

REVIEW OF E. REINER: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF AKKADIAN

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A Linguistic Analysis of Akkadian is an unusual addition to the library of the student of Assyriology because of the methodology employed in writing it. Unlike the traditional grammars such as von Soden's Grundriss der Akkadischen Grammatik or Ungnad and Matouš Akkadische Grammatik which are the standard introductions to the study of Akkadian, Professor Reiner's book represents a fresh and new approach to the study of an ancient language, the first time that such an approach has been undertaken in Assyriological studies. Reiner attempts: "to give a description of the elements of the language--phonemes and morphemes--and the occurring combinations of these elements in terms of categories established from the analysis of Akkadian itself, and not in terms of some grammatical model--such as one or another language of the Semitic family--nor in terms of the grammatical categories of the Assyriologist's native tongue or of some second language acquired by him, such as Latin or Greek, in the humanistic gymnasium" (p.15)." It is, therefore, easy to understand the apprehension with which such a grammar may be viewed by the student of Assyriology when, opening the book, he finds chapter headings such as "phonology" (with the subdivisions "phonemes", "stress", and "distinctive feature analysis") instead of the traditional chapter on "consonants and vowels"; when he sees "morphology" (subdivided to "morphophonemic alternations", "inflectional classes", and "distribution") rather than the conventional explanation of noun and verb, declension, conjugation, and inflection accompanied by paradigms; or when he reads "generative statements" written in a code which is unknown to him and which takes the place of the traditional rules of grammar. However, this "unorthodox" approach to grammar is quite familiar to the student of linguistics who, with the help of Reiner's book, is

capable of becoming familiar with Akkadian without too much difficulty. However, the student of Assyriology (who is usually trained as a philologist) will receive such a book with doubts and even with resentment, arguing "What is it good for?", "Who can understand it?" "How useful is such a grammar for the beginner or the advanced student or even "for Assyriology?"; and if he gains some knowledge of the basics of modern linguistics, the student of Assyriology may then ask "But what are the practical applications?" (a question which, by the way, is rarely asked by the student of linguistics who is too occupied with theoretical investigations on the nature of languages). Before trying to answer these questions, it will be necessary to explain a few things about the discipline of linguistics in a series of oversimplified statements: the modern study of linguistics (i.e. what a language is) gave rise to two parallel developments. The first, in Europe, goes back as far as the early 19th century, to the Grimm Brothers who had noticed the correlation between certain languages belonging to the same family. The second took place in America where anthropologists (such as Boaz) undertook the task of recording unknown Indian languages. (It is the American school of linguists which gave rise to modern linguistics and which is the most prevalent today). Working with an unknown language without any established framework with which to refer made it necessary to study a language in terms of that language itself. Conventions based on elements common to all languages (universals) were established and the following structure emerged: every language can be described in terms of speech which transforms a message. The elements which compose speech are sounds ("phonemes" in the linguistic terminology, and their study: "phonology"), their combination into meaningful units, i.e., particles, roots, stems ("morphemes" in the linguistic terminology, and their study: "morphology") and the combination of these meaningful units in an utterance to transform a message, i.e., sentence (syntax). The formulation of statements about a given language in terms of its phonemes and morphemes is the concern of the discipline called "descriptive" or "structural" linguistics, and which accounts for one branch in the field of linguistics. The title of Reiner's book, A Linguistic Analysis of Akkadian thus could be restated "An investigation of the structure of Akkadian and formalizing general statements about the construction of Akkadian which have emerged from this investigation."

The merits of such an investigation are apparent since it frees the language under investigation from the restrictive straitjacket which the more conventional methods of investigation impose. In the present case it frees Akkadian, a Semitic language, from the terminology of Greek and Latin

which belong to the Indo-European family. The following example illustrates this point: The notion of "stem" which we have inherited from the Latin grammarians is defined by linguists as "a morpheme or a combination of morphemes to which an affix can be added."¹ Thus English "friendships" contains three morphemes: 1) "friend" 2) "ship" and 3) "s" (=plural). The combination of "friend" + "ship" forms a stem "friendship"; "s" is the affix denoting plurality and by definition "s" cannot be added to "ship" alone. Thus, by definition the stem cannot be altered.

