

An Analysis of 'Power' in Sumerian Proverbs from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

Sumerian proverbs, which were created by the intellectuals of ancient Mesopotamia, contain a wealth of wisdom from early human civilization. From a linguistic perspective, some of these proverbs embody the rules established by the elite classes and imposed on society, reflecting their hold on social power. In this study, a meta-functional analysis on the systemic functional linguistics of these proverbs is used to explain them better.

Keywords: *Sumerian proverbs, power, meta-functional analysis, language*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Sumerian proverb is an essential part of the philosophical literature of early civilizations. The earliest works can be traced back to the Early Dynastic III (ca. 2600-2550 B. C.), according to the tablets unearthed in Tell Abu-Salabikh in 1963-1965. However, most existing collections date from the Isin-Larsa period (ca. 1900-1800 B. C.) — an era in which Sumerian had become an academic language. For this reason, most of these proverbs come from schools and are mainly used to teach writing. Some texts consist of small tables with word lists on one side and promoters on the other. Sumerian proverbs are in line with the modern definition of proverbs:

- 1) they are anonymous traditional sayings;
- 2) they consist in complete sentences with fixed syntax and cannot include verbal expressions;
- 3) they are concise and clear, with a simple syntax, and originate from a broad social range;
- 4) their expressions and connotations are summarised using metaphors and a clear appositive structure; and
- 5) their ostensibly direct oral presentation applies to the subtle logical operations related to the context-defined situation^[1].

In the ancient world, few people had the right to receive an education. When Sumerian was no longer used as a spoken language, receiving strict and complete writing training was a luxury. This is evident as almost all the existing proverbs are materials used by young scribes

when learning to write in school. Therefore, it is unlikely that proverbs were popular among the general populace, as Sumerian was no longer used as a spoken language in Old Babylonian period. The oral transmission of proverbs may therefore have been interrupted. Even in so-called bilingual texts, some works present a translation of Akkadian into Sumerian, rather than the other way around. The sources for many of these texts may well be from society, rather than from the scholars studying Sumerian. However, it is clear that the people who created them also belonged to a high social class — they did not come from the poor^[2]. As the educational resources are lacking and the elites want to control society, the right to writing remained firmly in their hands. The elites monopolized the right to explain society by monopolizing the right to language. Common people simply followed blindly in most cases. The elites used this power to formulate a series of codes of conduct and moral standards for society. After a long period of subtle influence, they formed so-called 'traditions' and 'laws'; that is, they decided what people could and could not do. As a result, the society operated well under the power of antiquity and tradition. To prevent resistance from the civilian classes, they taught people to be content with the status quo — to comply with 'fate' or 'God's will.'

Systemic functional linguistics focuses on the relationship between language and society, and between discourse and context. The social environment is an integral part of the context, and three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) form its core theories. This paper attempts to use these metafunctions to analyze how the Mesopotamian elites used proverbs to

guide and influence society through the power of language.

Many scholars may wonder whether a theory developed for the study of living languages can be applied to long-dead languages. However, the ability of language to symbolize meaning provides the basis for readers to understand the text as an intentional act of meaning. Therefore, the scholar's goal should be to describe the grammatical resources used to express meaning in the language — as meaning is the key function. Thus, the application of this theory does not depend on whether a language is alive or dead in some cases.

2. IDEATIONAL ANALYSIS

'Ideational metafunction' refers to the expression of language to describe people's experiences in the real world, including their inner worlds. That is, to reflect the subjective and objective occurrences in the world, the people and things, the time, place, situation, and other factors. Halliday distinguishes this as two components: the experiential and the logical^[3]. Language allows humans to construct a mental picture of reality and understand what is happening around and within them. Thus, the experiential function (processes in the real or mental world) refers to how language expresses the various 'experiences' that people have in the real world and their inner world. This is achieved primarily through the objectivity of the clause — a system of objectification that categorizes experience grammatically and specifies the participants and environmental components associated with this 'experience.' This clause is not only a mode of action but also a mode of reflection, where the goal is transitivity, which regards the experiential world as a controllable process category^[4]. There are three essential processes to the above system: material process, mental process, and relational process. The ancient elites had come to a conclusion through actual life experience (or a 'process') that they had more wealth and a higher status than the commoners and that they had absolute control over the poor. Thus, this ideology permeated their language, and they constructed a world of proverbs in which the boundaries between inferiority and superiority, and rich and poor, were rigid.

