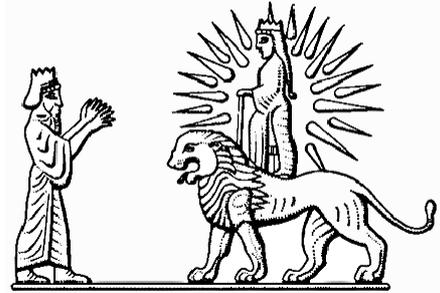


THE MELAMMU PROJECT

<http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/>



“The Babylonian Science of the Translation and the Ideological Adjustment of the Sumerian Text to the ‘Target Culture’”

STEFANO SEMINARA

Published in Melammu Symposia 3:

A. Panaino and G. Pettinato (eds.),

Ideologies as Intercultural Phenomena.

Proceedings of the Third Annual Symposium of the

Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project.

Held in Chicago, USA, October 27-31, 2000

(Milan: Università di Bologna & IsIao 2002), pp. 245-55.

Publisher: <http://www.mimesisedizioni.it/>

This article was downloaded from the website of the Melammu Project:

<http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/>

The Melammu Project investigates the continuity, transformation and diffusion of Mesopotamian culture throughout the ancient world. A central objective of the project is to create an electronic database collecting the relevant textual, art-historical, archaeological, ethnographic and linguistic evidence, which is available on the website, alongside bibliographies of relevant themes. In addition, the project organizes symposia focusing on different aspects of cultural continuity and evolution in the ancient world.

The Digital Library available at the website of the Melammu Project contains articles from the *Melammu Symposia* volumes, as well as related essays. All downloads at this website are freely available for personal, non-commercial use. Commercial use is strictly prohibited. For inquiries, please contact melammu-db@helsinki.fi.

STEFANO SEMINARA Roma

The Babylonian Science of the Translation and the Ideological Adjustment of the Sumerian Text to the ‘Target Culture’

As the most recent theories on the translation science consider this activity more and more an intercultural phenomenon, rather than only an interlinguistic one, I thought this Symposium was the appropriate place to present this paper, a further elaboration of some ideas risen from my doctoral dissertation on the Akkadian translation of the *Lugal-e* myth.

Starting from the 2nd millennium (that is, from the beginning of the period known as Old Babylonian), the Babylo-

nian culture represents a particular situation of bilingualism, defined by J. S. Cooper¹ “literary bilingualism”: the spoken language (spoken and written in the practical and every day use) is Akkadian, while the literary language is, together with the Akkadian, the Sumerian too.

During the Old Babylonian period, the ancient works of the Sumerian literature started being translated into Akkadian. The aim of this paper is to answer to the following question: how and why did the Babylonians translate the Sumerian?

Did a translation ‘theory’ exist?

The Babylonians did not leave a ‘manual of translation technique’. But it is likely that the teaching of the translation technique was entrusted, exclusively or very nearly, to the school apprenticeship and therefore transmitted only through the verbal channel.

The rare evidence of a Babylonian theory of the translation is documented only in texts of a scholastic nature. The lines 14 and 15 of the so-called *Examenstext A*, although obscure and hardly interpretable, seem to be devoted exactly to the translation activity practised in the schools. In particular, at line 15 there’s a

term, *pūhtu* (literally “exchange,” “substitution”), which has to be surely related to a process of translation, even if its exact meaning in our context remains ‘obscure’. Various interpretations of this term have been proposed (“synonym,” “antonym,” “metaphor,” “metonymy,” “inversion of signs”), but no one has turned out to be convincing up to now. The immediately following noun is not less obscure than the previous one: *egirtu*, generally identifying a particular type of document, but certainly having a different meaning in our passage, probably has to be connected to the etymology

¹ J.S. Cooper, *Sumerian-Akkadian Literary Bilingualism* (Chicago, 1969).

of the root (“something placed transversally”). It is not unlikely that the two terms refer to as many types of equivalences: linear the first one, “transversal,” maybe, the second one.

Furthermore, at the line 20 of the same text, it is written that the Sumerian language is a “mirror” (nì-sè-ga in Sumerian, *tamšīlu* in Akkadian) of the Akkadian language. Therefore, a relation of

specularity and symmetry would exist between the two languages.

