

(In(ter))discipline: The case of Egyptology

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[This article discusses some interdisciplinary approaches to Egyptology, and some of their implications on the grounds of method and theory. It will be argued that some phenomena, which are pervasive in the current academic practice, are directly related to the conceptual binomial discipline-authority; this includes the emic-etic dichotomy, peer-reviewing, prestige monolingualism, and “stencilled-interdisciplinary” approaches.]

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, Egyptology, discipline, academic career.

1. *Questioning the discipline, or doing epistemology: etic and emic approaches*

The tree of knowledge is not that of life (Lord Byron, *Manfred*, 1817).

1.1. *When how we think is what we think about something*

Epistemology means ‘science of knowledge’, which means that epistemology deals with how we think. However, what are we doing when we do epistemology? Specifically, does asking the question ‘How do we think?’ equal asking the question ‘What do we think about something?’? Such equality represents the *etic approach*. Kenneth Pike, the psychologist, coined the term ‘etic’ in 1954:

The etic viewpoint studies behaviour as from outside of a particular system, and as an essential initial approach to an alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behaviour as from inside the system. (I coined the words etic and emic from the words phonetic and phonemic, following the conventional linguistic usage of these latter terms).²

In linguistics, the term ‘phonetic’ refers to the sound production (something physical, then directly verifiable) of ‘phonemes’, which are the mental representations of sounds selected among many others for linguistic use, the ‘phonemic’ realm (i.e. something psychological, not physical which can only be verified indirectly).

Pike’s approach fails to supersede general criticism of dualism which is characteristic of any strict behaviourism, according to which psychological elements would be separated from the

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2. Pike 1954: 37.

physical elements, and only accessible through the latter. Notwithstanding this, his approach and the terms he employs (emic/etic) have proved to be operative at a general level, and have found a relevant echo first in anthropology and archaeology, then in Egyptology.³

A typical case of the etic approach is that of natural sciences. Etic by definition, in the way the term is employed here, as opposed to 'emic', natural sciences apply theories on alien systems. For instance, physics applies mathematical theory to the universe (the "alien" system). The following example will illustrate this point.

The biologist Mark Pagel says that he found once a nomad shepherd in the Chalbi desert, north of Kenia. Pagel does not register the shepherd's name but lets us know that he was a polyglot. He spoke Gabbra (his mother tongue), Rendile, Samburu, Turkana, and Swahili (the languages spoken by his neighbours), as well as English (spoken by the missionaries in the area, and presumably the language in which the unnamed shepherd and Pagel communicated). Pagel was so impressed by his polylingualism given the fact that the shepherd had never gone farther than 50 km from the place where he was born that he asked him why he could speak so many languages. The shepherd's answer was: "So I can talk to them", which is an emic answer. However, the biologist's interest was different:

I was asking a different question. What I really wanted to know was why there were four different tribes of nomadic pastoralists all living in the same area and herding the same kind of animals, whose genetic differences were negligible, and yet who had divided up the land and their lives so exclusively as to speak different languages. Why were there four tribes with different languages, customs, habits, and traditions, and not just one? Why do we humans have a tendency to form into small tribal groups rather than living as one large and homogeneous society?⁴

Pagel's question is an etic question which, when applied to the humanities, shows:

- *Lack of historicity*: in the previous example, the history of the human groups is not considered, particularly their migrations, especially when it is about nomad groups. Situations change through time, which makes human groups change.
- *Lack of cultural relativism*: given that the biological model is unique (genetic), the cultural one should be the same. Nevertheless, culture works in a much more complex way because the members of a culture choose what is significant or not, consciously or not, and their choices undergo social consensus, rejection or reinterpretation.

Humanities are emic by definition. In humanities, the system gets meaning from itself and gives meaning to itself: the system is as theory as the topic under study. It comes from this that if we were to apply a theory to a human system alien to that theory, such an approach could only be etic, as in the natural sciences. The same happens with those "human" sciences that call themselves 'theoretical': they consider the system a topic, not a theory, so its approach is always etic. That is the case of anthropology, psychology, and sociology (including their experimental or "applied" branches), which take the shape of natural sciences.⁵ These etic approaches seek objectivity, which

3. See recently the conference *Lady Wallis Budge Anniversary Symposium: Concepts in Middle Kingdom Funerary Culture* (proceedings published in Nyord 2019).

4. Pagel 2010: viii.

5. This "adoption" reveals as well in the format of publications to give them a "more scientific" appearance: see, on the quotation systems, Kitchen 1998: 627 (who quotes Derchain 1993: 27-28).

on the other hand, natural sciences do not claim anymore since Werner Heisenberg (1927)—at least not the fundamental sciences such as theoretical physics.⁶ For this reason, the novelty these “human” sciences pretend in contrast to those they label as “traditional” and look as descriptive (geography and history most of all) is only apparent. It is without saying that nor the so-called “traditional” human sciences are exclusively descriptive or the so-called “theoretical” human sciences are exclusively interpretative (non-descriptive). Very far from that. There is no descriptive-interpretative opposition; rather the interaction between two basic methodological processes that mutually feedback: one, the top-down process of sticking to the facts while interpreting them; two, the bottom-up process of describing what facts and how those facts get meaning within their system and for their users, and other facts do not.

From this point of view, the recent defence of an emic approach from the “theoretical” human sciences (mainly from anthropology) may be seen as an (unexpected, coincidental) acknowledgement of what always has been the main feature of human sciences: the emic character of their approach.

1.2. *When what we think is what we do with something*

It seems thus that a circle is completed, and we are asking anew: What do we do when we do epistemology? Specifically, does asking the question ‘What do we think?’ equal asking ‘What do we do with something?’? Such equality is what defines the *emic approach*.

This approach started to be developed in anthropology since the end of the twentieth century by authors such as Gell (1998), Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004), Henare, Holbraad & Wastell (2007), Pedersen (2011), Holbraad (2012), and Scott (2013), then to impact archaeology by authors such as Alberti & Marshall (2009), and Martin (2013).

