

Failed But Not Forgotten: A Psychoanalytic Contribution to Understanding Hieroglyphics

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Abstract

This paper will explore the study of hieroglyphics through a unique manner. Rather than using the famed Rosetta Stone which linguistically compares Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, Demotic script and Ancient Greek, we suggest a new approach to unraveling the mystery of hieroglyphics. We are pushed to do so because the Rosetta Stone was created around 3500 years after the birth of hieroglyphics and thus hieroglyphics had to evolve greatly over this long period of time. Moreover, we must assume that this language was not a phonetic based language in its origins. I argue to truly understand hieroglyphics one must try to come to terms with what these Egyptian symbols truly meant in their origins. From this solid footing, linguistics and other scientists can then focus on the step-by-step evolution of each symbol as they move towards a phonetic future. I use a notion that I coin called “linguistic economy.” Here I mean that each symbol represents or says the most in a passage or story in the most efficient manner, i.e. the who, when, where, how or why. As an example, I utilize the symbol of an owl and explain that it alone can express the time of day that a story takes place—this being dusk. To strengthen my argument that the owl could mean dusk and all that comes with it, I use Freud’s famed theories about the Dream-Work process that he explores in his “The Interpretation of Dreams.” In finality, we see that hieroglyphic symbols can most easily fall in line with the rules governing the unravelling of dream elements.

Keywords

Hieroglyphics, Rosetta Stone, Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams

1. Introduction

It is one of my dreams in life to write a paper based upon psychoanalytic appli-

cations towards a societal or historical issue. My favorite texts by Freud are all under this sway. At the top of the list is “Moses and Monotheism” with “Future of an Illusion,” “Civilization and its Discontents” and “Totem and Taboo” not far behind. I regard all these papers in awe.

And so me too, I have grand ambitions. Too grand, in fact, at least I think now. But perhaps one day I can inch closer to success. I’m referring to my “ridiculous” desire to unravel the true meaning and deciphering of hieroglyphics. I still believe in my theory and perhaps approach, but upon initial attempt after buying numerous books on the subject and pictures of this scribe, even books illustrating these pictographs’ evolution over different Pharaoh’s times, I failed miserably. But let’s now move onto my theory; and perhaps some other individual, or perhaps even myself, can in the future succeed in any small manner where presently I have not.

I wholeheartedly believe psychoanalytic thought can aid in getting a better understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphics and its movement towards phonetic maturity. And as you will soon see, I will utilize different aspects of Freud’s working concepts of the dream-work from his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* to explain this linguistic evolutionary process (Freud, 1953). And if this theory can apply to Hieroglyphics, it can with slight modifications apply to other languages. Though I will utilize many of Freud’s dream-work processes, the notions of “condensation” and “displacement,” the first and second processes that Freud speaks about in the Dream-Work chapter will take much of our center stage.

We know from the Rosetta Stone¹ that at some point phonetic equations were made between the sounds and the alphabets of Ancient Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphics. However, this tablet was made at a point in time when hieroglyphics were around for over 3000 years. Necessarily and linguistically much had to evolve in this pictorial language over this time. The Rosetta stone was created around 200 BC and hieroglyphics were first used around 3000 BC. In truth, this stone adds at most very little to what these carved pictures, both initially and perhaps even at the time of the Rosetta Stone, really meant and more importantly, how man’s first written language processed itself and evolved. If we could come to a reasonable understanding of such a mystery, no doubt eons of applications could be made in numerous fields of study, not only in linguistics.

In this paper, I will first speak about the deficiencies and pitfalls of deciphering hieroglyphics the way it is now approached. Most normally from what the Rosetta Stone bespeaks and then move backwards. I propose to truly understand and unravel this complex linguistic mystery we must understand what a hieroglyphic symbol means at its birth and then move forward in time. I then support

¹The Rosetta Stone is composed of three scripts. The top part of the stone is Ancient Egyptian using hieroglyphics while the middle of the stone is Demotic script. The bottom is Ancient Greek. Because of minor differences between the three written languages, it serves as a deciphering mechanism for where hieroglyphics had evolved at the time the Rosetta Stone was made. Today, the Rosetta Stone is now housed in the British Museum (Nix, 2021).

this argument through the ancient symbol of an “owl” using psychoanalytic theories taken from Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. I do this to propose what an “owl” could mean, which I argue could perhaps translate into the time of day of a story being dusk, and furthermore apply Freud’s dream theories to what all hieroglyphic symbols could mean in their origin.

2. Hieroglyphic Origins and Linguistic Economy

I argue that to truly understand something so abstract and complex as hieroglyphics, perhaps the only way is to trace and understand its origins. And then move forward in time as the pictures changed from original shape and use to more evolved shapes and applications. Nothing like this has ever been accomplished or reportedly attempted. In confidence, I do feel this is the only way out of this conundrum.

