

*Babylonian Theories of Language***Introduction**

In this chapter, I provide an overview of various Babylonian theories of language and lay out a repertoire of themes deployed in cuneiform sources. A panoramic view is needed because, contrary to received opinion, Babylonian thought displays substantial variation and disagreement, demonstrating a complexity that becomes particularly evident in Mesopotamian texts that explore the nature of language.<sup>1</sup> By understanding how cuneiform scribes could articulate variation we can better appreciate the full range of ideas available to first millennium Greeks. In the first part of the chapter, I describe the scholarly settings in which such theories or visions about the origin and nature of language emerged. In the second part, I analyze texts of various genres and time periods that are pertinent to this investigation. I identify several branches or schools of thought that roughly overlap with different specializations of cuneiform scribes, like the emphasis on sign theory of the diviners, the importance given by exorcists to matters related to speech acts, and the agnosticism of a lamentation priest, who questions the possibility of understanding the language of the gods.

<sup>1</sup> So, for instance, Lloyd 1989 p. 54 who writes with some ambivalence, “it is worth laying some stress on that feature [innovation] of those great civilizations, since it tends to be brushed aside when attention is focused on their undoubted elements of conservativeness and of deference to traditional authority, both in the sense of deference to the customary authority figures and in that of deference to the past.” Lloyd, as many other Hellenists, follows here the Assyriologist Oppenheim 1964, whose view of a Mesopotamian uniform and stable “stream of tradition” has been questioned by Robson 2019. There are also more subtle manifestations of this view; see, for instance, Haubold 2020, who believes that there was a Chaldeanism in antiquity that entered into contact with Platonism. Notice that Chaldeanism here stands in opposition not only to Platonism but also to Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and so on, a plurality of Greek schools of thought.

### One or Many Babylonian Theories of Language?

In the *Order of Things*, Michel Foucault writes that in sixteenth-century Europe, language was not considered “an arbitrary system” of signs but a property that “has been set down in the world.” According to this conception, “words offer themselves to men as things to be deciphered” and semantic analysis does no more than “to discover, not the original meanings of words, but the intrinsic ‘properties’ of letters, syllables, and, finally, whole words.”<sup>2</sup> Although Babylonians did not have letters but syllabograms and logograms, this depiction of sixteenth-century European conceptions of language could also apply to ancient Mesopotamia. In fact, it is quite possible that some roots of the view described by the French historian may go back to ancient Babylonian speculations about the nature of language, which made their way to Europe through the Jewish and Greek hermeneutical traditions. Antoine Cavigneaux and, more recently, Eckhart Frahm have documented this history of reception in its early stages, but they have mainly focused on the influence of Babylonian hermeneutics on the Jewish *midrash*.<sup>3</sup> And while the ancient Greeks were equally affected by Babylonian linguistic and semiotic conceptions, there is still much to explore about the interrelation of the Greek and the Mesopotamian traditions of understanding the nature of signification.

It is still commonly assumed that Greek philosophers and sophists were the first to propose that the meaning of language is conventional, that is, sanctioned by a linguistic community. The same belief maintains that for everybody in the ancient world outside the small circle of certain enlightened Greeks, the signification of names, nouns, adjectives, and so on, was given by the natural resemblance of the word to the thing it signifies. Given such a narrative, one might conclude that the Babylonians belonged with those who thought that the meaning of the linguistic sign was set by nature. However, this would oversimplify the problem.

Instead, the picture that emerges from the cuneiform sources appears complex, if not contradictory. On one side, we find models in which language and signs are divine and omnipresent: there is the writing of the gods imprinted in the sky, on the earth, in dreams and so on. But we also encounter the idea that meaning is established by convention or, more precisely, that it was progressively fixed by speech acts throughout the history of the universe. Such speech acts involved both gods and extraordinary humans. There are, moreover, perceptible differences between what appears to be identical schools of thought. Many sources agree that the

<sup>2</sup> Foucault 1994/1966 p. 36.    <sup>3</sup> Cavigneaux 1987; Frahm 2011; Gabbay 2012, 2016a.

meaning of the linguistic sign is set by nature; yet some attribute the relationship between sign and signified to the speech acts of gods or, alternatively, of men.<sup>4</sup> A social distinction may be in play here: in the realm of the diviners, signs are perceived as inherent properties of things that emerge from the writing of the gods, while among exorcists meaning is seen as emanating from divine and human speech acts. Divine speech acts that establish the meaning of names might seem only a variant of the “natural” hypothesis; but the speech act in itself implies convention and therefore prompts reflection on intentionality. Contrary to what modern scholars outside Assyriology often assume, Mesopotamian thought was neither monolithic nor dogmatic. Here again a paradigm still popular in classics and the history of ancient religions plays a prominent role in misconceiving Babylonian thought. The model presumes that Greek intellectual pluralism was the direct consequence of the democratic organization of the *polis*, unlike the royal monarchies of the Near East that fostered great conservatism among scribes and scholars.<sup>5</sup> However, the evidence points in a different direction, showing that Babylonians and Assyrians also found their ways around the authority of tradition.<sup>6</sup> A good example is provided by cosmogonical and cosmological tablets that attest a wide diversity of points of view. A cursory examination of those texts is sufficient to illustrate the divergent opinions that existed within the cuneiform tradition. According to a group of incantations, at the very beginning of the formation of the world there was Time, a concept that was represented by the divine couple Dūri and Dāri (from Akkadian *dūru* “eternity”). In some god lists Earth (Urash) was the primordial being while in others it was Sky (Anu).<sup>7</sup> In the *Epic of Creation*, Water (Tiamtu and Apsu) is the original matter from which everything emerges. These variations on the primordial elements show as much diversity as exists in the texts of the Greek Presocratics.

This multiplicity of views in the context of cosmogony is quite relevant for our inquiry because both in Mesopotamia and Greece, as well as in other ancient cultures, theories of language are often developed in cosmological frameworks. Consequently, any variation in the model of the cosmos has implications for a theory of language. In the cuneiform tradition, the *Epic of Creation* is probably the most salient example. As we will see in Chapter 2,

<sup>4</sup> From our modern perspective, to say that the gods set the meaning of signs by convention is the equivalent of asserting that the relation between sign and the signified is natural, but as Rochberg 2017 has shown the concept of nature was unknown to the Babylonians.

<sup>5</sup> See Vernant 1982. More recently Burkert 2008b has reinstated the opposition of Greek pluralism versus Oriental dogmatism on the basis of the different social structures of Greece and the Near East.

<sup>6</sup> See Brown 2003 and Finn 2017. <sup>7</sup> George 2016; Lambert 2012 pp. 417–426.

this innovative text not only introduces water as a primordial element from which everything generates but also locates the emergence of language at the very beginning of cosmic history. It does so by using the sounds of primeval mixing waters as a metaphor for the emergence of linguistic communication.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to recover the intellectual diversity of Mesopotamia in all aspects of Babylonian scholarship. This is due, to some extent, to the type of texts that the cuneiform tradition produced. In many cases, Mesopotamian theoretical texts appear, at first glance, to be no more than annotations, the remaining traces of an oral scholarly discourse now lost. This problem affects particularly the recovery of native Babylonian linguistics and theories of language, which are sometimes embedded in very condensed lists of concepts and abbreviated annotations. Despite these difficulties, some theories about the origin and the cosmological status of language can be reconstructed from a variety of sources such as mythical narratives, lexical exercises, commentaries, and incantations. We will explore some of these theories in this chapter and Chapter 2.

### Scholars and Language

Babylonian theories of language that we can recover from the ancient sources were produced in a scholarly environment that we know relatively well. Recently, we have seen important progress in the reconstruction of the intellectual world of the Babylonians and Assyrians. We now have a consistent picture of the scribes' education, their libraries and archives, their relation to the king and temple, their self-representation in art and myth, and most important for this inquiry, the type of exegetical techniques that scribes put in place. In order to contextualize the Babylonian conceptualization of language, I will start with the most basic elements of the school system and move gradually to the problem of self-representation of the scribes and how they conceived their discipline in regard to language. In sum, I will move from what we consider hard historical facts to a more speculative consideration of the indigenous categories that informed Babylonian ways of organizing a system of knowledge.

