A Tale of Two Tongues?  
The Myth of the Sun's Eye and its Greek Translation¹  
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Numerous papyrus fragments prove that the translation of literary texts was a widespread practice in antiquity. And yet, for most texts, we do not have both original and translation, the only precondition that would allow us to follow the work of the translator by analyzing similarities and divergences between the two texts.² To add to the problems of studying ancient translations, in the few cases when original and translation are both extant, the fragmentary condition of our sources often adds to the difficulties of working with ancient languages belonging to different linguistic groups.

An interesting text preserved both in the original and in translation is the Greek version of the Egyptian Myth of the Sun's Eye, the narrative of the attempt on the part of a character identified as wn$ kwf to bring back to Egypt the "Ethiopian cat," t$i imi.t ikš.t. As Spiegelberg was the first to realize, this is a narration of the legend of Tefnut that had previously been reconstructed by Hermann Junker on the basis of temple inscriptions.³ The goddess, the Sun's Eye, crucial to the power of her father Ra, the Sun, left for Nubia, and is now hiding in the desert. Ra would have asked Shu and Thoth to go and persuade her to come back to Egypt. The two characters mentioned in the portions of the text preserved, the wn$ kwf and the Ethiopian cat, represent respectively Thoth and Tefnut.

The most extensive Demotic source, P.Leid.Dem. I 384, from the early second century CE, has been published by Spiegelberg and later re-edited by Françoise de Cenival.⁴ Other fragments with passages from the episode of Sight and Hearing have since been published by John Tait as P.Tebt.Tait 8.⁵ A few fragments acquired by the University of Lille and published by Françoise de Cenival preserve passages of

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¹ I would like to thank Richard Jasnow for introducing me to the Myth of The Sun's Eye during a year long seminar at Johns Hopkins. His teaching and support were invaluable. I would also like to thank Janet Johnson, Traianos Gagos, and Ludwig Koenen for helping me gain a deeper understanding of the cultural context in which the Myth of the Sun's Eye and its translation were produced. Finally, thanks to Deborah Lyons for kindly helping me with the editing.

² More common is the case of translations whose original is not preserved. Although these texts are often interesting for the language they use and their multiple extant copies, they do not allow an accurate study of the work of the translator. A good example of one of these translations is offered by the Oracle of the Potter most recently studied by Ludwig Koenen, "Die Prophezeiungen des 'Töpfers',' ZPE 2 (1968) 178–209.


⁴ W. Spiegelberg, Der ägyptische Mythus vom Sonnenauge nach dem Leidener demotischen Papyrus I 384 (Strasburg 1917); F. De Cenival, Le mythe de l'œil du soleil. Translittération et traduction avec commentaire philologique (Sommerhausen 1988).

a markedly different redaction of the text as well as a list of headings. New fragments have recently been found among the holdings of the Center for the Tebtunis Papyri and their publication is forthcoming. The overlap between the sections preserved by these papyri allows us to get a sense of the rich tradition of this text.

The Greek translation is preserved by a papyrus of the third century CE, British Museum 274, and was first published by Reitzenstein and later re-edited by Stephanie West. It preserves passages from different sections of the text as known from the Demotic version as well as a few fragments that are still to be matched to any portion of the extant Demotic text.

I will examine passages that are preserved in both languages to gain a better understanding of the technique of the translator. Yet, the joint study of original and translation implicitly relies on some assumptions. First of all, I am implying that the author of the translation had in front of himself a Demotic text similar to the one preserved in the tradition represented by the Leiden papyrus as well as by P.Tebt. Tait 8, although this is only one of many possibilities. The publication by De Cenival of passages presenting a different version of the text reminds us of the existence of significant variants in the Demotic tradition. In comparing the texts of original and translation, I consider the gaps and differences between the Demotic and the Greek as the result of conscious choices on the part of the translator rather than as the result of the use of a Demotic text different from the one preserved in the Leiden papyrus.

This first assumption is based on an even more basic implication, that the transmission of the text presupposed writing. In other words, I am assuming that the translator did not just know the text as a result of oral transmission or of live performance, but that he had access to a written copy and that his work was closely based on it.

While these notes of caution need to be stressed, the similarities between the Greek translation and the text preserved by the Leiden Papyrus are strong enough to suggest that a copy very similar to this very text must have been used for the translation. The similarities are so many and the divergences so exceptional that no other explanation can be offered for the closeness between the two texts.