It goes without saying to carve out these symbols from stone was no easy task. Ask any sculptor! Thus, logic in this way states that hieroglyphic efforts were not first utilized to express simple phonetic sounds. It would simply too much effort expended. Even so, one could ask any person, academic or man on the street otherwise with a bare knowledge of this Egyptian language and they would all firmly say that phonetics had no place at the beginning of this language.

So what did these first hieroglyphics mean and why were these images to be the ones chosen by the ancient scribes and their audience? First, let’s consider this situation as one of **linguistic economy**². What could one picture, in its most compact illustrative sense, be generally understood as well as to both illustrate most efficiently and at the same time to express specifically a desire or notion—such as time of day, season, place, age, environment, etc. Intuitively, it is in this way of thinking that makes the initial effort to carve a specific picture in stone worthwhile because the symbol alone expresses one of substance as part of a story, decree, etc. And this is where psychoanalytic thought precisely comes in. We borrow from the concepts Freud developed for dream construction.

Before moving on, I would like to take a slight detour and speak about the very real notion that hieroglyphics were first used by the Pharaohs and their surrounding intelligentsia and scribes. Yes, this is most probably true, but in many ways this does not subtract from our economic argument above. The royals to tell their greatness stories, battle stories and after-life stories still fell under the **economic** laws stated above. Their scribes would still choose symbols that said the most with the littlest. Yes, these first symbols were only created for such an audience and purpose and this would logically lead to the origins of such symbols. Yet such symbols later on would necessarily fall into the mass audience’s hands and their widespread usage. What the masses would do with such symbols would necessitate the destiny of such symbols. Some would fall to the way side, some would thrive and some would be altered. All of this determined

²The term **linguistic economy** is one I have coined. It refers to the process of transmitting through speech or word the most efficient way possible to do so. In fact, as languages develop, they typically progress into abstract symbols (letters) to satisfy this law.

by the masses' tastes. And such symbols would again in their progression follow the economic law as described above, though alteration is really a further evolution of the symbol in question and truthfully lies outside the scope of this paper. Again here, I'm only interested in talking about the exact origins of a hieroglyphics original form. Now, let's get back to the story:

It is not my purpose here, as noted above, to try to unravel the complex mystery of hieroglyphics, but only yet to provide a plausible signpost. I would like to put forth one example from which my theories lead. Let's take the image of the owl. From my research, a quite old hieroglyphic. Surely, if you agree with the economical arguments presented above, the owl doesn't take on the abstract notion of being wise or smart as it does today in American society. Or perhaps phonetically equate to "Ow?" What could it efficiently express along the lines of the parameters discussed above? What about time of day? If owls inhabit where you live, you know that during certain times of the year, you will hear them start hooting around dusk for a distinct period of time. Surely, owls lived in ancient Egypt or writers/sculptors back then would never have had the inspiration nor accuracy to carve them. So back then, we can only assume that they too heard owls starting to hoot around dusk. And it is my argument here that there is a reasonable chance that owls were initially utilized as a hieroglyphic to denote the more generalized notion of a specific time of day. This being dusk in whatever story was being told. If this was the case, the picture of the owl would be an efficient picture, expressing substance, being specific and being generally understood by the intended audience. In essence it would be linguistically economic. One word of caution. It must be reiterated that I'm putting forth this time of day hypothesis for the **initial** pictorial use of the owl. Later like the rest of Egyptian hieroglyphics, the owl image's meaning would evolve until eventually expressing itself as a phonetic sound.

If this piece of analysis is correct then we have made considerable progress towards the unravelling of hieroglyphics; that is, if you agree that to get a strong understanding of this pictorial language its origins must first be understood. Then, using the law of linguistic economics that a symbol should say the most with the littlest we now have a stratagem with which to solve our problem. Moreover, we have presented a possible origins story of the Owl symbol.

3. The Application of Freud's Work on Interpreting Dreams Manifest versus Latent Content

Now let's turn to psychoanalysis and see how Freud's concept of the dream-work which he presented in Chapter 6 of his *Interpretation of Dreams* runs parallel in many ways to the hypothesis presented above concerning the origins of a hieroglyphic symbol. However before moving to this fertile ground, we must look at one of the basic tenets of Freudian dream interpretation—probably its main idea. According to Freud, a dream has a manifest content, which is what appears in a dream, and a latent content, the real meaning of the dream known as the dream thoughts. Interpretation of dreams is way to gain the true meaning

of a dream, thus unravelling the appearance of a dream into what it really means. And here we see our first parallel between our economic idea that behind a hieroglyphic symbol lies much more. In our example, the owl symbol is the manifest content and the time of day is the latent content. The time of day, which is not openly expressed, is economically abbreviated by the owl image. As a whole, what we really are seeking are individual symbols which can more efficiently satisfy the who, what, when, why or how.