#### *Ancient Scholarship and Metalinguistic Awareness*

Mesopotamian scholarship began with the invention of cuneiform writing at the end of the fourth millennium. Writing was developed in Uruk and adjacent areas for accounting purposes but was later adapted for the transcription of language. The writing system soon required the organization

and institutionalization of its transmission; with the development of writing, schools and scholarly traditions also appeared. Although the textual and archeological evidence in Mesopotamia is relatively rich in comparison to other cultures of the past, the picture we gain from a variety of sources remains incomplete. Today, for example, we know with some detail the first educational stages of the literati of that civilization, but do not know as well the details of what we would call, anachronistically, “higher education.”

Some of the best-attested cases of learning environments are the small schools of the Old Babylonian period (c. 1900–1600 BCE). The archaeological record shows that there was a decentralized educational system in which teachers taught students in private houses. A good example is the Tablet House F found in the city of Nippur. In this 45 square meter building located in a residential quarter, about 1,300 school tablets were unearthed that were distributed in three small rooms and a courtyard. This finding and the discovery of other school tablets nearby has allowed a detailed understanding of the elementary curriculum of the Old Babylonian period. A comparison with other sites outside Nippur leads to the conclusion that the curriculum in southern Mesopotamia was relatively stable, although variation of some texts and the order in which they were learned was not uncommon.<sup>8</sup>

Based on the analysis of the Nippur tablets, scholars have concluded that elementary education in the Old Babylonian period consisted of four levels in which students learned the basic cuneiform signs, while at the same time they studied Sumerian, already a dead language by the time. The students also became familiar with arithmetic, the writing of contracts, and were introduced to the copying and studying of Sumerian literary compositions. Moreover, the textual and archeological evidence suggests that the learning of cuneiform tended to occur within the family but was not necessarily restricted to it. On many occasions, copies were autographed by the sons of a master scribe who had passed down his craft to his descendants.

In the first millennium, schools seem to have moved from the private space of the family house to the temple. In a comprehensive study, Petra Gesche has proposed that scribal education consisted of two levels.<sup>9</sup> In the first, the pupils learned elementary writing by copying simple signs and word lists, excerpts of larger lexical lists, Akkadian verbal forms, and passages of literary compositions. In the second level, students improved their acquired knowledge by studying and copying parts of more complex texts that often came from the milieu of the exorcist (*āšipu*). Texts of this

<sup>8</sup> Cancik-Kirschbaum et al. 2018 pp. 46–68; Robson 2001.    <sup>9</sup> Gesche 2001.

type tended to reflect upon the origin of knowledge (as in *Gilgamesh*), the role of the scribe in the cosmos (as in *Adapa and the South Wind*), and upon theology, cosmology, and the nature of divine names (as in *Enuma elish* and *Tintir*). In that same period, bilingual texts and translations frequently replaced the Sumerian classics studied in the Old Babylonian period, which tended to be monolingual. By the end of the first millennium, when Babylon was under Hellenistic rule, learning cuneiform became increasingly more difficult. It was a world in which Akkadian had been displaced by Aramaic and Greek, something that is reflected in cuneiform tablets with Greek transliterations, some of the last wedges on clay of the cuneiform tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Since the instruction of cuneiform was bilingual and sometimes included more than two languages, especially in the peripheral areas, the question has often been raised of whether bilingualism contributed to the emergence of a metalinguistic consciousness. Although there is evidence that scribes developed linguistic and semiotic concepts, it is not clear that bilingualism alone triggered the appearance of such ideas.<sup>11</sup> The problem of the origin of Babylonian linguistics and theories of language is complicated by the fact that the treatise, as we know it from Greece, was not a known genre in cuneiform culture. We find grammatical and semantic concepts not in long discursive texts but tightly embedded in lexical lists, grammatical paradigms, medical and literary texts, and when it comes to phonetics, in the spellings of words.

In addition to the lexical lists that are attested since the fourth millennium BCE and contain, among other things, words organized semantically, like lists of synonyms as well as vocabularies,<sup>12</sup> the grammatical texts from the Old Babylonian period are probably the most cited example of linguistic awareness in the cuneiform tradition. The *Old Babylonian Grammatical Texts*, as they are called by modern editors, appear at a time when the language of Sumer was already dead; they contain Sumerian verbal conjugations with an Akkadian translation. The purpose of these tablets is debated – some think that they represent drills to learn Sumerian, while others regard them as theoretical texts that explore grammar through an early form of comparative linguistics. As Peter Huber has remarked, the *Old Babylonian Grammatical Texts* “provide

<sup>10</sup> For cuneiform text with transliteration in the Greek alphabet, see Geller 1997; Maul 2011; Stevens 2019 pp. 120–143; Westenholz 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Reiner et al. 2014. In a new study, Crisostomo 2019 has forcefully argued for bilingualism as a main driving force of ancient Mesopotamian scholarship.

<sup>12</sup> Lambert 1999; Reiner et al. 2014; Woods n.d.

a surprisingly detailed analysis of Sumerian verbal morpho-syntax – probably as sophisticated as is possible within a paradigmatic, non-discursive presentation.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to the alignment of Sumerian and Akkadian verbal forms, we find in those texts a specialized vocabulary that denotes number, morphological features such as prefix, infix, and suffix, as well as perfective and imperfective verbal aspects, while other grammatical terms still remain to be deciphered.<sup>14</sup> As impressive and interesting as the Babylonian grammatical texts may be, they do not deal with the question of the origin of language or the semantic status of proper names and are, therefore, of limited use for this study. In the next sections, then, I will discuss various texts that exemplify with more detail how scribes engaged with the question of the nature of language.

### The *Syllable Alphabet A*: Elementary Education and Mystical Speculation

Now I turn to *Syllable Alphabet A*, a school exercise that was used to introduce students to the most elementary cuneiform signs.<sup>15</sup> This simple syllabary, nevertheless, can help us understanding how the question of the origin of language could be articulated in the scribal workshops. In the first stages of their education, students began learning cuneiform by drawing the most basic traces, such as the horizontal wedge , the vertical , and the oblique , to later combine them into simple signs like . Once they mastered the basic wedges, they moved on to standardized school exercises like the syllable alphabets, which were collections of simple signs organized according to graphic or phonetic criteria. An interesting document that illustrates how elementary education and advanced scholarship convene in the question of the origin of language is the elementary writing exercise *Syllable Alphabet A* (SA A). This syllabic alphabet is a string of cuneiform signs organized according to rhythmic principles that facilitate its memorization. SA A, or at least a version of it, was already in use in the UR III period (c. 2119–2004 BCE) and is attested down to the first millennium. It consisted of 124 lines and possibly originated from an archaic list of personal names. Although SA A was just a very simple writing exercise, its ancient commentators often found it to contain profound knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Huber 2007, 2008; Veldhuis 2014 pp. 194–197. <sup>14</sup> See Black 1984.

<sup>15</sup> The term syllable alphabet, which may seem contradictory, appeared already in Landsberger 1933 p. 170 as *Silbenalphabet*. Since then, the name has been maintained in the Assyriological literature to reference this particular text; see e.g. Veldhuis 2014 p. 147.

<sup>16</sup> Cavigneaux and Jaques 2010; Landsberger 1933, 1959.

