

Akkadian Loans in Arabic? The Linguistic and Historical Evidence

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Abstract

Although the first mentions of the Arabs in the historical record come from Assyrian documents of the eighth century BC, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the issue of contact between the Mesopotamians and the early Arabs. This paper will examine the evidence for linguistic contact between the two groups, specifically focusing on the question of the influence of Akkadian on early Arabic. Using the methodology outlined by Thomason and Kaufman (1988), I will show that the historical evidence suggests a level of contact equivalent to level 2 of their five-level hierarchy of contact situations. This level corresponds to slight structural borrowing, and presupposes a large number of loanwords from the donor language in the receiving one. Although the identification of loanwords from one Semitic language into another is complicated by the many similarities in structure among all languages of this family, there are quite a few lexical items in Arabic that could well have originated as loans from Akkadian.

1. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 THE NEO-ASSYRIAN PERIOD

The first mention of the term “Arab” in the historical record is in the Monolith Inscription from Kurkh of the Neo-Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (Eph‘al 1982: 21). Among the battles described in this inscription is the one fought at Qarqar in Shalmaneser’s sixth regnal year, 853 BC, and one of the defeated kings mentioned in connection with this battle is “Gindibu of Arbaya.” The name Gindibu can be connected to Arabic *jundub* ‘grasshopper’ (Eph‘al 1982: 75), implying that *Arbaya* here does indeed refer to the same people who would later be known as Arabs. The *-u* suffix on Gindibu’s name is common (though not universal) in later cuneiform transcriptions of Arab names as well, is also a noted characteristic of the names in the Nabatean and Palmyrene inscriptions of the first few centuries AD, and is preserved orthographically to this day in the Arabic name *‘Amr* (Versteegh 2001: 28-29). Although, as Versteegh notes, this suffix is generally assumed to be a case marker, there are some problems with this assumption. For one thing, the renditions of it in various orthographies (such as the cuneiform use of a glottal stop or extra *u* sign at the end and the Nabatean and later use of the consonant *w*, generally used only for long vowels as short vowels are not marked in the script) strongly suggest that it represents a long vowel, while the case endings are of course short vowels. Zadok, who suggests that it is usually a hypocoristic suffix, points out that it is not clear that the same *-u* suffix is present in every name, and that sometimes it can even be interpreted in non-Arabic (generally Aramaic) terms (1981: 45-48). O’Connor concludes that the “Nabatean *waw*” was “designed to mark elements as (in some sense) non-Aramaic” in the Nabatean Aramaic orthography (1986: 223). Like many supposed pieces of evidence for the antiquity of the Arabic case system, this one does not bear close examination, and it seems unlikely that this ending would be interpreted as a case suffix at all if it weren’t for the assumption that the case system was inherited.

Gindibu is not mentioned in any other Assyrian source, even those documenting later campaigns in Syria, so it is probable that his group of Arabs lived rather away from the areas passed through by Assyrian military expeditions during this period (Eph'al 1982: 76). The next mentions of Arabs in cuneiform sources come from around a hundred years after Qarqar, when the Assyrians began to make concerted efforts to conquer the Levant under Tiglath-Pileser III. In the process, the Assyrians increasingly made contact with the nomads of the Syrian Desert, and various kings and queens "of the Arabs" appear in the annals of Tiglath-Pileser and his successor Sargon II starting in 738 BC, when Zabibe, Queen of the Arabs, paid tribute to Tiglath-Pileser along with a number of other monarchs from the western part of the Fertile Crescent (Eph'al 1982: 81-82). The name Zabibe can be connected to Arabic *zabi:b* 'raisin.' It is noteworthy that we have an example here of a woman in a position of apparently quite high authority in Arab society, and she is not the only one; there are many references to later Queens of the Arabs as well.

For the remainder of the eighth century BC, all our evidence for contact between Arabs and Mesopotamians comes from the area of Palestine and the Syrian Desert, which is understandable given the preoccupations of the Assyrian rulers at the time, but not very helpful in examining the evidence for Arab settlement inside Mesopotamia itself, which is my primary concern. There are some interesting facts that can be gleaned from this outlying military contact, however, such as the use in some of the records of the Arabic loanwords *ana:qa:te* 'she-camel' and *bakru* 'young camel' in the list of tribute paid to Tiglath-Pileser III by Samsi, Queen of the Arabs (Eph'al 1982: 85). Although it is not particularly remarkable that words like these would be borrowed to refer to tribute items from a foreign people, it does suggest that Arab-Assyrian contact was strong enough that the terms would be understood by whoever was the intended audience of the royal inscriptions (which is, of course, a vexing question in itself).