Two are the main assets of this approach: to explicitly acknowledge an *epistemological distance* between the scholar and the creator of the culture; and to highlight that distance is marked by “alienity”: the higher the alienity, the longer the distance. In Henare, Holbraad & Wastell’s words:

(...) anthropological analysis has little to do with trying to determine how **other** people think about the world. It has to do with how we must think in order to conceive a world the way they do.⁷

The emic approach is not just a post-modern version of cultural relativism⁸ but draws the theoretical and methodological consequences it conveys. As Henare, Holbraad & Wastell put it, it is about:

(...) taking things in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else.⁹

Not new in Egyptology,¹⁰ this fundamental, epistemological distance between how to think about something and how to do something with something (what to do with something) starts to be explicit since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This happens in two complementary ways:

6. Alberti & Marshall 2009: 349.

7. Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007: 15.

8. Alberti & Marshall 2009: 346.

9. Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007: 2–3.

10. Frankfort 1948 (Taylor 2011); Hornung 1971, for instance.

on one side, as a reflection on the modern approach to the ancient; on the other, by trying to build the creative thought of the items (artefacts, texts, etc.) produced in ancient times, in a sort of “intra-epistemology”, which has been labelled in anthropology and archaeology the *ontological turn*. It is important to stress that both views are complementary and, at all odds, inseparable in practice. In the first view, by focusing on the modern approach to the ancient, Rune Nyord writes on this distance:

(...) the antiquarian tradition means that the act of collecting details, be they archaeological or philological, often comes to be seen as an end in itself, without necessarily engaging with the wider consequences of what they imply about Egyptian experiences and conceptions of the world.¹¹

In the second view, by concentrating on the ancient thought, Antonio Loprieno observes the following on said distance:

L'Égypte, comme beaucoup d'autres cultures du monde ancien, montre une tendance à traiter de façon homologue certains discours que nous considérons séparés, et reconnaît une relation très étroite entre le contenu conceptuel des textes et le genre textuel que l'auteur choisit, jamais arbitrairement, pour véhiculer ce contenu. (...). D'autre part, le texte égyptien, qui se sert d'un système graphique qui n'est pas seulement au service du contenu, mais qui en détermine lui-même certains traits sémantiques, n'est souvent pas compréhensible sans tenir compte de la dimension du signe hiéroglyphique, surtout au niveau des déterminatifs. Encore plus qu'en Mésopotamie, où le système cunéiforme renonça très tôt au potentiel iconique des signes, le signifiant égyptien classe l'univers et attribue à la matérialité du signe un rôle culturel important. C'est dans cette participation de la sphère du signe à la définition des valeurs sémantiques que l'on doit probablement rechercher la raison des difficultés que continue à rencontrer la lexicographie égyptienne.¹²

Egyptological lexicography, one would rather say. There are two critical points in Loprieno's analysis: one, the content-form relation in the texts; two, the semantic interaction between the linguistic and the graphemic. Content and form, linguistic and graphemic, are concepts from an etic approach; what is done “with” them (respectively, the resulting text-document-action, and the resulting sign-action) are elements from an emic approach. Note that I do not use the term “concept” in the last case.

Once again, two examples will illustrate the fundamental importance of acknowledging the epistemological distance.

The first example is provided by those documents that Egyptologists call ‘onomastica’¹³ (‘lists of names’ in Greek) as if they were documents of an encyclopaedic character. Recently, Kraemer & Liszka have highlighted the main weakness of this view:

Scholars continue to view the Ramesseum Onomasticon as an intellectual document akin to the Onomasticon of Amenemope, which attempts to classify the whole world according to semantic categories. However, the contents show that the Ramesseum Onomasticon probably served as an orthographic reference for scribes who worked in the Theban region administration. The text lists only items that might be found in accounts of revenue or income for a royal or temple storehouse including liquids, nutritional plants, edible birds, fish, game animals, bread, grains, cuts of meat, precious stones,

11. Nyord 2018: 73.

12. Loprieno 2001: 6.

13. Gardiner 1947.

and minerals—Even the towns that it lists are limited to the “Head of the South”, an area of the Theban administrative jurisdiction. The list of cattle colours on the verso is more akin to the magical, medical, and religious topics that thematically united the papyri found in the Ramesseum Cache because the list relates to procedures that priests used to select and record cattle for sacrifice. The list is organized according to colour patterns of their hides, each of which receives a distinct abbreviation or symbol. Similar symbols exist in other texts. Gardiner already recognized that similar symbols occur in a New Kingdom papyrus from Gurob. Additionally from the late Middle Kingdom, P. Boulaq 18 includes the signs for “white” hide and “red with white face and spots” in a list of cattle for sacrifice in a festival of Montu. Also, P. Berlin 10233D verso has similar symbols for cow hides (unpublished). The best descriptions of how special priests, those attached to the goddess Sekhmet (*w^cb.w shm.t*), took great pains to choose and record cattle for sacrifice by their hair colors were recorded by Herodotus, Plutarch, and in some Roman receipts, but allusions to it exist in earlier documents.¹⁴

The second example is the classification, better said ‘listing’ of hieroglyphic signs. In 1889, Francis Llewellyn Griffith published an *Egyptian* list of hieroglyphs found in Tanis.¹⁵ Nine years later, he proposed an *Egyptological* list of hieroglyphic signs,¹⁶ which was a direct inspiration for the reference list by Alan H. Gardiner (1927),¹⁷ a referent in the discipline. This case is perhaps the best example of epistemological distance and illustrates what an emic approach means. On one side, it displays the awareness of the distance between the Egyptian thinking in the list of Tanis and the Egyptological thinking in the list of Gardiner. On the other side, it proves that both lists respond to the use their respective recipients (ancient Egyptians and Egyptologists) make of them; and that the lists act on those recipients. Gardiner made this point explicit:¹⁸ the reason of the choice and quantity of the signs in his list is the clarity that publications, mainly those of grammar and lexicography, should provide to the student; in other words, the reason of his list is first and foremost typographic and didactic, which is to say Egyptological. This intent is very sensible in itself and something that needs to be made explicit. Still, it represents a dead-end street in practice of significant consequences for research, as Richard Parkinson has pointed out:

