

CHAPTER FOUR

THE “WORD” IN SUMERIAN, PARTS OF SPEECH

We will try to define Sumerian parts of speech not by applying classical models, but by observing the morpho-syntactic behaviour of Sumerian “words”.

4.1. “WORD”

A “word” in Sumerian is an entity that can convey meaning on its own without anything spoken before or after. In *é-šè* “towards the house”, *é* is a word whereas *-šè*, the terminative postposition, is not. We define [*še*] as a nominal particle.

In *i-ĝál* “it is there/available”, *ĝál* “to exist” may occur independently, but the prefixed element *i-* may not. We define [*i*] as a verbal particle.

Thirdly, in *é-zu* “your house”, *-zu* “your” (sg.) does not qualify as a “word”, because to the question “whose house is this, mine or yours?” the answer cannot be **-ĝu₁₀* or **-zu*, but only *ĝá(-a)-kam*, *za(-a)-kam* “it is (of me =) mine”, “it is (of you =) yours”. [*ĝu*], [*zu*] and others are connectible with both a nominal and a verbal base. We define them as common particles.

Note: I owe the distinction of nominal, verbal, and common particles to G. B. Milner, *Fijian Grammar* (1956) 130 f. (M. uses “general” instead of “common”.) The Sumerian-Akkadian lexicographers were apparently aware of the idea “word”. Their lexical entries exactly correspond to our idea of a “word” (or of a compound); it is only in the grammatical series (OBGT, NBGT) that we see entries which we would define as “particles” (or rather syllables through which a morpheme boundary ran, e.g., *un*, *an*, *in*, *en* listed to denote consonantal preverbal *-n-*).

4.2. PARTS OF SPEECH

We may distinguish eight parts of speech: (1) nouns, (2) pronouns, (3) numerals, (4) verbs, (5) adverbs, (6) exclamations, (7) subjunctions,

conjunctions, (8) interrogations. All these occur as “words” (see our definition above) and may be found as entries in lexical texts. (1) to (4) may be combined with bound particles (prefixes, suffixes): nominal, verbal, and common. (5) to (8) do not combine with particles. (1) to (3) may be opposed to (4) as nonverbal to verbal categories.

Parts of speech can be identified exclusively on context. There is no way to tell by the form of the base alone whether we are faced with a noun (*dur*, *tur*), a verb (*gur*), or some other part of speech.

A further subdivision of (1) nouns into (1a) substantives and (1b) adjectives is not unproblematic. On the one hand, *sikil* “pure” cannot form a plural **sikil-e-ne* “the pure ones” whereas it may be followed by the plural of the copula: *sikil-me-eš* “they are pure”. For “the pure ones” a nominal head would be needed: *lú-sikil-e-ne* “the pure persons”. On the other hand, *sikil* following a nominal head, e.g., *ki-sikil* “(pure place =) girl, young woman” behaves exactly like an apposition and, as such, may take on all nominal particles.

For practical reasons, we will make the distinction between substantives and adjectives. As a guide-line of high antiquity we may again take the fact that certain Sumerian nouns are entered in lexical lists as Akkadian substantives while others are rendered by Akkadian adjectives. In Akkadian itself, the differentiation of substantives and adjectives is unproblematic on both morphological and syntactical grounds.

(1a) The substantive has the following grammatical categories: class (person, non-person), number (singular, non-singular, plural, collective, detailed, etc.), case (absolute, ergative, genitive, dative, locative, ablative, comitative, terminative, directive, equative), possession singular: 1st, 2nd, 3rd person: person and non-person class; plural: 1st, 2nd, 3rd person: person class only.

These grammatical categories—apart from class—are realized by the suffixation of particles.

The substantive may form part of quite intricate appositional and genitive constructions. It may be followed by adjectives. Some substantives may be repeated (“reduplicated”, e.g., *énsi-énsi* “all of the city rulers”), but we cannot as yet establish whether reduplication was open to any substantive or subject to restrictions.

Substantives and adjectives may take the prefixed particle *nam-*, serving to express an abstract concept: *nar* “musician”, *nam-nar* “music”, *mah* “very big”, *nam-mah* “greatness”.

(1b) The adjective rarely occurs on its own. It is usually connected with a (preceding—rarely following) substantive. Adjectives may serve as the base of adverbs, e.g., *dirig-bi* "(its excessive =) excessively". A few adjectives which express dimension take a reduplicated form when the preceding substantive is meant to be in the plural, e.g., *diġir-gal-gal(-e-ne)* "the great gods" (see also 5.3.7).

Note: This usage has been imitated in Akkadian where an equally restricted class of adjectives expressing dimension has bases with a lengthened middle radical, e.g., *ūlū rabbūtu* "the great gods" (Reiner 1966, 64).

Note: There is a conspicuous similarity between Akkadian nominal formations in *-ūtu* which express both the masc. plural of adjectives (e.g., *damqūtu* "good ones") and an abstract notion (e.g., *širūtu* "majesty", or *šarrūtu* "kingship"), and Sumerian formations with *nam-* (e.g., *nam-mah* "greatness", *nam-lugal* "kingship"). This similarity has most probably to be seen as another symptom of a Sumero-Akkadian linguistic area.

When an adjective is attached to a substantive, all suffixed particles pertaining to the substantive are placed after the following adjective so that one might argue, formally, that the adjective behaves like a substantive. In reality, however, the whole complex (substantive + adjective) has been substantivized.

