AT HER SPEECH
THE GODS OF THE LAND REJOICED*
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE LANGUAGE
OF OLD BABYLONIAN MYTHOLOGIC NARRATIVES

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1.

DURING THE SECOND AND FIRST MILLENNIA BC, Akkadian consisted of two main branches, Babylonian and Assyrian. Old Babylonian (henceforth OB), the language of Babylonia during the first half of the second millennium BC, was highly esteemed by the scribes of Mesopotamia until the late period. Therefore, the literary registers of Akkadian attested from the second and first millennia BC were derived from the literary registers of OB. Many of the non-administrative text corpora at our disposal, either Assyrian or Babylonian, are written in varieties of this standardized language. This is reflected in the term given to it: Standard Babylonian.¹

* [an]a iqiš piša īlydu: ilumazim (Anzu Aa: 41). I thank Eran Cohen for his comments on this paper and Eitan Grossman for editing it.

ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS: C any consonant; V any vowel; : vocalic length; < > a graphemic unit or string; phonemic strings or alleged pronunciations of written strings are printed in italic characters; ~ connects elements that are included in a stem (i.e., root and pattern and other optional morphs); √ root; • slot for a root radical; → or ← synchronic change or morphophonemic rule; / (in morphophonological formulas) ”in the environment of”; _ (in morphophonological formulas) before/after; + morphemic boundary; # word boundary.

Data for the linguistic study of Literary Babylonian are available from the OB period until well into the first millennium BC. Still, differences in genre and period naturally exist, and it would be wise to study distinct types of text individually. In this paper, I will endeavor to make a few observations on mythological narratives, which show relatively little variation in form between periods. Still, as will be explained below, most of my observations stem from recent work done on mythological narratives in earlier periods, notably OB. Therefore, the term Literary Old Babylonian as used in this study (abbreviated as LOB) refers to only a subcorpus of OB literary texts, viz., the one consisting of texts with mythological narratives.

As is true in many cultures, ancient and contemporary, mythological literature in Akkadian-speaking cultures was a subclass of poetry. It applies metrical-rhythmic order to its linguistic form and uses poetic language, as well as other salient features of poetry such as alliteration, repetition, and parallelism. Aside from these features, the texts usually termed myths or epics in Akkadian present other linguistic peculiarities in all domains of the language, viz., phonology, morpho-phonology, morphology, and syntax.
While working on the aural aspects of Akkadian poetic texts, it occurred to me that in Akkadian-speaking communities the poetic registers of language might have been closer to the spoken language than to the administrative ones. This idea stemmed from the view that the audience of poetic texts, notably of mythological narratives, would consist not only of professional scribes and literate people, but also of others. Poetry is that domain of culture that has language as its substance and resource. If we ask ourselves why people in second-millennium Babylonia needed mythology and, thus, for what purposes myths were composed, a legitimate question that may follow is about the degree of people’s understanding of the language of mythological narratives in comparison to the other written registers of that time, recalling that the latter were intended for the use of professionals only. I suggested that poetic registers were much closer to the naturally spoken registers than to the administrative ones, at least in their original form. Going one step further, one may hypothesize that the study of poetry, and more specifically of mythological narrative texts, may bring us closer to spoken features of Babylonian, not only in their historical forms but also in their contemporary form, at least to some extent.

One objection can be raised as regards the contemporaneity of the literary language in all attested periods. Babylonian dialects, like any human language, had been in constant change during the many centuries Babylonian was spoken and written. As is the case with many written languages (and all the more so in ancient Mesopotamia), writing reflects changes far less than spoken vernaculars do. As regards mythological texts, we have evidence that they were copied and transmitted throughout centuries and, therefore, they may be attested in different periods carrying linguistic features and structures very similar to those attested in OB recensions. A notable example are the Sippar tablets of Atra-Hasis. In


such cases, restoration of contemporary vernacular features is hard and such attempts may result with anachronism. However, in many cases one can observe a great deal of variation within texts of different periods. There is an observable tendency to make changes in both the literary aspects and the language of myths. An illustrative example is the differences between the Gilgamesh epic of the OB period and the later, standard edition of this epic. Features already found in OB Gilgamesh may expand in quantity in later recensions of the text. In later periods, features that might have been closer to contemporary vernaculars in older times may also become stylistic devices after they stop being used in the vernacular. Therefore, the search for vernacular features seems to be more fruitful in texts from the older periods. Indeed, variant forms and structures are traceable in texts written by different scribes and in different locations in texts from the OB period (e.g., the Harmal and Ishchali tablets of Gilgamesh, both from the Diyala region [see below, §§2.2, 2.4]). To sum up, although literary and poetic registers are different from conversational ones, still in the OB period, from which many of the literary texts stem, they may show significant similarities to oral registers. In what follows, suggested similarities of this sort will be traced in OB mythological narratives.

