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# The earliest Western talk analysis?: Ptahhotep's *Instructions*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines perhaps the earliest developed analysis of talk interaction in the Western world, the Ancient Egyptian *Instructions* of Ptahhotep. It fills a gap in the early history of social interaction analysis, is a socially-related account of talk, and it also had some influence on the rise of European talk-in-interaction instructions. To do justice to the complexity and wide coverage of the *Instructions*, this empirical study uses Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the text's social and contextual rhetoric, and Speech Act Analysis. Conversation Analysis (CA) is also used for a qualitative account of its instructions, broadening CA in line with recent scholarly work. The study hopes to answer two questions: socio-epistemically, what did Ptahhotep know about the analysis of naturally-occurring interactions? And socio-deontically, how did he incorporate this into his text, and make his instructions actionable?

**Keywords:** historical talk analysis, Ptahhotep, social epistemics, social deontics, talk-in-interaction instruction

## 1 Introduction

Speaking is harder than all other work.

He who understands it makes it serve.

(*Instructions* Verse 24)

This empirical study considers two questions: firstly, what was known about whole-of-life talk analysis in Ancient Egypt; and secondly, how can the recent developments in Conversation Analysis (CA) which incorporate epistemics and deontics be used to explore relations between interactants, using Ptahhotep's *Instructions* as an example. According to Lichtheim's introduction to Ancient Egyptian literature, the earliest writings were identifications of people, objects,

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and events, and the few remaining for our inspection were mainly found carved in the ancient tombs where the biographies of the entombed were supplied. The purpose of these was to store the reputation of the dead; a good reputation was dependent on both social-interactional achievement and moral worth. Ptahhotep's teachings showed how interactional achievement could be realised, be properly moral, and these purposes sustain his writing. His text provides an interesting exemplar for modern analysts in both its depth and breadth. The new approach to CA, with its inclusion of epistemics and deontics, provides methods for broadening the scope of talk analysis to include societal issues, and, again, Ptahhotep's text is useful to act as an exercise in practising these new developments. *The Instructions of Ptahhotep*, written in Egypt c. 4,200 years ago, was perhaps the earliest fully developed Western didactic text about talk: performing talk, listening to talk, and utilising talk events in social interactions. Egyptologists and others see it as a "wisdom" text, teaching etiquette and manners; however, for students of talk as social interaction, it deserves an account of its socio-interactional insights in themselves, and as an account of one writer's perception of contemporary discursive practices and modes of talk distribution.

Ptahhotep is described in the text as a Vizier, an important adviser and administrator to King Isesi, who ruled Ancient Egypt between c. 2434–2375 BC. The *Instructions* cannot be absolutely dated, but the scholarly consensus is that the earliest version of the text is in the Prisse Papyrus (now in Bibliothèque Nationale de France). The Prisseone is used in this study. It was written c. 2300 BC and so it is one of the oldest extant books in the West (Faulkner 1973: 159; Lichtheim 1973: 61–62). Hagen (2012) has a book-length account of its complex textual history. There are difficulties also in establishing its textual validity since its survival involved a series of scribal copyings from hieroglyphics. The colophon to the Prisse text (l. 645) reads: "It is done from its beginning to its end *as it was found in writing*" (italics mine), suggesting this text is a copy. That the text is in translation is also a major concern for socio-textual analysis, but so important is Ptahhotep's work that this risk has been taken. The *Instructions* has been translated in modern times, and there are versions online (see References for copies of the text), but I have used only one translation, Lichtheim's (1973).

## 2 Methodology

As an Instruction writer with apparently few exemplars to follow, Ptahhotep shows skill in the hard task of setting the organising themes, institutional

settings or “frames” (Collins, cited in Drew and Wootton 1988: 52–58) for his writing acts; isolating his talk-practice topics from the myriad matters of social life; and deciding what epistemic status, authority and stance/s he could use, and what deontic authority he could display. To explore such issues, a combinatory empirical study of the *Instructions* is undertaken here, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for its cultural context, Speech Act Theory, and some features of Conversational Analysis (CA) for the specific acts used by Ptah, and for those he sought to instruct. The version of CA used here includes social epistemics and social deontics, which have recently been drawn within its purview (Heritage 2012; Stevanovic and Perakyla 2012). This combination of methods befits the text's complexity as a high-order act of instructing, and hopefully shows something of the merit of such combining (Drew 2012: 61–68) to achieve a rich description. Though CA was primarily designed to analyse talk-in-interaction, its insights seemed worth adapting for the written *Instructions* since the text is a direct address to a known primary reader/hearer; is described in its introduction as a “speaking”; and its subject matter focuses on interactional speech.

