


Comparing the Visual Untranslatability of Ancient Egyptian and Arabic Writing Systems

Hany Rashwan

Abstract. The paper discusses the mechanism of visual *jinās* (roughly meaning wordplay?) in both ancient Egyptian and Arabic languages. It demonstrates the significance of looking into several overlooked visual aesthetics, which were mainly designed to stimulate the eyes and minds of the indigenous readers, to shape any theory related to the literary analysis of ancient Egyptian or Arabic writing systems.

Viewed linguistically, the AE language belongs to the same phylum as Arabic, which is known now as Afroasiatic¹ and shares many of the same linguistic features fundamental to literary production. Comparative linguistics has been concerned from the early nineteenth century with describing and arranging African-Asian languages and generating linguistic theories about their historical development, especially after deciphering the Ancient Egyptian and many other ancient languages. (Hodge, 1983) The Afro-Asiatic phylum has a history of scholarship acceptance almost as long as that of Indo-European, despite being a fam-

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1. The term Afroasiatic is also known as Afrasian (Diakonoff, 1981), Hamito-Semitic, Semito-Hamitic. The biblical terms such as Hamitic, Semitic, and Cushitic led to the long use of Hamito-Semitic or Semito-Hamitic for the whole phylum. Nowadays, these terms are objectionable because of their mythological origins; thus a neutral geographic term "Afro-Asiatic" or "Afro-asiatic" was generated and came into usage. The old opposition of Semitic to a certain "Hamitic" unity (into which all the African members of the family were forced) was resolved in the 1950s by Greenberg. He argued for the equal status of four African branches beside the Egyptian: Berber, Chusgitic, Omotic, Chadic.

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ily of much greater internal diversity and historical time depth. (Ehret, 1995)

This proposed comparison entails a conscious rejection of imposing Eurocentric concepts and terms — according to which Euro-American researchers did not support their literary assumptions by comparing AE literary devices with those of its kindred languages. Instead, I have sought to look outside literary studies altogether, and to apply the main principle of the comparative linguistic system: “languages should never be compared in isolation if closer relatives are at hand.” (Greenberg, 1971, pp. 22–23) This statement is particularly relevant when dealing with a ‘dead’ language. Studying the AE language is archaeology of a dead language, in which cross-linguistic comparisons provide strong support for closer hypotheses on literary textual practices, to avoid Eurocentric rhetorical misperceptions and misrepresentation. Stephen Quirke looks to the use of Arabic linguistic affinities with their AE counterparts. He explains how their interaction with the Arabic literary tradition could be useful for both AE literary analysis and for challenging Eurocentrism in the field of Egyptology as a whole. He argues that European-language impositions will not fully resolve the problematic questions raised by AE literature. Therefore, Quirke encourages Euro-American scholars to give the Arabic literary world a chance equal to the one that has been offered to their Eurocentric theories. Quirke considers that active engagement with Arabic literary traditions promises fresh perspectives that may challenge the self-contained approaches of contemporary theoretical readings of AE texts:

Classical Arabic poetry offers for certain motifs and ‘genres’ a resonance entirely lacking in English and other European literary traditions. The eulogy genre *madīḥ* allows appreciation of compositions at or outside our literary borders, and the *fakbr* ‘boast’ mercifully loses in Arabic the unfailingly negative reception assigned to much rhetorical content in English language studies of both literary manuscript and ‘autobiographical’ inscriptions from ancient Egypt. A more systematic encounter with Arabic literary tradition would above all serve to remind the European researcher that the questions of definitions, production, and reception of ancient Egyptian literature can also be asked from within Egypt. (Quirke, 2004, p. 28)

The comparison offered is part of a new suggested discipline called Comparative *Balāghah*. This new discipline focuses on comparing the literary devices of two kindred languages productively. I mean by ‘productive’ that the stylistic differences between the two systems are more stressed than the similarities. (Rashwan, 2020, p. 391) This methodology argues that AE literary devices are studied most productively on a comparative basis and that Arabic, a cognate language that belongs to the same Afro-Asiatic phylum, offers a new and closer platform for exploring and studying these literary devices. The literary structure of every language is peculiar to itself. The logic of this comparison argues

that a close investigation of the literary worlds of both the premodern Arabic and AE can shed new light on the literariness of the AE writings, by highlighting the importance of rediscovering the various forms of each literary device and their semantic function inside the studied text.

