

# Sound Symbolism in The Disputation between Bird and Fish 102-109

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J. CALE JOHNSON

## Sound Symbolism in The Disputation between Bird and Fish 102–109<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper investigates the poetic structure of a passage from *The Disputation between Bird and Fish* (lines 102–109). The unusual thing about this passage is that it is the only place within the disputation literature where physical violence (and death) takes the place of the verbal combat that typically occurs in the disputations. Although this passage is characterized by the total absence of speech, various words with the phonological form /sik/ act as a form of sound symbolism (phonological iconism) that points to the decisive moment in the passage: the fish's attack on the bird's nest, which results in the destruction of the bird's nest and its young. These eight lines (102–109) can be juxtaposed to the eight line sequence that immediately follows (lines 110–117), which are also non-verbal, but whose poetics are organized along entirely different lines.

Keywords: Sound Symbolism, Literary Disputations, Sumerian Literature

### Introduction

The Mesopotamian disputations<sup>2</sup> are verbal contests between two non-human, personified cultural types or abstractions, both of whom divide a particular economic or functional domain and contrast their own merits and their opponent's deficiencies. So, for example, in *The Disputation between Winter and Summer* (ETCSL 5.3.3) and *The Disputation between Hoe and Plow* (ETCSL 5.3.1), the protagonists debate their contributions to the agricultural regime, while in *The Disputation between Sheep and Grain* (ETCSL 5.3.2) the

<sup>1</sup> This paper derives from the first section of a paper entitled "The multimodal poetic structure of *The Debate between Bird and Fish* 102–117," which was originally presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> West Asian Linguistics Meeting, Kyoto, Japan, July 1, 2000, and in a much revised form at the American Oriental Society, Nashville, April 4, 2003. The rest of the original paper, which dealt with orthographic poetics in lines 110–117 will appear in a much expanded form under the title "Indexical Iconicity in Sumerian *belles lettres*." There are too many to thank individually here for their comments on this paper over the years, but special thanks to Jerry Cooper and Piotr Michalowski for comments on an earlier draft. All errors remain my own.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Vanstiphout's lead in using *disputation* to describe the texts in which non-human actors oppose one another, while reserving *debate* for those in which human beings of one kind or another are the interlocutors.

relative merits of animal husbandry and agriculture are juxtaposed.<sup>3</sup> The exceptional thing about *The Disputation between Bird and Fish* (ETCSL 5.3.5), however, is that the fish violates the formal limits of the debate genre and violently attacks the bird's nest, a transgression of genre that seems to have played a significant role in Vanstiphout's efforts to formulate a theory of genre in Mesopotamian literature along more or less Bakhtinian lines, even if Bakhtin does not figure in Vanstiphout's own description.<sup>4</sup> Vanstiphout argues, for example, that certain qualities of the fish's "way of life" such as the fact that it inhabits the largely silent and entirely invisible world beneath the surface of the pond are "intolerable in the framework of a debate."<sup>5</sup> That is to say, the fact that the fish is accustomed to the silent world of the watery depths and hesitant to engage in a loud and boisterous exchange with the bird clearly represents a *formal* problem for the disputation as a literary genre. How can the protagonists engage in an entertaining repartee if one of them simply refuses to speak? While it is clear that something unusual is going on in the passage, as of yet no one has offered any broader motivation for the actions of the fish. The transgression of the fish (its destruction of the bird's nest and young) represents the very point at which the limits of the debate genre as such are violated, hence the passage in which this violation of both social constraint and generic boundary takes place would seem to require a particularly close reading.

Unlike cult songs or royal hymns, the Sumerian debates are not particularly "poetic" in the ordinary sense of the word. Michalowski notes in his survey of Mesopotamian poetics that nearly all Sumerian texts, regardless of genre, are written in an elevated register in which parallelism, inclusio and other kinds of minor poetic structure are used to some degree.<sup>6</sup> This prosaic literary register was the central preoccupation of Sumerian literacy *per se* in the Old Babylonian period and served as the raw material for the generic system that was in place in the {e<sub>2</sub>-dub-ba-a} at that time,<sup>7</sup> but I would like to suggest that some of the most interesting poetics of this entire literature reside in the prose of the literary disputations, and I present one particularly rich example of sound symbolism here.