But now, are these formulations of a theoretical nature confirmed in the Babylonian accepted practice of the Sumerian texts’ translation, which can be reconstructed through the analysis of the Akkadian ‘versions’ of the Sumerian works?

The translation as a divination form and the Sumerian terminology for “translating” (*inim-bal*)

The symmetry is an important concept in the Babylonian way of imagining the reality. In fact, the idea of symmetry was totally congenial to the Babylonian conception of the *cosmos* intended as a whole of the reality’s layers perfectly corresponding with each other. This is exactly the image of the *cosmos* described in the poem *Enūma Eliš*, which attributes to the god Marduk, who had won the forces of *chaos*, the organization of universe. It is right this conception of the *cosmos* that justifies the practice of the most common Mesopotamian science: the divination, which is nothing but the search of the connections between the phenomena occurring in the macrocosm (whether concerning the sky or the divine world) and in the microcosm (whether concerning the history of the nations or the life of the individual). In such a vision of the world, it is easy to understand how every accident or phenomenon of the reality is intended as a sign to be interpreted (in order to understand the connection with the macrocosm, especially with the divine will, and then the possibility of a negative or positive effect on

the reality).

From this point of view, also a Sumerian text or, more exactly, each writing sign, due to its quality of ‘container’ of a plurality of meanings, becomes a sign to be interpreted. Therefore, the ‘conversion’ of a Sumerian text into the Akkadian language can be defined, rather than a real ‘translation,’ a ‘decoding’ operation, that is a thorough examination and a selection of the meanings accepted by the sign.

It is not a chance that the Sumerian term we generally render with our “to translate,” *inim-bal*² – literally “word-to-turn,” that is “to turn the word” –, actually does not mean exactly “to translate.” It rather expresses any act of communication – verbal or written – involving the passage from a code to another: from the human to the divine language (and vice-versa), from the animals’ to the men’s language, from a language to another (the only passage, among the mentioned ones, that we appropriately call “translation”). Furthermore, in some cases, the verb *inim-bal* is associated to the decoding of “omens”

² More rarely *eme-bal*, “to turn the tongue.”

(giskim) or “dreams” (ma-mú.d), emphasizing even more the relation between

the two techniques of the ‘translation’ (as we call it) and divination.

The translation as ‘decoding’ of each single sign or a ‘selection’ between various meanings of a sign

For the Babylonians, what we call “translation” is an inverse or specular process compared to the operation of writing. At this point, I need to make a consideration for introducing a further equivalence. In origin, the writing had represented the ‘coding’ process of the *realia* in the writing signs, in consequence of which the reality’s constitutive elements had been dismembered to be then gathered into ‘sets’ on the basis of their affinity – we would say: on the basis of semantic associations – and each set had been expressed with its own sign. Now, as in origin the writing had been the ‘coding’ process – and still was in all its aspects, at least virtually –, the translation is nothing but the ‘decoding’ of a sign through a ‘thorough examination’ of the numerous meanings contained, in order to find the meaning (theoretically the only possible one) that the sign assumes within a determined context.

Of course, this applies only to the translation of ‘continuous texts,’ mythological, epic and similar (the only ones where the signs are input within a complete sense context). On the contrary, in the lexical lists of each sign, all possible

meanings are given, each one with its Sumerian interpretation and correspondent translation into Akkadian.³ But the thorough examination of all possible meanings of the sign proceeds through a pure speculation and a chaining of “semantic associations,” until such a point that meanings (that is, translations into Akkadian), never attested in the Sumerian written tradition, but rather deduced through associations based on the Akkadian equivalences themselves, are often attributed to a sign. This way, it can happen that a sign is translated with an (Akkadian) term which is rather an antonym of its original value (in Sumerian). As an example, a lexical list gives the sign UD – which generally means “day,” but also “light,” “sun,” and so on – also the meaning of “night” (value which has never been attested for the sign UD in Sumerian!).

Based on what has been said up to now, we can therefore conclude that the translation is always the result of a choice, that is the selection of one or more meanings within the range of those accepted by the sign itself.

