perspective, entities with a self-standing value as opposed to the global context[12]; it cancels the strong links between signs and what they depict, conveying only extensional meanings and sounds, not intensional nuances; it misconceives the peculiar possibility this writing has of saying something without words, namely thanks to the way the signs occupy the space, and induces the search for connective forms that can be applied to the contents as it were from the outside (such as 'is'), while in Egyptian hieroglyphic writing the establishment of the analytic forms as opposed to synthetic ones was a rather slow process[13].

'Prepared' by transliteration, hieroglyphic inscriptions are then examined with logical tools developed with and through the practice of phonetic writing. As Derrida has recognised with arguments different in style but similar in vein to those of analytical philosophers, translations of Egyptian hieroglyphic texts are in some way Western (and ethnocentric) 'hallucinations'; they project on it the onto-logical structure of the Western languages. The basic projections are about the functions of sentences and words: in a system whose paramount function is to describe, sentences are considered primarily vectors towards truth values, and words *names*, i.e. vectors to objects. But these definitions are not suitable for a system whose main purpose is *not* to describe but to perform, as the hieroglyphic one and can induce some misconceptions. While a supposed tension of sentences towards their truth values can cause the intensional and performative differences between different groups of signs with the same referent to be ignored, the attribution of a tension towards

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[12] Egyptians accorded a privileged status to hieroglyphs in combination, not to single signs, as the expression of the two concepts shows: only hieroglyph*s* were "God's words [**mdw-nTr**]" (the plural term [**mdw**] meaning literally 'to speak', 'speech', the rare singular form [**mdt**] 'talk' or speech and quite seldom 'written word'): the single element was simply called "sign" or "image" [**tit**] and depicted as a part of a whole what has no existence by itself, namely as a part of Osiride's eye.

[13] The strong link between signs and what they represent does not make it necessary to express the relation between them, contained as it were 'internally' except for the cases in which an iconic representation of what has to be expressed is not possible, as in the case of the cartouche.

the object, and then to the name, can induce the idea of a neat distinction between ideograms and phonograms (cf. Vernus, this volume), the two functions being clearly distinct in the Western mentality which distinguishes the semantic level from the phonological one in language (cf. Loprieno, this volume). Surely it induced the merely iconic perception of determinatives that prevented Egyptologists from recognising for a long time their value as cognitive tools, representing for instance abstract categories present in the mind but not yet in the spoken language (cf. Goldwasser, this volume)[14].

Both the tensions towards objects and truth are strictly linked with a peculiar kind of logic, the bivalent one, which formed itself with and through the practice of the phonetic writing and based on a rigid application of the law of identity and of the principle of the excluded middle[15]. This kind of logic shapes the translations of hieroglyphic inscriptions not only because it is the necessary consequence of the priority accorded to truth and objects, but also because it is the conceptual base of the (de)compositional method with which the deciphering of hieroglyphs was and is performed (cf. Morra, this volume). A formal reason for the success of Champollion's word for word translation of the hieroglyphic text of the Rosetta Stone was the fact that he set up an understanding of its parts coherent with the meaning of the overall inscription, which he knew was the same as that of the Greek text below it, and the fact that his translation was univocal and rigorous (cf. Stolzenberg, this volume). In other words he respected the above mentioned principle of compositionality, assessing that the meaning of a complex expression depends on the systematic combination of its components. But as was seen before, compositionality does not comply in principle with a system as essentially ambiguous as the Egyptian hieroglyphic one, in which every word in the lexicon is part of a complex structure, in Goldwasser's words (this volume) "stands in the midst of a fine network that weaves it into a sophisticated embroidery of knowledge organisation, and may be scaffolded by several knowledge structures". At any rate, in the Western conception the principle applies only to complex expressions, not to single words (it is valid only at the level of the combination of words into sentences, not at that of their articulation into letters or phonemes, cf. Bonino, this volume). By contrast, in hieroglyphic writing it also holds at their level, because they can be written using different signs in many combinations, each one depicting something different and so potentially activating different nuances of meanings: the specific signs which occur in words do contribute to their meaning (cf. Loprieno, this volume).

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[14] While this function of the classifiers concretely shows how hieroglyphic writing can not be considered a mere mirror of spoken language, it can be questioned if the categorisation process the cognitive approach sees in the hieroglyphic system is not biased by the prejudice towards abstractness and objectivity, a tension typical of phonetic writing and so of the western conceptual scheme.

[15] For the links between this kind of logic and monotheism, cf. Chiurazzi and Morra, this volume.