The first lines of the *Syllable Alphabet A* give a good indication of its structure:

𒄠 𒄠	<i>me-me</i>
𒄡 𒄡	<i>pap-pap</i>
	<i>a-a</i>
	<i>a-a-a</i>
𒄢 𒄢	<i>ku-ku</i>
	<i>lu-lu</i>
𒄣	<i>maš</i>
𒄣 𒄣	<i>maš-maš</i>

As a form of commentary, ancient interpreters would add a column next to the syllabary; this column contained an Akkadian translation of the cuneiform signs. For instance, the first line of SA A reads 𒄡 𒄡 ME ME, while the corresponding translation in the second column is Gula, the name of the goddess of healing. In fact, the sign sequence ME ME can be read as a logogram with this meaning, but the rest of the translations that follow the first line very often have no parallels in the entire cuneiform corpus. This seems to indicate that most of the translations of the signs are the product of very free speculation. The first fifteen lines, for instance, were associated with fifteen divine names, but only the signs ME ME of the first line can be read as the name of a god. Another way to add an interpretation to the syllable alphabet was to attach to it an etiological myth that explained the origins of humankind, language, and scholarship. When SA A was accompanied by this myth, the tablet tended to be marked as a piece of secret knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

There has been much discussion about the function of Mesopotamian school exercises beyond the mere learning of cuneiform. Texts like SA A are part of a large corpus of lists of signs and words, which are known among modern specialists as lexical lists. In the early twentieth century, some proposed that cuneiform lists of signs originated not as school texts but as an attempt to classify the world. This interpretation has been called

<sup>17</sup> The practice of attributing a hidden meaning to signs of a syllabary or the letters of an alphabet is not unparalleled in other literary traditions of the Mediterranean. From Plato's *Cratylus* and the late antiquity treatise *About the Mystery of Letters* we know the practice of attributing to each letter of the Greek alphabet a theological and cosmological meaning, as it was later done in the kabbalah, but SA A is at least eleven hundred years earlier than the *Cratylus*. See Acevedo 2020; Bandt 2008; Dornseiff 1925; Stroumsa 2014.



the “order of the world hypothesis.”<sup>18</sup> In the case of the sign lists used at the beginning of the curriculum, the order of the world hypothesis seems less obvious; but it gains more plausibility when applied to the complex word lists of professions, trees, birds, wooden objects, stones, and so on, found in school settings. However, it has proved very difficult to read those texts as coherent models of classification due to the heterogeneity of the objects grouped in such lists. As an alternative to the order of the world hypothesis, Niek Veldhuis has proposed that the main purpose of the lists of signs and words in the cuneiform corpora was the teaching of writing. According to this line of thinking, the ancient lexical texts from Mesopotamia would not have addressed problems concerning the nature of the world.<sup>19</sup>

However, there is evidence that some of these lists were linked to cosmological speculation. This becomes clear in the god lists, which in many cases are expressive of cosmological and theological views. The theological models present in these lists are expressed through the structure of genealogies, the grouping of gods, and the use of one or another god as the first principle from which the universe generates. After the god lists, SA A is perhaps one of the lexical texts best suited for the exploration of Babylonian cosmological speculation. As I have previously mentioned, it is indeed a very simple syllabary, meant for very junior students, but at the same time it was studied by master scribes who attributed to it an esoteric meaning about the origin of language and mankind.

A tablet from the Middle Assyrian period (1400–1000 BCE) probably contains one of the best examples of an interpretation of *Syllable Alphabet A*. It was first published in 1919 by Erich Ebeling as *Text 4* in his *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts*, and it is now known by the acronym KAR 4. In this three-column tablet we find SA A in the first column, a myth in Sumerian in the second column, and an Akkadian rendition of the Sumerian narrative in the third column. Each line of the syllabary is aligned with a line of the myth that tells the story of the creation of humankind. A similar but poorly preserved tablet from the Old Babylonian period also aligns a similar myth with the sequence of signs that make SA A. This shows that already in the early second millennium there were attempts to find some coherent sense in the apparently meaningless school exercise. To make the point clearer, I give here the first four lines of the Assyrian tablet with the Sumerian

<sup>18</sup> Veldhuis 2014 p. 53.    <sup>19</sup> Veldhuis 1997, 2014 p. 56.

version of the myth and its English translation (ed. and trans. Lambert 2012, p. 354. ob. l. 1–4):

SA A	Myth	
me me pap pap	u <sub>4</sub> an ki-ta tab gi-na bad- a-ta-eš-a-[ba]	When heaven was separated from earth, its faithful companion,
a a a a	<sup>d</sup> ama- <sup>d</sup> INNIN-ke <sub>4</sub> -e-ne ba- sig <sub>7</sub> -sig <sub>7</sub> -de <sub>3</sub>	(When) the goddesses had been created,
ku ku lu lu	u <sub>4</sub> ki ga <sub>2</sub> -ga <sub>2</sub> -e-de <sub>3</sub> ki du <sub>2</sub> - du <sub>2</sub> -a-ta	When heaven was set up and earth was made,
maš maš maš	u <sub>4</sub> giš-hur-hur an-ki-a mu- un-gi-na-eš-a-ba	When the designs of heaven and earth were consummated.

As usual in the Babylonian tradition of arranging information in parallel columns, the second column has the function of explaining what is in the first, in this case, the meaning of the syllables. For instance, the syllable sequence “me me pap pap” is interpreted as meaning in Sumerian “when heaven was separated from earth, its faithful companion” (u<sub>4</sub> an ki-ta tab gi-na bad-a-ta-eš-a-[ba]). These syllables, which are also signs, could be read as logograms by advanced students and teachers, and therefore could be translated as whole words. One might indeed refer to them as logosyllables because, even if they represent syllables, they always have the potential to signify words. Yet the ancient translation of the syllables into Sumerian and Akkadian has astonished modern scholars since the first publication of this text.<sup>20</sup> The main problem resides in deciding how to understand the system of equivalences that ancient interpreters used to translate SA A into a myth.

As I will explain in Chapter 2 in more detail, cuneiform signs are polyvalent: they can be read with different syllabic and logographic values. The sign ME, for instance, can be read syllabically as /me/, /mi/, /šib/, /šip/, /sib/, and /sip/, but it can also be read as a logogram with multiple meanings such as “essence,” “office,” and “ordinance.” The sign PAP, on the other hand, has the syllabic readings /bab/, /bap/, and /pa/, but it can also mean “first and foremost,” “father,” “male,” and “brother” when read as a logogram. The principle of polyvalence of the cuneiform sign helped ancient interpreters with the attribution of meaningful readings to the syllables in SA A. And yet, there are no attested sign values in the entire cuneiform corpus that could justify the reading of the myth from the syllabary. It is

<sup>20</sup> Initially it was thought that the syllables represented a musical notation; see Landsberger 1933.

as if we would pretend today that a series of fifty-four random syllables produced with the Latin alphabet could be translated into a full story like *Alice in Wonderland*. Thus, the signs ME and PAP from the first two lines, as with the rest of the signs in SA A, can neither be read as “heaven” nor as “earth” nor as “separation,” as the author of the myth appears to translate them. The same difficulty applies to the rest of the signs composing the syllabary.

This leads to an important conclusion, namely, that the presumed language of SA A can neither be Sumerian nor Akkadian nor any other language that was written in cuneiform. If it was a language, as the commentator who added the myth wanted, it was a secret and extraordinary, and perhaps not human one. We could give up trying to find any coherent connection between SA A and the myth, while taking this relationship as a puerile hermeneutical exercise that could not be meant seriously, perhaps a scribal joke. But the picture becomes more suggestive if we look more closely at the text that emerges from the juxtaposition of the syllabary and the mythical narrative.

In the myth, the creation of humankind takes place right after the designs of heaven and earth. Once the physical universe and the gods have been fashioned, Enlil orders the creation of the human race in order to alleviate the workload of the gods and establish divine worship. As in other Sumero-Akkadian myths, some minor gods are sacrificed and from their blood, sown into the earth, humans are born. These are divided in two classes: the wise and the ignorant. The word used to designate the class of the wise in the Akkadian version is *ummânû*, a word that means “skilled,” but also “scholars” and “experts.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, the myth etiologically establishes a class division between those who are scholars (professional scribes) and those who are not. The end of the myth is quite telling in this respect (rev. l. 29–30):

*a-šar a-mi-lu-tu ib-ba-nu-u<sub>2</sub>*  
<sup>d</sup>*nisaba i-na aš<sub>2</sub>-ri šu-a-tu ku-un-na-at*

Where humankind was created,  
 There also was Nisaba cherished!