The first evidence for Arab settlement inside Mesopotamia itself, and thus the first evidence that really bears directly on the contact situation I am concerned with, comes from the reign of Sennacherib (705-681 BC). The description in the Annals of Sennacherib of his first campaign, which took place in 703 BC against the Chaldeans in Babylonia, mentions a captured enemy leader named Basqanu, brother of Iati'e Queen of the Arabs, and several of the towns mentioned in connection with the campaign have Arabic names (Eph'al 1982: 112-113). Eph'al concludes:

Walled towns with Arab names, surrounded by unwalled hamlets, reflect not only that Arab penetration into Babylonia was extended and intensive but that even if these towns were neither founded nor built but only controlled by Arabs, who in time changed the town names, the process of Arab penetration and settlement in Babylonia began at least some decades before Sennacherib's first campaign. (1982: 115)

If the Arabs had not built these towns, of course, they likely would not initially have been familiar with the building techniques and materials used in constructing them; this may be related to the apparent borrowing of architectural terms mentioned below

It is not clear, due to the paucity of sources, just what the relationship was between these Arabs and those that remained in the desert. It is thus difficult to say, for instance, which group Basqanu and Iati'e were associated with. Eph'al notes this difficulty but says:

However, judging from later parallels and perhaps even from the relations between the desert nomads and Sennacherib after his first campaign, the

Arabs along both sides of the West Babylonian border were probably in close contact. In any case, the settlement of the Arabs in western Babylonia during the Neo-Assyrian period, proceeding from nomadism through various stages of sedentary life, present us with a concrete example, so far unnoticed, of a phenomenon well-known in the history of the Near East. (1982: 117)

Connections between the two groups may have been strengthened by the continuing importance of the trade in spices from South Arabia, which was controlled largely by nomad leaders through whose territory the trade routes passed (Eph'al 1982: 123). It is reasonable to assume that the settlement of the Arabs in western Babylonia, near the terminus of the desert routes, was connected as well to the spice trade.

There are more connections between the Assyrian kings and the Arabs of Babylonia and the adjacent desert areas, largely in connection with Assyrian policy toward Babylonia in general. It seems that the Arabs of Babylonia generally followed the political positions of their neighbors (Eph'al 1982: 117), which in this period meant participating in frequent rebellions against Assyrian rule. The details of these events are not important for my purposes except to note that the participation of Arabs in them is yet another sign of their steady assimilation to Babylonian society.

1.2 THE NEO-BABYLONIAN PERIOD

After the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Chaldean Neo-Babylonian Empire arose to assume a brief mastery of the Near East. There are few sources for the condition of the Arabs in Babylonia during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC), but later, during the reign of Nabonidus (556-539 BC) relations between the Babylonians and the Arabs would become very important. Nabonidus actually left Babylonia and spent much of his reign at the oasis of Tema' (Arabic Tayma') in North Arabia, leaving everyday administration to his son Belshazzar (Eph'al 1982: 179). While it is unclear why exactly he did this, it is obviously of importance for contact between Babylonia and Arabia that the king of the former was resident in the latter. The spice trade probably played some role in this. There are, more importantly for my purposes, also quite a few references to Arabs and people connected with Arabia in Babylonia itself during this period, and several references to a community known as the "city of the Arabs" (*a:lu ša Arbaya*) (Eph'al 1982: 188-191). Although it might be assumed that this is a continuation of the Arabic settlement in the area from the Neo-Assyrian period, Eph'al strikes a cautionary note:

Although the existence of Arabs in Babylonia in the 6th century BC has thus been ascertained, it is still impossible to determine whether we are dealing with a continuation of the nomad penetration into Babylonia in the 8th century BC or with later political and demographic developments, in the course of which exiles from various lands founded settlements. Especially noteworthy is the incidence in Babylonia of people from Tema' prior to Nabonidus's arrival there. ... Perhaps their coming was connected with trade with North Arabia. ... It is difficult, in any case, to connect the arrival in Babylonia of people from far-off Tema' with the circumstances leading to Arab penetration into Babylonia in the 8th century BC. (1982: 190)

Given this and the rather clearer connection to trade among these Arabs than among those who had been present in Babylonia earlier, it is tempting to prefer this period to the earlier one as the time of most important contact between Arabs and Babylonians resulting in

extensive borrowing. Given the scanty evidence and still quite strong possibility that the Arab community in this later time was in fact identical to the earlier one, I feel it is best to leave the matter open.

