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BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN OLD BABYLONIAN MESOPOTAMIA: THE EXEMPLARS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

Stahl Field Report 2014

Archaeological Research Facility, UC Berkeley
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1. Old Babylonian Scribal Education

Recent scholarship of Old Babylonian (c. 1800–1600) scribal education has focused almost exclusively on the role of the Sumerian language in the curriculum. My research argues that the incorporation of a different language, Akkadian, via glosses and translations, particularly in the curricular word list Izi, distilled an ideological disparity between the two languages, thereby effecting a renovation of the ancient perception of Babylonian scholarship.

The basis of my research is a new edition of the word list Izi. Izi was a two-chapter textbook containing 1150 entries and was one of the most commonly copied compositions in advanced lexical education. The current edition of Izi, published in 1971, provides only a composite text with minimal notation of variation. My new edition adds over forty new exemplars from various collections across the world, most notably, Philadelphia, Chicago, Istanbul, and Jena (Germany). I have already personally examined the relevant tablets in Philadelphia, Chicago, Jena, and Istanbul, all of which attest the version of the list from the city of Nippur. The Stahl grant facilitated similar research in London in order to analyze manuscripts excavated or purchased by the British Museum in the late nineteenth century. These exemplars, emanating from alternative sites than the objects I have previously examined, provide an opportunity to test whether my theories extend beyond local traditions.

2. The Sippar Collection, British Museum

At the height of Victorian antiquarianism, the British public became fascinated with Babylonia and Assyria. Such sentiments were encouraged by British Museum excavations at the city of Nineveh and other sites in what is now modern Iraq. Sensationalist discoveries, such as the decipherment of a tablet that depicted a pre-biblical flood story, now known as part of the Epic of Gilgamesh, further codified Assyrianism in the public imagination.

In addition to official scientific excavations, the British Museum also sanctioned Ernest A. T. Wallis Budge, assistant at the British Museum, to investigate the looting of British Museum sites. Budge was authorized to purchase tablets from the market and bring them to the British Museum. Many of Budge's purchases have been judged as having come from the city of Sippar (Tell Abu Habbah). Among Budge's acquisitions is a lot accessioned to the BM on 12 May 1888. Within this lot was a large (6×9.25 inches),

mostly complete twelve-column tablet, BM 78279. This tablet attests the list Izi. Since this exemplar testifies a non-Nippur version of the list, it provides a number of new entries and aids understanding of a number of Sumerian lemmata. Moreover, this piece included several new Akkadian translations. This tablet, which I will soon publish in the journal *Iraq*, represents the most important non-Nippur piece for my research on bilingual education in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia.

3. Izi and Bilingual Education

In the field of scribal education, Sumerian, despite being a dead language, was valorized as the language of traditional knowledge and culture. As such, it carried with it the prestige of a (mostly invented) tradition of a Sumerian past. Thus, written scribal education was conducted almost exclusively in Sumerian. Akkadian, the more common language of everyday writing for those who could write, was exceedingly rare. For example, in the earliest linguistic stage of education consisted of lists of Sumerian vocabulary; only two exemplars out of hundreds contain Akkadian translations. In Advanced Lexical Education (ALE), scribes began incorporating Akkadian as part of their training in scholarly interpretation, although still rarely. Among the 161 exemplars of Izi, only 25 exhibit Akkadian translation glosses.

Closer inspection of these Akkadian glosses reveals that semantic correlation was not the principle goal for their inclusion. Only 60% of the total tokens of legible Akkadian glosses may be considered semantic correspondents. The other 40% reflect scholarly practices of analogical hermeneutics. Scribes rendered Akkadian correspondences based on complex semiotic, phonologic, morphologic, or speculative associations rather than strictly semantic criteria. Thus, the Sumerian word **utu** "Sun" is rendered in at least one exemplar by Akkadian *imērum* "donkey". This association considers the Akkadian words *imērum* "donkey" and *immerum* "sheep" the same while simultaneously assuming equivalence of Sumerian **utu** "Sun" and **udu** "sheep". Thus, **udu** = **utu** = *immerum* = *imērum*. While this example is one of the more blatant manipulations of phonological analogical hermeneutics, comparable processes explain similarly semantically discordant Sumerian-Akkadian correspondences.