Nisaba, the daughter of Heaven and Earth, is the goddess of writing and patron of scribes in Sumerian mythology; she was later replaced in this role by the Babylonian god Nabû. Here the interdependence of the birth of

<sup>21</sup> Line 19', Sum. *gašam*, Akk. *ummânu* and Sum. *lu<sub>2</sub>-im*, Akk. *nû'u*. See Cavigneaux and Jaques 2010.

humanity and the foundation of the cult of Nisaba reveals the scribal-centered perspective from which the myth was conceived. It is not political power or other aspects of social life that characterize the human condition but writing and learning. Immediately after the myth, the Middle Assyrian copy ends with a colophon stating that the text is secret knowledge to be circulated only among those who know: “may the initiate reveal to the initiate the secret that has been pronounced here” (*ni-šir-ti ša<sub>2</sub> ina aš-ri šak-nu mūdû [mūdâ li-kal-lim]*).<sup>22</sup>

In addition to placing the class of scholars at the top of the social hierarchy, the myth also names the very first humans, Ullegarra and Annegarra. Although the text does not say it explicitly, it is clear that this couple is the first to articulate a human language. In a seminal article published in 1933, at the early stages of the deciphering of SA A, Benno Landsberger set out to demonstrate that the syllabary was not a piece of musical notation as had been previously suggested. In this paper he proposed, among other things, that the apparently random signs were interpreted in antiquity as the representation of the very first human language: “one should suspect that the two texts were combined because one saw the Syllable Alphabet as the original language of the two primeval humans, Annigarra and Ulligarra: the creation myth then explains our mysterious alphabet through an etiology.”<sup>23</sup>

In his study, Landsberger also described certain formal aspects of the syllabary that convey features of natural languages. He observed, for instance, that SA A is organized with a certain rhythm that divides each line with a caesura in two parts (and sometimes in three), a typical feature of Akkadian poetry. He also identified groups of lines that build structures similar to strophes. Furthermore, he pointed out an interesting oscillation in the sequence of signs that moves from large sections characterized by an apparent lack of meaning to short sections in which Sumerian and Akkadian words can be discerned. All these features have created, in both ancient as well as modern readers, the impression of a language that is evolving from one stage to another. In the sequence of syllables of SA A, the ancient scribe would have seen an evolutionary process that started with the very first human language, which was destined to give rise to Sumerian and Akkadian. This language, although human, was also semi-divine and

<sup>22</sup> Such a colophon appears in copies of Syllable Alphabet A only when this is accompanied by the myth and, interestingly, this story of the creation of humankind does not appear without the syllabary. This should be taken as an indication of the esoteric quality of the myth. On secret knowledge and Sumero-Akkadian literature, see Cancik-Kirschbaum et al. 2018 p. 317; Lenzi 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Cavigneaux and Jaques 2010.

a transitional one between the language of the gods and that of men.<sup>24</sup> We know that this must be the case, because in the Assyrian copy, KAR 4, the names of the first humans are marked with the cuneiform determinative AN, an indicator of divinity. In sum, SA A present a model according to which there was a first human language from which both Sumerian and Akkadian (and possibly all other languages) evolved. This first language was partly divine but possibly not the language of the gods, which, in turn, was not Sumerian. Which was then the language of the gods? The myth-commentary added to this mystical syllabary does not answer this question but leaves it open.<sup>25</sup>

### The Semiotics of the Diviner

In addition to the grammatical and lexical texts discussed above in which scribes reflected on various aspects of language, there was the corpus of omen collections from which a sign theory of the diviner can be reconstructed.<sup>26</sup> Those who studied the relation between past, present, and future compiled and analyzed information about ominous events and their signification. This information was organized in large collections of omens, which consisted of a conditional and a main clause, that is, a protasis and an apodosis. The structure is quite stable and perfectly exemplified by the following omen from the collection *Šumma izbu* that deals with malformed births:

*šumma izbu uznāšu nabīrišu kašdā, rubû māta lā šuātu qāssu ikaššad*

If the ears of a malformed fetus reach its nostrils, the prince will conquer a land which does not belong to him.<sup>27</sup>

Much of the hermeneutical efforts of the diviners consisted of explaining how the protasis could lead to the prediction expressed in the apodosis.

<sup>24</sup> See Gadd 1937, who thought that the first lines of SA A mimicked a baby language, namely the words *meme* (mother) and *papa* (father). Only the second sign PAP is attested to mean father in Sumerian, while *mom* is known to be *ama*. Nevertheless, since the language that was supposed to represent SA A is not Sumerian but a language that would give birth to it, Gadd's reading is still plausible, especially considering the universal tendency to construct baby words for mother and father with nasals and labials (Jakobson 1987). In a later article, Landsberger 1959 proposed that SA A and SA B have originated in the logographic writing of personal names, but as Veldhuis 2014 p. 145 has noticed, this only applies to a limited numbers of cases in both syllabaries.

<sup>25</sup> In an Old Babylonian literary letter from a father scholar to a son, we read that the god Ea "brought about the birth of much Sumerian" in the minds of scholars (George 2009 p. 88 line 48). This text seems to suggest that, already in the Old Babylonian period, Sumerian was considered to be a scribal invention, even if such an invention was the result of Ea's inspiration.

<sup>26</sup> Manetti 1993; Maul 2018; Rochberg 2004.

<sup>27</sup> De Zorzi 2011 p. 56. For a critical edition and commentary of *Šumma izbu*, see De Zorzi 2014.

Although there are some apodoses that describe historical events,<sup>28</sup> Babylonian diviners perceived the relation between the protasis and the apodosis not as the result of some historical and natural laws but as a semantic dependency. Thus, the relation between the protasis and the apodosis is explained by means of symbolic analogy, which consists in the mapping of different semiotic domains through a system of equivalence. On the one hand, there is the divinatory medium in which the gods express their will, as the body of a fetus, the liver of a sheep, the heavens and the planets, and so on. On the other, there are the mirroring domains of politics, the family, and the individual.

In the omen quoted above, the diviner associates the head of the malformed fetus with the king, the prince, and the head of the household, while he puts the arms of the portent into relation with the assistants of the king, the governor, and the father. Likewise, the author of the omen equates the expansion of the ears of the malformed fetus into the adjacency of the nostrils with the prince's conquest of a territory that does not belong to him. But this association of images, perceived as signs, was often not considered as sufficient and needed further grounding. A stronger connection between a divinatory sign in the protasis and events in the apodosis could be achieved through the use of similar sound patterns in the words of the omen and through the polysemy of cuneiform signs.<sup>29</sup> In the previous example, the association of the protasis and apodosis is strengthened by the use of the same verb in both parts. Thus "if the ears of a malformed fetus reach (*kašdā*) its nostrils, the prince will conquer (*ikaššad*) a land which does not belong to him." The same effect could be achieved by using cuneiform signs with similar shapes, with equivalent logographic readings, or with substantial alliteration.<sup>30</sup>

To ground thus the interdependency between the signs at different levels, diviners used a micro- and macrocosmic model in which different semiotic domains mirrored each other. In extispicy, a discipline closely related but not identical to teratomancy, the liver of the sheep was taken to be a mirror of the heavens, and the malformations that appeared in the different areas of this organ were thought to find their counterpart in the

<sup>28</sup> This led some to believe that the origin of Babylonian divination must be found in empirical observations that produced large collections of data and the formulation of defective causal models. The Babylonians were said to be on the right track in attempting to establish the cause of events by observation of the real world, but then failed to discover the real causes behind the phenomena observed. For a critique of the "empiricist" interpretation of Mesopotamian divination, see Winitzer 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Cancik-Kirschbaum et al. 2018 p. 324; Frahm 2011 pp. 70–76; Gabbay 2012.

<sup>30</sup> De Zorzi 2011; Frahm 2011; Noegel 2007.

planets and stars that moved through the houses of the zodiac.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in the teratomantic omens, the body of the malformed fetus was divided into regions equivalent to those of the liver and the sky. When the gods expressed their intentions in one domain – like the heavens, the liver, the fetus, and so on – the same message was expected to appear replicated in other domains. For the diviner, then, the world was full of redundant and replicating messages.<sup>32</sup>

Diviners derived their semiotic models largely from the practice of writing. In this regard, two motifs have attracted much attention, namely, the metaphor of the “heavenly writing” and that of the “tablet of destinies.” In relation to the former, Francesca Rochberg writes that “to the ancient Mesopotamian literati of the middle of the first millennium B.C., the patterns of stars covering the sky were a celestial script.”<sup>33</sup> The same could be said of the liver and other divinatory media. This complex metaphor implies that the cognizable world is composed of signs that the gods produced in an act of writing. The meaning of the metaphor of the “tablet of destinies” goes along the same lines: what occurs in the world is contained as text in a divine tablet. These two metaphors are connected with representations of the divine in which some gods like Nisaba, and in later periods Nabû, acted as scribes of the gods. In this model, divine writing – understood as the doing of the gods – is the mediating factor between reality and human knowledge. In other words, reality becomes understandable to humans only through the interpretation of signs. The world is then the text and the medium of revelation par excellence, and the gods remain accessible to the mind only through the signs they imprint into the world.

