

The Curious Case of the Vanished Coordinative Conjunction in Neo-Assyrian Akkadian

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Keywords: coordination; loss; syntax; Semitic

Akkadian, an East Semitic language in Mesopotamia (2600-300 BCE), had two coordinators: phrase and clause level *u=* and purely clause level *=ma*. These Akkadian coordinators are attested in both of its major dialects, Babylonian and Assyrian, throughout their history. Within Akkadian, and more generally within Semitic, the exception is the dialect of Neo-Assyrian (1000-600 BCE), where both *u=* and *=ma* are missing from native Assyrian texts. In this paper we will concentrate on the coordinator *u=*.

ale tupp-ū u kasap=šu ibašši=u šūt=ma īde
where tablet.P CON silver=his EXT=SUBORD 3MS=FOC know.PRES.3MS
'he knows where the tablets and his silver are' (Old Assyrian)

ina Mat-rab-šaqe eql-u kiri-u ibašši
in GN field.P garden.P EXT
There are fields and gardens in Mat-Rab-šaqe (Neo-Assyrian)

Regional languages with which Neo-Assyrian was in contact, like Babylonian Akkadian and Aramaic, continued to use the Semitic coordinative conjunction **wa=* productively. In fact, Neo-Assyrian writers were familiar with both *u=* and *=ma* from Standard Babylonian texts, and used them correctly when writing in this dialect. Neo-Assyrian, therefore, became the only Semitic language to use asyndeton as its main strategy of coordination, a very rare strategy cross-linguistically. We are not aware of any other language which lost its coordinators and did not replace them.

The lack of overt coordination in Neo-Assyrian is a notable exception to the tendencies delineated in previous studies, such as Haspelmath (2004, 2007) and Stassen (2001, 2003). Haspelmath, e.g., notes that languages with a long tradition of writing overwhelmingly prefer syndesis, while languages that have not or only very recently been recorded in writing tend to lack indigenous coordinators, and frequently borrow such function words from prestige languages with which they are in contact (Haspelmath 2007: 7–8). Neo-Assyrian is an outlier, since it has a long history of writing, is in contact with languages with coordinators, but has not borrowed them nor did it develop a new coordinating strategy.

In this paper, we suggest that the disappearance of the coordinative conjunction in Neo-Assyrian is a result of a number of phonological and morphological changes, primarily the simplification of the case system and the shortening of final long vowels, all creating an environment where the coordinating conjunction, which is unstressed as a rule, was zeroed out: *šarru u šarratu* 'king and queen' > *šarrū šarratu* > *šarru šarratu*.

While the phenomenon of coordination loss is very rare, it happened in Neo-Assyrian through a series of regular and quite common linguistic changes: reduction of final unstressed vowels and merger of cases.

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