Old Babylonian Pluractionals and Their Medial Nature

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1 Introduction

Akkadian

Akkadian was an East Semitic language, attested approx. 2500 BCE – 70 CE, making it the oldest attested Semitic language, and thus also temporally closest to Proto Semitic (PS)[1].

Proto-Semitic

The reconstruction of PS has been lagging, mostly due to the following factors:

(1)
a. Lack of understanding of Semitic morphology, especially with its syntactic and semantic interfaces
b. (Too) Many different approaches and methodologies
c. Antiquated methodology, (too) directly borrowed from Indo-European Studies
d. No sufficient communication
- Especially with theoretical linguistics

→ Result: a 'patchwork' system for PS, in which many results are not compatible with others and sometimes not even accessible to other researchers.

New Roads to Proto-Semitic Reconstruction

In my upcoming dissertation & M.A. thesis the introduction of a new system for PS reconstruction is planned, which will hopefully be:

(2)
a. able to describe the languages in question,
b. able to explain its phenomena,
c. flexible enough to incorporate and/or adjust the many results achieved thus far.

This will entail the synchronic reassessment of the Old Babylonian Akkadian verbal system within Distributed Morphology, which in turn will be the base for new hypotheses for reconstructions of the PS verbal system.

These hypotheses will then be checked with features from spoken Ethiosemitic languages to either confirm or refine the suggestions.

M.A.: The Akkadian *tan*-stems in Their Semitic Context.

The focus will lie on Old Babylonian (OB)[2] pluractionals, so-called *tan*-stems, and the make-up and function of the characterising *tan*-morpheme.

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1 Huehnergard (2019: 49) postulates that PS was spoken no later than the late fourth millennium.
2 Old Babylonian was spoken around 2000-1500 BCE.

Hypothesis: *tan*-morpheme related to Semitic medialising *ta*-morpheme.[3]

2 Semitic Morphology

Semitic Word Derivation: (typically) triradical root + pattern.

Root: semantic base of word

Template: tense, voice, and φ-features, …

(3)

√prs (a/u)	+	$iC_1C_2VC_3$	→	iprus
'separate'		'3.SG.M.PRET'		'he cut off'

Akkadian Templates

Four 'head' templates:

- 'simple' G-stem (*Grundstamm*),
- 'intensive-factitive' D-stem (*Dopplungsstamm*),
- 'causative' Š-stem (Š being the causativising morpheme),
- 'passive' N-stem (N being the passivizing morpheme).

Problem: not all N-stems denote passive verbs, not all Š-stems denote causative verbs, most D-stems are not factitive, and the definitions of 'intensive' and 'simple' are vague.

Onto these templates we can map tense, voice, etc. As for voice, G, D and Š can form medials through the insertion of a *t*-infix either:

- between C_1 and C_2 (G, D),
- or ultimately before C_1 (Š)[4].

This gives the following paradigm, here for the root √qrb 'near, approach':

(4)

√qrb	*simple* (G)	*intensive* (D)	*causative* (Š)
active	iqrab	uqarrib	ušaqrib
	'be(come) close'	'bring'	'present, attach'
passive	naqrab (N)	-	-
	'make claim'		
middle	iqtarib	uqtarrib	uštaqrib
	'come close to one another'	'be brought[?]'	'come close to'

3 The *t*-Trouble

At the same (overt!) position a *t(a)*-infix can have three different functions:

- Medial, denoting reflexive or reciprocal action.
- Perfective
- (Some) Pluractionals (iterative, frequentative, habitual, continuous, or distributive)

Akkadian pluractionals

Pluractionals are formed through the insertion of a *tan*-infix between either

- C_1 and C_2 (G, D), or
- Ultimately before C_1 (Š, N).

[3] The theses are a continuation of work previously conducted on Semitic pluractionalisation.

[4] Note that only very rarely Nt-stems are attested. Instead of medial, they are probably perfectives.

This may look as follows for a G 3.SG.M.DUR:

(5) *iptanarras*
3.SG.M-√prs<tan>.DUR
'he continually blocks'

Crucially, in the D and Š stem paradigms, we do not see the full *tan*-morpheme, but only a *ta*, perhaps for phonological reasons.[5]

→ Indistinguishability with D or Š medials and perfectives.

The following table in (6) illustrates the problem. All pluractional *t*-morphemes have been marked with an underline, all medial *t*-infixes are bold, and perfectives are noted in italics.

