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BEYOND THE WORDS. SOME CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE WORD "TO TRANSLATE" IN SUMERIAN

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At least from the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC onwards, the translation from Sumerian into Akkadian represented an important part of the scribal activity in ancient Mesopotamia. Nevertheless a verb describing the specific activity of the literary translation is not known either in Sumerian or in Akkadian: inim-bal means "to speak (in order to resolve a misunderstanding)", "to interpret" and only rarely "to translate" (while the word eme-bal, which is known from the 3rd millennium onwards, designates the simultaneous translator). This is not surprising: on the one hand, there was no real need for translations (the scribes knew both languages and the rest of the population was illiterate); on the other hand, Sumerian and Akkadian were not considered two different languages, but the two perfectly symmetrical sides of one single original idiom (eme-ha-mun / lišān mithurti). Sumerian was the "dark" side of this language: therefore the so-called translations are rather interpretations of the original Sumerian texts, made in order to disclose their deeply hidden meaning. The verb inim-bal, literally meaning "to go beyond the word", suits well this kind of intellectual activity.

Keywords: Mesopotamia; Sumerian lexicography; inim—bal; bilingual texts; translations from Sumerian into Akkadian

1. THE RANGE OF MEANING OF inim—bal

According to the PSD[1]:

1. the Sumerian word for "to translate" is the compound verb inim—bal;
2. inim—bal means - besides "to translate", "to talk", "to converse" - "to interpret" as well;
3. the compound verb inim—bal has to be distinguished from inim … bal,[2] whose meaning is "to change the word", "to change an order".

This way the range of meaning of inim—bal partially overlaps with those of the following words:

1. dug_4/e: "to talk", "to converse", "to say", and so on;
2. bur_2: "to interpret";[3]
3. *eme—bal, "to translate".

Nevertheless the verb inim—bal should not be confused with any of them.

The exact meaning of inim—bal can be found on one hand in its 'etymology', on the other hand in its written and literary contexts as a whole.

The meaning of inim ("word") is quite clear, whereas the sense of bal in this semantic association is far from being completely understood.

All the following meanings (and many other related ones) are included in the word bal:

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1 *The Sumerian Dictionary of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania*, The University Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1984, vol. B, p. 54a.

2 Unlike inim—bal, inim … bal is not a compound verb.

3 This verb is quoted in PSD B, 55a as synonymous with inim—bal.

- "to rotate", "to turn over", "to cross";
- "to revolt";
- "to change", "to transgress (the terms of an agreement)".

As one of the basic meanings of bal is "to cross, overstep", inim—bal should be translated as "to go beyond the limits – i.e. the literal meaning – of a word", in order either to disclose its authentic sense or to resolve an ambiguity. This ambiguity can arise both from linguistic difference and from an accidental misunderstanding.

The use of inim—bal for "to talk, to speak" instead of the more common dug_4/e appears in the following contexts:

1. When the linguistic difference between the two speakers depends upon their substantial or ontological diversity:

A) when one of the speakers is an animal;[4]
B) when one of the speakers is a god;[5]

Two historical kings claimed to be able to speak (inim—bal) to their gods: Šulgi[6] and Hammu-rapi.[7]

In his hymn king Hammu-rapi says (l. 28): $šud_3$ inim-bal-e-de_3 gir_3-a-me-en, "I'm able to correctly express prayers".[8] This way the king claimed to be the only one who was able to correctly communicate with gods. Probably at a later stage the scribes were proud of the same skill as well, as it appears from the proverbs (quoted below).