The Greek translation displays several elements of interest, starting with the terminological choices made by the translator in the rendition of a text often dense with uncommon terms. A rather thorny

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8 The possibility that the text may have been meant for public reading has been proposed by several scholars, mostly in reference to the headings introducing the various sections of the text and supposedly meant to facilitate the performance of one or more readers by suggesting the tone of the passage they introduce. Spiegelberg, *op.cit.* (above, n. 4) 9–10; E. Brunner-Traut, "Altägyptische Tiergeschichte und Fabel. Gestalt und Strahlkraft," *Saeculum* 10 (1959) 124–185, at 152–153; De Cenival, *op.cit.* (above, n. 4) viii.

The importance of such headings has been confirmed by the papyrus in Lille, F. De Cenival, "Obscurités et influences dans le Mythe de l’œil du soleil," in K. Ryholt (ed.), *Acts of the Seventh International Conference of Demotic Studies, Copenhagen, 23–27 August 1999* (Copenhagen 2002) 39–43.

Similar performative issues are raised by other translations, like for instance the fragmentary version of the *Dream of Nectanebos*. 
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problem must have been represented already by the choice of a Greek name for the being whose aspect is taken by Thoth in a large portion of the extant text. The Demotic name used to refer to this creature, wnš kwf, has proved to be rather controversial and has been translated in various ways, reflecting the various understandings of the relationship between its components. Spiegelberg translated it with a compound, "Hundsaße," and so does De Cenival who opted for "chacal-singe," while Reymond suggested "the small wolf called kwf." These different choices reveal a real uncertainty on how the name wnš kwf should be understood. Luckily, in addition to the text of the Mythus, we have a pictorial representation of both characters appearing in this passage in the walls of the temple of Dakka. In this relief, the wnš kwf is represented as a simian with canine head. One wonders whether the translator had access to any figural representation of the Mythus or whether his entire knowledge derived from a written source.10

A crucial passage for the understanding of the name is in col. XXI of the Demotic text, as preserved in the Leiden papyrus, and its translation in Fr. F of the Greek text, a passage in which a slight change in the name of both gods can be observed. While the Demotic for the first time refers to this character as kwf, instead than as wnš kwf, the Greek explicitly speaks of a transformation: the god is said to change from λυκόλυγξ, as he had been designated in previous fragments, to λύγξ:

**P.Leid.Dem. I 384**, Col. XXI

\[\ldots \text{ir s}\]
\[\text{ḥbr s n pij s ḥbr n(?) kḥ. t js(?) r- i s \ldots m}\] mš:t
\[\text{r pi kwf } \text{ir kp ḥi-t s}\]

she transformed herself into a gazelle and she was very \ldots \ldots \]
while the monkey [kwf] burnt incense before her.

**Brit. Mus. inv. no. 274**, Fr. F col. II

\[\ldots [\text{ἐβη δὲ δ[. . . δορκά-}]
\[\text{δός τρόπον, με[τέ]βα[λε δὲ καὶ ὁ θεός}]
\[\text{καὶ οὐκέτι λυκόλυγξ ἀ[λλά]}
\[\text{λύγξ ἦν ὅρασθαι}]

\ldots as a gazelle.
Also the god transformed himself,
and he no longer was a λυκόλυγξ
but a λύγξ.

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9 West, *op.cit.* (above, n. 7) 162.
10 Representations of the animal stories told within the Mythus must have been common as shown by ostracon Berlin inv. 21443. Spiegelberg, *op.cit.* (above, n. 4) 7.
11 The transcription follows Spiegelberg’s *editio princeps* and has only been adapted for consistency with the rest of the article as well as to include new readings.
In both languages, the text moves from a compound name, \textit{wn\textasciitilde kwf} in Demotic, \textit{λυκόλυγξ} in Greek, to a simpler noun by eliminating the first half of the compound. Yet, while both names are constructed in a similar way and undergo an analogous transformation, one wonders how \textit{wn\textasciitilde kwf} could be translated as \textit{λυκόλυγξ}. While \textit{wn\textasciitilde} is commonly used with the meaning of "wolf," \textit{kwf} is believed to be derived from Middle Egyptian \textit{gf}, a term commonly taken to signify "monkey," as indirectly confirmed by the relief in Dakka, and not as "lynx" as the Greek version translates it.\textsuperscript{12} What is remarkable, beyond the differences in meaning, is the fact that the wordplay is the same in both languages and that in both cases the first half of the compound is simply dropped. The translator clearly thought that the wordplay was an element worth preserving even as he felt free to play with the actual translation of the elements used.\textsuperscript{13}