Our editorial preferences—at least as embodied in our publications on Egyptian texts—arguably reveal an institutional bias in favour of abstraction, unity and consistency as opposed to materiality and diversity.¹⁹

Gardiner himself was very much aware of the epistemological distance when he wrote:

The modern craving for scientific precision, so contrary to the habit of the Egyptians themselves, has often led in the past to falsification of the actual graphic facts. (...) In copying the monuments, we must resist the temptation to substitute more correct forms for those actually used. We are not entitled to impose upon the Egyptians our own scholarly preferences.²⁰

The vision and use of these elements were not static for the ancient Egyptians as it is not for the Egyptologists: the digital needs in current research are nudging Egyptologists in the quest for a

14. Kraemer & Liszka 2016: n. 23.

15. Griffith 1889.

16. Griffith 1898.

17. Gardiner 1957 (first ed. 1927).

18. Gardiner 1957, 438.

19. Parkinson 2013, 132. Cf. Parkinson 2009, 260-265.

20. Gardiner 1957, 439.

(functional) taxonomy of the hieroglyphic signs; particularly, the need of a code for discriminating them in text databases.²¹

One may further similar examples in other spheres that ask questions of this kind: in literature, what was literary in ancient Egypt?; in lexicography, what is a root in ancient Egyptian?; in cognitivism, how to isolate a metaphor in an ancient culture such as the ancient Egyptian culture? What follows is a swift comment on the three previous questions.

Literature. In 1996, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht wondered if Egyptology has any need for the theory of literature, which is to ask if it needs a theory of literature at all. The question may seem absurd to us Westerners, but is a manifestation of the intellectual inquietude caused by the epistemological distance. Although remarkable efforts have been devoted to defining the literary since the beginning of the discipline, particularly with Jan Assmann's studies since the 1970s,²² the question as such had not been asked previously in Egyptology.

The problem is not exclusive to Egyptology. In Greek studies, a discipline in which the literary is a paradigm for general definition, Klaus Geus recently expressed his epistemological inquietude about a "literary genre", of everyday use among Hellenists, which did not match any ancient Greek reality whatsoever, but which are real only for the Hellenists, i.e. a reality of an etic approach:

Westermann is not explicit as to why he coined this new term *παράδοξογραφία*, but we can surmise that it was for want of a catchy name for his collection of quite heterogeneous authors and works. Be that as it may, the term has persisted since then, but we must always be aware that there never was a distinct (if at all) literary genre referred to as "paradoxography" in antiquity and that in using the term paradoxography we constantly run the risk of applying modern concepts and notions to an unspecific bundle of texts which may or may not have had the same goals, forms and readers. And this is a real danger.²³

Lexicography. According to Hubert Roeder (2013), *apud* Karl Jansen-Winkel (1996), the Egyptian term *šh* is better translated with "active / useful" (Aktiver/Wirkmächtiger) than ("wie bisher üblich" ["as is usual"]) "transfigured / illuminated" (Verklärter/Lichthafter). The verb *sšh* is thus better translated with "activate" (aktivieren) than "transfigure" (verklären). The term *šh* is both things, but we prefer to consider two homoconsonantic roots because in our culture, the semantic extension "light → useful" does not work: an etic approach. Alternatively, we may consider a polysemic root that expresses different but related meanings, a frequent phenomenon that meets the linguistic principles of 'economy' (one root) and 'creativity': numerous meanings are produced from one root through metaphor or metonymy.²⁴

Cognitivism. In the extensive discussions on the mechanisms of metaphor, the question of its "universality" remains, a question which is in the very nature of language: a system which is, in essence, metaphoric in the more inclusive sense of the term, as a universal capacity and as a specific cultural actualization. This double aspect makes studying the phenomenon "metaphor" in

21. Polis & Rosmorduc 2015, 169.

22. Assmann 1974.

23. Geus, 2016: 244.

24. Respectively proposed by Martinet (1955) and Descartes (1637), Ve section, then adapted by Chomsky (mainly 1966) to play a key role in his theory. Although this issue cannot be treated here, what is at stake is the very concept of 'root', which might be etic (see, for instance, Bohas 1997).

an “alien” culture make the epistemological distance evident. A telling case of this distance in this context is the one explained by Gérard Roquet in 1973:

Les coïncidences de motivation sémantique sont souvent remarquables en ce qu’elles manifestent à travers un contenu verbal un contenu de conscience analogue : le français comme l’égyptien auront observé la pluie et les nuages et les deux ont vu la pluie “battre” le sol ou les plantes qu’elle couche ; les deux ont vu “rouler” les nuages gonflés comme des outres. La sémantique comparée sera un domaine de l’analyse du psychisme collectif stratifié dans les langues : chaque mot a été ou est un choix individuel, puis collectif et social devant les choses de l’univers et le milieu de l’homme. Tout n’a pas sombré de ces choix “sensoriels” les plus primes de l’homme, situé au centre des éléments informes qu’il devait nommer: la comparaison au niveau de la sémantique permet de déchirer le voile ; un nom ne spécifie, de la chose à nommer, qu’une certaine modalité de la perception de cette chose, mais les convergences perceptives sont fréquentes entre les langues les plus diverses. — Conséquences de ces vues : pour un locuteur français “nuage” est immotivé, “pluie” de même ; mais si je dis qu’un nuage “roule” ou que tombe une pluie “battante”, je précise ma perception que je vise à communiquer et l’image est si juste qu’elle est imposée dans la langue au point de devenir patrimoine commun ; on a re-motivé “nuage” et “pluie” qui étaient devenus des mots “opaques” sur le plan étymologique, à travers plusieurs millénaires d’usage et d’usure depuis leur état “motivé” indo-européen. Or le nom de la “pluie” en ancien-égyptien

est, si l’on en croit les graphies du type , consciemment relié au verbe “frapper” (à coups redoublés) : la pluie “bat”, “frappe” ; ce lien, probablement senti comme transparent par les locuteurs d’Ancien et (peut-être) de Moyen Empire, est —selon toute probabilité— disparu à l’époque où un copte parlait de **ϩϩϩϩ** (A) ou de **ⲙⲟϩ ⲛϩϩⲟϩ** (B). Pourtant, l’historien de la langue reconnaît dans **ϩⲟϩⲉ**