### Phonologically mediated poetics

Although poetics as a field of study has achieved an astounding sophistication at times (the work of Roman Jakobson comes to mind), Sumerian poetics is still in its infancy. There have been a few surveys such as those of Limet, Berlin and more recently Ferrara on the repertoire of poetic devices available in Sumerian,<sup>8</sup> but most of the varied attempts to introduce metrical rules into Sumerian have not met with any widespread acceptance.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J. J. A. van Dijk (1953); J. Bottéro (1991); H. L. J. Vanstiphout (1990); (1991); (1992); A. Cavigneaux (2003).

<sup>4</sup> H. L. J. Vanstiphout (1986); (1992), 348; (1999a); one of the key texts for Bakhtin's model of genre is M. M. Bakhtin (1986); see M. Silverstein – G. Urban (1996) for several case studies formulated along these lines.

<sup>5</sup> H. L. J. Vanstiphout (1992), 348.

<sup>6</sup> P. Michalowski (1996), 148–149; for a discussion of linguistic register, see A. Agha (2001).

<sup>7</sup> See S. Tinney (1998); H. L. J. Vanstiphout (1986); (1999a); (1999b); N. Veldhuis (1997).

<sup>8</sup> H. Limet (1976); A. Berlin (1979); A. J. Ferrara (1995).

<sup>9</sup> R. R. Jestin (1967); (1969); W. Heimpel (1970); H. Sauren (1971a); (1971b). I do not go into questions of imagery here, but see J. Black (1998) for an overview.

Michalowski has reviewed what we might call theoretical (largely Praguean) foundations;<sup>10</sup> these theoretical foundations are best exemplified, however, in Michalowski's earlier work on an incantation against 'bile' {ze<sub>2</sub>}, which acknowledges several kinds of phonological poetics, but sees little evidence for any strict metrical ordering.<sup>11</sup> One reason that Assyriologists have had a great deal of difficulty in formulating or confirming any widely recognized set of metrical canons may be due, however, to an awareness that (in the few examples of phonetically written Sumerian that we do have) there is a great deal of syncope and assimilation that is not represented in our transliterations and that, for the most part, we do not understand.<sup>12</sup> That being said, even if a truly metrical or other rule-based set of poetic canons were to be identified in, say, the hymnic literature, I would be very surprised if that kind of poetics were also to be found in the literary disputations. If anything, I would expect the disputations and debates to exhibit interesting rhetorical devices—as they do occasionally seem to – rather than metrical niceties. The text in question, *The Disputation between Bird and Fish* 102–109, reads as follows.<sup>13</sup>

(1) *The Disputation between Bird and Fish* 102–109<sup>14</sup>

102. u<sub>4</sub>-bi-a ku<sub>6</sub>-e mušen-ra sa<sub>2</sub> im-si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>-ge  
 103. si-ga lib-ba a<sub>2</sub>-ba mu-un-ĝen-ĝen  
 104. u<sub>4</sub> mušen gud<sub>3</sub>(U<sub>2</sub>.KI.SI<sub>3</sub>.GA)-ba zi-ga-gen<sub>7</sub> amar-bi-še<sub>3</sub> niĝ<sub>2</sub>-gu<sub>7</sub>-bi tumu<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>

<sup>10</sup> P. Michalowski (1996).

<sup>11</sup> P. Michalowski (1981).

<sup>12</sup> P. Michalowski (1996) and references therein. M. Civil (1976), 83 and n. 1 in particular refers to an unpublished paper, "Poetic patterns in Sumerian," read at the 118<sup>th</sup> meeting of the American Oriental Society, Baltimore, 1970, which "deals with an 8 + 5 syllabic metric pattern, with or without assonance, detectable in *The Debate between Tree and Reed* and in the opening lines of Gudea, cyl. A, among other cases; other meters and several matters of principle (some of which are not consonant with H. Sauren's (1971a and 1971b) proposals) are also discussed."