2. LOANWORDS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

According to the methodology outlined by Thomason and Kaufman (1988), structural borrowing is expected to be preceded by a fairly large influx of loanwords. In this section I will examine a variety of possible loanwords from Akkadian into Arabic. I will be adopting the format used by Kaufman 1974 for studying Akkadian loanwords into Aramaic, also used by Mankowski, who has described it as an excellent approach to inter-Semitic loanword studies, in his study of Akkadian loanwords into Hebrew. This will involve a listing of the putative loanword derivations in alphabetical order by the Akkadian word, with an indication of whether I find each derivation convincing (+), not (-), or questionable (?), followed by discussion of pertinent issues and problems in hypothesizing a loan in each case. References for previous discussion of each word will be put in footnotes. The abbreviations used in these footnotes are: F = Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen* (Leiden: Brill, 1886); J = Arthur Jeffery, *The foreign vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2007[1938]); K = Stephen Kaufman, *The Akkadian influences on Aramaic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); O = M. O'Connor, The Arabic loanwords in Nabatean Aramaic, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45 (1986); Z = Heinrich Zimmern, *Akkadischen Fremdwörter als Beweis für babylonischen Kultureinfluss* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1915). Akkadian words are cited in nominative case unless otherwise specified. As mimation was not present in the language during the period under discussion, it is not included. Arabic words are cited without case endings.

By way of introduction, I will say that the number of relatively well-established loanwords seems rather small for the kind of subsequent structural borrowing I am proposing, but this may be accounted for largely by the long time gap in attestations of the two languages and possible the additional factor of diglossia (see below). There do seem to be quite a few words that can plausibly be considered loans, however, and what's more they seem to fall largely into a few well-defined semantic fields, which tends to support the idea of cultural as well as linguistic influence being a major factor in the contact situation I am describing.

The issue of Aramaic is another major concern in this study. It is well-known that there are many words in Arabic that are ultimately of Akkadian origin, but the vast majority of them came through Aramaic, which displaced Akkadian as the lingua franca of the Near East and was in turn supplanted in that role by Arabic. In the course of such major language shifts, many loanwords, particularly for native flora and fauna and in cultural domains such as agriculture and navigation, were transferred from Akkadian through Aramaic to Arabic. It is often impossible to tell on formal grounds if a given word came through this method or directly from Akkadian to Arabic, so I have adopted a conservative stance, only considering a direct loan if there is some sort of problem with an Aramaic loan vector, either formally or in terms of Aramaic attestation (still somewhat problematic since Aramaic attestation is rather spotty in general). This method probably overlooks some actual direct loanwords that were also loaned into Aramaic, but that is just the price I have had to pay to keep from overextending my hypothesis.

In a certain sense, it does not actually matter very much whether a word came directly from Akkadian or through Aramaic, since the latter was already in the process of becoming the spoken language of Mesopotamia in the period I am discussing, and much of the influence of Akkadian on Aramaic can be attributed to (substratum) interference by shift (Kaufman 1974). This means the Arabs who were settled in Babylonia from Neo-Assyrian times onward would almost certainly have been just as proficient in Aramaic as in Akkadian (if not more so), and many of the Aramaic loans into Arabic may have actually entered the language at this time rather than during the later period of much greater influence shortly before and after the rise of Islam. There is of course no way to tell for sure when a given word was borrowed from Aramaic into Arabic, but this is a possibility that should be kept in mind in evaluating the following proposals.

2.2 LIST OF LOANWORDS

+ *apkallu* ‘wise man’ > **afkal* ‘priest’

This word, unattested in Classical Arabic, requires some explanation. It is a Sumerian loanword in Akkadian, where it does not have a specifically religious connotation, but it is strongly associated in a cultic sense with the Arabian Peninsula, and is often considered, in Kaufman’s words, “an early loan into the Arabic culture sphere.” Just how early is unclear; it appears often in the South Arabian inscriptions, implying that it, and the position it denotes, had been known in that region for quite some time. Kaufman also notes that it is used as a profession in Akkadian only in the first millennium, implying a borrowing of around our period, but it had already been used in that way in Sumerian going very far back; he concludes that it was therefore likely borrowed much earlier than the Neo-Assyrian period, when the feminine form appears in cuneiform sources to denote an Arabian queen. I am not so sure about this reasoning, but it is a possibility. If it is such a very early borrowing, it would not be relevant for my study of the first-millennium contact between Arabs and Mesopotamians. In any case, while the word is not found in Classical Arabic, it is mentioned in Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions which display strong Arabic influence (but not elsewhere in Aramaic), leading Kaufman to not include it as an Akkadian loan into Aramaic on the grounds that it is an Arabic loan. I agree and have therefore included it here, but it is not really in the same class as the other loanwords on my list.¹

+ *askuppatu* ‘threshold’ > *uskuffa* ‘(threshold) slab’

This is one of the best candidates for a direct borrowing, in my opinion. Although there is an Aramaic form *’skwpt*’, also generally considered an Akkadian loan, the form of the Arabic definitely points to a direct borrowing instead. The doubling of the *f* (which corresponds regularly to *p* in other Semitic languages) is particularly noteworthy; Fraenkel considered it an attempt to Arabicize the word, but in light of the Akkadian form (of which he was unaware) there is no need to posit any *ad hoc* changes on the Arabic side. This is one of several probable loanwords having to do with architecture,

