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Is That a Rhetorical Question?

Shipwrecked Sailor (pHermitage 1115), 150 Reconsidered

The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor is perhaps best known as a standard reading exercise for beginning students in Middle Egyptian, often seen for the first time in the hand copies of either De Buck or Blackman[1]. However, this role should not lessen its importance in any way as a finely crafted literary piece whose complexities and idiosyncrasies continue to captivate the attention of succeeding generations of Egyptologists[2]. In this article, I will focus on a single line

only, in the hope that offering an alternative interpretation and new grammatical analysis may help lend some clarity to an otherwise unclear passage[3].

The passage under consideration occurs towards the end of the story, after the unnamed Egyptian official relates his story to the divine snake and the snake, in kind, relates a story to the official. In an apparent attempt to seek release from the island, the official promises to sing the praises of the divine snake to pharaoh and send a vast quantity of valuable offerings back to the serpent. Following this speech, the snake is amused and we find him laughing at the Egyptian official: "Then he laughed at me for these (words) which I have said and he said to me." What follows consists of the snake's retort, which begins with the following phrase:

The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor
(pHermitage 1115), 150

The numerous translations of this tale attest to the difficulty in understanding the snake's reply and the lack of consensus about the

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[1] Adriaan de Buck, Egyptian Readingbook 2nd ed. (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1963), 100–106; Aylward M. Blackman, Middle-Egyptian Stories (Bruxelles: Édition de la fondation égyptologique, 1972), 41–48.

[2] A comprehensive bibliography for the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor would require a volume of its own, but important developments in the analysis of this tale can be traced in the following sources: A. H. Gardiner, "Notes on the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor", ZÄS 45 (1908–1909), 60–67; Vladimir Vikentiev, "The Metrical Scheme of the 'Shipwrecked Sailor'", BIFAO 35 (1935), 1–40; Hans Goedicke, Die Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen, Ägyptologische Abhandlungen, 30 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974); John Foster, "'The Shipwrecked Sailor': Prose or Verse? (Postponing Clauses and Tense-neutral Clauses)", SAK 15 (1988), 69–110; John Baines, "Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor", JEA 76 (1990), 55–72; Antonio Loprieno, "The Sign of Literature in the Shipwrecked Sailor", in Ursula Verhoeven and Erhart Graefe (eds.), Religion und Philosophie im Alten Ägypten: Festgabe für Philippe Derchain zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 24. Juli 1991, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 39 (Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 209–217; Peter der Manuelian, "Interpreting 'The Shipwrecked Sailor'", in Ingrid Gamer-Wallert and Wolfgang Helck (eds.), Gegengabe: Festschrift für Emma Brunner Traut (Tübingen: Attempto Verlag, 1992), 223–234; Günter Burkard, Überlegungen zur Form der ägyptischen Literatur: Die Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen als literarisches Kunstwerk, Ägypten und Altes Testament 22 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz,

1993); Gary A. Rendsburg, "Literary Devices in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor", JAOS 120:1 (Jan.–Mar., 2000), 13–23; Jacqueline Jay, The Narrative Structure of Ancient Egyptian Tales: From "Sinuhe" to "Setna" (Ph.D. University of Chicago, 2008).

[3] For the lines immediately preceding the ones dealt with here see: Donald B. Redford, "A Note on Shipwrecked Sailor 147–148", JEA 67 (1981), 174–175; Hans Goedicke, "Shipwrecked Sailor 147–148", JSSEA 12 (1982), 15; Craig C. Dochniak, "A Note on Shipwrecked Sailor 135–138", GM 142 (1994), 69–71.

grammatical constructions involved[4]. The variability in the translations quoted below demonstrate this confusion[5]:

1. "You do not have enough myrrh in all that has come to be (?), or incense"[6].
2. "You do not have much myrrh, although you have become an owner of incense"[7].
3. "You are not rich in myrrh and all kinds of incense"[8].
4. "Thou wouldst not have too much ꜥnti, if thou wouldst become possessor of the incense of the temple"[9].
5. "Tu n'as pas beaucoup d'oliban, tandis que tu es né possesseur de résine de térébinthe"[10].

