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A Structural Grammar of Babylonian

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to Mons. Luigi Villa

and Mons. John V. Sheridan
PREFACE

The purpose of this grammar is to provide a description of Babylonian which may serve both as a systematic theoretical statement of the structure of the language, and as a guide towards a better understanding of the textual record. The two major methodological concerns which have guided my effort may be summed up as follows. On the one hand, I have been especially mindful of the need to validate each category on the basis of explicit formal criteria. This applies not only to categories introduced here and at variance with common Assyriological tradition (e.g., in the treatment of the so-called irregular verbs); it also applies to well established categories which I have inherited from that tradition, but for which I have nevertheless sought to provide a fresh formal justification (e.g., the verbal tenses or the subjective/objective genitive). The second major concern has been to seek a validation of structural perceptions by looking at how they yield a better understanding of the texts, which are the only remaining cultural embodiment of this particular linguistic system. Wide ranges of meaning are embedded in grammatical mechanisms, and their full effect cannot be gauged on purely contextual grounds, i.e., through ad hoc conclusions from individual texts viewed in isolation. The discussion of such diverse topics as the notional value of verbal forms, the expression of action and condition, or the role of emphasis — all illustrate how much more insight a structural or distributional analysis of the language may ultimately yield at the level of textual exegesis.

More specifically, the overall goals and limitations of my endeavor may be spelled out as follows.

(1) The linguistic methodology employed aims at obtaining a coherent view of the linguistic system of Babylonian in its inner structure with an emphasis on evaluating the distributional validity of each and every grammatical class (whether traditionally accepted in Assyriology or proposed afresh here). Thus the term "structural" in the title implies (a) a rigorous definition of each class in its relationship to other classes, (b) a consistent differentiation between formal and notional categories, and (c) an understanding of the language as a living and organic system. Not taking established terms or concepts for granted, I make a serious effort at articulating in a structurally explicit manner what I perceive to be valid insights in the traditional understanding of grammar. Only where such an under-
standing is, in my opinion, at variance with the inner logic of the grammatical
system, do I propose alternate interpretations; and only where accepted terminol­
ogy seems to be specifically misleading, or where a non-English term has become
part of common usage, do I introduce new terms. In either case, I have explained
in detail my reasons for doing so whenever the occasion presents itself.

(2) There are, in fact, a number of differences with respect to previous works on
Akkadian grammar, which are far-reaching because they affect a variety of levels of
analysis, of which I will mention here two in particular. (a) The first pertains to
specific phenomena, such as the following. There are certain categories which are
radically altered in their understanding and are presented within a new setting,
such as the allocation of the weak verbs to morphophonemics. Other categories
are analyzed in ways that cut across established classifications, such as the per­
sonal inflection of the verb, whose consonantal component is allocated to external
inflection, while the vocalic component is allocated to internal inflection. Some
categories are dropped altogether, e.g., the permansive as a tense of the verb (the
pertinent forms are re-interpreted as a special form of nominal sentence; for the
perfect see presently). New categories are introduced which are generally not
found in grammatical treatments, e.g., the category of emphasis, here treated as a
special type of adjunct. (b) The second major difference pertains to the inclusion
of levels of analysis previously neglected, such as the following. A proper articu­
lation of the system of internal inflection allows, inter alia, for a more rigorous
definition of the concept of root and the consequent exclusion of primary nouns
and loanwords from nominal derivation. The concept of morphophonemics leads
to the recognition of a normal level of patterning for phenomena otherwise con­
sidered anomalous, such as the so-called irregular verbs. A careful distinction be­
tween formal and notional levels of analysis brings new light to categories which
have otherwise been described in a vague and impressionistic way, e.g., the distinc­
tion between action and condition. A syntactical analysis centered on the sentence
rather than on inflectional categories opens the way for a new understanding of
such varied phenomena as nominalization, hendiadys, or coordination.

(3) As will be clear from even a cursory look at the volume, neither do I follow,
nor do I presume to make a contribution to, any particular school of theoretical
linguistics. In particular, it may be noted that the term “structural” employed in
the title refers simply to my concern for rigorous formal analysis, in a sense that
might also be described as “distributional.” The former term (“structural”) refers
to the linguistic system viewed as an organic whole, the latter (“distributional”) 
refers to the method used in breaking down this system by identifying patterns of
recurrence among its component parts. While I have tried to utilize basic concepts
of contemporary linguistics, I have couched my presentation in a rather traditional
style. Accordingly, I have refrained from using any highly specialized formaliza­
tion, in the belief that the basic foundations and principles of linguistic theory have
a validity of their own which transcends specific formalizations, so that it should be feasible, in a case such as mine, to employ the former without applying the latter. In this respect my grammar is not as advanced as the groundbreaking work by ERICA REINER, who first brought the full impact of modern linguistics to bear on the study of Akkadian. (In a more autobiographic vein, I would like to acknowledge my personal debt to her, since I sat as a student in her classes using as our textbook what were then the proofs of her Linguistic Analysis.)

(4) As for the objection that modern linguistic methods are not suited for dead languages in general, and thus for Babylonian in particular, the following qualifications are in order. It is true, on the one hand, that the lack of living speakers prevents us from verifying unequivocally the possibility or non-possibility of given grammatical constructions. Yet it must be understood that while there are no living speakers today, they obviously existed at a certain point in the past; in other words, to the extent that the language was a living organism in the past, it can still be understood as such today. To this end, we must reckon with a set of filters which stand between us and this living organism, in particular the scribal medium and the size and nature of the textual inventory. We can cope with these two filters through the application of graphemic criteria for the former, and sampling procedures for the latter. If so, while we cannot tap directly the living competence of native speakers, we can arrive inferentially at adequate equivalents. Distributional analysis is a major factor in this process: given a sizable textual corpus, the patterned recurrence, or non-recurrence, of given classes to form specific distributional arrays is the most significant of these equivalents. Note in this respect how the statement of non-occurrence is a particularly important result of a linguistic analysis dependent on living informants: their competence is trusted in excluding the possibility of certain phenomena, i.e., in documenting their non-occurrence. Such a statement acquires its significance in function of a-priori structural considerations which prompted the question in the first place. For a dead language with a vast corpus of extant texts, such as Akkadian, electronic data processing can serve as the functional equivalent of a living informant in that it allows unlimited capillary access to even the most daunting amount of data, as long as these are properly structured. In my own work, I have benefited from a preliminary data bank of Old Babylonian data, so structured (see below, Introduction, 0.2).

(5) I have already referred a few times, in this preface, to a grammatical tradition, and I will do so often again within the course of the book. By this I mean the commonly accepted principles and categories, for which I feel that no particular bibliographical reference is necessary (though references will be given in a companion volume about which see presently). I generally refer to such a tradition when my presentation is at variance with it; when I wish to raise some objections to a common understanding of grammatical phenomena, even if I go along with it; when I articulate an explicit explanation for statements which are otherwise ac-
cepted as axioms. I hope it is clear from each specific instance where this occurs, as well as from the overall tone of my argumentation, that I do this out of the greatest respect for this tradition, and without any eagerness to espouse what is different only for the sake of novelty at any cost. The constant effort, which I trust will be apparent, to explain my reasons for choosing a different option should attest to the seriousness with which I have considered all alternatives - witness, for instance, the decision to retain the verbal category of the perfect in order to allow for more reflection on the reasons which, as they stand now, indicate to me that such a category should in fact be abandoned. Similarly, one should note how I have often proposed a fresh definition for traditional terms which appear to have been accepted and repeated in a somewhat unreflected way: this, too, should indicate with what care I have weighed the received wisdom before departing from it. Not that it could have been otherwise, considering the incalculable contributions of this tradition, as embedded especially in the monumental work by WOLFRAM VON SODEN. Thus, while I am aware as to how radically different, and admittedly controversial, some of the positions advanced here might be, I would like for them to be understood within the continuum of the tradition, rather than in antagonism to it.