From the sign to the text

At this point, it should be easier to understand the opening statement: that the

Babylonian translation of a Sumerian text is first of all a search inside the single

³ Sometimes, however, it can happen that also in continuous texts a sign is translated twice, that is with two of the possible Akkadian equivalences (herein-

after we will call this translation technique “alternative”).

signs of the writing. Another aspect of the Babylonian translations derives from the above said: the very little attention paid to the unity and internal coherence of the ‘target text.’ In the translation, in fact, each sign becomes an autonomous nucleus of meaning, therefore it can happen that some lines of the Akkadian translation turn out to be not very ‘natural,’ and even ‘illegible,’ or not very coherent, and even contradictory, with the context.

However, there’s a contrary trend: that the ancient translator does violence to the source Sumerian text in order to recover a certain coherence in the target text through the connection of verses which are often very far from each other.

The search of coherence can occur within a limited context, for example a single narrative section. At the line 550 of the *Lugal-e*, the god Ninurta condemns the ‘silica’ stone, one of his enemies in the mythical war he has fought against the ‘monster’ Asag, to saw off throughout eternity the horns “of the bull who knows the Mountain,” in Sumerian *am kur-zu-a*. In the Akkadian translation, the syntagma *am kur-zu-a* is expressed with the unexpected *ana muštaptūtika*, “for its betrayal.” The philological excuse for this translation is offered by the homophony between *am kur* and *an-kúr*, Sumerian equivalent of the Akkadian *muštaptu* (“betrayal”) in the lexical lists (further on we will speak about the homophony as one of the fun-

damental principles of the Babylonian translation technique). The Sumerian text saying “May you serve to saw off the horns of the bull who knows the Mountain!” becomes in the Akkadian version: “Because of your betrayal, I will tear you to pieces with my horns!”. This unusual translation is necessary to harmonize the sense of this line with that of the previous one (549), where the Babylonian translator, dissociating himself again from the Sumerian source text, has denounced the silica’s ‘double-cross’ during the cosmic conflict. In fact, the Sumerian text says more or less: “What is an alliance between the weak against a higher power for?” Completely different the Akkadian version: “You who run with the hare and the hunt with the hounds (literally: now on a side, then on the other)” (this is Ninurta speaking to the silica).

In other cases, the ‘literal’ translation of the source text is sacrificed in favor of the need to harmonize verses very far from each other. For example, at the lines 578 and 428 of the *Lugal-e*, two Sumerian synonymous expressions, but not totally coinciding (*siġ* and *gaz-ede til*, respectively “to tear into pieces” and “consume”), in analogous contexts (it deals again with a curse on two stones), have an almost identical translation in Akkadian (*ina pussusi nagmuru*, “to be consumed/to wear out by hint of crashing”).

Principles, rules and techniques of the translation

The fundamental rules of the translation activity were connatural in the

structure of the writing system.

The translation through homophony

The pictographic matrix – from which the cuneiform could never completely free itself, despite of the constantly increasing formal stylization of the signs – has certainly contributed to giving substance to the idea – not exclusive, though, of the Mesopotamian people – that between the name and the represented thing there was a relation which was neither historical nor conventional, nor incidental, but natural and necessary.

If the name is not a mere convention – that is, it doesn't simply represent, but 'is' the thing –, we do understand that also the sequence of sounds composing each word has to be meaningful. Therefore, the phonetic affinities between names, too, even semantically very distant, cannot be incidental: a deep relation has to exist between homophonous names. Actually, both nature and fate are recorded in the name of each being. This conviction justifies a typically Babylonian 'translating' method – perhaps the most typical one –, we herein call "translation through homophony." Its process is very simple: if the Sumerian

words X and Y are homophonous and A and B are their respective equivalences in Akkadian, you can translate X with B (even if the latter is actually the equivalent of Y) and, vice-versa, Y with A.

For example, at the line 167⁴ of the poem *Angimdimma*, the Sumerian term *me*, which means "essence, divine power," is translated into Akkadian with *tāhāzu*, "battle," due to its homophony with *mè*, which means "battle" in Sumerian. In this case, the scribe, compiling the bilingual text, substitutes the original *lectio* of the monolingual text (*me*) with the one which has acted as intermediary to the translation (*mè*). Other times, the intermediary can remain 'unexpressed,' making the scholar's task difficult. This way, at the line 68 of the *Lugal-e*, the 'syntagma' *alan-za*, "on your statue," is translated, completely unexpectedly, with the Akkadian *mūdû*, "expert, sage." If we pay attention, here the excuse has been offered to the Akkadian translation by the homophony between *alan-za* and *gal-an-zu*, which in Sumerian means exactly "great connoisseur."

