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LingAeg – Studia Monographica: Recent Publications and Backlist

Appellative Paronomasia and Polysemy in the *Tale of Sinuhe*

Scott B. Noegel¹

Abstract

This brief study details a number of hitherto unrecognized cases of paronomasia and one case of polysemy in the *Tale of Sinuhe* that allude to names that play prominent roles in the story. The devices constitute a sustained literary strategy that ties Sinuhe to the distant places to which he traveled during his self-imposed exile, even as they provide additional evidence for the story's literary craft and the author's knowledge of Syro-Canaanite idioms and culture.

Key words: Canaan, Itti-tawy, Kizzu, Phoenicia, Qatna, Qedem, Retenu, Sutean, Temhi.

Egyptian texts abound in paronomasia and polysemy of all sorts.² One can cite numerous examples of these devices that reflect upon, allude to, or exegete the names of gods, peoples, or toponyms. Elsewhere I have labeled this type of device “appellative paronomasia/polysemy.”³ I could offer numerous examples to demonstrate, but I shall suffice with a well-known example of appellative paronomasia from the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, in which the survivor recalls his voyage: *ph.n=n phwy w3w3t sn.n=n snmwt* “We have reached Wawat's wake, we have gone by Bigga” (ll. 8–10).⁴ Here the word *ph* “reach” and *phwy* “wake (lit. end)” resound each other, as do *sn* “go by” and *snmwt* “Bigga.”

In this brief note, I should like to draw attention to several cases of appellative paronomasia and one case of polysemy in the *Tale of Sinuhe* that similarly allude to places and people that play prominent roles in the story. I contend that the devices constitute a sustained literary strategy that connects Sinuhe to the many places on his journey in order to underscore his acculturation to and from nomadic life. They also reveal something of the author's literary craft and knowledge of Syro-Canaanite idioms and culture.⁵

Before moving to said cases, a brief word on method is perhaps in order, lest some confuse the apodictic style with which I author this contribution with a lack of awareness with

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2 See especially by Guglielmi (1984), (1986), (1996); Loprieno (2000), (2001).

3 Noegel (forthcoming).

4 I adopt the translation of Allen (2015: 10), who captures the device. For additional examples in this text, see Rendsburg (2000); Noegel (forthcoming).

5 Important works on these topics include: Grapow (1952); Brunner (1955); Foster (1980); Fischer-Elfert (1996: 198–199); Parkinson (1997: 21–53); Jay (2010).

the potential pitfalls in positing the existence of paronomasia and polysemy in Egyptian texts. Two points, I hope, will make my position clear. First, while a healthy discussion concerning the actual phonemic values of Egyptian consonants might, for some, impede an investigation of devices based on sound, it is important to remember that most sound devices also operate visually.⁶ So while one might debate how close in sound two words might have been, the use of the same consonants in each word ties them together visually as well. Second, while imposing eisegetic readings onto ancient texts is always a potential risk, I find that we run an even greater risk when we do not call attention to potential examples of the literary sophistication of ancient authors. Moreover, when the devices follow patterns of theme and usage, as I show below, the likelihood that they were employed deliberately seems assured.

The first case occurs in B 29, in which Sinuhe recounts: *fh.n=i r kpn y hs.n=i r kdm* “I set out for Byblos. I came near to Qedem.”⁷ Here the past tense of the verb *fh.n* “set out” suggests the word *fnh.w* “Phoenicia,” the very region in which one finds Byblos. The author employs this paronomasia again in Sinuhe’s complaint: *rdwy=i fh.n=sn sms ib wrd* “my feet are unstable, my mind (heart) seeks rest” (B 170). It is unclear here whether the consonants *fnh* should be read *fh.n* “they were unstable” or as an intransitive verb with the dative *fh.n* “unstable with regard to,” because the *n* was written before the determinative, but either way the consonants paronomastically suggest *fnh.w* “Phoenicia.”⁸ In B 190, we hear it yet again, this time in the king’s decree in which he describes Sinuhe’s aged state: *fh.n=k b33st* “You have lost virility” (B 190). These cases of paronomasia anticipate Sinuhe’s later description of his majesty’s decree that references the ruler of the land of Phoenicia (*fnh.w*)” (B 221). Bolstering the connection is the fact that *fnh.w* “Phoenicia” possesses the linen string determinative (𐀀) that also appears with the verb *fh*, whether read as “set out,” “be unstable,” or “lose.”