(6) Bibliographical references are kept to a minimum. Besides meeting the obvious need to provide textual citations, they are generally meant to provide support for special and unusual points that are made in the text. No attempt is made here to offer a systematic bibliographical apparatus for each grammatical category discussed. Because of the size that such a documentation entails, if given in an exhaustive manner, I have chosen to place such information in a separate volume, which will appear at a later date. Entitled A Critical Review of Akkadian Grammatical Studies, it contains a comprehensive annotated bibliography of studies on both Babylonian and other dialects of Akkadian, with an introductory chapter that gives a history of the discipline, and a detailed topical index sorted by grammatical categories in the same sequence as the one followed here. In this topical index one will find a systematic and exhaustive bibliographical coverage of each subject presented in this grammar, whether or not the particular opinion represented by each bibliographical entry has been dealt with in the corresponding section of the grammar. In this sense the topical index provides a full-fledged supplement to the data presented here, with the addition of points of detail which are omitted from the present book. By thus separating the fuller scholarly apparatus from the main body of the grammar I have been able to retain a more discursive style in my presentation, which I hope may contribute to the readability of my text. By the same token, the scholarly apparatus to be provided in the companion volume will be

1 References are given only for passages which are non-paradigmatic and which exhibit some unique feature. References for passages which can easily be located in the dictionaries are omitted. Forms within paradigms are not necessarily attested and are often generated on an ad hoc basis.
both more comprehensive and more fully documented than if relegated to footnotes given in this volume. It should be noted that in the grammar I have not given references to the companion volume, since the latter follows exactly the same sequence of topics as the former, so that cross-references may be assumed as automatic.

(7) It is hoped that this grammar may serve a pedagogical purpose and be utilized by students in the process of learning Akkadian. Though the book is obviously not an elementary introduction, it must be said that beginning students in Akkadian are not normally at an elementary stage either. Akkadian is studied only at the University level, where the study of grammar should entail more than just familiarity with a minimum of rules meant as an aid for a quick reading of the texts. The deeper the understanding of the linguistic structure, the firmer is our control on textual analysis, and the more finely tuned our sensitivity for the nuances of expression. In this light, a grammatical study is not only a key for deciphering a coded text, but also a diapason for training our inner ear to the life that still breathes in the texts. These can then be shown to be, in truth, not dead but only dormant. I should also note that relatively more attention than usual is given here to a definition of terms, and more space to a discursive type of argumentation. As for terminology, I have endeavored to explain in some detail even standard terms (e.g., verbal aspect or tense): my concern is not so much for nomenclature as for the underlying conceptual structure, for which after all the terms serve but as a label. As for argumentation, I have sought to communicate some of the heuristic function of grammatical research, where other grammars tend to offer a more deictic presentation of rules and data: this is partly because of the novelty of some of the conclusions, and partly because it seems pedagogically instructive to carry the students through a given line of grammatical reasoning rather than just presenting them with the resulting conclusions. My personal experience, and that of my students, in using various versions of this grammar in my own Akkadian classes has been very positive, and if circumstances will warrant it, it may be desirable to publish in the future a workbook which would include the exercises, drills and other instructional aids I have been using in my classes in support of this grammar.

(8) While I have kept formal linguistic notation to a minimum, the degree of substantive formalization may appear excessively algebraic to some — see, for instance, the presentation of the verbal patterns, where I have taken the concept of matrix to its logical consequences. The major argument in defense of my choice is the one already proposed, namely that this approach seemed best suited to arrive at a rigorous definition of the structural system of the language. But there is a secondary argument, which has in fact influenced my thinking even though there is no overt trace of it in this work. As conceived, my approach lends itself to the development of programming rules for the purposes of an electronic grammar of Akkadian, i.e., a set of programs which interpret the textual data on the one hand, and
can generate, on the other, specific forms in response to stated parameters. I have in fact tested this possibility with some preliminary programs which parse verbal forms, including those from weak roots, both actively and passively; for these I have used as algorithms the rules formulated in the grammar. Further work along these lines will prove that, far from being just a curiosity, this use of the grammar is effective in testing the consistency of the grammatical system, generating forms in simulation of living speakers, and serving the needs of practical pedagogical use.

A first draft of this grammar was completed in 1970, and some early versions have been circulated to various colleagues and have been used over the years in class instruction. For their comments on specific points I wish to thank the students who have followed my classes (several of whom are credited in the body of the text for their specific contributions). In particular, for their assistance in the final stages of proofreading, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of ROGER B. GOOD, RAJU KUNJUMMEN, DANA M. REEMES, MIKI YOKOYAMA, and especially of CHANG BAE LEE. From among the colleagues who have contributed comments on earlier versions I wish to thank especially JOHN B. CALLENDER +, THORKILD JACOBSEN +, ALAN S. KAYE, WILLIAM L. MORAN and THOMAS G. PENCHOEN. Most particularly it was I. J. GELB + who not only commented on specific points of my text, but also shared with me his keen insights on Akkadian grammar and on the variety of linguistic methods that could be applied to it.

Financial support has been provided by the Research Committee of the Academic Senate of the University of California, Los Angeles, which, through its enlightened and generous policy, has made it possible for me to rely over the years on the sustained assistance of a number of graduate students. Support for the electronic analysis of cuneiform texts, of which this grammar is in some ways an offshoot, has been provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities Grant RO 6291-72-153; by the UCLA Campus Computing Network; and by the Packard Humanities Institute. Support for the publication of this volume has been provided by IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies. To all of these institutions goes my heartfelt gratitude.

This volume is dedicated to two mentors and friends who have followed my personal growth stretching back in time even further than the beginning of my work on the grammar. Over the years, they were unfailing in pointing to the permanence of values, unfailing at the same time in their search for openness to changes in perception — ever a reminder of how the coherence of the journey is inextricably bound with the caleidoscopic drifting of the landscape.

La dedica a Mons. Luigi Villa riflette in particolare il profondo legame che mi ha associato a lui negli anni della mia prima formazione universitaria e che si è venuto sempre più intensificando pur con le intervenute distanze di tempo e di spazio — un legame che tanto più mi nutre alle radici quanto più meditato è il ripensamento dei valori da lui additati e personificati

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Giorgio Buccellati
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Symbols ................................................................. xxix
Abbreviations ......................................................... xxx
References .............................................................. xxxi

Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
  0.1 A historical sketch of Akkadian ...................................................... 1
  0.2 Babylonian within Akkadian .......................................................... 3
  0.3 Textual data ....................................................................................... 4
  0.4 Writing and language ........................................................................ 5
  0.5 A structural approach ....................................................................... 7
  0.6 Synchrony and diachrony ................................................................. 9

PHONOLOGY

Part I. The Phonemes

Chapter 1 Phonemic Inventory .............................................................. 15
  1.1 Phonemics and phonetics ............................................................... 15
  1.2 Consonants ..................................................................................... 17
  1.3 Vowels ............................................................................................ 19
  1.4 Length ............................................................................................ 19
  1.5 Stress .............................................................................................. 21
  1.6 A note on phonetic realizations ....................................................... 23

Chapter 2 Distributional Classes ......................................................... 24
  2.1 Word initial ..................................................................................... 24
  2.2 Word final ....................................................................................... 26
  2.3 Word medial ................................................................................... 26
Table of Contents

2.4 Vocalic clusters ........................................................................................................ 26
2.5 Summary .................................................................................................................. 28
2.6 Syllabic structure ...................................................................................................... 28
2.7 A note on syllabic length ......................................................................................... 29

Part II. Phonological Change

Chapter 3 Types of Phonological Change .................................................................... 31
Chapter 4 Free Variation ............................................................................................... 32
Chapter 5 Excursus on Historical Development .......................................................... 34
  5.1 Rearrangement of phonemic inventory ................................................................ 34
  5.2 Rearrangement of phonemic distributional classes .............................................. 36

MORPHOLOGY

Chapter 6 Morphological Processes ............................................................................. 43
  6.1 Internal inflection ..................................................................................................... 43
  6.2 External inflection ................................................................................................... 44
  6.3 Word composition ................................................................................................... 45
  6.4 Reduplication .......................................................................................................... 49
  6.5 Survey of boundary types: the word ...................................................................... 50

Part I. Internal Inflection

Chapter 7 Interdigitation ............................................................................................... 53