6. "(Ainsi donc) la myrrhe serait (un produit) rare selon toi, et tu serais devenu le maître de l'encens?"[11].
7. "Du bist doch nicht reich an Myrrhen, da du ja nur als Herr von gewöhnlichem Weihrauch geboren bist"[12].
8. "Hast du (hier) nicht viel Myrrhen? Alles, was (hier) ist, ist ja Weihrauch"[13].
9. "Hast du (hier) nicht viel Myrrhen, und bist du nicht ein Besitzer von Weihrauch geworden?"[14].
10. "Bist du reich an Myrrhen? Bist du ein Besitzer von Weihrauch?"[15].

Part 1. *n wr n=k ꜥntyw*

The uncertainty in our understanding of line 150 reflects the difficulty of identifying the grammatical constructions employed and clearly distinguishing their constituent elements. The underlying grammar of the first portion of the passage could be understood in one of four ways:

1. Negated *sḏm.n.f*
n wr.n=k ꜥntyw
"You are not great (of) myrrh."

2. Interrogative *sḏm.n.f*
(i)n wr.n=k ꜥntyw
"Have you become great (of) myrrh?"

3. Negated adjectival sentence
n wr n=k ꜥntyw
"Myrrh is not great for you."

4. Interrogative adjectival sentence
(i)n wr n=k ꜥntyw
"Is myrrh great for you?"

Each possibility contains its own difficulties. It is somewhat unexpected, although attested[16],

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[4] Early translation attempts exemplify the problems that this line pose, see Adolf Erman's translation attempt: "Myrrhen hast du nicht viel; alles, was (da) ist (?), (ist nur?) Weihrauch." [Adolf Erman, "Die Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen", ZÄS 43 (1906), 19]. He later revised this translation for his important work The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians: "viel Myrrhen hast du nicht, du besitzest nur Weihrauch" [Adolf Erman, Die Literatur der Ägypter (Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1923), 61]. The English translation by Aylward Blackman in 1927 renders this as "Thou hast not myrrh, being (but) a possessor of frankincense" [Adolf Erman, The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians: Poems, Narratives, and Manuals of Instruction, from the Third and Second Millennia B.C., Translated into English by Aylward M. Blackman (London: Methuen and Co, Ltd, 1927), 33].

[5] It should be noted at the outset that the following translations often come from volumes written for the general reader and thereby they obscure grammatical problems through translation. This is not such an impediment, however, for in most cases the translation makes clear the manner in which the translator interpreted the grammar of the passage.

[6] Stephen Quirke, Egyptian Literature 1800 BC (London: Golden House Publications, 2004), 74.

[7] William Kelly Simpson (ed.), The Literature of Ancient Egypt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 52; cf. "Myrrh is not abundant with you, although you have become a possessor of incense" in the previous edition of William Kelly Simpson (ed.), The Literature of Ancient Egypt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 55, followed by Burkard, Überlegungen, 88 with n. 28.

[8] Miriam Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume II: The New Kingdom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 214.

[9] Vladimir Vikentiev, "The Metrical Scheme of the 'Shipwrecked Sailor'", BIFAO 35 (1935), 33. This is a very idiosyncratic translation.

[10] Gustave Lefèbvre, Romans et Contes égyptiens de l'époque pharaonique: Traduction avec introduction, notices et commentaire (Paris: Librairie d'Amerique et

d'Orient, 1982), 38 and slightly altered in his grammar, "Tu ne possèdes pas beaucoup d'oliban" [Gustave Lefèbvre, Grammaire de l'Égyptien classique 2nd ed., Bibliothèque d'étude, 12 (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1955), § 630].

[11] Patrice Le Guilloux, Le conte du Naufragé (Papyrus Ermitage 1115) (Angers: Isis, 1996), 57.

[12] E. Brunner-Traut, Altägyptische Märchen (Düsseldorf-Köln: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1963), 9.

[13] Kurt Sethe, "Bemerkungen zur 'Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen'", ZÄS 44 (1907), 86.

[14] Gardiner, "Notes", 66.

