

Nemeh in Pharaonic Egypt: ‘Free’ or ‘Miserable’?

A Case Study of Historical Semantics

Abstract: This case study of historical semantics examines an ancient Egyptian term related to dependency and dependent labour, ‘*nemeh*’, along with its varied (and seemingly paradoxical) proposed translations, ranging from ‘orphan’ to ‘citizen’, from ‘deprived person’ to ‘free man’. This contribution considers *nemeh* through historical semantics, investigating the shared thematic background among concepts and lexical meanings which appear contradictory to modern historians and philologists – but were not so in their original social context.

Keywords: slavery in ancient Egypt, conceptualized freedom, semantic range, historical semantics, semasiology, semantic overlap, social history

“I am your slave, forever. Never again will I be a nemeh.”

P. Dem. Rylands 3, 1569 BC

“a nemeh – one who is weak, and persecuted by another who would ruin him [...]”

P. British Museum 10684, c. 1200 BC

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- 1 Primary sources are referenced either by their museum catalogue number (for example P. British Museum 10684, P. Dem. Rylands 3, Stela Metropolitan Museum of Art 12.184) or the customary title in italics (for example *Book of the Dead*, *Teachings of Amenemope*, *Coffin Texts*). All translations, unless otherwise cited, are by the author.

1. Introduction

The Egyptian word *nmh* (*nemeh*)² is attested throughout Egypt's long history, from the earliest attestations in the Pyramid Texts (c. 2400 BC) well into the Roman period (1st century AD). The usage of *nemeh* is broad, qualifying people as well as land, cattle, and rights to water usage. In reference to people, context often suggested some degree of misery: an orphan, a poor man, a child bitten by a scorpion. But this term was also used to qualify property and – specifically within the context of labour semantics – opposite to ‘slave’.³ Persons who had sold themselves into slavery, or whose ownership as a slave was being transferred, were stated to no longer ‘be a *nemeh* (-person)’ with regard to their owner. In turn, this led to the term being identified with – and subsequently translated as – ‘free’.

But this conclusion led to a scholarly conundrum: How did *nemeh* change meaning, from ‘miserable person’ or ‘orphan’ to ‘unenslaved’? Put simply, to the Egyptians, although the lexical meaning may have changed, the semantic scope did not. To us, an ‘orphan’, an ‘unclaimed cow’, and an ‘unenslaved person’ do not overlap semantically; but to the Egyptians, these terms did. This observation means that we can now ask the more compelling questions, namely: *why?* What are the similarities between these groups? What social structures led to the thematic (and therefore, semantic) overlap between an unclaimed piece of property, a person who was not enslaved, and someone lacking a father?

I propose that the shared feature between these terms is “unprotection”. In the social context of a society in which protection was held in high regard, an unclaimed piece of property was as equally unprotected as a person who was not enslaved – an unstated semantic overlap which does not exist in modern language translations of *nemeh*. The implications of this interpretation are manifold; but specifically for the semantics of coerced labour, this conclusion suggests that not belonging to an institution or person, even if that meant entering an enslaved state, was inherently undesirable.

This study has two purposes: first, a clarification of a single labour-related term; second, and perhaps more importantly, a larger-scope argument advocating for the use of historical semantics in future studies of terms which appear ambiguous or

2 *nmh* in standard Egyptological transliteration; here Anglicized as *nemeh* for ease of the reader. Anglicization is used throughout, with the standard Egyptological transliteration appended when relevant. On the “Egyptological pronunciation” in which /ε/ is inserted as a standard vowel, see Werner Vycichl, *La vocalization de la langue égyptienne*, Caire 1990, 215.

3 The standard volume on slavery in ancient Egypt (Abd el-Mohsin Bakir, *Slavery in Pharaonic Egypt*, Cairo 1952) is outdated and desperately needs updating. For brief but informative discussions, see Antonio Loprieno, *Slavery and Servitude*, in: Willeke Wendrich (ed.), *The UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles 2012; Günter Vittmann, *Ägypten. Vom Alten Reich bis in die Spätzeit*, in: Heinz Heinen et al. (eds.), *Handwörterbuch der antiken Sklaverei*, vol. 1, Stuttgart 2006.

paradoxical when deriving meaning from context (the philological approach) – especially when related to labour.⁴ Historical semantics provides an approach which takes context into account, but ultimately derives meaning from semantic range and social implications. This has the dual benefit of not only providing greater clarity and accuracy in translation but also underscoring the social context of labour-related terms through a reflection of how ancient persons classified their world.

This paper first lays out a brief overview of the methodology of historical semantics and its utilization in the following sections. It then proceeds with an introduction to the classifier system of the pictographic stages of the Egyptian language (and the relevance of this system to a historical semantic approach) as well as an evaluation of the classifier for *nemeh*. The textual attestations of *nemeh* are discussed at length, along with the misleading implication of semantic change as derived from these attestations. Lastly, I suggest a new interpretation of the diachronic evolution of this term based on shared semantic range (rather than lexical meaning) and argue for a broader application of historical semantics, especially when determining the meanings of ancient words and their connotations.

2. The methodology of historical semantics

Historical semantics offers an alternative method of engaging with historical evidence, specifically for this kind of pragmatic-linguistic identification of untranslated terms. Translation, in short, is the act of converting an emic concept – in this case, *nemeh* – to an etic word or series of words. This act necessarily carries with it the presuppositions and assumptions of the translator, which is even more relevant in the case of an ancient historian: a translator who is not only translating a one-to-one correspondence of emic-etic terms, but rather an emic concept with a range and boundaries which are not entirely clear to an etic term with a more clearly-delineated range.

In its most basic sense, historical semantics is the concept that words change in meaning over time, and the study of the social implications of these changes in meaning. Naturally, this kind of study is complicated when we are unsure of the meanings of words, and can only determine their range. In simpler terms, when we are unsure of meaning, how are we to analyse *changes* in meaning, let alone assign socio-historical value and implications to those changes?

4 On the pitfalls of the vagueness of terminology, and more specifically of vagueness surrounding terms related to labour, see Ogden Goelet, Problems of Authority, Compulsion, and Compensation in Ancient Egyptian Labor Practices, in: Piotr Steinkeller/Michael Hudson (eds.), Labor in the Ancient World, vol. 5: A Colloquium Held at Hirschbach (Saxony), April 2005, Dresden 2015, 527–530.