Section A. The Root

Chapter 8 Nature of the Root ....................................................................................... 57
  8.1 The root as a morpheme ......................................................................................... 57
  8.2 The root as a lexeme ............................................................................................... 59
  8.3 “Reality” of the root ............................................................................................... 59
Table of Contents

Chapter 9 Structure of the Root ................................................................. 61
  9.1 The verbal-(nominal) root ................................................................. 61
  9.2 The nominal root: the system of numerals ......................................... 62
  9.3 Incompatibility of the radicals .......................................................... 66

Chapter 10 Historical Excursus on the Unmotivated Noun ......................... 69
  10.1 Unmotivated nouns: primary nouns and loanwords .......................... 69
  10.2 Denominative verbs ........................................................................... 70
  10.3 Historical reality of primary nouns ................................................... 72
    10.4 Remarks on the structure of primary nouns .................................... 73

Section B. Patterns from Strong Triradical Roots

Chapter 11 Nominal Patterns ...................................................................... 77

Chapter 12 Verbal Patterns ........................................................................ 79
  12.1 Nominal and verbal patterns ............................................................. 79
  12.2 The system of coordinates .................................................................. 80

Chapter 13 Verbal Patterns: Consonantism ............................................... 82
  13.1 The coordinate system and the paradigm .......................................... 82
  13.2 A note on the format of the paradigm .............................................. 84
  13.3 A note on terminology ....................................................................... 84
  13.4 A note on compound stems .................................................................. 86
  13.5 The case against the “perfect”: formal considerations ...................... 87

Chapter 14 Verbal Patterns: Vocalism ....................................................... 88
  14.1 Introductory ....................................................................................... 88
  14.2 First vowel ......................................................................................... 88
  14.3 Last vowel ......................................................................................... 89
  14.4 Root vowel ......................................................................................... 90
  14.5 General vocalic shift $a > e$ ............................................................... 91
  14.6 A divergent interpretation of morphemic boundaries ....................... 92
  14.7 Review of non-predictable vocalic elements ...................................... 93

Chapter 15 Historical Excursus on the Vocalism of the Verbal Patterns ........ 95
  15.1 Original first vowel $a$ of finite forms in the B and N stems ............... 95
  15.2 Original morphological value of root vowel ...................................... 96
Table of Contents

Chapter 16 Verbal Patterns: Notional Categories ................................................. 97
  16.1 Formal characteristics and notional categories ........................................ 97
  16.2 Verbal and deverbal nouns: nouns of subject and description .................. 98
  16.3 Verbal nouns and finite forms ............................................................... 100
  16.4 Stems .................................................................................................. 106
  16.5 The case against the "perfect": notional considerations ............................ 108
  16.6 A simplified overview of the stem system ............................................. 112

Chapter 17 The Triradical System as a Whole ..................................................... 114
  17.1 Correlations within the matrix .............................................................. 114
  17.2 The verbal paradigm ........................................................................... 114
  17.3 A note on alternative patterns .............................................................. 121
  17.4 A note on the permansive ................................................................. 121
  17.5 A note on the template used in the paradigm ....................................... 122
  17.6 The complete verbal-deverbal paradigm ............................................. 123

Section C. Patterns from Strong Quadriradical Roots

Chapter 18 Correlations to Triradical Roots ...................................................... 127

Chapter 19 The Quadriradical System .............................................................. 129
  19.1 The two groups of quadriradical roots .................................................. 129
  19.2 An alternative interpretation of Group I ............................................... 132
  19.3 A note on notional categories .............................................................. 132

Part II. External Inflection

Section A. The Noun

Chapter 20 Types of Nominal External Inflection ........................................... 133
  20.1 Denominal afformatives ..................................................................... 133
  20.2 States of the noun ............................................................................. 134
  20.3 Substantives and adjectives ............................................................... 135
  20.4 Sequential configuration of elements of external inflection .................. 136
  20.5 Derivation and inflection .................................................................... 136
  20.6 A note on periphrastic derivation ...................................................... 137
# Table of Contents

Chapter 21 Denominal Afformatives ........................................................................ 139

21.1 Structural considerations........................................................................ 139
21.2 Nouns of description ........................................................................... 140
21.3 Substantives.......................................................................................... 140
21.4 Adjectives ............................................................................................ 142
21.5 Onomastic derivation .......................................................................... 143
21.6 A note on a possible prefixal afformative ........................................ 144

Chapter 22 The Inflection of the Normal State ..................................................... 145

22.1 The primary system ........................................................................... 145
22.2 The alleged plural -ānu ................................................................. 148
22.3 Mimation ............................................................................................ 148
22.4 The dual .............................................................................................. 149
22.5 A note on the historical development of the primary system ............ 150
22.6 The secondary case system: locative, terminative and gerundive ..... 151
22.7 A note on the historical development of the secondary cases ......... 153
22.8 Special forms ....................................................................................... 154

Chapter 23 The Inflection of the Construct State .............................................. 156

23.1 Concepts and terms ........................................................................... 156
23.2 The primary system ........................................................................... 157
23.3 The dual .............................................................................................. 159
23.4 The secondary case system: locative, terminative and gerundive ..... 159
23.5 Construct state in -a(m) .................................................................... 161
23.6 Special forms ....................................................................................... 161

Chapter 24 The Inflection of the Absolute State .............................................. 163

24.1 The inflectional markers .................................................................... 163
24.2 Inflection of cardinal numerals .......................................................... 163

Chapter 25 The Inflection of the Predicative State .......................................... 165

25.1 The inflectional markers .................................................................... 165
25.2 A note on the interpretation of gender/number markers .................. 166
25.3 Predicative state and permansive or stative ....................................... 167
25.4 The base .............................................................................................. 168

Chapter 26 Notional Categories ......................................................................... 169

26.1 Context-free categories: afformatives .................................................. 169
26.2 Context-free categories: number, gender ........................................... 169
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>Context-free categories: secondary cases</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>Context-bound categories: primary cases</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Section B. The Verb**

Chapter 27 Inflection for Person, Gender and Number .............................................. 175

27.1 The basic system ........................................................................... 175
27.2 Special forms ................................................................................. 176

Chapter 28 Modal Inflection ........................................................................ 178

28.1 Introductory ...................................................................................... 178
28.2 The subjunctive .................................................................................... 179
28.3 The desiderative ................................................................................... 180
28.4 Historical note on the desiderative .................................................... 183
28.5 The ventive ........................................................................................... 184
28.6 Asseverative and prohibitive ............................................................... 185
28.7 Summary of the moods ........................................................................... 187

Chapter 29 Notional Categories ..................................................................... 188

29.1 Introductory ...................................................................................... 188
29.2 Reference to subject (person, number, gender) .................................. 189
29.3 Reference to adjunct of motion (ventive) ............................................ 190
29.4 Definition of syntactical role (subjunctive) ......................................... 192
29.5 Attitude of speaker (summons) ............................................................ 192

**Section C. The Pronoun**

Chapter 30 Types of Pronominal Inflection ..................................................... 195

30.1 Morphological vs. syntactical considerations ......................................... 195
30.2 Limited nominal inflection .................................................................... 196
30.3 Inflection with nunation ...................................................................... 198

Chapter 31 The Personal Pronoun .................................................................... 200

31.1 The two sets of bases ......................................................................... 200
31.2 Inflection for gender and number ........................................................ 201
31.3 Inflection for case ................................................................................ 202
31.4 A note on secondary stress with pronominal suffixes ............................. 205
31.5 The paradigm ....................................................................................... 205
Table of Contents

31.6 Special forms ................................................. 208
31.7 The anaphoric pronoun ........................................ 209
31.8 A note on syntactical distribution ....................... 210

Chapter 32 Notional Categories .................................. 212

Section D. Invariables and Recapitulation

Chapter 33 Morphological Invariability and Classes of Invariables .......... 215
  33.1 Types of juncture ........................................... 215
  33.2 Traces of inflection ......................................... 216
  33.3 Vestigial inflection: particles (prepositions and conjunctions) .... 216
  33.4 Occasional inflection: proper names ........................... 217
  33.5 Full invariables: adverbs, enclitics and interjections ............ 218