The comparative reading of these AE literary devices offers the occasion for one further point of argument, and that has to do with how scholars should approach the literariness of the AE texts more broadly, opening the door to previously unexplored literary and linguistic approaches. Comparative *balāghah* keeps the conversation and literary engagement going. It extends the conversation, opens it out, and makes it potentially relevant to issues and interests not foreseen at the outset. Using this comparative methodology will not only supply exceptionally innovative insights into how the AE language makes literature, but it can achieve the required depth and complexity to answer many new questions that are not even envisaged by the Western literary traditions.

Using the Arabic frame to rediscover the AE literary practice does not imply forcing the investigated materials into Arabocentric concepts and definitions. Comparative *balāghah* aims to understand the native term first and see how it is similar or different from the Arabic and Eurocentric ones, to find a shared platform that may develop our conceptual understanding about what can be accepted as universal or neutral terms. The differences between the two languages are more important than the similarities; this point is well-illustrated in the visual *jinās* study of the AE writing, which rediscovers the ability of the AE writers to build visual metaphors that are carried by clever employment of the soundless determinatives that visually reflect the verbal layer.



Visual *jinās* (الخط — المرسوم — التصحيف)

This term in Arabic refers to two words that have identical number and kinds of letters except for one different letter, and these two letters are graphically similar (Al-Gundy, 1954, p. 140), such as (س — ش), (د — ذ), (ر — ز), (ص — ض), (ط — ظ), (ع — غ), (ج — ح — خ), (ب — ت — ث — ن), (ف — ق). The writer Mohammad ibn Badr el-dīn al-bisāṭī (d. 1634) collects various examples of this type of *jinās*, in his book entitled, *The inherited and humorous in the art of visual jinas (al-tālid wa al-ṭārīf fī fann jinās al-taṣḥīf)*. Al-bisāṭī considers it one of the most wonderful types of *jinās*, because the mind of the ardent reader is being stimulated by considering the visual and verbal interactions that are rooted in the nature of Arabic script, whether in poetry (*manzūm*) or literary prose (*manḥūr*) (Al-Bisāṭī, 2018, p. 32).

وَالَّذِي هُوَ يُطْعِمُنِي وَيَسْقِينِي وَإِذَا مَرِضْتُ فَهُوَ يَشْفِينِي

(God) He is the one who feeds and waters me, and when I become ill, He is the one who cures me. Q26:79-80

Visual *jinās* is represented between the two words *يسقين*—a verb meaning ‘to make me drink water’ and *يشفين*—a verb meaning ‘to cure my health problem’. Each word contains two graphically similar letters (س—ش) and (ف—ق).

The open question raised here is—can we apply the Arabic understanding of this visual type of *jinās* to the AE writing? i.e., the AE signs that look alike graphically², for example, the bird pictures  or human figures . I would argue that the main difference between AE writing and any other alphabetical system would be related to how the AE writers take advantage of the visual inimitability of their writing. The examples provided in this section shows how the Egyptian writer can supply the reader with various visual tools for better understanding the points he raises about the presentation and structure of information, in order to aid and clarify the visual reading process. The examples cited here for visual *jinās* confirm that visual clarification of the intended meaning is believed to be one fundamental function of the AE determinatives. A more careful analysis of the neglected role of the determinatives inside the AE sentences reveals that their functions are much more versatile literarily. The AE writer built literary texts out of words, but every word, if carefully examined in its textual context, will turn out to be a literary volcano in itself.

Related Determinatives














The AE writer employs related ‘determinatives’ or ‘sense-signs’ as images that reinforce the sequence of his words to build a visual context that confirms for the reader’s eye the verbal message, eloquently.










mi mṯw ḥm ibt

Like the water when it quenches the thirst. (Eloquent Peasant, Parkinson, 1991, pp. 34, l. 278)

2. On cryptography (the use of hieroglyphic signs to denote sounds or meanings different to their usual use often involves groups of similar signs), Darnell (2004, p. 3) argues in the introduction to his book entitled *The Enigmatic Netherworld Books of the Solar-Osirian Unity*: “At no time, however, do the Egyptians appear to have considered hieroglyphic cryptography as something other than an extension of the normal hieroglyphic system, for they do not appear to have employed any separate term for “cryptography”. He cites the most highly developed play on similar signs, in this mode of “cryptography”, in the temple of Esna (Roman Period) where one hymn is written with variations of ram signs and another hymn has crocodile signs—see photographs in Hallof (2011, p. 10).