<sup>13</sup> Both the edition of Alster and H. L. J. Vanstiphout (1991) as well as Civil's working edition were very kindly made available to me by their authors, but the sections in question do not differ from the ETCSL appreciably. For a translation of the entire text and relevant bibliography, see H. L. J. Vanstiphout (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Variations in the manuscripts for lines 102–109 are collected in this footnote; the sigla and the comments follow Civil's manuscript, but the corresponding museum numbers are supplied with the first occurrence of each sigla. In line 102, E (BM 65147 [CT 42, 42] + BM 68049 [CT 58, 62]) has {IM im-si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>-ge} in place of {sa<sub>2</sub> im-si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>-ge}, while I (UET 6, 40 + U 5641) has {im-ak-ak-NE} in place of {im-si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>-ge}. In line 104, D (Ni 9803 [ISET 2, 74–75]) has {tumu<sub>3</sub>-da} instead of {tumu<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>}; E omits {ba} in the phrase {gud<sub>3</sub>-ba} and has {niĝ<sub>2</sub>-gu<sub>7</sub>-du<sub>8</sub>-u<sub>3</sub>-bi} in place of {niĝ<sub>2</sub>-du<sub>7</sub>-bi}; I has {zi-ga-ni} in place of {zi-ga-gen<sub>7</sub>} and omits {bi} from the phrase {niĝ<sub>2</sub>-gu<sub>7</sub>-bi}; K (U16886 [UET 6, 41]) has {gud<sub>3</sub>-bi} in place of {gud<sub>3</sub>-ba} and {zi-ga-a-gen<sub>7</sub>} in place of {zi-ga-gen<sub>7</sub>}. In line 105, D has {mu-un-ĝar} instead of {mu-un-kin-kin}; I replaces the two words {si-ga a<sub>2</sub>-ba} with {si-ga-a-aš} and does not reduplicate the verbal root: {mu-un-kin}. In line 106, D omits the final GA sign from {gud<sub>3</sub>} and alters the verb considerably {bi<sub>2</sub>-[in-sig<sub>3</sub>-ge]}; likewise, E has {bi<sub>2</sub>-in-sig<sub>3</sub>} in place of {mu-un-sig<sub>3</sub>} and {eš<sub>3</sub> lil<sub>2</sub>-e} in place of {eš<sub>3</sub> lil<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub>}. In line 107, E has {erim<sub>3</sub>-a-ni} instead of {erim<sub>3</sub>-ma-ni} and I has {mu-un-[bir<sup>?</sup>]-re} for {mu-un-bu}. In lines 108, E has {mu-un-gaz-gaz} instead of {bi<sub>2</sub>-in-gaz-gaz} and {ab-e} instead of {ab-ba}, while I begins the line with {nunuz-bi gud<sub>3</sub>-bi-a} rather than {nunuz ĝar-ĝar-ra-ni}; W (NBC 7829) also seems to have the line, but it is quite distorted. In line 109, E inverts the first two

105. ku<sub>6</sub>-e ki si-ga a<sub>2</sub>-ba mu-un-kiĝ<sub>2</sub>-kiĝ<sub>2</sub>  
 106. gud<sub>3</sub>(U<sub>2</sub>.KI.SI<sub>3</sub>.GA) ĝar-ra u<sub>2</sub> si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>-ga-ni eš<sub>3</sub> lil<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub> mu-un-sig<sub>3</sub>  
 107. e<sub>2</sub> du<sub>3</sub>-du<sub>3</sub>-a-ni mu-un-gul-gul erim<sub>3</sub>-ma-ni mu-un-bu  
 108. nunuz ĝar-ĝar-ra-ni bi<sub>2</sub>-in-gaz-gaz ab-ba im-mi-in-šu<sub>2</sub>  
 109. ku<sub>6</sub>-e mušen-ra mu-ni-in-si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub> a-e ba-da-an-kar  
 102. *Then the fish plotted against the bird,*  
 103. *Silently, furtively, (the fish) was moving at the side,*  
 104. *(And when the bird rose from its nest to get something for its young to eat,)*  
 105. *The fish was waiting in a quiet place at the side,*  
 106. *(The fish) struck the nest (the bird) had made, where (the bird) would put the food, (and made [the nest] into) a deserted shrine,*  
 107. *(The fish) destroyed the house (the bird) had built and tore out its storeroom,*  
 108. *(The fish) caused the eggs (the bird) had laid to be smashed and they covered the sea,<sup>15</sup>*  
 109. *The fish had pulled off its scheme against the bird and (the fish) fled in the water.*