2.

The latter assumption is valid for all domains of language. As noted by many, dialectal features do find their way into the literature, mostly in phonology, morphophonology, and morphology. From LOB texts, one may suggest the following random list of such features that may hint at proximity to contemporary Akkadian vernaculars.

2.1. OB texts seem to attest to variation between \(i\) and \(e\) below the phonemic level, which is not usually given enough attention in the gram-

10. E.g., Reiner LAA, 21; Huehnergard Akkadian, 595; George Gilgamesh, 435–36 and passim in his commentaries.
11. For a discussion of these and other related features in their grammatical context, see Izre’el and Cohen LOB in the corresponding sections.
matical descriptions. Of course, each dialect may have had different sets of variants. While scantiness of data, the deficiency of cuneiform writing in representing the distinction between $<Ce>$ or $<Ci>$ and $<eC>$ or $<iC>$ syllables, and traditional spelling conceal most of the contemporary allophonic variation, the following examples may illustrate the point, even if not allowing serious analyses of the data:

(1) $<el\text{-}t\text{-}Ci>$ $elt\text{iiii}\ D\iiii$ “I could” (Gilgameş OB II: 9)
(2) $<\text{si}\text{-}mi\text{a} > \text{simia}$ “hear$\_r!$” (Agušaya A IV: 23)

$<\text{ni}\text{-}i\text{-}i\text{-}me> \text{inišme}^{12}$ “we shall hear” (Atra Ḥasis I: 214)
(3) $<'ne\text{-}la\text{-}ku\text{-}šum>$ $nellaku\text{šum}$ “(that) we are going to him”

(Gilgameş OB Harmal, 10)

Cf. $<ni\text{-}il\text{-}la\text{-}ku\text{-}šum>$ $nillaku\text{šum}$

(Gilgameş OB Schøyen, 14)

$<'i\text{-}ni\text{-}i\text{-}i\text{-}ku\text{-}un>$ $iniškun$ “let us set” (Gilgameş OB Harmal, 17)

Ex. 1 may represent the assimilation of a pattern vowel to the final vowel of the verbal form, a root with final radical $e$: $a+v\text{šte}\text{-}a\text{•}la\text{•}i\text{•} → alte\text{•}ie → alte\text{•}i → elte\text{•}i$. Ex. 2 shows an interesting recurring variation of forms with $i$ and $e$ of the same verb in different environments ($e\rightarrow i$/ _+a vs. $e#$). This change is not attested in the following form, which either reflects a different dialect or, perhaps, morphological spelling:

(4) $<\text{si}\text{-}me\text{-}a> \text{simēa}$: “hear$\_r!$” (Atra Ḥasis III, viii: 19)

Ex. 3 represents what seems to be dialectal variation. Similar occurrences from Gilgamesh tablets from the Diyala region exhibit some further tendency for $e$ in the surface structure$^{13}$ (cf. also ex. 7 below). As the second form ($iniškun$) suggests, this alternation is confined to certain environments, as they both seem to occur in the same dialect. Scantiness of data does not allow us, however, to determine the exact conditions for this variation.$^{14}$

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12. For the modal allomorph $i$: (more commonly transcribed as short and separated from the following verb) see Izré‘el and Cohen LOB, §2.4.2.6.3, and §3.3.5.5 with n. 18 and corrigenda (see above, n. 2). On p. 23, line 1, change to “We tend to interpret it as long.”