Visual *jinās* is represented between three related sense-signs that visually stress the meaning of being thirsty: -*mw*—a noun meaning ‘water’;  *ḥm*—a verb meaning ‘to quench (thirst) with just water as an ending determinative ; and  *ibt*—an infinitive form of the verb  *ibi* that means ‘being thirsty’, with an ending determinative of a man putting his hand towards his mouth, showing his need for water, and with a leaping calf, as a thirsty creature might jump at a source of water. The repetition of the water’s sign  as an ideographic sign in the word *mw* and as a soundless ending determinative in the verb *ḥm* highlights its importance for the following word  *ibt*, whose determinatives represent two thirsty figures from the human and animal worlds (—————).

first word	second word	third word	related images
			 -  -  - 









im in.tw n.i ḥt.f mzi phfy mzi ḥr-ib.f m

Let someone bring to me one whose front is a lion and his back is a lion and his middle like... (Khakheperreseneb text; Parkinson, 1997, p. 64)

Visual *jinās* is represented by the use of two successive words whose meanings are related to each other in a stimulating visual way: —a noun meaning ‘forepart (of an animal)’, and which is always written ideographically with the front part of a lion and is transliterated *ḥt*; and —a noun meaning ‘lion’ and transliterated *mzi*. The writer uses the same visual wordplay in the following sentence, in the two words —a noun meaning ‘the hinder parts or hindquarters, which is always written with the hindquarters of a lion and is transliterated *ph*, and —a noun meaning ‘lion’ and is transliterated *mzi*.

The writer here stresses his intended message visually and verbally, namely that the creature, which is required for this magical performance, should in some manner resemble the lion with its two special parts: the forepart and the hindquarters.

first word	second word	related images
		 -   - 










Contrasted Words With the Same Determinative

The AE writer can use two contrasted words that employ the same soundless determinative, in order to stimulate the reader's mind about the sharp differences between the used words conceptually. In other words, this technique visualizes the existence and non-existence of the described object for the reader's eye:



in *wnm dp iw wšd.(t).w wšb.f*

The one who eats, tastes; the one who has been questioned, answers. (Eloquent Peasant, Parkinson, 1991, pp. 33, l. 247)

Visual *jinās* is represented by using one shared ending determinative , for four contrasted words in a stimulating way. The two words:  *wšd*,  *wšb*—meaning ‘answering’ and ‘asking’. The determinative of the man putting his hand to his mouth  refers here to the speaking activity. While the other two contrasted verbs  *wnm*— *dp*—meaning ‘eating’ and ‘tasting’ have used the same determinative , to refer specifically to the activity of eating. This meaning is conveyed by the representation of the tongue in the verb *dpt*  as an additional determinative representing the state of sensing the taste of the food, not the actual eating process. The writer here used *four* words sharing one image (man-with-hand-to-mouth ) as the sole dominant determinative to represent different actions related to the mouth. These visual contrasts are useful in comparing the actions of speaking and eating.



first word	second word	third word	fourth word	shared image
				



Contrasted Words With Contrasting Determinatives









sšmm.s hšw nb mi ht psft wšdwt





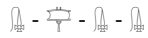
She (the sky) warms everyone who is chilled like a fire that cooks raw things. (Eloquent Peasant, ibid., pp. 34, l. 277)

Visual *jinās* is represented by the employment of two contrasting determinatives that reflect two contrasted meanings:  *sšmm*—a *sdm.f* verb meaning ‘to warm’ and  *hšw* a plural participle meaning ‘people who feel cold’. Both words have two contrasting ending determinatives that illustrate the source of the described status: the first

word uses the fire determinative  to illustrate ‘warmth’ and ‘heat’, while the second word uses the boat’s mast  which metaphorically represents the wind, but in this context, it represents a cold wind.

first word	second word	contrasted images
		



The AE writer also visually reinforces the quality of being warmed by using a simile that employs two other words with a close relation to the fire determinative  of *sšmm*. The writer uses the words  *ht*—meaning ‘fire’ and  *psft*—meaning ‘to cook’, in order to stress the capability of the sky to warm everyone. The repetition of the fire determinative is pushing the idea of being warmed against the undesired condition of being cold in the visual context of the sentence.




first word	second word	third word	fourth word	visual sequence
				



ḥpr ʒw ḥr m ḥwꜥ ib m wʒ n ntt n iit m ḥꜥw n ntt n ḥprt

The one who was happy (lit. with a joyful face) became like the one with grieved heart, do not scheme for something which did not come yet, do not rejoice for something which did not happen yet. (Eloquent Peasant, *ibid.*, pp. 38, ll. 302–303)