The projection of the Western conceptual scheme on hieroglyphic writing goes on with the projection on the target language of a peculiar *grammatical* structure, strictly linked to the particular Western tradition or perspective adopted by the scholars[16], and of a dictionary, i.e. a list of correlations set up by the translators between the expressions of the two languages they consider more or less equivalent. Even if knowledge of the environment and the beliefs of ancient Egyptians is essential to grasp both the function and then the meaning of the words, the western concepts prove fundamental in determining or building the meaning of the Egyptians expressions, especially of those less closely linked to observable data. The highly arbitrary translations of these concepts, on which the theories about Egyptian doctrines are built, make the latter unverifiable. It is impossible to judge whether Egyptians shared or not ideas which can exist only in a language structured like our own, as the discussion about the polytheistic or monotheistic character of the Egyptian religion has shown (cf. Morra, Pagano, this volume). As for the various possible grammars, the only criterion of choice between different theories can be only pragmatic (i.e. the degree of simplicity and adequateness they comply with).

5. Meaning and Hieroglyphs

Egyptian hieroglyphs provide interesting data both to philosophers of language and linguists, because they are evidence not only of an expressive system very different from the alphabetic one, but of 'primitive' phases of language and mental processes such as categorisation[17].

However, philosophers and linguists' knowledge of this ancient writing should be more realistic and updated, as Vernus (this volume) rightly states. With the remarkable exception of Derrida, they often consider it as something monolithic, static, in spite of its being an articulated entity characterised by different stages in the 4,000 years of its existence and affected by the specific

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[16] As A. Loprieno remarks (*Ancient Egyptian* cit., pp. 8-9), since Champollion's deciphering, "the grammatical study of Egyptian has been treated primarily within four successive approaches":

i) the 'neogrammatical' or morphological approach of the Berlin School, "methodologically semitocentric", i.e. "modeled upon a historical-philological method similar to the one adopted in contemporary Semitic linguistics, which also conditioned the choices of this school in terms of grammatical terminology or transliteration";

ii) the 'eurocentric' approach of A.H. Gardiner and B. Gunn, characterised by an Anglo-Saxon pragmatic vein, and checking the characteristics of Egyptian "against the background of the grammar of the classical languages and of what has come to be referred as 'Standard European'";

iii) H.J. Polotsky's Standard Theory, which questioned the adequacy of an Egyptian grammar based on the theoretical categories of Standard European languages, and based on the systematic application of substitutional rules for converting Egyptian verbal phrases as nominal or adverbial phrases;

iv) a more verbalistic approach and a contemporary shift to functional linguistic models, partly induced by the inconveniences Polotskian transposition may have, partly by the methodological developments in the field of general linguistics, partly by the increasing interest of Egyptolinguists in pragmatics.

[17] As Orly Goldwasser stated, hieroglyphs, "as a photographic moment of a language still in swaddling clothes, a document of mental processes […] may serve not merely the Egyptologist, but those who inquire into language in general, as well as those who investigate the abilities of the human mind to conceive and comprehend it" (*From Icon to Metaphor. Studies in the Semiotics of the Hieroglyphs*, <Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis> 142, Freiburg, Univ. Press - Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1995, p.7).

cultural and social contexts in which it is performed; they do not appreciate the complexity of its functioning and, often adopting the standard Egyptological view, they ignore the results reached by recent Egyptolinguistics, and mainly by its cognitive strand. For instance, they still hold that the differences between ideograms, phonograms, and determinatives are quite neat, which they are not (Cf. Vernus, Goldwasser, Loprieno, this volume); they do not recognise the cognitive and epistemological function of the latter, or at least they put it in the background with regard to the iconic one, despite the fact that the data inferable from the ancient Egyptian script seem to confirm the new cognitive approach to categories[18]. Moreover, sometimes spoken language is still considered as being prior to writing, and the intertwined relationship between the two is not recognised, but Egyptian hieroglyphics contradict the idea of writing as a mere mirror of language not only because its function was mainly performative, but because it had consequences on the spoken language, namely it influenced its structure and functions (cf. Roccati and Goldwasser, this volume).

Research by recent Egyptolinguistics seems to question in particular the assets of the analytical philosophy of language: for instance, the process of 'textualization' triggered by ancient Egyptian writing shows that the descriptive function of language was probably progressively selected, in a process in which the tension towards truth and meaning came to assume its privileged position, as it were, in a *contingent* way, while the traditional analytical research on meaning considers it necessary from the beginning[19]. Analytical philosophy pretends to be concerned only with meaning, and not in the way this is expressed, so it explicitly ignores the specificity of writing[20]: it considers it a mere support or mirror of the spoken language, but, as Egyptian hieroglyphic writing shows, this belief is a 'parochial' characteristic of the Western linguistic conceptual scheme, so it can not be a general principle of investigation into meaning. Generally speaking, however, it is questionable if the problem of meaning can be considered independently from the kind of notation chosen to express it.