Unlike the other sections of the debate, which are framed by *verba dicendi* which identify who is speaking and who is being spoken to, this passage is framed by the familiar discourse marker {u<sub>4</sub>-bi-a} "at that time," which is regularly used to introduce a new passage when *verba dicendi* are not in use, and a concluding stage direction {a-e ba-da-an-kar} "(the fish) fled into the water." Both the first and the last line of the passage include {ku<sub>6</sub>-e mušen-ra} as an inclusio, a framing device particularly apt due to its resemblance to the formulation typically found in quotation framing constructions elsewhere in the disputations.

Generally speaking, the passage is built up around (i) a series of verbal roots sharing the phonological form /sik/<sup>16</sup> (lines 102, 103, 105, 106 (x2), 109), and (ii) two pairs of reduplicated verbal root that are *not* of the form /sik/:

- (2) a. ĝen-ĝen (line 103) :: kin-kin (line 105)  
 b. gul-gul (line 107) :: gaz-gaz (line 108)

words in the line, yielding {mušen-e ku<sub>6</sub>-ra}, while I has a quite different line that still fits the context: {min<sub>3</sub>-kam-ma-še<sub>3</sub> ku<sub>6</sub>-e mušen-ra in-še<sub>3</sub> mu-ni-in-dub<sub>2</sub>}. Civil also notes that a gloss in E *i-še-er-ma* has been omitted from the copy in CT 42. It should be noted that the synthetic text generally follows D, except for the verbal forms in lines 105 and 106; the verbal form in line 105 {mu-un-kin-kin} is from E, while the form in line 106 {mu-un-sig<sub>3</sub>} is from I.

<sup>15</sup> I follow H. L. J. Vanstiphout (1997) in taking {ab-ba} as an abbreviated writing of {a-ab-ba-ka} 'sea' in the locative case (cf. A. Poebel (1927), 258 who notes several examples in which the /k/ of the genitive case is explicit, reference courtesy F. Wiggerman). {ab} could also be interpreted as 'dovecote' still in the locative case, but if so the phrase {eš<sub>3</sub>-lil<sub>2</sub>-la} in line 106 in presumably to be read as {ab lil<sub>2</sub>-la} 'deserted dovecote' as well.

<sup>16</sup> Implicit in much of this discussion is Gelb's old theory (I. Gelb (1961), 33) that in Sumerian the "voiced" stops in conventional transliterations actually correspond to voiceless, unaspirated stops, while the "voiceless" stops correspond to voiceless, aspirated stops. This view has been reiterated on typological grounds by C. P. Boisson (1989), but has met with some objections (G. Rubio (1999) apud P. Michalowski (2004), 28).

Within the frame established by the inclusio {ku<sub>6</sub>-e mušen-ra} in lines 102 and 109, three repetitions of {si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>} in lines 102, 106 and 109 not only confirm the presence of the inclusio, but also divide the passage into two halves, lines 102–106 and lines 106–109. Each pair of reduplicated non-/sik/ roots then falls into each half of the passage: the reduplications in (2a) appear between lines 102 and 106, while those in (2b) occur between lines 106 and 109. In (3) below the occurrences of /sik/ that structure the passage are in CAPITAL LETTERS, while the reduplications that intervene between the occurrences of /sik/ are in **bold**:

(3) Basic poetic structures in lines 102–109

102. u<sub>4</sub>-bi-a ku<sub>6</sub>-e mušen-ra sa<sub>2</sub> im-SI<sub>3</sub>-SI<sub>3</sub>-GE  
 103. si-ga lib-ba a<sub>2</sub>-ba mu-un-**ġen-ġen**  
 104. u<sub>4</sub> mušen gud<sub>3</sub>-ba zi-ga-ġin<sub>7</sub> amar-bi-še<sub>3</sub> niġ<sub>2</sub>-gu<sub>7</sub>-bi tumu<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>  
 105. ku<sub>6</sub>-e ki si-ga a<sub>2</sub>-ba mu-un-**kin-kin**  
 106. gud<sub>3</sub> ġar-ra u<sub>2</sub> SI<sub>3</sub>-SI<sub>3</sub>-GA-ni eš<sub>3</sub> lil<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub> mu-un-SIG<sub>3</sub>  
 107. e<sub>2</sub> du<sub>3</sub>-du<sub>3</sub>-a-ni mu-un-**gul-gul** erim<sub>3</sub>-ma-ni mu-un-bu  
 108. nunuz ġar-ġar-ra-ni bi<sub>2</sub>-in-**gaz-gaz** ab-ba im-mi-in-šu<sub>2</sub>  
 109. ku<sub>6</sub>-e mušen-ra mu-ni-in-SI<sub>3</sub>-SI<sub>3</sub> a-e ba-da-an-kar

In addition to these basic structures, a secondary parallelism occurs between occurrences of {si-ga} at or near the beginning of lines 103 and 105 and another pair of reduplicated verbal roots that modify the initial noun in lines 107 and 108, namely {du<sub>3</sub>-du<sub>3</sub>} in line 107 and {ġar-ġar} in line 108.

The one line that does not seem to participate in these poetic structures is line 104: {u<sub>4</sub> mušen gud<sub>3</sub>-ba zi-ga-ġin<sub>7</sub> amar-bi-še<sub>3</sub> niġ<sub>2</sub>-gu<sub>7</sub>-bi tumu<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>} “when the bird rose from its nest to get something for its young to eat.” This line makes use of none of the elements of poetic structure that organize the rest of the passage. In the chart in (4), I have summarized the poetic structure as described so far (“secondary parallel” refers to the parallelism between {si-ga} in lines 103 + 105 and the reduplicated roots modifying line-initial nouns in lines 107 + 108).

(4) Tabulation of structural features in lines 102–109

Line	/sik/ reduplication	non-/sik/ reduplication + secondary parallel	pattern
102.	yes	no	a
103.	no	yes	b
<b>104.</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>c</b>
105.	no	yes	b
106.	yes	no	a
107.	no	yes	b
108.	no	yes	b
109.	yes	no	a

As clearly demonstrated in (4), line 104 takes part in none of phonologically based parallels that structure the rest of the passage: it does not include any form of /sik/, nor does it include any reduplication. Moreover, it is a temporal subordinate clause that provides background information that helps the reader to make sense of the narrative sequence in the passage. The absence of phonologically mediated poetics in combination with its subordinate syntax and explicative function all indicate that line 104 is a later insertion into lines 102–109. If we exclude line 104, we arrive at a very tightly constituted symmetrical pattern as in (5).

(5) Tabulation of structural features in lines 102–103 and 105–109 (excluding 104)

Line	/sik/ reduplication	non-/sik/ reduplication + secondary parallel	pattern
<b>102.</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>a</b>
103.	no	yes	b
105.	no	yes	b
<b>106.</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>a</b>
107.	no	yes	b
108.	no	yes	b
<b>109.</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>a</b>

Once line 104 is excluded, the repetitions of {si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>} neatly occur at the beginning, middle and end, and the most important verbal root in the entire passage, namely {sig<sub>3</sub>} ‘to strike,’ occurs at the epicenter of the passage at the end of line 106. I will, however, suggest in my conclusion that line 104 was incorporated into the passage so as to orchestrate a series of parallels between lines 102–109 and the following eight line section in lines 110–117.

**Sound symbolism in lines 102–103 and 105–109**

Nearly all instances of sound symbolism within the Assyriological literature have to do with onomatopoeic representations of sound, in particular the use of phrases having the form {C<sub>1</sub>uC<sub>2</sub>-C<sub>1</sub>aC<sub>2</sub>-za}.<sup>17</sup> The first example in Black’s collection of onomatopoeic forms is from *Inanna and Ebiḫ* 144–145:

(6) Onomatopoeic symbolism in *Inanna and Ebiḫ* 144–145 (J. Black (2003), 40, ex. 1.2)

ebiḫ<sup>ki</sup>-e na<sub>4</sub> su ni<sub>2</sub>-ba-ke<sub>4</sub> / bar-bi-a **dub-dab**<sub>5</sub> ḫe<sub>2</sub>-em-mi-ib-za

*The rocks forming the body of Mount Ebiḫ clattered down its flanks*  
(translation Black)

<sup>17</sup> J. Black (2003); see also J. Klein – Y. Sefati (2000).

