



2.2 Notes on the construction of meaning in an Old Babylonian bilingual proverb about exotic animals

Version 01

April 2021

Frank Simons (University of Vienna, francis.simons@univie.ac.at)

Abstract: The paper studies an unusual bilingual proverb dealing with rare animals from exotic lands. It aims to demonstrate that the use of a string of very rare words in the proverb is not merely an aesthetic peculiarity, but in fact drove the development of the proverb.

© Simons 2021, Licence CC BY 4.0



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

This article results from research conducted under the auspices of the project REPAC “Repetition, Parallelism and Creativity: an Inquiry into the Construction of Meaning in Ancient Mesopotamian Literature and Erudition” (2019-2024, University of Vienna) that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement no. 803060).

How to cite: Simons, F., 2021, “Notes on the construction of meaning in an Old Babylonian bilingual proverb about exotic animals,” Project REPAC (ERC Grant no. 803060), 2019-2024, at <https://doi.org/10.25365/phaidra.261> (accessed day/month/year).

Among the less well-attested collections of proverbs from the Old Babylonian period, one bilingual example stands out as particularly interesting. The collection is preserved on just two tablets, one of which remains unpublished (courtesy J. Matuszak). The published tablet, N 3395, is a two column school tablet from Nippur, first edited by Lambert (1960: 272-3), and later re-edited more comprehensively by Alster (1997: 288-9).¹ The entire collection contains somewhere in the region of 20 proverbs, though the manuscripts are not exact duplicates so it is impossible to be sure of its original extent. The collection as a whole has several interesting features, but here we will consider just a single proverb:

N 3395, obv ² 5.	di-bi-da an-ša ₄ -an ^{ki} -na	<i>i-me-er an-ša-ni-[im]</i>
N 3395, obv ² 6.	dìm-šáḥ mar-ḥa-ši ^{ki}	<i>ma-ar-gi₄ pa-ra-aḥ-[še]</i>
N 3395, obv ² 7.	gul-lum me-luḥ-ḥa ^{ki}	<i>šu-ra-an me-luḥ-[ḥa]</i>
N 3395, obv ² 8.	til-lu-ug sa ₁₂ -ti-um ^{ki}	<i>pi-i-ir ša-ad-di-[im]</i>
N 3395, obv ² 9.	^{giš} asa ₁₂ ḪI ga-raš ^{sar} -gim	<i>ša ša-ar-ba-tam ki-ma karāš[im](G[A.RAŠ])</i>
N 3395, obv ² 10.	šab-šab-e	<i>i-ḥa-ra-[šu]</i>

The di-bi-da of Anšan,	The donkey of Anšan,
the bear of Marḥaši,	the <i>margû</i> of Paraḥši,
the gul-lum of Meluḥḥa,	the cat of Meluḥḥa,
(and) the til-lu-ug of the East,	(and) the elephant of the East,
are the ones which fell poplars as	(are the ones) which break down poplars
though they were leeks	like leeks

In each of the first four lines a very rare word – Sumerian in 3 instances, Akkadian in the other - is paired with a relatively common one in the other language: di-bi-da is otherwise attested only in a lexical list (Civil 1971: 179),² til-lu-ug only in the royal praise poem Šulgi B (Castellino 1972: 36-37, l. 59; ETCSL <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/c24202.htm> l. 58.), and gul-lum and *margû* are hapax legomena (contra CAD M/1: 278 s.v. *margû* A. See Simons forthcoming A: §2c). The better attested dìm-šáḥ is known from a handful of texts, mostly lexical, as a word for bear (Simons forthcoming A: §§2a-2b), and with the exception of *margû* the Akkadian equivalents are all perfectly commonplace – *imēru*, *šurānu* and *pīru* are the usual words for donkey, cat and elephant respectively.

At first glance, the superabundance of rare words in this proverb is unusual and difficult to understand. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that **the choice of this succession of rare words**

¹ Alster notes that Lambert's edition was made before the tablet was baked. It has also been collated by Castellino 1972: 117 and by Civil 1998: 11 n. 5. The edition given here follows that of Alster.

² Izi² "C" iv 35. di-bi-da = *e-me-ru* 'dibida = donkey'. This is a Middle Assyrian tablet (VAT 9714; CDLI P282498) provisionally assigned to the acrographic lexical series Izi = *išātu* by Civil, but with the proviso that it is likely a development from the exclusively Old Babylonian series Ní g - g a = *makkūru*, and its exact identification is therefore uncertain.

seems to have been motivated by the assonance and consonance of their constituent parts. The words *gul-lum* and *til-lu-ug* are phonetically related, revolving around /g/ and /l/, while *di-bi-da* and *dì-m-šaḥ* share the almost homophonous initial sounds /dib/ and /dim/, as well as a similar pattern of vowels. The final syllable of *gul-lum* nearly forms a palindrome with the succeeding first syllable of *me-luḥ-ḥa*.³ Similarly, the juxtaposition of *dì-m-šaḥ*, *mar-ḥa-ši*, *margû* and *parahše* emphasises the repetition of the consonants /m/, /š/, /ḥ/ and /r/. The same consonants are also notable in the other Akkadian animal names, *imēru*, *šurānu*, and *pīru*. It seems likely that this influenced the use of the word *margû* as the equivalent to Sumerian *dì-m-šaḥ*, which is otherwise only equated with *dabû* ‘bear.’ In addition, the sign DÌM is composed of the signs GAL and LUGAL which, were they to be pronounced aloud, would resound with *gul-lum* and *til-lu-ug*.

