# Research projects

## Everyday Writing in Graeco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt
### Outline of a new research programme*

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In October 2017, the European Research Council awarded a Starting Grant to Klaas Bentein for his project *EVWRIT: Everyday writing in Graeco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt: A socio-semiotic study of communicative variation*. In what follows, the research goals, methodology, and corpus of this new project are briefly outlined.[1]

### Introduction

As its title indicates, the focus of the ERC-funded project 'Everyday writing in Graeco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt: A socio-semiotic study of communicative variation' is on non-literary, 'documentary' texts. These texts, which range from scrap papers, shopping lists, and tax receipts on the one hand to marriage contracts, official petitions, and imperial edicts on the other, have been preserved in great number in Egypt's dry climate, especially in the period ranging from the fourth century BCE until the eighth century CE (that is, from the conquests of Alexander the Great until the Arab conquest of Egypt). Recent research has stressed the pervasive nature of writing during this period.[2] Whereas earlier accounts took a 'minimalist' stance towards literacy rates,[3] recent studies have nuanced this view, shifting the terms of the debate to focus on the social environments, in which written texts are embedded. Nowadays, it is recognized that a society as a whole can be literate, even when most of its members aren't: so, for example, MacDonald states that a literate society can be defined as one in which reading and writing have become essential to its functioning, either throughout the society, or in certain vital aspects (such as religious life, the bureaucracy, economic activities, etc.).[4] Bagnall argues that

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1 For more information, see our project website: <http://www.evwrit.ugent.be>.
2 See e.g. Jördens 2011.
3 See e.g. Harris 1989.
4 MacDonald 2005, 49.

Late Antique Egypt formed such a literate society, most adults being participants in a system in which writing was constantly used.[5] Those who did not have the ability to write had a variety of strategies to cope with this literate system: they could contact a professional scribe, or rely on their private networks (relatives, friends, neighbors, or the village school teacher).

One of the key characteristics of documentary texts is that they are varied in external appearance. Just to give some examples: they are mainly written in Greek, which had become the common language or *koinè*, but other languages, such as Latin, Coptic, and Arabic are also attested. They use a variety of linguistic registers, ranging from very formal, archaic language, to informal, every-day language. They are mainly written on papyrus, but writers also used other writing materials including potsherd, wood, linen, leather, and parchment. Their handwriting ranges from slow and calligraphic to very fast and cursive. The choice for one or more of these external features had a serious impact on the message of the text.[6] Whereas a number of ongoing research projects[7] have started drawing attention to material aspects of texts[8] and their contexts of production, there have been no large-scale, systematic studies of the social significance of external textual features.

It is precisely this aspect that our project will focus on: since elements such as handwriting, linguistic register, and writing material transmit indirect social messages concerning hierarchy, status, and power relations, we argue that they constitute 'semiotic resources'.[9] Our key hypothesis is that the expression of social meaning is enabled through 'communicative variation', that is, variation that is functionally insignificant but socially significant (e.g. *there are ~ there's ~ it's* a lot of people), across multiple semiotic resources. The main aim is to analyse the nature of this communicative variation in an inter-disciplinary fashion.

## 1. Social Semiotics

Theoretically, our project is embedded in the framework of Social Semiotics.[10] This relatively new theoretical framework attempts 'to describe and un-

5   Bagnall 2011.
6   As noted by Sijpesteijn with regard to Arab letters: 'the external features of the text were as important as the contents in establishing their authority', see Sijpesteijn 2013, 257.
7   Such as Martti Leiwo's 'Acts of the Scribe', see <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/actofscribe/>, and Rodney Ast's 'Antique Letters as a Means of Communication', see <https://www.materiale-textkulturen.org/subproject.php?tp=A02&up=>.
8   For a recent edited volume on this topic, see Hoogendijk and Van Gompel 2018.
9   See e.g. Jewitt 2009.
10  See e.g. van Leeuwen 2005.

derstand how people produce and communicate meaning in specific social settings'.[11] Broadly speaking, three strands of research can be distinguished within Social Semiotics: (i) *Socio-linguistics*, which analyses the relationship between language and its social context, (ii) *Critical Discourse Analysis*, which looks into the relationship between language and power relations/ideology, and (iii) *Multi-modality*, which investigates the relationship between the different 'modes' we use to make meaning, including visual, gestural, musical, choreographic etc. resources. It is our intention to combine the first and the third strands of research: we want to analyse how linguistic, but also other types of variation, can be related to the social context, and how these different modes are related to each other.