We find another case of paronomasia in Sinuhe’s explanation for his flight: *ii.n=i m mšc t3 tmh w whm=tw n=i ib=i 3d.w* “when I returned from the expedition (to) the land of Temhi, it was repeated to me, and my heart palpitated” (B 38–39). Note how the verb “repeat” in the passive construction (*whm=tw*) is a virtual anagram of the name *tmh w* “Temhi.”

Sinuhe later recollects: *iw hk3 pn n (r)tnw di=firy=i rnpwt š3 m βsw n mšc=fh3s.t nb.t rwt.n=i r=s iw ir.n=i hd^c=i im=s* “this ruler of Retenu caused me to spend many years as commander of his army. Every foreign land I went away from, once I made my attack in it” (B 100–103). Observe how the verb *rwt.n* “marched” paronomastically suggests *rtnw* “Retenu,” which Sinuhe had just named.⁹ The author could not have achieved the allusion without employing the past relative form of the verb *rwi*.¹⁰




6 For a useful caution concerning paronomasia in Egyptian texts, see Müller (forthcoming). I thank the author for making the review available to me through the editors of *Lingua Aegyptia*.

7 Schneider (2002: 261–262), suggests we read not Qedem, but Qatna. The translation does not negate the paronomasia operative here.

8 Gardiner (1916: 62), sees it as an error. Allen (2015: 128–129), translates *fnh.w* as “the woodworks” and discusses the difficulty of the reading. Parkinson (1997: 38), renders simply “Fenkhu.” Regardless of the interpretation, the paronomasia obtains.

9 Retenu is consistently written (*r*)*tnw* rather than *rtnw*.

10 Gardiner (1916: 43).

In B 107, we find another case of appellative paronomasia. Here Sinuhe recounts how success in battle earned him allegiance from the tribal leader: *mr.n=f wi rḥ.n=f ḳn.n=i* “He loved me. He acknowledged that I was strong (B 107). The past tense verbal construction *ḳn.n* constitutes a paronomastic allusion to *ḳn n* “Canaan.” Manuscript B is especially interesting in this regard as it records the determinative  before the past tense marker (unlike the H recension).¹¹ When one considers that the sign  is sometimes written with the arm sign , which of course, also doubles as the sound /ʕ/, the visual allusion to Canaan becomes even stronger.¹² Moreover, scholars have shown that the entire pericope of the battle that ensues immediately afterwards employs motifs found in Northwest Semitic literature.¹³

Paronomasia also appears in Sinuhe’s letter to the pharaoh in which he reports: *rḥ=t(w) wʕrt tn irt.n b3k im m ḥm=f* “This flight your servant did, in his ignorance, is known” (B 205). In this passage, one cannot help but hear the name *rtnw* “Retenu” repeated twice in the phrase *wʕrt tn irt.n* “this flight [...] did.” Since Sinuhe’s flight took him to Retenu the paronomasia is apposite.



The aforementioned list of places that Sinuhe cites in the king’s decree also refers to *ḥntiws m ḥnti kšw* “Ḥantawattish from the south of Kizzu” (B 219–220).¹⁴ Paronomasia obtains in this passage by way of *ḥnti kšw* “south of Kizzu,” which repeats the consonants found in the Luwian word for “ruler” *ḥntiws* “Ḥantawattish.”¹⁵

