

The Linguistic Classification of Eblaite: Methods, Problems, and Results

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Soon after the royal archives from Ebla were unearthed, the nature of the Semitic language contained in the texts from these archives became a much-disputed question in the fields of Assyriology and Old Testament studies. It is understandable that the ensuing discussion did not proceed from the beginning in a logical and methodologically clear way. One of the reasons for this was the fact that preliminary, and not always correct, citations from the texts often had to serve as arguments before the first major text publications appeared. Furthermore, the geographical and chronological setting of the settlement itself sometimes resulted in wild speculation. We were confronted with the earliest Semitic texts so far known, and the geographical situation of the site raised hope that the language of these texts might be a precursor of later Northwest Semitic. Therefore, the texts immediately aroused the special interest of scholars of the Old Testament. However, many of the connections between Ebla and the world of the Old Testament claimed in the early stages of Eblaite studies turned out to be wrong or improbable once more material became accessible and was studied more systematically. Thus, alleged attestations of biblical toponyms or of the name of Yahweh had to be abandoned, and the chronological distance between Ebla and the Bible was better taken into account. Nevertheless, there remain some linguistic features in the Eblaite texts that can be interpreted as early Northwest Semitic. Their extent and the role they play within the Semitic material as a whole are still disputed.

I do not intend to deal here with the history of Eblaite studies. Instead, I want to discuss and exemplify problems, possible methods, and results of a systematic linguistic analysis of the Semitic material from Ebla.

Theoretical Approach

The linguistic evaluation of the Semitic material contained in the Ebla texts leads us to three basic questions:

1. Is the linguistic material as a whole homogeneous, or can different languages be distinguished?
2. What is the relationship between this language or these languages and the other Semitic languages?
3. Can this or one of these languages be identified as the genuine language of Ebla?

The problem of a possible linguistic differentiation of the Semitic material did not play an important role in the first stage of discussion. From a systematic point of view, however, it should be the first question to be asked. The basic objects of linguistic analysis are single lexical items. This low level of analysis is necessary because a text may contain lemmata of different linguistic origins, which is most obvious, for instance, in the case of personal names and place-names. The most important criteria for the comparative linguistic evaluation of a given lemma are:

1. Type of lemma (for example, appellative versus proper name)
2. a. Phonology
 - b. Morphology
 - c. Lexicon (isoglosses)

Before single lemmata of a text can be studied in these different aspects, the orthographic system of the text must be clarified. In general, we may assume that the orthographic system and the linguistic features are consistent within one text (with the possible exception of proper names).

In order to evaluate the linguistic homogeneity of the entire corpus, we have to establish and compare the "minimal grammars" of the single texts, text groups, and proper names. Furthermore, the date, origin, and genre must be taken into consideration as text parameters, and we must look for correspondences between distinctive linguistic features and these parameters.

However, the range and variety of the possible results of such an investigation are confined by the structure of the material:

1. The writing system comprises many uncertainties that often make a precise linguistic analysis impossible. The ambiguities of the writing system are due to the following facts:
 - a. The script makes broad use of logograms.
 - b. Syllabic orthography cannot distinguish all the single phonemes, since most syllabograms stand for a class of phonemes of similar articulation.
 - c. In certain positions, some phonemes are not expressed at all.
 - d. Syllabic orthography does not reflect the syllabic structure of a word in a definite and unmistakable way.
 - e. The grammatical form of a word required by the context is probably not always expressed in writing. There seems to be an orthographic convention

that allows for the use of the nominative singular instead of the appropriate inflectional form required by the context.¹ This may be considered a phenomenon transitional between logographic and fully phonetic spelling.

The following example combines several of the above-mentioned orthographic ambiguities:

(1) *a-za-mi-ga* /²aš(am)mid-ka/ (ARET 5, 2 ii 8)²

Each of the syllabograms *a*, *zi*, and *ga* stands for more than one consonantal phoneme: *a* = /²a/, /²al/, /²al/, /²al/, /²al/; *za* = /za/, /sa/, /ša/; *ga* = /ga/, /ka/, /qa/. The sequence *a-za* may represent either two open syllables /²aZa/, or a closed syllable /²aZ/. Final /-d/ of the syllable /mid/ is not represented at all, since a syllabogram for /id/ is lacking in the Ebla syllabary.

2. Different grammatical features are not equally well represented in different types of sources. Therefore, it is almost impossible to compare entire paradigms from different texts or source types. Thus, the lexical texts contain no finite verbal forms, pronouns, or conjunctions, which are all of great importance for linguistic comparison, whereas the personal names yield many finite verbal forms but contribute little to our knowledge of nominal inflection. In addition, most of the verbal forms occurring in personal names are of the same type. A wider range of verbal forms is offered by the literary texts, but many of them are clearly of foreign origin. Thus, we might ask, for instance, if the *iPaRRaS* forms found in literary texts belong to the same paradigm as the *iPRuS* and *iPtaRaS* forms contained in personal names.
3. Finally, we have to take into consideration the possibility that a mixed koiné of the type exhibited later in the Amarna texts existed at Ebla. After analyzing the material according to its possible linguistic differentiation, we come to the question of its classification within the field of Semitic languages. This involves two main difficulties:
 - a. As already mentioned, precise phonological and morphological interpretation is often hampered by the uncertainties of the writing system. Since most of our interpretations are, in fact, more or less dependent on linguistic comparison, we have to be aware of the danger of circular argumentation.
 - b. The contemporary or nearly contemporary material for linguistic comparison is restricted almost exclusively to Akkadian, since most written sources for other Semitic languages are from much later periods.