Alternative translation

Due to its polysemous nature, each sign of the cuneiform writing includes a more or less large number of meanings, among which it isn't always possible to find the logical or semantic connection (if we exclude the evident cases of synonymy or homophony). In the translation of a continuous text, it can happen that

two Akkadian translations, equivalent to as many meanings potentially included in the sign, correspond to a sign-word of the Sumerian text (because in the Sumerian writing a sign is generally sufficient to express a lexeme).

This translating method can be defined "alternative translation."

⁴ The same thing occurs also in *Lugal-e* 483.

Some examples will be useful to make this ‘technique’ clearer. In the Sumerian prayers called *Eršahunga*, the god Enlil is often called with the traditional name of am, “savage bull.” Now, in some bilingual exemplars (but not in all), the term am is translated with a double Akkadian equivalence: the first one is the literal *rīmu* (that is “savage bull”), the second one is *bēlu*⁵ (“lord”). The latter, a secondary equivalence (also documented in the lexical lists), which has been derived from the first one through semantic association (alluding to the strength and noble ‘lordliness’ of the bull), had been probably used by the Babylonian translator for ‘purifying’ the image of the god from those theriomorphic features which, common in the theological imaginary of the 3rd millennium, had gradually died away in the subsequent developments of the Mesopotamian religiousness.

At the line 500 of the *Lugal-e*, the god Ninurta says to the Magnetite: *šul ní-tuku giš-nu₁₁ bar-šè gál*, “pious young man, making the light reflect on the external surface.” In the Akkadian translation of the passage, though, the sense of the god’s apostrophe to the stone is completely changed: *eṭlu na’du ša nīš nūr inēšu ana ahāti šaknu*, “careful young man, whose look is turned on the calumnies,” where to the Sumerian *bar* are given two Akkadian equivalences contemporarily: *inē šakānu*, “to turn the eyes on, to look at” (in Sumerian *igi-bar*) and *ahāti*, plural of *ahītu*, “calumny” (in Sumerian *bar*).

Sometimes, the alternative translation can generate a double line, with the effect that two lines in the Akkadian version correspond to only one line of the

Sumerian text. For example, to the line 409 of the Sumerian text of the *Lugal-e* – ^dNin-tu á-še₁₇-ba/bi(-šè) díb-bé-šè, “O Nintu, pass through these fresh places!” – correspond two different lines in the Akkadian version: ^d*Bēlet-ilī ša itātuša ilu mamman lā ittiqū*, “Bēlet-ilī, the limits of which no god violates” (409) and ^d*Bēlet-ilī ina tanēhti tišbī*, “O Bēlet-ilī, sit down peacefully!” (409a). The double line is the result of a double interpretation of the sign díb, which is translated with *etēqu* (“to violate” which is actually equivalent of the homophonous *dib*) at the line 409, with *tišbī*, imperative of *ašābu* (“to sit down,” in Sumerian *tuš*, another way of reading, together with díb, the sign KU), at the line 409a.⁶

The use of this ‘translating’ method is very frequent in the so-called ‘onomastic commentaries,’ which are nothing but translation forms elaborated in detail. It’s a typical way of the Babylonian philological science, where Sumerian names are accompanied by a commentary as a translation in Akkadian language. One of the most typical exemplars of this way is represented by the so-called “Commentary of Esagila,” where the name of the most prestigious temple of Babylonia, the Esagila, dwelling of the ‘national’ god Marduk, is put together with 17 different translations in Akkadian. These have clearly been obtained by disassembling the name of the temple in its constitutive signs-words (*é*, *sag*, *íla*, respectively “house,” “head,” “to raise,” therefore “the house raising the head”) and through their translation with Akkadian words equivalent to the original signs or to their homophonous ones. The

⁵ For some examples, see S. M. Maul, ‘*Herzberuhigungsklagen*’. *Die sumerisch-akkadischen Eršahunga-Gebete* (Wiesbaden, 1988), 98 and 112.

⁶ Other philological artifices of the ancient translator are too sophisticated to be analysed in this context.