The indifference of analytical philosophy of language to writing and to the way in which meaning is expressed may seem paradoxical given that both Frege and Wittgenstein's first works concerned precisely the construction of a peculiar notation for logical-mathematical research. Frege's

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[18] As examples of the general philosophical and linguistic attitude towards this difference, cf. J. Kristeva, *Le langage, cet inconnu*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1969, 1981², p.71; M. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1980, pp. 62-64. For a different opinion, cf. R. Harris, *The Origin of Writing*, cit.

[19] So, the study of ancient Egyptian writing seems to confirm some of the insights recently expressed by Michael Dummett (cf. *The logical base of metaphysics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1991), who denies the centrality, objectiveness and primitiveness of the concept of truth as it is presupposed by the two-valued semantics generally used by the analytical philosophers.

[20] Cf. Eva Picardi, who in her book *Le teorie del significato*, Laterza, Bari, 1999, p.8, writes: "In questo libro ci occuperemo solo del significato delle frasi e delle parole di una lingua parlata e non tratteremo affatto i problemi che

Begriffschrift (1879), for instance, proposed a conceptual notation for building and at the same time validating chains of reasoning, that could show exactly all the elements relevant for their truth. Representing bidimensionally the logical relations between propositions, this notation, as it were, takes pictures of the reasoning in its making, bypassing the representation of words and depicting thoughts directly, in so being structurally different from the phonetic writing, and apparently more similar to the hieroglyphic one (it is a carrier of meaning in itself, not a mere mnemonic aid of the spoken language)[21]. By the same token, in his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein thought that propositions must be conceived of as close to hieroglyphs because they similarly stand in a semantic relation to their meanings: exploiting the multidimensionality of the surface in which they are written, they can express logical and spatial relations between the signs without using words, and so picture the relations between their referents[22]. But nevertheless both notations proposed by Frege and Wittgenstein are the outcomes of a phonetic perspective, because they consider only the conceptual or logical content.

The point can be clarified by reflecting on the different conceptions of hieroglyphic writing which destructuralism and analytical philosophy have. The first recognises that hieroglyphs display not only contents but cognitive relations and tropic movements; by keeping traces of extra-iconic operations, they make the cognitive processes as it were observable *in fieri*. Furthermore, destructuralism considers the possibility of many writings of the same word and the frequent polysemy of the same expressions constitutive of this peculiar writing, and believes the choice between which of the signs to use important for the overall meaning (in a sentence whose value is performative, their intersubstitution cannot be without consequences). Hieroglyphs must then be read as symptoms of a more or less conscious choice process reflecting a subjective and cultural 'arbitrariness' that also contributes to the determination of meaning.

In contrast, classical analytical philosophy, following Frege, is not in the least interested in the representative elements of meaning, but only in the conceptual ones. Consequently, hieroglyphs can

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riguardano la lingua scritta – la confezione, comprensione e consumo di *testi*, dalla stele di Rosetta ai file di internet – o la peculiarità dei sistemi di *scrittura* che sono stati inventati dagli esseri umani nel corso dei millenni".

[21] The aim of Frege's notation was not to represent the natural thought as it takes shape in the reciprocal action with the verbal language, but rather to clearly render the structure of a reasoning. Frege distinguished his conceptual notation from the logical one conceived a few years before by George Boole, more adherent to the phonetic model and so to the natural language. It does not, as this one, shorthand the reasoning (with notes that afterward need an interpretation), but pictures it in its making, and recording every step of it, makes it possible to verify all the items of the deductive chain. As opposed to boolean writing, a system of logical forms abstract from the content, the conceptual notation is a system of symbols whose logical forms adhere strictly to the content they shape and make it clear that different symbols stand for different things. In Frege's view, the two notations are not translatable (cf. G. Frege, *Über den Zweck der Begriffschrift*, "Jenaische Zeitschrift für Naturwissenschaft", vol.16, 1883, pp.1-10).

