

On Cobras and Centipedes: PT 379, 392 and 399

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[This article is focused on three apparently related formulae included within the apotropaia of the Pyramid Texts: PT 379, PT 392 and PT 399, where the treatment of the prepositional phrases and the idiomatic use of certain ambiguous expressions have made it difficult to interpret and give sense to the meanings involved and also to establish connections with the cultural or religious context].

Keywords: pyramid texts, apotropaica, magical speech, inimical beings

Symbolic conception and performativity are both important elements of magical speech¹. The processes by which *signifier* and *signified* could be used, in order to deliberately draw “new” (specialized) terms or to “invent” semantic structures (exploiting figures such as metaphor and metonymy) that go beyond the framework of language², are basic in our comprehension of the potential, closed or extended, meaning of the discourse as a whole.

Taking as reference my recent translation into Catalan of the Pyramid Texts³, I reproduce in paragraph 4 of this article the renderings of PT 379, 392 and 399 and I will discuss here some new perspectives concerning the semantic content of these three formulae as an example also of how magical discourse was able to manage information, sometimes introducing an incongruent imagery or evoking mythical elements, which acted as effective instruments against those considered as dangerous or disturbing menaces in the hereafter.

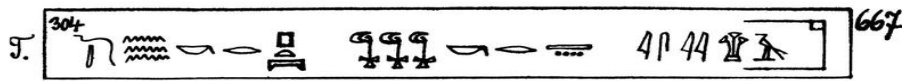
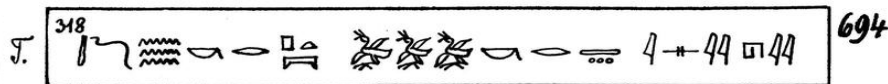
1. *PT 379, 392 and 399: Previous Translations*

With these introductory arguments as referential background let us have a look at each formula in more detail:

1. For the association of magic and word, see RITNER 1993: 35-56; BORGHOUTS 2001: 17-40; ROCATTI 2001: 71-79.

2. It is important to consider the capacity of words to act as symbols and to evoke situations and images in our mind. It is precisely here where the apotropaic force of magical speech lies, being able to go beyond words in order to provoke certain actions or summon powers. KOENIG 1994: 17-18.

3. BAQUÉ-MANZANO 2012a.

Spruch 379 (Schack Kap. 167).*Spruch 392 (Schack Kap. 179).**Spruch 399 (Schack Kap. 63).***Transliteration PT 379 [§ 667]; T/A/E 13:**

§ 667. *D(d)-mdw*: *mw=k r p.t ḥ3.w=k r t3 is iy ḥ3(=i)*.

Transliteration PT 392 [§ 688]; T/A/E 25:

§ 688. *D(d)-mdw*: *mw n(y)w (NN = Teti) m p.t t3.w n(y)w (NN = Teti) m t3 zk ib*.

Transliteration PT 399 [§ 694]; T/A/E 27:

§ 694. *D(d)-mdw*: *mw=k r p.t t3.w=k r t3 i-zy hy*.

The different translations of the formulae exemplify how divergent interpretations can be and how they can affect the understanding of the passages. Leaving aside conflicts of meaning, the essential discrepancy is mainly caused by the difficulty to consider the function of prepositions “*r*” and “*m*” in adverbial sentences. Thus, for Raymond O. Faulkner⁴ both prepositions would indicate, without distinction, the situation of the subject:

PT 379 [§ 667]: “Your water is **in** (= *r*) the sky, your thousands are **on** (= *r*) earth . . .”.

PT 392 [§ 688]: “My water is **in** (= *m*) the sky, my fledgelings are **on** (= *m*) earth, my heart is . . .”.

PT 399 [§ 694]: “Your water is **in** (= *r*) the sky, your fledgelings are **on** (= *r*) earth . . .”.

In his recent translation, Claude Carrier⁵ seems to adopt the same criterion, although he contradicts himself applying to the translation of PT 399 [§ 694] —corresponding in adverbial construction and basic structure to PT 379 [§ 667]— a nuance of direction for the preposition “*r*”. Thus:

PT 379 [§ 667]: “FORMULE À RÉCITER. Ton eau est **dans** (= *r*) le ciel, tes plantes sont **dans** (= *r*) la terre (. . . ? . . .)”.

PT 392 [§ 688]: “FORMULE À RÉCITER. L’eau de Tétî est **dans** (= *m*) le ciel, la progéniture de Tétî est **dans** (= *m*) la terre (. . . ? . . .)”.

