

# OTHER TIMES

DRAFT OF A THEORY OF HETEROCHRONOUS CULTURAL OBJECTS

Presentation of the diploma thesis of the same title  
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## 1. THE ROSETTA PROJECT

During Napoleon's Egypt campaign in 1799, French soldiers discovered a stele dating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, which provided access not just to that precise time period, but to several millennia of antique history. Of course, the object in question is the ROSETTA STONE, which bears an inscription about Pharaoh Ptolemy V. What is unique about this document is that the stele contains three different versions of the same text – in Greek, Demotic, and Hieroglyphics. Starting from the Greek inscription, historians were able to decode the meaning of the hieroglyphic script, which had been undecipherable for centuries, and to reconstruct the language of Ancient Egypt.

Today this stone has lent its name to the ROSETTA PROJECT,<sup>1</sup> an ambitious endeavour by linguists and interested volunteers from all over the world, who have made it their goal to save as many as possible of the circa 6000-7000 languages currently spoken from being lost and forgotten. In light of the fact that about half of them are used by very few speakers, amounting to only 0.3% of the world's population in total, and that many of these languages are no longer taught to children, experts estimate that they will be lost forever within decades. The Rosetta Project aims to document these endangered languages by collecting information about their script, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, genetic relationship to other languages, and the culture of their speakers, and preserving this data in a constantly growing archive for posterity. This, the project team hopes, would then enable reconstruction of these languages when they will have become extinct, so that mankind can still access the knowledge connected with them.

Apart from the creation of this online archive, which has by now become the largest linguistic database on the internet, the project group is planning long-term archiving of the collected data on specially produced nickel discs which are to be distributed all over our planet, the ROSETTA DISCS. One side of a disc, measuring just about 8cm in diameter, can be inscribed with up to 30,000 pages of microscopic size. The discs are extremely resistant to water, heat, and electromagnetic radiation, and because the information is saved in the form of an analog, graphical copy, it can be read with a simple microscope of 1000x magnification.

## 2. CANNED CULTURE

What we have here is a project that exemplifies the human desire for durability, stability, and recollection across time. The Rosetta Project is, firstly, a comprehensive survey of that which is present today, and in a second step an attempt to provide this collection with shelter against the uncertainty of the future. As it were, the Rosetta Discs may be analyzed as an equivalent to canned food: endangered languages are more or less shock-frozen in their current state, so as not to rot after their expiry date.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rosettaproject.org>

It is of special interest here that this act of conservation creates numerous symbolic references to time, whereby the project gains a peculiar kind of theoretical significance. First of all, as has already been hinted at, the data collection presents a snapshot of current linguistic knowledge. No matter when and to what purpose the information engraved on the Rosetta Discs will eventually be used: its value may or may not be timeless, but the data itself is not. Instead, it carries an inherent signature of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The archive will not just assist future historians in the reconstruction of dead languages, but also in the reconstruction of the achievements and methodology of today's academic discipline of linguistics.

Secondly, the facts inscribed on the discs do not simply document a single, universal reality. By collecting data not only about the languages themselves, but also on the cultures of their speakers, and by using native legends as sample texts wherever possible, the Rosetta Archive mirrors the fragmented niches on the periphery of today's global society. The highest common denominator of these cultures connected with endangered languages is that their outlook on time is different from the perspective of globalized modernity. Most of them could validly be called 'islands in time', residues of the past. Granted, the conservation of whole cultures is by far more difficult than the preservation of languages, and the Rosetta Project will hardly be able to save even one of these cultures. However, the collected texts contain clear traces of their unique worldviews and histories, enabling us to catch a glimpse of the locally differing cultural structures of time, however vague this glimpse may be.

Thirdly, the languages themselves must be analyzed as a medium which is crucial to understanding cultural heritage. This is evident on the example of the original Rosetta Stone: Only after the hieroglyphic script had been deciphered, archeologists were able to read the hundreds of inscriptions on temples, tombs, and papyrus scrolls. Knowledge of their language opened up a window into the time of the ancient Egyptians. In a similar way, the languages documented in the Rosetta Archive are hoped to provide access to the testimony of a wide range of cultures we currently know little about. The archive does not only contain symbolic references to our current age, but also to cultural history.