This type of sound symbolism is quite widespread in Sumerian and well attested in a number of present-day languages, e.g., English *tick-tock*, Japanese *pika-pika* (equivalent to English *twinkle-twinkle*), etc. The sound symbolism at work in lines 102–103 and 105–109 does not, however, make use of the {C<sub>1</sub>uC<sub>2</sub>-C<sub>1</sub>aC<sub>2</sub>-za} pattern and therefore requires substantially more justification.

In terms of a figure and ground relationship, the figure in the aural imagery in lines 102–103 and 105–109 is the verbal root of the decisive event line 106, namely {sig<sub>3</sub>}, which may also be rendered as {sag<sub>3</sub>}. In a quite different context (a pair of Eblaite incantations), Civil and Rubio have commented on the particular phonological form of the root and its variability between {sig<sub>3</sub>} and {sag<sub>3</sub>} as follows:

The existence of a variant /usik/ of /usak/ [of the verb ‘to sleep’] can be explained in the light of the alternation between /a/ and /i/ in words that present the /sVk/ pattern: **sag<sub>9</sub>/sig<sub>6</sub>/sig<sub>5</sub>, sa<sub>7</sub>(-g)/sig<sub>7</sub>, s<sub>ag</sub>/sig, s<sub>ag</sub>/sig<sub>11</sub>, sag<sub>11</sub>/sig<sub>8</sub>, sag<sub>8</sub>/sig<sub>15</sub>**. This alternation does not occur when /s/ alternates with /š/, or when /k/ (or /g/) alternates with /b/ (**sig<sub>4</sub>**, Eme-sal **še-eb**) or with /d/ (**sig<sub>4</sub>/šid, sig<sub>4</sub>/šid – gi<sub>4</sub>** “to roar, to howl”). Although some of these pairs represent a semantic relation or differentiation, others do not, so a phonological explanation must be sought.<sup>18</sup>

Civil and Rubio go on to note that an explanation for this phonological alternation will be forthcoming in Civil’s study of Sumerian phonology. Be that as it may, what the systematic alternation in so many unrelated words demonstrates is that the alternation between {sig<sub>3</sub>} and {sag<sub>3</sub>} is not an artifact of native or Assyriological scholarship, but in fact represents a phonological reality in Sumerian. This kind of structured variation permits a certain degree of abstraction in the representation of the root in question (hereafter simply {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>}), but more importantly it clarifies the phonological form of the consonants in the root and allows general principles of phonesthetic meaning to be applied to {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>}.

As Rhodes notes in a study of the phonology of phonesthesia in English, “[f]inal -p and -k refer to images that have an instantaneous decay” in the sense that the end of the representation of these sounds on a spectrogram is abrupt and thereby mimics the sound of a single blow such as one might hear when a stick or club strikes a solid object.<sup>19</sup> Rhodes lists examples from English such as “whack, thunk, [and] clack,” but other examples from English more closely resemble {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>} such as *strike* or *smack*. The sibilant at the beginning of {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>} could then recall the {si-ga lib-ba} furtive character of the fish’s preparation in line 103 for the attack in line 106, culminating with the *non-reduplicated* root /sik/ or /sak/, itself ending in a stop. Caution is in order of course, particularly since the same phonetic string /sik/ or /sak/ could represent a number of unrelated words in the proposal put forward by Civil and Rubio: {sig<sub>5</sub>/sa<sub>6</sub>(g)} “to be good (in quality),” {sig<sub>7</sub>/sa<sub>7</sub>(g)} “to be green/yellow,” {sig<sub>11</sub>/sag<sub>2</sub>} “to scatter,” {sig<sub>15</sub>/sag<sub>8</sub>} “to be precious, rare” in addition to {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>}. Even if pairs of related orthographies such as {sig<sub>5</sub>/sa<sub>6</sub>(g)} + {sag<sub>15</sub>/sag<sub>8</sub>} or {sig<sub>11</sub>/sag<sub>2</sub>} + {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>} were to be collapsed into two lexical entries instead

<sup>18</sup> M. Civil – G. Rubio (1999), 255.