17 translations of the commentary result, then, from the combination of the homophonous principle with the alternative one. So, at line 1, the name of the temple is translated ‘literally’ as “the house of the raised head” (in Akkadian *bītu našâ rēšī*), while at the line 13, Esagila (the Sumerian name of which is reformulated, using the same stratagem of the homophony, in *é-sa₁₂-an-aga-íl*) is expressed as “the house bearing the royal crown”⁷ (*bītu nāšû agê šarrūti*).

The same method – even if brought to

the highest refinement – is operative in the composition of the so-called section on the ‘50 names of Marduk,’ final part of the *Enūma Eliš*. The name of the god is expressed in 50 different ways, all in Sumerian. Each Sumerian name is disassembled into its signs or constitutive sounds. Then, each Sumerian name is followed by a comment in Akkadian language, obtained by ‘adding to’ and combining the Akkadian lexical equivalences with each unit – signs or syllables – obtained this way.

The translation through metathesis

In the most archaic cuneiform texts the pictograms were placed more or less freely – that is on the basis of considerations of an aesthetical or space’s economy kind – within the subsections of the tablet. This means that the signs’ position order (graphotaxis) did not coincide with the ‘reading’ logical sequence. Therefore, it was up to the scribe to interpret the text, by choosing the sequence to recombine the writing signs.

The Babylonian tradition recovers this archaic aspect of the cuneiform writing, reserving the possibility of modifying the writing signs sequence of the Sumerian text, with the effect of obtaining an Akkadian version very different from the source text.

As an example, at the line 549 of the *Lugal-e*, Ninurta, reprimanding the unruly Silica for the fact that an alliance between two persons cannot win the strength of a superior entity, says: *lú-min a-na-bi*, “what are (a-na-bi) two (min) men (lú)?” The late reviewer recombines the signs’ sequence of the source text through metathesis between *min* and *a*, obtaining *lú-a-min-na-bi*. As the sign *a* is homophonous of *á*, which means “side” (and one of the late sources even substitutes *a* with *á*), the Sumerian syntagma now means (more or less): “two sided man,” thing that authorizes the Akkadian version for the late translator: *ša anniš u ulliš*, “you who (stood) now on a side, then on the other.”

The ‘law’ of the specularity or symmetry

The need of inverting the signs’ order of the source (Sumerian) text in order to justify their recombination in the target

text is clearly explained in the light of another fundamental ‘rule’ of the Babylonian translation practice: the specular-

⁷ An addition as a commentary provides the translation key, giving the following explanatory equivalences: *sa₁₂=šarru*, *sa₁₂=agû*, *íl=našû*. For this text,

see A. R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, OLA 40 (Leuven, 1992), 80-81.

ity (or bi-univocal correspondence or symmetry) between Sumerian text and Akkadian version.

The search of specularity between the Sumerian and Akkadian texts has its own mythic grounds and a theoretical justification. According to the poem of *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, at the beginning of the human history, there was a time in which all peoples of the Earth (at least of that known then) – Sumer and Akkad, Šubur, Hamazi and Martu – spoke to Enlil “in the same language” (in Sumerian: *eme-diš-àm*).

This myth has been subject to several (and often opposing) interpretation attempts. But the theme, we are here concerned with, holds good that the region of Sumer and Akkad is linguistically differentiated from the other parts of the world (each one of which is, in its turn, distinguished by a qualifying name) through the attribute *eme-ha-mun*, probably translated by the Akkadians into *lišān mithurti*, literally “language of the correspondence,” or “language of the symmetry” or “specular language.”⁸

From a later tradition we know that Nabû – god of the scribe art, among the other things – was appointed to the control of the correct correspondence, function that he exercised as “guardian of the symmetry” (in Akkadian: *sāniq mithurti*).

The symmetry is already implicit in the text’s paging up, as it is mainly a matter of interlinear translations, where there’s always an Akkadian version corresponding to each line of the source

text. However, from other evidence, it seems clear that the symmetry between the two texts was the result of a coherent and systematic will. The specularity involves all text’s levels: morphology, syntax.⁹

The ‘violence’ to which the two texts’ languages are submitted makes the search of symmetry evident. The mechanism is of a circular type: on one side, the Akkadian text has ‘to submit’ to the Sumerian (up to result, in some cases, unnatural, illegible or not too much coherent with the context); on the other side, the Sumerian text is ‘revised’ in order ‘to second, to back up’ the Akkadian version (up to create real calques from the Akkadian language). This way, the Sumerian text of the bilingual versions wanders more and more from the original (that of the monolingual versions).