A further complication arises from attempting to translate words which ostensibly appear to have a direct (or, direct enough) correspondence with words or concepts in our own social reality. To cite an example from this case study: if *nemeh* is offered as a contrasting way of life to that of a slave, surely it must mean the opposite of a slave – in our terms, a free man. But when the Egyptians employed this parallel, did they (as we do) necessarily consider *freedom* the opposite of enslavement, or a different social or economic concept? Therefore it is precisely in situations in which there appears to be a correspondence or a dramatic change in meaning that us ancient historians must integrate historical semantics, lest we risk assuming “that we know and understand the social meaning of words and expressions without further translation work”.⁵

At first glance, *nemeh* offers a perfect vignette for the classical approach of historical semantics as a study of change in meaning: a term which, over time, changed its meaning. Indeed, it was the awareness of this diachronic change which formed the basis for this study of *nemeh*. However, it quickly became apparent that *nemeh* had not changed its meaning over time, but rather that modern lexical translations of an ancient concept implied a change in meaning while the semantic range of the term had remained unchanged within its ancient contexts.

In this case study, the methodology of historical semantics is used to identify the ancient semantic range of a term in parallel with the traditional approach of identifying its meaning alone. This is achieved through an analysis of the pictographic classifier with which this term appears – detailed below – as well as framing the evaluation of shared features in the social context of protection and lack thereof.







3. Classifiers in Egyptian: a tool for historical semantics

Before delving into the textual attestations of *nemeh*, this discussion warrants a brief introduction to a prominent feature of the Egyptian pictographic script, a feature which is particularly useful to scholars of historical semantics: in all pictographic phases of the Egyptian language (Old Egyptian, c. 2600–2000 BC; Middle Egyptian, c. 2000–1350 BC; Late Egyptian, c. 1350–700 BC; Demotic, c. 700 BC–400 AD)⁶

5 Tim Geelhaar et al., *Historical Semantics. A Vade Mecum*, in this volume.

6 All *pictographic* phases excludes Coptic (written with the Greek alphabet). Old, Middle, and Late Egyptian are attested in both hieroglyphs and their cursive form, Hieratic. Demotic is written mainly in its highly cursive form. Demotic includes classifiers, but in such a cursive script, it can be difficult to identify exactly what pictographic classifiers are intended to represent; on this latter note, see Janet Johnson, *Thus Wrote 'Onchsheshonqy: An Introductory Grammar of Demotic*, 3rd edition, Chicago 2000, 2.

nouns and verbs⁷ are usually accompanied by a representation of the semantic range to which they belong, called a ‘determinative’ or ‘classifier.’⁸ For example, the word ‘rem’ when spelled with two phonetic signs (*r-m*) could refer to ‘weeping’ or ‘a fish’; it is the determinative of a weeping eye or a fish which alters the meaning of an otherwise identically-written word. This pictographic classifier carried no additional phonetic value,⁹ but rather served to provide semantic information: a system of classification which indicated how the Egyptians linguistically organized their language and mindset. For instance, let us look at a simplified case of one classifier, with three examples of words which use it:

1.  *nekht* (*nḥt*), ‘strong’ +  (classifier)
2.  *hī* (*ḥi*), ‘to strike’ +  (classifier)
3.  *nehem* (*nḥm*), ‘to take away’ +  (classifier)

In the above examples, the classifier is a pictogram depicting a man striking with a stick. This pictogram could then be added on to phonetic representations of words, to *classify* the semantic category to which a word belonged. All of these words – ‘strong’ (adj.), ‘strike’ (v.), ‘take away’ (v.) – would be followed¹⁰ by the same classifier of a man striking with a stick. To the Egyptians, these words overlapped semantically; this overlap enough to warrant using the same classifier. These words could all be read differently, if they were only accompanied by a different classifier: when accompanied by a classifier of an arm, *nekht* means ‘stiffness of joints’; when accompanied with a classifier of water, *hī* means ‘flood’; when accompanied by a classifier of walking legs, *nehem* means ‘to rescue.’¹¹

7 A notable distinction; while there are some languages in use today with verbal and nominal classifiers, Egyptian appears to be the only case of a language with classifiers for both nouns and verbs. See Colette Grinevald/Orly Goldwasser, What are ‘Determinatives’ Good for?, in: Eitan Grossman/Jean Winand/Stéphane Polis (eds.), *Lexical Semantics in Ancient Egyptian*, Hamburg 2012, 46–53.

8 For the principles of this concept, see Orly Goldwasser, *Prophets, Lovers and Giraffes. Wor(l)d Classification in Ancient Egypt*, Wiesbaden 2002; Orly Goldwasser, *A Comparison between Classifier Languages and Classifier Script. The Case of Ancient Egyptian*, in: Gideon Goldberg/Ariel Shisha-Halevy (eds.), *Egyptian, Semitic and General Grammar. Studies in Memory of H. J. Polotsky*, Jerusalem 2009, 16–39; Arlette David, *De l’infériorité de la perturbation: L’oiseau du ‘mal’ et la categorisation en Égypte ancienne*, Wiesbaden 2006

9 In some cases, classifiers do provide phonetic (or partially phonetic) information, but this is the exception rather than the rule; Goldwasser, *Prophets*, 2002, 13f.

10 Egyptian can be written right-left, left-right, or even up-down; in this case, we would read the hieroglyphs from left-right, with the classifier ‘following’ the word.

11 As noted above, this is an oversimplification of the complexity of determinatives: similar determinatives (e.g. an arm with a stick and a man with a stick) could be used interchangeably, and determi-

In the 1930s, the renowned Egyptologist Alan Gardiner compiled a list of what he called “generic determinatives”, assigning the classifiers he saw into 27 groups: men, women, body parts, amphibians, furniture, crowns, and textiles, just to name a few.¹² While Gardiner’s categorization is certainly a helpful system – and still in use in Egyptological scholarship today – this grouping was based on our modern sensibilities, rather than on the Egyptians’ worldview. For instance, to return to our man-with-stick classifier above, the Egyptians also appended this classifier to the word for ‘teach (*seba*, *sb*)’. Clearly, to them, teaching inevitably involved some form of force, strength, or striking – a concept some of us may have experienced on a personal level.