Chapter 34 Recapitulation of Types of External Inflection ................. 219

MORPHOPHONEMICS

Chapter 35 Morphophonemic Alternations ................................... 223
  35.1 Nature of morphophonemic alternations ....................... 223
  35.2 A note on historical development ............................ 224
  35.3 Regressive and progressive length ........................... 225

Part I. Alternations Conditioned by Internal Inflection

Chapter 36 Pattern and Root as Conditioning Factors ....................... 229

Section A. Alternations Affecting Patterns (Strong Roots)

Chapter 37 Alternation Affecting the Vocalism of the Patterns .............. 231

Chapter 38 Alternations Affecting the Consonantism of the Patterns ....... 232
  38.1 The deverbal pattern MAPRAS ................................ 232
  38.2 The verbal patterns of the perfect and the T(N) stems ............ 232
  38.3 The N stem .................................................. 234
Section B. Alternations Affecting Roots and Patterns (Weak Roots)

Chapter 39  The Notion of Weak Radical ............................................................... 235

39.1 The weak radical as a set of alternating realizations .................................. 235
39.2 The environment as a discriminant among alternatives ............................... 236
39.3 A note on geminate roots ............................................................................. 237
39.4 A note on terminology .................................................................................. 237

Chapter 40 Patterns from Triradicals with Weak First Radical .......................... 240

Chapter 41 Patterns from Triradicals First Aleph .............................................. 242

41.1 Derivational rules ......................................................................................... 242
41.2 External inflection of selected forms ............................................................ 243
41.3 Systemic deviations ...................................................................................... 244
41.4 Vocalic shift \(a > e\) ....................................................................................... 244
41.5 Lexical deviations ......................................................................................... 245

Chapter 42 Patterns from Triradicals First Nun ................................................. 246

42.1 Derivational rules ......................................................................................... 246
42.2 External inflection of selected forms ............................................................ 247
42.3 Systemic deviations ...................................................................................... 248
42.4 Lexical deviations ......................................................................................... 248

Chapter 43 Patterns from Triradicals First Waw ............................................... 249

43.1 Triradical and biradical realizations ............................................................. 249
43.2 A historical note on vocalism ........................................................................ 249
43.3 The triradical system: derivational rules ....................................................... 250
43.4 External inflection of selected forms ............................................................ 251
43.5 Systemic deviations ...................................................................................... 252
43.6 The biradical subsystem ............................................................................... 252
43.7 External inflection of selected forms ............................................................ 253

Chapter 44 Patterns from Triradicals Middle Weak ......................................... 255

44.1 Derivational rules ......................................................................................... 255
44.2 Systemic deviations in the realization of patterns ......................................... 257
44.3 Systemic deviation in the choice of patterns ............................................... 258
44.4 Lexical deviations and historical remarks ................................................... 258
44.5 External inflection of selected forms ............................................................ 258
# Table of Contents

Chapter 45  Patterns from Triradicals Final Weak ......................................................... 260  
   45.1 Derivational rules .................................................................................................. 260  
   45.2 External inflection of selected forms ..................................................................... 261  
   45.3 Lexical peculiarities .............................................................................................. 263

Chapter 46  Patterns from Triradicals Double Weak ....................................................... 264  
   46.1 Introductory ........................................................................................................... 264
   46.2 Triradicals first Aleph and final weak (?C:) ............................................................ 264
   46.3 Lexical deviations for triradicals first Aleph and final weak ................................. 265
   46.4 Triradicals first Nun and middle weak (N:C) ......................................................... 266
   46.5 Triradicals first Nun and final weak (NC:) ............................................................. 267
   46.6 Triradicals first Waw and middle weak (W:C) ....................................................... 267
   46.7 Triradicals first Waw and final weak (WC:) ........................................................... 268
   46.8 Triradicals middle Aleph and final weak (O:) ......................................................... 269

Chapter 47  Patterns from Quadriradicals Single Weak .................................................... 270  
   47.1 Introductory ........................................................................................................... 270
   47.2 Quadriradicals middle weak (Group I) ................................................................. 270
   47.3 Quadriradicals final weak (Group II) .................................................................... 271

Chapter 48  Patterns from Quadriradicals Double Weak .................................................. 272
   48.1 Derivational rules .................................................................................................. 272
   48.2 Systemic deviations .............................................................................................. 274
   48.3 Alternative patterns .............................................................................................. 274

Section C. Paradigms and Correlations in Pattern Formation

Chapter 49  Paradigms from Weak Roots .......................................................................... 275
   49.1 Paradigms from triradicals first Aleph ................................................................. 276-277
   49.2 Triradicals first Nun .............................................................................................. 278-279
   49.3 Triradicals first Waw ............................................................................................ 280-281
   49.4 Triradicals middle weak ...................................................................................... 282-283
   49.5 Triradicals final weak ........................................................................................... 284-285
   49.6 Triradicals first Aleph and final weak ................................................................. 286
   49.7 Triradicals first Nun and middle weak ................................................................. 287
   49.8 Triradicals first Nun and final weak ...................................................................... 288
   49.9 Triradicals first Waw and final weak .................................................................... 289
   49.10 Quadriradicals double weak ................................................................................ 290
Chapter 50 Correlations in the Realization of Weak Radicals 291
  50.1 Introductory 291
  50.2 Correlations of realizations by environment 291

Chapter 51 Correlations in Pattern Formation 293
  51.1 Verbal patterns 293
  51.2 Nominal patterns 293

Part II. Alternations Conditioned by External Inflection

Chapter 52 Introductory 307

Section A. Alternations Affecting Phonemes in Contact at Morphemic Boundary

Chapter 53 Alternations Affecting Consonants 309
  53.1 Introductory 309
  53.2 Dental followed by postfixal $t$ 310
  53.3 Labial or nasal followed by enclitic $m$ 310
  53.4 Dental followed by suffixal $k$ or $\dot{s}$ 311
  53.5 Dental or fricative followed by suffixal $\dot{s}$ 311
  53.6 Postfixal $m$ followed by pronominal suffix 312

Chapter 54 Alternations Affecting Vowels 314

Section B. Alternations Affecting Syllabic Structure (Phonotactics)

Chapter 55 At Morphemic Boundary with Vowel 315
  55.1 Apheresis 315
  55.2 Contraction 317

Chapter 56 At Morphemic Boundary with $\emptyset$ 318
  56.1 Outside of the construct state 318
  56.2 The construct state 318
Table of Contents

SYNTAX

Chapter 57 Minimal Units................................................................. 323
  57.1 Syntactical structure .......................................................... 323
  57.2 Immediate constituents .................................................... 324
  57.3 Graphic notation – modern .............................................. 326
  57.4 Graphic notation – ancient ............................................. 327
  57.5 A note on substitution tests ............................................. 328
  57.6 A note on syntactical paradigms ..................................... 329
  57.7 Major and minor constituents ....................................... 330
  57.8 Sentence, clause, phrase ............................................... 331
  57.9 A note on discourse analysis ........................................ 332

Chapter 58 Distributional Classes.................................................. 334
  58.1 Limitations on correlation of constituents ....................... 334
  58.2 The operative factors ..................................................... 335

Chapter 59 Surface and Deep Structure......................................... 340
  59.1 The notions of surface and deep structure ....................... 340
  59.2 Correlations between deep and surface structure ............. 341
  59.3 Intonation ......................................................................... 343

Chapter 60 Excursus on Historical Development .............................. 345

Part I. Constituent Structure

Chapter 61 Introductory.................................................................. 347

Section A. Inflectional Correlations: Government

Chapter 62 Introductory.................................................................. 349

Chapter 63 Subject and Predicate: Discord................................... 350
  63.1 Subject ............................................................................. 350
  63.2 Predicate .......................................................................... 350
  63.3 Nominal sentence and permansive .................................. 352
Table of Contents

63.4 Verbal and nominal predicates ............................................. 354
63.5 A note on substantives and adjectives .................................. 355
63.6 A note on determination and referentiality ............................ 355
63.7 A note on the predicative complement .................................. 358