However:

4. FAULKNER 1969: 126, 129, 130.

5. CARRIER 2009: 331, 339, 341.

PT 399 [§ 694]: FORMULE À RÉCITER. Ton eau est **pour** (= *r*) le ciel, ta progéniture est **pour** (= *r*) le ciel [*sic*]⁶! Venez crier (?)!”.

For James P. Allen⁷ the content of PT 379 [§ 667] and PT 399 [§ 694] would convey, concerning preposition “*r*”, a sense of prospectivity maybe as expression of wish or command, while in PT 392 [§ 688] preposition “*m*” would indicate the state or situation of the subject as well. Thus, Allen translates:

PT 379 [§ 667]: “RECITATION. Your water **to** (= *r*) the sky! Your flowers **to** (= *r*) the earth! Behold, the (protection of the) utterance is around me!”.

PT 392 [§ 688]: “RECITATION. The water of Teti is **in** (= *m*) the sky, the fledglings of Teti are **on** (= *m*) earth: the heart is excavated”.

PT 399 [§ 694]: “RECITATION. Your water **to** (= *r*) the sky! Your fledglings **to** (= *r*) the earth! Go away, haul!”.

A similar criterion is adopted by the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (*ThLA*)⁸ whose authors translate:

PT 379 [§ 667]: “Dein Wasser **zum** (= *r*) Himmel! Deine Blumen **zur** (= *r*) Erde! Siehe, der (Schutz des) Spruch(es) ist um mich. (?)”.

PT 392 [§ 688]: “Das Wasser des Teti ist **im** (= *m*) Himmel, die Küken des Teti sind **auf** (= *m*) Erden. Das Herz . . .”.

PT 399 [§ 694]: “Dein Wasser **zum** (= *r*) Himmel! Deine Küken **zur** (= *r*) Erde! Geh weg, winde dich!”.

It is widely accepted that nothing in adverbial sentences clearly indicates time reference, thus prepositions, associated with their semantic scope, constitute the only elements that can evoke time⁹; consequently it is essential to contextualize the discourse and its particular expressions in order to discern the internal coherence and to establish a more conclusive understanding of formulae.

2. Semantic Sense and Context

Within apotropaic formulae, discursive elements provide key ingredients on how ancient Egyptians observed and symbolized their “natural” environment. As I have introduced in a recent article¹⁰, the apotropaic formulae included in the corpus of the Pyramid Texts were addressed to elements able to cause evil or threaten royal possessions and control the spaces through which the king proceeded in his way to the hereafter. According to this, a stereotypical and conventional role of hostility was played particularly by snakes¹¹, although other creatures, such as centipedes, scorpions¹² and, in general, underground beasts, also helped to reinforce the notion of inimical beings.

Starting from these general arguments, it is important to consider first the words represented within the domain of the three formulae in question:

6. This is clearly a mistake; “*le ciel*” should have been “*la terre*”.

7. ALLEN 2005: 88 (T 252), 91 (T 267), 91 (T 274).













8. *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (<http://aew.bbaw.de>).

9. LOPRIENO 1995: 144-145. Thus, preposition “*m*” would express a simultaneous situation of the subject, while preposition “*r*” implies a prospective reference.

10. BAQUÉ-MANZANO 2012b: 267-270.

11. See AUFRÈRE 2013: 93-122.

12. VERNUS-YOYOTTE 2005: 429-435, 440, 449-455.

PT 379 [§ 667]	 <i>mw</i>	 <i>p.t</i>	 <i>h3.w</i>	 <i>t3</i>
PT 392 [§ 688]	 <i>mw</i>	 <i>p.t</i>	 <i>t3.w</i>	 <i>t3</i>
PT 399 [§ 694]	 <i>mw</i>	 <i>p.t</i>	 <i>t3.w</i>	 <i>t3</i>