The attention paid to the switch from \textit{wn\textasciitilde kwf} to \textit{kwf} is even more remarkable in contrast with the intentional avoidance of too close an adherence to the Demotic in the large majority of the references to both characters. As already noticed by West, the translator not only eliminates the Egyptian names of both gods to designate them as Hermes and "the goddess," but in contrast with the complexity of the Demotic designations for both figures it often opts for the use of simple pronouns.\textsuperscript{14} This bears similarities to the way in which other stylistic features of the Demotic prose have been lost in translation like the repetitive constructions and the alliterations of the original.

The Greek text offers examples also of the "translation" of various Egyptian ideas and metaphors. Such reformulation often results in a Greek text that is only at best a simplified version of the Demotic rather than an authentic translation. The interest of every passage in which this happens is enhanced by the fact that each one of them has been negotiated by a translator proficient in the two languages: the problem cannot be so much the absence of the appropriate terminology nor the ignorance of the specific content, but must be sought somewhere else. Yet, the reasons behind such changes are rather elusive and still need to be investigated.

A passage interesting from this point of view is the dialogue of Hearing and Sight, two birds embodying the qualities indicated by their names, and summing up together complete knowledge. This idea is at the center of the entire section: in this dialogue, the two birds alternate in telling one story consisting of a long enumeration of animals of prey turned into prey, a series that ends only with the \textit{s\textbar m} and death. This leads to the affirmation that the god Ra, the only one above death, is in control of all things, the morale of this story.

The conclusion of this passage is interesting not only for the ideas and beliefs expressed but also for the problems they present to the translator: the introduction of several characters from Egyptian mythology forces the translator to find their equivalent among Greek figures, sometimes in the absence of any

\textsuperscript{12} A thorough examination of this figure is undertaken by De Cenival, "Lyco-lynx et chacal-singe dans le Mythe de l'œil du soleil," \textit{BIFAO} 99 (1999) 73–83.

\textsuperscript{13} This observation would obviously be a more direct reflection on the skills of the translator if we could demonstrate that the passage from \textit{wn\textasciitilde kwf} to \textit{kwf} did take place in the text used by our translator and that it is at the origin of his own choices. In the absence of other testimonia for this passage, to demonstrate at least that this terminological shift did take place in the entire tradition, we can only remark that both the Demotic text and its Greek translation present a similar pattern. As Mark Smith remarks, since we do not know beyond doubt the text used by the translator, there is no certainty that this might be a direct translation; Smith, \textit{op.cit.} (above, n. 3) 1082–1087, at 1083.

\textsuperscript{14} West, \textit{op.cit.} (above, n. 7) 162.
well-established tradition. Complex modifications are required when the long passages of attributes and features that accompany specific characters have to be re-written in Greek. In the process, the internal coherence of the text and ultimately the basic meaning of each passage are radically changed.

The text becomes particularly problematic in the lines containing the conclusions that Hearing draws from the entire story. The beginning of column 15 contains an excursus on the sšm, a noun commonly translated with "griffin." The Demotic indulges in the enumeration of its qualities. The sšm combines human and animal features, as it is characterized by elements of falcon, man, lion, fish, and snake. Precisely this combination of features from different animated beings seems to make of it a higher type of creature defined as "the herdsman of everything that is upon the earth" in the words of John Tait.15 As Spiegelberg points out, this figure may have been referred to in the context of the definition of the Pharaoh: the depictions in tombs 15 and 17 in Beni Hassan represent a being that results from the combination of lion and falcon and is referred to with the term srf, an equivalent of the srrf also introduced in the Mythus to refer to the sšm.16

It is difficult to assess how this figure is translated into Greek since no name is preserved for it in the fragmentary Greek version. The translation mentions death but little else can be said about its content. Yet, even a cursory glance shows how much shorter the Greek text is when compared to the Demotic. The translator must have thought that the best way of translating this passage was to abbreviate it, leaving out several details. Thus, despite having found an adequate translation, the Greek text does not render the subtle references behind the Egyptian figures.

A passage rich of theological implications follows at ll. 12 ff. of this column.

