Sam Mirelman
Research Fellow, Department for the Study of Antiquity, University of Geneva
Sam.Mirelmann@unige.ch

Translation as Royal Legitimation: The Concepts of "Source" and "Target" Language in Sumerian-Akkadian Royal Inscriptions from the Old Babylonian Period (2000–1600 BC)

Bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian royal inscriptions from the Old Babylonian period (2000–1600 BC) are amongst the earliest examples of literary translation in world history. The concept and purpose of translation in this early corpus remains largely unexplored, despite its importance to historical linguistics. For example, in most instances translation involves the transference of meaning from an original "source" language to a "target" language. It remains an open debate whether in Sumerian-Akkadian royal inscriptions from the Old Babylonian period, one language is the original "source" and the other language is the "target".

Sumerian is perhaps the earliest language recorded in writing. The date of its earliest attestation is disputed, due to the fact that early cuneiform writing is almost entirely logographic. Assuming that such early logographic writing does indeed represent Sumerian, the Sumerian language is attested from the late fourth millennium BC. The period during which Sumerian died out as an everyday language is also disputed, although this development almost certainly took place around the late third millennium BC. From the Old Babylonian period (2000–1600 BC) until the late first millennium BC, translation between Sumerian and Akkadian became commonplace. It is in this period that Sumerian became a clear marker of antiquity and prestige, a function which has been compared to the role of Latin in Medieval Europe. By contrast, Akkadian was the vernacular language of Mesopotamia. However, various dialects and registers of Akkadian may be identified, including a literary dialect.

In the 18th century BC the king of Babylon, Hammurabi, began to compose (or have composed for him) bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian inscriptions (these inscriptions are "virtual" bilinguals, because the Sumerian and Akkadian versions are written on different physical objects, typically clay nails). This is an important phenomenon, as it is certain in this instance that the Sumerian versions of such inscriptions were newly composed for the king, in a period during which Sumerian was certainly a language known exclusively amongst scholars and priests. The Sumerian in such inscriptions features several markers of language contact with Akkadian. Indeed, one may argue that in such inscriptions the Akkadian is the "source" language and the Sumerian is the "target". However, if this is indeed the case it would go against the expected direction of translation, from the prestige language of Sumerian to the vernacular Akkadian. Indeed, it would suggest that Sumerian functioned as a means of conveying the impression of being a source language, due to its symbolic role as a marker of antiquity and authority. Thus, in the case of this very early example of literary translation, translation does not seem to function as a means of conveying meaning from one language to another. Instead, Sumerian-Akkadian translation functions as a means of conveying prestige and authority, and as a means of asserting royal legitimation.

In the case of Sumerian-Akkadian translation described above, one may arguably use the term "pseudo-translation" (Toury 1995: 40–52), or the concept of language contact through translation (e.g. Kranich 2014). The specific problems involved in the study of written, as opposed to oral, language contact must also be considered (Adams, Janse and Swain eds. 2002; Lavidas 2022).

References

Adams, J. N., M. Janse and S. Swain (eds.). 2002. *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Text.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kranich, S. 2014. "Translations as a Locus of Language Contact." In J. House (ed.), *Translation: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 96–115.

Lavidas, N. 2022. *The Diachrony of Written Language Contact*. Brill's Studies in Historical Linguistics 15. Boston/Leiden: Brill.

Toury, G. 1995. *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (2nd Edition 2012). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.