14. George Gilgamesh, 247 n. 102 notices that the occurrences of the $ne$- prefix occur in primae-aleph verbs. However, he also cites other forms with this prefix in other Gilgamesh tablets from the same region (Ishchali), as well as from Mari.
2.2. As is generally accepted in Akkadian studies, two consecutive vowels had already contracted before the OB period. One exception is a sequence of high front vowel and a (iu, ea), which follows the general rule of contraction only at a later time, i.e., in or toward the Middle Babylonian period. LOB attests to variation between contracted and non-contracted forms also with i/e, which may point to the conclusion that, in spite of the common view, non-contracted forms had already been outdated in the vernacular by the time our texts were written down:

(5) piašu (Atra Ḫasis I: 47) ~ pašu (Atra Ḫasis I: 85) “his mouth”

(6) musda:at (Gilgameš OB II: 15) ~ musda:at (Gilgameš OB II: 37) “she who knows”

Note that whereas ex. 5 presents variation from a relatively late text, ex. 6 cites forms from an early OB text.

2.3. A dialectal change of i+a to e is attested in the following form from the Diyala region:

(7) <i‰-ba-ta-[an]-’neš-ti> i‰bata[an]nešti “he held us” (Gilgameš OB Ishchali: 4”)

The regular form of the first plural oblique pronominal suffix is -niašti. Geoge notes the occurrence of a similar feature in Mari and, very occasionally, further south.

2.4. A Gilgamesh tablet from Nippur attests two irregular forms of a primae-u verb:

(8) iniišib (Gilgameš OB IM: 8); iniišib (Gilgameš OB IM: 6)

← i+ni+ušib “let us sit”

The first form seems to be a naturally occurring form, where the initial root radical u did not have the expected effect on the vowel of the person prefix (nušib). Such forms are attested elsewhere in Akkadian literature.

15. GAG §16k.
16. For the possible eighteenth-century date of the Pennsylvania and Yale tablets of Gilgamesh (Gil OB II, III), see George Gilgamesh, 161.
17. George Gilgamesh, 260.
18. GAG §42g, h.
The second form may represent a clash between the LOB (and general OB) standard and the linguistic standard of that individual dialect, especially when compared to the following third person form in this very same text, structured according to the LOB standard:

\[(9) \text{u:bbalunim } \text{“they bring” (Gilgameš OB IM: 2)}\]

Verbal inflection, as it seems to have been operative in this dialect, took the regular course of 1st plural and third person inflection with the vowels ə, e and i.

2.5. A variant -asti (→ -e:ti) for the 2nd singular masculine of the suffix conjugation (“stative”) is attested in the following:

\[(10) \text{šelretsitum } \text{“you are young” (Gilgameš OB III: 191)}\]

Old Assyrian has -asti for both genders. In Babylonian -asti usually marks the 2nd feminine singular, yet there are other, sporadic attestations of this form for the masculine as well. In OB texts the occurrence of -asti for the masculine may thus be regarded as reflecting a dialectal spoken reality.

2.6. Alongside the standard Babylonian third person marker i-, which is unmarked for gender, LOB attests the variant ta- (or te-), notably for human or animate subjects:

\[\text{seinem 70. Geburtstage dargebracht von Freunden, Schulern und Kollegen, AOAT 274 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003), 581.}\]


22. Unfortunately, there is inconsistency in the representation of imperfective G primae-u verbs in Izre’el and Cohen LOB with regard to the length of the first vowel (exs. 119, 246, 417, 524, 574, and 671). As suggested by plene spelling in some of the texts, and in conformity with the behavior of the initial u in the S and D verb classes (op. cit. §2.4.2.5.1), the first vowel of imperfective G primae-u verbs is to be interpreted as long when in word-initial position (cf. op. cit. §2.3; E. E. Knudsen, “Stress in Akkadian,” JCS 32 [1980]: 11).


24. GAG §75b, c; R. M. Whiting, Jr., Old Babylonian Letters from Tell Asmar, Assyriological Studies 22 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1987), 10 [henceforth: Whiting Asmar]; George Gilgamesh, 213.

25. HED 148–51.
She heard ... as she was weeping for him,

ninśiskura išappu kिma arḫim

Ninsiskura was bellowing like a cow.

(Descent to the Netherworld: R11–12)

The ta- prefix is an ancient Semitic inheritance, and was preserved as the standard 3sgf marker in Assyrian. It occurs also in Old Akkadian26 and in Early OB.27 The use of i- for the feminine in the second line can be explained by its being the standard OB form, transmitted with an older form of the text, while ta- suggests a surfacing of a local, vernacular feature.