The ‘calques’ can be of various kinds. The lexical ones are rare: for example, at the line 42 of the myth of the *Marriage of Sud*, the Sumerian *sù-ga* (“empty-handed”) is translated into Akkadian through the adverb *rīqiš* (from *rīqu* “empty”). As it is a *hapax*, it’s not unlikely it is a calque.

The semantic calques are another type. For example, at the line 257 of the *Lugal-e*, *zú-ŠEŠ*, “with bitter teeth,” is translated literally *ša šinnā marrū* (“the teeth of whom are bitter”), even if the verb *marāru* (“to be bitter”) is never otherwise documented in association with “teeth.”

Another consequence of the search of

⁸ It seems that, at least at the beginning, *ha-mun* referred to a particular type of fish, which, split in two parts, was then left to dry. Referred to the countries of Sumer and Akkad, then the attribute would mean “(lands) the languages of which are one to the other as the two parts of a fish cut along the bone.”

⁹ However, there are translations where the symmetry between the Sumerian and Akkadian text is inten-

tionally avoided (S.M. Maul, “Küchensumerisch oder hohe Kunst der Exegese? Überlegungen zur Bewertung akkadischer Interlinearübersetzungen von Eme-sal-Texten,” in B. Pongratz-Leisten – H. Kühne – P. Xella (eds.), *Ana šadī Labnāni lū allik. Beiträge zu altorientalistischen und mittelmeerischen Kulturen. Festschrift für Wolfgang Röllig* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1997), 253-267).

the symmetry is that type of translation we herein propose to define “analytical.” The analytical translation consists in disassembling the composed logograms into their constitutive signs, assigning to each of them an Akkadian equivalence. Therefore, for example, in *Lugal-e* 424, *usu* (written Á.KAL) – usually correspon-

ding only to *emūqā* (“strength” in Akkadian) – is expressed through *emūqī* (= Á) *dannāti* (= KAL), “powerful strength.” At the same way, in *Angimdimma* 156 and in *Lugal-e* 24, *gú-en*, in Sumerian “throne hall,” is expressed with *ina naphar bēlī*, “among all (GÚ) the lords (EN).”

Why did they translate?

According to what has been said up to now, it is clear that the Akkadian version of a Sumerian text was not conceived as a support to the comprehension of the source text, even if we cannot exclude the use of the bilingual material for scholastic purposes. The aim of the Ba-

bylonian translator seems to be that of using his own deep knowledge of the Sumerian to achieve sophisticated interpretations of the source text rather than to offer a tool for its comprehension. In synthesis, the knowledge of the Sumerian seems a starting point, not a final one.

The ‘obscurity’ of the Sumerian

Anyhow, the ancient sources agree in underlining the ‘obscurity’ (*dul* in Sumerian, *šullulu* in Akkadian) of the Sumerian language. In the scholastic text known as *Examenstext A*, the scribe asks his son (or pupil): “Do you know how to interpret the hidden sense¹⁰ of all you have learnt in Sumerian?.” In another scholastic text (entitled *Eduba D*), a student answers to a colleague who boasted of “speaking” the Sumerian (*inim-bal*): “As you say! But the sense of the Sumerian remains obscure for you too!”¹¹

Now, as the obscurity to which the verbs *dul* and *šullulu* allude is the one obtained interposing a screen between the view point and the light source, it is evident that the Babylonians accepted two comprehension levels of a Sumerian text: the first one superficial, the second deeper (or hidden or obscure). Therefore, the translation of a Sumerian text doesn’t so much consist in its conversion into the Akkadian language, as rather in the ‘penetration of the veil’ hiding the deep sense of the original.

Free or literal translation?

The continuous mixture of the two meaning levels within the bilingual text can generate a feeling of a singular mix-

ture of two translation ‘strategies,’ literal the first one, free the second (respectively corresponding to the two meaning

¹⁰ *nī-dul-bi* in Sumerian, *katimtašu* in Akkadian.

¹¹ The term is again *dul*.

levels, superficial and deep). Actually, this distinction between free and literal translation – which has always been fundamental in the Western translation, from the first theorizations in translation matters – is alien to the Babylonian thought, just because the two meaning levels co-

exist in the same sign, in every respect. It's up to the translator, in every moment of his work, to privilege a level or the other one: the ancient translator's 'choice' and interpretation 'freedom' become important once again.