As can be expected, this classification was not entirely black-and-white, and the Egyptians did understand that words could potentially fit into more than one category. In some cases we find up to as many as four classifiers, as in the case of ‘fisherman’ (*weha*, *wh*), which appears with a duck, a fish, our aforementioned man with a stick, and a man sitting down. The first two classifiers – a duck and a fish – are integral to the action of fishing. The third classifier assigns the nature of the activity to one that involves force. And the final classifiers, a man sitting down, represents the taxonomy of the fisherman himself: male.

One may wonder how this digression into classifiers is relevant to the case study at hand. In brief, when evaluating a word with contexts that suggest confusing or contradictory translations, it can be particularly helpful to take a closer look at the classifiers in order to provide greater semantic context.



In hieroglyphs, *nemeh* appears with the classifier of a child with a hand to his mouth, as if sucking his thumb.¹³ Generally speaking, this classifier is usually appended to words of children and childhood:¹⁴ ‘son’ (*sher*), ‘daughter’ (*sheret*), ‘new-born’ (*mes*), ‘brood’ (*nekhen*), ‘pupil’ (*renen*), and even ‘rejuvenate’ (*renpy*) and ‘new recruit’ (*nefer*). Like the earlier examples in this paper, many of these words could be read differently with different classifiers: *mes*, with a classifier of a woman, meant ‘to give birth’; *nefer*, with no classifier at all, meant ‘beautiful’. As

natives were not *always* included as part of the orthography of the word; however, this simplification serves to explain the concept for determinatives largely for illustrative purposes.

12 For the complete sign list, see Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar. Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*, London 1957, 442–548. Although called “determinatives”, this list is not to be confused with the determinatives used as linguistic classifiers, as the signs were sorted into groups irrespective of their usage; rather, Gardiner’s “determinatives” referred to the groups into which the signs were sorted.

13 Nicola Harrington, *The Ancient Egyptian Conception of Children and Childhood*, in: Lesley Beaumont et al (eds.), *Children in Antiquity. Perspectives and Experiences of Childhood in the Ancient Mediterranean*, London 2012, 12.

14 Goldwasser, *Prophets*, 2002, 16; Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 1957, 443; Harrington, *Ancient Egyptian*, 2021, 12.

pointed out by Arlette David,¹⁵ even the pictogram itself represents the weaknesses of a child, sitting down on “an absent maternal lap”,¹⁶ sucking his finger for comfort or perhaps pointing to his mouth because he cannot yet talk.

This classifier suggests that *nemeh* is someone or something at the same level as a child, or perhaps bearing qualities shared with a child. In certain contexts, this made sense: an ‘orphan’ or perhaps ‘miserable person’ could be seen as helpless and child-like. But in other contexts – like the opposite of a slave – this classifier only muddied the waters. With this in mind, we can now delve into the (apparent) paradox of *nemeh* in its textual attestations.

4. The ‘paradox’ of *nemeh* – or not: a (brief) history of the philological approach

When attempting to determine the lexical meaning of *nemeh*, the traditional philological approach trod a familiar path: identify a previously unidentified word, interpret the context in which that word appears, derive its meaning, list that meaning in a dictionary, reap rewards. Except, as in this case study, this approach could lead to vague or misleading conclusions. In the case of *nemeh*, attempting to derive meaning from context led many scholars to erroneously assume that the word had undergone a drastic change in meaning at some point,¹⁷ from orphan or poor man to citizen to free. With a philological approach, this does appear to be the case. But from a historical semantics approach, it is clear that although the lexical meanings differed in time and context, the Egyptians perceived a semantic and connotative overlap in these lexical meanings, which – in modern contexts – we do not.

In some contexts, the meaning of *nemeh* seemed obvious, a fill-in-the-blank logic puzzle. For instance, varied autobiographical inscriptions and literary works suggest a very specific meaning:

15 Arlette David, *The nmh and the Paradox of the Voiceless in the Eloquent Peasant*, in: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 97 (2011), 73–85, 78.

16 *Ibid.*, 78.

17 “The lexeme *nmh* undergoes a semantic evolution during the Middle Kingdom [...]” (David, *nmh*, 2011, 75); “There indeed seems to have been a major difference between Middle Kingdom and later occurrences of the term”, Katalin Kóthay, *The Widow and Orphan in Egypt before the New Kingdom*, in: *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 46/1–2 (2006), 151–164, 158; for a summary on various scholarly interpretations, see Eugene Cruz-Uribe, *Slavery in Egypt during the Saite and Persian Periods*, in: *Revue internationale des droits de l’antiquité* 1982, 41–71, 50–52.

- I saved a widow without a husband, I raised the *nemeh* without a father. (Middle Kingdom graffito)¹⁸
- I was a father to the *nemeh*, a husband to the widow. (Middle Kingdom stela)¹⁹
- You are the father of the *nemeh*, the husband of the widow. (Middle Kingdom literary tale)²⁰
- I was a *nemeh* from my mother and my father, but the ruler built me up. (Amarna Period tomb inscription)²¹
- I left the tomb while I was *nemeh* from my father. (New Kingdom Book of the Dead)²²
- As for him who has no children, he brings up a *nemeh*. (New Kingdom private letter)²³

Since a widow is one without a husband, on analogy, a *nemeh* is one without a father: an orphan. And indeed, this was a common translation. But *nemeh* also appeared in contexts where it *could* mean orphan, but not necessarily – rather a person who happened to be disadvantaged or deprived in some way:²⁴

- The condition of the inferiors, the widows, and the *nemeh* (pl.) was reported to me. (Middle Kingdom stela)²⁵
- Horus has been bitten, the *nemeh*. (New Kingdom magical text)²⁶
- I was the protector of the elders [...] the herald of the *nemeh* (pl.). (Middle Kingdom stela)²⁷
- I have reached the state of a *nemeh*. (Late Middle Kingdom inscription)²⁸
- [The king] clothed me when I was nobody, he made me powerful when I was a *nemeh*. (New Kingdom stela)²⁹

18 *Hatnub Graffito* 24 (David, *nmh*, 2011, 83 [ex. 2]).

