Exploring language variation and change in the distant past.

The modelling of 'prehistorical' language features through comparative analyses and reconstructions offers a unique insight into language dynamics in the distant past (e.g., Dunn et al. 2011; Carling & Cathcart 2021). However, to analyse the particulars of the process of language change in its socio-historical embeddings, we are constrained to analyse written documentation. But not all records are suitable for this endeavour; historical sociolinguistic research has mostly focused on well-attested post-medieval European languages (e.g., Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003), and could be expected to find major limitations for ancient languages (Winter 1999). Then, how far back in time can we go to study variation and change in languages? What are the temporal limits for assessing the *uniformitarian principle* (Bergs 2012)?

While sociolinguistic variation has indeed been accounted for in the study of languages going back at least to classical antiquity (e.g., Adams 2013), this presentation explores the study of language variation and change ca. 4 millennia before present. Using corpora of Old Babylonian epistolary texts (cf. Hernáiz 2020), significant observations can be made regarding phonological and morphological variables in Akkadian, one of the earliest recorded languages. Two case studies will be discussed: the deaffrication of sibilants and gender syncretism in the demonstrative/pronominal paradigm.

Despite clear limitations, the characteristics of the continuously growing record of Akkadian provides documented data (i.e., not reconstructed) that illustrate the co-existence of variants of linguistic variables in communities of the distant past. The analysis of these variables offers a higher resolution image of language change in the context of socio-political fluctuations, population movements and contact between lectal varieties.

Key words

Language variation and change, syncretism, deaffrication, ancient languages, Akkadian

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