Chapter 64 Subject and Predicate: Concord .................................. 360

Chapter 65 Predicate and Complements ..................................... 362
65.1 Complements and transitivity ............................................. 362
65.2 Simple complement ("direct object") ................................. 364
65.3 Indefinite object ("internal accusative") .............................. 365
65.4 Objective clause ............................................................. 366
65.5 Direct speech .................................................................... 366
65.6 A compound complement ("indirect object")? ...................... 367
65.7 Direct object embedded in verbal form ................................. 368

Chapter 66 Predicate and Adjuncts .......................................... 369
66.1 Formal structure ............................................................... 369
66.2 Nominal adjunctivation ...................................................... 370
66.3 Subordinate adjunctivation .................................................. 374
66.4 Constraints on the use of tenses ......................................... 376
66.5 Coordinate adjunctivation (hendiadys) ................................. 377
66.6 Embedded adjunctivation ................................................. 380
66.7 Undifferentiated adjunctivation (paronomastic adjunct) ......... 382
66.8 Undifferentiated adjunctivation (emphasis) ......................... 383
66.9 Emphasis: notional typology ............................................. 385
66.10 A note on ambiguity ......................................................... 389

Section B. Sequential Correlations: Word Order

Chapter 67 Absolute Positions ................................................. 391
67.1 Absolute and relative positions .......................................... 391
67.2 Contact sequences ........................................................... 391
67.3 Sentence (and clause) final ................................................ 393
67.4 Sentence initial ............................................................... 395

Chapter 68 Relative Positions ................................................. 396
Table of Contents

Section C. Semantic Correlations: Feature Analysis

Chapter 69 Syntax and Lexicon ................................................................. 397

Chapter 70 Feature Inventory................................................................. 400
  70.1 Nouns: notional categories ......................................................... 400
  70.2 Formal correlation to verbs: partial restrictions ......................... 401
  70.3 Formal correlation to verbs: total restrictions ......................... 402
  70.4 Action and condition: notional categories .................................. 403
  70.5 Action and condition: formal criteria ........................................ 405
  70.6 A note on analytical vs. analogical definitions ......................... 408
  70.7 A note on the permansive of transitive fientives ....................... 409
  70.8 Dimension of the action: punctual and durative ....................... 411
  70.9 Correlations between semantic and morphological criteria .......... 412

Part II. Transformations

Chapter 71 Introductory .................................................................... 415
  71.1 Concepts and terms .................................................................... 415
  71.2 A note on the use of tranformations ........................................ 416
  71.3 Criteria of organization ........................................................... 416

Section A. Individual Constituents

Chapter 72 Introductory ................................................................. 419

Chapter 73 Transformations Affecting Process .............................. 421
  73.1 Interrogative .............................................................................. 421
  73.2 Negative .................................................................................... 421
  73.3 Potential .................................................................................... 422
  73.4 Unrealizable potential .............................................................. 422
  73.5 Causative and factitive ............................................................ 423

Chapter 74 Transformations Affecting Elements Other than Process.... 425
  74.1 Passive ....................................................................................... 425
  74.2 Imperative and desiderative .................................................... 427
  74.3 Performative .............................................................................. 427
Section B. Nominalization

Chapter 75 Introductory ................................................................. 429
  75.1 Types of nominalizing transformation ....................................... 429
  75.2 Nominalization proper: types of deep structure ......................... 430
  75.3 Nominalization proper: types of surface structure ...................... 431

Chapter 76 Relative Clauses ............................................................. 436
  76.1 Attributive and consecutive clauses ......................................... 436
  76.2 Government and concord in relative clauses ............................... 437

Chapter 77 Noun Phrases with Predicate as Head ................................. 440
  77.1 Types 1-3: predicate and subject (subjective genitive) ............... 440
  77.2 Type 4: stative plus adjunct (limitative, superlative, partitive) .... 442
  77.3 Type 5: intransitive plus adjunct (locative) ............................. 444
  77.4 Type 6: transitive plus complement (objective) .......................... 445

Chapter 78 Noun Phrases with Subject as Head .................................... 446
  78.1 Types 7a-9a: subject and predicate (attribution) ....................... 446
  78.2 Types 7b-9b: subject and predicate (potential);
                 the case against the so-called “attributive genitive” .......... 447
  78.3 Type 9c: subject and infinitive ............................................. 449
  78.4 Types 10-11: subject and adjunct ........................................... 449
  78.5 Type 12: subject and complement (possessive) ........................... 451

Chapter 79 Noun Phrases with Complement as Head ............................... 453
  79.1 Type 13a: complement and predicate (potential) ........................ 453
  79.2 Type 13b: complement and predicate (infinitive phrase) ............. 453
  79.3 Type 13c: complement and predicate (attributive) ..................... 454
  79.4 Type 13d: complement and predicate (subjective) ..................... 455
  79.5 Type 14: complement and adjunct (datival) ................................ 455
  79.6 Type 15: complement and subject (possessive; agentive) .......... 456

Chapter 80 Noun Phrases with Adjunct as Head ................................... 457
  80.1 Type 16-18: adjunct and predicate (potential) .......................... 457
Table of Contents

Chapter 81 Government and Agreement in Noun Phrases ........................................ 458
  81.1 Head and modifier ................................................................. 458
  81.2 Attribution and apposition ....................................................... 458
  81.3 Attribution with cardinal numerals as modifiers ............................. 460
  81.4 Anticipatory emphasis ........................................................... 460
  81.5 Government with multi-place noun phrases .................................. 461

Chapter 82 Word Order in Noun Phrases and Clauses ........................................... 465
  82.1 Contact sequences ................................................................. 465
  82.2 Attributional chains ............................................................... 466
  82.3 Appositional phrase with determinative pronoun as head ..................... 467
  82.4 Relative order within attributional chains ..................................... 468
  82.5 Word order in clauses ............................................................ 470

Chapter 83 Review of Nominalization Types ....................................................... 471
  83.1 Index by notional categories ..................................................... 471
  83.2 Surface ambiguity ................................................................. 471

Section C. Conjoining

Chapter 84 Introductory ........................................................................ 473
  84.1 Subordination and coordination ................................................. 473
  84.2 Reversibility and irreversibility .................................................. 474

Chapter 85 Reversible Sequences ............................................................. 476
  85.1 Surface reversibility: disjunctives ................................................ 476
  85.2 Deep reversibility: cumulatives and adversatives ............................ 477

Chapter 86 Irreversible Sequences ............................................................. 478
  86.1 Introductory ............................................................................. 478
  86.2 Conjunction before first sentence: conditionals ............................... 478
  86.3 Conjunction after the first predicate: virtual subordination ................. 479

Section D. Deletion

Chapter 87 Introductory ........................................................................ 483
# Table of Contents

**Chapter 88 Sentence Level**

88.1 Subject ................................................................. 485
88.2 Complement ............................................................ 486
88.3 Predicate ............................................................... 486

**Chapter 89 Transform Level** .................................................. 488

89.1 Object deletion with causatives .......................................... 488
89.2 Agentive deletion with passives ......................................... 488
89.3 Subject, object or predicate deletion with nominalization ......... 488
89.4 Pronoun deletion with attributive clauses .............................. 489
89.5 Constituent deletion with conjoined sentences and phrases ....... 491
89.6 Particle deletion with conjoined sentences ........................... 493
89.7 Preposition deletion within nominalization ............................ 494
89.8 Sentence deletion with subordinate clauses: oath formulae ....... 494