19 Stela Metropolitan Museum of Art 12.184 (David, *nmh*, 2011, 83 [ex. 10]); Stela Hannover 2927 (David 2011, *nmh*, 83 [ex. 7]).

20 *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (David, *nmh*, 2011, 83 [ex. 8]); William K. Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, and Poetry*, New Haven 2003, 29; translation is Simpson's, with the replacement of *nemeh* for 'orphan'.

21 Repeated in numerous private tombs of the Amarna age (David, *nmh*, 2011, 85 [ex. 24, 25, 26, 27, 28]).

22 *Book of the Dead* 170 (David, *nmh* 2011, 85 [ex. 31]).

23 O. Berlin 10627 (Edward Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, Atlanta 1990, 149).

24 Note that this is an illustrative rather than exhaustive list of all the attestations of *nmh* in reference to a poor/miserable person.

25 Stela UC 14333 (David, *nmh*, 2011, 83 [ex. 9]).

26 J.F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, Leiden 1978, 69.

27 Stela Louvre C1 (David, *nmh*, 2011, 83 [ex. 6]).

28 P. Ramesseum 9 (David, *nmh*, 2011, 84 [ex. 14]).

29 *Ahmose Stela* (David, *nmh*, 2011, 84 [ex. 20]); Ibrahim Harari, *Nature de la stèle de donation de fonction du roi Ahmôsis à la reine Ahmès-Nefertari*, in: *Annales du Service des antiquités de l'Égypte* 56 (1959) 139–201.

- This person has elevated the status of the *nemeh*. (Middle Kingdom Coffin Text)³⁰
- I gave to the poor, I aided the *nemeh*. (New Kingdom wisdom text)³¹
- If a *nemeh* petitions you – one who is weak and persecuted by another who would ruin him, fly to him and give him something. For him, you are a rescuer. (New Kingdom wisdom text)³²
- If the Nile is delayed [...] then everyone becomes a *nemeh*. (New Kingdom Nile hymn)³³
- Did I not raise you up when you were *nemeh* (pl.), did I not cause you to be high officers? (New Kingdom stela)³⁴
- If you find a *nemeh* bearing a large debt, make it into three parts; release two of them. (Late Period wisdom text)³⁵
- If a man sees himself in a dream uncovering his own backside, (this is a) bad (omen): He will be a *nemeh*. (New Kingdom dream oracle)³⁶
- May you not be a *nemeh*, like a youth [...] may you not be *nemeh*, may you not be sick, may misery not fall upon you. (New Kingdom satirical text)³⁷
- [Amun] is the protector of the silent, the savior of the *nemeh*. (New Kingdom inscription)³⁸

This bundle of evidence, in turn, led translators to propose ‘poor man’, ‘beggar’, or ‘low status person’ as possible translations for *nemeh*.³⁹ Yet these translations and their implications are contradicted by further evidence: a group of women in funerary stelae with no attested husbands appear with the feminine form of *nemeh* (*nemhyt*).⁴⁰ They are said to be the *nemhyt* ‘of’ different groups of people – the town, the domestic servants, the necropolis workers – ‘orphan’ makes little sense in this context, and there is also no reason to assume that these women were disadvantaged,

30 *Coffin Texts* Spell 125 (David, *nmh*, 2011, 84 [ex. 19]); Simpson, *Literature*, 2003, 269.

31 *Instruction of King Amenemhat* (David, *nmh*, 2011, 84 [ex. 21]); Simpson, *Literature*, 2003, 168.

32 P. BM 10684 (Alan Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, vol. 1, London 1935, 38).

33 O. Golenisheff 4470 (Stephen Quirke, *Egyptian Literature 1800 BC. Questions and Readings*, London 2004, 199).

34 *Kadesh Stela* (Alan Gardiner, *The Kadesh inscriptions of Ramesses II*, Oxford 1960, 11).

35 P. BM. 10474 (Simpson, *Literature*, 2003, 234).

36 P. BM 10683 (Gardiner, *Hieratic*, 1935, 18).

37 *P. Anastasi II and V* (David, *nmh*, 2011, 78).

38 Berlin 6910 (David, *nmh*, 2011, 79).

39 Eugene Revillout, *La condition juridique des NEMHIOU aux diverses périodes du droit égyptien et particulièrement sous les Sheshonkides*, in: *Revue d'Égyptologie* 9/1 (1900), 92–95; Donald Redford, *History and Chronology of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt: Seven Studies*, Toronto 1967, 31; Harari, *Nature*, 1959, 178; Ricardo Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, London 1954, 10, 57, 318, 416, 512.

40 Kóthay, *Widow*, 2006, 156–161; David, *nmh*, 2011, 83 (ex. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18).

poor, or miserable.⁴¹ In a magical text, when the god Horus is bitten by a scorpion, his mother Isis (a goddess herself) deposits him for healing in a town and states a desire that her identity as a *nemhyt* “who has fled her town” is not revealed.⁴² Are we to understand a goddess as secretly poor or disadvantaged? These are not the only cases in which *nemeh* appears to have referred to someone who was not disadvantaged, and perhaps even advantaged, like some kind of citizen:⁴³

- An official needs his *nemeh* (pl.). (New Kingdom wisdom literature)⁴⁴
- A field of *nemeh* (pl.) is that which has to bring gold for the treasury of Pharaoh, and the *nemeh* (pl.) plough it in order to send its proceeds to the treasury of Pharaoh. (New Kingdom administrative letter)⁴⁵
- All men are jubilant, when their *nemeh* (pl.) are not silent. (New Kingdom inscription)⁴⁶
- Let them not recognize my identity as a *nemhyt* who has fled from her own town. (New Kingdom magical text)⁴⁷
- Keep an eye on that slave of a *nemeh*, whom you brought to be appointed as an official, because he is not an official. (New Kingdom stela)⁴⁸
- In his town live the *nemeh* (pl.), the great alongside the small. (New Kingdom literary tale)⁴⁹

41 Indeed, Kóthay (Widow, 2006, 159–161) argues the opposite: these women seemed to enjoy status and wealth within their community.