By combining these two strands of research, our aim is to develop a new approach towards communication practices in antiquity. Whereas sociolinguistics has been applied to texts from the past (under the heading of '*historical* socio-linguistics'[12]), there have been no applications of multimodality to antiquity: for example, one textbook is explicitly entitled 'Multimodality. A social semiotic approach to *contemporary* communication'.[13] An important point of convergence between sociolinguistics and multimodality, and a practical starting point for this project, can be found in the work of M.A.K. Halliday. While being a linguist, Halliday at an early stage recognized that 'there are many other modes of meaning, in any culture, which are outside the realm of language'; he noted that these other 'modes' are 'all bearers of meaning in the culture. Indeed we can define a culture as a set of semiotic systems, as a set of systems of meaning, all of which interrelate'.[14]

One of Halliday's key insights is that communication is not only multimodal, but also polyfunctional: Halliday postulates three kinds of meaning, called 'ideational' (construing our experience of the world and our consciousness, e.g. 'pen' = instrument for writing), 'textual' (organizing discourse and creating continuity and flow in texts, e.g. 'I love music, so I will go to the festival', *so* indicating a consequential relationship between two clauses), and 'interpersonal' (enacting personal and social relations, e.g. 'I might go', *might* indicating probability of realization).[15] These three types of meaning can be systematically related to three major contextual variables, known as 'field' (what the discourse is about), 'mode' (the ways in which interactants come into contact), and 'tenor' (the interactants and their relationship) respective-

11  Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 (1996), 266.
12  See e.g. Conde-Silvestre and Hernandez-Campoy 2012.
13  Kress 2010; our emphasis.
14  Halliday 1978, 4.
15  The last of these three types corresponds to what we have called 'social meaning' so far.

ly, so that field corresponds to the ideational function, mode to the textual function, and tenor to the interpersonal function. Each of these contextual variables can be further specified (in terms of the social parameters that are traditionally recognized in socio-linguistics), which enables very detailed investigation of how different types of meaning are established.

An important distinction that is made in studies of social semiotics, multimodality in particular, is that between 'intra-semiosis', the making of meaning *within* semiotic resources, and 'inter-semiosis', the making of meaning *across* semiotic resources.[16] This distinction corresponds to the project's two major research goals.

## 2. Intra-semiosis

The first major goal is to outline which semiotic resources play a role in documentary texts from Graeco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt, and to describe the 'semiotic' potential of each resource, that is, its inventory of communicative variants and the social meaning these variants carry. We hypothesize that the relevant semiotic resources can be situated along two major dimensions or 'modes', that is, the 'verbal' mode and the 'visual-graphological' mode.[17]

## 2.1 The verbal mode

Rather than taking into account all of the languages attested in our corpus (that is, Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Arabic), we will investigate the verbal mode through an in-depth analysis of Ancient Greek, which is the language used in the majority of the documents.

The conquest by Alexander the Great marked a crucial moment in Egypt's linguistic history: Greek became established as the language of power and administration, which it continued to be until the Arab conquests in the seventh century. However, the Greek that was used in Egypt and elsewhere was not that of the Classical writers. As the common language of a great number of speakers, Greek underwent a quite fundamental restructuring: the optative was lost, the perfect and future tense disappeared, word order changed, vocabulary was extended through derivation and borrowing, etc.[18] Documentary papyri form one of the prime witnesses of these linguistic changes. Surprisingly, however, relatively little linguistic research has been done on this corpus after the initial breakthrough by Deissmann and his followers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which definitively changed the study of Post-classical Greek, and culminated in Mayser's Grammar of the Ptolemaic papyri.[19] As

16  See e.g. Lim 2004, 220–221.
17  Compare Matthiessen 2007, 24–25.
18  See e.g. Horrocks 2010.
19  Mayser 1926–1938.

Evans and Obbink have observed, these 'linguistic resources of extraordinary richness … have hardly begun to be explored'.[20] We intend to rectify this situation by performing an in-depth lexicological and morpho-syntactic analysis of the texts.