2. When a previous misunderstanding must be solved, as it appears from the evidence quoted in the PSD, for instance:

- in TCS 1, 125 rev. 3-4 (Ur III period), the "man" (lu_2) of a certain Puzur-haja has got to appear before the court in order to explain (inim-bi a-bal-e) the delivery of eštub-barley instead of the expected kur-barley;
- in *Iniminanna to Lugalibila* 9 two people have got to "interpret" (inim i_3-bal-en-da-na) an "omen" (giskim);
- the text *Enlil and Sud* is particularly interesting about the semantic relationship between inim—bal and other *verba dicendi*: only gu_3-de_2 ("to call") and dug_4/e ("to say", "to tell") introduce direct speeches throughout the whole text, with the exception of lines 14 and 24. Here the verb inim—bal appears instead of those verbs (line 24, together with dug_4), probably because Enlil wants to express his own intentions, according to Sud (=Ninlil)'s request (ta-z[u], l. 19). The explanation is necessary because of a previous misunderstanding: seeing Enlil approaching to herself, Sud has feared that the god had mistaken her for a prostitute. That is why Enlil reassures her, explaining (inim—bal) that he doesn't want just to have sex and that his intention is rather to marry her;

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4 *Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna* 174 (a cow) and 187 (a goat).
5 OECT 1, 16 iv 16 (Nisaba); *Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna* 32 (Inanna); JCS 29, 17 (Nanaja).
6 Šulgi B 42.
7 ZA 54, 52: 28.
8 Instead of "I am … powerful (when it comes) to invoking a blessing" (according to PSD's translation).

- in YBC 7352 (obv. = rev.) lu$_2$ inim-gi-na bal-bal seems to mean "the man who correctly interprets (the words of the gods)" rather than "a person who (always) speaks a true word".[9] This way the proverb should sound like that: "The man who correctly interprets (the words of the gods): (his) word (comes) from his god – it is a favourable destiny – and (his god) is with him daily".

To this last Sumerian proverb other ones are probably to be related:

- nig$_2$ inim bal-bal-e-en-na-zu a-ba-am$_3$ giš mu-ra-an-tuk-tuk, "Who will listen to your interpretations?";[10]
- lu$_2$-gi-dur$_5$ ak-gin$_7$ lu$_2$-u$_3$-ra nig$_2$-gi-na inim nu-mu-un-da-ab-bal-e,[11] "A man who fares like a swaying reed does not interpret the truth to other men".

In *Sinšamuh to Enki* 26 the verb inim—bal refers to a scribe as well. In consequence of a "sin" (nam-tag-ga-ĝu$_{10}$) he has inadvertently committed, Sinšamuh has lost his skill:

šu-ĝu$_{10}$ sar-re-de$_3$ ba-DU ka-ĝu$_{10}$ inim-bal-bal im-ma-an-la$_2$ (l. 26),
"My hand is 'gone' for writing, my mouth is inadequate for interpreting".[12]

Here inim—bal probably refers to the will of the gods.

If we understand inim—bal in the above mentioned contexts as "to interpret" (instead of "to talk", "to say" and so on, as in PSD), no wonder the same verb is found in connection with ma-mu$_2$(d) ("dream"), meaning "to interpret a dream". On the contrary it must be explained why inim—bal is used in contexts concerning translation (and particularly from Sumerian into Akkadian).

2. "TO TRANSLATE IN SUMERIAN": inim—bal AND *eme—bal

As a matter of fact, according to PSD, the verb inim—bal with the likely meaning "to translate" appears only in one Sumerian proverb (and its variants), which dates at the Old Babylonian period:

eme-gi$_7$-ta inim e-da-bal-e(-en) he$_2$-eb$_2$-da-gal$_2$ eme-gi$_7$ i-ri-dul-la(-aš),
"If it happens to you that you have to translate from the Sumerian, the Sumerian is hidden from you".[13]

Besides, the common verb for "to translate" in Sumerian is not inim—bal, but *eme—bal, literally meaning "to change language, to pass from one language to another". As a noun (meaning "translator, interpreter") it appears in the administrative texts from the

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9 According to PDS's translation.

10 According to Alster 1997, I 13, rather than "to what you are speaking about" (as in PSD's translation). Rather than "to an unskilled pupil" (Alster 1997, II 345a) this proverb could be referred to a scribe who cannot correctly interpret the omens of the gods.

