Akkadian and Sumerian Language Contact

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15. Akkadian and Sumerian Language Contact

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Abstract

The mutual influence of East-Semitic Akkadian and isolate Sumerian on each other is the first known and documented example of contact-induced language change. Speakers of East-Semitic and Sumerian may have been in contact for over a thousand years, and the contact resulted in similarities on the level of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. This chapter describes the linguistic traits of Akkadian that may have developed under the influence of Sumerian. Except for a considerable number of loanwords from Sumerian, this influence manifests itself in shared patterns, categories, constructions, and meanings but not in loaned forms.

1. Introduction

Sumerian was a linguistic isolate spoken in the southern part of ancient Mesopotamia; an area that roughly corresponds to today's Iraq. A generally accepted reference grammar of Sumerian has not yet been written. Recent descriptions varying in length, scope, and details are Thomsen 1984, Edzard 2003, Michalowski 2004 and Zólyomi 2007b. An introduction to the problems involved in the linguistic study of Sumerian is found in Black/Zólyomi 2007.

   Contact between Sumerian and dialects of East Semitic is thought to have begun at least as early as the turn of the 4th to the 3rd millennium B.C.E. The history of the relationship between Sumerian and Akkadian can be surmised only on the basis of indirect evidence, such as the temporal and geographical distribution of personal names, texts, and text types, aided by our knowledge of the history of ancient Mesopotamia (cf. Sallaberger 2004; Woods 2006). Many of the alleged shared features are

already present in the languages when they become accessible to us through phono-graphic writing in the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C.E., but lacking pertinent sources we know nothing about the nature of contact preceding this period. From about the 24th century onwards Akkadian became the dominant language, resulting in asymmetrical bilingualism in which knowledge of Akkadian may have proved practical in an increasing number of social contexts. The dominance of Akkadian eventually led to the replacement of Sumerian by Akkadian. The date of vernacular Sumerian's death is controversial in Sumerology. Some scholars place it around or even before the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C.E. (see Michalowski 2006); i.e. much earlier than Sallaberger 2004 and Woods 2006 who convincingly argue that Sumerian must have still been a vernacular in most parts of south Mesopotamia at end of the 3rd millennium B.C.E. Thus Sumerian probably vanished as a vernacular during the first part of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. After this period Sumerian was taught and learnt only for the purposes of cultic, literary and scholarly traditions.

The presumably widespread bilingualism (cf. Woods 2006) resulted in similarities between the two languages on the level of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. For interferences from Akkadian on Sumerian see, for example, Zólyomi 2007a; Edzard 2003, 173−178; Black/Zólyomi 2007, 13−22. The present chapter is concerned with the linguistic traits of Akkadian that may have developed under the influence of Sumerian. Except for a considerable number of loanwords from Sumerian (cf. 2.11), this influence manifests itself in shared patterns, categories, constructions, and meanings but not in loaned forms, a fact which alone may be an indication of prolonged and stable bilingualism.

2. Linguistic influence of Sumerian on Akkadian

2.1. The gutturals and phonemic /e/

A distinctive development of Akkadian phonology is the gradual merger and loss of the five reconstructed Proto-Semitic 'guttural' consonants */ʾ/, */h/, */ḫ/, */ʿ/, and */ġ/ by the 2nd millennium B.C.E. (cf. GAG § 23; Huehnergard 1998, 38−40, 587; Kouwenberg 2006). As Sumerian had no such phonemes, this development has been considered a prime example of Sumerian substrate influence on Akkadian (Falkenstein 1960, 303; Edzard 2003, 175). In fact this process was only one in a series of related developments:

(i)   Three of these phonemes (*/ḫ/, */ʿ/, */ġ/) caused colouring of an adjoining [a] to [e] (cf. Keetman 2004, 9−10). This originally allophonic [e] later became phonemic, indicated by the fact that it remained there even after the loss of the conditioning gutturals. Keetman (2004, 10−12) assumes that speakers of Sumerian, in which /e/ was a phoneme with substantial functional load (cf. Keetman 2005), must have played some role in this phonemicization. He argues further that the merger and loss of gutturals were in fact facilitated by the emergence of a phonemic /e/, as the newly emerged /e/ could substitute for the gutturals in distinguishing word forms. Hasselbach 2005, 107, thinks that only long /ē/ was phonemic in Sargonic Akkadian, and short [e] was an allophonic variation of either /a/ or /i/ (cf. also Huehnergard/Woods 2004, 232−233).