Furthermore, Marc van de Mieroop has argued that the Babylonians believed that writing in general, not only divine, was a generative cosmic principle. Contrary to the dominant modern view that writing is referential and representational, Babylonian scholars saw writing bestowed with the power of constructing realities. This applies both to gods and to scribes.

<sup>31</sup> Koch-Westenholz 2000 pp. 24–25; Maul 2018 pp. 25–30; Rochberg 2004 p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> On the analogy between the signs in the liver and the signs of heavens, Rochberg 2004 p. 187 writes “just as in extispicy, in which the gods were thought to ‘write upon the liver’ a forecast encoded in the cracks and coloration of the liver, the gods were also believed to act on (we might say ‘cause’) the signs observed in the natural world.” This same identification of different divinatory media continued in Greek and Etruscan extispicy. In the liver model of Piacenza (c. 100 BCE) the different parts of the liver with a particular divinatory value are “mapped according to regions of the heavens and the zodiac” (Furley and Gysembergh 2015 p. 14). For the diffusion of Mesopotamian liver divination in the Mediterranean see Bachvarova 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Rochberg 2004 p. 1.

While the gods created by a process of inscribing signs onto the world, scribes tried to produce texts that could come as close as possible to those of the gods. In this view, true knowledge comes into existence when the human text matches the text of the gods. Such an epistemology, so van de Mieroop argues, was derived from the practice of writing and was therefore a form of graphemics. Thus, the aim of writing, both divine and human, was not to represent language but to create an autonomous “reality independent from speech.”<sup>34</sup>

Some aspects of van de Mieroop’s reconstruction of a Babylonian *epistēmē* may hold true, but his generalized description of this complex phenomenon fails to recognize the role of orality in the life of Mesopotamian scholars. For the scholars who produced the cuneiform culture, language as spoken speech was very present in the world. The complete image that accompanies the idea of the divine “heavenly writing” is not that of a writer with a stylus who puts down onto a tablet what he has in mind, but that of a speaker who enunciates and dictates to a scribe. And in fact, Babylonian scholars gave a very central place to magic and its transformative power. On many occasions, mythological narratives, also produced by scholars, describe how the whole universe and its parts is created not precisely by writing but through speech acts. Besides the semiotics of the diviner, then, there was also theory in which enunciation precedes the emergence of the sign. In this case, the intentional act that generates meaning becomes as important as the sign itself.

It is easy to overlook the significance of orality in Babylonian epistemology. Seth Sanders has plausibly asserted that both Babylonians and the people of ancient Israel shared a semiotic ontology that informed their cognitive universes. He argues that this common conceptual framework passed from Mesopotamia to Israel due to geographical proximity and histories of cultural exchange, migration, exile, and imperial occupation that entangled the two populations. But, according to Sanders, this semiotic ontology took different shapes in each region. While in Mesopotamia, “the more widespread assumption was that the world was full of – in fact, made of – divinely shaped signs” that had resulted from the very writing of the gods, the Hebrew “God literally speaks the universe into order and into being.”<sup>35</sup> Sanders then contrasts writing and speaking as if they were clear cultural variations of a model that conceives the universe as linguistic in nature. At the epistemological level this means that the Babylonians believed that if they could read the signs of the gods they could get to

<sup>34</sup> van de Mieroop 2015 p. 80.    <sup>35</sup> Sanders 2017 p. 234.



know how the world actually worked, while in ancient Israel to comprehend the world was not a matter of interpreting the writing of God, but of understanding the intentional force of God's primordial speech. However, as I will show, the idea that the universe has emerged from divine speech acts is widely attested in Mesopotamia long before the writing of the Hebrew scriptures.

### **The Speech Act Theory of the Exorcist**

Although celestial divination and haruspicy were two of the principal specializations of scribes, the arts of the exorcist were equally important. It is true that we possess large compilations of celestial and liver omens, and a plethora of lexical lists, but there are also large collections of incantations and narratives that have a central place in the world view of the scribes. Recently, major editions of magical compendia have been made available in critical editions but, unfortunately, incantations have not generated scholarly interest comparable to that in divination.<sup>36</sup> Most recent studies about cuneiform systems of knowledge have privileged lexical lists and omen collections over literary and magical texts.<sup>37</sup> Divinatory and lexical sources are in fact revealing, but overemphasis on this type of material risks discounting the importance given to spoken performative language in Mesopotamia.

Thus, to gain a balanced view of Babylonian theories of language and their implication for the cosmological models of the time, it is not only necessary to assess the profound impact of writing on this culture but also to consider the important role of orality in an intellectual culture that used writing as an aide-memoire. As Jeremy Black has put it:

Although a literary composition about oral transmission may seem to be paradoxical or perverse, it is simply a reflection of the scribes' everyday reality: patterns of preservation of tablets suggest strongly that our manuscript sources are not the traces of a copied literary tradition but one of telling, listening, and memorization. Ironically, many of the tablets preserving the world's oldest literary tradition are ephemera: they were produced as part of the memorization process and were never intended to last.<sup>38</sup>

In what follows I will reconstruct an approach to language that is anchored not only in the practice of writing but also in the performance of ritual.

<sup>36</sup> The publication of the *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals* (Abusch et al. 2010) and the critical edition of the series *Maqlû* (Abusch 2015) will probably change this situation.

<sup>37</sup> See for instance Crisostomo et al. 2018; Rochberg 2017; van de Mierop 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Black et al. 2004 p. 275. See also Delnero 2012.

This model derives from the performative activity of specialists who attempted, like the gods, to shape reality through speech. As we will see, the arts of the exorcist will prove to be a platform as good as the semiotics of the diviner for the understanding of Babylonian conceptions of language and signification.

*The Language of the Sage Adapa*

In this section I turn to the myth of Adapa, the story of a sage who served as the model and idealized mirror of the Assyrian and Babylonian incantation priests or exorcists. Adapa's incantations were so powerful that he broke the wings of the South Wind, an act that triggered both alarm and admiration in heaven and almost granted him immortality because his speech was almost as mighty as those of the gods. Like Adapa, the main task of the exorcists was the mastering of transformative speech. As practitioners of magic, Babylonians saw language as a central element in the process of transforming reality in both material and immaterial terms.<sup>39</sup>

The centrality of the exorcist is shown by the fact that he was often in the inner circle of scholars who advised the king, having under his supervision other specialists like haruspices, astrologists, and lamentation priests.<sup>40</sup> Among all Babylonian scholarly professions, his was the one that seems to be closest to Ea, the god of wisdom and transformative speech. He was thus the sage par excellence, and no other expert was represented like him in the religious imagination. His counterpart in myth was the archetypal sage Adapa, the one who changed the order of things with incantations and was summoned to heaven by Anu, the king of the gods.<sup>41</sup> The sage Adapa is known to us from different texts including incantations, royal inscriptions, and mythical narratives. Although they can differ substantially in detail and provenance, these texts are commonly considered to be variants of one and the same story that is known in modern scholarship as the myth of *Adapa and the South Wind*.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> As it is the custom in linguistics and anthropology, one may be tempted to use here the adjective performative, instead of transformative, but Babylonians did not see the language of ritual as purely performative.

<sup>40</sup> Jean 2006 pp. 111–139; Lenzi 2016; Maul 2018 pp. 190, 237–252.

<sup>41</sup> For the use of the Adapa myth in the reflection and construction of the exorcist's identity see Annus 2016; Sanders 2017.

<sup>42</sup> The English standard edition of these group of tablets is Izre'el 2001. The previous Italian version of Picchioni 1981 is still very useful. See Cavigneaux 2014 for the Sumerian version of the myth not included in Izre'el 2001.

In recent years, a Sumerian version from the Old Babylonian period was published. It had survived in two tablets found in a private house of the ancient city of Meturan, once inhabited by one or more individuals with a strong interest in magic. The characteristics of the text have led some scholars to think that the owners were exorcists.<sup>43</sup> Besides the Meturan tablets, other Sumerian fragments have been found in Nippur, while the largest Akkadian fragment comes from an Egyptian scribal workshop in Amarna. The latter tablet is from the Middle Babylonian period (c. 1300 BCE) and contains an important part of the narrative. In addition to these documents, there are two Neo-Assyrian fragmentary tablets, one of which ends with an incantation against the South Wind similar to one that occurs in the text from Meturan. The discovery of the Sumerian version shows the long history of the myth and its importance in the self-understanding of the exorcist. It is quite possible that Adapa's story was a charter myth for this profession.

