THE ORACULAR CONFERENCE:
A TEXT-LINGUISTIC CASE STUDY
IN LATE EGYPTIAN

ARIEL SHISHA-HALEVY

The following discussion aims primarily at a tentative applica-
tion of explicit text-linguistic analytic procedure to a special Late
Egyptian corpus hitherto subjected but to superficial linguistic
attention, *viz.* the Egyptian oracular texts (here I shall examine
the Late Egyptian, not the Demotic evidence)[1]. However, a
secondary goal of this paper is to make a contribution towards an
aspect of a general theory of the dialogue: in viewing the texts
which constitute the discussed corpus as embryonic dialogue-forms,
I will attempt to explore some ideas for a schematic-typological
approach to defining and characterizing these dialogues in general.

0.1—2 CORPUS, TEXT, CONTEXT

0.1.1 Two corpuses are considered: (a) a large, homogenous,
contemporary collection of ostraca containing short oracular en-
quiries. These apparently constitute a special kind of performative
texts or *Koinzidenzfall* (to adopt the term coined by Koschmieder
1965: 26—34, 46f.), simultaneously forming the means of enquiry and
the enquiry itself — hence their drastic brevity. In most cases
a polar, yes/no (total or *rhematic*, see below) response-form is pre-
supposed, implicitly or explicitly, in the *form* of enquiry (which is
'answerable', see Lakoff 1973, or confirmable (texts 16—21, 23—4
below), but is not explicit in the text itself; (b) Papyri *recording*

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[1] In his *Untersuchungen* (1950—2), F. Hintze achieved an outstanding,
pioneering text-conscious account of Late-Egyptian grammatical systems,
an unparallelled work which has not been followed up and is indeed the only
application of any this approach to the grammatical (as distinct from *stylis-
tic*) description of phase of Egyptian. Still, having to struggle with elemen-
tary problems of Late Egyptian minimal-pattern grammar, Hintze's account
is not as methodologically meticulous as could be desired.

oracular proceedings, with the response (total or partial) explicit in the text. Each enquiry (corpus (a)) or enquiry-response (corpus (b)) unit is here defined as a TEXT, thereby precisely determining its points of initiation and termination.

0.1.2 SPECIMENS[2]

CORPUS (a), from Černý 1935, 1942, 1972:

TEXT (1) ≠*n iw.tw dit Sti r ḥm-ntr?* ≠ ≠ Will Seti be appointed priest ? ≠

(2) ≠*n ntf iṯз рзу tmз?* ≠ ≠ Is it he who stole this mat ? ≠

(3) ≠*n snḏ.w?* ≠ ≠ Will they be afraid ? ≠

(4) ≠*n bn-iw.f r ḏbw.f n.s?* ≠ ≠ Will he not return it to her ? ≠

(5) ≠*n bn-iw.s r dit n.i?* ≠ ≠ Will she not give me ? ≠

(6) ≠*Ḥr ḫpr im.f?* ≠ ≠ Is it Horus who is in him ? ≠

(7) ≠*n tm.i int.w?* ≠ ≠ Should I not fetch them ? ≠

(8) ≠*рзу.i nb nfr, ḏd.f tзy mdt n-mзˁt?* ≠ ≠ My good Lord, did he really say this thing ? ≠

(9) *ir nз ḳdw nty iw.tw ḥr ptr.w, nз-nfr.w?* ≠ ≠ As for the dreams which they will have, are they good ? ≠

(10) ≠*n i.ir.i tз mdt m-śs?* ≠ ≠ Did I do this thing well ? ≠

(11) ≠*n iṯз-sw nз rmṯ рз mśз?* ≠ ≠ Did the troops take it ? ≠

(12) ≠*n sw ˁ Nb-nfr?* ≠ ≠ Is it in the possession of Neb-nufer ? ≠

(13) ≠*n mn-m-di.s m-im.w?* ≠ ≠ Does she not have them ? ≠

(14) ≠*n bзw n зny-nḫt?* ≠ ≠ Is it the fury of Ani-nakht ? ≠

(15) ≠*nз Nḫt?* ≠ ≠ Is it Nakht ? ≠

(16) ≠*iṯз-sw rmṯ.* ≠ ≠ Somebody stole it. ≠

(17) ≠*śsp рзу ˁnḫ!* ≠ ≠ Accept this animal ! ≠

(18) ≠*nsy-sw Ms.* ≠ ≠ It belongs to Mes. ≠

(19) ≠*sw ˁ Iḫ-ntf.* ≠ ≠ It is in the possession of Akh-entef. ≠

(20) ≠*рз-(three) ḥry-mḏзy.* ≠ ≠ The three officers. ≠

(21) ≠*iw.f n Nsw-imn.* ≠ ≠ It will belong to Nes-amun. ≠

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[2] These are but representative: this will serve for the purpose of tentative theoretical exposition envisaged here.