Next to the analysis of the 'ideational' and 'textual' functions of linguistic features (the syntax and semantics, so to say), our main point of attention will be the 'interpersonal' (social) functions of these features: in many cases, variant constructions were in use at the same time, each with different social values. Lee, for example, notes that the difference in choice between the 'order words' προστάσσω, ἐντέλλομαι, and κελεύω 'are of connotation, not of lexical meaning'.[21] Similarly, in the field of syntax, Bentein has drawn attention to the correlation that seems to exist between complementation patterns and formality.[22] Our project aims to uncover such social correlations (connotations) in a more systematic way, and on a much larger scale.

## 2.2 The visual-graphological mode

For the visual-graphological mode, diverse semiotic resources will be taken into account: typography,[23] writing material, and document format. Whereas visual elements such as paintings, drawings, and photographs have received much attention in socio-semiotic research, paralinguistic aspects such as typography have been considered of lesser importance. Even less attention has been paid to material aspects of writing such as writing material and document format.

Papyrological studies have drawn some attention to the social importance of these resources. Typography has undoubtedly received the most attention: the study of visual-graphological elements has a longstanding tradition in studies of Antiquity, where it is known as '(papyrological) palaeography'. Palaeographers, however, mainly paid attention to Greek and Latin texts. Our project will also include Arabic and Coptic texts, which have received much less scholarly attention, and study the interaction between these different types of texts. Moreover, palaeographers tend to focus on the micro-level (that is, letterforms); our project will also look into macro-level elements such as the number of lines, the length of lines, symmetrical vs. wavering lines, etc. Writing material and especially document format have been given much less attention; document format in particular is a completely new semiotic re-

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20  Evans and Obbink 2010, 2.
21  Lee 2012, 3.
22  See e.g. Bentein 2017.
23   Whereas the term 'typography' is sometimes associated with printed text, it is now increasingly being used 'to refer to the visual organisation of written language however it is produced', Walker 2001, 2.

source, which was first hinted at by Fournet and has recently received a more in-depth treatment by Sarri.[24]

Again, the intention is to make an inventory of meaning-making features for each of the above-mentioned semiotic resources. Rather than studying their ideational and textual meaning, however, the purpose will be to directly connect features to the interpersonal dimension, and to analyse how they create social meaning. Whereas a number of interesting preliminary observations have been made, a detailed and systematic investigation of such correlations has yet to be undertaken.

### 2.3 At the interface between the verbal and visual-graphological modes

As a last part of the intra-semiotic subproject, the role of language choice and orthography as semiotic resources will also be taken into account. Language choice and orthography are situated in between the verbal and the visual-graphological modes. They are obviously related to the verbal dimension; however, their immediate realization is a visual-graphological matter: for example, each of the languages that is attested in our corpus is attested with a specific script. As with the visual-graphological resources, we will make an inventory of meaning-making features, and analyse how these can be connected to the social context.

Since orthography is such a broad topic, the project will focus specifically on Ancient Greek. The orthography of Post-classical and Byzantine Greek papyri has been quite well studied in the past.[25] Since, however, the primary interest of these studies is phonological change, they pay very little attention to the normative, interpersonal dimension of orthographic choice, a topic which has come under renewed attention elsewhere.[26] Moreover, these studies mostly concentrate on *unlicensed*, innovative orthographic variants: in our corpus, one also finds licensed variants, all of which were socially accepted, but which seem to have carried distinct social values.

For language choice, the inventory is much more limited. However, the situation is more complicated than it may seem because of the phenomenon of 'code switching': in some documents, two languages/scripts are used interchangeably; moreover, multiple scripts are sometimes used in one and the same document for one language. It has been suggested that such practices carry social meaning, but much more investigation is needed, through a careful analysis of such code-switching passages.

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24　Fournet 2007; Sarri 2018, 87–113.
25　We have Theodorsson 1977 for the Ptolemaic period, and Gignac 1978 for the Roman and Byzantine periods
26　See e.g. Sebba 2007.