¹ K p.34, O p.215.

which is nicely congruent with my hypothesis that the main period of contact producing these loans took place when previously (semi-)nomadic Arabs settled in Babylonia and assimilated to the material culture of the area, which included houses of quite different design than they were used to. Kaufman notes that the Assyrian form of this word is *aksuppu*, meaning that the loan must have been from Babylonian, another bit of evidence nicely substantiating my claim.²

? *ba:bu* ‘door’ > *ba:b* ‘door’

Another architectural term. Fraenkel notes that this is the earliest of the many Arabic words for “door” to be attested, and that it is found frequently in pre-Islamic poetry. He also notes that it is very common in Jewish Aramaic (especially in the Talmud) but quite rare in Syriac. D. H. Müller (cited by Jeffery) argued from this that a direct loan is more likely than one through Aramaic, since the vast majority of Aramaic loanwords came through Syriac and the Jewish Aramaic contribution was comparatively miniscule (on which see Jeffery *passim*). As Fraenkel points out, however, the secondary meaning ‘chapter (of a book)’ must certainly have come from Jewish Aramaic, since it is unknown in Akkadian (though probably derived from the secondary meaning “account entry” mentioned by Kaufman) but quite common in the Talmud. A later loan of the secondary meaning is of course possible, but it removes all justification for considering a direct loan in the first place, unless one were to claim that a very common word like this is unlikely to have been borrowed from a language that was not a major influence otherwise. The early attestation of the word in Arabic, pointing to an early borrowing (mentioned by Kaufman as well) may be relevant here. However, I see no really compelling grounds for deciding this issue one way or the other, so I have left the question open.³

+ (*išsur*) *xurri* ‘hole bird’ > *hurr* ‘pigeon?’

Semantically the match is very good. The Akkadian gloss is a literal rendering; it is not clear exactly what bird it refers to (perhaps some sort of partridge?). The Arabic word is found often in the early poetry, but its meaning is likewise fairly obscure and a matter of much dispute for the lexicographers. This combination of a semantically transparent formation in the donor language and a formally similar but semantically obscure term in the borrowing language with very similar meanings is a very good sign of a borrowing. The Akkadian term is actually a construct phrase from which the first term, meaning ‘bird,’ has apparently been lost, and only the second term borrowed with the meaning of the whole. Formally, the correspondence of Akkadian *x* to Arabic *ḥ* is difficult (though not unprecedented; see *sa:xiru* below), and the Arabic term may have undergone some restructuring in the direction of the common Arabic root *ḥrr* ‘free.’ The term is not attested in Aramaic, and the only previous scholar to note the correspondence was

² F p.19, K p. 37, Z p. 31.

³ F p.14, J p.74, K p.40-41, Z p.30, D. H. Müller, *Wiener Zeitschrift für Kunde des Morgenlandes* 1, p.23.

Zimmern, who however glossed the Arabic word as ‘falcon’ for some reason.⁴

+ *kissugu* ‘a fish’ > *kawsaj* ‘swordfish’

Another correspondence noted only by Zimmern. Although the vowels are not particularly similar, the close correspondence in the consonants (Arabic *j* is the equivalent of *g* in other Semitic languages) combined with the similar semantics and the lack of any other cognates makes a loan a reasonable explanation.⁵

+ *laqlaqu* ‘stork’ > *laqlaq* ‘stork’

The very close formal correspondence (the degemination of the final consonant is due to the adaptation of the word to a more common Arabic quadriliteral pattern) and perfect semantic congruence, combined with the lack of attestation in other Semitic languages, including Aramaic, make a loan quite likely. Note that this word, like the previous two entries, refers to an animal, a semantic field in which loans are particularly common cross-linguistically.⁶

+ *libnat* ‘mudbrick’ > *libna* ‘mudbrick’

The Akkadian word is actually the construct state; the *status rectus* nominative is *libittu*. Although Kaufman claims that “[t]here is no compelling reason to assume that Akkadian is the origin of the Common Semitic term and its related forms,” the very close formal similarity of the Akkadian and Arabic forms as against Aramaic *lbynt*’ etc. suggest a loan. Fraenkel suspects a loan based on the fact that there are two different vowel patterns for the word (the other being *labina*), which is not typical of native Arabic vocabulary. Given the Akkadian term, I think *libna* must be the original form. Note that the final *-at* of the Akkadian construct has apparently been reinterpreted as the formally similar Arabic feminine ending.⁷

+ *ma:xirtu* ‘moving upstream’ > *ma:xira* ‘ship plowing the sea’