42 Translated as ‘independent’ by Borghouts (Magical Texts, 1978, 68) *contra* ‘beggar-woman’ in an earlier translation (Adolf Klassens, A Magical Statue Base in the Museum of Antiquities at Leiden, Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden 1952, 96); but in both translations – as well as the original text – we are left wondering why Isis wants to hide her *nemhyt*-status from the people healing her son.

43 For the translation ‘citizen’, see Adolf Erman/Hermann Grapow, Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache, vol. 2, Leipzig 1928, 268.8. Similar interpretation by Cruz-Uribe (Slavery, 1982, 52) who says that the term is a legal status, referring to persons who were “independent in the control of their property, welfares, and rights. While an individual may be a member of the upper classes, royalty or priesthood, if he was able to exercise complete legal responsibility then he was acting as a *nmḥw* before the law.” Unusually, for the word ‘slave (*bʿk*)’ as ‘citizen’, see Adel Farid, An Unpublished Early Demotic Family Archive, in: Kim Ryholt (ed.), Acts of the Seventh International Conference of Demotic Studies, Copenhagen, 23–27 August 1999, Copenhagen 2002, 71–135.

44 P. Boulaq 4, *The Instructions of Ani* (Alessandro Roccati, Sapienza egizia, Brescia 1994, 107–122; Joachim Quack, Die Lehren des Ani. Ein neuägyptischer Weisheitstext in seinem kulturellen Umfeld, Fribourg 1994).

45 P. Valençay I (Alan Gardiner, Ramesside Administrative Documents, London 1940, 114–124); *nmḥ* (pl.) translated as ‘free tenants’ in: Wenté, Letters, 1990, 130.

46 Kurt Sethe, Urkunden der 18. Dynastie, Leipzig 1909, 2174.9–10 (David, *nmḥ*, 2011, 85 [ex. 30]).

47 Borghouts, Magical Texts, 1978, 68.

48 Boston MFA Stela 25.632, l. 11 (Wenté, Letters, 1990, 27f.).

49 P. BM. 9994, l. 2,10 (Caminos, Late-Egyptian Miscellanies, 1954, 74).

- Taiuhenu has no other son or *nemeh* who can claim [the wells she is selling] except [the buyer] Esbast. (Late Period stela)⁵⁰

And perhaps most confusingly, *nemeh* was not only used for people: the term was also used to refer to cattle⁵¹ – that were presumably not poor, orphaned, or citizens – and, frequently, with reference to land and possessions without any other qualification. It is admittedly difficult to derive meaning from context when all we have is a sale describing the land as “*nemeh*-fields”,⁵² a pledge of possessions in which a man vaguely describes his assets as “*nemeh*-things”⁵³ or “things of a *nemeh*-man”,⁵⁴ or a graffito in which a man qualifies his month of priestly service as “month of a *nemeh*-man”.⁵⁵

When trying to determine the meaning of this *nemeh* qualification of property or service, translators turned to contextually derived meanings, suggesting that, for instance, when referencing fields, the term might refer to fields held specifically by people of low status.⁵⁶ In tandem, scholars also could not ignore the usage of *nemeh* opposite the term for ‘slave’ when referring to people:

- I am your slave, forever. Never again will I be a *nemeh* with regard to you. (Late Period self-sales into slavery)⁵⁷
- They are your slaves. They will never be able to be a *nemeh* with regard to you. (Late Period slave sale)⁵⁸
- They are no longer with him as slaves, they are with him as brothers and children, being *nemeh* (pl.) of the land of pharaoh. (New Kingdom adoption)⁵⁹

50 *Dakhleh Stela* (Alan Gardiner, *The Dakhleh Stela*, in: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 19/1 (1933), 21–22).

51 Eugene Cruz-Uribe, *Saite and Persian Cattle Documents*, Chico 1985, 4, 18, 20, 31, 32, 37.

52 E.g. the *Abydos Stela of Sheshonq*, Cairo JdE 66285 (Robert Ritner, *The Libyan Anarchy. Inscriptions From Egypt's Third Intermediate Period*, Atlanta 2009, 170).

53 E.g. P. OI 17481 (George Hughes/Richard Jasnow, *Oriental Institute Hawara Papyri. Demotic and Greek Texts from an Egyptian Family Archive in the Fayum (Fourth to Third Century BC)*, Chicago 1997, 9).

54 E.g. O. Bodleian 704.

55 *Medinet Habu Graffito* 46, 9 (Heinz-Josef Thissen, *Die Demotischen Graffiti von Medinet Habu: Zeugnisse zu Tempel und Kult im Ptolemäischen Ägypten*, Sommerhausen 1989, 39f.).

56 Malte Römer, *Gottes- und Priesterherrschaft in Ägypten am Ende des neuen Reiches. Ein religionsgeschichtliches Phänomen und seine sozialen Grundlagen*, Wiesbaden 1994, 412–451.

57 P. Rylands 3, 5, 6 and 7 (Francis Llewellyn Griffith, *Catalogue of the Demotic Papyri in the John Rylands Library*, Manchester, London 1909, 52–54); Louvre E706 (Michel Malinine/Jacques Pirenne, *Documents juridiques égyptiens*, Paris 1950, 73f.); P. BM. 10622 (Herbert Thompson, *Two Demotic Self-Dedications*, in: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 26 (1941), 68–78, 70).

58 P. Bibl. Nat. 223 (P. W. Pestman, *Les papyrus démotiques de Tsenhor [P. Tsenhor]*, Leuven 1994, 63–66).

59 P. Ashmolean 1945.96 (Alan H. Gardiner, *Adoption Extraordinary*, in: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 26 (1941), 23–29, 24; Eugene Cruz-Uribe, *A New Look at the Adoption Papyrus*, in:

- [In leasing you this land, I will ensure that you will not pay the harvest-tax], as my *nemeh*. (Late Period land lease)⁶⁰
- You are to carry out all the tasks of the farmer with the equipment of a *nemeh*. (Ptolemaic land lease)⁶¹

This, in turn, led translators and lexicographers to start translating *nemeh* as ‘free’ when referring to people;⁶² the now-common translation of ‘private’ in reference to land,⁶³ apparently, “followed this interpretation”.⁶⁴ And indeed, this meaning of *nemeh* as ‘free’ seems to have been relevant to the Egyptians as well: when they needed to translate the Greek epithet *eleutherios* (‘free’), they used ‘*nemeh*-man’;⁶⁵ when Coptic became the language of Egypt, *nemeh* formed the basis of the word *remhe* (ⲣⲙⲔⲉ) meaning ‘free man’.⁶⁶

The bottom line of this foray into translation woes concludes with a question: what were translators to do? The philological approach of deriving meaning from context had produced inconclusive results, leading translators to wonder if *nemeh*

The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 74/1 (1988), 220–223, 223; Christopher Eyre, The Adoption Papyrus in Social Context, in: The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 78 (1992), 207–221, 208).


