

Language contact in the Ancient Near East

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The Ancient Near East is a cultural, political, and economical hub where languages belonging to the Semitic, Afro-Asiatic, Hurro-Urartian, and Indo-European language families are known to have coexisted with at least four language isolates contributing to the mixture. With more than 4000 years of uninterrupted documentation of linguistic history, this unique configuration is an ideal testbed for contact induced language change and is of particular interest for estimating the impact specific sociolinguistic factors have on language evolution.

There is no doubt – in the context of Semitic languages in particular – that language contact has an important role in the way languages evolve over time and in determining typological clusters (Faber 1997, Lutz 1992). However, there is little agreement today on the best way to model language contact (Hess 2018). The problem is exacerbated when the languages in contact are closely related (Dench 2001, Dixon 2001, Pat-El 2013). Attempts have been made using geography, ethnicity, political boundaries, and large migration events as proxies for language contact (see for example Lupyan and Dale 2010, Toynbee 1959, Ostler 2006, Breyer 2014, among others). All these attempts have taken one potential conduit for language contact and operationalized it as a proxy for language contact as a whole. However, while all of these factors may lead to language contact, there is no such requisite. If they do play a role, the interplay of all the different factors creates a unique contact situation which generates a unique linguistic outcome.

The current study tries to address this issue by looking at the language contact in the Ancient Near East in a more holistic way, determining the ways in which different sociolinguistic factors, i.e. different types of language contact influence linguistic development. The study examines 70 morphological and morphosyntactic features in around 60 (spatial and temporal) language varieties of the Ancient Near East. The linguistic features are then correlated with different extralinguistic factors such as geography, environment, trade routes, political power, social structure, mass events, and population genetics. These factors are used to determine different types of language contact. A quantitative statistical model is used to associate the type of language contact with specific linguistic developments. The well-known historical context of the Ancient Near East serves to measure the plausibility of our model against. By doing so, we hope to isolate the structural-linguistic and the extralinguistic factors and model the specific ways in which they interact to create new linguistic innovations.

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