1. Note, for example, MEE 4, 180: *a-a-gu₂(-um) li-sa-nu* /²alāg- lišān-/ 'stammering of the tongue' (or /²alāq-/ 'sticking'). A similar case is MEE 4, 212: KIR₄.DU₃ = *ša-qi-lum/lu-um a-bu₃ /daqir-²app-/* 'with a "high" nose', or the like. Examples such as these could, however, reflect asyntactic "dictionary style."

2. 'I bound you' or 'I bind you'; cf. Edzard's commentary, ARET 5, p. 19.

The third main problem to be considered is the identification of Eblaite. Assuming that the texts reflect a single Semitic language, is this language to be identified with the language of Ebla, or is it rather a literary language adopted along with the system of writing? If, on the other hand, different languages can be distinguished, which one is the language of Ebla?

The first and most simple criterion of course would be explicit evidence given by the texts themselves. Such evidence has, unfortunately, not yet turned up.

Second, certain types of sources are more likely to represent the local language than others. Thus, personal names constitute the most natural (but occasionally misleading) source for the indigenous language. Of similar importance are the names of specific objects of local origin, such as plants, animals, or institutions. On the other hand, one has to look for contrasting features in sources that are likely to be of foreign origin.

Exemplification and Results

I would like to exemplify the foregoing theoretical considerations and present some basic results. As a starting point, I shall take the Semitic items in the bilingual lexical texts. Analysis and comparison of the different duplicate lexical texts yield a rather homogeneous picture of orthography, phonology, and morphology.

The inventory of consonantal phonemes that can be deduced from the orthographic system by linguistic comparison comprises 26 consonants, assuming that $\text{š}/\text{d}/\text{z}$ and $\text{š'}/\text{s'}$, which are not distinguished orthographically, have already merged into š and š' , respectively. The merger of the voiced, voiceless, and emphatic occlusives, and of the voiced and voiceless interdental, which also are not distinguished in the script, is improbable according to everything we know from the other Semitic languages.

(2)	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>		<i>m</i>
	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t'</i>	<i>n</i>
	<i>g</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>q</i>	<i>ḡ</i> <i>ḫ</i>
	<i>ḍ</i>	<i>ṭ</i>		<i>ç</i> <i>ḥ</i>
	<i>z</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>š</i> (< <i>ḍ</i> , <i>ẓ</i>)	<i>ç</i>
	<i>š</i> (< <i>s'</i>)			<i>h</i>
	<i>l</i>			<i>ʔ</i>
	<i>r</i>			<i>w</i>

Besides the consonantal phonemes, we find the vowels *a ā i ī u ū* and the diphthongs *aw* and *ay*.³

3. In place of the (proto-)Semitic diphthongs *aw* and *ay*, we normally find syllabograms of the type *Ca* (*C* = consonant) that might represent */Cā/*, reflecting monophthongization of *aw* and *ay* > *ā*.

The phonological system is characterized by the following features:

1. Beyond *n*, *m* is also often assimilated to the following consonant:

(3) ŠE.GIN₂ = *si-tum* /šittum/ < /šimtum/ (MEE 4, 693)⁴

On the other hand, *m* as part of the prefix *ma-* is not dissimilated as in Akkadian, if the root contains another labial:

(4) GIŠ.AD.US₂ = *ma₂-ma-du* /ma^cmadu(m)/ (MEE 4, 482)⁵

2. *l* may be “weakened” to ^ʔ, *ɣ*, or probably even zero, and *r* may be written with syllabograms containing *l*.

(5) NI₂.TI = *ba-a-lu-um* /pa^ʔālhum/ (MEE 4, 1290)⁶

(6) AB₂.LU = *ba-ga-lum* /baqarum/ (MEE 4, 1101)⁷

3. As in later Akkadian, sibilants preceding dental occlusives may become *l*:

(7a) NI₃.KAR.KAR = *dal-da-i-bu₃* /taltah(h)ibu(m)/ (MEE 4, 74)

derived from

(7b) NI₃.KAR = *sa-^ʔa₃-bu₃* /šaḥābu(m)/ (MEE 4, 73)⁸

4. The sequence *ya* as a rule becomes *yi*,⁹ as in Akkadian (where *yi* > (^ʔ)*i*):

For this interpretation, see G. A. Rendsburg, “Monophthongization of *aw/ay* > *ā* in Eblaite and in Northwest Semitic,” in *Eblaitica 2* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 91–126, with previous literature. Rendsburg’s main argument is that the Eblaite writing system was able to represent the diphthongs by the spellings *Ca-wa* and *Ca-a*, which would have been regularly used if the diphthongs would have been preserved. However, the “plene” spellings, which I implicitly took as an argument for interpreting *Ca* as /Caw/, /Cay/ (“Zu Syllabar und Orthographie der lexikalischen Texte aus Ebla: Teil 1,” *ZA* 72 [1982] 233), witness clearly to the existence of diphthongs, and regular “defective” spellings are not an isolated phenomenon in Eblaite orthography: gemination of consonants is also left unexpressed in most cases. Furthermore, the usual monophthongization *aw* > *ā* and *ay* > *ē* is attested: for *aw* > *ā*, see (36); for *ay* > *ē*, see MEE 4, 616, where *mi* /mê/ occurs besides *ma-a* /may/ < /māwī/: A.TUKU = ^ca₅(NI)-a-u₃ ma-a; a-a-u₃ mi. It is unlikely that *aw*, *ay* > *ā* should have taken place at the same time. Rendsburg also adduces examples of monophthongization from other Semitic (and non-Semitic) languages. However, many of them could be interpreted differently. For instance, the nominal pattern *PurāS* is not necessarily to be derived from *PuRayS*, and spellings of “Amorite” verbal forms like *ya-bi-il* (interpreted as *yābil*, H stem imperfect from w-b-l), may represent biradical G stems as well (*yabil*). Examples from later Semitic languages often involve orthographic problems, too, and never concern the entire lexicon of a language but only isolated cases for which individual explanations are to be sought (for example, analogy, or special morphological and phonotactic conditions).

