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## RECITATION, SPEECH ACTS, AND DECLAMATION

## التلاوة، النصوص السردية، والخطابة

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## RECITATION, SPEECH ACTS, AND DECLAMATION

### التلاوة، النصوص السردية، والخطابة

Erika Meyer-Dietrich

Rezitation, Sprechakte und Deklamation  
Récitation, énoncés performatifs et déclamation

*Ancient Egyptian texts have been found with instructions on how they should be performed. Recitation, speech acts, and declamation are related to the action of speaking out loud in religious-ritual and juridical contexts, as well as for entertainment. Recitations are used in contexts that demand a correct wording or the power of words as utterance. Speech acts are performative or operative texts, which have an effect by being spoken out loud and result in a change of the persons or objects that are addressed by the text. Declamations are a performance of literary compositions to an audience. The basis on which texts can be considered as part of a recitation, speech act, or declamation are not only in-text terms but also indications of their performance-context, their localization in an accessible place, and their performance by an authorized person.*

عثر على العديد من التوجيهات مع النصوص المصرية القديمة موضحة كيفية القيام بعمل هذه النصوص. إن التلاوة والنصوص السردية والخطابة متعلقين بقراءة النصوص بصوت عالي خلال الطقوس الدينية وداخل السياقات القانونية وأيضاً للمتعة أو التسلية. تعني التلاوات هنا بالنص الذي يقرأ حيث يكون النطق الصحيح مطلوب، أو تكون قوة الكلام المنطوق مطلوبة. أما النصوص السردية فيعني بها نصوص أدائية أو منطوقة تصبح فعالة عندما تقرأ بصوت عالي مما قد يؤدي إلى حدوث تغيير بالأشخاص أو الأشياء التي قصدهم تلك النصوص. وأخيراً الخطابة هنا تعني أداء النصوص الروائية أمام جمهور. ويتم التعريف بين هذه الفئات الثلاث من النصوص بناءً على محتوى النص، وعلى سياق قراءة أو إلقاء النص، وأيضاً بناءً على مكان إلقاء النص، وقيام الشخص المؤهل بقراءة أو سرد النص.

**E**gyptian wisdom literature (such as the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* on Papyrus Prisse 5, 4 - 7) and narratives (the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, for example) clearly establish the relationship between speaker and listener. The pronounced word is the heard one. It is through listening that knowledge is gained. Sinuhe is motivated to stay where he hears the Egyptian language (Sinuhe B 31 - 32). The importance of listening corresponds to the

emphasis on language as a bond that connects speaker and hearer. The relationship involves people across gender borders (P. Prisse 5, 8 - 10) and ontological borders. In addresses to the living, the deceased requests that the offering formula be read aloud. With the sound of their voice, visitors who read the formula give rise to the actual existence of that, which they are evoking for the benefit of the deceased. The relationship works on an ethical level. It integrates people into society

(Assmann 1990: 69 - 82). The Egyptian idea, which regards the word that leaves the speaker's mouth as a creative act (Zandee 1964), conveys the belief that the spoken word is powerful. The word of the creator is communicated to the multitude (as we see in Coffin Texts I 325a, *Book of the Dead* 38: 2, and Stela Turin 1791). The asymmetry of the few who recite and the many who hear the recitation is emphasized in the Middle Kingdom (for example, in Stela Cairo CG 20017) and the Second Intermediate Period (see the inscription in Tomb el-Kab, cf. Lepsius 1971 - 1974, III: 13c). "Raising the voice" (*rdj hrw*) announces someone's arrival (such as we see in the *Harper's Song* in Theban Tomb 178). This cultural attitude concerning the potential and the spread of the language justifies a perspective on texts as communicative acts that are orally performed.