[22] Cf. Wittgenstein's example of the expressive possibilities of the image of the two fencing men (cf. Bonino, this volume) with Galgano's reflections (this volume) on the interaction between the statues. Both Frege and Wittgenstein tried with their notations to reconnect sign and content, and so to avoid the use of connective forms external to contents (cf. Wittgenstein's critics to Russell's concept of form).

express the true nature of proposition only if their iconic character is considered, and the ideographic one (ideographic in the sense of trace of ideas) ignored, because propositions do not essentially reproduce the representations linked to the meanings they express, but only the logical relations between their components. A consequent outcome of the logocentric approach, the analytical philosophy of language considers the ideograms 'pictures of objects' and their combination oriented towards truth or falseness (cf. for instance the importance of the concepts of name and object in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and his theory about the sense of propositions as a direction towards truth values). On the contrary, Derrida's aim is precisely to unhook language from the objectiveness to which it was anchored by the Western approach, to re-orient the sign towards its grammatical constitution origin. Furthermore, in an analytical philosophical perspective the *constitutive* many to many relation holding between expressions and referents in hieroglyphic writing, and the blurred distinction between the functions of signs, cannot but be considered as defects. This writing can not comply even in principle with the Leibnizian ideal of univocality[23], because the principle of substitutivity proves inapplicable to it. The choice between the multiple signifiers of the same signified is not irrelevant for the meaning of the sentence in which they appear.

6. Convergent topics

Egyptologists on the one hand, and philosophers of language/linguists on the other hand converge on some common research areas[24]:

- arbitrariness and conventionality in language: a crucial topic in any study of language, from the ancient Greeks up to modern linguistics, semiotics and philosophy of language (cf. Vernus, this volume);
- the several functions of language[25], the spoken/written continuum[26], and the different forms of writing/semiosis in their strict relationship with the cultural and social system[27] (cf. Goldwasser, Loprieno Roccati, this volume);

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[23] An ideal indeed applicable only to well-constructed languages, i.e. languages devoid of ambiguity.

[24] Not to mention scholars from different traditions who are also involved in the complex interplay between language/culture and the multifarious aspects of the Ancient Egyptian language: semioticians, anthropologists, historians, scholars of religion.

[25] Cf., among others, R. Jakobson, *Selected writing*, Mouton, The Hague, 1960; Austin J. L., *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1962; cf. the opposition "(true) writing"/"memory aids" (discussed in Loprieno, this volume) to refer respectively to hieroglyphs and to Greek writing.

[26] For a scalar view of the distinction between spoken and written language, taken as a *continuum* and considered in their different forms, cf., among others, D. Biber, *Variation across speech and writing.* Cambridge, CUP, 1988, C. Bazzanella, *Le facce del parlare. Un approccio pragmatico all'italiano parlato*, Firenze/Roma: La Nuova Italia, 1994, 1996[2], 2002[3].

[27] Let us think about the relevance of religion in hieroglyph writing and Ancient Egyptian society.

- categorisation and prototypes, metaphor as a central cognitive tool[28]. As a community, our cultural experience and our language are strictly intertwined (as Whorf, among others, pointed out[29]), and the outside world is shaped, so to say, or 'classified', depending on this relationship[30]. The meaning of what is intended by a speaker (which often differs from what is actually said[31]) has to be inferred on multiple grounds, both with regard to metaphorical speech[32], and to the so-labelled literal speech[33] (cf. Chiurazzi, Goldwasser, Loprieno, this volume).

- contextual constraints: if it is true (as it seems to be) that hieroglyphic writing not only displays contents but it also shows relations and tropic movements, it represents – through images and their layout –pre- or extra-iconic operations, we easily understand the crucial relevance of context, in its complex configuration[34], to the interpretation of hieroglyphs[35]. More specifically, Roccati (this volume) underlines the relationship between text and physical channel: "Testo e supporto (in tedesco 'Schrift-träger') cominciano a distinguersi quando si creano scritti di carattere diverso tra loro, carattere accentuato dall'elaborazione di grafie distinte il cui uso è vincolato al carattere di ciascun testo, e ciò indipendentemente dal supporto usato".

- multidimensionality, multimodality, and multidirectionality. Multidimensionality recurs in any graphic system; but especially characterises hieroglyph writing: "the multidirectionality depends on the figurativeness of the hieroglyphic sign; it is by redirecting its asymmetric signs that the scribes changed the orientation of a whole inscription or just part of it. Unlike our letters, whose effectiveness relies precisely on their neutral and 'transparent' nature and

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[28] Cf. also the topic of *rebus à transfert* with regard to the 'construction' of meaning (cf. Morenz, Vernus, this volume; B. Indurkhya, *Metaphor and Cognition: an Interactionist Approach*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1992; C. Bazzanella and C. Casadio (eds.), *Prospettive sulla metafora*, "Lingua e stile", 1999, XXXIV, 2, 149-226; C. Bazzanella, *Metaphor and context: some issues*, in Kronning Hans et al. eds., *Langage et référence. Mélanges in honour of K. Jonasson*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Upsala, 2001, pp. 39-49), and to the so-labelled literal speech (cf. J. R. Searle, *Literal meaning*, "*Erkenntis*", 13, 1979, p. 207-224; F. Récanati, *The alleged priority of literal interpretation*, "Cognitive Science", 1995, pp. 207-232).