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(22) #*n-biȝ*.# #No.#

(23) #*nȝ-nfr pȝ kȝ; šsp sw!*# #The bull is good; accept
it!#

(24) #*ir nȝ ḥbsw idd.k, m tȝ šri sš 'Imn-nḫt iiṯȝ-st?*# #As for
the clothes which you said, is it the scribe Amen-
nakht's daughter who stole them?#

CORPUS (b), from Barnes (1949), Blackman (1925, 1926), Daw-
son (1625):

TEXT (1) *m-ḏd*] #*mi n.i, pȝy.i nb nfr, ink ikd pȝ ḫnw?*
iw.f ḏd] *im pȝ ḫn . . . ʿn*# [*i.n.f*
saying:] #Come to me, my good Lord, is it I who am
to build the mansion?
and he said:] Give the mansion back . . . !# [said he

(2) #*twi wȝḥ.k m-bȝḥ 'Imn-ḥtp . . . iw.i sȝ.k iw.i int.k*
wḏȝ.tw# [ḫr.f
#I am placing you in the presence of Amen-hotp . . .
I will protect you, I will bring you back safe and
sound# [says he

(3) *ʿḥ'.n pȝ nṯr hȝnȝ r-wr sp 2 r-ḏd*] #*ntf i.iṯȝ-st*#
then the god nodded greatly, twice saying] #It is he
who stole them.#

(4) *sim.*] #*ʿḏȝ*#
sim.] #False.#

  0.2 Two environments and extra-sentential relationships are
distinguishable for these texts: (1) the textual one (*cotext*, Dressler
1973: 10 f.), zero for corpus (a), narrative (*i.e.* restricted) for (b);
(2) the extra-textual, situational context, the "external contex-
tualization" ("the worlds in which the text can appropriately be
used", Fillmore 1976): this is recoverable or inferable for cor-
pus (a), explicit in the textual environment for (b). In both cases
we are not ignorant of the pragmatics of the discourse situation,
nor of the operational technicalities of these texts.[3] The tension of
status difference obtaining between the applicant-allocutor and
oracle-addressee (*cf.*, albeit with essential differences, Karcevski
1941: 70 f.) is an all-important datum for the formulation of special
or definitional characteristics of this dialogue type; but probably

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[3] Important information may be found in Černý 1935, Blackman 1925,
1926.

the prime analytic fact is the textual environment: the zero-cotext of corpus (a). We have here text-homonymic sentences (Dressler 1973: 58, references in note 144), with the issue of extra-sentential cohesion rendered void, text-linguistic analysis here coinciding with minimal-pattern or sentence analysis; also, with the datum of zero cotextual dependence (boundness) we may observe an independent (or at least not textually relatable) characterization with regard to Functional Sentence Prespective and Communicative Dynamism: see below. True, all this may justly be considered disadvantageous for the purpose of *texture description;* still, it provides the ideal circumstances for the task in hand, which is the definition-oriented exposition of the microscopic intricacies of a textual type. The same holds true for the unambiguously bounded cotext in corpus (b) and the subdividing signals: text-initial *r-ḏd,* *m-ḏd* "saying:", text-final[4] *ḥr.f, i.n.f* "says he, said he". Both corpuses allow us consequently to isolate a neat minimum specimen of dialogue, one which I propose to put forth as a subspecies by its own right. Moreover, one notes, at least in corpus (a), that what we encounter is only one, the first — *allocutive* — component of the conventionally conceived dialogue; the second, the *response,* is not included in our cotext and information, and is irrelevant insofar as it has no contentual or semantic motivating bearing on the allocution, although the latter does presuppose, and must accommodate, its general *form* (it is worth noting here that yet another problem, the difficulty of positing a single thematic text-basis for a dialogic textual type — see Dressler 1973: 83 — is in our case elegantly obviated). All this, to borrow a laboratory phrase, increases as it were magnification and resolution, providing us with a microscopic view of an elementary and in a sense atomic constituent of the dialogue.