Fourthly, languages are more than transparent media of human communication. They also function as a storage medium in and of themselves; a special type of archive, so to speak. In their daily use, they record traces of their own utilization, for example in their vocabulary or in certain grammatical idiosyncrasies, but also on the phonetic level via the phenomenon of sound change. All these processes take place very slowly and are not usually noticed by the speakers; however, over the centuries they lead to the emergence of new, different languages – a good example is the development that led from Latin to the modern Romance languages (e.g. French, Spanish, and Italian). By comparing genetically related languages such as these, linguists are able not only to reconstruct their common ancestor with surprising precision, but also to draw conclusions about their speakers' cultures, even if no written sources are available. The symbolic presence of the past that is visible in the Rosetta Project is twofold.

Fifthly, the future also holds an important position in the temporal structure of the Rosetta Project. Linguistic and cultural information is collected and archived with special regard to future usefulness; in fact – and this is crucial – to usefulness *after* a supposed catastrophe which is also located in the future, namely the assumed extinction of the languages in question. Their conservation simultaneously fulfills the function of a *reserve*; in case of an unfortunate turn of events, at least some of the linguistic research material available today shall remain.

### 3. HETEROCHRONIA

In view of this multi-faceted symbolic structure of temporal references, objects like the Rosetta Discs can be regarded as *heterochronous* objects. In a first approximation, this term basically means that many different and heterogeneous links to OTHER TIMES become visible based on a single object, which allow us to talk about more than just the actual here and now – about times gone by, about times to come, and about connections between these times as well. In other words: A heterochronous object always has more than one historical context. By preventing past contexts from disappearing and by anticipating future contexts, it renders them VIRTUALLY PRESENT. In the vicinity of heterochronous objects we find a multitude of overlapping discourses, each referencing a different point in time, and this overlap creates a surplus of meaning compared to ‘normal’ objects.

In this regard, heterochronia is highly similar to Michel Foucault’s concept of HETEROTOPIA, of ‘Other Spaces’. More precisely: these two types of symbolic configurations mirror each other, just as space and time are different dimensions of the same grid of the universe in which all existing objects – for instance: things, people, communication – position themselves. Of course, in physical reality *only a single object may be placed at any given point in space, whereas all currently actualized objects occupy the same point in time.*<sup>2</sup> Niklas Luhmann formulates this correlation as follows:

*Space makes it POSSIBLE FOR OBJECTS TO LEAVE THEIR PLACES.  
Time makes it NECESSARY FOR PLACES TO LEAVE THEIR OBJECTS.*<sup>3</sup>

The unique feature of both heterochronia and heterotopia is that this standard topology is symbolically undermined, that is, undermined in the medium of MEANING (not in the medium of time and space). HETEROCHRONIA assembles relations to multiple points in time in a single object, and HETEROTOPIA *“is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”*.<sup>4</sup> Both configurations create a node, a kind of local gravitation centre in the symbolic structure of space and time.

<sup>2</sup> LUHMANN (2000), p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> LUHMANN (2000), p. 112 (emphasis original).

<sup>4</sup> FOUCAULT (1997), p. 354.

Of course, these specific configurations do not come into existence on their own accord; rather, they are the result of cultural activity. If culture in a general sense may be described as the process of creating a symbolic network of references in the medium of meaning – according to Luhmann “the most general medium that makes both psychic and social systems possible and is essential for their functioning”<sup>5</sup> –, and if, under certain circumstances, the application of symbolic cultural techniques leads to the construction of heterochronous or heterotopic objects that feature a surplus of both possible and active relations to other items in the domain of meaning, then such objects should indeed play a specific, unique role in the unfolding of culture. Their increased ‘semantic gravity’ in comparison with the remaining cultural space must exert recognizable influence on the network of meaning by virtue of the diversity of symbolic reference paths.