On a discursive level, *mw* = “water” is closely related to a sequential *p.t* = “sky” and both terms co-occur in the three formulae. I surmise for *mw* = “water”¹³ a metaphorical sense of “venom”¹⁴, taking into account that such extensive connotation reveals, in our opinion, a cognitive image of the hostile context in which the speech progresses. Very similar is the association that the text establishes between *h3.w*, *t3.w* and *t3* = “earth”. In correspondence, and following Faulkner’s translation for *h3.w* = “thousands”, I have conjectured that it could lead to the notion of “great number or quantity”, i.e., a figurative category of a word not revealed by its (con)text. This seems to me better than accepting without objections other alternatives, such as: “flowers” (Allen), “Blumen” (*ThLA*) or “plantes” (Carrier), which a priori seem to be far from the semantic contents of the apotropaia. Likewise, as for *t3.w* = “fledgelings” (Faulkner and Allen) or = “Küken” (*ThLA*), all seems to indicate that we are before a metaphorical expression—for Carrier “progeniture”—, concerning a previous reference word concealed again within the context of the sentence. However, before any attempt of conclusion is drawn here on the translation of the three formulae in question, it is important to examine very carefully the interplay between words and the context in which they occur, to help us specify a more proper meaning and eventually avoid that we get lost in translation. For this purpose, I would like to bring up here a group of parallel sentences, also included in the apotropaic group of the Pyramid Texts: PT 240 [§ 244a]¹⁵, PT 299 [§ 444a]¹⁶ and PT 378 [§ 663a]¹⁷, whose message follows a similar adverbial pattern and conveys an equivalent semantic description too:


D(d)-mdw: d.t ir p.t zp3 hr.w jr t3

WORDS TO BE PRONOUNCED: O cobra to the sky! O centipede of Horus to the earth!¹⁸

13. See KAPLONY 1992:16-44.

14. Normally *mtw.t*, however in PT 230 [§ 230b] *mw* = “water” is also replaced for the snake “venom”. Likewise, a metaphor related to the “snake venom”, under *mw*, occurs in two papyri at the Louvre Museum (L 3237, L 3239), see GOYON 1975: 351. Finally, *mw* was used in reference to “scorpion venom”, see *Wb* II, 52, 16, and WESTENDORF 1977 (in *LÄ* II): 596-597, s.v. “Gifte” and, in relation also to the scorpion venom, the combination *mw-rdw.w* rendered as: “*liquides humoraux*” (ROUFFET 2009: 3, and n. 12); on the former cf. however *Wb* II, 469, 7.




















15. W/F/Wg 29; T/A/E 9; P/A/E 32; M/A/E inf. 41; N/A/E inf 49; Nt/F/E sup 50.

16. W/A/E 24; T/A/E 11; N/A/E inf 57.





17. T/A/E 10.

18. About these three formulae cf. translation and comments of LEITZ 1996: 409, 425, 426.



It seems obvious that the previous passage displays strong evidences of being a direct illustration of the content of the three formulae analysed in this article. Actually, if we compare the constituent structure of the two groups we obtain:

PT 240 [§ 244a] 299 [§ 444a] 378 [§ 663a]		  			  	
PT 379 [§ 667] 392 [§ 688] 399 [§ 694]		(only in PT 392 [§ 688]) 		     	(only in PT 392 [§ 688]) 	

The table gives us not only a proper report of the equivalences among sentences, but also permits to establish semantic relations between words. Therefore, *dt* = “cobra” apparently corresponds to *mw* = “water”, while *zpʒ* = “centipede” corresponds to *hʒ.w* = “thousands” and also to *lʒ.w* = “fledgelings”. In my interpretation I assume this is not incidental, since the corresponding words, evaluated as metaphorical or figurative within the formulae PT 379 [§ 667], PT 392 [§ 688] and PT 399 [§ 694], should be considered in fact metonymic-based and consequently they replace (→) reference terms and eventually enlarge the meaning suggested by the context of PT 240 [§ 244a], PT 299 [§ 444a] and PT 378 [§ 663a]. A likely relation could be established as follows:

Reference terms PT 240 [§ 244a], PT 299 [§ 444a] and PT 378 [§ 663a]	Metonymic-based terms PT 379 [§ 667], PT 392 [§ 688] and PT 399 [§ 694]	Enlarged meanings
 <i>dt</i> = “cobra”	 ← <i>mw</i> = “water” > venom”	a) of a venomous cobra. b) of a spitting cobra.
 <i>zpʒ</i> = “centipede”	 ← <i>hʒ.w</i> = “thousands”	a) of a great number of (centipede) legs (<i>Myriapoda</i> ?). b) of walking (of centipede) legs towards its prey ¹⁹ .