### 3 CDA: Text and context

#### 3.1 The text

The *Instructions* consists of an Introduction by an unknown author stating Ptahhotep's social status; then Ptahhotep supplies a two-verse Prologue, and then there is a 6-lines introductory paragraph claiming that he was teaching “excellent discourse ... as profit to him who will hear, as woe to him who would neglect [it]” (ll. 5, 6). Then follow 36 verses of instruction, and an Epilogue of eleven verses: in all, 49 verses, of c. 4,000 words, providing roughly 134 instructions, on approximately 80 socio-interactional (SI) issues. Ptahhotep wrote the *Instructions* specifically for his grandson who was entering the network of elite managers who handled such administrative interactions as community disputes, administrative messages, and the maintenance of institutional records.

#### 3.2 Genre and text

By c. 3000 BC in Egypt, “Wisdom” literature was a new and as yet unstable genre which put cultural matters into writing (Lichtheim 1973: 58), and was a

way of reproducing, and of controlling, social epistemes and setting interpersonal behavioural norms and rules. Further, it assumed that reading texts could bring about some degree of fulfilment of their interactional messages (Fischer 2003: 37; Taavitsainen 2009: 105–106). So Ptahhotep’s text, and its dissemination in society, recorded, and importantly preserved, a particular understanding of the social world. His special quality was to see that the small-scale activities of interpersonal behaviour within the larger-scale structural mechanisms of society, were an important part of achieving a high degree of social cohesion. He made clear that learning how to achieve good discursive interactions would be of significant socio-capital value for readers.

Because of its apparent textual isolation it is hard to assess the genre of the *Instructions* as a matter of text production, or to link it with any predecessors, though the presence of discreteness in its versification and its adage-like phrases may indicate an influence from the school-texts of the time. And one cannot assess whether Ptahhotep was an innovative writer; Posener (1971: 225) thinks not, but in contrast to the small fragment of *Instruction of Hardedef*, written c. 200 years earlier, and to the one-page *Instruction of Ke’Gemni*, of which a copy exists in the Papyrus Prisse, Ptahhotep’s text is much longer, deals with far more issues, and its language and structural composition are more complex. Also, in a period of generic development it cannot be known how readers would read such instructional texts (Swales 1990).

## 4 CDA: Society as rhetoric

Perhaps the best way to see Ptahhotep’s sense of his society’s talk-functioning is to see how he incorporated it into his educational design. Bowers and Iwi (1993: 357, 368) suggest some ways of constructing society as rhetorical strategies in talk, of which the following two seem appropriate here.

### 4.1 Society as pre-existing

Ptahhotep presented society as a long-standing, inherently harmonious and relatively secure structure in which communities with shared interests and attitudes prospered. For him, society was primarily constituted in talk, because people naturally craved “interchange” and social aimability. He wrote “Poor is he who shuns his kin / He is deprived of interchange, Even a little of what is craved” (V 20). Also, for him, talk was the means by which people passed on ideas and opinions, and, importantly, spoke of those who uttered them. As such

they were the holders of others' reputations: "Gain supporters through being trusted;...Your name is good, you are not maligned" (V 14); and "his remembrance is in the *mouth* of the living" (Epi 4). Ptahhotep saw talk as setting and maintaining the standards of interactional behaviour and preserving the status quo, and doing so particularly when people acted as talk judges:

- as approvers, rewarders: praising truth-telling, evidentiality, and also consistency as a factor in solidarity, "people will say 'that is just like him'" (Epi 8); and in Epi 10, "[people will say] 'he's the son of that one'", recognising and approving of family connections in a person's speaking acts. This suggests something of the smallness of the community, and its modes of knowledge-sharing; and that a person's articulation of an idea was part of a socially important, recognisable and consistent selfhood. Within-family teaching was also approved, "[a father should say what] will profit his son" (Epi 2) and "If a man's son accepts his father's words, No plan of his will go wrong" (Epi 5).
- as disapprovers, punishers: rejecting talk which maligned others, or revealed others' secrets, or in other ways damaged social peace. Such speakers could have their personal lives fail, and beyond that, the whole community could risk deterioration into strife: "[in any place] Beware of approaching the women. Then death comes for having known them" (V18); and "Don't command except as fitting, He who provokes gets into trouble" (V 25).

## 4.2 Society and its conventional knowledge

The social measures in the *Instructions* provide a glimpse of what we would now call Ptahhotep's social framing, or the "imagined communities" of Benedict Anderson (1983), or Bourdieu's "habitus" (1990), or Foucault's "epistemes" (1994). The *Instructions* mostly assumed that social situations were already established, e. g., on visiting one of higher rank it is stated "The antechamber has a rule, All behaviour is by measure" (V 13), where the "measure" already existed; Ptahhotep did not deal with how to create or manage new situations. So he said nothing about choosing a wife, but rather about ensuring that an already chosen wife did not make home-life unpleasant: "If you take to wife a [frivolous woman] ... Do not reject her, let her eat" (V 37); and in an already established friendship: "[if a friend] does a thing that annoys you, ...don't attack, ... his fate will come" (V 33), (this latter implying a degree of determinism, and therefore of acceptance and toleration).

