



Indexical iconicity in Sumerian *belles lettres*

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ABSTRACT

Logographically written languages offer rich possibilities for the use of iconic signs and configurations to encode meaning alongside ordinary denotational textuality. Although indexical iconism has been used to clarify the micro-structure of conversational interactions and other performances, this paper looks at implicit metapragmatics within the text-artifact itself in two test beds (European concrete poetry and Tang Chinese poetry), before turning to Sumerian literary materials from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1800–1600 BCE). The absence of theoretical treatises from this period has often led to the suggestion that there was no theory in ancient Mesopotamia, but this paper argues that Mesopotamian “theory” resides in the implicit metapragmatics of the same cuneiform signs that also generate the denotational meaning of the text.

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1. Introduction

One of the most important advances within the realm of cultural semiotics within the last century has undoubtedly been the recognition that various forms of metalanguage play a central role within all kinds of cultural practice, particularly in practices that seek to manipulate human speech or written texts so as to achieve non-linguistic goals such as ritual purification, medical healing, exorcism or transformations in social identity. The primary difficulty that we face in identifying and making sense of this type of metapragmatic function (see below for a definition) is that it is often implicit, operating in terms of poetic structures in which correlations between a microcosm (anything from the body of a patient to the formal structure of a written text) and the macrocosm (typically a more or less transcendent model of the universe) are manipulated so as to form a dynamic figuration of the expected outcome of the ritual or procedure. These types of correlations between microcosm and macrocosm have been elucidated within certain fields such as discussions of correlative cosmology within sinology, but discontinuities in the cuneiform textual record as well as the absence of a *written* native hermeneutic tradition for archaeologically recovered cuneiform materials – prior to the middle of the second millennium BCE – have blocked nearly all efforts to identify this type of dynamic figuration within the earlier cuneiform tradition.¹ In the following, I first define and exemplify indexical iconism, primarily using simple alphabetic examples as well as exempla from 20th-century, European concrete poetry and Tang period literature in Chinese. In each of these examples, the diagrammatic form of an internally complex “logogram” serves as a model for the very text in which the logogram itself occurs, and as we will see this type of text-internal iconism often serves as a kind of implicit commentary on the medium of communication itself. With these comparanda in mind, I then turn to examples of concrete poetics and cross-modal iconism in the Sumerian literature from the end of the third and the beginning of

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¹ For an overview of correlative cosmology in Chinese thought, see Henderson (1984), Yu (1987) and Ekstroem (2002). Frahm's recent volume on Babylonian and Assyrian commentaries (Frahm (2011), a revised version of his *Habilitationsschrift*) offers an excellent overview of standard methods of commentary in later cuneiform literature, but does not concern itself with the phenomena discussed in this paper. Geller has also paid special attention to medical commentaries in his recent overview of cuneiform medicine (2009). The issues dealt with in this study have far fewer precedents in the secondary literature, largely in Maul (1999, 2003) and Selz (2002a, 2011). There is also a significant tradition of commentary that arises in the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2600–2400 BCE) in connection with the Cities List (see NTSŠ 82+ and NTSŠ 168+ and similar materials) and culminates in the so-called Zami Hymns, but this requires further study (see Krecher, 1992, 294).

the second millennium BCE, namely examples in the Lugalbanda epics and a literary debate known as *The Disputation between Bird and Fish*. The somewhat unusual orthography of the Sumerian word for ‘nest’ ({gud₃} = U₂.KI.SI₃.GA) provides a diagrammatic model of the events described in the ordinary denotational construal of the Lugalbanda materials, particularly the discussion of Lugalbanda’s illness and the possibility of his recovery. This trope, in turn, seems to be based in large part on a theoretical meditation on the role of iconism in logographic writing that is embedded in *The Disputation between Bird and Fish*, lines 102–117.

One of the few areas of Mesopotamian cultural practice in which there is a scholarly consensus that this type of orthographically driven sign by sign exegesis actually existed is in the interpretation of divine names as found, for instance, in the last two tablets of *Enūma Eliš*.² The procedure in these texts, in which each orthographic element in a divine name is treated as a separate logographically written word, is firmly rooted in both the hermeneutic principles of Old Babylonian extispicy as well as the interpretive principles that evolved in the technical disciplines related to divination (dream interpretation, medicine, wisdom literature, and so forth) in the post-Old Babylonian period.³ The manipulation of individual cuneiform signs so as to arrive at a global interpretation of a given name or term lies at the very heart of Mesopotamian semiotic theory, logic and even underpins Mesopotamian science, *tout court*.⁴ Thus the isolation of a reasonably coherent Old Babylonian literary trope, in which the decomposition of a sequence of cuneiform signs and their reinterpretation provides a model for illness (as well as the possibility of either recovery or death), would represent an important addition to this family of hermeneutic techniques. And while the passages that portray Lugalbanda’s illness and recovery in the Lugalbanda epics offer a clear instantiation of this trope, an analogous passage in *The Disputation between Bird and Fish* is best interpreted, in my view, as a *theoretical* meditation on the trope found in the Lugalbanda passages. The theoretical character of *The Disputation between Bird and Fish*, lines 102–117, is difficult to prove on the basis of the Sumerian materials from the Old Babylonian schools alone, particularly since the oral commentary that undoubtedly accompanied the written corpus in the Old Babylonian schools is irrevocably lost. I will suggest, nonetheless, that *The Disputation between Bird and Fish* did indeed serve as a theoretical model for certain passages in the Lugalbanda epics.