(1) *dub-sar sag₉-ga-me-en, saġ ki-bi ma-an-ġal₂, dul nam-šag₄-tam-še₃ [X]-ġu₁₀ ga-ab-ši-de₆, [X X] X-bi mu-zu, [...] /e₃\-a [...] X AŠ*

I am a great scribe. I will be given a privileged position. I will protect the stewardship.

Here, a relational process can be observed. The author focuses on his status as a scribe, and his thus deserving of a special status over others. Additionally, the author sees himself as benefitting society. This is because in ancient Mesopotamian society scribes held a special position in society, serving as officials at all levels and holding the

role of disseminating and explaining knowledge; in the eyes of this class, they were inherently superior.

(2) *Kug kalag-ga /la₂\ [ka kalag-ga sam₂]*

Those who pay in high-value silver will be advantageous when negotiating.

Here, a material process can be observed. A rich man who negotiates a situation, whether in business or in court (which the proverb does not specify), will be, and should be, in a favorable position. It is important to note that this statement makes it very clear that in the process of 'negotiation' the party with the advantage is not the one who is 'right', but the one who has more money.

(3) *šaġ₂ lu₂-šaġ₂-šum-ma mi-ni-ib-šum-e, gu₃ i₃, ra-/ra\,kasal ninda₂-zu, u₃ pa-bil-/ga-zu\ i₃-re₇-eš-am₃, u₃ za-e al-du-un-/na\-ni gu₃ i₃-ra-ra-e-še*

A pig about to be slaughtered by a butcher will squeal. Your ancestors and forefathers walked this road before you, and now you are walking it, so why are you squealing?

Here, a mental process can be observed. The pig on the counter is unwilling to die, but the butcher speaks the words he has always understood to be true — the pig should be allowed to die like its ancestors. The meaning behind this is that those in power demand that those oppressed consciously accept reality and understand that their life and death are entirely up to the rulers. This is what the rulers believe, although they are not at liberty to say it outright. Mesopotamia was not a stable society, and for thousands of years it was in turmoil, during which the lower classes often rioted out of discontent with the oppression of the nobility and elite. It is therefore understandable that the ruling class sought to spread this 'lineage theory' through proverbs.

3. INTERPERSONAL ANALYSIS

Broadly speaking, interpersonal metafunctions refer to the status, attitudes and social relations established by the speaker. This is mainly achieved through the tone system. The modal system is the most used in Sumerian proverbs, and these ancient intellectuals were happy to use modal verbs and imperative sentences to assert their superiority. This function is also the part of these proverbs where language is most closely linked to power, where the ancient intellectuals told the common people explicitly, almost unobtrusively, and in a commanding tone, what they could and could not do.

(4) *lu₂ a-šag₄ ur₁₁-ru-ke₄ a-šag₄ ħe₂-ur₁₁-ru lu₂ še šu su-ub-bu-da-ke₄ še šu /ħe₂\-eb-su-ub-be₂*

Those who plough the fields must plough the fields, and those who collect the grain must collect grain.

This sentence states that one's occupation is fixed and cannot be changed. A person (especially a commoner)

should do what he or she is supposed to do and should not concern himself or herself with anything outside of his or her occupation or go beyond what he or she is. Those who plough the land and those who reap the harvest are clearly distinguished. In Mesopotamian society there are different occupations, and there is a very clear distinction between the high and the low. The intellectuals who coined the proverb were trying to advise people to keep to themselves and not to think of changing their professions, out of a need for stability, to secure tax revenues and to preserve the status of the elite from being challenged.

(5) lu₂ diġir-ra-a-ni nu-mu-un-kal-kal lu₂-bi ki nu-tum₃, ibila-a-ni a nu-de₂ AN /saġ\ [X X]-/ke₄?, ħa-ma-da-gub-be₂ [X X] X

If a man does not honor his God, that man will not be buried. Nor will his heirs provide tribute for him.

This curse states that those who do not respect the gods will not end well, but in reality, it is mainly to warn the common people that if they do not respect the 'gods,' or the upper classes, then they will suffer a miserable fate and will not even be saved after death. When secular power was not enough to intimidate the people, the rulers used the power of the gods and kept adding some mystery to them, thus deifying themselves who ruled the people in their place.