4. Akk. *šimtu* ‘sign’, ‘color’. For another possible example, see (35).

5. Akk. *nēmedu* ‘support’.

6. Akk. *palāhu* ‘to fear’.

7. Hebrew, Arabic *baqar* ‘cows’.

8. Arabic *saḥaba* ‘to withdraw’, ‘to take away’.

9. That *i* represents /yi/, not /^ʔi/, is indicated by the contrasting syllabogram *i₃*, which stands for /^ʔi/ and /^ci/.

(8) $A_2.ZI = a/i-me-tum /yamittum/, /yimittum/$ (MEE 4, 534)¹⁰

5. *a* in the vicinity of ^c or *h*, which in Akkadian becomes *e*, is normally preserved as in Early Old Akkadian; see (4).
 6. Diphthongs are normally preserved, not monophthongized (*aw* > *ō*, *ay* > *ē*), which happened very early in Akkadian (for the possibility of a monophthongization *aw*, *ay* > *ā*, see n. 3):

(9) $GIŠ.ŠINIG = ba-nu /baynu(m)/$ (MEE 4, 395)¹¹

(10) $UD.GAN_2 = a(-wa)-mu 2a_3-mu-tum /yawmū ḥammūtum/$ ¹² (MEE 4, 777)

More important than phonology for the purpose of linguistic classification is morphology. The most characteristic morphological features shown by the lexical texts are the following:

1. The system of noun declension is basically identical with that of Akkadian:
 - a. Thus, we find mimation in the singular and in the plural with the endings *-ātum*, *-ūtum*, whereas the masculine plural ends in *-ū*.
 - b. Adjectives form a masculine plural in *-ūtum*, see (10) and (14b).
 - c. Besides the three common Semitic cases in *-u*, *-i*, *-a*, there are cases ending in *-iš* and in *-um*, which correspond to the Akkadian terminative and locative cases:

(11) $ŠU.TA.ŠU.DU = ga-tum-ma ga-ti-iš /qātum-ma qātiš/$ (MEE 4, 512a [emended reading])¹³

2. The most characteristic features of verbal morphology as exhibited by the lexical texts are the following:
 - a. There are stems marked by an infix *t* that have a reciprocal or iterative meaning and thus correspond to the Gt and Gtn stems of Akkadian. Since orthography normally does not allow for a distinction between Gt and Gtn forms, interpretations have to be based on semantics. Thus,

(12a) $A_2.DU_7.DU_7 = da-da-ga-bu_3-um /tattakpum/$ (MEE 4, 544)

could be a reciprocal stem from

(12b) $A_2.DU_7 = na-ga-bu_3(-um) /nakāpum/$ (MEE 4, 553)¹⁴ and

10. Akk. *imittu* 'right (hand)'.

11. Akk. *bīnu* 'tamarisk'.

12. Akk. *ūmū emmūtum* 'hot days'.

13. 'From hand to hand'. A: *ga-du[-ma] ga-ti[-iš]* (reading according to photograph, to be corrected in MEE 4); AI: *ga-du-ma ga-(ti)-iš*; q: *ga-(du)-ma ga-ti-iš*.

14. Akk. *nakāpu* 'to gore'.

(13a) EDEN.DU.DU = *dar-da-bi₂-tum* /tartappidum/ (MEE 4, 1342)

an iterative stem from

(13b) EDEN.DU.DU = *ra-ba-tum* /rapādum/ (MEE 4, 1342)¹⁵

- b. Quadriliteral verbs apparently follow the N (and Š) stem pattern and thus correspond to the Akkadian naBaLKuTum type. Thus we find alongside an infinitive

(14a) AL₆.BAL¹(KUL) = *na-bar-su-um* /naBarSu²um/ (MEE 4, 993)

the participle of an Ntn stem of the same root:

(14b) A.BAL = *ma-wu mu-da-bar-si-u₃-tum* /māwū muttaBBarSi²ūtum/ (MEE 4, 640a)¹⁶

All of the above-mentioned features are typically Akkadian and are not shared by any other Semitic language. Further characteristic, but not exclusively Akkadian features are the following:

- c. The regular infinitive of the G stem, which is very well attested in the lexical texts, follows the pattern PaRāS:

(15) DU.DU = ²a₃-*la-gum₂* /halākum/ (MEE 4, 1000)¹⁷

- d. The causative stem is formed with š (to the exclusion of Hiphil forms). The following equation apparently contains the Š and D stem of the same verb:

(16) NI₃.LAK-173.(A/E).SA₂ = *sa/su-bu₃-tum* /ša²BuDum/, /š²BuDum/, *u₃-bu₃-tum* /²uBBuDum/ (MEE 4, 124a-c)¹⁸

This example also shows that infinitives of the Š and D stems are formed in the same fashion as in Akkadian, and that “Assyrian” (*PaRRuS*, *šaPRuS*) and “Babylonian” patterns (*PuRRuS*, *š_uPRuS*) coexist. The former occurs more often than the latter, which is historically younger and might be due to Mesopotamian influence. For analogous forms, see (32) and (37).