11 Alster 1997, I 203.

12 Instead of "for dialogue", in W.W. Hallo's translation (Hallo 1968, 85).

13 UET 6/2 167: 41-42 and dupl.; cf. SP Coll 2.49 and UET 6/2 167: 4.

Old Akkadian period on (2nd half of the 3rd millennium BC), sometimes in connection with a geographical name (e.g. eme-bal Me-luh-ha^{ki}, "interpreter of the land of Meluhha", eme-bal Mar-tu, "interpreter of the land of Martu", and so on).[14]

As a verb eme—bal appears in the lexical lists from Ebla (Syria, 2nd half of the 3rd mill. BC), where it is followed by Eblaite glosses related to the Semitic root **'pl*, "to answer", "to take part in a conversation".[15] It is noteworthy that in the later (Akkadian) lexical lists (from the Old Babylonian period on, 2nd and 1st millenniumBC) inim—bal and eme—bal tend to overlap: e.g. *napālu*, "speaker", corresponds to Sumerian KA-bal (= inim—bal), but *nāpaltu* ("answer", "satisfaction") is equated with eme—bal.

This (later) overlapping confirms that at the very beginning eme—bal and inim—bal had different ranges of meaning. In fact it is only in connection with the ablative suffix /ta/ (in eme-gi$_7$-ta, "from the Sumerian language") that inim—bal means "to translate" in the unique passage quoted in PSD as a proof of the equation inim—bal = "to translate".

The proverbs – especially those of the so called "Collections" – can be considered as the pieces of a single mosaic. That iss why it is possible to have the chance to understand the authentic meaning of inim—bal by combining two proverbs: the one quoted in PSD (UET 6/2 167, see above) and the proverb SP2.56:[16]

dub-sar ša$_3$-dab$_5$-ba nu-un-zu-a inim-bala-e me-da he$_2$-en-tum$_3$,

"If the scribe does not know how to grasp the meaning, how will the translation succeed?"[17]

3. SUMERIAN AS THE 'DARK SIDE' OF THE LANGUAGE AND THE NEED FOR INTERPRETATION

From the Babylonian point of view (at least from the beginning of the 2nd millium BC) Sumerian is "obscure", because its most authentic and deep sense (ša$_3$, literally its "core") is so to speak "enveloped" (dul) by some sort of external wrapping. Nevertheless Sumerian is not accounted as a "foreign" language, both from a technical-historical and from an ideological-cultural point of view. Firstly the Mesopotamian civilization was culturally bilingual (actually multilingual) almost from its very beginning: the Babylonian scribes of the 2nd and 1st millennium knew both Akkadian and Sumerian, so that mere translations were of no use. Secondly Sumerian and Akkadian were accounted each as the mirror image of the other, as the two perfectly symmetrical halves of a single language. According to the so called "Incantation of Nudimmud" – part of an epic text known as *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*[18] (lines 135-155, especially 141-146) – the world was divided into four geographic and linguistic areas: Šubur, Hamazi, Martu and the unity made up of Sumer (ki-en-gi) and Akkad (ki-uri). This unity is linguistically designated as eme-ha-mun, a mysterious compound word that was translated into Akkadian as *lišān mithurti*, i.e.

14 Gelb 1968; Heltzer 2000.

15 Fronzaroli 1980. Cf. Akkadian *apālu* A, "to satisfy a legitimate demand", "to answer a question" (CAD A/II 155 ff.).

16 Alster 1997, I 56.

17 According to Alster's translation.

18 See Mittermayer 2009.

"language of the correspondence/symmetry". Why Sumerian was accounted as the obscure half of this "compound language" must still be explained.