**Glossary of Grammatical Terms** ............................................. 497

**Texts Cited** ............................................................................ 501

**Index of Akkadian Words** ....................................................... 503

**Subject Index** ........................................................................ 505
SYMBOLS

C  any consonant (upper case letters stand for sets of alternating realizations)
V  any vowel
I  $i/a$, see below, 14.2
?  $%/\&$, see below, 41.1
N  $n%/\&$, see below, 42.1
W  $w%/\&$, see below, 43.3
/  root vowel $u/a$
\  root vowel $i/a$
:  upper case notation for length (subsuming set of realizations)
+  length expressed segmentally (and referring to the phoneme that precedes)
*  length expressed segmentally (and referring to the phoneme that follows)
#  length expressed segmentally (and referring to the phoneme that precedes)
{}  morphemic transcription (when explicitly marked)
//  phonemic transcription (when explicitly marked)
| |  equivalent of [ ] for graphemic, sign by sign transliteration
[ ] (1) graphemically: sign by sign transliteration; (2) palaeographically: a break in the original text; (3) morphemically: form not attested. – Generally, the symbol is omitted in case one, since sign by sign transliteration is normally apparent from the context. When an explicit notation is needed, I use in this grammar the symbol [ ].
*  non existence of a given form (given after the asterisk), whether the form is reconstructed or it is structurally excluded
-  (1) graphemically: sign boundary in sign by sign transliteration; (2) morphemically: morpheme boundary (also given as +); (3) occurring alone in a cell of a chart or diagram: absence of a given phenomenon
+  (1) within words: morpheme boundary (also given as -); (2) occurring alone in a cell of a chart or diagram: presence of a given phenomenon
~  (1) alternative realization (normally understood in the sense that something can be rewritten as something else, see for example below, 41.3); (2) correlation of forms, e.g., when a form is derived from another (see, e.g., 10.2)
>,< (1) in historical reconstructions: direction of change; (2) in syntax: direction of transformation from kernel sentence to transform
<table>
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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>compare</td>
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<td>cm</td>
<td>common</td>
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<td>construct</td>
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<td>construent</td>
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<td>N(tn) stem</td>
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<td>NB</td>
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<td>OB</td>
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<td>part.</td>
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<td>perf.</td>
<td>perfect</td>
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<tr>
<td>PN</td>
<td>personal name</td>
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<td>pres.</td>
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<td>pret.</td>
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<tr>
<td>prtcpl</td>
<td>participle</td>
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<td>s.v.</td>
<td>sub voce</td>
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<tr>
<td>SB</td>
<td>Standard Babylonian</td>
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<tr>
<td>sec.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Š(tn)</td>
<td>Š(tn) stem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vadj</td>
<td>verbal adjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>wr.</td>
<td>written, writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSem</td>
<td>West Semitic</td>
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</table>
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INTRODUCTION

0.1 A historical sketch of Akkadian

The schematic maps reproduced on the following page provide a brief visual synopsis of the development of Akkadian and of the main dialectal classifications within it. "Akkadian" is the term used to cover the entire span of time from the middle of the third millennium to the time of Christ. The oldest period is known as "Old Akkadian": it is the language spoken under the kings of the Sargonic dynasty, and it is very closely related to the language spoken at Ebla, which several scholars consider a form of Old Akkadian.

The period around 2000 B.C. marks a sharp break in the linguistic tradition of Mesopotamia. This is especially evidenced by the emergence of two clearly differentiated dialects — Assyrian in the North and Babylonian in the South, in the West and at times also in the North. Old Assyrian is perhaps more closely related to Old Akkadian, although there is also a definite continuity between Old Akkadian and Old Babylonian. From now on, the two main strands run a parallel course, both divided in three parallel periods, identified respectively as Old, Middle and Neo-. Throughout its development, Assyrian remained more clearly restricted within well defined geographical confines: the triangle formed by the Tigris, the lower Zab and the Zagros mountains. Even the Old Assyrian texts found in Cappadocia, while outside this area in geographical terms, belong squarely within it in linguistic terms, since they were written by merchants who were only temporarily absent from their homeland. Babylonian, on the other hand, is a much more cosmopolitan language, being spoken over a much wider area, especially in the Old Babylonian period, and being used also by the Assyrians as a cultural language. It is remarkable to note, in the light of such a widespread diffusion, how relatively minor the internal variations are within Old Babylonian itself.

At the time of Middle Babylonian, a version of Akkadian is also used in the West; many of the texts were found in the Egyptian capital known by its modern name of Amarna: it is a poorly written type of Akkadian, which reflects inadequate training of non-Akkadian speaking scribes, especially in texts written in the capitals of petty local kingdoms in Syria.

Standard Babylonian is the term used for a revival of some aspects of Old Babylonian in the literary texts of the Assyrian empire. Many of the major works of lit-
Introduction

Literature, such as Gilgamesh or the Enuma Elish, and the political texts known as royal inscriptions, are written in this form of Akkadian, a revival of what was perceived as the classical form of the language.

Late Babylonian, on the other hand, is the language written at a time when Akkadian was no longer a spoken language, after it had been replaced by Aramaic.
0.2 Babylonian within Akkadian

As indicated in the title of this grammar, we will limit the scope of our inquiry to Babylonian. I use the generic term “Babylonian” to refer essentially to Old Babylonian and its survivals in other Babylonian dialects of later periods, in particular Standard Babylonian. Either Old Babylonian as such, or Babylonian in the extended meaning, is generally viewed as the classical dialect of Akkadian. This is partly due to the impact of extra-linguistic considerations, such as the cultural significance of the textual output of that period, and partly to the very fact that the archaizing imitations of Old Babylonian in the later periods attest to a certain normative character, or at least a certain linguistic influence of the dialect as felt even in antiquity. While such a meaning of the term “Babylonian” taken to refer to common strands in a continuous linguistic development is in common practice, its use in the present context requires some explanation.

I should stress in the first place that it is not my goal to produce a reference grammar of Old Babylonian or, even less, of “Babylonian” in the broader sense of the term — meaning by this a grammar that includes an exhaustive philological documentation of the textual corpus which underlies the linguistic analysis. The examples provided are meant to illustrate the linguistic understanding of given phenomena, not to document the spread of their chronological or geographical range. In practice, I will generally choose Old Babylonian examples in the first place, and Middle or Standard Babylonian examples either in addition to Old Babylonian examples, or in place of them whenever they are either the only or the better ones available.

Since the term “Babylonian” does not refer to a dialect spoken over a restricted period of time, how can it properly be the object of a synchronic, structural

1 Rowton, e.g., uses the term “classic” Babylonian to refer to just such a concept, see Rowton 1962 “Permansive”, p. 234.

2 I have undertaken a different effort along these lines, namely an electronic analysis of cuneiform texts, from a graphemic, morphological and syntactical point of view. This project originated in 1968 with one of the first major grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities aimed at developing the application of electronic data processing and analysis to textual corpora. It is still active, and it is ultimately meant to provide a categorized rendition of various corpora, where a vast documentary body of data can be scanned electronically for pertinent linguistic phenomena – the closest equivalent to a “living” informant for a “dead” language. A few volumes and disks have appeared, and others on graphemics, morphemics and syntax are in different stages of preparation. For a recent status report on the project see G. Buccellati, “Cybernetica Mesopotamica,” in E. M. Cook (ed.), Sopher Mahir: Northwest Semitic Studies presented to Stanislav Segert, (= Maarav, 5-6), 1990, pp. 23-32. – I will refer occasionally to a sample corpus of 219 letters from the royal chancery of Babylon under Hammurapi and his successors. In its current form, this data base includes 13,274 words as text occurrences and 2,594 words as lexical items.
Introduction

analysis? Why not limit the scope of the research more specifically to "Old" Babylonian? In my understanding, the term "Babylonian" refers to a linguistic system which includes kat'ëxochên the dialects of the Old Babylonian period, but also, in addition, its survivals in later periods. The wide chronological span which subsumes data here treated as synchronic may be surprising. But, as I will stress presently (0.6), "synchrony" does not mean "contemporaneity"; rather, it refers to the essential need for the component elements of a system to co-function in structurally defined ways, if that system is to retain its identity. In point of fact, even the Old Babylonian "dialect" of the Old Babylonian period is not a synchronic monolith, because significant dialectal variations obtain for a period of some four centuries over a region that spans from Southwestern Iran to Western Syria. No effort is made here to differentiate systematically between these various dialects and sub-dialects, precisely because it is assumed that Babylonian as such represents a coherent linguistic system of its own.

In practice, it may be noted, the very term "Akkadian" is often equated with the notion of Babylonian that I have just outlined, partly because of the notion that Old Babylonian and its survivals represent the classical stage of the language, as mentioned above. When a typical Akkadian form is cited in the literature, it is normally the Old or Standard Babylonian form, to which divergent forms may be contrasted from Old Akkadian, Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian: emblematic in this respect is the practice followed in the two major Akkadian dictionaries, in which the entry words are generally given in the Old Babylonian form in AHw and in the Standard Babylonian form in CAD. In this grammar, too, I will generally speak of "Akkadian" when the phenomena envisaged apply across the board.