## 5 CDA: Speech acts

This part of the study uses Speech Act perspectives and methods to examine, firstly, how Ptahhotep transferred his knowledge to his readers, and secondly, what acts he wanted them to consider. However, this needs a reminder that when studying other times and cultures, one cannot be sure what speech *action* is represented by a speech act *verb*, let alone its felicity conditions or its degree and kind of face threat (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2008: 4). However, this study will cautiously follow the Uniformitarian principle (Labov 1994: 23–25), accepting that these verbs *may* have meant roughly the same then as now, and that the linguistic forces in language use were not unlike those operating today (Romaine 1982: 122). Teaching, for example, both in the past and now, seems to share the same pragmatic actions of directives and exemplifications: certainly Ptahhotep supplied many such acts, and they have similarities to teaching acts today.

### 5.1 Ptahhotep's own speech acts

Ptahhotep used “speaking” or “telling” as his instructional acts, e. g. “tell him [his hearer] the words of those who heard” (Pro 2), and “listen to my sayings” (Epi 1), perhaps resembling the orality of school teachers, for example, in their use of more clausal additivity than subordination in style (Ong 1982: 31–77), e. g. “if a man says ... and if a man says ... and if he says ...” (V 6). In this way he might hope to allay readers’ fears about studying such a complex document. In approximately 92 percent of his 134 specific instructions, Ptahhotep used the imperative mood, which could suggest a sense of his own authority and/or the importance of his teaching, and, of course, it applied the consistency he approved of in the speech of others, e. g. “it is [only] the skilled who should speak” (V 24), and “control your mouth” (Epi 10). Roughly half of the imperatives were negative commands, e. g. “don’t be arrogant towards him” (V 10). These, no matter what their intended teaching role might have been, can entail a problem which could negate the instruction: any mention of a bad act can cause that act to enter readers’ minds, where instead of the intended sense of an act’s bad impact, it could remind them of some pleasurable feature of doing the bad act. In the other 8 percent of instructions, he used the less authoritative forms of suggestion or conditionals, as in “If a good example is set [by you]... [you] will be beneficent [sic] for ever” (Epi 2).

## 5.2 Instructions on speech acts for the reader

The largest group of the instructions (c. 30 percent) is about how readers should “speak” and about its associated behaviours. Ptahhotep maintained that the best acts were cooperative, e. g., “Do for him [your son] all that is good” (V 12); while the worst acts, on which he concentrated, were competitive, or negatively represented others. His views here show similarities to Grice’s (1975) Maxims, Leech’s (1983) principles, and Sacks’(1992) speech pair rules. The range of their pathologies includes:

1. Talk placements
  - a. The wrong placement of speaking acts, either in a talk-situation, e. g. with a friend, “don’t start an oppositional event with an impolite act, be friendly first” (V 33) (Leech’s tact?); or in a speaker’s life-experience: “It is [only] the skilled who should speak in council” (Against 24) (Leech’s modesty?): “Ensure that your talk fits your listeners’ knowledge or needs” (Epi 12) (Gricean “manners?”);
  - b. Disobeying the initiating or response rules: “don’t speak to him until he summons” or not speaking when addressed, both in V 7 (Sacks’ rules?);
2. Talk and politeness
  - a. Do not specifically insult others by articulating their faults, or repeating their outbursts; do not be generally oppositional: flouting, attacking;
  - b. Do not command without warrant, or be generally hostile;
  - c. Do not insult others by praising oneself or being arrogant (Leech’s modesty?);
  - d. Do not insult others by wasting their interaction time, particularly as to talk content (Grice’s quality or relevance?); or gossiping, or not speaking to good purpose, e. g. “[not saying] things that count” (Epi 12);
  - e. Do not be more broadly impolite and/or anti-social, e. g. on a delicate issue, “Do not recall if [a successful man] once was poor” [because he has worked hard for his success] (V 10) (Leech’s generosity?);
  - f. Do not reveal one’s feelings. Ptahhotep did not assume feelings were wrong; indeed he also wrote “Follow your heart as long as you live” (V 11), but in talk he wrote, “Conceal your heart, control your mouth, then you will be known [as good] among the officials” (Epi 10). This last instruction could perhaps prevent private bad qualities becoming publicly known, as if public ignorance of them was a good thing.
  - g. Do not be insulting by poor non-verbal behaviours, e. g. not sitting or standing as befits one’s rank (V 13), or not averting one’s face when answering an angry person, (V 25).

Ptahhotep did not, however, give speech act solutions to inappropriate talk, such as apology or changing topic, and he never suggested that readers should themselves think of alternative acts if they got into difficulties.