2.7. Finite verbs of the Š class from prinae vocalis roots show two alternative patterns, ušav•• and ušuv••:

(12) ušēlî “he raised” (Erra and Naram-Sin: 17)
(13) tušušûlîma “youSGF raised up” (Descent to the Netherworld: R8)

These two patterns may reflect dialectal variation.28

2.8. LOB attests to dialectal variation of tn forms of roots with a weak first radical (a vowel, a length element, or n), where the first radical is deleted, which also affects the syllable structure:

(14) īnumallak “he was going” (Erra and Naram-Sin: 36)

Cf. āttumallak “I was walking” (Gilgameš OB II: 4)

2.9. Lastly, mimation should be considered. The impression we get from reading the available grammatical descriptions is that mimation is a feature prevalent in OB, with signs of decay toward the end of the period. Still, scholars do mention its occasional absence in earlier stages of OB as well,29 but never as more than a passing remark, whereas the general view is that mimation is still preserved throughout most of the OB period.30

27. Whiting Asmar, 11–12.
30. A short survey of the literature is given in S. Izre’el, “Linguistics and Poetics
As for LOB, one must recall that the texts, as preserved today, may be copies of older tablets, whose source may have been either written tablets, dictation, or memory. At least in the first case, the original spelling may have been kept and may, therefore, reflect an older pronunciation. In the latter two cases, spelling may reflect, at least partially, the contemporary oral aspect of the recited text.

A salient example of arbitrary variation in spelling between older and newer forms is the spelling of mimated and non-mimated forms in a single text, a feature of the older language. In the space-time continuum of the LOB corpus, the historical process of mimation loss must, therefore, be seen as synchronic variation. There is a great deal of fluctuation within the texts included in this corpus. Some texts, notably earlier ones, tend to preserve mimation to a large extent; others show only sporadic forms with mimation overtly spelled (i.e., by -vm signs). Fluctuation between forms with and without overtly spelled mimation can also be seen in a single text. While in most cases fluctuation between mimated and non-mimated forms seems haphazard, in some cases linguistic conditioning can be isolated. For example, in the oldest version of the Etana narrative, mimation seems to be preserved except for in verse-final position, probably constrained by prosodic patterns.31 Integrative and in-depth research is needed for other texts.32 In any case, the data at hand leads to the inevitable conclusion that mimation became unstable or totally lacking in the vernaculars during most of the OB period, and not only toward its end.

All the above features—although they suggest some interesting insights regarding possible traits of Akkadian vernaculars, as is the case with mimation—do not go beyond the boundaries of the word and, therefore, can play only a minor role in the endeavor to support the hypothesis of structural proximity between LOB and the spoken language. In contrast, syntactic features may well provide major insights regarding the question of proximity between spoken registers and the language of mythological narratives.

31. Izre’el Etana.

3.1. Akkadian has always been marked by its students as being deviant from the Semitic core structure in its rigid verb-final word order. This verb-final order is explained as the result of Sumerian interference, one of many borrowed features from Sumerian resulting from long-term contact between the two languages.\(^3^3\) Literary texts, as opposed to contemporary Akkadian texts of other genres, exhibit a flexible word order, which is taken to be a prominent feature of Literary Babylonian.\(^3^4\)

Since literature, and especially poetry, does manipulate language for poetic reasons, this deviant word order is explained as a feature of poetic license\(^3^5\) and, therefore, unrepresentative of the core syntactic nature of Akkadian. Among poetic constraints one may think of chiasm (ex. 15), pragmatic change in word order (ex. 16), and so on.

\[(15) \text{šikaram } išti:am \text{ / sebet assammim}\]
\[\text{He drank beer / seven jugs.}\]
\[\text{gi} \text{gimeš OB II: 96–102}\]

\[(16) \text{Anu (and) Adad guarded the upper regions,}\]
\[\text{I guarded the earth below.}\]
\[\text{Atra Ĥasis II, v: 30–31}\]

Note that in neither example do we have a verb-final construction.\(^3^6\)

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34. GAG §130b; Hecker Epic §1.2.7.

35. Hecker Epic §1.4.1.

36. Of course, like other Semitic languages, Akkadian has non-verbal sentences also, which will not be dealt with here. Needless to say, poetic and pragmatic constraints operate on all types of sentences, not only on verbal ones. Note the following chiastic structure:
The theory of Sumerian interference as a possible source for the emergence of the verb-final standard word order of Akkadian, although not unchallenged, seems to hold firm enough. Therefore, one may ask whether the flexible word order in Literary Babylonian, whether or not the result of poetic constraints, is an innovation or a residue of ancient Semitic.