(SAA2), **ϩⲟϩⲓ** (BF) “être frappé” etc. l’état évolué de l’ancien verbe  *hwi* “frapper”. Le nom de la pluie en copte est devenu immotivé, d’où les syntagmes redondants du type “eau de pluie” = “pluie” **ⲙⲟϩ ⲛϩϩⲟϩ** (B). De la même façon, le rapport de base a dérivé (ou de forme de fondation à forme fondée) qui unit *tonner* et *étonner* n’est plus senti en français parlé.²⁵

Many other examples could come to join the previous ones from the archaeological and anthropological fields, in which the epistemological distance is likewise relevant: child burials,²⁶ rites of passage,²⁷ the “dichotomy” religion-magic,²⁸ or the figurative representation (its very existence in tombs,²⁹ and the existence of aspective³⁰). In the latter case, an etic interpretation predominates that states “without representation there is no afterlife”; in other words, aspective is a kind of representation of the reality,³¹ as opposed to “perspective”. Notwithstanding this, an emic interpretation of the representations together with the mortuary texts would further bring to a holistic view of the tomb as a space for communication inhabited by support, message, and communicative participants; in other words, the tomb as a space for social interaction *per se*.³²

We may now discuss some repercussions of this awareness.

25. Roquet 1973: 158-159 (n. 4).

26. Petkov 2014.

27. Józefów & Popielska-Grzybowska 2009.

28. Otto 2013 (with previous bibliography).

29. Gee 2010: 145; quoted in Arp 2013: 26.

30. Brunner-Traut 1990; Arp 2013, 28. See also Verbovsek 2011; Nyord 2013; Gracia Zamacona 2015.

31. Arp 2013: 28.

32. Compare the excellent case put by Theis 2015 of disagreement between archaeological and philological information in mortuary context: the search for matching both “kinds of information” is the result of an etic approach.

2. *Discipline, interdiscipline: indiscipline*

No hay cuestiones agotadas, sino hombres agotados en las cuestiones (Santiago Ramón y Cajal, *Reglas y consejos sobre investigación científica*, 1898).

The said epistemological distance has caused a particular “crisis” in Egyptology as a discipline. It has primarily impacted two general spheres, although with disparate reach and range depending on the institutions involved (mainly universities and museums). On the one hand, the reflection of Egyptology on itself and its object; on the other, the quest for “solutions” outside of it, i.e. multidisciplinary, transdisciplinarity, or interdisciplinarity. Not that these terms are interchangeable, as remarked by Mieke Bal when she treats the situation in museum studies during the seventies and eighties of last century:

(...) the transdisciplinarity lost any critical edge it might have had. Multi-disciplinarity was conceived as an ‘umbrella’ under which people from different disciplines studied similar objects, in projects like ‘musical instruments in painting and literature’. (...) only *interdisciplinarity* led to new visions that affected the participating disciplines themselves. (...) Inter- means *between*. It denotes a willingness to exchange on an equal basis.³³

Interdisciplinarity is taken here in this sense of “equal exchange”. Nevertheless, in Egyptology, interdisciplinarity generally refers to approaches different from philology and archaeology, not of disciplines different from Egyptology. Otherwise said, it is understood that we are doing Egyptology “in a different manner”, through other lenses such as those of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, or social history. This view implies that the discipline does not tilt: it remains Egyptology.

Although this view may seem peculiar, it is not exclusive to Egyptology but shared with Assyriology, Sinology, Indology or Americanistics, all terms that refer to non-European geographic-cultural areas which Europeans labelled for the first time. There is not the equivalent “Europeology”: Europeans do not study themselves as a culture, so to say “all together” but upon their own “topics” by using “theoretical” terms such as history, religion, philology, and archaeology—all European terms again. Of these disciplines, so-called theoretical, those that were not employed since the beginning of Egyptology are not more alien (*per se*) to Egyptology than those who were (philology and archaeology): they are more recent, then less-frequented (sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics).

It might seem obvious (then immediately accepted) to state that when dealing with the study of a culture alien to the European culture, any culture is strange because of not being European. However, this fundamental epistemological inconsistency has generated an intellectual inquietude among European (more broadly, Western) scholars, which has crystallised in compensatory reactions (and as many as misunderstandings) through time. Three of them have gained significant intellectual impact and pervade many current studies in humanities, including Egyptology. Since the three issues (opposition between description and interpretation, the myth of progress, and exotism) have been profusely studied, just a brief mention is needed.

Description versus Interpretation. This opposition lies in the fallacy that a distinction between description (which would be objective) and interpretation (which would be subjective) is possible. As said before, since Heisenberg (1927) we know that such an opposition is impossible, not even

33. Bal 2018: 58.

for natural sciences: according to the uncertainty principle, it is not possible to tell with certainty and at the same time the position, on one side, and the mass and speed (momentum) on the other, of a particle.

*The myth of progress.*³⁴ Originating from the Renaissance, and with an extraordinary rise since and during the nineteenth century, this is the idea that growth is infinite in all fields. Accordingly, it is difficult to view the past in a non-patronising manner—take the case of the study of writing systems or religious thought, to mention two examples of high relevance.

*Exotism.*³⁵ Cultures are similar and different in different degrees and manners, but only to a spectator can be exotic. Furthermore, this consideration is unaffected by time and space: ancient Rome is thus not exotic to the eighteenth-century United States, nor classic Greece to the Aufklärung Germany, but Chinese or Yanomami cultures are, despite their being contemporary to those Western culture examples.