This is evident from the example of Foucault’s ‘Other Spaces’. These are, basically, precisely defined and geographically locatable places that function according to different rules as compared to the rest of the society. Every heterotopia creates its own, locally valid discourse which on the one hand draws a line that separates it from normal space – for instance, one may enter a theatre only with a ticket, and leave a prison only after having been officially released –, and on the other hand mirrors the order of normal space in a specific way – the theatre is a place where the actors embody not themselves, but other, usually fictitious people; the prison is a place where people who have broken the rules of society are assembled. It is the essence of heterotopic places that they “*have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect*”.<sup>6</sup> Heterotopias have the function of a critical commentary with regard to the surrounding cultural space<sup>7</sup> because they radically question the rules a society abides by and unmask social conventions as illusory. However, they also serve to stabilize the existing order by providing a place for non-normal people, objects, and activities, and thus making them controllable. In a certain sense, a heterotopia exists both within and outside the normal cultural space. It is the concrete realization of ‘inclusive exclusion’, which addresses the Absolute Other with acceptance and recognition of its heterogeneity in order to integrate it into the order. In the language of systems theory, heterotopia marks the UNION OF DIFFERENCES.

The characteristics of *heterochronia* are very similar. Of course, the distinction marked here is not between inside and outside, but between now and not-now. By using the heterotopic strategy of not rejecting Other Times, but symbolically integrating them into the present, an essential precondition for *cultural memory* is created: a node in the web of time, which memory can use to realign itself. A heterochronia directed at the future establishes forward connections that can then be picked up by another heterochronia which is oriented to the past, and be put to productive use by the latter. It should be noted that most heterochronous objects appear to act both forward and backward – we have seen an example of such a symbolic structure in the Rosetta Project.

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<sup>5</sup> LUHMANN (2000), p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> FOUCAULT (1997), p. 352.

<sup>7</sup> “*eine kritische Kommentarfunktion in bezug auf den sie umgebenden Raum*”, BAUM (2001), p. 17 (translation DZ).

#### 4. SEMANTIC COMPRESSION

But how does this creation of symbolic relations work? With recourse to a model proposed by Hartmut Winkler, cultural techniques of stabilization can be divided in two classes: **MONUMENTAL** techniques on the one hand, and techniques of **REPETITION** on the other hand. Upon close inspection it becomes clear that these ideal types are in fact two sides of the same system of inscriptions, which plays an important role in balancing change and stagnation during the development of ‘culture’. For in order to become culturally significant, the meaning of a monument must be re-actualized in regular intervals. Conversely, repetition relies on a prototype with which to compare the result of the repeating act. Monuments again and again become performative, and symbolical performances are in need of a fixed point of reference.

*“Over the centuries, a written text can have tens of thousands of readers who take notice of it and integrate it into their activities; certain readers may read it repeatedly. Its material durability asserts itself most notably by establishing a specific type of repetition, which creates a kind of gravitational centre for further repetition.”<sup>8</sup>*

The two types of continuity are thus mutually dependent and influence each other. Because of this interaction between inscription in monuments and usage in discourse, actions and events are converted into structures, into a compact arrangement of symbolic codes which is known to us under the label ‘culture’. Over time, this process of **COMPRESSION** often reaches a point where such “*coagulated activity*”<sup>9</sup> culminates in the emergence of a heterochronous object.

This can be demonstrated on the example of the Rosetta Project. In the first step, everyday activities and extraordinary events in the life of a group of people, as well as these people’s reactions to what they experience, constitute a contextual network of meaning, a ‘culture’ in the ethnographical sense of the word. This includes a moral framework – which actions are allowed and valued, which ones are prohibited – and a medium of communication, a *language*. The latter can be analyzed as a complex, rigid system of rules and semantics which can only be broken out of at the cost of not being understood (monument), but being an immaterial symbolic system, it requires constant updating through actual speech acts (repetition).<sup>10</sup> While in use by multiple generations of speakers, the language itself undergoes change and incorporates traces of their activities, values, and experiences into its own structure. Over the course of a language’s life, its vocabulary and grammar are constantly imprinted with the mark of time.