Freud writes in parallel as a way to introduce his Dream Work chapter:

“The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same-subject matter in two different languages... The dream-thoughts are immediately comprehensible, as soon as we have learnt them. The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a *pictographic script* (italics added), the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts.”

Again, the owl is the manifest dream-content, a *pictographic script*, and the underlying dream-thought is the setting of dusk.

4. Freud's Dream Work Processes

After much thinking and mulling over, I believe the simplest way to present this information is to go one by one over Freud's documented dream-work processes and see how they can apply to our attempted understanding of what the original meaning of the oldest hieroglyphics could be. We are going to go over these processes in the order by which Freud presented them in his Dream-Work chapter. The order is condensation, displacement, representation and secondary revision. Though this analysis will be quite brief, the reader should come away with an idea how these dream-work concepts apply to the linguistic ideas presented in this paper.

So let's now turn to Chapter 6 of the *Interpretation of Dreams*, “The Dream-Work,” and do some analysis.

5. Condensation

Freud writes:

“The first thing that becomes clear to anyone who compares the dream-content with the dream-thoughts is that a work *condensation* (italics added) on a large scale has been carried out. Dreams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of dream-thoughts. If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill a half a page. The analysis setting out the dream-thoughts underlying it may occupy six, eight or a dozen times as much space.”

This falls right in line with our stated law of **linguistic economy**. What truly lies behind a symbol in its original form is of more wealth in terms of what the pictograph is expressing. Yet, in reality, this does not say much because this is in

fact true of all symbols. It is why symbols are used. Thus, we must go deeper.

Anyone familiar with Freudian psychoanalysis knows that it is based upon the idea of free-association. Let your mind go and see it where goes. Always think or speak your mind no matter what comes up into consciousness. In this way, you are working through your defense mechanisms, busting through repression and getting preliminary access to your unconscious (preconscious?) or what lies underneath. And more so, one who has been under treatment by an analyst or exercises a self-analysis knows firsthand that his free-associations overlap, diverge to multiple thoughts and conglomerate truly into a huge jig-saw puzzle which in some way hopefully comes together into a satisfying partial truth. This describes Freudian psychoanalysis in its most bare bones.

Most importantly for the matter at hand, similarly when one does dream analysis one quickly sees how behind the same dream image or thought per se, a multiple of train tracks explode into divergent directions leading towards different substations (or in other words latent dream-thoughts) . In this way, Freud says that a dream's manifest content has a lot of ideas behind it and says singularly an individual dream image is **multi-determined**.

And so is our symbol of the owl. Again, the owl is the manifest content. In its most broad sense, it represents a setting of dusk. But truly the owl represents much more. What lies behind the owl are the other happenings that occur at dusk, some of them occurring consistently like the owl and others that occur more periodically. The crickets chirping, the sky and clouds changing colors transitioning on their way to more darkness, and perhaps depending on the time of the year, a rising of the moon. So the symbol of the owl represents all these things as well as others not mentioned. In this sense, the symbol of the owl is **multi-determined**. Another way of thinking about this is that any consistent environmental impetus which also regularly occurs at dusk like the owl hooting, per se the crickets chirping, would too be a good and clear choice of the hieroglyphic representing the setting of dusk. I can only guess the initial scribes preferred inscribing owls.

6. Displacement

Freud transitions from exploring dream condensation to the next section of the Dream-Work chapter where he talks about dream displacement. He writes:

“In making our collection of instances of condensation in dreams, the existence of another relation, probably of no less importance, had already become evident. It could be seen that the elements which stand out as the principal components of the manifest content of the dreams are far from playing the same part in the dream-thoughts. And, as a corollary, the converse of this assertion can be confirmed: what is clearly the essence of the dream-thoughts need not be represented in the dream at all.”

In this way, displacement of psychical value plays well into the dream's efforts to avoid dream censorship. It does this by the dream seemingly headlined by

images that have little relation to the dream-thoughts, while the more important material relates to insignificant components of the dream.

More to home of what we are trying to establish, the displacement property is describing for us the technique by which the time of dusk can be replaced by a seemingly insignificant aspect of itself, in our case the owl.³

In a complex way, Freud summarizes the way in which condensation and displacement work together to form the manifest content of dreams:

“It thus seems plausible to suppose that in the dream-work a psychical force is operating which on the one hand strips the elements which have a high psychical value of their intensity, and on the other hand, *by means of over-determination* (italics added), creates from elements of low psychical value, which afterwards find their way into the dream-content. If that is so, *a transference and displacement of psychical intensities* occurs in the process of dream-formation, and it is as a result of these that the difference between the text of the dream-content and that of the dream-thoughts comes about. The process which we are here presuming is nothing less than the essential portion of the dream-work; and it deserves to be described as “dream-displacement”. Dream-displacement and dream-condensation are the two governing factors to whose activity we may in essence ascribe the form assumed by dreams.”