### 5.3 Hear and listen – a special case

One of Ptahhotep's interactional concerns was "hearing" and "listening" as major tasks in a peaceable speech community, as in Epi 4: "How happy is he [the father] to whom it is said: 'The son, he pleases as a master of hearing' [my emphasis]". And the difference between "hearing" and "listening" was made clear: he regarded "hearing" as just quietness while someone spoke, while "listening" meant absorption of what was heard; as in "If hearing enters the hearer, The hearer becomes a listener [my emphasis]" (Epi 3). On several occasions he managed to link listening as a personal behaviour to general sociability, e. g. where he saw "listening" as an act to make others feel good. So he wrote of a magistrate listening to a plaintiff:

Listen calmly to the speech of one who pleads;  
 Don't stop him from purging his body  
 Of that which he planned to tell.  
 A man in distress wants to pour out his heart  
 More than that his case be won. ....  
 A good hearing soothes the heart.  
 (V 17)

His theme of sociability pervades the whole text, and can be analysed using the epistemic and deontic methods suggested by Heritage (2012) and Stevanovic and Perakyla (2012).

## 6 CA: Analysing the text – social epistemics and deontics

In his important recent paper, Heritage (2012) makes a proposal for the extension of CA to include epistemics, arguing that in talk speaker-*status* is a strong influence on the acceptance or rejection of speech actions, stronger even than talk-*stance*. Stevanovic and Perakyla (2012) also recently argued for the extension of CA, in their case to include social deontics, i. e. the formulation and



value of differential authority roles of speaker and hearer. In brief, epistemics is about examining how communication reflects the world as perceived by the communicator; and deontics is about trying to impose the world presented in the communicator's words. These considerations allow a focus on the text's important strategic competencies; however, epistemic tactics seem inevitably to overlap with any deontic purposes, though I will try to keep them separate. Again, this part of the study will isolate Ptahhotep's own "talk" tactics from those he wanted his readers to use.

## 6.1 Epistemics

One important feature of interaction is the epistemic qualities of the interactants, and these qualities take three forms: *status*, *authority* and *stance*, about which the following points can be made with respect to Ptahhotep's sense of them in his Instruction text.

### 6.1.1 Epistemics – Ptahhotep

The epistemic *status* of the writer could be significant in two ways: pre-interaction and intra-interaction. The pre-textual social reputation of Ptahhotep already supplied him with high status, which could recommend him to potential readers, and in later times so would his status as a voice from the valued past. The first intra-text status tactic is the selection of "Instructions" for the text's title (though it is not known who made this decision). "Instruction" was a highly regarded action in Ancient Egypt, signalling that the writer not only knew the accepted perceptions of his world, as in Prologue V 2 "[I am telling] the ways of the ancestors" and instructing "the sayings of the past", but could also see their importance for contemporary life. Although at this distance it is hard to recognise which are "the sayings of the past", there are some adagical style features that suggest their presence: brevity, expansive applicability, location at introductory or summarising positions, and particular rhythms. Possible examples include: "What age does to people is evil in everything" (Pro V 1); "Wretched is he who injures a poor man" (V 4); "He who uses elbows is not helped" (V 13); and, importantly, "He who hears becomes a master-hearer" (Epi I). The question then arises: did Ptahhotep's use of adages supply him with epistemic *status* through his knowledge of them; or were those adagical values a sign of his epistemic *authority* because he took upon himself the right to use them? Or was he simply showing himself on same epistemic level as his readers by thematising the knowledge they shared?

Also intra-text, the introduction and particularly the prologue provide explicit statements about his status. In the 2-verse Prologue, Ptahhotep's status is constructed in two very different ways. Pro V 1 shows him as elderly and decrepit:

Childlike one sleeps all day.  
 Eyes are dim, ears deaf,  
 Strength is waning through weariness,  
 The mouth, silenced, speaks not,  
 The heart, void, recalls not the past,  
 The bones ache throughout.  
 (Pro 1)

This account of poor health shows something further of the difficulties in analysing epistemics. Was this a culturally governed usage, i. e. was it almost an end-of-life statement, which at that time was a respected speech act, and sign of a life's legacy (Lichtheim: 58), and thus served to demonstrate his epistemic status as one who had achieved a long and valued life? Or, did it show that he was powerful enough to overcome old age by writing a text (though the emphasis is on loss of memory and deafness suggests epistemic incapacity rather than power)? In part, this last reading might depend on the degree of applicability of the topics to Ptahhotep himself: it is hard to be sure of this, but perhaps "*one* sleeps all day [my emphasis]" is a personal reference, while others are more generally applicable, "Eyes are dim", "The bones ache throughout". The talk reference – "The mouth, silenced, speaks not" – certainly seems untrue of Ptahhotep as a writer. In another view, the poor health detail could have been a tactic to mitigate his high epistemic status, possibly reflecting a concern that if his knowledge seemed too clever, readers might fear they could not possibly understand or emulate him, thus making the instructions self-defeating. In other words, Ptahhotep may have tried both to evidence his age-superiority of knowledge and to still make it learnable.