0.3 Textual data

From the point of view of the relationship between spoken and written language, we may perhaps best distinguish three levels in the textual tradition. (A) Letters are the texts which most closely represent the spoken language of the day. They were dictated to a scribe, and retain much of the flavor of direct speech, although even the letters are filtered through the routine of scribal writing habits. (B) The literary texts in a broad sense contain a more reflexive approach to the written medium: the language is more refined, sophisticated, cultured, and hence less closely linked to normal speech. (C) The administrative and scientific texts (e.g., contracts or rituals) are highly formulaic in nature, and thus one more degree removed from actual speech. Like all forms, they developed a style which, although responsive to the rules of grammar, is nevertheless more static, conservative and rigid.
From the point of view of the scribes, we may also distinguish three major types. (A) Scribes of the royal chancery were responsible for political texts (normally in the form of display inscriptions), literary and scientific texts kept in the royal libraries, diplomatic correspondence, treaties and administrative texts. (B) Scribes of the temple schools were responsible for religious texts used in the cult (e.g., rituals, hymns, incantations), literary and scientific texts, and administrative texts. (C) Private scribes handled almost exclusively letters and administrative matters.

From the point of view of form, the typology is much too rich for even a brief overview. Only two points may be mentioned by way of example. Poetic texts are numerous, and while the rules of metric control are not well understood, there can be little doubt that a real distinction obtained between normal discourse (prose) and one which is more highly channeled (poetry). The other example is the so-called scientific literature, which is characterized by the presence of an "if" clause: a case is stated in the conditional form, and its consequence, or resolution, is stated as the main sentence; this simple stylistic device allows for an easy flow of the argumentation, which is the hallmark of all scientific reasoning.

The content of the textual tradition is also extremely rich and complex, and need not occupy us here, since its bearing on a linguistic description of Akkadian is more tenuous.

The rules and exemplification used in this grammar are of a sufficiently generalized import that they may be taken to apply to the broad range of texts mentioned above, exclusive primarily of poetry.

0.4 Writing and language

Akkadian is a dead language in the precise sense that no living speaker exists today or has existed since the time when modern analysis of this particular language started in the last century. Our knowledge of it is not based on living informants, but has rather been derived almost entirely through the medium of written sources (the only exception being that some of our information, particularly with regard to phonology, has been obtained inferentially from parallels with "living" languages). The writing system itself was meant to convey the language in its full reality, but it remains an opaque medium, which cannot be taken at face value. This is true of many other systems, such as the one used for English, which can hardly be called a transparent medium. Not that the English writing system is inadequate: as a system it is adequate, because it renders the language fully and coherently. But there are only a few one-to-one correspondences between the graphic symbols and the sounds of the language, and as a result a correct reading requires the application of a great number of rules. Akkadian presents similar dif-
Introduction

ficulties, though for different reasons. The question is: how is it possible to discover such rules for Akkadian if the lack of living informants prevents an independent control of the written evidence? The answer is twofold.

In the first place, internal criticism can show both inconsistencies and regularities in the writing system, which may allow a reasonably good insight into the real significance of certain graphic notations. For instance, the same Akkadian word may be written differently as *ip-pa-ar-ra-as* and *i-pa-ra-as*. This could be taken to mean that Akkadian has long and simple consonants in free variation: but such a conclusion is ruled out by various considerations (not to be given here) of a phonological and morphological nature. The better conclusion is that consonantal length, though present and contrastive in the language, may or may not be represented in the writing. When not represented graphically, it has to be read into the text through the knowledge of the phonological and morphological structure of the language. In the case given above, both forms should be read *ipparas*. 3

The second most effective guide in the effort at attaining to the language behind the writing, is the comparison with living languages which are related to Akkadian, namely the various Semitic languages spoken today chiefly in Southwestern Asia and North Africa. Comparative considerations are especially important in phonological matters, since no inference can be made as to articulation on the basis of an internal analysis of the script and the textual data. Clearly, our description of the phonemic inventory cannot be done purely on the basis of the cuneiform material, but presupposes a comparative and historical approach as an indispensable prerequisite. For example, the reading of $\text{IT} \text{ab}$ as *a-ab*, and its interpretation as $\text{?ab}$ as “father of” is based on the correlation with the word $\text{?ab}$ “father (of),” in Arabic, Hebrew, etc., and on the observation that such reading and meaning fits equally well all other occurrences of $\text{IT} \text{ab}$ (where these two signs can be isolated as constituting a single word). Note that while the meaning “father of” could also be obtained from the context or from an ancient translation in a non-Semitic language, it is only the correlation with known Semitic languages which allows a phonological analysis establishing the reading $\text{?ab}$ and more precisely the articulatory nature of $\text{?}$ as glottal stop, $a$ as back low vowel, $b$ as labial voiced stop. In addition, occasional transcriptions of isolated Akkadian words in other ancient scripts (e.g., Greek) are also of some value for a thorough reconstruction of the phonological structure of Akkadian.

In some ways, then, it is possible to reach behind the writing system and perceive linguistic reality as expressed by graphic symbols. Yet the fact remains that

3 In my understanding, graphemics is the study of the systematic correlations between the phonemic dimension of a language and its graphic embodiment. As such it extends beyond the identification of specific values for given signs, and it includes especially rules of correlation such as the one just stated above. In this grammar I refrain altogether from a discussion of graphemics, which I have treated most recently in “The Ebla Electronic Corpus: Graphemic Analysis,” in *Actes du Colloque International de l'Histoire et l'Archéologie de la Mohafazat d'Idlib = AAAS 40* (1990) 8-26.
our understanding of the language is largely based on a set of assumptions regarding the nature of the Akkadian writing system. In this grammar we will dispense with any comparative and historical argumentation aimed at showing the validity of such assumptions; they are simply taken for granted. It may be noted that, in this respect, there is general agreement among scholars, and that nothing in this grammar will be introduced that is based on a controversial understanding of the writing phenomena. It should also be stressed that while there is reasonable certainty as to the accuracy of phonemic, grammatical and semantic analysis, the details of articulatory phonetics are only approximate, and may in some cases be considerably at variance with actual pronunciation in ancient times. Thus, the classification of phonemes which follows is based on articulatory considerations obviously not because articulation can be verified empirically, but simply because it is assumed on distributional and comparative grounds.

In this grammar we will follow Gelb in using the term "transliteration" for a sign by sign (or a graphemic) rendering of the cuneiform script, and the term "transcription" for a phonemic rendering of individual words. Transliteration will normally be represented graphically by syllables in italics linked by a hyphen, e.g., \textit{i-pa-ra-as}, transcription by a connected word in italics, sometimes enclosed between virgules, e.g. \texttt{iparras} or \texttt{/iparras/}.

0.5 A structural approach

The description of Babylonian given here aims at providing an understanding of the structure of the language as such, and not only a key to the reading of texts. In other words, my goal is to provide not a phrasebook with 'how-to' explanations, but rather a description of the language viewed as a system, through which one can in turn shed light on individual texts. At first, this may seem like needless acrobatics in which one indulges at one's own peril instead of adhering closely to the texts. But I hope to show that there is merit to this approach, and that far from leading us into a rarefied and sterile atmosphere of self-serving abstruseness, it increases our real understanding of the expressive mechanisms — and thus of course of the texts which are our only conduit of expression and meaning.

In the first place, any language has an internal structure of its own which is worthy of independent study. There is an almost aesthetic quality to an appreciation of the architectural qualities of a linguistic system, which is truly a living organism. And if we try to do justice to the language as an autonomous entity, we can “learn” it more fully and in greater depth: we will then avoid two pitfalls which we may call the “straight-jacket” and the “ad hoc” approaches. The straight-jacket method is one which presupposes a language as having some kind of logical priority, and models other languages to conform to it; whether this assumed priority is
attributed to Latin or English, it will in any case do injustice to the language we are trying to study, and suffocate, as it were, its authentic characteristics. The ad hoc method is one which prescinds from systematic theory, and explains a language in function of one or another specific text: this approach seems more satisfying at first, but may end up in a morass of unrelated details which seriously lessen our explanatory powers.