For the sake of convenience (and because custom dies hard), the term "stem" is frequently used in describing a Semitic language, (Reiner, p. 72 #5.4.3.) even though such a usage is, technically, incorrect since the concept of the "stem" as used in the Indo-European languages is nonexistent in the Semitic languages.² Most Semitic words are composed of a triconsonantal root combined with various vocalic infixes and combinations of other prefixes and suffixes. Thus the root prś in the G takes on the shapes: i-PRUS, ta-PRUS-i, a-PRUS, etc. The root prś is a discontinuous morph which denotes the lexical meaning; "u" is an infixed morph which denotes G Preterite; the other prefixes and suffixes denote the person. However, even the linguistically unsophisticated reader will notice one regularity in the example given above: PRUS is the common element for the G Preterite conjugation, and the personal affixes are added to it, and it is this element, the root in the G which is called the stem.

An additional merit of the methodology of descriptive linguistics is that it provides us with the tools to describe a language in the most economical fashion and it is unfortunate that it is this very aspect of linguistics which deters most people inasmuch as it requires a familiarity with the terminology and shorthand notations used by the professional linguist. However, if the student is faced with the choice of either reading bulky grammars where one is required to search through many pages for a certain grammatical point which may be illustrated through numerous examples, or with that of looking for a more concise rule which applies to that point and which will always work, the second choice is, by far, more preferable. Mastering the terminology and notations is

1. H. A. Gleason, An Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics (N.Y.:1955) p. 59. Z. Harris in Structural Linguistics (Chicago:1963) p. 161, gives a somewhat different definition which is still very close to the one mentioned above.

2. With the exception of kinship terms and parts of the body.

a technical obstacle which can be easily overcome. Returning to the above-mentioned example pr̄s, with a descriptive grammar, the student who is faced with an unknown form taprusi in the text rather than searching laboriously for such a form in the conventional grammar, is able to find the stem pr̄us quickly and immediately sees that it is a G Preterite stem. Then, looking for the personal affixes, he easily discovers that he is faced with the 2nd person feminine singular. Noticing the regularities in a language also facilitates the learning of it. Instead of memorizing paradigms and conjugating an infinite number of verbs, the linguistically sophisticated student knows that, in the G Preterite, he has to remember the basic stem CCUC and the personal affixes. In a descriptive grammar this rule would appear: G Preterite = Personal affix + CCUC + mood.

A further merit of descriptive grammar is pedagogical. Knowing the structures of both the language to be learned and the language of the student enables the teacher to point out the differences between the two and to anticipate those points which will be hard to master.

In the 1950s and especially after the publication of Noam Chomsky's Syntactic Structures (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1957) an interest arose among linguists in "generative grammar," a fairly new approach to linguistic theory and description, an aspect of linguistics to which part of Reiner's book is devoted. A "generative grammar" very much resembles a program written for a computer, and this is by no means an accident. The initial impetus for this line of investigation came from the attempt to build translating machines which, in turn, opened new avenues for the theoretical linguists in which the emphasis was placed upon finding a more economical way of stating rules then employed in descriptive linguistics. This required reducing facts down to the basic essentials until the written rules of grammar began to resemble mathematic formulae to the untrained eye. (Examples of such grammatical rules can be found in the Appendices of the book under discussion). The aims of "generative grammar" are to be able to tell which combinations of linguistic elements are permitted, i.e., to make sure that only grammatical sentences could be generated from a structural description, and to see to it that basic concepts and operations would apply to all languages. Problems and issues raised by these restrictions will occupy the linguists for years to come, but will also increase our understanding of the nature of languages. Although the workings of such a system are easy to understand, to construct such a grammar requires much training and a very analytical mind.