Visual *jinās* is represented by employing two contrasting ending determinatives for the reversed *jinās* words:  *ḥwꜥ*—meaning ‘being sad’, with a sparrow bird as a determinative that always represents negative meanings in the AE lexicon and  *ḥꜥw*—being happy, with a man clapping or raising his hands as a determinative to express happiness. Both words use contrasted determinatives to illustrate the contradictory nature of the two emotional states better. The AE writing uses this small negative bird (the sparrow) to reflect the emotional status of being sad, this negative bird being metaphorically related to agricultural settings, where those small birds form a dangerous threat to the farmers when they devour their grains before they have a chance to grow and thus affect the crops produced. In the case of the word for happiness, AE writing uses a cheerful human figure.

first word	second word	contrasted images
		

Different Words With the Same Determinative

The visual features of AE writing allow its writers to employ two different words that are semantically related by using the same determinative, in order to illustrate metaphorical connotations that may exist between them. However, it should be stressed that the two words are not contrasted semantically.



in *sdrw m3 rswt*

The sleeper is the one who can see the dreams. (Eloquent Peasant, Parkinson, 1991, pp. 33, l. 248)

Visual *jinās* is represented by using three successive, related determinatives to better illustrate the semantic context: *sdrw*—a participle indicated by an image of a seated man, meaning ‘the one who sleeps’, ‘lies down’, ‘goes to rest’, or is ‘inert’, ‘inactive’, with a sleeping man over a bed as soundless determinative ; then *m3*—a *sdm.f* verb meaning ‘to see’, with an eye as a beginning hieroglyph ; and finally *rswt*—a plural noun meaning ‘dreams’, with an eye as a determinative . The plural noun *rswt* is derived from the verb *rsw* which means ‘being awake’, and ‘vigilance’. The writer thus considers the dreaming action during the sleeping process as a full, real, awakened state metaphorically. The shared eye determinative confirms this metaphorical similarity between the two contrasting actions. The link is related to the ability to see in both worlds, even with closed eyes during the sleeping process.



first word	second word	third word	related images
			- -






gm.n.i nb ntrw iw m mhy Bw ndm r h3t.f šd.f sš-kd n imm nht imm m3^c hrw

I found the master of the gods coming like the north wind and the gentle breeze before him and he saved the draughtsman of the god Amun ‘Amun-Nakbt’ the justified. (Neb Ra Hymn to Amun, Kitchen, 1980, pp. 653, ll. 8–9)

Visual *jinās* is represented by the visual relation between two words that have the same determinatives, artistically written beside each other: *mhy*—a noun meaning ‘north wind’, ‘storm that comes from the north’, with a ship’s mast as an ending soundless determinative , which metaphorically represents the strong wind and *hw*—a collective plural noun meaning ‘wind’, with a ship’s mast as an ideogram

to metaphorically represent, in this context, the breeze or gentle wind. The creative writer highlights the ending determinative of the first word , by placing it beside another different word that has been written with a single symbol that stands for the whole word, which is the ship's mast . The reading of its visual context may suggest that the writer aims, by using this visual correlation, at confirming two different notions related to the wind being super-fast but delicate and gentle as well, linking them metaphorically to his own praised god.

first word	second word	highlighted image
		


Using an Unusual Determinative



The AE writer can change the usual ending soundless determinative to serve the described textual context innovatively. This writing technique shows how the visual memory of the reader's eye is important to decipher the intended message from the writer's side and how each different determinative can be pregnant with an additional layer semantically. The studied examples confirm that some AE words could bear two meanings at the same time as if one of them were winking at the other and the meaning overall lay in this wink. The same word, in a different textual context, can mean different things simultaneously. The AE writer can choose between the available determinatives that fit his textual context. Therefore, I would argue that changing the determinative is the dexterous performance of an innovative trick, by which one idea is presented when using the common word root, while another meaning is substituted by changing its usual determinative. This type of visual *jinās* gives more interesting answers about the AE writing practice and the authorial intention but also difficult questions related to the ancient reader's response to such visual instruments. It may raise questions about the impact of additional social factors on the conception of creating 'beautiful speech' within a specific discourse, such as social class, race, and even education level.