- e. On the other hand, the formation of verbal nouns exhibits some differences from Akkadian. Most typical are the infinitives with prefixed *t*

15. Akk. *rapādu* ‘to roam’.

16. The root of /muttaBBarSi²ūtum/ is not clear. The spelling admits several possibilities: p-r-š/š-²/^c.

17. Akk. *alāku* ‘to go’.

18. Most probably corresponding to Akk. *ebētu* ‘to bind’, sc. LAK-173 = ESIR₃ ‘sandals’; cf. M. Civil, “Studies on Early Dynastic Lexicography III,” *Or* n.s. 56 (1987) 237. This explanation seems preferable to mine in “Zu Syllabar und Orthographic der Lexikalischen Texte aus Ebla: Teil 2 (Glossar)” *ZA* 73 (1983) 41 n. 146 (Akk. *abātu*).

derived from stems with infixes *t*. In addition to (12) and (13) we may cite

- (17) TEŠ.TEŠ.KU₂ = *du-uš-da-gi-lum* /tušta²kilum/ (MEE 4, 164)¹⁹

These forms have no clear correspondences in other Semitic languages. They can be explained, however, as an extension of the common Semitic *taPRis* pattern serving as a verbal noun of the D stem.

Let us finally turn to the vocabulary. Here, too, we find numerous isoglosses with the Akkadian lexicon, many of them shared by no other Semitic language. Thus, the common Semitic words

- (18a) NI₃.TUŠ = *šu-ba-du/tum* /tub(a)tum/ (MEE 4, 88)

- (18b) AMA.MU = *u₃-mu-mu* /²ummum/ (MEE 4, 1044)

- (18c) MU.NI₂.ZA = *su-mu-um* /šumum/ (MEE 4, 1144)

occur in their typically Akkadian forms with *u*, whereas at least some of the other Semitic languages have different stem vowels.²⁰ The two typically Akkadian terms for 'hand', *qātum*, for which see (11), and *rētum* (*rittum*), are also attested in the lexical texts from Ebla:

- (19) ŠU.ŠA₃ = *la-²a₃-tum* /raḥ(a)tum/ (MEE 4, 516)

Other isoglosses that connect the lexical texts with Akkadian are nouns; for example:

- (20a) ERIN₂.KI.GAR = *u₃-ma-num₂* /²ummānum/ (MEE 4, 140b)²¹

- (20b) GIR₂ = *šu-ga-ga-bu₃-um* /duqāqaypum/ (MEE 4, 094)²²

- (20c) NIN.PEŠ₂.HA.LUM = *ḥa-ma-zi-lum* /ḥamašširu/ (MEE 4, 0300)²³

- (20d) GEŠTUG₃ = *ḥa-zi-zu₂*, *ḥa-zi-zu-um* /ḥasīsum/ (MEE 4, 389)²⁴

- (20e) EŠGAR = *ga-lu-ma-tum/du-um* /kalūmatum/ (MEE 4, 928)²⁵

- (20f) ^dBE.KALAM.TIM = *ti-lu ma-tim* /mātīm/ (MEE 4, 795a,b)²⁶

19. Akk. *šutākulu* 'to square' (Št from *akālu* 'to eat', lit. 'to make eat one another').

20. Akk. *šubtu* 'seat'—Hebrew *šalibt*(?) (Masoretic *šebet*, which points to *šabt*, is probably secondary); Akk. *ummu* 'mother'—Heb. ²*imm* (Masoretic ²*ēm*); Akk. *šumu* 'name'—Hebrew *šim* (Masoretic *šēm*).

21. Akk. *ummānu* 'troop'.

22. Akk. *zuqāqīpu* 'scorpion'.

23. Akk. *ḥamašširu* 'mouse'.

24. Akk. *ḥasīsu* 'ear', 'understanding'.

25. Akk. *kalūmatu* 'female lamb'.

26. Akk. *mātu* 'land'.

- (20g) GI₆.AN = *mu-šum* /mūšum/, *me-su/šum* /mīšum/ (MEE 4, 816a)²⁷
 (20h) UR.SAG = *qa-ra-tum* /qarrādum/ (MEE 4, 271)²⁸
 (20i) ME.TE = *ra-ma-num₂* /nu-um /ramanum/ (MEE 4, 1026)²⁹
 (20j) NI₃.U₂.RUM = *da-li-mu* /talīmu(m)/ (MEE 4, 99)³⁰
 (20k) NI₃.ZI.PA.ZI.PA = *da-na-i-si-tum/du* /tanHištum/ (MEE 4, 120)³¹
 (20l) AB.A = *ti-²a₃-ma-tum* /tihāmatum/ (MEE 4, 1343)³²

and verbs like:

- (21a) AL.GAL₂ = *ba-ša-um* /baša²um/ (MEE 4, 991)³³
 (21b) ŠU.I₃ = *ba-ša-sum/šu-um* /paša²um/ (MEE 4, 502)³⁴
 (21c) A.GAL₂ = *i-ša-wu* /yišāwum/ (MEE 4, 624)³⁵
 (21d) AN.GAL₂ = *i-ša-wu* /yišāwum/ (MEE 4, 624)³⁵
 (21e) GABA.RU = *ma-ḥa-lum/lu-um* /maḥārum/ (MEE 4, 947)³⁶

The lexical texts also contain some Sumerian loanwords, for example:

- (22) GIŠ.DUB.DIM₂ = *maš-dab-ti-num₂*, etc. (MEE 4, 403)³⁷

or *tuppum* ‘clay tablet’ in

- (23) DUB.I₃ = *du-bi₂ i-ra-tim* (MEE 4, 1166)

Far more numerous than words of Sumerian origin are roots, words, and meanings known from other Semitic languages, but not attested in Akkadian, such as (6) *baqarum* ‘cow(s)’ or

- (24) GIŠ.GIŠKIM.TI = *ma-ba-da-a/²a₃/u₂* /mabṭaḥ-/ (MEE 4, 469)³⁸

27. Akk. *mūšu* ‘night’.

28. Akk. *qarrādu* ‘warrior’, ‘hero’.

29. Akk. *ramanu* ‘self’.

30. Akk. *talīmu* ‘beloved’, ‘favorite’. According to the Sumerogram, the meaning of the Eblaite term is ‘own’.

31. Akk. *tēnešētu* ‘people’. According to the Sumerogram, the meaning of the Eblaite term is ‘life’ or ‘living being’. The underlying verb corresponds to Akk. *nēšu* ‘to live’. The second (*h/h*) and third radicals are not certain (*š/š*), since the verb is not attested in other Semitic languages.

32. Akk. *tiāmtu*, *tāmtu* ‘sea’.

33. Akk. *bašū* ‘to be present’, ‘to exist’.

34. Akk. *pašašū* ‘to anoint’.

35. Akk. *išu* ‘he has’. According to the Sumerogram, the Eblaite term has preserved the original meaning ‘to be present’, ‘to exist’.

36. Akk. *maḥāru* ‘to face’, ‘to approach’, ‘to receive’.

37. Akk. *muštaptinnu* ‘a pole, used by the potter’.

38. Hebrew (Masoretic) *mibṭāḥ* (probably < *mabṭaḥ*) ‘confidence’.

Sometimes Semitic, or at least non-Sumerian, terms that were replaced in Akkadian by Sumerian loanwords are preserved. Thus, for 'harp' and 'bear' we find *kinnārum* and *dabbum*:

- (25) BALAG = *qi-na-lum/ru₂/ru₁₂-um* /*kinnārum*/ (MEE 4, 572)
 AZ = *da-bu₃(-um)*, *dab₆-bu₃* /*dabbum*/; *a-zu₂-um* (MEE 4, 870)

which in (Mesopotamian) Akkadian normally were replaced by *balangu* and *asu*. However, *asum* is attested in one of the duplicates as well.

Of special relevance to the problem of linguistic homogeneity or diversity are equations in which—as in the last example—the duplicates offer different Semitic renderings of the logogram. Do those lexical variants reflect different languages? Or are they to be understood as coexisting words of a single language? There are several facts and considerations that favor the second explanation:

1. The variants do not show significantly different phonological or morphological features.
2. Duplicates vary only in single entries. There are no duplicates that differ consistently from others in the Semitic renderings of logograms.
3. The correspondence between logograms and their Semitic equivalents is possibly not yet as standardized as in later stages of the cuneiform system.

Therefore, lexical variants may well represent synonyms coexisting in the same language. These synonyms may of course belong to different stylistic, social, or dialectal levels of that language, and they may also ultimately stem from other languages. Thus, the Sumerian loanword *asum* for 'bear' and the Semitic term *dabbum* in example (50) presumably belong to different stylistic levels, whereas the terms *mūšum* and *mīšum* for 'night' in example (35) can perhaps be explained as dialectal variants.

An interesting example of different Semitic words corresponding to one logogram is the following example, where we find three Semitic equivalents for the sign SAG+KID₂:

- (26) SAG+KID₂ = *bar-sum-tum*, *sa-ra-tum*, *ma-al-a-tum* (MEE 4, 260 [reading corrected according to photographs]).

Unfortunately, the meaning of the logogram is not clearly recognizable from other sources. Therefore, we do not know whether the three Semitic equivalents are real synonyms or whether they circumscribe a wider range of meanings of the logogram that could not be covered by a single Semitic term. The term *bar-sum-tum* is likely to correspond to Akkadian *paluršumtum* 'old woman'. In accordance with this interpretation, *sa-ra-tum* could be identified with Akkadian *šarratum*, but in the sense of its Hebrew cognate *šarra(h)* 'princess' rather than in its Akkadian meaning 'queen', since the Eblaite word for 'queen' was *maliktum* according to the economic

texts. The remaining term may be interpreted as /mar³atum/ and thus yields a third designation of a female person. Etymologically, it corresponds to Akkadian *mārtum* 'daughter'. However, this meaning hardly fits with the meanings 'old woman' and 'princess' of the preceding terms. The meanings of later cognates in Aramaic (*mārṭā*) and Arabic (*al-mar³atu*) are 'lady' and 'woman', respectively, which would seem more appropriate in our context. However, an isolated semantic difference possibly indicated by the above equation does not prove, of course, that "Eblaite" is closer to Northwest Semitic or Arabic than to Akkadian.