### *Recitation*

The concept of the spoken word as the perceived one is in line with the evaluation of pronunciation that is obvious in the rich use of recitation markers in the texts. A distinction between the pronounced word as such and declamation understood as skilled and professional recitation is unattainable. The Egyptian obsession with the written word can be observed in the scribes' playful attitude in puns and alternative spellings. In the available source material, this is not matched by an apparent obsession with the way words have to be performed in the texts. The most valuable source for instructions on how to recite religious texts has survived in the Ptolemaic and Roman *Book of the Temple* (Quack 2002). According to this book, the children of high-ranking priests were trained in musical performance of hymns, appropriation of traditional texts (reciting by heart), and explanation of problems (comments). A "book of recitation after" is listed among the scriptures. The education of scribes who worked as magicians (Sauneron 2000: 60), teachers (*jmj-r sbꜣw*) in the House of Life (Quack 2002), chironomists, music teachers (*jmj-r hsw*), and religious specialists such as lecture priests or stolists (*hm-ntr*) and

the Great of the Pure Ones (*ꜥꜣ wꜥbw*), who recited the daily temple ritual (Guglielmi and Burroh 1997: 106), shows the importance of recitation in ritual.

The scarce evidence of terms employed for techniques of recitation gives rise to a lexicographical problem regarding the audible dimension of words. *Sꜣꜣꜣ* ("to tremble (with the voice)"), suggested as tremolo (Quack 2002), *wꜣꜣ* ("to start singing"), and *tjꜣ* ("to scream") are mentioned in the *Book of the Temple*. Singing without instruments may indicate a rhythmic performance of lyrics, hymns, prayers, and laments as a kind of *Sprechgesang*. *Njs* ("to call") is treated as reading aloud by Morenz (1996: 51). *Dsw* ("to call") and *šnj nt-ꜥ* ("to recite the ritual") is, according to the references given in *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, used for the recitation of spells. The use of *dsw* is restricted to cosmographic texts as found in royal tombs. *Šdj* ("to recite") is employed for ritual recitation mentioned in biographies of individuals. The markers for recitation in texts do not distinguish between words, phrases, or spells that are pronounced (*dd mdw*) and those that are recited (*šdj*). They are equally valued as performance to cause words to act, to enhance their meaning, and to render them effective.

The weight that is put on the perception of words is not sufficient to classify texts as read in reality. This even applies to texts with recitational instructions or markers that clearly characterize them as recitation and to texts that are iconographically represented as spoken. Written markers that designate the text as words to be uttered are: *dd mdw* ("to say words"), *r-dd* ("in order to say"), and *tꜣꜣ* ("spell"). Uninterrupted speech is indicated by *ddj* ("to carry on without pausing"). Markers indicating that words have to be repeated in the same or in a reversed order are: *ꜣꜣ 2* ("once again," literally "twice"), *dd mdw 4* ("to be recited four times"), and *tꜣꜣ-phr* ("vice versa"). In tombs of private individuals, iconography provides an imagined speaker-situation for uttered words. Texts are accompanied by a representation of the



Figure 1. A priest holding an unrolled papyrus scroll.

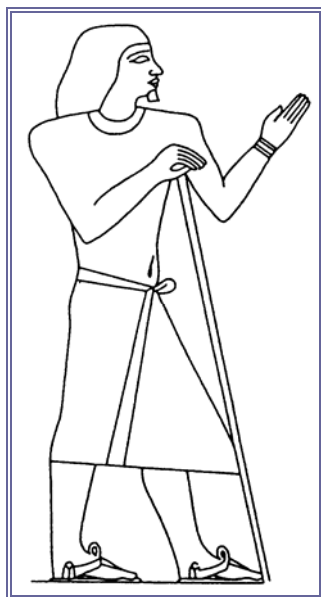


Figure 2. The tomb owner represented as the speaker.

speaker with a gesture of recitation. In tombs from the 5<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the lecture priest holds the unrolled papyrus scroll (fig. 1). Sometimes the tomb owner is represented as the speaker. He is depicted as a man with one arm lifted up in invocation like the determinative A 26 in Gardiner's sign list (fig. 2). The hand held to the mouth (fig. 3) is a gesture of a call (Dominicus 1994: 129). When the speaker is introduced in the form of a picture or the first person pronoun, it is



Figure 3. Gesture for a call.

possible to understand the text recited in an appropriate context as ritual activity. The extensive use of the formula *dd mdw* ("to say words") marks the words as speech acts. From the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom onwards, religious-ritual texts were discernible as recitations by means of the above mentioned markers. There has been ample discussion about whether the Pyramid Texts were actually recited for the dead king. Although the possibility cannot be denied, it ought to be considered that in the ritual of embalming, the embalmer spoke to the deceased person (see Papyrus Boulaq 3: 4, 11). It was believed that the deceased could hear. This supports the idea that texts located in pyramids, coffins, and tombs are thought to have been recited and heard. The basis on which it can be suggested that sources are part of a recitation is their performance as ritual event in an accessible place at an actual time by an authorized performer.