Given the fact that the rare words explicitly refer to foreign animals, it seems wholly plausible that they are not in fact Sumerian or Akkadian *per se*, but rather foreign names of foreign animals. This is almost certainly the case for the otherwise unknown *margû*. The CAD understands *margû* as a foreign word (CAD M/1: 278 s.v. *margû* A), presumably on the basis that an Akkadian etymology gives either a deverbal noun from *ruggû* ‘to wrong, to make illegitimate claims’ (CAD R: 404 s.v. *ruggû*) + *ma-*, or a quadrilateral root **mrg*? The language of Marḥaši (the Jiroft civilisation) is almost completely unknown, but as the animal in question is said to be ‘of Marḥaši’, and the word *margû* is evidently a loanword from an uncertain language, it is perhaps within the bounds of reason to suggest that *margû* is a remnant of this language. The same may also be suggested of *gul-lum* and the language of Meluḥḥa (the Indus Valley civilisation), and perhaps of *di-bi-da* and Elamite, though I can find no plausible candidate in the *Elamisches Wörterbuch* (Hinz & Koch 1987). It is also plausible that this is ultimately another loanword from the Indus Valley civilisation. No country is given for the *til-lu-ug* but it is equally likely to be a foreign word.⁴

Clearly this proverb is a work of some poetic skill. The euphony present throughout the first four lines demonstrates that the words were carefully chosen, and, as Steinkeller has pointed out, the whole proverb is also geographically organised, with the lands listed in order from west to east (Steinkeller 1980: 9). This led Civil to suggest that the animals may stand figuratively, or through alliteration or pun, for the lands from which they are said to come (Civil 1998: 11-12, n. 6). The animals dealt with in the proverb, however, are at least plausibly identifiable with actual animals, and the practice of presenting exotic animals as diplomatic gifts make it likely that they actually came, or were thought to have come, from the lands in question. This will be discussed at greater length in a forthcoming paper (Simons forthcoming B) which will deal with the identities of the animals involved.

³ It is possible that both *di-bi-da an-ša₄-an^{ki}-na* and *gul-lum me-luḥ-ḥa^{ki}* are sandhi spellings, which is to say that the animal name and the place name have rolled into one – *dibidanšan* and *gullummeluḥḥa* respectively. It is not possible to be certain, however, as both *dibida* and *gullum* are so rare that we do not know their normal forms.

⁴ It has been noted that *dì-m-šaḥ* seems to have been borrowed from a Semitic language (Civil 1998: 12). See further Simons forthcoming A: §2a, n. 21.

Crisostomo has recently demonstrated that Sumerian and bilingual proverb collections were assembled using the same sorts of analogical techniques as were lexical lists, and that individual proverbs could be generated, among other methods, through **interlingual phonological analogies** (Crisostomo 2019: 154-155). That is to say, phonetic correspondences between Sumerian and Akkadian words and phrases could play a large role in the development of proverbs. This offers a rather better way of interpreting the proverb discussed here. As we have discussed, there are **clear interlingual analogies** in the proverb between Sumerian, Akkadian, and whichever foreign languages the animal names came from. Following Crisostomo's argument, these should be understood as the basis from which the text developed - **the euphonic juxtaposition of foreign names for comparably powerful animals and foreign place names is the root of the proverb**. The succession of very rare words we have examined here is, therefore, not merely an aesthetic choice, but is in fact fundamental to the development of meaning in this text.

Bibliography

- Alster, B. 1997**, Proverbs of Ancient Sumer: The World's Earliest Proverb Collections (2 Volumes). Bethesda, MD.
- Castellino, G.R. 1972**, Two Šulgi Hymns (BC). Studi Semitici 42, Rome.
- Civil, M. 1971**, Izi = *išātu*, Ká-gal = *abullu*, and Níg-ga = *makkūru*. Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon 13, Rome.
- Civil, M. 1998**, "‘Adamdun,’ the Hippopotamus, and the Crocodile' in Journal of Cuneiform Studies 50, 11-14.
- Crisostomo, J. 2019**, 'Creating Proverbs: The Listing Scholarship of the Sumerian Proverbs Collections' in KASKAL 16, 141-157.
- Hinz, W./H. Koch, 1987**, Elamisches Wörterbuch (2 Volumes). Berlin.
- Lambert, W.G. 1960**, Babylonian Wisdom Literature. Oxford.
- Simons, F. forthcoming A**, 'Lions and Bison and Bears, oh my! Thoughts on some rare words in the cuneiform lexical tradition I - Animals and Instruments.'
- Simons, F. forthcoming B**, 'The Donkey of Anšan – a Rhinoceros in Mesopotamia?'
- Steinkeller, P. 1980**, 'The Old Akkadian Term for <<Easterner>>' in Revue d'Assyriologie 74, 1-9.