In "generative grammar" the basic assumption is that there is a basic underlying kernel sentence for every

language.³ In English such a sentence is composed of a noun and a verb. This sentence can be expanded to include particles and modals. Such an expansion of the sentence is called "derivation." The sentence "the man hit the ball" will be derived from the following set of rules:

Sentence

1. S (Sentence) becomes NP (noun phrase) + VP (verb phrase)
2. NP _____ T + N
3. VP _____ Verb + NP
4. T _____ the
5. N _____ man, ball, etc.
6. V _____ hit, etc.

ex. Sentence

1. NP + VP
2. T + N + VP
3. T + N + Verb + NP
4. the + N + Verb + NP
5. the + man + Verb + NP
6. the + man + hit + NP
2. the + man + hit + T + N
4. the + man + hit + the + N
5. the + man + hit + the + ball

Sentences which cannot be derived can be reached by transformation. A transformation is applied when a change in the word-order of the derived sentence is required. (The English passive is such a case). The verb-slot can be expanded to include Auxiliary + verb. The derivational rules quoted above will carry us to the stage NP - Aux. - V - NP. However, this is not enough to arrive at the sentence "the ball has been hit by the man" from "the man hit the ball." In this case a transformation for the passive should be applied. The rule calls for the following procedures:

When we have NP(=X₁) - Aux(=X₂) - V(=X₃) - NP(=X₄) and want to get a passive, then

X₁ - X₂ - X₃ - X₄ _____ X₄ - X₂ - be + en-X₃ - by + X₁

Thus "the man(=X₁) has (=X₂) hit (=X₃) the ball (=X₄)" becomes "the ball(=X₄) has (=X₂) been hit (=X₃) by the man (=X₁)."

There is no doubt that, on the theoretical level, the insights gained into the structure of Akkadian could be used by the student of Assyriology in the same way that principles of descriptive linguistics could be used by him. How-

3. Rules are taken from Chomsky, Syntactic Structures.

ever, a question should be raised concerning the practicality of using such an approach when dealing with an ancient language. To develop a "generative grammar" to the degree in which it can be practically used in a project such as that currently undertaken at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago requires a vast expenditure of manpower and of time. In spite of many years of work already done, there has not yet appeared even a single complete "generative grammar" for any known language. Such an enormous effort is well-justified in dealing with modern spoken languages where the number of texts is infinite, but with the ancient languages, where we are dealing with a relatively finite number of texts (the possibility of obtaining new texts is limited by the haphazard chance of discovering them during the course of excavations) it would, perhaps, serve the purpose of the Assyriologist better if the time and effort expended in constructing a "generative grammar" would be put into conventional translations of the known texts.

As Professor Reiner herself points out in the introduction to her book, the present study suffers from shortcomings which are a result of writing for two types of readers, the linguists and the Assyriologists. Here the old rule about the impossibility of serving two loyalties well applies. The student of Assyriology will still find the study too difficult to follow because of his lack of knowledge of linguistic principles and terminology. The glossary of linguistic terms, although helpful, does not answer his needs. How can the Assyriologist, without any knowledge of linguistics, follow such a definition as: "Phoneme: A phoneme is a bundle of concurrent (acoustic) DISTINCTIVE FEATURES serving primarily to differentiate MORPHEMES and whole words. One or more phonemes may constitute one morpheme." (p.153) (Such a definition is also somewhat linguistically inaccurate and requires a proof.) Other terms used which are defined in the text, e.g. "phonotactics", "stem", etc. are not repeated in the glossary. Had the book been written for a linguistic audience only, it is expected that it would have been more concise and that a larger part of the data would have been presented in "generative" terms. Reiner's work is valuable and welcome, despite these few flaws. As the first linguistic study applied to an ancient language, it points out the universality of linguistic theory, and it helps to bring into closer relationship the linguist and the philologist who, after all, are both concerned with language.