### 3. Intra-semiosis

The second major goal of our project is to study the interrelationship between different semiotic resources: whereas each of the semiotic resources described above can be said to 'make meaning', ultimately the meaning of the text as a complex sign depends on the interrelationship of these different dimensions. Whereas the interrelationship between different semiotic resources forms one of the central areas of current multimodal research, it still forms a theoretical challenge. So far, little attention has gone to the interrelationship between the verbal and visual-graphological modes; moreover, virtually no studies have focused on the interpersonal (social) dimension, as this project does. Papyrologists have made a number of intriguing observations about the joint expression of meaning: they have observed connections between *document format and typography*;[27] *typography and language/script*;[28] *linguistic register and typography*;[29] *language/script and writing material*;[30] *writing material and typography*;[31] etc. So far, however, these correlations have not been further explored.

Our project aims to offer a more comprehensive analysis. In particular, we will measure the strength of co-occurrence between semiotic features and specific social parameters, analysing for example which features are pragmatically salient when it comes to the expression of social distance. Whereas the main focus will be on convergent features, in other words, intersemiotic complementarity,[32] the occurrence of divergent features will also be looked into. Next to this, we will also investigate the existence of larger patterns of co-occurrence, through multi-variate statistical methods. A central concept in this regard is that of 'register' (which can be defined as 'a variety according to use'; contrast with a 'variety according to user' such as dialect): while this notion is well known in linguistic studies, in other fields, such as typography, it is much less well known. We will not only apply the notion of 'register' to these new fields, but also develop the concept of 'multi-modal' registers,[33] that is, registers across semiotic resources. A second, related concept which can be applied to our corpus is that of 'genre'. Genres, which form stable patterns of register configurations, provide the analyst with an alternative, more direct way of investigating the occurrence of multiple semiotic features.

27  See e.g. Fournet 2007, 360.
28  See e.g. Cromwell 2010, 228.
29  Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 43.
30  See e.g. Bagnall 2011, 76.
31  See e.g. Sijpesteijn 2007, 517.
32  See e.g. Royce 2007.
33  See e.g. Matthiessen 2007.

## 4. Corpus and database

In order to study communicative variation in a comprehensive way, our project focuses on Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Arabic documentary texts from the Roman and Late Antique period (first to eighth century CE). Whereas previously documentary texts could only be accessed in printed works, nowadays full access to the documentary texts has become easy, thanks to a number of initiatives in Digital Humanities such as Papyri.Info[34] and Trismegistos.[35] Regrettably, however, there are different databases for Graeco-Latin, Coptic and Arabic texts, attesting to disciplinary fragmentation within the field of papyrology. Moreover, each of these different databases presents information at different levels of detail: for example, for Graeco-Latin papyri, full texts are much more often available than is the case for Arabic and especially Coptic papyri; the same is true for digital images. For this reason, we are currently collaborating with the Trismegistos team to develop a database which brings together documentary texts from these different research traditions. We not only intend to consistently input all metadata, but also to add several annotation layers, including morpho-syntax, lexis & orthography, typography, materiality, text structure, and languages. By 2023, we hope to have completely annotated a focus corpus of about 5,000 texts coming from a number of sites in Middle Egypt for all of these different types of information. At the end of the project, all data will become freely available online through a dedicated website.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth briefly outlining some of the main areas where our project hopes to make an impact. First, by offering a holistic perspective towards the meaning of documentary texts, we hope to shift the attention from the literal meaning of the text, towards the social meaning that it conveys. Second, the new digital tool that we are developing will open up new ways to investigate Ancient texts: it will allow researchers to annotate texts with multiple layers of information, and to retrieve different types of information. It will thus complement existing initiatives in the field of digital humanities. Third, our project will make an important contribution to current socio-semiotic research: it will unlock a large new field of research, since documents from Antiquity have never been studied from this perspective; it will investigate a number of semiotic resources which have received very little attention so far, such as handwriting, writing material, and document format; and it will reveal the interplay between the different semiotic resources in a detailed

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34   See <https://papyri.info>.
35   See <https://www.trismegistos.org/>.

way. Fourth and finally, by combining the frameworks of multimodality and socio-linguistics in a novel way, this project will make a significant theoretical contribution, developing the new field of *Historical Social Semiotics*.

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