Within their cultural context, the interaction on a symbolic level renders the pronunciation of words and their perception in no respect less real. A consequence of the imagined performance of texts that are located in inaccessible places is that the performance is congruous with the text. Performance is an activity that defines itself by being acted out. Imagined speech acts lack the discrepancy between text as prescript and recitation as acting. Therefore, a prerequisite for texts that

can be suggested as part of a recitation is the possible discrepancy between text and performance constituted by the accessibility for the actor and the visibility of the text. To include recitation by heart reduces the condition for performance to accessible spaces. The locations can be exclusive, e.g., temples for the daily cult, tomb chapels, and the embalming hall, or public, e.g., procession routes on the occasion of religious festivals. In order to transfigure offerings, speech acts were performed in the temple and the necropolis. The recommendation in the Calendar for Good and Bad Days (Leitz 1994) to “hurry and spend the day in a festive mood with spells” (*Tagewählerei*, 1 *pri* 27) calls for recitations on the occasion of festivals. Biographies, *Harper's Songs*, and funerary papyri mention in this context the recitation for the *ba* of a god as being advantageous. It is reasonable to assume that location and time for magical spells differed from the performance in public spaces. To cure a seriously ill individual, the spells must have been recited at any time and in any place, including private homes.

### *Speech Acts: Performative and Operative Texts*

Texts that were recited on a regular basis have survived, inscribed in temple walls and as papyrus documents. The most important papyri are the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus from the Middle Kingdom (see Quack 2006), the libraries that were attached to the temples from the Late Period (Tebtunis papyri; see Ryholt 2005), and magical papyri, the latest of them written in Greek. Ritual texts are multifunctional. In papyri for ritual use, different types of text can be combined: instructions, comments, narrative passages, and performative expressions. In view of the dimension of time, performative texts can be categorized as prescriptive, operative, and interpretative texts (Dücker 2004: 9). Only the operative parts of ritual texts function as speech acts, that is, the words have the power to do things the very moment they are uttered (Austin 1962). To be operative, words have to address somebody and do what they do because of their connotations that attach

certain values to them (Butler 1997). Prayers, hymns, and aretologies addressing a god use a salutation, the second personal pronoun, names, titles, and epithets. In Dücker's taxonomy, texts addressing somebody announce a performance and are classified as proclamative. Operative text-types encompass all texts that are recited in the ritual act proper. The time dimension for operative speech acts is the present. This is the case when ritual texts are written in the present tense or the performative *sḏm.n.f* (Gunn 1924: 69 - 74). Their performance as actual ritual event qualifies speech acts as future-oriented acts (Althoff 2003).

Words as deeds act simultaneously on two levels. They work on the level of operative texts as performed and on the level of speech acts as activity in its own right, which is the change of the social or ontological status of the addressed persons and objects. Both activities are dialectically related. Expected results of acting by speech influence how speech acts are performed (Roeder 2004: 26). A possible criterion to distinguish operative texts from non-operative texts is that ritual as activity constitutes itself as different and in contrast to other activities (Bell 1992: 90). Roeder puts forward the criterion of semantic power to create a ritual environment that is believed to exist (Roeder 2004: 26). According to Egyptian terms, three different operative text-types can be discerned: 1) the *sḥ* (“to transfigure”), which indicates the effect of speech acts to transform the addressee into a person who can act, or a profane object into a religious one by recitation; 2) protective and therapeutic spells to save from harm or cure the addressee and curse the enemy; and 3) *shp* (“to satisfy”), which are hymns to appease the addressee (Roeder 2004: 34).