Let us now attempt to evaluate the Semitic material of the lexical texts as a whole. Most important for this purpose are, in my opinion, the significant morphological correspondences with Akkadian that were pointed out above. This picture is confirmed by the lack of serious morphological deviations from Akkadian. The second important criterion is constituted by a great number of diagnostic isoglosses with Akkadian. The phonological system is in general more archaic than that of Old Akkadian. It is characterized, on the other hand, by two more or less complementary features that are not known in Mesopotamian Akkadian and that most probably are due to non-Semitic influence, namely the "weakening" of etymological *l* and the spelling of *r* with syllabograms representing *l*.

On the whole, deviations from Akkadian remain within the borders of historical development and dialectal variation. I therefore would not hesitate to classify the Semitic language of the lexical texts as an Akkadian dialect influenced by other (Semitic and non-Semitic) languages in the same way that Mesopotamian Akkadian was influenced by Sumerian (and probably other languages).

According to the methodological approach outlined above, the remaining kinds of sources are to be analyzed in the same way. A survey of the whole corpus enlarges but does not change or contradict the picture gained from the lexical texts. As pointed out earlier, comparison between different texts and types of sources is hampered by the fact that features relevant for linguistic classification are not equally distributed among them. In order to abbreviate and facilitate presentation, I will not examine each of the remaining types of sources separately. Instead, I will briefly compare the list of linguistic features observed in the lexical texts with other types of sources. The first important point to be noted is that the phonological system as exhibited by the lexical texts is roughly the same in all other types of sources. Second, some of the morphological features of the lexical texts—for instance, case endings and mimation—are also found in the other sources. Furthermore, the list of morphological features can be enlarged by several finite verbal forms. Thus, many personal names³⁹ contain a form corresponding to the Akkadian preterite, for example, /yišma^c/ in

39. For references, see the indexes of ARET 1-4, 7-9, and Krebernik, *Die Personennamen der Ebla-Texte* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1988).

(27) *Iš-ma₂-i₃-lum*

The prefix of the third-person masculine singular also occurs in its older form *ya-*. The vowels *a* and *i* change in the other prefixes, too, but the vowel of the prefix does not depend on the vowel of the stem as, for example, in Ugaritic, which has the patterns *yaqtul-*, *yaqtil-*, and *yiqtal-* (“Barth/Ginsberg law”).

Forms ending in *-u* that might correspond to the indicative of Ugaritic and Arabic do not occur. Some rare exceptions occurring in literary texts (for example, in ARET 5, 1) may be explained as graphic representations of forms without endings or as affirmative forms.

Some personal names of a shortened type consist of only one verbal form with infix *t(a)*. It may be compared to the G perfect or Gt preterite of Akkadian. The stem vowel of corresponding forms without infix behaves as in Akkadian, where both forms have the same vowel in the *a-*, *i-*, and *u-*class, but *iPRuS* – *iPtaRaS* in the *ablaut* class:

- (28) *Il₂-da-kas* beside *Il₂-gu₂-uš*— . . .
Iš-da-AL₆ beside *Iš-AL₆*— . . .
Ig-da-ri₂-iš beside *Ig-ri₂-iš*— . . .

The existence of a fientive perfect of the *qatala* type cannot be ascertained. Alleged *qatala* forms in personal names are instead to be interpreted as nouns in the “accusative” denoting the predicate. Forms like *ar-ra* or *ḥa-ra* in the names

(29) *Ar-ra—il*, *Ḥa-ra—il*

should accordingly be explained by analogy to predicative *a-ba₄ /²aba/* ‘(he is) father’ in

(30) *a-ba₄—il*

On the other hand, we have clear examples of endingless stative forms of the Akkadian type in personal names as well as in literary texts; for example, *na-im* /*na^cim/* ‘is good’ in

(31) *a-bu₃—na-im*

or

(32a) ²*a₅(NI)-bu₃-ḥu /²abbuḥū/*
²*a₅bu₃-ḥa /²abbuḥā/*(32b) *da-nu-nu /dannunū/*
da-nu-na /dannunā/⁴⁰

40. ‘They (masc./fem.) are girded’ (Akk. *ebēḥu*), ‘they (masc./fem.) are strengthened’ (Akk. *da-nānu*), both D stems.

in the literary text ARET 5, 3 iv 5ff. In literary texts, we also find present forms of the Akkadian type, as in (1) or in

(33) *ti-a-ba-an* /ti²abban/ (ARET 5, 3 i 2)⁴¹

As in the preterite forms of personal names, the vowel of the prefix may be *a* or, more often, *i*. Thus, we find in another literary text, whose Mesopotamian origin is indicated by a duplicate from Tell Abū Ṣalābīḥ (IAS, 326+342)

(34) *da-ma-sar* /tamašsar/ (ARET 5, 6 ix 5)⁴²

and

(35) *ti-da-ḥu-ru*₁₂ (ARET 5, 6 xii 2)⁴³

The latter is a *tiPRuSū* form of the third masculine plural as attested at Mari and later at Ugarit and in the el-Amarna letters. Verbs primae *w* have forms with /u/ in the prefix, as in Akkadian. Spellings with *a* probably represent the diphthong *aw*, as in the personal name

(36) *Du-bil₂—da-mu* = *Da-bil₂—da-mu*

D and Š stems are inflected with *u*-prefixes, as is shown by the following example of a paronomastic construction:

(37) *ga-du-ru*₁₂ *u₂-ga-da-ra* /qatturu yuqattar(am?)⁴⁴ (ARET 2, 34 viii 12–13)

Personal pronouns of the third person have initial *š* (for example, *-su* *-išu* ‘his’), while forms with initial *h* (like Arabic *huwa*, *-hu*, etc.) are not attested at all. A very characteristic feature connecting “Eblaite” with Akkadian is the existence of dative and accusative pronouns, such as *-kum* ‘to you’ and *-kuwāti* ‘you’ (acc.):

(38) *I₃.NA.SUM-kum* (SEb 1, 4 TM.75.G.1766 ii 4)
gu₂-wa-ti-ma /kuwāti-ma/ (ARET 5, 4 ii 3).