Most nautical terms in Arabic are from Aramaic, and many of them are originally of Akkadian origin, but they are generally pretty clearly loans from the early Islamic centuries. The excellent formal correspondence between these terms, however, combined with the total lack of Aramaic attestation, suggests a direct loan. The Akkadian word is a technical term for a ship traveling upriver, found only in lawsuits from the Old Babylonian period referring to collisions between rivergoing ships. This is obviously much earlier than the period of Arab settlement in Babylonia, but there is no reason to assume the terminology did not survive longer given the vagaries of textual attestation. Traffic on the Tigris and Euphrates certainly did not diminish. The vaguer but clearly similar semantics of the Arabic word suggest that the

⁴ Z p.51, E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, reprint 1984, p.539.

⁵ Z p.52.

⁶ Z p.52.

⁷ F p.4-5, K p.66, Z p.31.

Akkadian technical term may not have been properly understood when it was borrowed, or that the subtleties of its meaning were lost or altered over time.⁸

+ *manzaltu* ‘(star) position’ > *manzil* ‘lunar phase’

Astronomy and astrology were fields of knowledge strongly associated with Mesopotamia in ancient times, so it is hardly surprising that words like this one were often borrowed into other languages. In this case the known borrowings were mainly into Aramaic, but the forms attested in most Aramaic dialects are not very similar to the Arabic form (most, for instance, lack the *n*). The one exception is Mandaic *m'nz'l* ‘constellation,’ which is however not particularly close semantically to the Arabic and if the alephs represent long vowels not all that close formally either. Although the vowelings and the otherwise unprecedented loss of the feminine ending (see *simmiltu* below) are also formal problems with proposing a direct loan, the semantic connection is relatively close and the problems are no worse than with any other derivation, so I think this is the best solution.⁹

? *nisxu* ‘extraction’ > *nusxa* ‘copy’

This loan is very problematic formally. It is attested in Nabatean Aramaic as *nsh̄t*, and the usual explanation (accepted by Kaufman, O’Connor and Jeffery) is that it was borrowed into Aramaic and pronounced with *x* rather than *h̄* in the Nabatean dialect but spelled with *h̄* because that is the normal Aramaic equivalent of Akkadian *x* (Kaufman mentions the “frequent historical spellings of Nabatean”), then loaned from Nabatean Aramaic into Arabic with *x*. Later Aramaic dialects have *k* instead; these are considered borrowings from Arabic. While this account is plausible, the Nabatean form could also be a loan from Arabic, and the replacement of *x* by *h̄* an attempt to Aramaize it. It is noteworthy in this respect that the spoken language of the Nabateans is generally thought to have been a form of Arabic, and there are quite a few Arabic loanwords in the Nabatean inscriptions. If this is the case, there is no problem with proposing a direct loan from Akkadian into Arabic, except for the rather odd addition of the feminine suffix (which is, of course, a problem with any derivation through borrowing). Since, however, neither of these options seems obviously better than the other, I have chosen to leave the matter open.¹⁰

? *purattu* ‘Euphrates’ > *fura:t* ‘sweet river water’

The Arabic term is also the name for the Euphrates. While this is the sort of toponym that could have been borrowed at any time, the semantic extension of the Arabic word suggests an early loan at a time when the Arabs were not overly familiar with large rivers. Jeffery seems unsure if a direct loan or one through Syriac is more likely.¹¹

+ *sa:xiru* ‘magician’ > *sa:hir* ‘magician’

⁸ J p.274, Z p.45.

⁹ K p.69-70, Z p.62.

¹⁰ K p.64, 78, 142-143, J p.279-280, Z p.29, O p.218, F p.251.

¹¹ J p.222-223.

Although Arabic *ḥ* for Akkadian *x* suggests an Aramaic intermediary, there are no plausible candidates known. Kaufman suggests Mandaic *s'hr'* 'demon,' but he admits that it "is not definitely derived from this [Akkadian] word." Despite the formal problems, the exact semantic match makes me think a loan here quite likely. Jeffery notes that magic was strongly associated with Mesopotamia.¹²

- *simmiltu* 'staircase' > *sullam* 'ladder'

Kaufman accepts with little comment an Akkadian origin for some Aramaic terms with greater formal similarity (Eastern Neo-Aramaic *semmilta*, Syriac *sblt'*, Mandaic *swmbylt'*), but makes no mention of the Arabic word, for which Jeffery prefers an Aramaic etymology but does not reject the possibility of a direct borrowing. This is problematic, however, on account of the fact that a loanword hypothesis would involve both metathesis and the loss of the feminine suffix, which is almost unattested among well-established loans from Akkadian into other Semitic languages (see *manzaltu* above). Minkowski, in discussing a similar form in Hebrew, makes use of an elaborate abstract demonstration using card suits to show the implausibility of a loan here, and I follow him in considering this unlikely to be a loan.¹³