The ideological 'adjustment' of the Sumerian text

In the most delicate passages of the text – in particular the ones of a theological or ideological importance – it is evident that the translator's choice among the various possibilities of expressing a sign is not casual at all; on the contrary, most of the times, it is aimed at the attempt to recover the Sumerian source text to a type of cultural and religious sensibility closer to the 'target context' (where the translator lives).

Particularly significant are the cases where the translator tries to recover the ancient divinities of the Sumerian *pantheon* to the type of 'divine imaginary' which had gradually established itself in the 2nd millennium, mainly through the reduction of the theriomorphic features (or excessively 'naturalistic') that had characterized the Sumerian conception of the divine world and, vice-versa, by underlining the aspects of majesty and dignity of the divinities.

For example, at the line 137 of the *Lugal-e*, Šarur, the weapon of the god Ninurta, in order to dissuade its lord from engaging a 'duel' with the terrible Asag, says so: "do not raise your arm (á-zu ba-ra-ni-zi) for Inanna's dance (that is: "for the war")!" The Babylonian translator, perhaps to rehabilitate Ninurta's image and to recover Šarur's ad-

vice to a 'heroic' standard, transforms the text this way: "do not draw your arm away (á-zu ba-ra-mu-un-gi in the Sumerian text, *idka lā tani' amma* in the corresponding Akkadian translation) from Inanna's game!," that is: "do not back out!," exploiting the homography (or homophony) between the signs ZI and GI (the latter, homophonous of gi₄, "to go back" in Sumerian, then equivalent of the Akkadian *nê'u* of the form *tani' amma*).

At the line 182 of the *Lugal-e*, An, the god of the sky, in front of the terrible devastations of Asag, is afraid, "he trembled with fear" or, to say it with the Sumerian context, *íb-dúb*, where the syllable *íb* expresses a sequence of verbal prefixes (/i/+b/), while *dúb* renders the 'verbal root' or the base lexical unit ("to tremble with fear"). The translator – surely, or almost, to redeem the image of An, not much respected by his Sumerian colleague – renders *íb-dúb* with the Akkadian verbal form *īgug*, "he got angry." But how does he arrive to this translation? He completely neglects the verbal root *dúb*, while assumes as 'bearer of meaning' the sign *íb*, corresponding to the Akkadian *agāgu* ("to get angry") as lexical equivalent (both in the lists and in the *praxis* of the other bilingual texts).

In the Lamentation called *URUHU-*

*LAKE*¹² (lines 2 and 12), the term *mušen*, “bird,” epithet of the invoked divinity, is translated with *ardatu*, that is “young woman,” probably on the basis of the

homophony between *mušen* and *mu-tin* (Sumerian equivalent of *ardatu*).

The bilingual literature in cuneiform is full of such examples.

The inversion of sense

In this ‘purification’ process of the Sumerian text, the translator can go as far as the mystification and distortion of the original text, in particular when the possibility of ‘recovery’ of the text is not included in one of the various sign’s senses. In such cases, the translator can go as far as the interpolation, mainly through the input (or suppression) of negative particles or through translation based on antonyms.

For example, at the line 517 of the *Lugal-e*, Ninurta, speaking to the alabaster stone, says: “only you attacked me” (*šu dili-zu mu-e-ni-zi-zi-i*), which is then translated as *qātka ištēn(i) lā*

taššā, that is “you were the only one who didn’t attack me,” with the evident addition of a negative particle (*lā*). What may have induced the translator to a version opposite of its original? It’s because the alabaster, as we can notice in the following lines, is blessed by Ninurta, and, consequently, the Babylonian translator has probably considered that this stone cannot have attacked him (in fact, it is likely that the sentence of the Sumerian text has to be intended in a concessive sense: “even though you attacked me, I bless you,” this should be the final sense of the god’s sentence).

Conclusions

We can conclude that we have to affirmatively answer to the opening question: “Did a Babylonian translation science exist?” Even though almost all the examples mentioned in this paper are

from the *Lugal-e*, they have many parallels in the bilingual literature in cuneiform. An exhaustive presentation of all material will be provided in one of my next works, ready to be printed.

¹² M.E. Cohen, *The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Potomac, 1988), 253f.