A religious-ritual or juridical setting is a plausible scenario for speech acts. In the Coffin Texts, the perception of words confirms a successful illocutionary act. Statements like “my words have been heard” (CT II 86e - 87c) legitimate the deceased. The reference to words that were heard in trial or before the tribunal of the gods shows that,



like the religious-ritual, also a juridical context is supposed to render a quotation functional and authentic as a speech act. Non-religious recitations may have been uttered in the court of law, which took place in “the gate of justice.” As religious or juridical activity, recitation has to be performed by specialists who embody the required practical knowledge and who are endowed with the power to do what they are doing. A condition for operative speech in regard to the situation is a cultural convention that agrees on the criteria for persons who are authorized to recite words in a certain context (Wörner 1978). The power to act is referred to and thereby reproduced in the speech act itself as the performer’s self-representation in the daily temple ritual. The power is institutionalized. It sanctions priests to take on the role of a divine being on the occasion of festivals, to recite formulae in the ritual of embalming and for the funeral, and to read liturgies for a deceased individual during lunar feasts and other calendrical festivals. It permits scribes and magicians to pronounce spells that affect the cause of life or cure somebody. For officials who were endowed with the power to act by speech in a juridical context, see Lippert (2008).

The ritual knowledge required in terms of competence and performance classifies recitation both as ritual practice and as performing art. It demands a state of purity, preparation for the act itself, speaker competence, and ritual mastery. The state of purity is described in the *Book of the Dead* and on stelae: “One has to recite the spell clean and pure, not having approached women and not having eaten small cattle or fish” (BD 64; translation in *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*). The special preparation for the speech act is the purification of the mouth (for example, PT 72; epithet in a morning song, cf. Leitz 2002, Vol. 5: 488) and, according to one source, also the ears (see *Himmelskub.*: 254); they were purified with salt or with incense (PT 127). Speaker competence includes “ritualization,” which means the use of language as speech act in a ritual.

### *Ritualization*

Ritualization forms texts to distinguish them from daily spoken language. This can be done by using an archaic type of language for religious texts. It explains the appearance of Late Middle Egyptian, also called *égyptien de tradition*, that coexisted with later Egyptian for more than a millennium. Ritualization is the structuring of recited texts in a rhythmic manner by employing the language’s natural rhythm, caesuras, alternating speakers, choral passages, and refrains. Moreover, speaker competence includes the knowledge of the ritual language, intimacy with the use of language, the range of meaning attached to words in a ritual, and their possible connotations. The speaker embodies a practical knowledge of how to perform the ritual. Recitation as ritual practice is the capability to put forward expected values that are attached to words. This is accomplished by positioning them first in the text, accompanying them with gestures for recitation, singing them, or reading them in an appropriate manner according to situation, purpose, and intended effect. A connotational device of positioning, called “honorific anticipation,” is testified in writing. Signs and names referring to the divine or royal sphere precede the rest of the sentence independent of their actual syntactic position to express a cultural attitude vis-à-vis the person it represents (Loprieno 1995: 18). The question arises whether such a cultural attitude is exclusively graphic or can be assumed for oral performance. Ritual practice is using words in a way that highlights or minimizes certain inherent aspects by means of stress, tone, pitch, lengthening, pauses, and rhythm. While the investigation of such audible resources must remain hypothetical, the researcher should keep them in mind.

Connecting ritually performed speech acts with other activities in the ritualization process synchronizes them with the ritual environment. Therefore, correct timing is essential for the act itself to work in the intended manner.

Ritual mastery is the ability “to take and remake schemes from the shared culture that can strategically nuance, privilege or transform” (Bell 1992: 116). This allows ritual specialists to pronounce texts unmodified or to give them subtle nuances. The relationship between historical developments in ritual discourse and performance causes minor changes, e.g., of personal pronouns in texts. These changes may support their actual performance. Developments in the spoken language and changes in cultural conceptions influence ritual recitation. One example is the change in the use of ritual language that appeared during the reign of Thutmose III (Schott 1953).