? *šawiru* 'ring' > *siwa:r* 'bracelet'

The semantic connection is quite good. Zimmern proposes a loan through Aramaic, but the attested Aramaic forms are not very similar to the Arabic. Kaufman concludes that all the forms are cognate. Fraenkel likewise considers the Arabic form native. Jeffery suspects a direct borrowing, citing the form of the Arabic, by which he presumably means the preservation of the *w*. The vowels are somewhat problematic, but otherwise the formal correspondence is not bad. Since the cognate hypothesis seems equally strong, however, I decline to definitively endorse Jeffery's proposal.¹⁴

+ *šimtu* 'plucked wool' > *simt* 'thread'

The formal correspondence is perfectly regular, and the semantic similarity is clear enough. There is no Aramaic equivalent attested. The only scholar to note the correspondence is Zimmern, who rather oddly glosses the Arabic word as 'linen or wool clothing' when the meaning 'thread, string' is all the dictionaries give.¹⁵

+ *tarpa'u* 'tamarisk' > *tarfa:* 'tamarisk'

The long vowel in the Arabic is somewhat problematic, but it can be explained as an attempt to fit the unfamiliar word to a more common pattern. Otherwise, the formal match is excellent. The exact semantic correspondence and lack of cognates make this a fairly straightforward example of a borrowing. Note that it refers to a plant, a common semantic domain for loans.¹⁶

¹² J p.166, K p.90, Z p.67.

¹³ J p.177, K p.92.

¹⁴ F p.56, J p.180, K p.102, Z p.38.

¹⁵ Z p.37.

¹⁶ Z p.53.

- *zanzaliqqu* ‘a tree (Persian lilac?)’ > *zanzalaxt* ‘China tree’

Although the forms are fairly similar and there are no other forms like them attested in any other language, the irregular phonetic correspondences and imperfect semantic match make a loan unlikely. There is probably some connection between the two, but it is much more likely to involve a third (substratum?) language than a direct link.

? *ziba:ni:tu* ‘scales’ > *zaba:niyya* (meaning obscure)

The Arabic word is a hapax legomenon in the Qur’an of obscure meaning. Kaufman says Akkadian must be the ultimate origin of this Arabic word and the star name *zuba:niya:*, but there is no really obvious Aramaic intermediary attested (except perhaps Mandaic *zb’nyt* ‘a horned creature’), and a direct loan is a possibility which Jeffery cites, attributing the proposal to Karl Vollers (although Jeffery himself prefers a Syriac origin). I have not accepted it for sure, however, since the obscurity of the Arabic word makes it impossible to judge the closeness of a semantic match.¹⁷

2.3 ANALYSIS

Out of 18 candidates for loanwords, I have accepted 11, rejected 2 and considered 5 possible but uncertain. There is no denying that this is a small number given the level of contact I am positing and my hypothesis of structural borrowing of the case system, but given the vagaries of attestation and the very long time gap between written records of the two languages, it is quite possible that other loanwords were either lost or transformed beyond recognition in the intervening centuries. This seems to be what happened with **afkal*, which is unattested in Classical Arabic but was clearly known to at least some Arabs as late as Nabatean times, and given its importance in South Arabia it is likely that it was known rather widely in the Arabian Peninsula. We happen to know about it because of its cultural significance, but how many other words like it were borrowed by the Arabs but lost for whatever reason before written records in Arabic began in the early Islamic period? There is no way to know.

Kaufman identified about 200 “certain” Akkadian loanwords in Aramaic (1974: 166). He divided these somewhat arbitrarily into ten semantic domains: Political-Legal Terminology, Names of Professions, Architecture, Religion, Astronomy, Topographical Features, Scribal Terminology, Tools and Utensils, Other Items from the Material Culture, and General Vocabulary. He found that the first three areas contained the most loanwords, although the percentages were quite different for each Aramaic dialect he looked at. His conclusion from looking at his data in various ways was that in the period of most important contact Akkadian was the language of politics and culture, but Aramaic was the “dominant” language, i.e., the primary spoken language of the society in question (his sociolinguistic framework was a bit outdated) (1974: 169). In other words, the contact situation that resulted in Akkadian influence on Aramaic was one of interference through shift, in Thomason and Kaufman’s terms, rather than borrowing.