1.1 THE DIALOGUE: MACRO- AND MICROSTRUCTURES

It is obvious and by now generally agreed that the casual, over-simplifying diohotomic divisions of grammatically relevant discourse types (*e.g.* E. Benveniste's *histoire* vs. *discourse,* H. Wein-

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[4] *Cf.* the text-final signals in a corpus (similar to our corpus (a)) of oracular texts from Egyptian Greek sources (edited by Schubart in *ZÄS* 67 (1931) 110—115).

rich's *erzählte* vs. *besprochene* Welt) is far from adequate or exhaustive; but equally idealizing (even if equally serviceable as a practical first step) is the concept of the incomplexity, or monolithic nature of such a conventionally defined type as the dialogue. Some linguists (Sandig 1972, Werlich 1975) consider 'dialogicity' (or sim.) to be a characterizing category cutting across several different real types of discourse; but even among those who do see the dialogue as a distinct textual *Gattung* (as do Posner 1972, Hausenblas 1964: 74 f., with multiple sub-categorization, and of course numerous matter-of-fact references to the "dialogue" in the course of text-grammatical and sentence-grammatical discussions), the tendency is to treat it as a compact entity, or at least to underplay its inner complexity. The dialogue is often used as a basis for the definition of "independent" (sometimes even "normal", "elementary") sentence-forms (*e.g.* in Karcevski 1941: 68 f., Fillmore 1976: 91): this is understandable, even justifiable, as the dialogue, or at least its *allocution* component, does seem to contain a full or maximal system. Still, this (with no proper qualification) means obscuring the true inner structure of the dialogue: while macrostructurally it may appear a uniform textual entity, e.g. externally or when opposed to a narrative texteme (see Mistrík 1978), a close microsyntactic examination would prove its texture to consist of two sub-systems, one *allocutive* (*cf.* the tagmemic school's 'initiation'), the other, marked by more exclusive feature, *responsive* or *apocritic*. Obviously, the two are independent, combinable in an *alternating discourse* (Hausenblas' term, 1964: 74 f., after Paul's *Wechselrede*, Paul 1920: §219), which is again an ideal case. It is this interdependence which constitutes the unity (Hausenblas 1964: 75) or cohesion factor of this textual type: when one grammatical component or another in the reponse constituent are realized by zero, as is very frequently the case in both colloquial and literary documentation, this only serves to enhance the closely-knit texture of the macrostructure. There is however no escaping the fact that in many languages the two constituent parts belong to (at least partly) distinct grammatical systems: note the apocritic verb-forms in Nubian and Amharic (Armbruster 1960: §4608, 6102—7, Goldenberg 1966: 3 ff.), the Celtic 'responsive' (*'Antwortform'*), a syntactic and morphosyntactic category (Wagner 1959: 223—231, Greene 1972); the so-called ellipse (selective zero-realization) is of course characteristic of the response constituent: re-

138

sponse-forms exhibit this and other cohesion-exponent features (Halliday—Hasan 1076: 137 ff., 'substitution', and 206—217; Morgan 1973; Schmidt—Radefeldt 1978). Consider also Karcevski's *phrase-réponse* (1941: 69) and the classification in Fries 1978. Other phenomena, such as interrogation exponents, response-soliciting signals, address, command and appeal modalities, performative speech features are exclusive to or typical of the allocution system. It goes without saying that, although in many cases the two systems overlap or coincide, it is just in the allocution: response disparities that one must look for clues for the characterization, micro- and macrosyntactic, of the dialogue.

1.2 In corpus (a) of the texts here analyzed we observe most often the realization of the *allocutive* system, but occasionally also the responsive one *alone* (*e.g.* Nos 9, 16, 23): these instances may be interpreted either as *réponse totale* forms (Frei 1968), put before the addressee to be endorsed in some way or other, or as tagged unmarked questions: (16) "Somebody stole it, (isn't it so? didn't they?)". In corpus (b) both substructures are sometimes explicit, giving us an idea of their full concatenation, which, in our texts, is the simplest possible alternation.