Prologue V 2 counteracts Pro V 1 by offering a complex talk interaction which instantiates the writer's high status by assuming the right to make a request even of the highest authority, the King, in which Ptahhotep asks the king to order him to write the *Instructions*: Ptahhotep says "May this servant be ordered ... to tell him [his reader] the ways of the ancestors ...", "Said [the King] the majesty of this god: Instruct him then in the sayings of the past" [my emphasis].

So the King gave his imprimatur to the document, providing a metacomment on the importance of the text. But this also ironically downplays Ptahhotep to

one obeying an order; perhaps this is a way of recording extreme power while softening it.

Epistemic *authority* is describable as the degree of self- and social-knowledge that interactants display in communication with others. It can be shown through a writer's ability to differentiate between apparently similar social acts; to recognise similarities between apparently disparate acts; and to know the process-details of social actions, e. g. knowing how to defuse an anger situation as in: "when you answer one who is fuming, Avert your face, control yourself" (V 25). Within any interaction, degrees of epistemic authority can be asymmetric between interlocutors (Drew 1981; Heritage and Raymond 2005); and the asymmetry can vary from moment to moment. However, in a written instructional text one could expect the asymmetry to be more settled in favour of the writer, but the methods of instantiation of Ptahhotep's epistemic authority varied in many ways, perhaps illustrating his sense of differences in his readers' abilities, though, of course, we have no knowledge whether he got it right. For example, in V1, he wrote with certainty that his readers would be proud: "Don't be proud of your knowledge, Consult the ignorant and the wise", while elsewhere he anticipated reader ignorance, as in "Don't impose on one who is childless", with an explanation of "impose": "Neither decry or boast of [your children]"; then supplied the reason "There is many a father who has grief" (V 9). In V 6, he assumed readers' knowledge was variable, first writing "Do not scheme against people, God punishes accordingly", with no explanation of what "scheming" was, which schemes were bad, and what were God's punishments, but then immediately gave an explanation: "If a man says: 'I shall be rich,' He will have to say 'my cleverness has snared me.'" While this last problem (cleverness) seems quite specific, it is still broad enough in meaning to permit readers to apply the instruction to a range of different "clever" schemes within their future lives.

Ptahhotep also bolstered his authority by supplying the provenance and evidential certainties of his subject-matter, e. g. in the use of maxims and socio-religious beliefs. These qualities can be linked to the later classical "ethical appeal" or *ethos*, i. e. the charisma, expertise, and particularly trust, associated with a communicator's constructed persona (Corbett 1990: 37–79). Another relevant aspect of classical *ethos* in instruction was the need for a degree of *logos* or logicity in textual management (Corbett 1990: 80–85) to support readers' understanding. Ptahhotep's logical skills are shown in the tripartite scheme of the *Instructions* and its segmentation into individual verses, which serve as ideational markers. His logic was also able to isolate the action components of whole communication, and put them into the logical and/or chronological order in which they would occur in a situation, e. g. he taught that a guest

at table should first take what is given, then look at what is before him rather than looking at the host, and then not speak till addressed (V 7).

One very complex example of *logos* occurs in Vs 2–4, where he instructed the non-use of three negative acts, gave the reasons for these, and showed their relation to social success or failure [paraphrased here]:

If you meet a powerful man, or an equal, or one of lower rank

[Act]	[Immediate result]	[Final result]
Don't flout the powerful man	[he won't agree if you do]	your self-control will match his power
Don't copy an equal's evil speech	[his evil will be disapproved]	your name will be good among men
Don't attack lower ranks	[you will injure the poor man]	you will win because the magistrates will reprove him on your behalf

Here he managed to order the social ranks from most to least power, and at the same time, order the acts from least to most powerful, and then, equally logically and chronologically, gave the *immediate* bad consequences of *doing* each of these acts, followed by the *longer term* good consequences of *not doing* each of these acts. In an entirely different aspect of “order”, Ptahhotep knew that in an interaction the chronological order of speech acts was significant, as in V 33 where he stated that it was better for keeping a friend to “approach him, deal with him alone”, i. e. in private, and only then “dispute with him”.