My research, facilitated by the Stahl grant, demonstrates that Old Babylonian scribes engaged in innovative interlingual scholarly practices. This conclusion leads to two important implications. First, modern Assyriological researches cannot uncritically regard word lists produced by such scribes as dictionaries conveying one-to-one semantic correlations. Second, similar practices have been widely recognized in later cuneiform scholarship as analogous (or perhaps precursors) to interpretive methodology such as Jewish Midrashic exegesis. My work shows that such practices were systematically inaugurated in the early second millennium B.C.E. and would remain ubiquitous throughout cuneiform culture. A true Babylonian scribe operated fluidly in the interlingual space.



Figure 1.

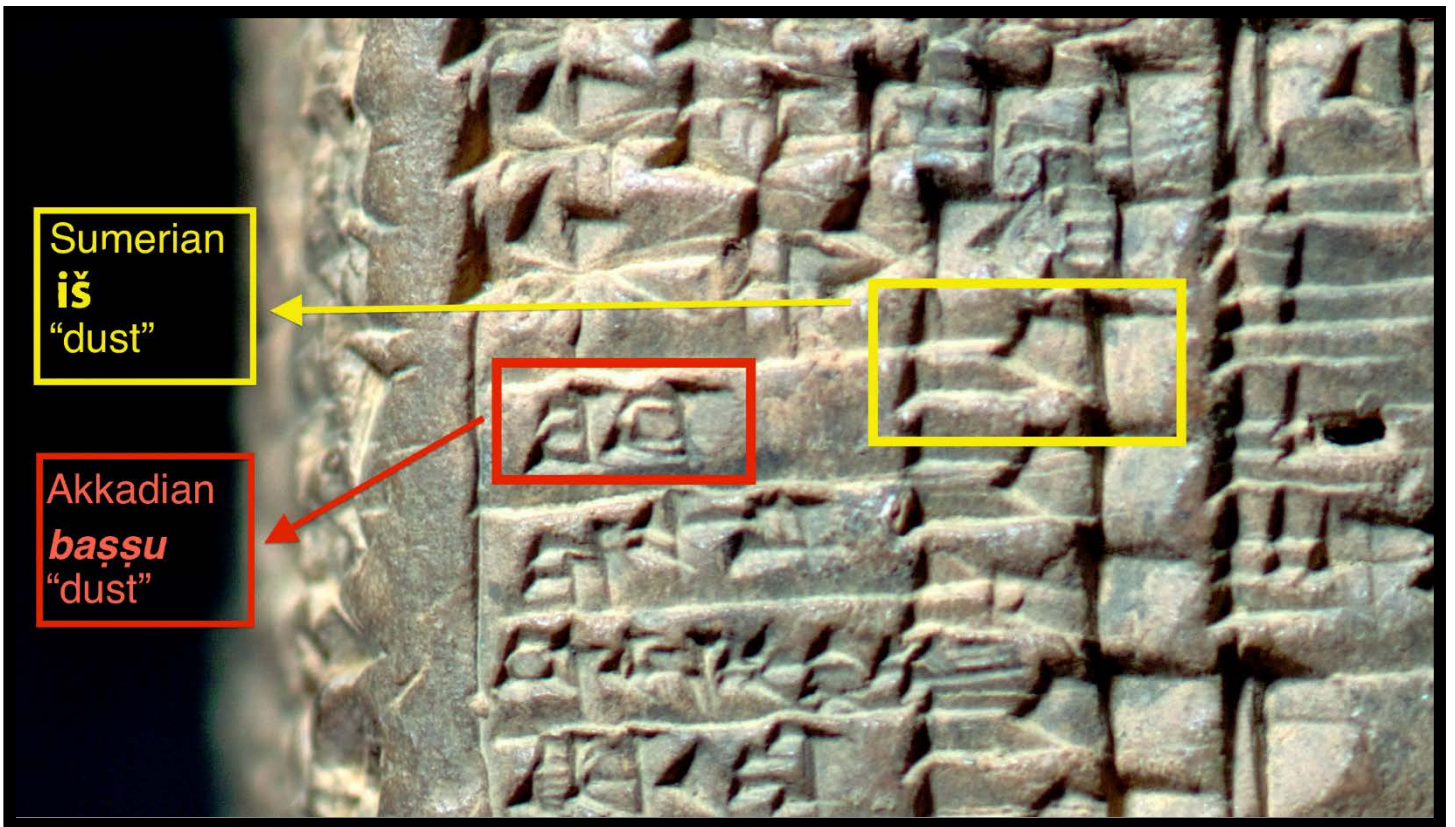


Figure 2. Akkadian glosses