To see what conclusions I could draw about the rather different contact situation I am looking at, I applied some of Kaufman’s methods to the much smaller corpus of loanwords I considered likely. I used Kaufman’s semantic domains to reduce the circularity of any arguments I might make from this exercise; although he derived them from his data, they are

¹⁷ J p.148, K p.112-113, Z p.16, 62.

separate from mine, and since they come from the same society they may be useful categories in general. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1

Semantic Domain	Number of Loanwords
Politico-Legal Terminology	0
Names of Professions	0
Architecture	2 (<i>askuppatu, libnat</i>)
Religion	2 (<i>apkallu, sa:xiru</i>)
Astronomy	1 (<i>manzaltu</i>)
Topographical Features	0
Scribal Terminology	0
Tools and Utensils	0
Other Items from the Material Culture	1 (<i>šimtu</i>)
General Vocabulary	5 (<i>xurri, kissugu, laqlaqqu, ma:xirtu, tarpa'u</i>)
Total	11

Seeing how different these results are from Kaufman's, it could be argued that this is largely because his categories are not appropriate to my data, and while that is probably true, it is in itself noteworthy since his categories were derived directly from his data. I have found no examples of loanwords in the political sphere, which was one of Kaufman's largest categories, nor any names of professions (except for *apkallu* and *sa:xiru*, which I classified as religious terminology). Architecture is an area where Kaufman found many loanwords and I also found some, vindicating his statement that "[i]t has long been recognized that architectural terms are frequent among Akkadian loanwords" (1974: 167). I found three words relating to religion and astronomy (which, given the nature of both in Mesopotamian society, might better be combined into a single category), none relating to topography, writing or tools, and only one relating to the non-architectural material culture of Mesopotamia at all. The rest fell into the "general vocabulary" category, although most of these would better be categorized as "flora and fauna" (a semantic area where Kaufman was hesitant to look, because of the difficulty of tracking down the origin of many of these words [1974: 30]); only *ma:xirtu* is an exception, and it is hard to classify as it is a participle with adjectival meaning. All the other words are nouns, which is actually in line with Kaufman's findings about Aramaic, and hardly unexpected given how much more frequently nouns are borrowed than other parts of speech in contact situations in general.

To set up more meaningful categories for this data than Kaufman's, I would say that flora and fauna account for 4 words, religion and astronomy for 3, architecture for 2, material culture for 1 and technical nautical terminology for 1. This paints a very different picture of the relationship between Arabs and Mesopotamians from Kaufman's of the situation he looked at. Rather than a process of language shift (and death) leading to lexical and grammatical interference, this is the story of a group entering a new land full of new things, both natural and man-made, and adopting indigenous words for them as they assimilate to a new culture, both material and otherwise. The lexical evidence to back up my conception of the sociolinguistic situation is therefore quite striking.

3. DIGLOSSIA

3.1 DIGLOSSIA IN ARABIC

One issue that might be thought to affect a sociolinguistic situation like this, and perhaps explain the relatively low levels of lexical borrowing accompanying putative structural borrowing such as I am claiming, is diglossia. Since my proposal involves at least somewhat conscious, deliberate adoption of linguistic structure by speakers in a diglossic (as well as bilingual) situation, it is a priori possible that diglossia could explain some of the unusual features of the resulting linguistic situation.

The term “diglossia” was coined (or, better, brought into English and popularized) by the noted Arabist Charles Ferguson in a 1959 article (Ferguson 1959). His definition:

Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

This definition is somewhat problematic, and there have been objections to various parts of it and efforts to improve on it ever since the article was first published. For my purposes here, the main problem is the reference to “written literature” as an inherent feature of the “high” variety in a diglossic situation. This seems to discount the possibility of diglossia existing in illiterate societies, which would mean it could not have arisen very early in most of the world and would likely be closely associated with modernization and the rise of the nation-state (and indeed some have interpreted the concept this way and concluded that it is not useful for analyzing premodern societies; see, e.g., Schwartz (1995), especially page 17).

Ferguson, however, did not discount the possibility of diglossia without literacy. He writes in a footnote:

All clearly documented instances known to me are in literate communities, but it seems at least possible that a somewhat similar situation could exist in a non-literate community where a body of oral literature could play the same role as the body of written literature in the examples cited.

Following Zwettler (1978), I am assuming that this was the case among the pre-Islamic Arabs, and that this sort of diglossia goes back very far, indeed, even as far back as the times I am discussing when Arabs moved into Babylonia and came into contact with speakers of Akkadian.

Similar things have been claimed by others. Kaye attributes the term “preliterate diglossia” to the prominent Americanist Mary Haas, and quotes her description of it:

I do not believe that writing is *necessary* for such a situation. A highly venerated oral literature which is passed from generation to generation by memorization provides an entirely comparable situation. (Kaye 1975: 325, emphasis Haas’s)

Kaye also considers the possible origin of such a situation, and after noting that the Yanomami of South America are reported to have a special “chanted trade language” used for “formal intertribal communication” at special “gatherings,” he says that “[i]t seems

possible that Arabic speech communities in their preliterate stages could have had beginnings such as those among the Yanomami” (1975: 337). If I am correct that diglossia was already present among the Arabic-speaking tribes in the mid-first millennium BC, of course, this development must have taken place very far in the past indeed. Once it arose, however that happened, it could easily have been maintained by the processes proposed by Zwettler (1978) using the Parry-Lord approach to oral-traditional poetry; this presumably involved some combination of informal apprenticeship and formal schooling, both of which are often present in preliterate societies (Akinaso 1992).