(ii) In the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, the presence of the newly emerged /e/ in turn caused every /a/ in the stem and the pronominal affixes of the verb to change to /e/, a development known as 'Babylonian Vowel Harmony' (Kouwenberg 2001, 226; see Huehnergard 1998, 46 for a list of affixes immune to Babylonian Vowel Harmony). As a similar rule causing the assimilation of different vowels within a word played an important role in Sumerian (see Keetman 2005, 11–13), Keetman suggested that Babylonian Vowel Harmony might reflect the influence of Sumerian (2004, 11). His proposal finds support in Kouwenberg's (2001, 237) observation that this sound change originated in the south in the 2nd millennium B.C.E., and subsequently spread to the north, but never reached Assyrian Akkadian.

These developments started in about the 24th century B.C.E. and were completed by the first part of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. They therefore overlap in time with the period of assumed asymmetrical bilingualism. One is therefore tempted to assume that these phonological changes may in fact reflect the influence of a Sumerian speaking population gradually shifting to Akkadian. Hasselbach (2005, 231–233) finds that contrary to expectations the orthography indicates the loss of gutturals and the phonemicization of /e/ in texts from the north first, but not from the south. She does, however, note the possibility that the Akkadian of the southern texts 'might have been a learned literary language that was not native to this area' (2005, 232).

2.2. The cislocative

Both Sumerian and Akkadian possess a verbal affix expressing the category of cislocative, known as the ventive in Assyriology. In Akkadian it is expressed by a suffix (-*m*/ -*am*/-*nim*, cf. von Soden 1995 § 82; Huehnergard 1998, 133–135; Kouwenberg 2002), while in Sumerian it is expressed by a prefix (*m(V)-*, cf. Attinger 1993, 270–280). In both languages, the ventive principally indicates a motion towards a deictic centre, which may be either the location of the speech event or one of the speech-act-participants: the speaker or the addressee. In both languages the ventive affix may also function as 1st ps. sg. pronoun: in Akkadian as 1st ps. sg. dative pronominal suffix (cf. Kouwenberg 2002, 235–239), while in Sumerian as the 1st ps. sg. pronoun in front of a dative or directive prefix, both of which express motion with an endpoint towards an entity. The morphological marker of the ventive in Akkadian is cognate with the marker of the Semitic energic mood (cf. Krebernik 1993, 126–129). Its use as a cislocative marker thus developed most probably under the influence of Sumerian. One may speculate that it acquired its cislocative meaning by exaptation (Lass 1997, 316–324) after its original modal function had been taken over by other forms in Akkadian (cf. 2.4). Its regular use in front of pronominal suffixes may in turn have made the opaque morpheme susceptible to reanalysis as a cislocative marker by analogy with equivalent Sumerian verbal forms.

2.3. The pronominal system

The pronominal systems of Sargonic Akkadian and Babylonian (and also of Eblaite) are characterized by an increased number of case distinctions compared with Old-

Assyrian (cf. Table 15.1) and Proto-Semitic. This increase came about as the cumulative result of at least four developments: (i) the innovation of dative pronouns with a suffixed /m/ morpheme by analogy with the ventive used as 1st ps. sg. dative pronoun (cf. 2.2); (ii) the innovation of 1st and 2nd persons oblique forms with an infixed /t/ morpheme for the independent personal pronouns by analogy with 3rd ps. forms; (iii) the innovation of dative pronouns with an infixed /š/ morpheme; (iv) the innovation of plural accusative pronominal suffixes with infixed /t/ by analogy with independent forms (cf. Huehnergard/Woods 2003, 249−250; Huehnergard 2006, 10−12). The second two innovations did not reach Assyrian, the northernmost Akkadian dialect.

