Syntactic change in Akkadian: The evolution of sentential complementation

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Studies in the historical syntax of languages and language families are mostly limited to languages with a long history of documentation, e.g. Indo-European, Egyptian, Semitic, and Chinese. Akkadian is unique in this respect, as it is one of the earliest and longest attested languages with two thousand years (2500 BC to 500 BC) of written texts.

Based on a corpus of letters in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, Deutscher examines the development of sentential complements in this language, both from a structural and a functional perspective.

After an introductory chapter, in chapter 2, Deutscher presents his understanding of sentential complements. He argues that complements need to “be understood in terms of the semantic category ‘argument’ rather than the surface categories ‘object’ and ‘subject’” (p. 4). He extends the meaning of complementation to what he calls “Functional Domain of Complementation,” “which includes complements as well as other strategies that perform similar functions” (p. 4).

In chapter 3, he gives a short introduction to Akkadian, outlining its history, and describes his corpus.

In chapter 4, Deutscher shows how in Akkadian sentential complements first emerged from adverbial clauses containing the adverbial conjunction kīma ‘because’. This happened through a process of semantic bleaching, whereby a sentence like ‘He complained to the governor because the barley was not collected’ would now be interpreted as ‘He complained to the governor that the barley was not collected’ (p. 42).

In chapter 5, he describes the emergence of a quotative construction in Babylonian. In Old Akkadian, direct speech is introduced either without any formal marker, or with an enclitic particle -mi (68). A phrase enma X ‘this is what X says’ can be found in introductory parts of a letter. In the late Old Akkadian period, enma appears as umma, still with the same meaning. By the time of early Old Babylonian, umma is used to introduce direct speech.
In chapter 6 he presents the main semantic categories of verbs and the different structures which were used in the “functional domain of complementation” of Babylonian. These included finite complements (‘you know that he took an ox’), asyndetic parataxis (‘he took an ox, may you know’), ‘as you know’ constructions (‘as you know, he took an ox’), infinitive complements (‘you told him to take an ox’), and coordination (‘tell him and he should take an ox’) (p. 98).

In chapters 7 and 8, he describes the structures used with the different verbs in more detail.

In chapter 9, he examines another functional domain, the “wh-functional domain,” which shows a similar development.

In chapter 10, Deutscher demonstrates that a similar functional development can be found in various other languages, e.g. Dyirbal, Sumerian, Biblical Hebrew, and Hittite.

In chapter 11, he tries to explain why finite complements would emerge and become more common in the later history of Babylonian. He argues that “finite complements are better at handling more complex propositions than the alternative strategies” (p. 167) and “that the expansion in the use of finite complements during the historical period can be seen as an adaptation to the increasing complexity of communicative needs” (p. 175).

The book is a very interesting case study in syntactic change, well-founded and backed up by many examples. It is worth reading not only for Assyriologists, but for anyone who is interested in historical linguistics, most especially historical syntax.

Notes

1 However, some studies of the historical-comparative grammar of language families have been written from a less ideal research situation, e.g. Carl Meinhof’s *Grundzüge einer vergleichenden Grammatik der Bantusprachen* (Berlin: Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 1906) and Zygmunt Frajzyngier’s *Grammaticalization of the Complex Sentence, a Case Study in Chadic* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996). In both cases, these authors had to base their reconstruction of the grammar of the respective language families on the little documentation that was available at that time.