### *Declamation of Literature*

Except for ritual speech acts, literature is the type of texts that were probably recited in ancient Egypt. The sources comprise tales, travel narratives, dialogs, teachings, and poetry. Isolated calls and speaker labels that are included in a wider concept of narratology (Fludernik 1996) are not part of a recitation. No archaeological finds testify to reading in public or private circles. However, several circumstances promote the assumption that literary texts were performed orally. They are comprehensively investigated in Parkinson’s treatment of Middle Kingdom literature as social practice (Parkinson 2002). The word *šdj* (“to recite”) is used for ritual texts, spells, letters, and biographies, implying a declamatory method of delivery. The style of literary compositions reflects a performative oral setting. However, it is not clear whether these characteristics of text composition testify to the performance of texts or otherwise. Written in order to be heard, the author may invent a fictive audience for the text (Parkinson 2002: 57).

The criteria of visibility and accessibility for recited texts also apply to literature. Within their fictional framework, literary compositions are enacted communication. In contrast to ritual texts, declamation of literature is not operative as performative speech in the sense that the words uttered do

things. Their performance is limited to the level of words that are delivered in a declamatory manner. The second level of speech acts as activity in its own right is not relevant to literature. Literary performance also differs in its time dimension. In contrast to future-oriented speech acts, the performance of literature is retrospective. Narratives tell something that has taken place. In teachings, things that have yet to happen are presented as consequences.

In the Middle Kingdom (P. Ramesseum II), structuring points (*Gliederungspunkte*) mark the rhythm of speech (Morenz 1996: 38). In the New Kingdom, paragraph markers (Tacke 2001), units of thought—also called *parallelismus membrorum* or thought couplets, which is the use of language in its natural rhythm in the sense of structuring a narrative (Foster 1994)—metrics (Burkard 1996; Fecht 1963), and devices for a poetic style (Guglielmi 1996) indicate the rhythm of speech. The performer combines the customary use of language (*hn n mdt*) with a sensitivity of reading that is discernible in how he follows the plotline (Collier 1996). The performance of literature in an elite context is attainable in the prologue to the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*. Evidence for told folklore is scarce. Educated scribes were the storytellers. Other professions that are trained in rhythmic performance of texts, e.g., singers, chironomists, and priests, cannot be excluded as possible performers of literary compositions. Among the holdings of the temple library of Tebtunis were teachings (Hoffmann and Quack 2007: 239) and narratives. In the *Myth of the Sun’s Eye* (e.g., Papyrus Leiden I 384 ro), the god Thoth in his shape as a baboon tells stories to appease and to entertain Tefnut. It has been suggested that the lines written with red ink and the remark *hrw.f m-mjtt* (“his voice likewise”) instruct the storyteller to use the same intonation every time the baboon is speaking (Spiegelberg 1917: 9).

The narrator tells literary works as entertainment or moral instruction. For that purpose, the language, colloquial or elevated,



functions as rhetoric resource for the storyteller or lecturer. A rhetorical element that is discernible in literature is dialectical positions. The partners in the fictive dialogs are named. The author introduces a following recitation by “he says.” Often he also mentions the listener in a dialog with “he said to me.” In the Middle Kingdom, examples of speech that are not introduced by such a remark are rare. The introductory remark “NN says” appears seventy times in Papyrus Westcar (Grapow 1960: 161). The story takes place in a scenario that the listener recognizes.

An introductory remark, for example, *sḏd.j* (“I shall tell you”), introduces the narrative passages in the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* and anchors the story in the moment when it is told. The quoted passages raise the empathy of the listeners. The choice of citations or sayings increases familiarity. Enclitic particles and exclamatory devices address an audience. Devices that raise the listener’s empathy in performance are the style of literary compositions, refined language, and means of articulation, e.g., emphatic constructions and topicalization.

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Among religious ritual texts, hymns in the first place have attracted the Egyptologist’s interest, as the results of a search for “hymn” on [Aigyptos](#) demonstrate. Current work on the performance of texts in ritual is provided by the [project for ritual studies at Heidelberg University](#) in Germany. A comprehensive treatment of the performance of Middle Kingdom literature is Parkinson (2002). Loprieno (1996) provides an overview of form, metrics, and language in religious texts and in literature.

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## External Links

Aigyptos

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Ritualdynamik

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Figure 1. A priest holding an unrolled papyrus scroll. (After Junker 1940: fig. 3.)

Figure 2. The tomb owner represented as the speaker. (After Hassan 1936: fig. 219.)

Figure 3. Gesture for a call. (After Duell 1938: pl. 169.)