The combination of a multimodal text with an interpretative tradition that sees such a text as a performative embodiment of a ritual practice or an ideology is undoubtedly a complex form of semiosis. Before turning to actual examples of this phenomenon, therefore, let me first define a few terms that will, hopefully, help us to see how this kind of complex figuration actually takes place. By far the most important contrast is the opposition between object language and metalanguage within both the semantic realm and also within the realm of pragmatics.⁵ In (1), for instance, we see one of the most basic forms of metalanguage, a semantically-driven definition of the word *fish*.⁶

(1)	Object language	Metalanguage
	<i>A fish (is)</i>	...any animal living exclusively in the water; primarily denoting vertebrate animals provided with fins and destitute of limbs...

Here the snippet of object language “a fish (is)” refers to an entity that is unknown to the addressee, while the metalanguage comment provides a semantic definition of what a fish is. This is the characteristic activity of parents answering the innumerable questions of their children as well as a wide variety of pedagogical activities.⁷ Alongside this kind of metasemantic glossing behavior, we also find metalinguistic descriptions of the appropriateness and effectiveness of speech in context, otherwise known as the pragmatics of language use.

In an event of metapragmatic semiosis, the object (language) consists of a snippet of language in use and the metalinguistic comment describes the degree to which this use of language is effective, felicitous, powerful and so forth, rather than describing its semantic value.⁸ One of the earliest coherent descriptions of this type of phenomenon was J.L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words*, which subsequently served as the basis for speech act theory as formulated by Searle among others.⁹

² On the textual situation, including connections between *Enūma Eliš* and the late god lists, see Michalowski (1990) and Seri (2006), however the most important discussion of the (inter)discursive context of *Enūma Eliš* is undoubtedly Frahm’s “case study” (Frahm, 2011, 345–368). For a general description of the semiotic background at play in these texts, see Bottéro (1974, 1977) and Lambert (1999).

³ The best overview of such techniques, primarily using rabbinic typologies to elucidate Mesopotamian exempla, remains Lieberman (1987), particularly his discussion of notarikon (*not ariqon*), “which takes a word as an abbreviation of a phrase,” as Lieberman puts it. The key figure in Lieberman’s discussion, Nabū-zuqup-kēnu, has also played a central role in Frahm’s work, particularly Frahm (1999). Frahm also discusses these techniques in his survey (Frahm, 2011, 59–85).

⁴ Thus, in very similar terms, see Bottéro (1974, 1977). The naturalization that motivates this type of interpretive practice (viz. the non-arbitrariness of the cuneiform signs used to write a name from an emic point of view) is no simple matter and the complicated interaction between naturalization and conventionalization has been described at length in Parmentier (1994, 175–192).

⁵ The contrast between object language and metalanguage has been discussed by a number of different researchers, but the opposition itself stems from Tarski’s work on the semantics of quotation (Tarski, 1935), and above all, Jakobson’s appropriation of the opposition in his work on poetics (Jakobson, 1958, 1968, 1970). Here and in the following I adhere quite closely to Silverstein’s interpretation of these matters; see Silverstein (1976, 1993). For an overview of this line of thought, see Mertz (2007) and Mertz and Yovel (2009).

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, sub *fish*.

⁷ Silverstein (1976, 16).

⁸ In his programmatic descriptions, Silverstein takes the contrast between metasemantic and metapragmatic function is axiomatic, given the fundamental role that metasemantic activities play in native or emic description of language function (Silverstein (1976, 1993). Nonetheless, Silverstein also emphasizes that metasemantic glosses as in (1) are only one particular type of metapragmatic function, in which the pragmatic goal of language use is reference and predication. Western theories of denotational language usually treat semantic structure (reference and predication) as primary with pragmatics as a residue of poorly understood special functions, but within the branch of linguistic anthropology in which Silverstein situates his work this Western bias has been largely overcome.

⁹ Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) are the standard references, but see the contextualization of Searle’s speech act theory as well as the famous Searle–Derrida debates as summarized in Lee (1997, 5–8 and 265–276).

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