Table 15.1: A comparison of the Old-Babylonian and Old-Assyrian pronominal systems

	Independent personal pronouns			
	Singular and plural			
	OB		OA	
Nom.	ø		ø	
Gen .-Acc.	-t-		-t-	
Dat.	-š- (+ -m)		-t-	
	Pronominal suffixes			
	Singular		Plural	
	OB	OA	OB	OA
Gen.	ø	ø	ø	ø
Acc.	ø	ø	-t-	ø
Dat.	-m	-m	-š- + -m	-t-

In Sumerian the dative case was a formally salient category, having both nominal and verbal markers. The emergence of distinct dative pronominal forms in Akkadian is probably the result of convergence between the two languages, helping to achieve a morpheme-per-morpheme intertranslatability.

2.4. The modal system

The Akkadian modal system makes extensive use of two morphemes: a particle *lū*, and a verbal prefix *lV-* (cf. von Soden 1995, 81; Edzard 1973; Huehnergard 1998, 142−147; Streck 2007, 56). Huehnergard 1983 derives these morphemes from a Proto-Semitic *lu/law* and *la-* respectively, assigning them distinct functions that do not overlap.

The distribution of the Akkadian morphemes is determined partly by functional and partly by morphophonological factors: the prefix *lV-* marks deontic (optative) modality; while the meaning of *lū* is mainly asseverative, but before forms without pronominal prefixes (such as nouns and statives) and before forms whose pronominal prefixes start with a strong consonant its function is the same as that of prefix *lV-*. It is likely that the functional overlap between *lū* and *lV-* developed due to the influence of Sumerian: the extension of *lū* to deontic contexts may have happened by analogy with the use of the Sumerian verbal prefix *ḫV-*, whose functions covered the functions

of both *lū* and *lV-* (cf. Edzard 2003, 116−118; Michalowski 2004, 42−43; Zólyomi 2007b, 33−34). There existed other isomorphisms: *ḫV-* and *lū* were both used as markers of bisyndetic emphatic disjunction, and *ḫV-* and *lV-* were both used in the protasis of unmarked conditional sentences (these uses may derive from the use of *ḫV-* expressing epistemic possibility); both *ḫV-* and *lV-* were used to express purpose after a clause with a deontic modal form (cf. Huehnergard 1998, 147). The existence of two distinct forms which express strong and weak negative deontic modality in both languages (Akkadian prohibitive vs. vetitive; Sumerian verbal forms with the prefixes *bara-* vs. *na-*, cf. Zólyomi 2007b, 33−34) may also be the result of convergence.

2.5. The stative

The Akkadian stative (Streck 1995, 166−189; Kouwenberg 2000) is a construction in which a (verbal) adjective or a noun forms a predicate with a pronominal copula (cf. Stassen 1997, 62−106, esp. 76−91). Several features of this construction have been connected with the influence of Sumerian that forms non-verbal predicates with a verbal copula (see Thomsen 1984, 273−278):

(i)   Edzard 2003, 176, suggests that the stative of nouns has developed under the influence of Sumerian, in which the nucleus of the copular predicate is often nominal. This proposal is based on the assumption that the stative spread secondarily from adjectives to predicative nouns. This assumption, however, may be unfounded in view of Stassen's research which finds that predicative adjectives always take over the encoding strategy of other (verbal, nominal, or locational) predicates (1997, 30−34), and considers the use of the copula an inherently nominal strategy for forming predicates.

(ii) In the 1st and 2nd person the base of the Akkadian stative of adjectives does not show agreement in gender and number with the subject (as does the adjective), but remains unchanged. Streck 1995, 184, assumes that this phenomenon reflects a Sumerian pattern, as in this language the nucleus of the copular predicate always remains unchanged and shows no agreement.

(iii) Finally, Streck 1995, 184, also suggests that the so-called active statives (i.e. statives with an object) in Akkadian are formed by analogy with Sumerian copular clauses in which the nucleus of the predicate may be a non-finite verbal form governing an object. Kouwenberg (2000, 58, 66−67) however, argued in connection with (ii) and (iii) that these features are natural corollaries of the stative's grammaticalization into a finite verbal form.