2. THE ORACULAR CONFERENCE:
PRIMARY OR DEFINITION CHARACTERISTICS

In setting out to define the dialogue sub-species here examined, we observe the following four basic traits, all unvarying throughout the evidence, all cumulatively constituting a type-definition:[5]

2.1 First and foremost, it is significant that the system abstractable here coincides with that in evidence for the Late-Egyptian dialogue macrostructure: this alone would determine the overall affinity of the texts in hand.

2.1.1 To mention but a few of the grammatical phenomena featured in this system (amongst which one must of course count the immediately observable use of *interlocutive* reference items, vocatives, imperatives, interrogation and address signals):[6] the

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[5] According to Posner's classification ours is a one-sided, reactive dialogue (Posner 1972: 192 ff., 195 f.) — which would still be far from adequate characterization.

[6] See Hintze (1950—2: 161 ff.).

so-called "emphatic" forms and their constructions, being in fact nominalized (thematization) forms of the verb, and constructed with a sequent adverbial as rheme and focus[7] — see (10); likewise the Cleft Sentence patterns with a nominal/pronominal rheme preceding a nominalized (relative or participial) verbal theme (corpus (a) Nos 2, 6, (b) No. 1). Also exclusive to the full system exhibited by the dialogue are the special nominal predication (Nos 14—15) and adverbial predication (12, 19) patterns, and obviously non-narrative tense-forms ((a): 1, 3, 4, 5, 7 etc., (b): 1, 2, 3).

2.1.1.1 Note in this connection that all three most important Functional Sentence Perspective/Communicative Dynamism intra-sentential, morphological/syntactic features of Late-Egyptian Grammar are included in this system and represented in our specimen texts: the "emphatic" verbal thematization forms (for an adverbial rheme); the Egyptian version of a Cleft Sentence pattern, with a nominal/pronominal rheme preceding a nominalized verbal theme (see Halliday 1967: 236 ff.); and the marked (non-verbal) nominal theme (our Nos 9, 24; Halliday 1967: 213, 219 ff., 226: 'thematic foregrounding' and 'theme prominence'). All are excluded from truly narrative stretches.

In view of the zero context-dependence of our texts, we may take these FSP/CD features as referable to the same situational warranty of presupposition (related to the omniscience of the *plus habens* divine addressee) that must needs justify all other exponents of presupposed information (or 'givenness') in the texts (see below): that is to say, the addresse of the enquiry assumes complete familiarity of the addressee with every possible background or extrasentential relationship of the explicit text. Everything but the (occasionally very limited) focus is stated, and often formally marked, as *given:* note extreme cases such as No. (22). This peculiar circumstance alone could furnish a cogent idiosyncratic characterization of our kind of dialogue.

2.2 This dialogue is *one-way* (applicant → oracle) and *irreversible:* note this affinity with another relatively uncommon dialogue subspecies, *viz.* the *rhetoric address.*

2.3 The oracular conference is *unique,* non-recurring in one and the same text — initial and final.

[7] See, among other accounts, Frandsen 1974: §85—92.

2.4 Technically, this dialogue is *mediate:* this is related to its peculiar interpersonal environment, the operators of enquiry and response being on different levels. The initiative lies invariably with the applicant (allocutor): consequently, we can be sure that our text-initial is truly initial.

2.5 It is here suggested that these special criteria be viewed as simplificatory circumstances, — both in the sense of "excluding unessentialities" and of "abstracting" — in the realization, and analysis, of a dialogue form; consequently, that the form taken here be considered a minimal or *elemental* (embryonic) variant of more complex and extended dialogue types.

2.6 *En passant,* it may be rewarding to note the existence of several modern or less esoteric (though sometimes hardly less specialized) instances of the textual type determined above. Cases in point are: various *information-eliciting* questions with their responses (enquiries after the time, places — and ways to reach them, prices, *etc.*), formal or ceremonial questions and responses (*e.g.* in a marriage rite, in initiation ceremonies), various procedures in man-machine transactions, from "enquiries" put to a calculator up to computer input-to-output limited proceedings; also, question-naire or formularies of various kinds with a formulated series of enquiries, the response to which is the text filled-in in the slots provided. All these cases qualify as one-way and non-recurring (although some could be repeated, seriated or extended; and only some are mediate).