- 60 P. Louvre E7833 (George Hughes, Saite Demotic Land Leases, Chicago 1952, 56).
- 61 P. BM. 10560 (Cary Martin, A Demotic Land Lease from Philadelphia: P. BM 10560, in: The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 72/1 (1986), 159–173, 165, 169); presumably opposed to the equipment of a slave (Erwin Seidl, Ägyptische Rechtsgeschichte der Saiten- und Perserzeit, Gluckstadt 1973, 17; Edda Bresciani/P. W. Pestman, Testi demotici, in: Ignazio Cazzaniga (ed.), Papiri della Università degli Studi Milano, volume terzo: P. Mil. Vogliano, Milano 1965, 169–199, 174f.).
- 62 Thompson, Self-Dedications, 1940, 68; Bakir, Slavery, 1952, 50; Girgis Mattha, The Demotic Legal Code of Hermopolis West, Cairo 1975, 70; Aristide Théodoridès, Les papyrus des adoptions, in: Revue internationale des droits de l’antiquité 12 (1965), 79–142, 130; Harari, Nature, 1959, 178; Jean-Marie Kruchten, Le décret d’Horemheb, Brussels 1981, 31–33; William Ward, Index of Egyptian Administrative and Religious Titles of the Middle Kingdom, Beirut 1982, 830. There are certain scholars who argue that *nemeh* represented a status-marker somewhere between enslaved and free, namely Griffith (Catalogue, 1909, 52), Bernadette Menu (Le prêt en droit égyptien, in: Cahiers de recherches de l’institut de papyrologie et d’égyptologie de Lille 1 [1971], 59–141), Gardiner (The Wilbour Papyrus, Oxford 1948, 206), and Nathaniel Julius Reich (Papyri Juristischen Inhalts in Hieratischer und Demotischer Schrift aus dem British Museum, Wien 1914, 15). Cruz-Uribe (Slavery, 1982, 49) did not use ‘free’, arguing that the use of this translation “may have modern connotations which may be inappropriate for a discussion of Egyptian society”.
- 63 Gardiner, Dakhleh, 1933, 21; Cruz-Uribe, Slavery, 1982, 50f.; Koenraad Donker van Heel, Papyrus Louvre E 7852: A Land Lease from the Reign of Taharka, in: Revue d’Égyptologie 48 (1997), 81–93, 92; Robert Ritner, Third Intermediate Period Antecedents of Demotic Legal Terminology, in: Kim Ryholt (ed.), Acts of the Seventh International Conference of Demotic Studies, Copenhagen 2002, 343–360, 350.
- 64 Klaus Baer, The Low Price of Land in Ancient Egypt, in: Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt 1 (1962), 25–45, 26 note 10.
- 65 Heinz Felber, Augustus Ζεὺς Ἐλευθέριος im Demotischen und die Etymologie von ⲣⲙⲔⲉ, in: Göttinger Miszellen 123 (1992), 27–36.
- 66 Commonly assumed to be a development of ‘*nemeh*-man’, *rm̄t-nm̄h*; *ibid.*, 32, 35; however, a re-evaluation of the somewhat unconvincing etymology of the term is much needed.

referred to a poor man, a beggar, a disadvantaged orphan, or alternatively to an unenslaved, land-owning citizen (and his ‘unenslaved’ land and ‘unenslaved’ equipment). Surely, it could not be both – hence, the “paradox” in the heading of this section.

But, through historical semantics, there is no such paradox: to the Egyptians, the different meanings suggested by the varied contexts in which *nemeh* appears all belonged to the same semantic category. In other words, to the Egyptians, *nemeh* represented something that could equally refer to a fatherless person, the opposite of a slave, an unoccupied field, or an unclaimed cow. As an approach, historical semantics motivates ancient historians to inquire precisely why certain concepts were considered similar enough to warrant usage of the same term to describe them; put simply, to investigate the context of a social fabric in which a fatherless person could be comparable to an unoccupied field.

5. ‘Unprotected’ as a semantic umbrella

The following section examines the term *nemeh* not through the philological approach of deriving meaning from context, but from the historical semantic approach of deriving meaning from the social implications of semantic range. The overarching goal of historical semantics is to “reveal the links between words, representations, and social structures”;⁶⁷ this link can aid us in determining the semantic range of the term *nemeh* as it appears in its social (rather than textual) context.

 In a return to classifiers, *nemeh* was often accompanied by the pictogram of a child, suggesting some level of immaturity or need for aid, which is not necessarily a bad thing. However, *nemeh* was also occasionally accompanied by the classifier creatively titled by Egyptologists as the “bad bird”:⁶⁸ a pictogram of a sparrow which follows words with negative connotations. Being a *nemeh*, apparently, was undesirable. A dream oracle,⁶⁹ for example, suggests the same meaning, interpreting a dream of a person showing their backside as a prophecy that this person would become a *nemeh* – and this outcome is decidedly ‘bad (*dw*)’.⁷⁰

This negative connotation provides a clue to the semantic range of *nemeh*: whether referring to people or to property, it is an undesirable state. This made enough sense when the context of the term suggested some degree of misery (for example ‘orphan’). But it posed a problem to translators when *nemeh* was used

67 Danuser et al., *Historical Semantics*.

68 David, *De l’inferiorite*, 2006.

69 P. Chester Beatty III, Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri*, 1935, 9–22.

70 Kasia Szpakowska, *Behind Closed Eyes. Dreams and Nightmares in Ancient Egypt*, Swansea 2003, 14; Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri*, 1935, 18.

opposite to ‘slave’ because the idea of ‘freedom’ as a negative state is not quite conducive with our modern idea of ‘freedom’ as desirable.⁷¹ However, when we eliminate the idea that *nemeh* necessarily referred to ‘free’, and instead examine its semantic context, the issue is rendered moot: perhaps it was not ‘freedom’ which was undesirable, but rather something else.