Although the different extant copies present some variations, the core of the story remains relatively clear: there was a priest of Ea, called Adapa, who one day went to the sea to catch fish for his god. When he was in the open sea, the South Wind overturned his boat and sank him into the deep waters. Adapa retaliated with an incantation that broke the wings of the wind. For seven days the South Wind did not blow until Anu, king of the gods, intervened. Anu summoned the priest to heaven, interrogated him about the reasons for his action, and offered him immortality as a way of keeping him among the gods. Following Ea's advice, Adapa refused the gift of immortality and was sent back to earth.

The Sumerian version sets the story of Adapa in a period of political unrest, far removed in time, when humans still lacked proper understanding of the cosmos and the gods. This version breaks off right at the point when Ea is about to communicate something important to Adapa.<sup>44</sup> Reasonably, one can assume that Ea is revealing a body of knowledge that will help mitigate the social turbulence that affects mortals. In Fragment A of the Assyrian recension there is no mention of political unrest, but there is a description of Ea transferring divine knowledge to Adapa (*obv. col i, l. 3–8* ed. Izre'el 2001):

<sup>1</sup>u<sup>1</sup>z-na rapašta(DAGAL-tu<sup>m</sup>) u<sub>2</sub>-šak-lil-šu<sub>2</sub> u<sub>2</sub>-šu-rat māti(KUR) kul<sup>1</sup>  
 (MU)-lu-mu  
 ana šu-a-tu<sub>2</sub> ne<sub>2</sub>-me-qa iddiššu(SUM-šu<sub>2</sub>) napišta(ZI-ta<sup>m</sup>) da-ri<sub>2</sub>-ta<sup>m</sup> ul  
 iddiššu(SUM-šu<sub>2</sub>)

<sup>43</sup> Annus 2016; Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 1993. <sup>44</sup> Cavigneaux 2014.

ina u<sub>4</sub>me-šu-ma ina ša-na-a-ti ši-na-a-ti ap-kal-lu<sup>m</sup> ʾmār<sup>1</sup>(ʾDUMU<sup>1</sup>)  
 eri-[du<sub>10</sub>]  
 d<sub>e2</sub>-a ki-ma rid-di ina a-me-lu-ti ib-ni-šu  
 ap-kal-lu<sup>m</sup> q<sub>i2</sub>-bit-su ma-am-man ul u<sub>2</sub>-šam-sak  
 le-e<sub>2</sub>-u<sup>m</sup> at-ra ha-si-sa ša<sub>2</sub> da-nun-na-ki šu-ma

(Ea) created him with great intelligence to instruct (*kullumu*) about the designs of the earth.

To him he gave wisdom, but he did not give him eternal life.

In those days, in those years, the sage (*apkallu*), a native of Eridu,

Ea created his follower among the people.

The sage's speech – no one blames;

He is skilled and foremost in understanding (*atra hasīsa*) about the gods.

In this passage, Ea turns Adapa into a super-sage (*atra hasīsa*), a qualification that reminds us of the antediluvian king Atra-hasis, who saved mankind from the great flood thanks to the privileged knowledge he had received also from Ea.<sup>45</sup> But Adapa's gift is not only knowledge of the designs of earth but also of a particular use of language. In line 2 of the same fragment, Ea gives him "speech like that of Anu" (*qibīt kīma qibīt Anu*), one that nobody can blame (*mamman ul ušamsak*). It is precisely this kind of linguistic knowledge that makes Adapa transgress the boundaries between the realm of the gods and men. Adapa overstepped his functions when he intruded on the dominion of the gods by neutralizing the South Wind with an incantation. This caused a disruption in the distribution of divine and human prerogatives. Transformative speech belonged until then to the gods, who were the only ones who could alter the ontological foundations of the world. In this myth, then, the vector that connects the sage with the divine is not precisely the technology of writing, as the metaphor of the heavenly writing does for the diviner, but the power of language to transform reality. Until Adapa, language that can create and transform reality belonged only to the gods.

The transgressive character of Adapa's speech explains why he was offered immortality and why Ea induced him to reject it. Anu's offers to stay in heaven was an attempt to turn the liminal sage into a god and, consequently, to relocate transformative speech back to the domain of the divine. Ea, on the other hand, wanted Adapa to remain mortal because this was the only way to transfer permanently transformative speech and magic to humans. In terms of transgression of divine order, Adapa is the equivalent of the Greek Prometheus who stole fire from the gods to give it to

<sup>45</sup> See *Atra-Ḫasis: the Babylonian Story of the Flood* edited by Lambert et al. 1969.

humans. The exorcist's charter myth is, nevertheless, quite distinct from the one of the Greeks insofar as it is the power of language and not fire that represents the foundation of culture. The figure that stands closest in the Greek imagination to Adapa is Orpheus, a prophet also connected to magic and transformative speech. Orpheus, however, is not the patron saint of an intellectual caste located at the center of the Greek social hierarchy, but a model for the marginal and the extraordinary.<sup>46</sup>

This emphasis on transformative speech is not only a topic of the myth of Adapa. As we will see in Chapter 2, in a text as central for Babylonian scribal culture as the *Epic of Creation*, the entire foundation of the world is conceived as an evolutionary process that begins with an originally unarticulated nameless state of things, the primordial chaos, and ends in a fully differentiated and named universe. This process was thought to be incrementally constituted by a series of divine speech acts that moved the universe forward to its final form. A similar, if not identical, model is implied in other compositions as, for example, *Atra-hasis*, the Old Babylonian poem that deals with the creation and partial destruction of humankind through a divinely sanctioned flood. Also, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, transformative speech plays a central role in a text that apparently is concerned with a quite different issue, the quest for immortality. All these texts are very likely the works of exorcists. And although we do not know the names and professions of the authors of the *Epic of Creation* and *Atra-hasis*, we know that the redactor of the Standard Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh* was an exorcist.<sup>47</sup>

### *Enkidu's Enunciation of the Prostitute's Fate*

Right at the beginning of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the gods send to the young and abusive king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, a friend who could help him moderate his temper. The divine gift is Enkidu, who falls like a meteorite from heaven into the wild; he has the appearance of a man but lives like an animal. To become Gilgamesh's friend, Enkidu needs to make a transition from nature to culture, something that only Shamhat, the prostitute, can achieve. She initiates Enkidu into the arts of sexuality, the drinking of beer, and the eating of bread – three unequivocal markers of civilization in the epic. After the prostitute has de-animalized Enkidu,

<sup>46</sup> For a treatment of the relation between Orpheus and cultural marginality, see Edmonds III 2008, 2013. On Orpheus as a *magos* with special verbal powers, see the comprehensive study by Hernández 2010. See also Meisner 2018 with references.

<sup>47</sup> Lambert 1962 p. 60.

the friendship begins, and the two companions set out on a hubristic journey that leads to the killing of Humbaba, the ogre appointed by the gods to guard the Cedar Forest. This first act of transgression is followed by Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar's love and the subsequent slaughter of the Bull of Heaven. After these two offenses have occurred, the gods reveal to Enkidu that he will die as a consequence of his wrongdoings. In pain and scared by the prognostic of death, Enkidu curses Shamhat for having introduced him into civilized life (SB VII 104–111, 130–131 ed. and trans. George 2003):

[*lu-u*]z-zur-ki iz-ra rabâ(GAL)<sup>a</sup>  
 [*u<sub>3</sub>*]t-ti har-piš iz-ru-<sup>f</sup>u<sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup>-a liṭ-hu-ki ka-a-ši  
 [*e t*]e-pu-ši bīt(E<sub>2</sub>) la-le-ki  
 [*la?* t]a<sup>?</sup>-ram-mi-i x x x x ša<sub>2</sub> ta-hu-ti-ki  
 [*e tu-u*]š-bi i[na maštaki(AMA)? ša<sub>2</sub> ardāti(KI.SIKIL)]meš  
 [šu-bat-k]i<sup>f</sup> dam<sup>1</sup>-q[u qa<sup>f</sup>qa<sup>?</sup>-ru? li-šab-hi  
 [*lu-bar i-sin-na-ti-ki šak-ru ina tur-bu-<sup>?</sup>i li-ba*]t-lil  
 [*e tar-ši-i bīt?* . . .] u ba-na-a-tu<sub>2</sub>  
 (. . .)  
 aš<sub>2</sub>-šu<sub>2</sub> ia-a-ši [*ella*(KU<sub>3</sub>) tu-šam-ṭin-<sup>f</sup>ni<sup>1</sup>  
 u ia-a-a-ši *ella*(KU<sub>3</sub>) [*tu-šam-ṭin*]-ni ina šēri(EDIN)-ia

[I will] curse you with a mighty curse,  
 my curse shall afflict you now and forthwith!  
 A household to delight in [you shall not] acquire,  
 [never to] reside in the [midst] of a family!  
 In the young women's [chamber you shall not] sit!  
 Your finest [garment] the ground shall defile!  
 Your festive gown [the drunkard] shall stain [in the dirt!]  
 Things of beauty [you shall never acquire!]  
 (. . .)  
 Because [you made] me [weak, who was undefiled!]  
 Yes, in the wild [you weakened] me, who was undefiled!