I tend to adopt the latter hypothesis. However, I would go a step further and ask whether the literary registers, in general, and the register of poetic narratives, in particular (in our case mythological narratives), would not be closer, at least in some respects, to the contemporary vernacular than the administrative registers were. The common perception of letters being closer to the colloquial style (or, in general, that prose is closer to the spoken registers than poetry) may not be justified in some societies, and I would ask myself on what such an assumption might be based, other than on an anachronistic view. This assumption goes well with the following statement by Eran Cohen, who, on his part, follows the points of view of Kraus and Sallaberger: “[T]he language [of the Old Babylonian letters] is an everyday language but, being very conservative and of a formulaic nature, it is by no means a spoken language.”

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sîrûša šabāzû} & \quad \text{Her flesh is (set) to go to war,} \\
\text{šélu šaraissa} & \quad \text{To quarrel her hair is (set).}
\end{align*}
\]

(Agušaya A, V: 43’–44’)


As much as Ancient Mesopotamia can be regarded a literate society, it must be recalled that any designation of it as such cannot be measured by modern, Western standards; most, if not all of the writing, was carried out by professional scribes. The Semitic Mesopotamian scribes learned their writing skills via Sumerian. Following their initial study of cuneiform signs, scribes proceeded to the writing of lexical lists and other texts, many of them bilingual. They learned how to write administrative texts of all types, e.g., legal documents, letters, and many others, in order to master the patterns required to write these types of texts. Therefore, writing in Babylonia and Assyria is to be regarded not only as a highly professional skill, but also one that involves deep Sumero-Akkadian cultural and linguistic interference. Would it be unsound to speculate that some linguistic features that we have become accustomed to in our long acquaintance with Akkadian were features confined to written registers and not features belonging to registers of the spoken language? This we shall never know, of course. But let me proceed with this line of thinking and ask whether it might be possible for verb-final word order as we know it to have been a feature of only some of the written registers of Akkadian, and not one that was part and parcel of any actual Akkadian vernacular.

3.2 The position of the verb is not the only syntactic structural trait that differs remarkably in administrative and poetic registers. Another interesting feature is split apposition, i.e., where two appositive elements are separated.

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43. Pearce Scribes 2270–71; Oppenheim Mesopotamia 276–87.
44. GAG §133g; Izre’el and Cohen LOB §4.1.4.1.1.
(17) **paššu:** *ispuku: rābuštim* “They cast big hatchets.” (Literally: “Hatchets they cast big.”) (Gilgameš OB III:165)

(18) *ila ḫsmu: rīgīšu* “They heard the god’s uproar.” (Literally: “God they heard his uproar.”) (Atra Ḫaṣīš III, ii: 50)

(19) *ša aššad ina ašši ibnu: bišsu* “They built Adad’s house in the city.” (Literally: “Of Adad in the city they built his house.”) (Atra Ḫaṣīš II, ii: 20)

Although ex. 17 may seem at first sight a poetic device, i.e., a feature of decorum, the two other examples are more familiar to us as instances of an extrapositional pattern where the fronted element has a resumptive pronoun taking its position within the sentence, as in:

(20) **enlil illaka: dišmaššu** “Enlil—his tears were flowing.” (Atra Ḫaṣīš I: 167)

Although found in written registers, extrapositional patterns are a prominent feature of spoken, conversational language. The extensive employment of extrapositional patterns in mythological narratives is a typological feature that makes them similar to the spoken language, and therefore more intimately related to the authentic language of their contemporary audience. One should note that linguistic features tend not to be confined to any single register and their prominence in one or more registers can be, and usually is, quantitative. Comparing ex. 17 to exs. 18, 19, and 20, I would hesitate in regarding its pattern too, viz., split apposition, as a pure outcome of the need for poetic decorum, without any basis in an existing vernacular. However, this must await further research.