2.6. The Akkadian perfect

The Akkadian 'perfect' *iptarVs* developed from the preterite of the Gt-stem, a derivational stem formed with a *t*-infix (see Streck 1995, 212−234; Streck 2003, 106−110; Huehnergard 2006, 13−14). It is an Akkadian or East-Semitic innovation. The basic function of the derivational *t*-infix was detransitivization (reciprocal, reflexive, mediopassive). Its grammaticalization to become the marker of a fully-fledged tense form by

the second part of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. has been connected by a number of scholars with the influence of Sumerian (von Soden 1965; Woods 2001, 548−588; Streck 1995, 221; Huehnergard 2006, 13−14), which has a verbal prefix, the prefix *ba-*, with functions similar to those of derivational *t-* (cf. Zólyomi 2007b, 31−32). Bilingual royal inscriptions and bilingual verbal paradigms (cf. Black 1991) from the first part of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. show that a relationship of equivalence between *t*-infixed Akkadian and *ba*-prefixed Sumerian verbal forms was well established. Nevertheless, as *ba*-prefixed Sumerian forms with undeniable perfect meaning are not known from before the 2nd millennium B.C.E., and the grammaticalization of forms with passive-resultative meaning into a perfect is a well attested phenomenon, the role of Sumerian in the emergence of Akkadian perfect, if it had any at all, is by no means certain. About the separative meaning of the *t*-infix, another alleged isomorphism with Sumerian *ba-,* see Streck 2003, 48−53, 103−110, and Kouwenberg 2005.

2.7. Subordinated clauses

In Akkadian the finite verb of subordinate clauses is marked with suffixes (*-u/-ni/-ūni*, cf. von Soden 1995 § 83; Krebernik 1993, 126−127; Hasselbach 2005, 208−209 for their distribution) that are cognate with the suffixes of indicative verbal forms (**yaqtulu*) in Proto-Semitic. Their use in subordinate clauses is a retention from Proto-Semitic (cf. Eilers 1968). Dependent clauses have a tendency to preserve archaic features, but in this case one may also wonder whether the structure of equivalent Sumerian structures, in which the finite verb is marked with a suffix −/(')a/, contributed to the preservation of these forms.

2.8. Loss of internal plurals

Huehnergard 2006, 9, suggests that Sumerian, in which plurality of human nouns is marked with a suffix, might have facilitated the general loss of the use of internal plurals in Akkadian.

2.9. Tense systems

Akkadian and Sumerian tense systems show remarkable similarities. Both languages appear to have a relative tense system involving two main tenses: one of them (Sumerian present-future, Akkadian *iparrVs*) denotes actions simultaneous or posterior, while the other (Sumerian preterite, Akkadian *iprVs*) denotes actions anterior relative to a given reference point provided by the context (see Streck 1998; Zólyomi 2007b, 25−26). The direction of diffusion is uncertain in this case, as the tense systems of the languages before the contact are not known. Streck 1998, 194, thinks that other neighbouring languages (Hittite, Elamite) exhibit similar systems, which would make this feature a distinctive trait of a much larger area.

2.10. Word order

The basic clausal word order is SOV in both Akkadian and Sumerian. The Akkadian word order is probably an innovation that reflects the areal influence of Sumerian (see, however, Michalowski 2006, 164−165 for a summary of arguments against this assumption with references to previous literature), while the predominantly verb-initial word order of West Semitic is a retention from Proto-Semitic. The archaic word order was still used occasionally in Eblaite, the westernmost East-Semitic dialect, and in some Akkadian personal names (Edzard 2003, 174).

2.11. Lexicon

Sumerian loanwords in Akkadian are estimated to constitute approximately 7% of its vocabulary (Edzard 2003, 178). Lieberman 1977 catalogued 529 Sumerian loanwords in Akkadian before the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C.E., but 102 of these loans are attested only in lexical texts. These loans are almost without exception nouns. A study on the semantic classes of these words is a desideratum. In addition to loanwords, there exist a number of Sumerian and Akkadian idioms which correspond to each other word for word, e.g. $šag_4$-$še_3$ — gid_2 = *ana libbim šadādum* 'to consider earnestly' (lit. 'to draw to the heart') (cf. Edzard 2003, 175−176).

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