<sup>19</sup> R. Rhodes (1994), 285.

of four, three distinct and apparently unrelated lexemes (‘high quality’, ‘green/yellow’ and ‘strike/scatter’) share the phonological form /sik/ or /sak/ and only one of these three lexemes seems to be onomatopoeic. In a discussion of sound symbolism in Lower Chinook, for example, Silverstein acknowledges a similar conundrum:

“[n]eedless to say, these [onomatopoeic] shapes are closely matched by others that denote entirely different states of affairs, their synonyms have entirely other shapes in many instances, and where we can locate [etymologically related words in] Wasco correspondents . . . we have no evidence of any felt sound-iconic or onomatopoeic quality to those particles.”<sup>20</sup>

Therefore any sound symbolic proposal involving {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>} clearly requires additional evidence from the particular context of lines 102–103 and 105–109.

The other phonological pattern at work in lines 102–103 and lines 105–109 – beside the ubiquitous repetition of /sVk/ – is somewhat more difficult to describe because it is a pattern of avoidance, namely a systematic avoidance and structured absence of /s/ and /k/, the very consonants that form the central figure of the passage in /sVk/. Note that each pair of reduplicated verbal roots in (2a) and (2b), repeated in (7a) and (7b) below, share some phonological material: {kin-kin} either rhymes with {ġen-ġen}, or if we read {kiġ<sub>2</sub>-kiġ<sub>2</sub>} instead of {kin-kin}, the final consonant of {kiġ<sub>2</sub>} rhymes with the initial consonant of {ġen}; {gul-gul} and {gaz-gaz} simply alliterate.

- (7) a. ġen-ġen (line 103) :: kin-kin (line 105)  
b. gul-gul (line 107) :: gaz-gaz (line 108)

The dissonant consonants in each pair, however, also seem to participate in a poetic pattern known as a linked half-rhyme as exemplified by the well-known Beatles’ lyric:<sup>21</sup>

- (8) a. Blackbird singing in the dead of night /t/  
b. Take these broken wings and learn to fly /fl/  
c. All your life /f/  
d. You were only waiting for this moment to arise /z/

Although none of the lyrics in (8) rhyme perfectly, the final segment of each adjacent pair of partially rhyming words are close enough in phonological terms to allow the stanza to pass from /t/ to /z/, phonemes that would otherwise seem entirely unrelated. Zwicky writes that “[i]mperfect rhymes can also be linked in a chain: X is rhymed (imperfectly) with Y, and Y with Z, so that X and Z may count as rhymes thanks to the mediation of Y.”<sup>22</sup> Thus /t/ and the cluster /fl/ largely differ in aspiration with the tongue in nearly the same final position (8a and 8b), /fl/ and /f/ differ only in the loss of the /l/ clustered with /f/ in (8b), and /f/ and /z/ are both fricatives that primarily differ in the point of articulation.

<sup>20</sup> M. Silverstein (1994), 56.

<sup>21</sup> Lennon and McCartney after A. M. Zwicky (1976), 678.

<sup>22</sup> A. M. Zwicky (1976), 677.

Bearing in mind the usual caveats about the unreliability of reconstructions of Sumerian phonology or even a consistent mapping between transliteration and phonological form, I would like to suggest that something similar is at work in the sequence of reduplicated verbal roots in (7). Since the type of structured variation of {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>} as described by Civil and Rubio is not available for these verbal roots, we must proceed on very tentative grounds and I will use a distinct notation “{/g/” to simply mean the value of a “phoneme” in the transliterational metalanguage used by Assyriologists. {ġen} and {kin} seem to exhibit a partial rhyme in {/in/} or {/en/} and differ in the articulation of the initial velar, or alternatively, if we take up the reading {kiġ<sub>2</sub>} rather than {kin}, both roots still share the same place of articulation for the first consonant ({/ġ/} and {/k/} respectively) but differ only in place of articulation for the final consonants (both {/n/} and {/ġ/} being nasal stops, the former dental and the latter velar). Likewise, {gul} and {gaz} share {/g/} but differ in both vowel and final consonant. The difference between {/z/} and {/l/} may in fact be quite similar to the oppositions between /fl/, /f/ and /z/ in (7), if {/l/} can be seen as a lateral fricative of some kind.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in a recent analysis of half-rhymes in Japanese rap lyrics, Kawahara discusses several consonantal pairs that differ substantially in phonological features yet nonetheless show a great deal of acoustic similarity, which could also be the case here.<sup>24</sup>