3.3 Inverse adjectival appositive phrases are another noticeable feature of Literary Babylonian:

(21) *ša šišti nesēreššu* “the entrances to the forest” (literally: of forest entrances) (Gilgameš OB III:253)

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45. Cf. Izre’el and Cohen LOB §4.3.2.
To this type of construction one also may add other, similar types of irregular attributive constructions like the following, which have structural proximity to the extrapositive constructions listed above (exs. 18, 19 and 20):

(22) *milikša ma.tam* “advice for the land” (literally: her-advice land)

(Etana OV I, i: 2)

(23) *agušaya dunnaša* “Agušaya’s power” (literally: Agušaya her-power)

(Agušaya B, VI: 13)

In other Akkadian registers, inverse attributive constructions are extremely rare. They are notably found in Mari and in Peripheral Akkadian, where interference from the local vernaculars may be the basis for the emergence of such constructions in the administrative, written medium. However, one may also speculate about its borrowing from spoken registers of the Akkadian superstratum.

4.

A notable feature of Babylonian mythological narratives is their extensive use of dialogues. Dialogues may be even closer to the spoken, colloquial language, than are narratives. Many cultures attempt to imitate spoken language in literary compositions in one way or another. One prominent feature of dialogues is the use of vocatives. Vocatives can come in different places in the sentence and may suggest a contemporary feature:

(24) *inanna ibri:* ša nillakušum ul šadu:mmma: “Now, my friend, is the one to whom we are going not a mountain?”

(Gilgamesš OB Schöyenː 14–15)


(Etana OV I, vi: 6’)

Both examples present structures that might have been similar to the contemporary respective vernaculars. Especially notable is ex. 25, where a short form of the first person nominative independent pronoun *ana* is attested. Although this can be interpreted as a scribal omission of the sign

49. GAG §138.l.
51. Izre’el Amurru Akkadian §3.3.3.1.
ku (for anāku), sporadic attestations of this short pronoun elsewhere in Akkadian\(^{52}\) may nevertheless suggest the surfacing of a vernacular form, known from other Semitic languages,\(^{53}\) as well as from Eblaite.\(^{54}\)

The important distinction made by Eran Cohen\(^{55}\) between two types of textemes in mythological texts, viz., narrative and dialogue (with narrative dialogue in between) may prove to be a powerful tool in pinpointing many other phenomena related to colloquial syntax, notably in dialogues. This will remain for others to pursue, as I have not used this distinction in this survey.

5.

Finally, I would like to touch briefly upon an area of investigation that is still new in the general study of the spoken language, viz., the interface between syntax and prosody. It has recently become clear that the basic structural unit of the spoken language is the “prosodic group,” or, as it is usually termed in the literature, “intonation unit,” “intonation group,” “tone group,” or similar terms, trying to capture basically the same concept. As suggested by its name, a prosodic group (henceforth: PG) is defined by prosodic features such as accentual patterns, intonation, shortening or lengthening of syllables, and pauses.\(^{56}\) A PG may consist of either a clause or part of a clause.\(^{57}\) PGs are short; e.g., in English they consist of

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52. GAG §41g*.
an average of 4 or 5 words per unit. Chafe’s cognitive model of information flow in discourse explains that PGs are constrained by the cognitive processes occurring during verbalization in the minds of both speaker and hearer. Chafe suggests that the focus of consciousness is typically expressed with four words in English.

Going back in time and space to our Ancient Near Eastern texts, it has long been known that meter is based not on syllable count but on structural arrangement of prosodic-syntactic units, which I called “metremes.” A metreme is best defined as a prosodic unit that carries a single main stress. The next large poetic unit is the colon, or half verse, which usually


58. Chafe Discourse, 65. These data are taken from a sample count of English conversation by Chafe, and include only substantive units, i.e., PGs that carry information with them rather than serving to regulate the conversation (units like “Yes,” “Well,” “Okay” and so on). The latter are much shorter.

Preliminary research on PGs in Israeli Hebrew suggests a similar, even smaller number of syntactic units within a PG (N. Amir, V. Silber-Varod and S. Izre’el, “Characteristics of Intonation Unit Boundaries in Spontaneous Spoken Hebrew: Percepcion and Acoustic Correlates,” in _Speech Prosody 2004_, International Conference; Nara, Japan, March 23–26, 2004, ed. by B. Bel and I. Marlien, ISCA Archive, http://www.isca-speech.org/archive/sp2004, 678. The number of counted words is according to their written form. It will be recalled that Hebrew and English differ in the organization of written words in several ways, notably the joint spelling of small particles together with the following word.