With reference to people, *nemeh* could suggest a poor or disadvantaged person, a person without a father, a citizen or village dweller, and the opposite of a slave. With reference to property, *nemeh* could suggest cattle, land, or equipment that is unclaimed and could be transferred or sold. What, may we ask, do these things have in common? I propose that the general contexts in which *nemeh* appears, regardless of the meaning implied by specific contexts, suggest the same semantic source: someone (or something) lacking protection or a relationship with a protector. Protection was held in high regard in Egyptian society, whether this protection originated from the gods, the king, high officials, or simply a superior person. This ideology is apparent in teachings and wisdom texts: instructions urge to seek out “a strong superior”⁷² when one has been injured, warn against taking a superior to court “without protection,”⁷³ and warn that a man without protection “sleeps in prison.”⁷⁴

A person without a father in Egypt was considered unprotected, especially in legal contexts. Like the widow who lacked a husband, this state of fatherlessness implied deprivation from a “natural male protector” who would speak for the woman or child in legal situations.⁷⁵ Local leaders refer to ‘speaking’ on behalf of widows and fatherless children, ‘hearing’ their complaints – vocabulary reflective of judicial and legal protections. *Nemeh*, in the contexts where the term refers to an ‘orphan’ on analogy with a widow, is one who needs to be protected because he is lacking a father, a protector.

It was not just fatherlessness which could leave a person unprotected. The contexts in which people labelled as *nemeh* needed protection could be as varied as an infant Horus bitten by a scorpion, an army officer before his promotion, or a person carrying a large debt. All of these people needed a protector: someone to speak for

71 Orlando Patterson, Slavery, Alienation, and the Female Discovery of Personal Freedom, in: *Social Research* 58 (1991), 159–187, 159f.; on ‘freedom’ as a concept, see below.

72 *Teachings of Amenemope* 22.1–4; Juan Carlos Moreno García, The ‘Other’ Administration. Patronage, Factions, and Informal Networks of Power in Ancient Egypt, in: Juan Carlos Moreno García (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Administration*, Leiden 2013, 1029–1065, 1030.

73 *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy* 8, 11.

74 P. Insinger 10/5.

75 Kóthay, *The Widow*, 2006, 152.

them in court,⁷⁶ elevate their status through a promotion, heal them of their scorpion sting, or relieve a third of their debt. They were not necessarily orphaned – or indeed, even necessarily miserable – but they did need a third party who could provide some aid or protection.

Some of the contexts for *nemeh* suggest something like a citizen – for example “an official needs his *nemeh* (pl.)” – but citizens, too, needed protection in their social context. In the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom, regional officials as well as the king underscored their responsibilities to their people. This was considered a symbiotic relationship: the people of a town, nome, or region were loyal to their ruler, and in exchange, the ruler protected them from threats both real and metaphorical.⁷⁷

While this aspect of protection is reasonable for people, we may wonder how it applies to property: land, cattle, and even the water in wells. Naturally, the question arises as to how property be ‘unprotected’. The answer lies in the importance behind title – or more specifically, title protection – in Egypt, especially during the later periods of Egyptian history. In exchanges and transfer of property, it was the responsibility of the owner to protect the title of the property and evidence its chain of title.⁷⁸ This responsibility was intended to protect the parties of the contract in court: for example, in a sale, the seller could never claim that he did not transfer the title in exchange for silver, and conversely the buyer could not claim that he did not give the silver and receive the title in return, since these acts were in writing. In this context, property which had been quitclaimed was considered *nemeh*: unclaimed, unprotected, even ‘orphaned’, at least until its new owner had taken responsibility for it.⁷⁹

6. *Nemeh* as ‘unprotected’ in the context of slavery

We finally come to the facet of *nemeh* related to labour and dependency: the contexts in which *nemeh* appears as the opposite of a slave. The use of *nemeh* suggests that for the Egyptians, the opposite of enslavement was undesirable. It was this apparent

76 E.g. O. Borchartd 2 (David, *nmh*, 2011, 78): “May he [Amun-Re] cause the court to answer as one voice, on behalf of the *nemeh*.”

77 J.J. Shirley, Crisis and Restructuring of the State. From the Second Intermediate Period to the Advent of the Ramesses, in: Moreno García (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Administration*, 2013, 521–606, 540f.

78 Many documents end with the disclaimer that the transfer of (written) title deeds are crucial to the transaction and that they may not be challenged in court; Eugene Cruz-Uribe, A Transfer of Property during the Reign of Darius I (P. Bibl. Nat. 216 and 217), *Enchoria* 1979, 37; Seidl, *Rechtsgeschichte*, 1956, 32–33; see also the *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy* 13/9: “every man acquires property; it is the wise man who knows how to secure it” and 17/6: “do not accept a gift without a document”.

79 For land, this carries with it the additional negative implication of a (potentially fertile) field left untilled.

contradiction that spawned confusion following the philological approach; the reasoning is that one would desire *not* to be a slave, and yet being unenslaved is presented as unfavourable. In light of the semantic implications of *nemeh* discussed above, I suggest that when the term was used in opposition to ‘slave’, it represented not ‘freedom’, but rather unprotection.⁸⁰

Through self-sale into enslavement, a person was able to become protected: they were granted a roof over their heads and limited social benefits in exchange. Superiors were morally obligated to take care of their dependents, whether these dependents were their own children or other members of their household (including slaves) from illness, lawsuits, and illegal seizure.⁸¹ Thus, we see an overlap between the vocabulary of slavery and other forms of voluntary subordination for which a person would receive protection, such as pleas to a god for patronage.⁸² When slaves pledged that they were no longer *nemeh*, they did not mean that they were no longer ‘free’ following their self-sale. Rather, they were stating they were no longer unprotected or unclaimed, with the connotation that to be unprotected was economically and socially disadvantageous.