Two more cases of toponymic paronomasia appear when Sinuhe tells the king that he had not intended to flee: *wʕrt tn irt.n b3k n ḥmt=(tw)=s nn s(y) m ib=i n ḳmd=i s(y)* “this flight that (your) servant did; it was not planned. It was not in my mind. I did not plot it” (B 223–224). The first again takes advantage of the phrase *wʕrt tn irt.n* “this flight [...] did” to resound “Retenu” twice. The second exploits the verb *ḳmd* “plot” to suggest the name *ḳdm* Qedem, which appears earlier (B 29, 182, 219). Since Sinuhe’s references to Qedem, Retenu, and Phoenicia are still fresh in the mind of the reader/listener, the allusions are difficult to miss. Indeed, as Alan Gardiner remarks:

the places that Sinuhe does name must have possessed some meaning and interest for Egyptian ears; this is certainly true of Retenu, and is probably true of Kedme, a word of which the literal meaning could not fail to be known to anyone with the least smattering of a Semitic tongue.¹⁶

It is probably no accident that when Qedem first appears, it follows immediately after the verb *ḥs* “approach, draw near” (B 29), the very meaning of the Semitic verb *qdm*.¹⁷ In fact,

11 Gardiner (1916: 44), sees the writing in manuscript B as a mistake.

12 In fact,  appears as a determinative for *mdḥ.w* “stone masons” in B 300, but as  in the parallel text in L 2. See also Gardiner (1957: 444, A 24). Though the name Canaan does not appear in the tale, its connection to the region was well-known, as the famous “Israel stela” of Merneptah (l. 26) demonstrates.

13 See Donner (1956); Lanczkowski (1958); Knauf (1979: 33); Blumenthal (1983: 42).

14 I adopt the rendering of these foreign names from Schneider (2002: 261–263), who also surveys the various ways the names have been rendered.

15 Allen (2015: 128), reads *ḳḥw* instead of *kšw*.

16 Gardiner (1916: 21–22).

17 On the meaning of *ḥs*, see already Müller (1893: 265, n. 1).

in biblical Hebrew, the root similarly can refer to “approaching” a city (e.g., 2 Kgs 19:32 = Isa 37:33).¹⁸ Knowledge of Semitic also appears in B 219, where the author employs *miki*, the Northwest Semitic word for “king” (i.e., *mlk*).¹⁹

One fascinating case of appellative paronomasia exploits the presence of a keyword that recurs no less than seven times in the narrative—the verb *itt* “seize.” Pharaoh seizes the inheritance of his father (B 47), is seized by the love of his subjects (B 66), seizes lands while still “in the egg” (B 69), seizes the lands of the south (B 71), and seizes lands like Horus (B 218). Sinuhe too seizes the spoils of the champion of Retenu (B 144). The numerous uses of the verb well anticipate Sinuhe’s description of his return: *dm.n=i w^c im nb m rn=f iw wdp.w nb hr irt=f šsp.n=i β n=i βw šbb t^h tp-m³=i r p^ht=i dmi n itw(3.wy)* “I pronounced each of them by his name while all the cupbearers were busy at their duties. I set off after the wind was raised for me, with kneading and straining beside me until I reached the landing of Itti-tawy” (B 246–247). Not only does *dmi* “landing” paronomastically recall the verb *dm* “pronounce” at the start of Sinuhe’s statement, but the name of the capitol Itti-tawy at Lisht is not written fully (i.e., either as *imn-m-h³.t it-t³.wy* “Amenemhat-Seizer-of-the-Two-Lands” or just *it-t³.wy*), but appears in abbreviated form so as to be indistinguishable from the verb *itt*.²⁰ This then prepares the reader for a wonderful case of polysemy near tale’s end, when Sinuhe appears before the pharaoh and proclaims: *iw=i mi s itw m t^hhw* (B 254). Translators typically render the words as “I was like a man siezed by dusk.” However, in the light of the previously used abbreviated form of the capitol, we also can read it: “I was like a man of Itti(-tawy) at dusk,” a fitting description of a man returned to the capitol in a daze.

My final case of appellative paronomasia also exploits a keyword that occurs seven times in the tale—the ethnonym *sti.w* “Suteans.” We first hear it in the opening verse in Sinuhe’s title “dignitary of the estates of the sovereign in the land of the Suteans (*sti.w*)” (R 1). It then appears in reference to the Walls of the Ruler which the king had constructed to repel them (B 17). After fleeing, Sinuhe then encounters a shiek from among the Suteans who recognizes him and comes to his aid (B 25). Sinuhe next refers to the Suteans as a people whom pharaoh was made to smite (B 72), and whose incursions he himself once opposed (B 97). When Sinuhe finally begins his return to Egypt the Suteans accompany him (B 245).