Adjectives, like substantives, may take the prefixed particle *nam-*, e.g., *nam-mah* "quality of being the greatest" (but it is not yet known how far this was a productive feature); cf. p. 24 bottom.

Thomsen 1984, 64 f., quotes Gragg 1968, 9 who considers adjectives as a sub-class of the verb. In fact, adjectival bases can often be turned into verbal bases, but this can hardly be stated as a general overriding rule.

Black 2003.

(2) Pronouns have the categories of person (1st, 2nd, 3rd), class (person, non-person), number (sg., pl.), and case.

(2.1) Personal pronouns: As 1st and 2nd persons can, by nature, only be person class (unless non-person class becomes a "person" in a literary context), the differentiation of person : non-person is restricted to the 3rd person; moreover, it does not operate in the 3rd pl., where only person class occurs.

As for case, personal pronouns have a restricted system of case inflection as compared with substantives: absolutive and ergative are identical in form; there is no ablative or directive.

We do not include as parts of speech the bound forms of personal pronouns in their quality of possessors; cf. below 5.2.

We may include, among pronouns, the question words "who",

“what”, because the answer may not only be a substantive (who: my father), but also a person (who: me, you). Sumerian, like most of the world’s languages, distinguishes “who” (a-ba) and “what” (a-na).

The system of deictic pronouns is still poorly explored in Sumerian. Bound forms (suffixed particles) are not included here; see below 7.

(3) Numerals. Cardinal numerals are written in the sexagesimal system (see below, 10.2) following the item counted. In this respect, they resemble adjectives, and as with adjectives if a complex of substantive + cardinal number is provided with a suffixed particle, it is shifted from the substantive to the numeral, the whole complex, substantive + numeral, being turned into one noun.

Numerals occur in the genitive, after a substantive, in order to denote ordinal numbers: mu-3-kam “(it is the year of three =) third year”.

(4) The verb is the most complex part of speech in Sumerian. It has an extremely variable set of prefixed particles as well as a number of suffixed particles. The verbal base in itself may be subject to variation.

The verb may express the following categories: person, class, number, action, direction, tense/aspect, mood.

Except for lexical lists where the (simple or reduplicated) verbal base is regularly equated with Akkadian infinitives, the verbal base extremely rarely occurs alone, without any prefixed or suffixed particles.

A verb(al complex) may be turned into a noun, i.e., be nominalized, by the addition of the suffixed particle [a] (see 12.16). Such a newly created noun may then be subject to nominal inflection (receiving suffixed case particles). Nominalized verbal complexes frequently have to be rendered by English dependent clauses. The very productive system of Akkadian (nominal) infinitive constructions may be seen as an Akkadian share in the Sumero-Akkadian linguistic area (see 17).

(5) Adverbs. Words which describe in a more precise way the idea contained in a verb are traditionally defined as adverbs: “he arrived”, “he recently arrived”. In Akkadian, this category is usually formed with an adjective as base + the ending -iš, e.g., *eššu* “new”, *eššiš* “anew”, *damqu* “good”, *damqiš* “nicely”. This way of forming adverbs has two Sumerian counterparts:

gibil-bi “(its new =) anew”,
zi-dè-eš [*zid-eš*] = *zi(d)* “true” with the adverbial particle [*eš*]
 (Attinger 1993, 253–56), “truly”, “in a sincere, reliable way”.

Note: The obvious similarity of Sumerian [eš] and Akkadian [iš] may not be due to pure chance. Was the Sumerian adverbial a loan from Akkadian?

Less frequently, -bi + šè (or -éš?) are combined: mah-bi-ŠÈ “in a most exalted way”; gibil-bi-ŠÈ “anew”.

Cf. Thomsen 1984, 66 f.

The adverb being already a derived form, it is frozen in itself and not subject to further change.

(6) Exclamations. They express joy, fear, pain, surprise, doubt, etc. i (dUtu) “woe (o Sungod)”, u₈-ú-a [way] “alas, woe”, a-la-la “hey”, and others.

Here also belong the expressions for “yes”, hé-àm (lit. “let it be”) and “no”, in-nu (where the negative particle [nu], given the status of a base, is preceded by the neutral motion particle [i]).

(7) Because Sumerian mainly uses nominalized verbal phrases (to which postpositions may be added—see 12.16) instead of subordinate clauses, it essentially lacks subordinations and conjunctions. Note ì-gi-in-zu “as if”, tukumbi “if” (for which Old Sum. has [uda], see 14.2.1).

As a conjunction, ù “and” has been borrowed from Akkadian [wa, u].

Note: Borrowing “and” is well known in agglutinating languages: ve (Arabic wa) in Turkish, ja (Old Germanic jah) in Finnish, eta in Basque. But Sumerian u only occurs to connect phrases, not parts of speech; insofar it is not a replacement of Sumerian -bi(-da) which may connect parts of speech (see hereafter).

As a replacement for a conjunction, -bi or -bi-da is attested: áb amar-bi-da “the cow (with its =) and the calf”;

^dNin-ġir-su, ^dŠára-bi(-r) “to Ningirsu and Šára” Ent 28/29 i 5–6 (see 5.4.2.6. b).

(8) Interrogations. We can only partly translate into Sumerian the famous hexameter quis quid ubi quibus auxiliis cur quomodo quando. For “who” and “what” see 9.4; “where” is me-a; “why” is a-na-aš (-àm) [anaš’am] “for what (is it)?”.

[J. Black, Sumerian lexical categories, ZA 92 (2002) 60–77, came to the author’s attention only after the preceding chapter had been written.]