The opposition description versus interpretation in Egyptology deserves some comment. It has expanded in the last years whether in a systematic or operative scenario, frequently under the terms ‘empirical’ and ‘theoretical’ respectively, and sometimes fueling a disagreement in which some present the descriptive as ‘traditional’ as opposed to the ‘theoretical’, which would be the interpretative.³⁶ However, tagging as ‘traditional’ an approach or technique more than ten years old and not fitting the current mainstream equals to labelling as ‘theoretical’ a new approach or technique less than fifty years old which did not follow the standards of its time. When set in these terms, the discussion instead reflects two opposite opinions: according to one, only the new would be appropriate as a tool for analysis; according to the other one, only the old manner is acceptable in a discipline.

In Egyptology, since the 1970s, at least, two reactions have surfaced to outdo the misunderstanding: on the one hand, creating massive databases to give access to significant quantities of organized data, and with the ultimate objective of exhaustivity, universality, and capacity for updating;³⁷ on the other hand, conducting interdisciplinary approaches with the aim of understanding, explaining or reinterpreting crucial questions about the ancient Egyptian thought that appear intricate, incomprehensible or needed of a revision.³⁸

The supposed opposition between descriptive (empirical) and interpretative (theoretical) is not exclusive to Egyptology, far from that. In a recent collective volume edited by Eitan Grossman, Martin Haspelmath and Tonio Sebastian Richter, *Egyptian-Coptic linguistics in typological perspective* (2015), the preface states:

Overall this is an empirically rich, well-argued, and theoretically informed set of articles showing both how Egyptian-Coptic can throw light on typological issues and how consideration of typology can advance work in Egyptian-Coptic linguistics.³⁹

34. Bury 1920.

35. Ségalen 1978 (written between 1904 and 1918).

36. See recently, for instance, Nyord 2015; Meeks 2015.

37. Schenkel 1982; Totenbuch-Projekt 1994; Gracia Zamacona 2013; Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae 2014; Ramses online 2015.

38. Baines 1976; Weeks 1979; Lustig 1997 (Sinclair 1998; Meskell 1999; Brewer 2001); Loprieno 2003; Howley & Nyord 2018.

39. Comrie, 2015: vi-vii.

The book is published in a series entitled *Empirical Approaches to Language Typology*, reflecting the said opposition between theoretical and empirical (interpretation versus description). The said opposition implicitly bestows the first one (as active and primary) over the second one (as passive and secondary). Recently, Ansgar Nünning has transparently displayed this prestige of theory, even within the context of awareness about the epistemological distance which any etic approach implies in humanities:

Die Frage lautet nicht, *ob* sich Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaftler bestimmter Theorien, Modelle und Konzepte bedienen oder nicht, sondern wie bewusst sie sich ihrer theoretischen und methodischen Prämissen sind und wie explizit sie die verwendeten Kategorien darlegen.⁴⁰

An example of that prestige from a formal point of view (that of “academic writing”) may be useful here. Mary Lea and Brian Street analyse a British university student’s bewilderment who received a positive assessment from the reviewer of a history essay and a negative one from the reviewer of an anthropology essay. Lea’s and Street’s analysis claims that the reviewers’ disagreement leans on the fact that the student majored in history and did know well enough anthropology, and they base that claim saying that:

(...) his experience with writing in history led him to attempt to break down and categorise some factual aspects of his knowledge in his anthropology essay, without attention to some of the implicit ways of writing knowledge in his anthropology, and in particular the need to abstract theory rather than attend to factual detail as evidence, as was required by at least some tutors in that discipline.⁴¹

It is difficult to find a clearer and shorter description of the supposed fracture between theory and empiry. It is then difficult to avoid these two questions: one methodological, can any science be without the two of them?; the other cultural, does that supposed opposition stand outside the culture or language in which it was created (in this case, the Anglo-Saxon culture and the English language)?

The second question has to do with the concept of authority, which will be discussed below. As for the first question, the “opposition” between theory and empiry has no relation whatsoever with the need for abstraction (which is usually adduced in Linguistics for a study to be considered “scientifically linguistic”) or with the need for empirical knowledge (which is usually argued in the field of “regional” studies for a study to be “scientifically Egyptological”, in the case under consideration here). Such opposition has to do with the opposition between “schools” or even individuals; in other words, it has to do with the very concept of “discipline”; or differently said, it affects the question: What is Egyptology, and what is not Egyptology?

This isolation of positions, or this “existence of schools” is not exclusive to Egyptology, and has been criticised at least since the seventeenth century with these words by Roger Bacon, which are still very up-to-date to the disgrace of us as scholars and teachers:

Again, in the habits and regulations of schools, universities, and the like assemblies, destined for the abode of learned men and the improvement of learning, everything is found to be opposed to the progress of the sciences; for the lectures and exercises are so ordered, that anything out of the common track can scarcely enter the thoughts and contemplations of the mind. If, however, one or two have perhaps dared to

40. Nünning 2008: v; quoted in Roeder 2013: 9.

41. Lea & Street 2012: 165.

use their liberty, they can only impose the labor on themselves, without deriving any advantage from the association of others; and if they put up with this, they will find their industry and spirit of no slight disadvantage to them in making their fortune; for the pursuits of men in such situations are, as it were, chained down to the writings of particular authors, and if any one dare to dissent from them he is immediately attacked as a turbulent and revolutionary spirit.⁴²

Furthermore, the theory-empiry opposition does not usually act as a galvanic element to advance the knowledge of a given subject and its theoretical and methodological consequences, which are always intimately connected. Instead, it causes the isolation of different positions both within the discipline and in general. Notwithstanding this, in the case of Egyptology, awareness of this isolation has led to reaction (partially but determined) in recent years to open to other disciplines, as noted by David Gange en 2016:

The last decade has seen more written on the history of Egyptology than had any other. Recent events, such as the conference ‘Disciplinary Measures: Histories of Egyptology’ at UCL suggest that a field has coalesced, even come of age. Many more Egyptologists are engaging with the approaches of historians, literary scholars and historians of science than ever before, while many more scholars in those fields are finding that Egyptology’s past speaks to the concerns of their discipline.⁴³

Apart from the isolation of Egyptology regarding other disciplines, already remarked by Gerhard Haeny,⁴⁴ isolation between Egyptologists is another factor to be considered. Such isolation can be interpreted as an extreme adhesion to a given “school”; an atomisation of the phenomenon. In that vein, Jacqueline Jay remarks when commenting on the different tries in reconstructing the ancient Egyptian poetic form:

The poetic structure of Middle Kingdom literary texts has been an extremely fruitful area of research in recent decades – so fruitful, in fact, that at times it may seem as though there are as many theories as there are Egyptologists. Mark Collier sums up the current state of affairs well in his contribution to *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms*: “There is perhaps now a consensus that Middle Egyptian literature invokes some form of artful unit of compositional organization whether this be meaning-based or prosodically-based, particularly in terms of the widely recognized phenomenon of the pairing of composition lines (parallelismus membrorum) in Egyptian literary composition.” Egyptologists do, it is true, dispute the precise role parallelism plays in Egyptian literature: is it simply a poetic device, or is it the basic structural principal underlying Egyptian verse? Despite these debates, however, the frequent appearance of parallel structures in Egyptian texts is an indisputable (and undisputed) fact, opening a line of research distinct from more theoretical questions. By examining the parallel structures found in specific texts, we may achieve an enhanced and, in some cases, a more accurate interpretation of those texts. The term “parallelism” was coined in 1778 by the Hebraist Robert Lowth to describe the semantic relationship between one poetic line and another. Until recently, scholars of the Hebrew Bible and Egyptologists alike followed Lowth closely, making semantic parallelism their primary focus. Over the past few decades, however, the study of Biblical Hebrew poetry has changed dramatically. Following the lead of the linguist Roman Jakobson, Biblical scholars no longer restrict themselves to semantic parallelism and have expanded their focus to include patterns of grammar and sound.⁴⁵

42. Bacon 1898 [1620]: xc.

43. Gange 2016.

44. Haeny 1974. See Vernus 2013; Bickel 2013; Schneider & Raulwing 2013; Gange 2014; Moreno García 2014 & 2015.

45. Jay 2010, 165.

Nevertheless, of much more interest is Jay's remark that the idea of "parallelismus membrorum" in poetic studies, which dates back to the eighteenth century, is adopted in Egyptology (from Biblical studies) then refined, according to Jay, much later with the studies by Jakobson. Why Jakobson and not Bakhtin? Otherwise said: we witness, on one side, the atomisation of Egyptological interpretations while; on the other, we see how one theory is accepted coming from another discipline, a prestigious a discipline as to remain for almost three hundred years—and possibly many to come. Two reflections on this case: First, does this case exemplify the isolation that Egyptology suffers as compared to other disciplines through the adopting and keeping of a prestigious theory by a prestigious Egyptologist ("the father of the idea" and creator of a "school")? The second question must be a consequence of the isolation of Egyptology as a discipline: Does this instance showcase also the fragmentation of the different positions in interpreting a given theory that lead to the isolation of Egyptologists amongst them? The answer to both questions appears to be affirmative to this writer.

Another case that has attracted the attention of numerous scholars with almost as many interpretations is the study of ancient Egyptian colours. After a quick chronological review of the studies available on the topic, one can immediately identify a constant procedure: the introduction of a prestigious theory then its adoption and discussion through time until its substitution by a new theory and the repetition of the whole procedure: In the case of colours, the theory of Young-Helmholtz⁴⁶ (originating from physics in the period 1802-1859 then adopted for Latin in 1883 by Th. R. Price and adopted for Egyptology by Wolfgang Schenkel in 1963 via Ostwald 1921) to be later replaced by the theory of Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (originating from psychology in 1969 and adopted for Egyptology by John Baines in 1985)⁴⁷.

This case proves a particular academic practice that privileges theory over empiry. By no means, it discredits the generational right—or duty, depending on opinions—to propose a new "state of the art", such as Joachim Quack puts it in the context of dating Earlier Egyptian texts (Old and Middle Kingdom):

Hier bewahrheitet sich das oft zu beobachtende Prinzip, daß Wandlungen der Grundschauungen nicht einfach an objektiven Kriterien hängen, sondern auch am Bedürfnis jeder Generation, sich selbst zu profilieren.⁴⁸

Quack exemplifies his statement with the different interpretations of the grammar of Middle Egyptian:

Das Phänomen ist strukturell mit der Entwicklung in der Betrachtung des Mittelägyptischen vergleichbar, wo Polotskys vorher randständige Thesen nach Gardiners Tod rasch zur "Standardtheorie" wurden, sich nach Polotskys Tod aber ihrerseits zunehmenden Zweifeln ausgesetzt sahen.⁴⁹

A widely-accepted phenomenon in historical studies,⁵⁰ even an essential feature of human knowledge⁵¹ is that every human knowledge is whether new or no knowledge. This does not mean

46. Young 1802; Helmholtz 1859.

47. See also Schenkel 2007 & 2019; Warburton 2008. For a critique on the Berlin & Kay theory, see Gautier 1997.

48. Quack 2013: 451.

49. Quack 2013: n. 299.

50. Fontana 1982: 9-13; Evans 1997, mainly the introduction and chap. 1.

51. Kuhn 1962.

that new knowledge must be better than old knowledge; nor that old knowledge does not play any role in new knowledge. As Santiago Ramón y Cajal reminded at the beginning of this section: “No hay cuestiones agotadas, sino hombres agotados en las cuestiones”.

3. *Three illusions: novelty, rapidity, and authority; or what’s the use of discipline?*

The best of prophets of the future is the past (Lord Byron, *Journal*, 1821).

Precisely because of its reassessing things in another manner, interdisciplinarity has evidenced at least three illusions that are in principle unrelated to it, and which are certainly not exclusive to Egyptology.