Ancient Mesopotamian cultures shared with other civilizations the idea that human history is not linear, but circular. The same is true for every kind of historical development, included the history of language (or writing, being these two aspects of the communication hardly distinguished from each other in ancient Mesopotamia). According to the Sumerian myths, human writing was a gift of gods (in particular of Inanna, who had stolen it from Enki[19]) and at the very beginning[20] men "talked to Enlil in one and the same language".[21] The interpretation of the so called "Incantation of Nudimmud" is still very controversial, but from the beginning of the studies the time of the unique language has generally been described as a sort of "Golden Age" of mankind. The first step of the decline was determined by Enki, the wise god, who "put different languages in the mouth of men",[22] causing linguistic diversity. The literary echo of this myth can be found in the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of languages.[23]

As a consequence of this linguistic change, according to Mesopotamian texts, all other languages of the world have become similar to animal cries, of course with the exception of Sumerian and Akkadian. No matter whether Sumerian should be identified as the original unique language[24] or not, this development – or decline from the Mesopotamian point of view – affected Sumerian and Akkadian, too: the original meaning of words (and of signs) was lost, as we can assume from the efforts to recover it, which are evident in the cuneiform literature of all time.

The Mesopotamian way to recover the original sense of writing is philology, which displays itself both in the (bilingual) lexical lists (where every sign is given its Sumerian reading and corresponding Akkadian equivalence) and in the 'literary' translations from Sumerian into Akkadian. It can happen that the Sumerian original text is given not the literal Akkadian equivalence (that of the lexical lists), but the one which was supposed to correspond to the original meaning. Sometimes one single translation is not enough and that is why two Akkadian translations can be given as equivalence to a single Sumerian line of text ('alternative translations').

The most meaningful example of this practice is the list of the names of the god Marduk at the end of the Babylonian poem known as *Enuma Eliš*. The (Sumerian) name of the god is given many different (Akkadian) translations (each of them possible from the Babylonian point of view), which all together disclose the personality and the power of Marduk (similar cases are the list of names of the god Ninurta in *Ninurta and Anzu* and the list of names of the temple Esagila).

From the Mesopotamian point of view it is possible to grasp the deep sense of the reality only through the study of the writing signs (or of the words). This study is not

19 *Inanna and Enki*.

20 According to another interpretation, the text refers to the future (see bibliography in Mittermayer 2009).

21 ^{d}En-lil$_2$-ra eme AŠ-am$_3$ he$_2$-en-na-da-ab-du$_{11}$ (*Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* 146).

22 ka-ba eme-kur$_2$-kur$_2$ … mi-ni(-in)-ĝar-ra (*Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* 154).

23 Genesis XI, 1-9.

24 So, for instance, Vanstiphout 1994.

arbitrary, but depends upon a complex of rules, which all together form a sort of code. The Mesopotamian science primarily consists of all of the study of signs and the sign *par excellence* is the writing sign. So important is the interpretation of signs in the Sumerian civilization that this activity is put under the control of the gods, in particular of Nisaba, mistress both of wisdom and writing: she is usually represented with "the tablet of the stars" (dub-mul) on her knees.[25] Her task explains why in OECT 1, 16 iv 16 she is called inim bal-bal sa_6-sa_6, "who makes the interpretation (of signs) favourable". It is not a chance that in the inscriptions of Gudea[26] Nisaba announces the building of Ningirsu's temple (Eninnu) through "a bright star" (mul-ku_3): stars are the signs that the gods write in heaven and astronomy (or astrology) is nothing else but the study of this heavenly writing. This also explains why the range of meaning of inim—bal partially overlaps with that of bur_2, which expresses divination.

Both divination and translation had to go beyond the surface appearance of things and signs, in order to disclose their hidden sense, choosing it among many other possible meanings. A later development of the scribal art clearly demonstrates the affinity between divination and writing. Towards the end of the Mesopotamian civilization (end of the 8th – beginning of the 7th century BC) and probably under influence of the Egyptian writing system, the scribes of the last Assyrian kings invented new hieroglyphic signs for the representation of the royal names and titles (for instance bull or lion for "king", mountain for "land", plough for "Assyria", and so on).[27]

It is not a chance that king Esarhaddon called these signs (nowadays known among the scholars as "astroglyphs") *lumāšī*, i.e. "constellations", connecting the two kinds of signs *par excellence*: cuneiform and stars. This exoteric writing system probably aimed at protecting the kings from magical attacks. This way philology (i.e. the science of the interpretation of signs) could either reveal or conceal the true and authentic meaning of words (or images).