Epistemic *stances* are the textual positions that writers adopt to present and vary aspects of their status and/or authority, and the degrees of their commitment to each element of subject matter. A writer's epistemic stance can be seen in emphasis or in quantity of detail, or the choice of command or advice, etc., and should alert readers to the differential values of each matter, and could produce related changes in their learning responses. And, importantly, they could also suggest that stance-change itself has meaning, and this too could be useful for readers to learn. So Ptahhotep's stances need to be seen as not just tactics for compliance, but also as exemplars for readers' future rhetorical use. Ptahhotep's primary epistemic stance is that of confident instructor. The realisation of this stance varies, however, from brief summarising to lengthy exemplifying, from stating to insisting, and from thoughtful to emotional. These variations could be different aspects of one stance rather than different stances; certainly he segued from one to another with no change-of-stance signalling, e. g. in the above instance from Vs 2 – 4, “don't flout”, where he connected the

verses by reiterating their initial words “If you meet” while varying the instructional forms that followed. He varied, firstly, from *positively ordering* “Fold your arms, bend your back” when with a high-rank opponent, to secondly *suggesting* “you will make your worth exceed his by silence” when with equal opponent. Thirdly, his stance is one of *negatively ordering* while supplying a reason “Do not attack him, because he is weak” when with a lower rank opponent. These may be variants of a single instructional stance to indicate a single recognition of rank differentiations, but the differences are great enough to suggest they are different stances. In V 1, he wrote

Good speech is more hidden than greenstone,  
Yet may be found among maids at the grindstones.

Here a politically focussed CDA analyst would note that Ptahhotep adopted a socially complex stance – acknowledging the speech competence of the lower ranks while devaluing them to serve as an educational resource for the higher ranks. Also in V 1, he produced another stance variation, towards his readers this time, in the “double instruction” (Schegloff 2007: 75–76): “don’t be proud” followed by “consult [with others]” – the first a powerful negative command about a whole-of-life personal behaviour; the second a less powerful positive command about a briefer activity which might or might not seriously impact on the consulter’s life. Such variations may have been yet another solution to the problem of maintaining instructional power while reducing his status dominance where useful. His stance also varied in V 8, where two simple commands, “give [your master’s] message as he said it” and “keep to the truth” assume readers knew what these meant. This was followed by a different type of command “guard against reviling speech”, which assumed reader ignorance about “reviling” and supplies a (very partial) definition of its result: “[it] embroils one great [person] with another.” This too is a kind of “double” instruction – “don’t revile” and “don’t embroil” – but with different relations between the parts than in the V 1 example.

Corbett (1990: 86–94) argued that teaching without a degree of emotionality could be unsuccessful, in part since emotion acts as a memory key. In the *Instructions*, an emotionality stance was mainly restricted to the Epilogue, which generically differs from the earlier parts of the text by acting as a peroration to persuade readers to heed all his instructions. He used an adagical style as in “Hearing is better than all else” and “He who hears is beloved of god” and “How good for a son to listen to his father, How happy is he...” (Epi 3 and 4), and “The fool who does not hear, He can do nothing at all, He does all that one detests” (Epi 6). Also in the Epilogue, Ptahhotep used a

significantly different stance, that of a man who is unsure of reader attention: in the first seven verses, he advised or suggested, in initial conditional clauses: “If you listen to my sayings”, “If a man’s son accepts his father’s words”, “If hearing enters the hearer” [my emphasis], all reflecting urgent reasons for attention.

### 6.1.2 Epistemics – readers

Ptahhotep indexed his primary reader as high *status*, a descendant of his own important family, knowing and accepting the social standards, and capable of bureaucratic duties. Importantly, Ptahhotep also showed something of the epistemic *authority* he accorded his readers by couching his instructions in a general way, assuming they could handle the appropriate thinking and learning processes that generalities require. However, he predicted that along with this authority went a degree of arrogance, and an unwillingness to learn, which he expressed strongly in “The fool who does not hear, ...[will suffer] A living death each day” (Epi 6). He assumed that his readers could make social-epistemic errors of status, authority and stance, and for these he supplied warnings and instructions, as in the quotation about “pride” (V 1). And he saw his reader to be relatively ignorant of the specifics of such social behaviours when judging between different speech acts, e. g. whether a master is dictating a message or just offering an aside (V 8).

In the Epilogue this noticeably changes, with the intensity of his commitment, and a more comprehensible and repetitive style, seeing readers as people who know their families’ nature and significance, accept their filial duty to uphold their ancestors’ reputations, and are capable of using the lessons of the *Instructions* in employment to raise and extend their social skills:

Be deliberate when you speak,  
 So as to say things that count:  
 Then the officials who listen will say:  
 “How good is what comes from his mouth!”  
 Act so that your lord will say of you:  
 “How good is he whom his father taught;  
 When he came forth from his body,  
 He told him all that was in [his] mind,  
 And he does even more than he was told”.  
 (Epi 12)

## 6.2 Deontics

Social deontics is definable as the accepted authority of an interactant to give information to others (Stevanovic and Perakyla 2012), and of readers/hearers to note and orient to it. Ptahhotep's deontic stances are expressed through language and rhetoric, text design, knowledge distribution, material selection, assessment of his readers, and variation in presentation to sustain interest. Again, this account will distinguish Ptahhotep's own deontics and those he instructed for his readers.