Important lexical items supplied by nonlexical texts are prepositions, conjunctions, and numerals.

The two well-attested prepositions

(39a) *in* ‘in’

(39b) ²*a₅(NI)-na* ‘to’

41. Akk. *labānu* ‘to make bricks’.

42. ‘She drags (a garment)’ (Akk. *mašāru*).

43. Probably /tittaḥrū/ < /tīmtaḥrū/ ‘they (the gods) approached’ (Akk. *maḥāru*); for the assimilation of *m*, see (3).

44. ‘He will fume incense’ (Akk. *qatāru*); possibly with *t*, which was dissimilated > *t* in (Mesopotamian) Akkadian beside *q* (according to “Geers’ law”).

constitute two of the most important isoglosses with Akkadian, corresponding to *in*, *ina* and *ana*, respectively. They are, apart from uncertain traces in Ge^cez, not attested in other Semitic languages. On the other hand, the Ebla texts also contain some prepositions not attested in Akkadian. The most important one is

(40) *si-in* ‘towards’

which might be related to Sabaean *s₁wn* ‘toward’.

A similar picture is gained from the conjunctions. Here we find

(41) *su-ma* /šumma/ ‘if’

as a noteworthy isogloss with Akkadian, while

(42) *ab* /²ap/⁴⁵

occurs also in Ugaritic and Hebrew, but not Akkadian.

The number word ‘thousand’ is

(43) *li-im* /li²m/

as in Akkadian and not ²alp-, as in the other Semitic languages. On the other hand,

(44) *ri₂-PAP*

‘ten thousand’ is not used in Akkadian. The reading is either *ri₂-pap* /ribab/ or *ri₂-pa₄* (cf. Heb. *ribbō*), the grammatical form of which would be more difficult to explain.

We now need to extend the question about linguistic homogeneity, answered in the affirmative in the case of the lexical texts, to the whole corpus. The bulk of the material indeed seems to represent the same language. There are significant features that different types of sources have in common, and there are others that complement one another. The most obvious common feature is the phonological system, which is substantially the same in all types of sources. Complementary features linking the language of the lexical texts to that of other types of sources are, for instance, the clearly Akkadian morphological features of the lexical texts and the use of the typical Akkadian prepositions *in* and *ni-na* in most other kinds of sources.

Our picture of the linguistically uniform, Akkadian character of the texts as a whole was gained primarily by pointing out its typically Akkadian features. But we should also ask which features could prove the non-Akkadian character of a Semitic language of the third millennium and whether any of them can be found. The most distinctive features would be morphological—for instance: plural forms ending in *-ūma* or *-ūna* next to a singular form without mimation or with nunation, broken plurals, a suffix conjugation of the *qatala* type, causatives of the *Hiphil*

45. See P. Fronzaroli, “La congiunzione eblaita ap,” *SEb* 4 (1981) 167–76.

type, pronouns of the third person with initial *h*, and the use of the prepositions *bi* and *li* instead of *in* and *ni-na*. None of those features can be identified with certainty in the Ebla texts.

The superficial linguistic uniformity of the corpus as a whole does not exclude the possibility that it may also contain non-Akkadian Semitic elements. Establishing the general linguistic character of the texts was, however, a necessary condition for further investigation in this direction. The fact that one language that may be classified as an Akkadian dialect is generally used in writing limits the search for other Semitic elements almost exclusively to possible lexical influences on this Akkadian dialect and to the corpus of personal names. Influences on vocabulary are difficult to prove because we do not know the complete Akkadian lexicon of the middle of the third millennium. It is highly probable that there were dialectal differences already in the vocabulary of early Akkadian and that later Akkadian has preserved only part of its original Semitic vocabulary. In the onomasticon, as in other types of sources, we find Akkadian features like the *iPRuS—iPtaRaS* paradigm, or the vowel /u/ in the conjugational prefix of verbs primae *w*, which have already been mentioned. From the lexical point of view, *Ar-si—a-ḥa* or *U₃-da—a-ḥa* containing the typical Akkadian verbs *rašā²um* ‘to get’ and *watā²um* ‘to find’ may be cited as additional evidence. On the other hand, the onomasticon includes some features that are not attested in or even contradictory to Akkadian. Thus, many feminine names,⁴⁶ for example

(44a) *Ba-nu-ud/du*

(44b) *Dal-du-ud*

(44c) *Zi-gi-ru₁₂-du*

are marked by the ending *-ūt*, which is not used this way in Mesopotamian Akkadian.