As in divination, even in writing coding and decoding are both parts of a single process. In fact the idea of reversibility and circularity was deeply rooted in the most ancient meaning of bal. That is why in connection with inim, bal can mean both "to interpret" (inim—bal) and "to change the meaning" of a word (inim … bal).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion there is no proper Sumerian equivalence to our words "translation" and "to translate"; rather there are two words which partially correspond to them:

1. eme-bal (Akkadian *targumannu*), which means "interpreter", "specialist in simultaneous translation";
2. inim—bal, which means to "interpret", "to uncover the true and authentic sense of a word (or sign) beyond the surface", but also, on the contrary (and according to the 'etymology' of bal), "to reverse, to change the meaning of a word" (inim … bal).

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25 E.g. Gudea, Cylinder A V 21-25.

26 Cylinder A VI 1.

27 Roaf - Zgoll 2001.

According to some Old Babylonian proverbs the verb inim—bal could designate the translation from Sumerian into Akkadian as well. The meaning of inim—bal (“to interpret”, “to go beyond the word”) fits well in what we know about these translations, which are not just the conversion of a text from one language to another, but a new text resulting from the search for the true and deep sense which was supposed to be hidden in the original one.[28]

ABBREVIATIONS

CAD *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of Chicago*, Chicago 1956-2010.
PSD *The Sumerian Dictionary of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania*, The University Museum, Philadelphia 1984.

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[28] Cf. Seminara 2001.

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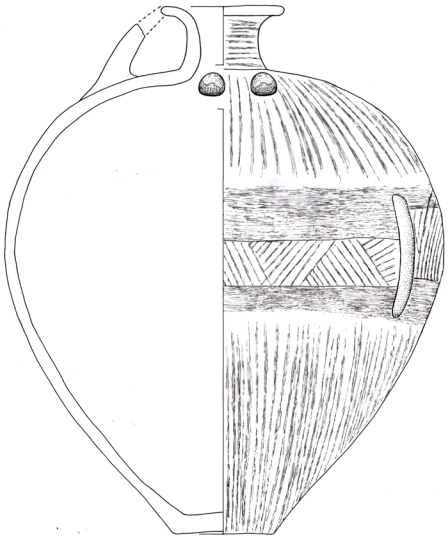

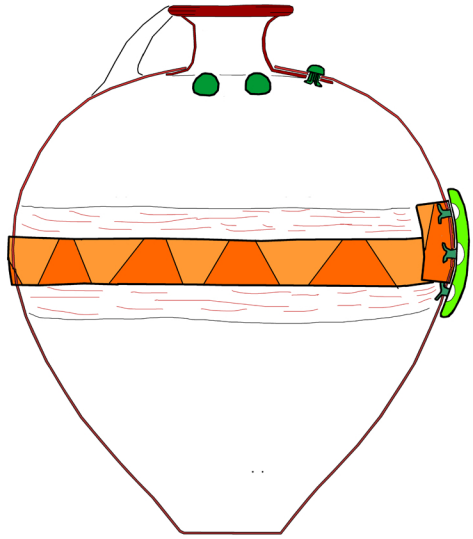

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SOMMARIO

EDITORIALE i

ARTICOLI

M. Jafari-Dehaghi - Čahār zahagān *in Middle Persian literature* 1

S. Seminara - *Beyond the words.*
Some considerations about the word "to translate" in Sumerian 7

R. Francia - *Gli Ittiti e la loro riscoperta nella Turchia repubblicana* 15

K. Rashid Rahim - C.G. Cereti - L. Colliva - A. Fusaro - C. Insom -
G. Labisi - S. Mancini - J. Bogdani - M. Galuppi - G. Terribili -
MAIKI, Missione Archeologica Italiana nel Kurdistan Iracheno:
la carta archeologica dell'area di Paikuli, obiettivi e metodologie applicate 25