### 6.2.1 Deontics – Ptahhotep

His main deontic authority (and part of expressing his epistemic authority) was that of commanding compliance, as in “Do not covet more than your share” (V 20); but he occasionally varied this to simple assertion, as in “The trusted man ... will himself become a leader” (V 3); or suggestion, “Nor should you listen to it [calumny]” (V 23). The significant point about his stance with respect to its deonticity is its changeability, which may have reflected his knowledge of the different learning responses of his readers, e. g. recognising that his instructions might meet with resistance, as in “When you speak [as a magistrate] don't lean to one side, ... lest one complain ... And your deed turns into a judgment of you” (V 28). At times he assumed his readers knew the rule behind an instruction, but needed guidance about the rule's applications in their lives. So he only provided the speech act's consequences: “Seek out every beneficent deed, that your conduct may be blameless” (V 5). This ability to vary the contents of the instructions to fit his perception of readers' knowledge was a significant deontic skill, requiring him to consider the likely reception of his teaching, to see readers' sense of a discursive event, and to search the storehouse of his own mind for a relevant instance which matched but also clarified the act being taught.

Ptahhotep varied his deontics in various rhetorical ways, e. g. by *reiteration* and *repetition*. Reiteration is a relatively straightforward verbal recurrence, which he used (a) within one instructional cluster to emphasise its importance as in V 11, “Follow your heart as long as you live” and “When wealth has come, follow your heart”, with the second narrowing the focus to one particular phase of “living”; or (b) dispersed through his text, and thus showing that the act could occur in several places in the social interaction landscape, as in “Teach the great what is useful” (V 27) and “Teach your son to be a hearer” (Epi 4) [my emphasis]. This also supported his view that

there was an ongoing need for future teaching. Reiteration works persuasively by softening the mental demand on readers, as it only causes them to search their recently set-up memory to find the previous occurrence of the instruction, and this could make the topic seem familiar and obeyable, unlike those “new” instructions which required more mental exercise as they jolt the mind to note, assess, and record a new idea.

Repetition, on the other hand, is a more noticeable act, linking variants of an idea with some difference of connotative meaning or rhetorical effect in the recurrence. It can instruct the connectivity of different aspects of the same act where these are at issue, as in “quite impossible, completely useless”, or when an act is thought to be too complex for a single mention (Mulholland 1994: 312–314). In V 4, Ptahhotep wrote: “do not answer him [an opponent] to relieve your heart, Do not vent yourself”, showing two different aspects of a single act: its possible cause, “to relieve [one’s] heart” and the specific action, “vent”. Another repetition was: “Adhere to the nature of him [the master] who sent you, Give his message as he said it ... Keep to the truth, don’t exceed it”(V 8) – providing four different features of the new administrative genre of “reporting”. The first is in the “nature” of the message, the second is the need for accuracy of talk-reporting, and the third, behind the message, the need to understand and show the master’s “truth” without elaboration.

Another deontic tactic for teaching was to use *discourse markers* (Schiffrin 1986) to elucidate the text by information structuring and cognitive shifts, or to support more interpersonal matters, such as listening and responding to information, e. g. by displays of writer attitude, or reflection on the writer/reader interaction. The study of discourse markers is, of course, especially difficult in a translated text, and something of this can be seen in the following contrast between Lichtheim’s and Faulkner’s versions, both published in 1973. Lichtheim prefers to list the instructions discretely rather than indicate their connections, and so uses only 18 “and”s as clause or phrase markers while Faulkner has 89. Broadly, one could suggest that in this respect Lichtheim’s version may be truer to the hieroglyphic base text; however, this also works to present Ptahhotep as a more confident instructor, more adagical, more succinct, and surer of his readers’ understanding than Faulkner’s version, which presents a more “modern”, narrativised, cohesive writer, with many linkages, modality changes, and subordinate clausing to string the text together. As an illustration, in V 12, Lichtheim has “If he [your son] is straight, Takes after you, Takes good care of your possessions, Do for him all that is good, He is your son”; while Faulkner has “If he is straightforward and reverts to your character and takes care of your property in good order, do for him everything that is good, for he is your son.”



Ptahhotep also used *meta-instruction* as a form of discourse marker, through which he deontically expressed his epistemics (or epistemically expressed his deontics?), perhaps hoping that by orienting to this explicitness of his “knowing” identity, his readers would be keener to read and comply with his instructions in this new genre. For instance, he used meta-commands to pay attention, of the type ‘heed what the writer is writing’ as in “how good for a son to listen to his father ... he will be honoured” (Epi 4). But Ptahhotep did not use such metacomments as “you may / may not know this”, and “you may find this difficult”, which explicitly assert readers’ degree of knowledge; nor did he use such structural signalling as “turning now to ...” and “my next point”. Nor did he use those metacomments which show variations in cognitive importance of individual matters, as in “more essentially”, or “importantly”, perhaps assuming other aspects of his writing would make this clear, or that his readers would already understand varying importances, or his text may simply have been constrained by its original hieroglyphics system.