[29] B. Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1956.

[30] Cf. among others, O. Goldwasser, *From Icon to Metaphor* 1995, P. Violi, *Significato ed esperienza*. Milano, Bompiani, 1997; cf. Goldwasser, Loprien, this volume.

[31] Cf. P.Grice, *Studies in the Ways of Words*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1989.

[32] Cf. S. Vosniadou e A. Ortony (eds.), 1989, *Similarity and analogical reasoning*, Cambridge MA, Cambridge University Press, 1989; Z. Radman, 1995, *From a metaphorical point of view: a multidisciplinary approach to the cognitive content of metaphor*, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 1995, Indurkhya cit., Bazzanella and Casadio cit., C. Bazzanella cit.

[33] Cf. Searle cit., Récanati cit.

[34] For a recent, interdisciplinary, review on the complexity of context and its relevance to several types of interaction, cf. V. Akman and C. Bazzanella, *The complexity of context*, in id. (eds.) *On Context, Journal of Pragmatics,* special issue 35, 2003, pp. 321-329.

[35] Context is of course crucial to the interpretation of any utterance in any language, as Malinowski already stated in 1923. Malinowski B.: 1923, The problem of meaning in primitive language. In C. K. Ogden e I. A. Richards (eds.) The meaning of meaning. A study of the influence of language upon thought and the science of symbolism, Kegan Paul, London, pp. 333-83.

on their being a simple means to convey language, the Egyptian reader had to pay special attention to hieroglyphs as it was only through their observation that he knew in which direction he should start reading […] In the Egyptian script there is no univocal relationship between the signifier and the signified. A graphic signifier can have multiple signifieds as a signified can be written with different graphic signifiers. Thanks to its figurativeness and multidirectionality hieroglyphic writing can convey several meanings beyond the transcription of language and even go so far as to form part of a representation" (Galgano, this volume). Context may be held responsible for multidimensionality itself: «La plurivocité qu'on trouve dans le mécanisme psychique, dans ses mouvements tropiques, dépend, non pas d'une richesse sémantique cachée, souterraine, mais, comme le souligne Freud, du contexte ou, mieux, de la *disposition*. C'est pourquoi le rêve - comme les hiéroglyphes et même l'écriture chinoise - est essentiellement une scène, une *scène d'écriture* […]» (Chiurazzi, this volume). Multimodality and multidirectionality have recently attracted the attention of scholars, mainly cognitive and computer scientists, especially in the analysis of multi-media corpora, and in its relation with context[36].

As the recent Egyptolinguistical readings of Derrida's works and of cognitive philosophy demonstrate, general research into language can provide Egyptolinguistics with new theoretical suggestions and analytical tools, while Egyptolinguistics can provide philosophy of language and linguistics with new data. It should be remarked as well that a deeper intellectual exchange between these disciplines could also induce a standardisation of the conceptual and terminological conventions used, thus helping mutual knowledge and understanding[37].

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[36] Cf., among others, E. Magno Caldognetto and P. Cosi, eds., *Multimodalità e Multimedialità nella Comunicazione*, UNIPRESS, Padova, 69-74, 2001; Proceedings of LREC-2000 Workshop on meta-descriptions and annotation schemes for multimodal/multi-media language resources, Athens, Greece, 29-30 may 2000, National Technical University of Athens Press, Athens, Greece, pp. 49-51; Turner E. H., Turner R.M., Phelps J., Neal M., Grunden C. and Mailman J., Aspects of context for understanding multi-modal communication, in Bouquet *et al.* (eds.), *Modeling and Using Context*, Berlin: Springer, 1999, pp. 523-526.

[37] As A. Loprieno remarked in *Ancient Egyptian*, cit., p. iii, philosophy of language and linguistics usually ignore the data worked out by Egyptolinguists not only because of the peculiar and not univocal transliteration conventions they use, nor because their translations, very seldom interlinear, are more interesting from a semantical point of view rather than from a syntactical one, but also because the methodological frame they adopted until recently, the so-called Standard theory, made them develop conceptual and terminological conventions often clear only to Egyptologists and sometimes at odds with those of current linguistics, conventions that only today the new generation of Egyptologists, more interested and sometimes trained both in linguistics and pragmatics has started to question.