L. Nigro - *The Copper Route and the Egyptian connection in 3rd millennium BC Jordan*
seen from the caravan city of Khirbet al-Batrawy 39

M. Sala - *EB II-III* aegyptiaca *east of the Jordan:*
a reevaluation of trade and cultural interactions between Egypt
and Transjordanian urban centres 65

C. Fiaccavento - *An EB III Red Polished jug from Palace B in Khirbet al-Batrawy*
and jugs with Reserved Alternate-Hatching Decoration (RAHD)
from Palestine and Transjordan 83

D. Montanari - *An EB IV dagger from Tell es-Sultan/Jericho* 101

F. Spagnoli - *Una brocchetta dipinta dal Tempio di Astarte*
nell'Area sacra del Kothon a Mozia 113

B. D'Andrea - *Nuove stele dal Tofet di Mozia* 123

A. Orsingher - *Listen and protect: reconsidering the grinning masks*
after a recent find from Motya 145

EDITORIALE

Quando iniziò le pubblicazioni nel 1978, *Vicino Oriente* era l'organo dell'allora Istituto del Vicino Oriente, diretto da Mario Liverani. Fino al 2000 furono pubblicati dodici volumi in ventidue anni (1978-2000), grazie alla infaticabile dedizione di Isabella Brancoli Verger. La riorganizzazione della rivista nel 2007 ha portato alla pubblicazione di sei volumi (XIII-XVIII) in sette anni (2008-2014), rispettando rigorosamente la cadenza annuale, fatto che ha consentito alla rivista di essere inserita in classe A e le ha permesso di iniziare il percorso di indicizzazione in *Scopus*. Dallo stesso anno *Vicino Oriente* è anche disponibile online e ha contestualmente ripreso la pubblicazione dei *Quaderni* (volumi dal IV all'VIII), dedicati ad ospitare raccolte coerenti di scritti derivanti per lo più da Convegni o *Festschriften* (FS Mayer, FS Amadasi, Convegno "La percezione dell'Ebraismo", ecc.), come nel caso della pubblicazione dell'opera di Umberto Scerrato, in tre volumi. Complessivamente, sono stati dunque pubblicati tredici volumi in sette anni con un notevole sforzo economico e soprattutto editoriale e con un amplissimo spettro tematico all'interno delle discipline orientalistiche. Questi risultati sono solamente un aspetto della fiorente attività scientifica svolta da tanti colleghi interni ed esterni a quella che è stata prima la Sezione Vicino Oriente e poi la Sezione di Orientalistica del Dipartimento Scienze dell'Antichità.

Ora che una riorganizzazione dell'Ateneo ha di fatto disperso nuovamente gli orientalisti, *Vicino Oriente* resta un organo aperto e attivo, dotato di *referee* esterni (nazionali ed internazionali), di una precisa procedura di valutazione e accesso alla pubblicazione, di un comitato scientifico e, soprattutto, di una redazione cui va il mio più sentito ringraziamento per l'infaticabile sforzo profuso per rispettare i termini di uscita della rivista e garantire la coerenza interna dei contributi e la qualità grafica dell'impaginato.

In tempi tanto difficili per l'Italia e, specialmente, per i Paesi ai quali è rivolta non solo l'attenzione scientifica, ma la partecipazione umana di tanti di noi, questo lavoro svolto da giovani dottorandi volontari è la migliore risposta, silenziosa ed efficace, a chi avesse creduto che la fine, dolorosa, di una esperienza potesse esaurirle tutte. La continuazione degli scavi in aree molto difficili, dal Kurdistan all'Iraq, dalla Palestina alla Giordania, dalla Sicilia alla Sardegna, lo sforzo di tanti giovani colleghi nell'avvio di nuove imprese di ricerca sul campo, la prossima apertura del rinnovato Museo del Vicino Oriente, Egitto e Mediterraneo nella prestigiosa sede del Rettorato, testimoniano che una nuova generazione si affaccia – finalmente – con coraggio.

L'Oriente è ancora una sorgente di luce alla Sapienza.

Lorenzo Nigro