[15] Hans Goedicke, Die Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen, 58.

to find a *sḏm.n=f* of an adjectival root such as 𓄫 *wr*[17]. As an intransitive verb, *wr* should not govern a direct object, leaving the status of *ʿntyw* undetermined. For such a construction, we would expect a preposition (*wr.n=k r/m ʿntyw*, lit. "You are great with respect to/in myrrh")[18]. These factors lessen the likelihood that a *sḏm.n=f* form is meant here. As adjectival roots are uncommon in the *sḏm.n=f* construction and the addition of *ʿntyw* requires further clarification through a preceding preposition unlikely to be dropped in this position, options 1 and 2 above employing the *sḏm.n=f* form should probably be rejected.

Due to the preceding issues, the majority of translators have understood this passage as a negated adjectival sentence with *ʿntyw* as the subject[19]. However, as James Allen has pointed out, the presence of ⌣ is not the expected negation of an adjectival sentence, which would consist of either ⌣ *nn* or ⌣ ... 𓏲 *n...is*[20]. Un-

fortunately, the negated non-verbal adjectival sentence is rather rare in itself. One possibility for resolving the grammar of option 3 listed above is to understand ⌣ *n* for ⌣ *nn*. Such a resolution, however, depends upon an analysis of the second half of the passage which has important consequences for our interpretation.

Part 2. *ḫpr.t nb snṯrw*

In order to make a better determination between possibilities 3 and 4 for the first half of line 150, we must first take up the remainder of the passage, which has been understood in two ways.

1. *ḫpr.t nb(.t) snṯrw*
"(and) all forms of incense."

2. *ḫpr.t(y) (m) nb snṯrw*
"being (lit. having become) an owner of incense."

The problem with taking *nb* as an adjective modifying *ḫpr.t* has been pointed out by Gardiner[21]. He notes that *nb* does not have the feminine ending *t* and therefore does not agree with the feminine *ḫpr.t*. He also notes that there are four other instances in the papyrus where *nb* is written *nb.t* in order to agree with a feminine substantive[22]. For this reason we would expect the *t* to be written here in line 150. Therefore, it seems preferable to understand the *ḫpr.t* here as the 2nd person singular stative *ḫpr.t(y)* in a circumstantial clause. The loss of *y* in the written script is well attested and common with so-called semi-vowels[23]. The *.ty* ending agrees with the previous *n=k* as a 2nd person singular reference. One would expect to see an 𓄫 *m* of pre-

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[16] A collection of negated examples presented in Battiscombe Gunn, Studies in Egyptian Syntax (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1924), 201.

[17] Allen, Middle Egyptian, 224 employs *wr.n=f* "it has become large" as an example of an adjective verb in the *sḏm.n=f*.

[18] Cf. the examples from Sinuhe B146–147, quoted by Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, 110: *ʿ3 n=i im wsḫ n(=i) m ʿḥʿ.w=i ʿš3 n(=i) m mnmn.t=i*, which has traditionally been understood as a series of adjectival sentences. However, if we take into consideration the comments of Allen, Middle Egyptian, 226 that the *sḏm.n=f* of the adjective verb "expresses the acquisition of a quality rather than the quality itself," then perhaps these phrases could be understood as *sḏm.n=f* forms since Sinuhe just acquired these goods: *iṯi.n=i nt.t m im3=f kf.n=i ʿ3y=f ʿ3.n(=i) im wsḫ.n(=i) m ʿḥʿ=i ʿš3.n(=i) m mnmn.t=i* "I took what was in his camp. I uncovered his tent. I became great thereby. I became wide in my standing. I became numerous in my cattle."

[19] The adjectival sentence appears in the list of attested rhetorical question constructions gathered in Deborah Sweeney, "What's A Rhetorical Question?", Lingua Aegyptia 1 (1991), 325–326.

[20] Allen, Middle Egyptian, 125; David P. Silverman, Interrogative Constructions, Bibliotheca Aegyptia 1 (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1980), 56–59. David Silverman's comments on initiality apply here: "When negative examples of this pattern [adjective + noun/pronoun subject at the beginning of a clause] occur, *n* precedes the clauses, and *js* is placed within it, and it would seem that these clauses should therefore be understood as initial constructions that are allowed

to stand in a non-initial position after the negation *n* through the use of the particle *js*" [David P. Silverman, "Determining Initiality of Clauses in Middle Egyptian", in William Kelly Simpson (ed.), Essays on Egyptian Grammar (New Haven: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 1986), 39].