ity n swb} n.f r k} n pt ir bryt 3t m t} n š}sw

The sovereign of the one who gives praise for him to the height of heaven, who made great butchery in the land of Shasw. (Ramses II Zigzag poem, Yoyotte, 1950, pl. VII, l. 6)

Visual *jinās* is represented by changing the common determinative of the word  *bryt*. The word is always written with a fallen cow with

its legs bound  that represents the slaughtering process of meat animals. The resourceful writer uses a fallen human determinative  to add a new visual meaning to the word. The new meaning confirms that the slaughtering process is not anymore related to the animal world, but rather to the enemy people of the Egyptian king in the land of Shasw. This resourceful graphic change highlights the author's desire to get a sense of double negative metaphors that convey the despising of the enemies of his praised king. On the one hand, the king approached his enemy as the fearless butcher looms over the helpless animal intended for slaughter; on the other hand, the enemy's resisting capability is not better than the resistance of a bound fallen animal. In other words, the enemy's status is nothing more than that of bound animals, ready to be slaughtered, in the eyes of the mighty king.








This word  also corresponds with the similar word  *br*, which is always used in military texts as a verb to mean falling down or as a noun to mean the fallen enemy. The writer here depends on the lexical memory of his readers to recall the common words in order to decipher why he changes the word's usual determinative.

original word	used word	un/usual determinative
		






mk dmi.k šnw ḳ3 nst.k

Look, your landing-stage is surrounded [by a crocodile] because of the truthfulness of your tongue. (Eloquent Peasant, Parkinson, 1991, pp. 26, ll. 161–162)

Visual *jinās* is represented by the addition of an unusual determinative, in order to add another semantic layer to the word. The word  is derived from the verb  *šnw*—meaning 'encircle' or the verb  *šn* meaning 'to circuit', with a determinative shaped like a circle or ring. The word  *šnw*—meaning 'king's cartouche' is derived from this verb as well. The writer uses the original root of the verb *šnw*, but he added a crocodile's image  as an ending soundless determinative to create a new adjectival verb, meaning 'surrounded by crocodile'. The crocodile determinative is visually and grammatically connected to the previous word  *dmi*—meaning 'harbour', 'quay'. The word ends with a river channel as soundless determinative . Both the crocodile and the word *dmi* have been figuratively used here to indicate something different from their literal meanings. The word *dmi* means here the anchorage of the afterlife paradise. Therefore, the determinative characterizes the journey after death as a river expedition; while the crocodile denotes evil doing or not telling the truth, to be more precise according to the sentence context.

The visual message here is that the evildoer will find his evil-doing surrounds his harbour of paradise. The evil is metaphorically represented by the crocodile determinative. The writer here employs a horrible life experience that none of the receivers would wish to be part of in order to stress the importance of truthful speaking.³ The writer uses the expression of the tongue's truthfulness as an implied critique from the robbed farmer to the government officials that he complains about. The visual context of these words has been used by the writer to reflect the power dynamic of this verse, which in turn encourages the reader to grasp what the farmer means by saying the opposite when using the crocodile's image.

first word	second word	related images
		

Conclusion

In alphabetical writings, the sound is partly dominant, as demonstrated in Arabic visual *jinās*. However, it becomes a secondary element in the case of AE visual *jinās* as it relies more on deciphering the implied message by the comprehension of 'seeing.' The individual ability of the AE writers, in using various eye-catching features to alert the mind's eye during the reading process, should not be overlooked or underestimated in both scripts (the hieroglyphic and its cursive version called hieratic). Using the understanding of our print culture, which is more related to rigid alphabetic constructions, should not overwhelm our critical minds in encoding the AE visual messages. AE writing reflects a different practice of using pictures like a true or metaphorical medium for literary communication. This picture has the potential to create new meanings or construct a visual argument for indigenous readers. (Rashwan, 2019, p. 154) Most of the scholarly focus goes then towards the verbal meaning and usual philological problems. Therefore, the visual aspects of the AE literary expression are still overlooked. The visual *jinās* is almost an ignored topic of investigation because scholars depend on the phonetic transliteration, which leaves out half of the artistic productivity of the AE writing system. Egyptologists became mechanically satisfied to replace the visual poetic form of the AE writing with deceptive transliterations.

3. The writer metaphorically uses a shared life memory of the AE culture to create a religious warning. Religions construct the afterlife punishments or rewards by extracting them from happy or painful life memories that humans experience during their earthly life. Literary exaggeration is always used to reinforce these religious ideas through creative literary devices.

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