3. We are now in need of some way or ways of classifying or achieving a typology for our texts. One could adopt any of the various ingenious methods suggested *e.g.* in Gülich—Raible 1972, by Sanding (positive-negative characterization according to several communicative categories or properties) or Weinrich (a 'text-partiture' matrix made up of numerous binary characterizations applied to every segment of a text—every text, in our case). We could start with truth-finctional *(affirmative : negative)* indi-cation, the negative member of the category being further sub-divided into *modal (tm-)* or *mode-indifferent (bn-),* a distinction to be applied to the affirmative counterparts too; then, *modulation:* declarative statements, interrogation: note that we have here only the 'Bestätigungsfrage' type (*polar* question, Frei's *inter-rogation totale,* for which I would also suggest the term '*thematic* question', since in the analysis of the whole allocution-response

complex this sort of question can be considered the theme for which the answer is the rheme; see Dressler 1974: 91 ff., Grimes 1975: 325, 338 ff., and *cf.* Gabelenz 1901: 369 "Das Gehörte verhält sich zu dem weiter Erwarteten, wie ein Subject zu seinem Prädicate").[8] However, the most telling classification in my opinion, at least from the textual-analytic point of view, is one taking into account the *informational text perspective:* the contextual information index or parameter, being in the text the ratio of *information presupposed* (i.e. presupposed as given, in the sense of Allerton's "givenness", Allerton 1968: 136 ff.: the allocutor's assumption of the addressee's awareness) to *information rendered,* with consideration of their grammatical realization. It is reference items (Halliday 1967: 206), pronouns (including demonstrative and the def. article) and proper names that most characteristically represent the information, their reference-group, as presupposed: see for instance Nos 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (corpus (a)). Nevertheless, the basic layer of presupposition is that of the very validity of situation for the thematic basis of the texts: in No. 1 (a), for example, the very question of appointing someone — and then *Seti* — as priest, even if we do not include the existential issues in our thematic text basis. In the text, a zero (*i.e.* negative rendering) may indicate the presupposed information (*cf.* the object in No. 5, the pronominal subject in Nos 14—15). The definite article, which usually represents the information presupposed, may occasionally be linearly conditioned, hence irrelevant to the informational text perspective opposition (so in Nos 9, 24). Other kinds of deictics may also be exponents of this presupposition (Nos 2, 17). Exponents of the 'information rendered' constituent are primarily the predicates, *i.e.* rhemes, adnominal and adverbal adjuncts (*e.g.* in Nos 9, 24). A characterization scale of the IP : IR ratio would be gradated between maximal (in our specimen selection, No. 24) and minimal (Nos 14, 15, 22?) information rendering, or, inversely, minimal— maximal presupposition. A grid of all the criteria, adding others

[8] The characterization of the texts in corpus (a) as 'answerable' must here be qualified: a special attested (if uncommon) option is an explicit *response-form* in the enquiry slot; or, to put it structurally, enquiry and response-forms merged/neutralized in the dialogue complex. Pragmatically, the enquirer puts, as it were, the preformed response (instead of the allocution) before the divine addressee for endorsement or rejection (Nos 20, 22, 23). In corpus (b) we have either the complete allocution-respose structure (1), or the response alone (2—4).

such temporal categories, would display the grammatical particularization as well as the diversity image of the corpus (which far exceeds the specimen given here). A contrastive dimension would be introduced by comparing the Egyptian grids with ones based on Greek oracular corpuses (*e.g.* those of Delphi, Dodona, Graeco—Egyptian oracles).

4. By way of conclusion, let me reiterate my conviction that it is only by means of microsyntactic examination within the framework of a macrostructure that a valid understanding (both in the sense of system resolution and of type definition) of a given text can be achieved. Applied to a dialogic text, this (on its own banal) principle must mean the consistently separate treatment of both its substructures. The benefit of a description of a corpus such as that here discussed would be twofold: first, and foremost in the case of an as yet inadequately charted language such as Egyptian, gaining an insight into a precisely defined grammatical system which is after all one that can be taken as the most differentiated, representing most categories, and (if only by definition) the primary among the numerous *systèmes de grammaires* in the language; secondly, such a study must merit general-linguistic and methodological attention for its lessons and contributions towards the definition or grammatical judgement of a textual type.

ARIEL SHISHA-HALEVY
Department of Linguistics
The Hebrew University
JERUSALEM
ISRAEL

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143

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