The first illusion is the just mentioned lure for *novelty*, according to which any new analytical model is better than an old one, and all new models are “interdisciplinary” while old ones are “not-interdisciplinary”. More specifically, in Egyptology, one cannot avoid the impression that the interdisciplinary (usually understood as “synchronic” approaches, which prevail in anthropology and sociology) is what is modern, while the “non-interdisciplinary” (usually historical approaches) is what is “traditional”. In a review of *Society and death in Ancient Egypt*, by Janet Richards, we read:

The following sections [of the reviewed book] use *anthropological methods* as well as *more traditional Egyptological approaches* to analyze the spatial distribution of tombs, types of graves, grave goods and demographic information in the cemeteries of Riqqa, Haraga, and Abydos (...).⁵²

Why “Egyptological approaches” (not “methods”) are more traditional than “anthropological methods” (not “approaches”)?⁵³ This seems to imply that Egyptology (in this case) is a discipline (in the narrow sense) but anthropology is not; that the discipline is something closed and amorphous which needs to be explained “objectively from the outside”; that what is not “discipline” is the method with which analysis is performed. This view exemplifies what an etic approach is.

Because of the need to accomplish the academic *cursus honorum*, researchers are compelled to publish quickly, which strongly impacts the research quality, depth, and scope. This situation has even reached the general audience:

Peter Higgs, le physicien père du fameux boson qui porte son nom, ne pourrait plus faire ses recherches aujourd’hui. Car il ne trouvait pas assez vite et ne publiait pas assez, a-t-il lui-même raconté après avoir obtenu son prix Nobel en 2013. L’université d’Edimbourg était à deux doigts de se passer de ses services lorsqu’il a été nommé une première fois en 1980, ce qui lui a finalement assuré d’être toléré jusqu’à son prix.⁵⁴

52. Doxey 2006: 37.

53. See mainly Björkmann 1964. On the quintessential problem of the biased archaeological material from ancient Egypt, see Posener 1962. On some contents about applying anthropological frames to archaeology too straightforwardly, see Smith 2017. More in general on Egyptology as a scientific discipline, see Gertzen 2017.

54. Larousserie & Frammery 2017. See also Spencer 2009 on current academic publication in the humanities and its relationship to “browsing” research (particularly, p. 95).

Out of rush, interdisciplinarity has occasionally been reduced to applying a “stencil” from a (prestigious) source discipline to the target discipline.⁵⁵ When such a stencil gets established (or intended to) in specific fields within the discipline, we reach the third and last illusion.

Authority. Once an analytical pattern is introduced from one discipline to another, it becomes *the* analytical pattern, which can compete with existing patterns in the target discipline. Mieke Bal has exemplified that as follows:

In spite of the dismissal of structuralism implied in the term ‘poststructuralism’, more recent movements such as ‘cognitive narratology’ deploy similar structures, now called ‘story logic’.⁵⁶

It is well known that this process of establishing a discipline is mainly achieved through peer-reviewing and reviews. This is a process that the three illusions have not spared. In the autobiography, *I am a linguist*, R.M.W. Dixon considers that the three illusions affect the very heart of the current scholarly production:

There are a number of implicit assumptions in academia today, all basically unfounded. One is that everything which has appeared in print must be useful and correct. Another is that all opinions are equally good. A further idea is that any new work on a particular topic is necessarily superior to previous publications on that subject.⁵⁷

After giving some advice on how to write an article to contribute to attaining academic excellence (to verify reference works, fundamental authors and recent studies, to write the article, and have it read by scientific colleagues), Dixon questions the nowadays situation of peer-reviewing:

Now submit. The journal editor will send it out to referees, who are frequently not people of the highest quality. (Good linguists prefer to get on with their work, rather than devote too much time to assessing others.) There may be a fairly sensible referee report, with useful suggestions for improving the paper. Typically, there will also be a report from someone who has failed to understand critical bits of the argumentation (...). This is annoying but it is also useful. I want the paper to be read and understood by people at all levels of intellect (or lack thereof).⁵⁸

In Egyptology, stress before the idea of academic authority is easy to find since its inception as a discipline. This develops from the very high level of authority by the Egyptian Society in the eighteenth century (1742-1744), which recommended “not to write too many things”⁵⁹ to a “balanced” construction of knowledge, which has, as in other disciplines, very often held a “proper scientific conservatism”⁶⁰, in J.R. Harris’ own words about a critic revision of lexicography, notwithstanding the fact of his supporting himself on the previous critic remarks by Alan H. Gardiner⁶¹.

55. An example is the “determinatives-are-classifiers” thesis, which applies the linguistic stencil-concept “classifier” (Aikhenvald 2000) to the hieroglyphic signs known as “determinatives”.

56. Bal 2018: n. 12 (p. 58).

57. Dixon 2011: 344.

58. Dixon 2011: 344.

59. MacGregor 2007: 55.

60. Harris 1961: 9.

61. Gardiner 1947: xiii.

In this scenario, a feeling that the idea of conservation could be or was tried to be threatened by specific approaches which were precisely labelled as “interdisciplinary” has produced reviews which, according to Richard Evans, gave “more heat than light”⁶². It is quite apparent that to criticise a review for bias is not to question the value that peer-reviewing has to maintain not only rigour but also, in some cases, scientific honesty. In the latter sense, Vladimir Golenishchev wrote in 1882, when the discipline (in the strict sense of the word) was yet forming:

Dans le troisième cahier du journal égyptologique de Berlin pour l’année 1880, M. Erman publia tout dernièrement en transcription hiéroglyphique quelques ostraca hiératiques des musées égyptiens d’Edimbourg et de Florence. Tous ces ostraca, comme je n’ai pas eu de la peine à m’en convaincre, sont précisément ceux, dont, pendant mon séjour dans ces deux villes (à Edimbourg en 1875 et à Florence en 1876), j’ai fait tirer à mon compte des copies photographiques. Le choix des ostraca publiés par M. Erman ainsi que la mention, faite par ce savant, de photographies appartenant au Musée de Berlin, ne me laissent pas de doute que M. Erman ait effectivement eu sous les yeux les mêmes photographies, dont j’avais donné une série complète non pas au Musée de Berlin, mais personnellement à M. le Dr. Stern, conservateur du Musée égyptien de Berlin et mon compagnon de voyage en Italie en 1876; je m’étonne donc que dans l’article de M. Erman il ne soit pas fait la moindre mention de moi, malgré que le Dr. Stern qui, seul, possédait de moi des photographies de Florence et à qui j’en avais cédé le droit de publication, aurait bien pu renseigner M. Erman, par les soins de qui les photographies avaient été tirées. Quant à la photographie de l’ostracon d’Edimbourg, j’en avais distribué des exemplaires à plusieurs égyptologues de ma connaissance.⁶³

The last sentence of this quotation is to be remarked because Golenishchev displays that peer-reviewing has a central value in attributing authorship (and authority) of one scientific work or find.