This does raise the question as to how Egyptians regarded the concept of freedom, especially in these sale and self-sale contexts. That topic merits a dedicated work in its own right, but some initial comments may be made here. If the use of *nemeh* is not taken necessarily as a declaration of freedom or unfreedom, then the natural conclusion that follows is that freedom is not mentioned at all in these sales. Some scholars, notably Bernadette Menu, have taken this as evidence that these were not sales of people, but rather sales of the labour of people.⁸³ Menu’s argument hinges on an *a priori* assumption that private slavery did not exist as a practice,⁸⁴ and therefore, these contracts could not possibly be reflective of evidence of slave sales or anything similar.⁸⁵ A more nuanced argument is

80 I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this manuscript for the suggestion that “defencelessness” may be a more apt description of the status experienced by these persons; however, the use of “unprotection” is a conscious decision to parallel the common “unfreedom”.

81 Moreno García, *The ‘Other’*, 2013, 1051; Michael Chauveau, *Administration centrale et autorités locales d’Amasis à Darius*, in: Bernadette Menu (ed.), *Égypte pharaonique. Déconcentration, cosmopolitisme*, Paris 2000, 99–109; see also P. Insinger 33/15, which states that not offering protection to the weak can come back to haunt a person: “He who leaves the weak in torment is one who complains when he is no longer protected.”

82 Abdel Gawad Migahid, *Demotische Briefe an Götter von der Spät- bis zur Römerzeit*, Würzburg 1974, 80–84.

83 Bernadette Menu, *La question de l’esclavage dans l’Égypte pharaonique*, in: *Droit et cultures* 39/1 (2000), 59–79.

84 Menu, *L’esclavage*, 2000, 77–79.

85 Bernadette Menu, *Captifs de guerre et dépendance rurale dans l’Égypte du Nouvel Empire*, in: Bernadette Menu (ed.), *La dépendance rurale dans l’Antiquité égyptienne et proche-orientale*, Cairo 2005, 356–358.

that although ‘freedom’ was not a legal category – and therefore did not warrant mention in legal documents – it was still a concept with which the Egyptians were familiar,⁸⁶ as evidenced by the practice of manumission through adoption. In the spirit of historical semantics, it is important to note that familiarity with the concept of ‘freedom’ does not mean that words for ‘freedom’ inhabited the same range nor carried the same connotations with which we understand the concept today.⁸⁷

As a final comment, it is crucial to state that this apparent choice between enslavement (that is, protection) and ‘freedom’ (that is, unprotection) is only the illusion of choice: slavery was only the better of two evils when the secondary evil was starvation, homelessness, or death. The labour of these people was not *exchanged* for protection as much it was *sacrificed*. Nevertheless, it was this sacrifice that made slavery a protected status in comparison with the alternatives.

7. Conclusions and Implications

This case study employed historical semantics to explore the range of a term which had been previously interpreted as referring to seemingly contradictory concepts: miserable, deprived, or orphaned, but also free, unencumbered, or private. The historical semantic approach demonstrated that although these concepts are contradictory *in translation*, this was not the case in their socio-historical contexts. Instead, they fell under the same semantic umbrella of someone or something lacking protection, wherever that protection was meant to have originated (for example protection of title for property, social protection for an orphan, legal protection for a citizen of a town).

The high value placed on protection means that not only was ‘freedom’ not the direct opposite of ‘enslavement’ but also that within the social context of Egypt, entry into an institution or household may have been seen as preferable to unprotection, even at the cost of enslavement. Indeed, the implications might be yet wider: the use of *nemeh* in labour-related contexts has been cited as evidence of ‘freedom’ in Egypt.⁸⁸ However, since the term can more accurately be translated as ‘unprotected’ or perhaps ‘unclaimed’ rather than ‘free’, its usage is therefore not conclusive evidence of an understanding of the concept of ‘freedom’, but rather a call to explore

86 As well stated by Christopher Eyre: “stress lies on the practicalities, and not the legalities of dependence”. Christopher Eyre, *How Relevant Was Personal Status to the Functioning of the Rural Economy in Pharaonic Egypt?*, in: Menu (ed.), *La dépendance rurale*, 2005, 157–186, 179.

87 For an overarching comparison of ancient and modern concepts of freedom, see Larry May, *Ancient Legal Thought*, Cambridge 2019, 89–97.

88 E.g. Théodoridès, *Les papyrus*, 1965, 52; further citations in Cruz-Urbe, *Slavery*, 1982, 49–52.

the concept of ‘protection’ more extensively. A work on the concept of freedom in Egypt is a *desideratum* (and beyond the scope of this study). It is my hope that this case study in historical semantics and the resultant accuracy in the translation of *nemeh* would contribute to such a future study, but also to a further study on systems of patronage and protection in Egypt.

Historical semantics formed the foundation of this present contribution, providing the methodological basis for determining the shared features of the attestations of *nemeh* while still accounting for lexical meaning. Within ancient studies, I argue for the adoption of this methodology not just as a tool for the clarification of confusing or paradoxical terms (like *nemeh*) but also because such an approach illuminates the social context in which a semantic overlap like this one could occur – especially in contrast with our own social context. In this case, the range of lexical meanings and semantic background of the term *nemeh* paints a picture of a society in which protection is paramount, and in which one would be miserable without it. Although not entirely alien to our own sensibilities, this concept is sufficiently different from our own social reality to warrant a closer examination at the implications of our translation choices.

The utilization of historical semantics in this case study to evaluate range and implications of that range can and should be employed in future studies of similar labour-related terms, such as *bak* (*bʿk*) and *hem* (*ḥm*). Both of these terms have been variously translated as ‘slave’ or ‘servant’, which have vastly different implications in our vernacular.⁸⁹ An analysis of the lexical meanings of these terms in the context of labour-related textual attestations, as undertaken by Hofmann,⁹⁰ is certainly not without merit. But inclusion of attestations which are not labour-related – a larger-scope project well beyond the limits of this case study – as well as a subsequent social analysis of semantic range through historical semantics would shed further light on the social factors at play in labour relationships in ancient Egypt.

89 And at times, perhaps more concerningly, translated as anachronistic or Orientalising terms such as ‘concubine’, ‘handmaiden’, ‘slave-lad’, etc.

90 E.g. Tobias Hofmann, *Zur sozialen Bedeutung zweier Begriffe für “Diener”: B3k und Ḥm. Untersucht an Quellen vom Alten Reich bis zur Ramessidenzeit*, Basel 2005.