(6) ukur₃ bu-lu-uh₂ si-il-/le? \ lu₂ niġ₂-tuku-e igi tur nam-ba-e-gid₂-i

The poor should not look at the rich with contempt.

Here, it is said that there is a distinction between the rich and the poor, and that the poor must not show the slightest disrespect to the rich. Here is a naked demonstration of the intellectual elite's worship of money. For in those days, those who possessed great wealth were not always those who possessed knowledge.

(7) an-ku₄-ku₄ nu-si-si, ib₂-ta-e₃ nu-silig-ge, niġ₂-gur₁₁ lugal-la-ke₄, igi-zu na-an-il₂-en

What comes in is never enough, and what goes out never stops. Do not envy the wealth of kings.

The superficial meaning of the phrase seems to be that the commoners should be content, as wealth is inexhaustible. However, the last sentence is most important: do not direct your greed at the King and do not covet his position. This is a clear direction that commoners should not rebel, be honest and content with their position, and covet the rich and powerful. This was the wish of every king in Mesopotamia, who imagined that he would always be respected and obeyed unconditionally by his subjects. Only in this way could they maintain their lavish lifestyle and continue to receive enough troops and taxes to support their larger wars of plunder.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The linear character of language requires the speaker to choose the subject position of the sentence. The choice of subject position often indicates the writer's emotions and position, with whoever is located in the subject position having a higher status and more power. Thus, although the ancients could not have known about this theory, they kept practising it in the course of their own literary production. The below example of the use of imperative sentences in Sumerian proverbs illustrates this point:

(8) ukur₃ ħa-ba-ug₇ nam-ba-da-ti₃-i, ninda i₃-pad₃ mun nu-pad₃ mun i₃-pad₃ ninda nu-pad₃, uzu i₃-pad₃ gazi nu-pad₃ gazi i₃-pad₃ uzu nu-pad₃

Let the poor man die, let him not live. So that when he finds bread, he will not find salt; when he finds salt, he will not find bread; when he finds meat, he will not find condiments; when he finds condiments, he will not find meat.

Here lies the secret of the ancient rulers who ruled and oppressed their people — to neither let them die nor let them live. To emphasize this point, the author adopts a condescending position and uses imperative sentences to make his point, thus enhancing the commanding and coercive overtones of the discourse. Therefore, he naturally chooses the subject position, thus inadvertently reinforcing his identity as 'the one who commands'. At the same time, the passage uses the metaphorical function that a man cannot have both A and B. When he has one, he cannot have the other, thus bringing him to a state of 'half dead, half alive,' that is to say, able to maintain only the most basic level of survival and thus have to give up all material desires. Of course, such commands and metaphors are aimed at the lower classes and are not used to bind them to themselves. As rulers, their desire is the opposite of this proverb, that of getting more. This statement makes it even clearer that Mesopotamian proverbs serve an edifying function, their fundamental purpose being not to sum up the experience of those who have gone before them, to spread useful knowledge and truths, but to educate those 'who should be educated'.

5. CONCLUSION

Perhaps not all linguists agree that early languages also possess a wealth of meta functionality. However, based on the brief discussion in this paper, it is possible to see that the theories of modern linguistics can be applied to the study of early human languages. This is not a conflicting theory, although many scholars do not acknowledge it. Although human language is in a constant state of flux, its basic function has never changed, and as long as a language has existed in real time, it must have performed its function in real time. That is to say, theoretically, any modern theory of language can be applied to ancient languages.

Through this study, we can see that language has been profoundly bound up with power since early civilizations and that rulers and social elites were able to use language very skilfully to exert influence over civilian society and steer its course. Whoever was in a higher position had the power to use language and public opinion to control society. The power of language is never visible to the eye; it can reach into many aspects of society and culture, controlling people's psyches through its subtle influences. Especially in ancient societies, a world where illiteracy was the majority and where most people lacked sound judgement, it was easier to be led by those who held the power of language. We cannot find any civilisation where the elite did not use the power of language. Some civilisations may not have had words, but intellectuals were still able to influence hearts and minds through their words, although, of course, this influence was far less than that of words that could be passed down through the ages.^[5]

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