<sup>8</sup> “Ein schriftlicher Text kann über die Jahrhunderte Zehntausende von Lesern haben, die ihn zur Hand nehmen und in ihre Praxen integrieren; einzelne Leser können ihn wiederholt zur Hand nehmen. Seine materielle Dauerhaftigkeit also bewährt sich vor allem darin, einen bestimmten Typus von Wiederholung hervorzubringen, der der Wiederholung eine Art Gravitationszentrum schafft.” WINKLER (2002), p. 300f (translation DZ).

<sup>9</sup> “geronnene Praxis”, WINKLER (2002), p. 304 (translation DZ).

<sup>10</sup> cf. WINKLER (2002), p. 303f.

In the case of an endangered language with only a few speakers left, the probability of actualizing repetition is strongly diminished. Now, in our example, linguists become interested in the dying language and start documenting it. Again, this results in a change of its concrete form: Firstly, not all details of a language can be dealt with in a necessarily generalizing written grammar. Secondly, the categories inherent in scientific description and classification – which are themselves the result of centuries of semantic compression – exert a significant influence on the perception and analysis of the language's rules. (Of course, the reverse is also true: any data about previously undocumented languages, in its capacity as raw material for research, also impacts the future development of academic linguistics.) What is more, in the process of being archived the language experiences a switch in type of code: From this moment on, as a document, it is not predominantly performative and repetitive any longer, but more strongly monumental.

Further codes are added when the documents are engraved on Rosetta Discs: firstly, the technological knowledge necessary to produce these objects; secondly, the historical knowledge associated with the original Rosetta Stone; and thirdly, the cultural logic of prevention in the face of possible loss of data. The result is more dense and monumental than ever: an object merely the size of the palm of a hand, with an expected durability of 2000 years, contains not just countless references related to this specific language, but also those related to several thousand others.

What happens here is a REPEATED INCORPORATION OF ADDITIONAL SYMBOLIC DIMENSIONS into the topology of the relevant discourse, which is attained through a performative act of inscription. With every ACT OF DISCURSIVE COMPRESSION, a node in the temporal structure of the medium of meaning is established, and at this node a heterochronous object emerges – at first the language itself, then the scientific archive, and in the end the Rosetta Disc as an attempt to communicate with the future.

The main role that this creation of heterochronous relations plays for the underlying symbolic network, i.e. for culture, is that it provides access points for a wide range of possible connections, thereby counteracting the *improbability of communication* as postulated by Niklas Luhmann. In other words: the production of heterochronous objects allows for a greater leeway in the autopoiesis of society as a system. Because heterochronia is always more than just an ordinary distinction within the medium of meaning, because *as a node* it always creates *several distinctions at once*, which in turn have to be distinguished *from each other*, the resulting structures remain sufficiently flexible so they can be used as a medium for further compressing acts of inscription. The meaning-processing machine 'society' can continue to operate.

## 5. THE EPISTEMIC GAP

This, however, can lead to a recursive integration of compressed objects into further compression processes. What happens in that case is that the heterochronous object, possessing a higher level of compression already, assumes a role comparable to the denser discourse of heterotopic space, from which it challenges and criticizes the rules under which the lower-level compression works, commenting on the cultural grammar of ‘normal space’. Again, the Rosetta Project can serve to demonstrate this.