(6)

	G	*D*	*Š*
regular pret.	iprus	uparris	ušapris
-t-forms	ip**ta**ras	up**ta**rris	uš**ta**pris
-tan-forms	ip<u>tar</u>ras	up<u>ta</u>rris	uš<u>ta</u>pris
regular dur.	iparras	uparras	ušapras
-t-forms	ip**ta**rras	up**ta**rras	uš**ta**pras
-tan-forms	ip<u>tan</u>arras	up<u>tan</u>arras	uš<u>tan</u>apras
regular pfct.	ip*ta*ras	up*ta*rris	uš*ta*pris
-t-forms	ip*ta***t**ras	up*ta***ta**rris	uš*ta***ta**pris
-tan-forms	ip*ta*<u>tar</u>ras	up*ta*<u>ta</u>rris	uš*ta*<u>ta</u>pris
regular stat.	paris	purrus	šuprus
t-forms	pi**t**rus	pu**ta**rrus	šu**ta**prus
-tan-forms	pi<u>tar</u>rus	pu<u>ta</u>rrus	šu<u>ta</u>prus

The following issues stand out to us immediately:

(7)
a. In D and Š preterite *-tan*, *-t* and regular perfectives are overtly the exact same form,
b. In D and Š there is no difference between perfective and stative *-tan* and *-t*,
c. In G, assimilation of *-tan*'s n→C_2 in preterite, perfective and stative,
d. In G, no difference between preterite *-t* and regular perfective,
e. Full *-tan* surfaces only in durative,
f. Double *-ta* in perfective *-t* and *-tan*.[6]

Especially, regarding (7a, b, and d), the question arises: how could native speakers parse the forms correctly when they were overtly identical?

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[5] In Akkadian consonant clusters may not exceed two consonants. Further, the two consonants must be separated by a syllable boundary.

[6] Note that this phenomenon where one *ta*-morpheme denotes a perfective and the other a pluractional is only attested for OB. There are no clear cases of Gt perfectives and only six attestations for Dt or Št perfectives.

→ This raises the question whether medials, perfectives, and pluractionals are actually formed with the same morpheme.
In perspective of our goal of creating a uniform system for PS reconstruction: the status of the *t*-morpheme in Akkadian is relevant not only from an Akkadian perspective (to understand its Akkadian history) but predominantly because the morpheme is found in every Semitic language in its medial function.

4 Medials and Pluractionals

Previous Analyses:

Kouwenberg (2010)

Streck (2003), G-stems.

Function of the *t(a)*-infix in Akkadian is 'reciprocal-reflexive-passive',

Medial -*ta* and perfective -*ta* the same morpheme

Esp. in later periods, Gtn forms increasingly used to denote 'originally' Gt semantics.[7]

Great discrepancy in the translations used in the dictionaries: Dt and Št forms are easily classified as Dtn or Štn and vice versa.

Current Analysis:

Arguments for postulating a relationship between medials and pluractionals:

1. Identical form in D, Š, but also possibly overlapping semantics in G
2. Dissection of the *tan*-morpheme into *ta*- and -*n*.

- ta: medial

- n: ? (e.g. an empty morpheme[8], arose through phonological processes, is related to the nasal noun-pluractionaliser[9], etc.), its function, however, cannot be crucial to the creation of pluractionality.

Especially considering *pluractional+medial* forms, there must have been two spots for insertion of the morpheme. Merged at the root, the morpheme spells out as pluractional, merged at VoiceP it would be medial.

Evidence for the pluractional position being close the root comes for instance from weak verbs, for instance √wrd 'descend. Consider the following G 3.SG.M:

(8) warādu (√wrd), simple, 3.masc.sg.

durative	*perfect*	*preterite*	*imperative*
urrad	ittarad	urid	rid
'is decending'	'had descended'	'descended'	'descend!'

If -*tan*- were to be infixed into, say, the durative form, we would expect the following derivation:

(9) √wrd *urrad* (<**i-warrad*)→**utarrad* (<**utanrrad* /) / **utanarrad*

[7] Streck notes that the ambiguous Gt forms that look like Gtn are likely a result of Late Babylonian orthography. But the existence of this confusion is still notable to us.

[8] A similarly puzzling *n*-morpheme is found in a class of verbs in Wolane, an Ethiosemitic language. There, the morpheme does not seem to contribute anything to the semantics of the verb (Meyer 2006).

[9] An example would be found for instance in *peʾettu* 'burning coal.SG' and *pe-ʾ-na-a-ti* (SAA 2 51:533). See Kouwenberg (2010: 436).

Instead, the attested form is *ittanarrad* (<**i-w-tan-arrad*).

5 Conclusion

I postulate two different positions at which *-ta* can be merged and depending on which a different meaning is derived.

Semitic pluractionalisation taking place at the root, a *-ta* merged at the root would then derive a pluractional. For PS I postulate a pluractional position, directly at the root.

Still unclear

Even with two positions at which *-ta* can be merged we are left with the problem of distinctiveness. Perhaps different positions in the derivation spell out differently phonologically?

The nature of *n* and why it appears only in duratives and simple verbs is still unclear.

6 Bibliography

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