[21] Gardiner, "Notes", 66.

[22] The four other instances occur at lines 48, 116, 134 and 174.

[23] Allen, Middle Egyptian, 202.

dication here, but as Gardiner notes, it is not unusual for it to be absent[24].

In addition to these grammatical considerations, the logic of the context must be preserved. Depending upon the interpretation of the remainder of the passage, the resulting translation would be "Myrrh is not plentiful for you, as you are (lit. having become) a possessor of incense," "Myrrh is not plentiful for you, as you are (lit. having become) not a possessor of incense," or "Myrrh and all the products of incense are not plentiful for you." The first option lacks sense in the context of the story for why would the snake claim that the sailor has no myrrh, but possesses incense[25]? The second option, while resolving several difficulties, forces the reader to make several assumptions: 1) that $n = nn$ and 2) that the negation applies also to the following clause. While possible, the rarity of the stative negated with nn[26] compounded by the necessity to carry the negation over, seems to stretch the likelihood that this is what our writer meant. The third option, from the perspective of the translation, seems reasonable, but as ex-

plained above, it is unlikely that *nb* modifies *ḫpr.t*. Moreover, *ḫpr.t nb snṯr* strikes this author as an odd way to communicate this statement in Egyptian.

Part 3. (*i*)*n wr n=k ꜥntyw ḫpr.t(y) nb snṯr*

An interesting solution for this passage involves taking ⏤ to be a substitution for interrogative ⌐: (*i*)*n wr n=k ꜥntyw* "Do you have a great deal of myrrh?"[27] This substitution, rational on a phonological level, has long been recognized[28], although often debated because of the uncertainty involved in determining if such phrases are negative or interrogative[29]. Gardiner's translation of the passage (quoted above) assumes two functions of the morpheme *n*. He states the sense of the passage is: "Hast thou not here, even before our very eyes, myrrh enough, and art thou not become a possessor of incense?"[30] In this translation then, *n* performs a double duty, not only negating the sentence as *n*, but marking it as interrogative with (*i*)*n*. In addition, Gardiner carries the negation through the dependant clause as well. He does this in order to maintain the sense of the context. However, the implication that the official stands amidst a rich bounty of myrrh and incense is contradicted by his previous statement to send these very gifts back to the snake. The setting of the scene is the "Island of the Ka", perhaps a location of such precious materials, but the snake himself refers not to this island, but to Punt when refer-

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[24] Gardiner, "Notes", 66, n. 1. Interestingly enough, anonymous *scholia* in the Oriental Institute's copy of Erman's transcription from 1907 read "Has 𓈖 become ṅ in *nb*?" While possible, as ingenious as it may be, the common appearance of the *m* of predication before *nb* makes it unlikely.

[25] As implied by Simpson's previously quoted translation "You do not have much myrrh, although you have become an owner of incense." At this point in the story the sailor has yet to possess anything, having been promised items only upon his return to the residence. It is the snake who will give him his oils and incense, but *he has yet to do so*. That does not happen until a little later in the narrative when the sailor is ready for departure. So up to this point, the sailor is still shipwrecked and talking to a divine snake. The old perfective expresses the condition of the sailor now, at the time of the snake's speaking to him ("having become" = "being"). He is currently neither rich in myrrh nor a possessor of incense, having nothing apart from the wooden shelter he built and the food he collected. In that collection, no mention is made of incense or oils even though the text details the food items and states that the island was full of all good things. We must assume that the sailor was unaware of the existence of these products on the island for he offers to send them back to the snake as an offering. That is when the snake laughs at the sailor for his naïvité.

[26] Allen, Middle Egyptian, 212.

[27] Literally, "Is myrrh great (= bountiful) for you?" (Allen, Middle Egyptian, 125), following earlier authors, e.g. Hans Goedicke, Die Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen, 59.

[28] Already detailed with examples in Gunn, Studies in Egyptian Syntax, 89–90.