3.2 DIGLOSSIA IN AKKADIAN?

The concept of diglossia has been applied very widely, with varying theoretical interpretations and mixed results. With regard to the ancient Near East specifically, it is often referenced in connection with Hebrew and Aramaic, often in attempts to figure out the relationship between them in Jewish communities of the first centuries AD (Goshen-Gottstein 1978, Schwartz 1995) or to date various features in Biblical Hebrew (Bergey 1984, Tsumura 1999). Diglossia tends to play a fairly small role in the latter kind of research, which is mainly focused on other questions. One exception to this generalization is Rendsburg 1990, which presents itself as a study of diglossia in Biblical Hebrew. This is a particularly problematic work in my opinion, since it defines “diglossia” essentially in terms of a contrast between “literary” and “colloquial” speech, which, while not an uncommon way to use the term, seems to me to rob it of its specificity in describing a particular and not very common sociolinguistic situation. Schwartz is similarly critical of broad uses of the term like this; as he puts it, “[t]he utility of so broad a conception of the phenomenon as a principle of social classification is not obvious, for diglossia in this sense is a feature of all but the simplest societies” (1995: 16). As a result of Rendsburg’s interpretation of diglossia, his book is mainly about searching for evidence of “colloquial” features in the Biblical text, and in doing so he is, I think, overly reliant on the concept of “drift,” which he uses as justification for comparing quite specific syntactic and morphological features in Biblical Hebrew and other Semitic languages only attested much later, particularly Arabic.

Questionable uses with respect to Hebrew aside, however, the concept of diglossia has not been very widely adopted in the study of the ancient Near East. On the one hand, this is rather expected, since all our knowledge of that time and place comes from written sources, and diglossia is preeminently a concept that applies to spoken language (or, more specifically, to the interplay between written and spoken language). On the other hand, though, the well-documented nature of some of these societies could give us an opportunity to try to understand how written language may have functioned in societies where literacy was very limited and where culture must, therefore, have been predominantly oral for most people. Mesopotamia, being one such society, seems like it would be a good place to look for evidence of this kind. Was there diglossia among the speakers of Akkadian?

Given our current state of knowledge, it is hard to say. Stephen Kaufman explicitly compared Standard Babylonian, the literary register of Akkadian in the first millennium, to Modern Standard Arabic (though without using the term “diglossia”) (1974: 6), but his interpretation contains much guesswork about the intelligibility of Standard Babylonian to the average (illiterate) Akkadian-speaker, and it is hard to say how accurate it is. A conference of prominent Assyriologists on the subject of “orality” in Mesopotamian narrative (“epic”) poetry, the proceedings of which are contained in Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992,

concluded that this genre shows little sign of being of oral composition, at least in the Parry-Lord sense, and that while it shows many signs of “aurality,” it is fundamentally a product of a literate society, and in the form we know it is clearly of written origin. While there surely must have been something in the way of oral popular literature in ancient Mesopotamia, there is little trace of it in our texts and no way to tell how similar or different its language would have been from the written register we know so well.

It is clear, then, that our current state of knowledge is nowhere near a determination of what, if any, role diglossia played in ancient Mesopotamian society. The sociolinguistic situation I am positing for contact between Arabs and Babylonians would thus involve diglossia on the Arabic end, with the new features being picked up by the Arabs being consciously incorporated into their formal poetic language, but not necessarily anything similar on the other side. This also means that I must posit a certain amount of literacy among the Arabs, to enable them to learn about things like case endings in the first place, since there is no evidence that there was any spoken register of Akkadian that contained such things (which is not to say, of course, that there definitely wasn't). This is not actually that odd a thing to claim, as the Arabs in Babylonia were likely involved closely with the spice trade across the Arabian Desert, and merchants in Mesopotamia were generally literate. They were thus also probably in close contact with the Arabs who still lived in the desert, and may on that account be assumed to have maintained their language to some degree (as it would be useful in business) even as they assimilated culturally over the generations. There was thus a probable conduit for linguistic (and cultural) influence from the acculturated, literate Arabs of Babylonia to the nomads of the desert, who would have incorporated many aspects of that influence (like, say, a case system in the poetic language) into their own society and preserved and developed them until they reached the level of elaboration apparent when Arabic became a written language a thousand years later.

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