In order to make sure that someone who finds a Rosetta Disc a millennium from now will begin using a microscope to read the detailed linguistic data, the front side of these discs is inscribed with the biblical creation myth in eight languages in parallel (English, Spanish, Russian, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, Hebrew, Arabic, and Swahili), starting at a size readable with the bare eye, and getting progressively smaller from there. Why the Bible, seeing as most of the cultures documented by the Rosetta Project have virtually no connection to Christianity whatsoever? Of course there is a simple answer: The story of creation does not only symbolically mark the origin of culture in general, positioning itself in antithesis to the motive of archiving languages precisely in view of their impending demise; rather, it is plainly the single text available in the highest number of different languages. Indeed, the data on *all* languages contains a translation of the Book of Genesis. But in spite of that straightforward explanation, the choice of this highly connotative text establishes a number of revealing temporal relations that expose a thoroughly Western trail of thought in the cultural background to the Rosetta Project. Symptomatically, it is the very Book of Genesis in which it is said, “...and God said unto them: *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.*”<sup>11</sup> – this passage forms a central part of the theological justification for the aggressive expansionism of Western culture, which in turn has been a significant factor in the decline and extinction of indigenous languages all over the world, and is, in the context of Globalization, still involved in it.

By rendering visible this contrast, however unintentional, the Rosetta Discs behave **OBSTINATELY** in a Heideggerian sense,<sup>12</sup> and direct the focus towards the historical contingency of the current codes and conventions of their cultural environment. The temporal node of heterochronia leads to a constellation in which the possibility of a discursive space beyond the borders established by usually unquestioned parameters of thought becomes visible. The ‘Other Time’ opens an *epistemic gap* in the structures of meaning and forces us to switch to a higher level of observation, from which the underlying distinctions used in the production of meaning can be examined as such in their relativity and dependency on contextual information. By this, culture itself is placed in a position – in no way to be taken for granted – of being able to *deal with gaps* in cultural heritage and to *think across fundamental upheavals* of epistemic frameworks. This “*toxic quality*”<sup>13</sup> of marking and questioning the very mechanism of thinking itself is the central accomplishment of heterochronia.

<sup>11</sup> 1 MOSES 28.

<sup>12</sup> cf. HEIDEGGER (2001), p. 103-106.

<sup>13</sup> LUHMANN (2000), p. 95.



## 6. SUMMARY

Let us recall: Both heterotopic places and heterochronous time-objects create a special type of symbolic references in the structures of culture whose central feature it is to challenge the assumptions underlying the basic mechanism of the production of meaning. Not everything that is thinkable or sayable can actually be thought or said in a specific historical situation. Heterotypical cultural objects shed light on these restrictions, and by forcing the observer to switch to second-order observation they make visible not just the restrictions themselves, but also the restrictions of these restrictions.

Such heterotypical objects correspond quite closely to that which Foucault – in the preface to »*The Order of Things*« – calls a 'discursive heterotopia', a "*non-place of language*".<sup>14</sup> However, they exist not only as heterotopic places that combine various spatial configurations to a clearly bounded physical location where the ruleset of the usual order of society functions differently to some extent. Rather, it appears that heterotypical objects can also manifest as a heterochronous activity that symbolically compresses multiple references and relations to points in time, moves and reconfigures the focus in the symbolic network of cultural meaning, and thus draws attention to the historical relativity and contingency of conventions.

The core function of 'Other Places' and their strategy of 'inclusive exclusion' lies in contributing to the stabilization of *synchronic order* in the face of a multitude of heterogeneous objects which cannot otherwise be sorted into a manageable classification scheme. Parallel to this, 'Other Times' operate on the *diachronic* level concerned with the search for continuity, and find their role in ESTABLISHING CONNECTIVE NODES that support *autopoiesis* of the respective system in the temporal dimension. The cultural technique of heterochronia performatively references specific points in time and their associated cultural constellations, and thus participates in shaping the future course of symbolic development in processing meaning and medial representation. A symbolic "*web of time*"<sup>15</sup> is created, which ensures that the configuration of each represented node resonates in the configuration of all other nodes. In this way, the concept of 'Other Times' provides useful insights into the mechanics of cultural strategies of dealing with time on the one hand, and into the historical conditions for cultural grammars on the other hand.

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<sup>14</sup> FOUCAULT (2002), preface, p. xviii.

<sup>15</sup> "Zeit-Netz", GROSSKLAUS (2004), p. 168.

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This text is based on the theoretical framework developed in:

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The original German version is available at:

<http://www.david-zintl.de/texte/rosetta.pdf>

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