**P.Leid.Dem. I 384**, Col. XV

\[\text{qd} \, \text{ti} \, \text{md.t} \, \text{nfr.t} \, \text{ti} \, \text{md.t} \, \text{bn.t} \]

12  
\[\text{nt} \, \text{r-iw} \, \text{w} \, \text{r} \, \text{ir} \, \text{s} \, \text{hr} \, \text{p} \, \text{ti} \, \text{P} \text{-R} \, \text{p} \, \text{ti} \, \text{nt} \, \text{t} \, \text{šp} \, \text{n} \, \text{ss} \, \text{qd} \, \text{mi} \, \text{hpr} \, \text{f} \, \text{iw} \, \text{w} \, \text{qd} \, \text{tw} \, \text{y} \, \text{dlh} \, \text{n} \, \text{ḥt.t} \, \text{t} \, \text{hr} \, \text{t} \, \text{P} \text{-R} \, \text{t} \, \text{nw} \, \text{r} \, \text{hr} \, \text{y} \, \text{m-k} \text{t} \text{pi} \, \text{nw} \, \text{r} \, \text{hr} \, \text{t} \, \text{nt} \, \text{r-iw} \, \text{f} \, \text{iw} \, \text{f} \, \text{ni} \text{j} \, \text{f} \, \text{ḥnm.w} \, \text{nij} \, \text{f} \, \text{stm.w} \, \text{n} \, \text{nt} \, \text{nh} \, \text{nt} \, \text{hr} \, \text{p} \, \text{ti} \, \text{[. . .]} \, \text{qd}(\?) \, \text{s} \, \text{c} \text{n} \, \text{r-iw} \, \text{f} \, \text{nw} \, \text{r} \, \text{pi} \, \text{nt} \, \text{ḥn} \, \text{ti} \, \text{swḥi.t} \, \text{t} \, \text{r}-\text{i} \, \text{s} \, \text{ḍb}(\?) \, \text{p} \, \text{i} \, \text{i}-\text{ir} \, \text{s} \, \text{ṭt}(\?) \, \text{swḥi.t} \, \text{m-k} \text{t} \text{pi} \, \text{i}-\text{ir} \, \text{ḥtb} \]

16  
\[\text{b-i} \, \text{r} \, \text{p} \, \text{j} \, \text{w} \, \text{mtn[i]} \, \text{ṣc} \, \text{m-s} \, \text{w} \, \text{c} \text{n} \, \text{c} \text{n} \]

"The good and the evil that take place on earth, Ra pays them back in kind. Although one could say that I am smaller than you, Ra looks at me in the same way he looks at you. His sense of smell and his hearing are in everything that is on earth." … said also: "He sees what is in the egg

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15 Tait 1976 (above, n. 5) 39.

when it is still intact. Whoever breaks an egg is just like one who commits murder. His stain will
never be washed away.”

Brit. Mus. inv. no. 274, Fr. D col. I

56 ἀγαθοῦ καὶ κακοῦ ἀνταπόδοσιν δίδωσιν. καὶ νῦν ἑγὼ, μεγαλότιμε, εἰ καὶ τῇ πε-ριοχῇ τοιούτος σοι φαύνομαι,

60 ὁ Ζεύς ὃς σε ἐπιβλέπει κἀμὲ κάφοραί. ἐν παντὶ ζωίων πνεύ-μα αὐτοῦ ἐστίν καὶ τὰ ἐντὸς
tου ωἰοῦ τίνα ἐστίν ἐπίσταται;

64 τὸν ωἰον συντρίψαι τα ὅς
phovē̂a metérchetai, ὁ δὲ pho-
neus eis tōn aĩōna ègkechá-
rakta.

He pays back
the good and the evil. And now, I,
my Lady, even if I seem such to you in appearance,
somewhat weak and despicable,

60 as much as the eyes of Zeus are observing you
he watches over me as well. In every living being
is his spirit. He knows even
what is inside the egg.

64 He who breaks the egg
is pursued like a murderer and the murderer will carry the stain for ever.

In this passage rich of theological implications, the Demotic continues to talk about Ra by saying that
he is the one that sees everything that happens on earth. The translator is compelled to find a good Greek
equivalent. Helios is promptly introduced with this function, a solution that clearly reflects the characteri-
zation of this figure in Greek culture. Yet, in the continuation of the passage, it is Zeus that is presented as
a fitting equivalent for Ra, a switch possibly eased by their syncretistic connection. The focus of the De-
motic text, the praise of Ra by means of an extended section on his attributes, is thus put aside in the
Greek version when it is interrupted for a while to take advantage of the long-established equivalence Ra-
Helios. This switch from Helios to Zeus diminishes the coherence of the passage and betrays its main goal:
the praise of the father of the goddess who is being addressed with the purpose of eliciting a positive
response on the part of the goddess herself, a goal reached within the text as her changed attitude
demonstrates. In the Greek version, the positive reaction of the goddess is less clearly the result of the previous passage and may appear somewhat unjustified.