Ptahhotep seemed also to understand which instructions previously known to his readers might have been forgotten, as if in their “epistemic domain” (Stivers and Rossano 2010), or “knowledge gradient” (Heritage and Raymond 2005), there was what I will call a “forgetting” possibility, which needed a “reminder” to recall it. For example, in V 8, as a kind of appendix to its main topic of accurate reporting, he briefly forbade “maligning”, adding “[because] the KA abhors it” which could be a “reminding” of something from a reader’s religious education. In a stable society, and one based on strong familial authority, reminders were probably more needed than the need for ‘new’ informing instruction; certainly, some of the instructions were linked to ones his readers might already know, as in the “greenstone” case (V 1), where he varied his deontic tactics between the two topics, “pride” and “artistry”. Firstly, he assumed his readers already knew that pride was wrong, so simply reminded them of this – “Don’t be proud of your knowledge”; secondly, perhaps thinking his readers would not know why specifically “pride-in-artistry” was wrong, he supplied a brief reason that “no artist’s skills are perfect” (V 1).

### 6.2.2 Deontics– readers

The reader’s deontic authority was made explicit in the Prologue’s royal instruction to attend and accept – “May obedience enter him”, which entailed judging whether to believe what was written, introspecting on its value in their lives, storing it for recall; and finally deciding how to act, in accordance with, or

resistance to, the instructions (and/or to the social perceptions informing them). This could improve their deontic status as a “model for the children of the great” (Pro 2), or as a person “[who was] Renewing the teaching of his father” (Epi 8).

## 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 Ancient Egyptian value of the *Instructions*

The very existence of the *Instructions* suggests that Ptahhotep believed that instruction, introspection, and learning could act powerfully to prevent social trouble by maintaining discursive solidarity and good social control, through shared community practices and their cohesive qualities. He recognised that social interaction acts were isolatable, generalizable, and teachable, and he knew that the acquisition of communication capital was important for a measure of personal comfort and social calmness. The *Instructions* suggests the value of maintaining the legitimation and pathologisation of current social acts. Interestingly, a majority of his instructions suggest that social norms should be given precedence over individuality. What impact his instructions had on his readers’ lives cannot be answered now. And Ptahhotep’s representation of society cannot be taken as a true record of his whole society. Indeed it has been argued that trying to find specific practices through general instructions is to seek what texts are most reluctant to tell us (Burke 1993: 93). However, the examples in the instructions do offer one man’s perceived rules, though not the actual practices, of early Egyptian society that we cannot easily access in other ways.

### 7.2 Ptahhotep’s influence on European talk-in-interaction instruction

While Ptahhotep had some uncertainties about social continuance, as in “one... knows not what will be” (V 22), on the whole he believed that the known world and its civilisation could survive into the future, frequently asserting that a specific social behaviour inevitably led to a specific result. The very fact that his *Instructions* in various editions survived roughly 1,000 years in Ancient Egypt (Faulkner 1973: 159), suggests that his views were shared by many for a long time. Furthermore, it could be said that the *Instructions* was a likely formative influence on European civilisations as

the text spread through trade and travel around the Mediterranean. Posener (1971: 221), for example, remarks that the Ancient Egyptian wisdom texts are “a stage on the long road down to our own times, and our world would have been very different without them”. Ptahhotep’s insistence on the value of instructing spoken interaction was certainly echoed in such early European texts as Dhuoda’s (c. 843) *Handbook for William*, Alfred’s (c. 1250) *Proverbs*, Erasmus’s (1529) *De Pueris Instituendis*, and the Royal Society’s works on language and education, and the many courtesy and civility texts of the medieval and early modern periods. Though the *Instructions*’ actual connection from 4000 BC to today’s world has not been fully traced, it has been specifically adduced as an Egyptian influence on Hebrew thought (Pritchard 1969); on Greek philosophy, illustrated in Matthews and Roemer (2003: 11–12, 158); on Greek religion and language (Bernal 1987); and on Christianity, particularly as exemplified by the direct comparison of 25 of Ptah’s instructions with the Old Testament Proverbs in Matthews and Benjamin (2006: 285–288, 406–409, 418–419). The Greeks and Christianity have over time significantly affected the behaviours of European social interaction, and while modern writers on communication and interaction may not know of Ptah, their sense of the value of interactional instruction certainly resembles his. The *Instructions* also remains important because written instructing was then, and still is, a powerful, institutionalised, communicative action.

Many features of the text could not be included here because of space constraints, and this study has had to be exploratory only. But it is hoped that this present account shows something of the state of knowledge of talk and its analysis 4,000 years ago, and recommends Ptahhotep’s text to the attention of current scholars in text and talk.

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