At this stage of the discussion, a more general reflection on the idea of “discipline” made by another linguist, Martin Haspelmath, may be relevant. Haspelmath asks himself to what extent some theories are more valid than others:

That the Nostraticists [linguists that claim the existence of a substrate common to Indoeuropean, Afroasiatic and some other major family of languages] are fairly isolated is true, of course, and maybe linguists should tell their colleagues in adjacent fields that there is no correlation between what gets press coverage and what is widely accepted in the field. *But are we so confident that there is a necessary correlation between what is widely accepted and what is true?*⁶⁴

One last remark is in order now, which takes us to the conclusions: To what extent authority lies in the prestige of the language that is used to write a scientific work? Is such prestige linked to using the same language as or a similar language to the authority’s?⁶⁵ In this sense, it is surprising that some of the authors mentioned above that manifest an explicit criticism on reviews and peer-reviewing show a clear preference for a language of prestige (theirs).

62. Evans 1997: 362. On the intrinsic misunderstanding between peer-reviewing and interdisciplinarity, see Holbrook 2017. On (anglophone) peer-reviewing demystification, see Paltridge 2017. Some recent remarks on peer-reviewing in Egyptology are Winand 1993 & 2015; Nyord 2012 & 2014.

63. Golénisheff 1882: 3-4.

64. Haspelmath 1998: 1005. See also Haspelmath 2013. Similarly, from the perspective of historical studies, Evans 1997: 12-14.

65. Lea & Street 1998: 167-169.

In his autobiography, Dixon mentions a letter from Michael Halliday, professor of linguistics at the University of Edinburgh, in which the professor tries to convince the prospective student to join his class by quoting a series of 36 linguists of prestige: only 4 out of them wrote in a language other than English (and the different language was only one: French).⁶⁶

Another case is Richard Evans. In his critic work *In defence of history* (1997), the British historian almost exclusively quotes British and American historians (and again the different language is only one: German).

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated practice. As an example, this is an extract from a recent review by Claudio Moreschini (professor at Università di Pisa) in which he criticizes “intellectual monolingualism” as well as the illusion mentioned above of novelty:

Sarebbe stato desiderabile, a mio parere, che gli autori avessero tenuto in maggior conto gli studi anteriori agli ultimi 20-25 anni. Concordo con G. Reydam-Schils, la quale, recensendo su *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (BMCR 2015.10.43) I. Hadot, *Senéque* (Paris, Vrin 2014), osserva che “there is a more general and, in this reviewer's opinion at least, legitimate concern underlying the polemic [sc. tra Ilsetraut Hadot e la critica più recente]. The author pleads for a rehabilitation not only of her own work but also of that of other scholars outside of the Anglo-American tradition whose publications have suffered relative neglect... There is indeed a marked trend in Anglo-American scholarship (to which there are also some happy exceptions) to take over certain areas of research in ancient philosophy and then to push out, as much as possible, the older literature and alternative perspectives.”⁶⁷

4. Then, what's the use of a discipline?

...quae sunt Caesaris, Caesari... (Mt 22:21).

Furthering on this reflection about the language of prestige, authority and discipline, an Australian professional of (non-English) cultural heritage, Laurajane Smith has recently self-censored the studies in her language (English). One of the chapters in his book *All heritage is intangible* (2019) is entitled “The development of Anglophone heritage studies”. The chapter begins by stating significantly:

The 1985 publication of David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* marks the beginning, at least in the English speaking world, of focused academic attention on heritage.⁶⁸

This statement is of the utmost interest for our discussion: notwithstanding the displaying of a connection between the emic (sub)conscience of the researcher (“I perform studies on heritage *in English*”) and her etic activity (“I study “non-anglophone” heritages”), she quite surprisingly considers the *founder of the discipline* a work written in English.

First, Smith's statement proves that ‘discipline’ is an etic concept. The key for this interpretation is the term ‘academic’ which the author uses in a performative way: if we all say that something is academic, it ends by being it—and the opposite is also true.

Second, Smith's statement displays as well that its “eticity” is rooted in the researcher's (working) language: Smith does not make any mention whatsoever to possible previous

66. Dixon 2011: 60-61.

67. Moreschini 2016.

68. Smith 2012: 10.

works—not even as predecessors, not even in her language. Preoccupation on heritage dates back to much earlier than 1985 in Europe: since Roman times to the renaissance Papacy, Revolutionary France or the royal charter by Carlos IV of Spain (1803), all this in languages other than English.⁶⁹

Last, Smith's statement manifests, as the very title of the Lowenthal's work quoted (*The Past is a Foreign Country*), the *exoticism* that permeates etic approaches and the formation of a discipline: a discipline is based on distancing, which attracts (the exotic) and reifies (the discipline) a culture alien to the researcher's. To justify this approach, the statement that it is academic is made (authority). As a consequence of all the previous, it follows that a culture cannot express itself (the emic approach): only an etic approach can.

The mistake in putting 'discipline' in these terms is evident, because of its reduction to an introspective exercise sprinkled with examples to illustrate a theory. This approach is evident when Smith explains her fieldwork in her book. Her fieldwork is conducted in different countries and on several study cases, but again in English language and a Western environment: "I have been involved in interviewing visitors at numerous museums and heritage sites in England, Australia and the USA".⁷⁰ Despite its empirical appearance (thousands of questionnaires to visitors in tens of institutions), the study remains a purely etic approach.

The previous example shows that the frontier between the "interdisciplinary" and the "traditional" is far from being operative to re-define what discipline is or what is the value of keeping the concept "discipline" itself.⁷¹

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70. Smith 2012: 27.

71. See for instance Russell 2014.

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