As for the actual content of Ra’s praise, the two texts seem to express different perspectives. In the Demotic text, Ra’s omniscience is expressed by means of several references to the different senses: smell and hearing are said to be his way of knowing everything that is on earth, and, later in the same passage, he is said, among other things, to be able to see even what is inside the egg, a not-so-veiled allusion to his own birth. The stress on the senses present in Demotic is replaced in the Greek version by a reference to the πνεύμα (ll. 61–62), a concept of great importance but that was completely absent in the original. Zeus’ knowledge is still imagined as all encompassing as it is clearly said in the continuation of the passage, but the characteristics of this knowledge are not investigated. Yet, the exploration, and praise, of such knowledge was precisely at the center of the episode of Sight and Hearing in Demotic. In this passage, the translation tries to reproduce the literal meaning of the original, but the translator soon gives up conveying the richness of the Demotic text. He chooses instead to work with concepts already familiar to his audience while avoiding too technical ones, and he offers the gist of this long section without going into detail.

In conclusion, the simplification of some passages and the changes undergone by others in the transition from Demotic to Greek seem to follow specific patterns.

The sections of theological content have been greatly simplified. Not only have the allusions they contained been neglected, but even what was the explicit content of the text has been diminished. When complex concepts have been translated, although the translation may still somewhat follow the literal meaning of the original text, this is done without the ambition to render the deepest references, often of theological content, of the original.17

The translator cannot resist using some of the equivalences that had already been established between Egyptian and Greek gods, like in the case of Ra and Helios. Yet, such choices often disrupt the internal coherence of the text and betray the complexity of the carefully crafted Demotic text.18 The final product of this translation is a version whose theological content is downplayed in comparison to the original, and yet, it is a text easily accessible and readable.

The importance of the literal level of the text is visible in the translator’s rendition of the switch from wnš kwf’to kwf. The transformation of the characters and all the other events narrated are at the center of the attention of the translator and in conjunction with the elimination from the text of most references to the traditional Egyptian religion makes the plot the best preserved element of the original story.

The third century CE, when the translation was produced, is a time when the number of Demotic papyri is in sharp decline, a datum to be correlated with far-reaching changes in the use of written

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17 This extends to every aspect of the presence of the gods in the life of the Demotic speaker. Even an action as full of divine references as pronouncing an oath loses its direct reference to the gods when translated into Greek where it becomes an action that has nothing to do with the divine sphere.

18 Other commentators have underlined the attention paid to the sections of religious content. M.C. Betrò, “L’alchimia delle traduzioni: il Mito dell’occhio del sole e il P. B.M. Inv. no. 274,” in Atti del XVII convegno internazionale di papirologia (1984) III 1355–1360, at 1359.
Demotic. At this time of deep transformations in literacy, when Greek is a language learned by a large number of inhabitants of Egypt and written Demotic is quickly relegated to a few small groups, someone felt the need to translate the text into Greek but his motivations are not easily understandable.

The choices made by the translator cannot always be explained as a simple desire to make an Egyptian story available to a Greek speaking audience. First of all, it is not at all clear who would constitute this Greek-speaking audience. By the third century AD the flow of Greek immigrants had long ceased. Yet, the translator’s choice of Greek figures to replace the gods and goddesses of the original is not quite justified if the translation was destined to a Greek-reading Egyptian audience. Why eliminate Ra and substitute him with Helios and Zeus, instead of simply narrating this traditional story in Greek without changing the original names of its characters? Why eliminate the most complex theological references? Does this correlate with a change in the perception of Egyptian traditional religion?

While pondering these and many other questions, we are reminded of the challenges presented by each translation, a series of difficulties best exemplified by the statement placed at the conclusion of the Oracle of the Potter, the reminder that the translation follows the text of the original as much as possible, κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, and that perfect adherence to the original is but an elusive ideal.

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21 Similar choices have been made in the case of other figures like Apophis and in the translation of expressions that feature references to the gods, like oaths. Also in these instances the references to the gods have been simplified or suppressed and no longer figure in the translation. These passages will be the object of a later study.