Non-Akkadian lexical elements are, for the reasons already stated, difficult to identify as such. Thus, the root of *na^cim* ‘good’, which is also well attested in the Amorite onomasticon, seems to be non-Akkadian. It is interesting to note, however, that it forms an endingless stative of the Akkadian type, *na^cim*, as quoted in (31) and not **na^cima*, following the pattern of *ṣaduqa* in *Ḥammī-ṣaduqa*. The name

(45) *Mi—ga—il*

certainly corresponds to biblical *Mī-ka-²il* (Masoretic *Mīkā²ēl*) and may be regarded as one of the earliest clear attestations of Northwest Semitic. It contains *mī* ‘who?’ and *ka* ‘like’, which in Akkadian would be *man(num)* and *kī(ma)*, respectively. Similarly, the name

46. For references, see the indexes of ARET 1–4, 7–9, and Krebernik, *Die Personennamen der Ebla-Texte*.

(46) *Iš-ra—il*

most probably corresponds to biblical *Yiśrāʾēl*. The identification is supported by the spelling with *iš*, which normally represents Semitic *ś* and *š*, while *iš₁₁* is used for the interdentals *ḏ* and *ṭ*.⁴⁷

We finally come to the question of whether the Akkadian dialect prevailing in the sources is the vernacular of Ebla, or whether this must instead be sought behind the non-Akkadian elements visible most clearly in the onomasticon. The easiest conclusion would be that Akkadian was taken over as a literary language along with the writing system and that Eblaite is reflected by the non-Akkadian elements mentioned. There are, however, some reasons that militate against such a simple solution. First, the onomasticon contains many typical Akkadian elements. Second, the peculiarities that characterize the Akkadian of the Ebla texts show that this language cannot merely be an import from Mesopotamia. At least, we do not know any comparable Akkadian dialect from Mesopotamian sources. The peculiarities of Eblaite Akkadian are absent in contemporary sources from Tell Abu Salabikh and Mari, which admittedly do not offer the whole range of features to be compared. One could, of course, try to explain the characteristic features of Eblaite Akkadian as influences of a local non-Akkadian language on normal Mesopotamian Akkadian. This explanation might be valid with regard to lexical influence. It is, however, unlikely insofar as the archaic phonological system is concerned. The peculiarities of Eblaite Akkadian instead should be taken as an argument for its non-Mesopotamian origin. In all likelihood, the treatment of *l* and *r* in Eblaite Akkadian witnesses to the influence of a non-Semitic language. This is probably the same as the one attested by toponyms like

(47a) *A-da-bi₂-ig/gu₂^{ki}* (ARET 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9: Indexes)

(47b) *Ša-na-lu/ru₁₂-qu₂^{ki}* (ARET 2, 3, 4: Indexes)

and personal names, such as

(48a) *La-ḥa-bi₂-ig*

(48b) ²*A₃-ma-ru₁₂-gu₂⁴⁸*

or non-Sumerian loanwords in the lexical texts, such as

(49) EN = *ša-ša-ḥu-lum*, *šu-šu-ḥu-lum* (MEE 4, 806)

47. Cf. Kebernik, *Die Personennamen aus Ebla*, 28–29.

48. For non-Semitic proper names, see D. O. Edzard, “Semitische und nichtsemitische Personennamen in den Texten aus Ebla,” in *Eblaite Personal Names and Semitic Name Giving* (ed. A. Archi; Rome: Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria, 1988) 25–34. M. C. Astour (“Toponymy of Ebla and Ethnohistory of Northern Syria: A Preliminary Survey,” *JAOS* 108 [1988] 552ff.) tried to show that names ending in *-ig/ag/ug/gu₂* and *-ab/ba* are Semitic, but this seems doubtful, especially in the case of the alleged Semitic suffix *-(i)g*.

As pointed out in the theoretical section above, another type of source material apart from personal names that is likely to reflect the local language with a comparable degree of probability might be sought in the designations of specific local phenomena or institutions. To this class of vocabulary could belong the titles of the king and queen. The reading of the logogram EN designating the ruler of Ebla is probably not *ša-ša-lu-lum*, as given by the lexical texts quoted above, but *malikum*, which would be in accordance with the title of the queen, *ma-lik-tum*. The term as such differs, of course, from the usual Akkadian word for king, *šarrum*, whose Sumerian correspondence is LUGAL. According to the lexical equation discussed under (26), where the feminine *šarratum* occurred, Eblaite *šarrum* may have had a meaning similar to its Hebrew cognate *šarr* 'prince'. Nevertheless, *malikum* also exists in Akkadian, and the Eblaite term agrees with the Akkadian form of the word (also attested in Arabic), not with Ugaritic *malku* or Hebrew *malk* (Masoretic *melek*). Thus, the Eblaite titles *malikum* and *maliktum* seem to support the Akkadian character of the local language rather than to constitute an argument against it.

Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the linguistic analysis presented above. The majority of the Semitic material present in the various types of sources reflects a single language. This language is so closely related to Akkadian that it may be classified as an early Akkadian dialect. Various characteristic features indicate that it is not simply Mesopotamian Akkadian imported as a written language together with the cuneiform writing system. Some presumably non-Semitic influences point, assuming that they have rightly been ascribed to the non-Semitic stratum attested in the Ebla texts themselves, to a local origin of this Akkadian dialect. Non-Akkadian Semitic elements in the onomasticon and in the vocabulary show the presence of speakers of other Semitic languages, presumably the ancestors of later Northwest Semitic. The border between Akkadian and other Semitic languages seems to have been situated somewhere in the region of Ebla. The Ebla texts thus testify to a much broader extension of Akkadian in the third millennium than previously assumed.