Enkidu's cursing of Shamhat does not only affect the future life of a specific person but it also fixes the destiny of the class "prostitute." Whatever the predicates of this curse may be, they will extend to all prostitutes who will come after Shamhat. The implications of this constitutive act can be better understood if we turn to a known but often neglected aspect of the epics of the Eastern Mediterranean. Johannes Haubold has shown that ancient Near Eastern epics (including Homer) are cosmogonical narratives that are concerned with the last epochs of the formation of the universe.<sup>48</sup> While

<sup>48</sup> Haubold 2002.

Akkadian creation stories, such as the *Epic of Creation*, deal with the formation of the universe, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is concerned with the establishment of social institutions in a time when creation had not come to a close. In this interpretative framework, Enkidu's performative speech plays a central role in establishing prostitution as a social practice and in forming the perceptions attached to this practice in the Babylonian society. This latter aspect becomes evident in Enkidu's blessing of Shamhat that follows right after the curse.

Given the overtly negative effect of the speech act, the god Shamash intervenes to counterbalance Enkidu's performative utterance. The sun god explains to the former wild man the various beneficial aspects of sexuality and culture, pointing to one of Shamhat's most prominent achievements, namely Enkidu's friendship with Gilgamesh. In response to the sun god's convincing arguments, Enkidu amends his previous curse with a speech act of an opposite nature, a blessing (SB VII 151–158, ed. and trans. George 2003):

*a*[*l*-*ki*<sup>f</sup>*šam-hat ši-ma-ta lu-šim-ki*]  
*p*[*i*-*ia ša iz-zu*]-*ru-ki li*<sup>f</sup>*tur lik*<sup>l</sup>-*r*[*u-ub-ki*]  
 [šak-ka-nak-k]i u<sub>3</sub> rubû(NUN)<sup>mes</sup> li-ir<sup>f</sup> a-mu<sup>l</sup>-k[i]  
 š[a<sub>2</sub> 1 bēr(DANNA) ]i-im-haš ša<sub>2</sub>-par-šu<sub>2</sub>  
 š[a<sub>2</sub> 2 bēr(DANNA) ]i-na-as-si-sa qim-mat-su  
 a-a ik-lak-ki re-du-u<sub>2</sub> mi-sir<sub>2</sub>-ra-šu<sub>2</sub> lip<sub>2</sub>-tur-ki  
 li[d-din-ki<sup>n</sup>]<sup>a4</sup> šurra(ZU<sub>2</sub>)<sup>na4</sup> uqnā(ZA.GIN<sub>3</sub>) u hurāša(KU<sub>3</sub>.SIG<sub>17</sub>)  
 in-[ša-ab-t]u<sup>f</sup> tu<sup>l</sup>-tur-ru-u<sub>2</sub> lu-u nid-din-ki

Come, [Shamhat, I will fix your destiny!]  
 [My] mouth [that] cursed you shall bless [you] as well!  
 [Governors] shall love you and noblemen too!  
 [At one league off] men shall slap their thighs,  
 [at two leagues off] they shall shake out their hair!  
 No soldier shall [be slow] to drop his belt for you,  
 obsidian he shall [give you], lapis lazuli and gold!  
 Ear[rings] and jewelry shall be what he gives you!

As the result of the act of cursing and subsequent blessing, the destiny of the prostitute – as a universal category, not as a particular case – is both negative and positive. This polarity, encapsulated in the tension between cursing and blessing, expresses the cultural ambivalence of the Babylonians towards prostitution. According to the epic, then, the institution was established *in illo tempore* through an extraordinary being, partly human, animal, and god, whose speech acts had the power of shaping reality. Moreover, since the final form of prostitution emanates from a linguistic

process, the presence of this in the world is similar to that of a sign in need of interpretation.

### Names of Divine Origin

Although cuneiform sources do not explicitly discuss to what extent the languages of the gods and mortals resemble each other, a group of texts makes it clear that some words were believed to be of divine origin: the names of gods, cities, temples, and regions of the cosmic geography. For instance, in the *Creation of Eridu* we are told that the sacred city of Babylon was founded in a time when there were no temples, no houses, no trees. “All the world was sea” and then Marduk created Babylon and named it “Pure City” and “Pleasant Shrine” (*ālu ellum šubāt ṭub libbišunu širiš imbū* l. 16).<sup>49</sup> Here, as in many other cuneiform texts, naming by the gods is closely related, if not identical, to the crafting of things. Since this idea was widely accepted, it is common to find among Babylonians scholars the belief that the study of names could lead to a deep understanding of the world. The explanatory word list *Tintir = Babylon* was compiled with this in mind.<sup>50</sup>

*Tintir* is a collection of five tablets that deal with the sacred topography of Babylon. Tablet I consists of a list of the fifty-one names of the city. Like other Babylonian explanatory works, the text is divided into three columns, each line comprising a name in Sumerian, then the gloss “Babylon” as the primary explanation, and finally an interpretation of the Sumerian entry. The first line of Tablet I reads:

i	ii	iii
TINTIR <sup>ki</sup>	ba-bi-lu	<i>ša ta-na-da-a-ti u ri-sa-a-ti šar-kas</i>
<i>Tintir</i>	Babylon	on which fame and jubilation are bestowed

According to Andrew George, the main purpose of this hermeneutical text was to portray Babylon as the cosmological center of the universe, “a place of prosperity and happiness, of justice, freedom and beauty.”<sup>51</sup> And it did so by explaining how Babylon obtained such attributes through the

<sup>49</sup> Lambert 2012 pp. 366–375. <sup>50</sup> George 1992 p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> The names Pure City and Pleasant Shrine that occur in the incantation the *Creation of Eridu* also appear in *Tintir*. When the gods named Babylon Pure City (URU KU.GA in Sumerian and *ālum ellum* in Akkadian), they engraved a quality into the city that Babylonians discovered through their analysis of the name and then meticulously recorded in their encyclopedic list.



verbal creativity of the gods. In the native conceptual framework, each name in the list is an emanation coming from a divine speech act that defined, *in illo tempore*, the qualities of the city. Understanding those names and the context in which they were given was a way of gaining access to the essence of the sanctuary of the gods.

As I will show in detail in the next chapter, what applies to Babylon and its names also applies to all other things created and named by the gods. This idea gave rise to what one might call an onto-philology, a scholarly practice that assumed that the study of divine names and other linguistic terms of similar status can give access to the essence of things. In the Babylonian scholarly tradition, the gods are the primordial name-givers whose creative intention can be decoded through word analysis. In modern scholarship, the tendency has been to call this practice “speculative philology.”<sup>52</sup> However, the term speculative is far from representing the Babylonians’ firm conviction that lexical analysis could reveal the properties of entities created by the gods.

### Skeptical Positions

In the previous sections we examined different ways in which the Babylonians conceptualized the nature of language, names, and the sign. While one approach was to rely on the “heavenly writing” metaphor and assume that the gods produced a meaningful world by inscribing their signs into it, the other was to use ritual speech acts as a model for understanding language. From those approaches, two main hermeneutical techniques emerged: the semiotics of the diviner and the etymology of scribes. While divination focused on the deciphering of worldly signs, the onto-philology inspired by the craft of the exorcist sought to journey back in time to the original speech acts that once established the meaning of names. But there were also doubts about the presumed semiotic nature of the world, something that could be called a semiotic skepticism.