59. Chafe Discourse.


consists of two metremes, but also of a single metreme or, rarely, of more than two. A verse seems to be the basic prosodic-syntactic unit of a poetic text and it usually consists of a combination of two cola, each consisting of two or three metremes. In the latter case, all three metremes may constitute a single, undivided verse, or they may belong to smaller orders, i.e., constitute two cola of one and two metremes each.\(^\text{62}\)

It would be interesting to study the relationship between a PG and a verse. Of course, no spoken data can be retrieved from ancient Mesopotamian scribes. Still, I would take it as a premise that syntactic structures found in verses will match, mutatis mutandis, strategies of PG structure in a spoken discourse, notably in a narrative. To illustrate the point, here are two very short narrative passages, one from a conversation in a contemporary Semitic language, Israeli Hebrew,\(^\text{63}\) one from OB Gilgamesh (Gilgameš OB II: 87–93). Each line consists of a single PG in the Hebrew example or a verse\(^\text{64}\) in the Akkadian one.

**Israeli Hebrew:**

1. *haya šama*
   
   there-was there
   
2. *eyze kos tapuzim*
   
   some cup oranges
   
3. *kšerakadtem*
   
   when-you-danced
   
4. *basof*
   
   in-the-end
   
5. *ani ba*
   
   I come

**Akkadian:**

1. There was there
2. a cup of orange juice,
3. when you were dancing
4. at the end.
5. I came,

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64. The OB text differs in its metrical representation from later versions, in that a line in the OB version may be regarded as a half verse (or colon) in the later version. Whether this change reflects any essential change in the metrical structure needs further investigation.
6 *ani besi hatsama*
   I in-top-of the-thirst being very thirsty,

7 *dofek*
   knock drank

8 *xatsi kos*
   half-of cup half a cup.

Akkadian:

1  *akašlam iškunu: maḥaršu*
   food they-set before-him They placed food before him.

2  *iptéščma inaṭṭal*
   he-watched-and he-was-looking He watched, he was looking

3  *u ippallas*
   and he-was-seeing and observing.

4  *ul isde enkidu*
   not he-knows Enkidu Enkidu did not know

5  *akšam ana akašlim*
   bread to eat to eat bread,

6  *šikaram ana šatešm*
   beer to drink to drink beer

7  *laš lummud*
   not taught he has never been taught.

PG 1 of the Hebrew passage has a verbal predicate and an adverb, whereas PG 2 consists of an argument, and PGs 3 and 4 consist of two adverbs, one in the form of a subordinate clause (PG 3), one in the form of a prepositional phrase (PG 4). PG 5 consists of an independent clause with a pronominal subject and a participle. PG 6 consists either of a clause in itself, of which the predicate is the adverbial phrase *besi hatsama*, or the subject of a clause of which its predicate is found in PG 7 (the participle *dofek*), the phrase *besi hatsama* functioning in this parsing as an adverb. Finally, PG 8 consists of the complement of the predicate *dofek*.

Line 1 of the Akkadian passage consists of a complete clause, with a verb (which, of course, includes the subject within), an object, and an adverb. Lines 2–3 have three verbs, which form a single semantic-syntactic unit. Line 4 consists of a predicate and a nominal subject, of which the complement is found, as in the Hebrew passage, in the following line together with a second complement, being an extension of the predicate. Similarly, line 6 consists of a parallel string, being the complement of the predicate in line 7.
There is much to be learned from comparing speech and ancient poetry in terms of prosody, production phenomena, pragmatics, and style. Among other features, I would pay special attention to tonic parallelism, i.e., a series of PGs with similar intonation contours and to lexical and syntactic repetition. However, these must be left for the future.

For what is there, the point, I believe, is made. I therefore call for research along all these lines, if not to prove any proximity between linguistic features of Old Babylonian mythological narratives and their spoken counterparts as could actually been heard in ancient Babylonia (I wish we could!), at least for the sake of gaining further insights into genres, registers, syntactic structures, and other linguistic features of Literary Babylonian. One thing I can assure my readers: (S)he who takes over from here, will constantly rejoice (ištănaddi) along with the gods of the land.

Textual References

65. Of course, prosody is not explicit in written texts, but phenomena that reflect prosodic-syntactic features may well be discerned in Akkadian mythological narratives.


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It is an honor and a pleasure to dedicate this study to Tzvi, with whom I spent endless evenings discussing Mesopotamian mythology and Akkadian literature, learning from his wisdom and enjoying his warm hospitality and friendship.