

# AMARNA-AKKADIAN AS A MIXED LANGUAGE

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## 1. Introduction.

Amarna-Akkadian is a language represented by a large number of letters which were sent to the Pharaoh by vassal kings in Syria and Palestine. The letters were found in the state archives of Tell-el-Amarna (Egypt). They were written during the reign of Akhnaton (14th century B.C.). All are written in cuneiform script.

On linguistic grounds, the letters can be divided into four groups:

- letters in a non-Semitic language (Hittite or Hurrian).
- letters in a fairly correct Akkadian.
- letters in a mixed Akkadian-Hurrian jargon.
- letters in a mixed Akkadian-Kanaanite jargon.

The first two groups do not concern us here. The third group is represented by only a small number of texts. The last group contains the large majority of the Amarna correspondence. In this paper the letters of the last group will be taken as a basis. The language will simply be called 'Amarna-Akkadian'.

The two languages concerned in the formation of Amarna-Akkadian are Akkadian (East-Semitic) and the ancestor of the Kanaanite languages (a Northwest-Semitic idiom, here called Pre-Kanaanite). For West-Semitic, Amarna-Akkadian is the oldest form attested. East-Semitic and West-Semitic are related to each other, but on many points they differ considerably.

In general, Amarna-Akkadian uses Akkadian lexical items with Pre-Kanaanite flectional morphemes and syntax. The flectional morphemes include person-number marking in the verb and the expression of tense-aspect. Some exceptions should be made:

- in certain fixed expressions of letter-style, Mesopotamian Akkadian is used.
- one finds a great number of lexical glosses from Pre-Kanaanite, which are preceded by a special sign to show that they belong to another linguistic system.
- a small number of Amarna-Akkadian words are Pre-Kanaanite, e.g. *janu*

'there is not'.

Other words have an Akkadian form but have the semantics of their Pre-Kanaanite counterparts, e.g.

- (1) Armana Akkadian (ES): *išū* 'there is'  
 Akkadian: *išū* 'to have'  
 cf. Hebrew : *yeš* 'there is'

## 2. Grammar.

### 2.1. Phonology.

As to the phonological system, not much can be said. The orthography is a peculiar variant of Akkadian spelling systems in the Levant, but the choice of the spelling system probably has no direct phonological basis.

### 2.2. Morphology.

The ways of flectional influence on Amarna-Akkadian from Pre-Kanaanite differ:

1. Suffixes and prefixes are generally Pre-Kanaanite. The ways the suffixes are attached to the verb may be mixed Akkadian and Pre-Kanaanite, e.g.

- (2) Amarna-Akkadian: *palx-ati* or *palax-ti* 'I am afraid'  
 Akkadian: *palx-āku*  
 Pre-Kanaanite: \* *palax-tī*

In some cases a conjugated Akkadian verb-form was taken as a stem for affixation, e.g.

- (3) Amarna-Akkadian: *tašappar-ta* 'you sent'  
 Akkadian: *ta-šappar* 'you are sending'  
 Pre-Kanaanite: \* *šapar-ta* 'you sent'

In this case the Akkadian imperfect 2sg prefix *ta-* was considered part of the stem and the perfect 2sg.m ending *-ta* was suffixed.

2. Ablaut patterns are generally Pre-Kanaanite. The apophonical passive formation of the imperfect, which does not exist in Akkadian is amply

attested in Amarna-Akkadian, e.g.

- (4) *y-addin+u* 'he gives'  
*y-uddan+u* 'he is given'

The same is true for the (suffixal) conjugation of the perfect. In Akkadian only a stative conjugation with the ablaut pattern CaCiC exists. Amarna-Akkadian has a perfect active pattern CaCaC, as West-Semitic, and a perfect passive or stative pattern CaCiC. The last form is not as important in later Kanaanite as in Amarna Akkadian, but this is probably due to later developments in Kanaanite and not to inference phenomena in Amarna-Akkadian.

### 2.3. Syntax.

Except for some Akkadian standard formulaic expressions, clausal and sentence syntax are West-Semitic. Standard Akkadian is a strict SOV language. Amarna-Akkadian almost only uses VSO-based word-order. The tense-aspect system is almost exclusively Pre-Kanaanite. Free grammatical morphemes may be Akkadian (e.g. the prepositions) or Pre-Kanaanite (e.g. *janu* 'there is not').

## 3. The linguistic context of Amarna Akkadian.

Amarna-Akkadian was used in Palestine and Syria, in the regions where later the Kanaanite languages Hebrew and Phoenician were spoken. There is no reason to assume that there was an important community of native speakers of Akkadian in this region. In the 15th-14th century B.C., Akkadian was used as the language of administration and correspondence in many countries of the Levant: in Hatti (next to Hittite), in Mitanni (next to Hurrian), in Ugarit (next to Ugaritic), etc. The Akkadian used in these countries has its peculiarities, some of which can be explained from the native language of the scribes, but none of them reveals the mixed language type attested in Amarna-Akkadian. It is probable that in parts of Palestine and Syria Pre-Kanaanite languages were written too. Our documentation on this is however too scanty to be sure.

We do not know much about the origin of the Amarna-Akkadian jargon. It is probable that it originated in intellectual circles (scribes) and it is doubtful whether it was ever a spoken language. Its status was not low, otherwise it would not have been used to such an extent in letters to the King. There are some reasons to believe that the scribes who used

Amarna-Akkadian knew (a variant of) Standard Akkadian too. We find in a number of letters next to the Amarna-Akkadian 1sg perfect desinence *-(a)ti* the Standard Akkadian *-āku*. Moreover, there are a number of features which an educated scribe could not have missed. For to learn cuneiform script one needs years of education. It seems that the language of instruction was Standard Akkadian. In all these years, a scribe would certainly have learned that in Standard Akkadian the 3sgm desinence of the imperfect verb is *i-* and not *ja-* or *ji-*. Therefore, Amarna-Akkadian should not be considered as bad Akkadian written by somebody who did not know the language sufficiently, but as a distinct idiom that could be chosen instead of Standard Akkadian.

It is probable that Amarna-Akkadian was a language used only by scribes, who acquired it during their education. It might very well be a conscious creation of these scribes. There are no traces of the language before or after the Amarna-period, but documentation about the region is rather scanty. The genesis of Amarna-Akkadian has certainly nothing to do with language death: Kanaanite languages are well attested in later periods.

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