7. Representability

Freud’s third aspect of the dreamwork is called representability. In essence, dreams turn thoughts and ideas into primarily visual images and more rarely into auditory elements such as words, speeches and the such. Let him explain:

“The foregoing discussion has led us at last to the discovery of a third factor whose share in the transformation of the dream-thoughts into the dream-content is not to be underrated: namely, *considerations of representability in the peculiar psychical material of which dreams make use* (Author’s italics) - for the most part, that is, representability in visual images. Of the various subsidiary thoughts attached to the essential dream thoughts, those will be preferred which admit of visual representation...”

So is it a surprise that cave-paintings have pictures and not letters! And that the oldest, most complex and organized written language consists of pictures—this is, of course being hieroglyphics.

And as we all know, “A picture can say a thousand words.” Or better yet, “A symbol can say a thousand words.” Or an owl hieroglyphic, in its original use, can express a specific time of day which in itself consists of much more information, ideas and thus words than a single owl.

³Moving beyond our example of the time of dusk and an owl, we see that the theory of dream displacement really applies to any situation where a symbol substitutes for a larger entity. Though in converse of what we have been arguing, the law of displacement states that the psychic value transfer between a symbol and its meaning could be near infinite. They, in fact, could have truly little real relationship with one another other than one symbolizes the other.

8. Secondary Revision

This is Freud's fourth and final element of the dream-work process. Initially, we hope that such a name could allude to the evolutionary process of how a language progresses forward to match the needs of its future users. Unfortunately, this is far from the case.

Freud writes:

“The thing that distinguishes and at the same time reveals this part of the dream-work is its *purpose* (Author's Italics). This function behaves in the manner which the poet maliciously ascribes to philosophers: it fills up the gaps in the dream-structure with shreds and patches. As a result of its efforts, the dream loses its appearance of absurdity and disconnectedness and approximates to the model of an intelligible experience.”

Freud states that secondary revision is a process that acts in accordance with the rules of waking thought. In this way, our understandings about what constitutes normal psychical activity can be seen here; whereas with the other dream-work processes we see their inner-workings as being foreign and not how our consciousness works. Finally, secondary revision's origins do not lie in the dream-thoughts, its due process is to make more order of what the rest of the dream-work has manifested from the dream thoughts.

So our terminal question now arises: Is there anything here that the production or evolution of a symbol can lend itself to this process of secondary revision. Well, it's either zero or near nil. Actually, in many ways, it could be seen as negative. Abstraction of a symbol's meaning typically increases, if at all, the longer the symbol is in use. And secondary revision is a mode of increasing intelligibility and logic to an otherwise disordered situation. Hence, we have movements in opposite directions.

9. Conclusion

In interpreting the images seen in **dreams** one must sometimes follow them from the beginning to the end and sometimes from the end to the beginning...—Artemidorus⁴

—But what about **hieroglyphics**. Utilizing the Rosetta Stone could be seen as a so-far failed attempt from the end (its phonetic quality) to the true meaning of hieroglyphics (its beginnings). What about my theory “from the beginning to the end?” Could there be actual promise here? Has it ever been done? Not to my knowledge!!!

When writing this article, it was quite fascinating to see how many times hieroglyphics comes up in the “Dream-Work” chapter. Numerous times. And numerous more in the rest of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Why you may ask? Because both puzzles—the mind's unconscious and how it manufactures dreams, and the complexity of one of man's greatest achievements, this being the

⁴Artemidourus was a dream interpreter who lived in the 2nd century AD.

written word, are both duly fascinating, complex and truly mind-blowing. Dreams are a product of the inner-workings of the mind. Hieroglyphics, as well any written or spoken word, or truly any human behavior has its roots within some depth of the mental realm. Everything human is enshrouded in the mind's paradigm. So taking both these "mind blowing" human achievements, the interpretation of dreams and hieroglyphics, and seeing what can be learned from one another is purely natural.

And perhaps this paper does hold some truth and perhaps it could lead to you, me or both of us to begin truly uncovering one of the greatest human mysteries to ever exist in a **beginning to end manner**.⁵

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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⁵Some readers have asked for other examples that fit into the theories presented here centering around the owl hieroglyphic. One that I feel fits these same requirements is the three choppy lines on top of one another. I believe that this may represent location—at or near the water. Once again, **linguistic economy** would be achieved.