To conclude this chapter, I will briefly discuss two texts that question the idea that humans can understand divine signs and language. The first is a Sumerian liturgical text preserved in a Hellenistic exemplar from Babylon that belonged to a scribe and *kalû* priest named Liblut. The text was presumably recited in the temple during the service to the gods and exhibits the traits of the lamentation literature of the *kalû* priests, which

<sup>52</sup> For instance, Crisostomo 2019 p. 59; Frahm 2004 p. 50. Sometimes we also find the term “speculative etymology” as in Geeraerts 2013.

often thematize the distance between gods and men. The litany focuses on the language of the gods and the impossibility of men to understand it. It opens with the following enigmatic line in Akkadian “that which is founded like a storm, its center cannot be found,” and then switches to Sumerian to lament the inaccessibility of divine speech (SBH I, ll. 5–15, 54, ed. and trans. Peterson 2014):

e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> <sup>c</sup>an gu-la <sup>af</sup>ud<sup>1</sup>-<dam ki am<sub>3</sub>-us<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-bi nu-pad<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>>  
 e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> <sup>cd</sup>mu-ul-lil<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub> <sup>ef</sup>ud<sup>1</sup>-<dam ki am<sub>3</sub>-us<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-bi nu-pad<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>>  
 e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> <sup>cd</sup>am-an-ki-ga-a ud-<dam ki am<sub>3</sub>-us<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-bi nu-pad<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>>  
 e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> <sup>cd</sup>asal-lu<sub>2</sub>-ḫi-e ud-<dam ki am<sub>3</sub>-us<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-bi nu-pad<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>>  
 e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> <sup>cd</sup>en-bi-lu-lu-u ud-<dam ki am<sub>3</sub>-us<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-bi nu-pad<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>>  
 e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> <sup>d</sup>mu-ze<sub>2</sub>-eb-ba-še<sub>21</sub> ud-<dam ki am<sub>3</sub>-us<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-bi nu-pad<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>>  
 e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> <sup>d</sup>šita<sub>5</sub>-du<sub>3</sub>-ki-šar<sub>2</sub>-ra <sup>a</sup>ud-<dam ki am<sub>3</sub>-us<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-bi nu-pad<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>>  
 e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> <sup>d</sup>di-kud-maḫ-am<sub>3</sub> <sup>a</sup>ud-<dam ki am<sub>3</sub>-us<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-bi nu-pad<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>>  
 ŠU<sub>2</sub>e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> an-še<sub>3</sub> an al-dub<sub>2</sub>-ba-an-ni<sup>c</sup>  
 e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub> ki-še<sub>3</sub> <sup>a</sup>ki al-sag<sub>3</sub>-ga-ni<sup>c</sup>  
 ( . . . )  
 [e-ne-eṅ<sub>3</sub>-ṅa<sub>2</sub>]-ni a-zu ga-am<sub>3</sub>-ma-ga <sup>u</sup>a-zu-bi lul-[la]

The word of greatest An is a storm touching the earth, its center cannot be found.  
 The word of Enlil is a storm touching the earth, its center cannot be found.  
 The word of Enki is a storm touching the earth, its center cannot be found.  
 The word of Asalluhi is a storm touching the earth, its center cannot be found.  
 The word of Enbilulu is a storm touching the earth, its center cannot be found.  
 The word of Mudugašea is a storm touching the earth, its center cannot be found.  
 The word of Šiddukišara is a storm touching the earth, its center cannot be found.  
 The word of Dikudmah is a storm touching the earth, its center cannot be found.  
 His word above makes the heavens tremble.  
 His word below shakes the earth.  
 ( . . . )

If I bring his word to a diviner, the diviner is false.

Although this copy is Hellenistic, Sumerian lamentation literature goes back, at least, to the beginnings of the second millennium.<sup>53</sup> The lamentations produced by the *kalû* priests have been compared to Greek tragedy because, in many cases, they mourn the destruction of cities that have been abandoned by their patron gods.<sup>54</sup> Most likely, it is the exile of the gods and the repercussions of such distancing on human life that make it possible for the *kalû* to question the human capacity to rationalize the divine and the world in general. It is then the task of the lamentation priest to problematize the possibility of understanding the language of the gods. In the face

<sup>53</sup> Cohen 1974; Delnero 2015; Gabbay 2019. <sup>54</sup> Bachvarova 2008.

of a tragic situation, the world becomes for the *kalû* unintelligible and consequently the claim of the diviner to decipher the speech of the gods is uncovered as a human illusion. This incapacity of men to understand reality as the incarnation of divine communication is also found in other texts like the *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* in which a man, who has been abandoned by his god, Marduk, complains about the efficacy of the exorcist and diviner (Tablet II, ll. 2–9, ed. Oshima 2014, trans. Lambert 1996, modified):

*a-sab-hur-ma le-mun le-mun-ma*  
*za-pur-ti u-ta-ša-pa i-šar-ti ul ut-tu*  
*ila(DINGIR) al-si-ma ul id-di-na pa-ni-šu<sub>2</sub>*  
*u<sub>2</sub>-sal-li<sup>d</sup> iš-ta-ri ul u-šaq-qa-a re-ši-ša*  
<sup>lu</sup>*bārū(HAL) ina bi-ir ar<sub>2</sub>-kat<sub>3</sub> ul ip-ru-us*  
*ina ma-aš-šak-ka ša<sub>2</sub>-’-i-li ul u<sub>2</sub>-ša<sub>2</sub>-pi di-i-ni*  
*zaqiqu a-bal-ma ul u<sub>2</sub>-pat-ti uzni*  
<sup>lu2</sup>*mašmaššu(MAŠ.MAŠ) ina ki-kiṭ-ṭe-e ki-mil-ti ul ip-tur*

As I turned around, it was more and more terrible;  
 My ill luck was on the increase, I could not find good fortune.  
 I invoked my god, but he did not show me his face,  
 I prayed to my goddess, but she did not raise her head.  
 The diviner with his inspection did not get to the bottom of it,  
 Nor did the dream priest with his incense clear up my case.  
 I beseeched a dream spirit, but it did not hear me;  
 And the exorcist with his ritual did not appease the divine wrath against me.

As the hymn of the lamentation priest and the *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* show, there was competition and disagreement among Assyrian and Babylonian professionals when it came to the matter of knowing the relation between divine will, sign, and language.

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As I have shown, there were many different approaches and attempts to conceptualize the sign, the origin and function of language, and the nature of signification within the scribal cultures of Mesopotamia. Nor this should surprise us, given the long period of time in which the cuneiform tradition developed. I have covered here textual examples that range from the second to the first millennium, but a more comprehensive analysis would also include the third millennium BCE and the peripheral areas of Mesopotamia. In addition to the long timespan, scholarly specialization and literary genre also played a role in informing different theoretical emphases. There were at least six main fields of specialization in ancient Mesopotamian scholarship: haruspicy, celestial divination, dream

interpretation, medicine, magic, and the art of lamentation.<sup>55</sup> For reasons of space, I have discussed only the techniques of the diviners and exorcists while briefly touching on the lamentation priest. I examined above the semiotics of the diviner (shared by both haruspices and astrologers) and the speech act theory of the exorcist or magician; these two approaches were clearly delimited by conceptual metaphors that arose from professional practices. We have also seen the modeling of an *Ursprache* as in the case of *Syllable Alphabet A* and the interpretative tradition attached to it, as well as the doubts expressed in lamentations about the very same possibility of meaning.

Contrary then to one of the main tenets of Orientalism, namely, that Babylonian thought was dogmatic and monolithic, the evidence suggests that there was a wide repertoire of theoretical possibilities informed by professional habitus and literary genre. However, we also must acknowledge that individual preferences may have played a significant role. Cuneiform scholars were not restricted to the viewpoint of a diviner or exorcist or lamenter but could shift from one perspective to another; the very rich collections of texts that archaeologists have found in royal libraries and private houses prove that Babylonian and Assyrian literati were continuously exposed to a variety of theoretical perspectives.<sup>56</sup> After having established the rich complexity of Babylonian linguistic practices, I will now pass to the examination of how the relationship between name and meaning was understood in the *Epic of Creation*.

<sup>55</sup> See Lenzi 2016 and Parpola 1997.    <sup>56</sup> See Pedersén 1998.