19. When alarmed, the centipede (*Scolopendromorpha*) makes tiny incisions with its numerous feet, dropping into each incision some kind of venom that causes intense irritation. CLOUDSLEY-THOMPSON 1958: 54-55.

 zp^3 = “centipede”	 $\leftarrow \beta.w$ = “fledgelings” (“able or willing to fly”)	{ a) of raising centipede poison claws (forcipules) and anterior legs to seize prey in mid-air. b) of a centipede willing to attack.
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Once established the semantic links concerning this metaphorical potential, let us get back to the formulae in question and analyse how the other constituent elements behave. In our examination of the meaning, the determining role of suffix pronouns and genitival adjectives in expressions denoting possession must be considered. Thus, in PT 379 [§ 667] and PT 399 [§ 694] we find the suffix pronoun =*k* in: *mw=k* “your water” or *h3.w=k* “your thousands” and also *l3.w=k* “your fledgelings”, while in PT 392 [§ 688] the genitival adjective *n(y)w* is used in: *mw n(y)w* (NN) “the water of Teti” and *l3.w n(y)w* (NN) “the fledgelings of Teti”. At the semantic level, the former use of pronouns or nouns in symmetrical structures denoting possession is relevant in the identification of the character involved, namely the possessor, the king, as PT 392 [§ 688] clearly shows.

3. Conclusive Translation into Catalan and English

Bearing in mind the previous arguments, I have proposed to render the formulae PT 379 [§ 667], PT 392 [§ 688] and PT 399 [§ 694] in Catalan and now English, as follows:

Translation PT 379 [§ 667]; T/A/E 13:

a) Catalan

SIGUIN DITES LES PARAULES: Que la teva aigua sigui vers el cel!

Que els teus milers siguin vers la terra!

Compte, la (protecció de la) sentència és al meu voltant!

b) English

WORDS TO BE PRONOUNCED: May your water be to the sky!

May your thousands be to the earth!

Behold, the (protection of the) utterance is around me!

Translation PT 392 [§ 688]; T/A/E 25:

a) Catalan

SIGUIN DITES LES PARAULES: L'aigua de Teti és al cel, els volanders de Teti són a terra. El desig és soscavat.

b) English

WORDS TO BE PRONOUNCED: The water of Teti is in the sky, the fledgelings of Teti are on earth. The will is undermined.

Translation PT 399 [§ 694]; T/A/E 27:

a) Catalan

SIGUIN DITES LES PARAULES: Que la teva aigua sigui vers el cel!

Que els teus volanders siguin vers la terra!

Au, marxa!



b) English

WORDS TO BE PRONOUNCED: May your water be to the sky!

May your fledgelings be to the earth!

Hey, go away!

4. Situation and Final Remarks

Hidden feelings (fear, anger), retained within the psychological framework of hostility created by the apotropaic texts²⁰, are undoubtedly condensed in the situation introduced by the three formulae analysed here. Two inimical beings of the underworld, a cobra and a centipede, are both threatening the King's way in the hereafter. The officiant, through the magical speech, calls their attention. He also addresses them very carefully, avoiding to employ the conventional terms,  *dt*, "cobra" and  *zp3*, "centipede", particularly when the king's name is written or simply suggested in the formulae. He then utters stereotypical, imitating metonymic-based terms, in order to re-create a less offensive image of both creatures. Thus, the venom of the spitting cobra is simply transformed, by means of the performative discourse, into "water" (*mw*), fashioning a distorted and "less dangerous" image of the potential attack of the snake. Meanwhile, the poisonous forcipules and the anterior legs of an equally hazardous centipede are simply alluded under a vague figurative "thousands" (*h3.w*) or a pungent, although somehow mocking "fledgelings" (*β3.w*). As we can observe, the lethal abilities of cobras and centipedes, against which the king alone (hence the use of possessives) must be confronted²¹, have been counteracted by means of defensive authoritative expressions able to impose or influence over such inimical creatures. At that point, the power of words is supported also by the integration of a mythical environment, sky and earth, descriptive of the supernatural, finally invoked as the guarantee that chaos will be defeated and balance eventually restored²².

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20. For the disposition of apotropaia in the walls of the Pyramids with texts, MATHIEU 2001: 185-206.

21. The King is usually compared in this kind of formulae to the figure of god Horus and this is evocative of the main role of the god in the magical contexts. See DARESSY 1903.

22. On this respect see BORGHOOTS 2001: 32-33. Likewise, I would like to kindly thank the anonymous referee of *Aula Orientalis* for calling our attention on the other relevant meaning of the term *l3.w*, “air” (*Wb* V, 350-351), which consequently would establish an interesting association between the elements: “water”, “sky”, “air” and “earth”. To this respect, see PADRÓ 1980: 5-17.

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