Paronomasia on the term *sti.w* “Suteans” occurs when Sinuhe boasts his first move against the champion of Retenu: *sti.n=i sw* “I pierced him (with an arrow)” (B 138). Underscoring the paronomasia is the pierced hide ideogram/determinative (𓆎) which appears with both “Suteans” and the verb “pierced.”²¹ The paronomasia is significant, because the passage in which it occurs marks Sinuhe’s complete acculturation into Sutean culture. Having now fought a battle like one of them, instead of opposing them as he once had, he has fully become Sutean. In fact, as he relates it, the event was a tipping point, moving him to return home. The acculturation is brought to the fore the last time we hear the term “Sutean” in the words sung about him by pharaoh’s family: *s³-nht iw m t³m*

18 For a prime example of Egyptian knowledge of the Semitic language, see the so-called “Satirical Letter” (P. Anastasi I, BM 10247); Fischer-Elfert (1983), (1986).

19 Schneider (2002: 262–263).

20 See the discussion by Gardiner (1916: 93).

21 The two words are etymologically related, the Suteans being identified as archers.

km3m.n sti.w “Sinuhe has returned as an Asiatic, remade as a Sutean” (B 265). What makes the line so remarkable is the four-fold use of the throw-stick sign (𓏏), first phonetically in *3m* “Asiatic,” then logographically and as a determinative in *km3m* “remake, create,” and finally as a determinative for *sti.w* “Sutean.” Used consistently in reference to foreign places and peoples, it marks Sinuhe as thoroughly non-Egyptian.

The numerous cases of paronomasia found in the *Tale of Sinuhe* demonstrate that, far from being a mere literary flourish, they constitute a deliberate and sustained literary strategy. Each of the cases ties Sinuhe’s actions to his wanderings, from the capitol to Syro-Canaan and back again, in a way that emphasizes his acculturation into nomadic life and reintegration into Egyptian society. Thus, the devices function similarly to the title given to him by the king’s wife and children, *s3 mhyt* “son of the North(wind)” (B 276), which Gardiner calls “a playful allusion to the name of Sinuhe on the one hand, and to his wanderings in Northern Syria on the other.”²² I add to Gardiner’s observation that Sinuhe’s flight first brought him to *m3ꜥ.ty m h3w nht* “Two-Maats Canal in the neighborhood of Nahat (B 8).”²³ The references to *m3ꜥ.ty* “Maaty” and *nht* Nahat, the sycamore sanctuary of Hathor near Giza,²⁴ offer yet two more allusions to *s3-nht* “Sinuhe” the *m3ꜥ* “true” (friend) of the king (C 2). Moreover, the song sung by the king’s family offers a final paronomastic reminder of Sinuhe’s time spent in *rtmw* “Retenu.” As they intone: “he made flight for (*wꜥrt n*) fear of you” (B 277).

Like the allusions to Sinuhe’s name, appellative paronomasia and polysemy strengthen the connection between Sinuhe and the distant places to which he ventured. They emphasize his complete transition to and from life among the nomads, while also providing additional evidence for the story’s literary craft and the author’s knowledge of Syro-Canaanite idioms and culture.²⁵

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22 Gardiner (1916: 107).

23 With Allen (2015: 66); Parkinson (1997: 28), renders “Lake Maaty” and “the Sycamore,” respectively.

24 Goedicke (1957: 81–82).

25 On the author’s knowledge of Northwest Semitic idioms and geography, see Morenz (1997); Schneider (2002); Quack (1993), draws attention to a fascinating idiom in the Zinjirli stela of Panammuwa I (ll. 32–33) that parallels the Egyptian expression in B 104–106. He considers the possibility that Sinuhe might be using a local expression, but ultimately concludes that it is a calque of Egyptian origin. If it indeed represents the author’s display of local expressions, then we have another example of his style-switching abilities.

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