The present grammar is structurally oriented in the specific sense that it looks at Babylonian on its own terms, as an autonomous entity: our presuppositions are all in function of the language as a living organism, with its own internal constraints, rules and peculiarities. The key procedure, in this method, is to identify what are normally called “distributional classes.” These are groups of phenomena which can be shown to have the same functions in different contexts: for instance a preposition will be defined as such not because it can be translated with an English preposition, but because it occurs regularly in the language with a certain class of words and not another. For instance, the two words /ina imur/ cannot co-occur in this sequence in Akkadian (just as their counterpart “in he saw” cannot co-occur in English), whereas the two words /ina bitim/ do co-occur (just as their English counterpart “in the house“). We can say, then, that words with the same distribution as /ina/ belong to one and the same class, namely a class which admits co-occurrence with words like /bitim/ but not co-occurrence with words like /imur/. Words are thus “distributed” into well specified formal “classes,” that is, they fall into distributional classes which can be so identified in formal terms.

A correlative notion to distributional classes is that of mutual exclusivity among such classes. In terms of the above example we can say that /ina/ and /imur/ are mutually exclusive because one is not found to replace the other in any known context. Wherever we find /ina/ or another word belonging to the same class, we cannot find /imur/ or another word of the same class: thus the sequence /imur bitim/ is impossible in the language.

A structural approach is especially important in the case of “dead” languages, i.e., languages for whom there are no living informants – like Akkadian. Here we can only rely on the internal consistency of the linguistic phenomena observed, without the benefit of independent verification in answer to specific questions. When we say that something is impossible in the language, we mean to say that it is inconsistent with everything that has been observed in the known texts. The validity of such a statement depends not only on the size of the textual sample on which it is based, but also on the stringency of the structural analysis: the more accurate we are in our understanding of structural affinities and incompatibilities, the safer our conclusions will be with regard to the possibility or impossibility of given linguistic phenomena.

A criticism which has been raised against attempts such as mine is that one merely restates the obvious in different terms. In one respect, this may indeed be
expected to be the case. Ironically, it may be said that the sum total of all possible sentences in a language is a grammar, too – but so unwieldy as to be meaningless. A “re-statement,” then, is useful because it accounts more effectively for classes of phenomena, or, alternatively, because it articulates in explicit terms correlations which are present only implicitly in the data. The value of a grammar is to be found in the degree of simplicity and comprehensiveness of such re-statement.

Another criticism is that new terms and new formalizations are considered as needlessly complex and abstract, as if they were adopted to make up for an actual lack of understanding. For my part, I have seriously striven to introduce only such elements of either terminology or formalization as are truly needed for the definition of genuine structural relationships. In its pejorative connotation, “jargon” is to language what “bureaucracy” is to society – a parasitic superstructure which suffocates the organism it is supposed to serve. Such jargon I try to avoid. But the reverse is also true. Since there is a tendency to attribute substantive, rather than nominal, valence to labels, it is important that labels be as close as possible to the reality which they are meant to define. Such jargon I do introduce. For these reasons, I pay more attention than one might expect to a justification of terminology and formalizations. I obviously do not mean to preempt the work of general linguists who can explain such matters better and more fully. I only wish to show that there is substance to such terms and schemes as I have chosen. This seems especially useful since at times a certain amount of lip service is paid to jargon, in such a way that, for instance, “phoneme” may stand for nothing more than a “letter,” or “grapheme” for “cuneiform sign.”

While I follow a strict structural method in the grammatical presentation of the language, room can be made in the practice of teaching for a more inductive approach. What matters is to be able to keep the levels of analysis separate: in other words, when studying the language as a language, we must be mindful of its internal structure rather than of its empirical embodiment in given textual passages; but in order to read the texts, we can and must use our own intuition, bypassing or short circuiting, whenever useful, theoretical considerations.

0.6 Synchrony and diachrony

Another fundamental concept is the difference between a synchronic and a diachronic description of the language. A diachronic description views the language in its becoming, i.e., as it unfolds through various historical stages: a phenomenon is explained in terms of its chronological antecedents and presuppositions, it is viewed as the result of a set of conditions and in turn as a precondition for further development.
A synchronic description, on the other hand, views the language as a working system, in terms of the logical connections of its component parts, and regardless of how they have come into being through time. Synchrony is not a small slice of temporal development, it is rather a logical system viewed outside of any temporal development.

An analogy may help to explain these concepts more clearly. The assembly chart of any mechanical tool details the interconnections among the constituent parts of the tool in a purely synchronic way, i.e., as a logical system. It ignores the issue of temporal development (i.e., it ignores diachrony) in many different ways: for instance, it ignores the question of how and when the various component pieces were manufactured, who invented them, whether they were all in stock at the time this particular tool was produced and marketed, it even ignores, overtly, the question of which pieces must be mounted first and which last (although this is in fact implied by the diagrammatic position of the lines which show how the pieces go together). Note that all of these issues are of real interest for a fuller understanding of the tool itself: the quality of a given model may well have been influenced by what component parts were already in stock, so that a particular design improvement may have been foregone for the sake of economy — a "historical" fact which might explain a particular structural flaw in our hypothetical mechanical tool. But a structural description of the tool, i.e. its assembly chart, works at other levels of significance and explanation than a historical justification: the user just wants to know how to change a part, and to that end he only needs to know how all existing parts fit together.

That is precisely what we will attempt to do in this grammar: we will study the question as to how all the known parts of Babylonian fit together, we will try to reconstruct the assembly chart of a real organism as it existed at a given point in time in the past. Note the last comment: we must deal with a specific "model," as in the case of a tool's assembly chart, not with an abstract, universal type. And the particular model which we will choose is Babylonian in the sense described above (0.2). It should be clear that our choice to give here a synchronic presentation is in no way to be understood as belittling the value of a historical presentation. A historical, or diachronic, study is fully justified and in fact very important; it is simply that we must keep levels of analysis rigorously distinct, and that here we choose to analyze only the synchronic dimension.

It is important to understand the difference between "synchrony" and "contemporaneity." I already stressed that synchrony is not a thin slice of diachrony — it is for the same reason that synchrony is not simply a statement about two things which exist at the same point in time. Note how tricky etymology would be in this respect: etymologically, synchrony (Greek "with" + "time") is in fact identical to contemporaneity (Latin "with" + "time"). But consider the following example, taken from English. The two sentences "he doesn't" and "he don't" are indeed
Introduction

contemporary, since they are both spoken and understood by currently living speakers. But they are not synchronic, because they do not co-occur as part of the same speaker's dialect: whoever says “he doesn't” would not say “he don't” (except quoting or imitating another speaker). We can say that the two sentences, “he doesn't” and “he don't,” occupy the same slot in the same distributional class, hence, they are mutually exclusive, and not allowed within the same synchronic system.

The analogy we have just proposed may also serve to illustrate another aspect which was discussed above, namely the concept of a structural approach. The mechanical tool of our analogy is obviously intended to be used for a specific utilitarian purpose. Similarly, one might argue, a language is a tool used to convey a message: hence one expects to have rules of operation (how to speak it or how to read a text) and only secondarily may an interest arise in the “assembly” chart (the structural make-up of the language). After all, most human beings speak one or more languages without any real knowledge of their structure. This is true: it is what is called “linguistic competence,” which is different from linguistic theoretical awareness. In the case of a dead language like Akkadian, however, the lack of living informants makes it imperative to develop some degree of linguistic sophistication even in order to obtain a low level understanding of the texts: one cannot profitably use a Berlitz school approach to the study of cuneiform. Language may certainly be viewed as a tool, but an infinitely more delicate and subtle one than a mechanical tool, and a serious knowledge of its operational capabilities requires a real understanding of the “assembly chart,” even for utilitarian purposes.

4 Of course, the same physical speaker might utter both phrases if he speaks, on different occasions or different contexts, both dialects – much as the two phrases “he doesn't” and “il ne fait pas” may be physically uttered by the same (bilingual) speaker, but remain nevertheless portions of two distinct languages, i.e. two distinct synchronic systems.