[29] Cf. the debate regarding the long passage in the Tale of Wenamon in which multiple phrases starting with *nn* ⏤ have been interpreted by some as questions and by others as negative statements, as noted in Edward F. Wente, "The Report of Wenamon", in William K. Simpson (ed.), The Literature of Ancient Egypt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 119 n. 12.

[30] Gardiner, "Notes", 66.

ring to the source of these spices[31]. Therefore, Gardiner's suggestion seems to make little sense.

In accordance with the context of the story and the grammatical options outlined above, I prefer to understand *n* for interrogative (*i*)*n* introducing an adjectival sentence followed by a dependent clause containing the stative. Grammatically, this is the simplest solution, already recognized by Goedicke, and requires no textual emendation (negative *n* for *in* being commonly accepted). However, what is critical to understanding this passage in the context of the story is to realize that the question is rhetorical, i.e. it is "not asked with the view of eliciting new information" from the official[32]. I would suggest the following translation: "Is myrrh plentiful for you, being a possessor of incense?" In the context of the story this translation works well. The sailor has just told the divine snake that many great deeds will be done for the snake, including sending back incense and oils, since the snake appears sincere about returning the sailor home to the royal residence. Responding to the sailor's offers, the snake laughs at him because of his naïve remarks and goes on to ask the sailor, "Is myrrh plentiful for you, being a possessor of incense? Indeed, I am the lord of Punt"[33]. In this sense, the question is rhetorical[34] and the snake uses his domination of the conversation to put the sailor in "a position of inferiority"[35]. The snake does not expect the sailor to actually respond because the answer is obvious. In effect belittling the official, the snake poses to him a rhetorical question for which the answer is an implied "no" and without allowing the official time to respond, the snake goes on to relate that it is *he*, not the sailor, who is ruler of the island filled with such precious gifts.

Summary

This article examines a difficult passage from the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor (pHermitage 1115, 150). Near the end of the story, the official relates the good deeds which will be performed on behalf of the divine snake if he allows the official to return home. The snake's enigmatic response has provoked a variety of interpretations. It may be possible to resolve the questions surrounding this section of the tale by understanding the passage as a rhetorical question used by the snake to trump the official.

Keywords

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[31] It is worth repeating that upon the official's arrival, he found an abundance of food, described in detail in the story (lines 47–52), but no mention is made of other items such as oils, myrrh or incense.

[32] As defined by Sweeney, "Rhetorical Question", 317. It also functions as a corroboration question, the typical form of rhetorical question, see Sweeney, "Rhetorical Question", 327.

[33] Note the pun here using *nb*. The snake implies his possession (*nb*) of incense and myrrh (*Pwn.t*) as juxtaposed to the sailor's lack of possession (*nb*) of incense (*sntr*) and myrrh (*ꜥnty.w*).

[34] Goedicke, Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen, 60, argued against the rhetorical interpretation stating: "Im Gegensatz zu Sethe und Gardiner liegt m. E. hier keine rhetorische Frage vor, sondern ‿ ist als Schreibung für die Fragepartikel *in* anzusehen." The mocking quality inherent in the conversation has been pointed out by Le Guilloux, Le Conte du Naufragé, 57, note 76, although partially garbled in understanding: "Litt. 'la myrrhe n'est pas important (en quantité) pour toi, (et) tu es devenu (ou "venu au monde") maître de l'encens.' Il ne s'agit certainement pas ici d'une constatation de la part du Serpent, mais plutôt d'une raillerie, comme le naufragé le constate lui-même dans la phrase précédente. C'est pourquoi il nous semble opportun d'employer une tournure narquoise."

[35] Sweeney, "Rhetorical Question", 322. At first glance it may seem that this question falls into the category "questions which A answers himself," but it is clear that the situation fits with the description of Sweeney, "Rhetorical Question", 324: "Rhetorical questions seem to be asked either when A already has power over B, or is trying to gain power over B by playing one-upmanship. A gains power by manipulating B into giving the answer A wants, disregarding B's answer, or showing that B cannot answer A's questions – in every case, A *reverses* the normal preconditions of asking questions in a power play with B."