The interesting thing about the poetics of the passage, in my view, is that each pair of dissonant half-rhymes seem to form a paradigm that projects an implicit third member: {/k/} and {/ġ/} in lines 103 and 105 – on the assumption that word-final {kiġ<sub>2</sub>} shifts to {kin} – would imply the third member of a velar series, namely {/g/}, while {/z/} and {/l/} in lines 107 and 108 would seem to call for a third sibilant or lateral fricative, perhaps {/s/}. If these reconstructions are valid to some degree, then the implicit members of each set of half-rhymes, namely {/s/} and {/g/}, would also correspond to the consonants in the segment /sVk/, which is the phonological form that organizes lines 102–103 and 105–109 as a whole.<sup>25</sup> This may suggest that there was a delicate play of co-occurrence and absence between the verbs having the form /sVk/ and the other reduplicated verbs in the passage.

Returning once more to the notion of figure and ground, whereas /sVk/ acts as figure, I would like to suggest that the alternations between {gul} and {gaz} as well as {ġen} and {kin} provide a diffuse scatter of partially rhyming sibilants and velars that act as a ground for the most important verbal root in the passage, namely {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>} in line 106. This opposition between the several occurrences of /sVk/ and the various other reduplicated roots is also emphasized by the non-reduplication of {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>}: it refers to a single,

<sup>23</sup> Due to the alternation between Emegir {/n/} and Emesal {/s/} as well as the regular phonological change of \*-št- to \*-lt- in later forms of Akkadian, Alster proposed that the phoneme underlying the alternation between {/n/} and {/s/} was a lateral sibilant – better known as a lateral fricative in the phonological literature (I. M. Diakonoff (1980), 7–12; B. Alster (1982), 4; M. K. Schretter (1990), 68–69). If the alternation of {/n/} and {/l/} in the negative prefix \*nu is allophonic and based on the relative sonority of the following vowel, one could argue that it is also the result of allophonic variation of an underlying lateral fricative phoneme. If {/l/} is in fact a lateral fricative, its articulation would fairly closely resemble the /fl/ in (7b) without the bilabial component of the cluster.

<sup>24</sup> S. Kawahara (2007).

<sup>25</sup> On the equation of {/g/} = /k/, see footnote 16 above.

momentary action in opposition to the repetitive movement or activity that the reduplicated roots generally signify. It is telling that, with the exception of {sig<sub>3</sub>/sag<sub>3</sub>} in line 106, nearly every other finite verb in the passage is an atelic, reduplicated verb. Thus the phonological poetics of lines 102–103 and 105–109 form a concentric pattern that focuses the attention of the reader on the decisive event represented by the verb {mu-un-sig<sub>3</sub>} in line 106, namely the fish’s attack on the bird’s nest, while the sound symbolism at work in the passage models the attack in its own terms.

### Conclusion

Whereas the organizing principle of lines 102–103 and 105–109 is primarily phonological, the organizing principle in lines 110–117 seems to be almost entirely orthographic.

#### (9) *The Disputation between Bird and Fish* 110–117

110. u<sub>4</sub>-bi-a mušen igi piriġ-ġa<sub>2</sub> umbin ħu-ri<sub>2</sub>-in<sup>mušen-na</sup>  
 111. gud<sub>3</sub>(U<sub>2</sub>.KI.SI<sub>3</sub>.GA)-bi-še<sub>3</sub> a<sub>2</sub> dub<sub>2</sub> i<sub>3</sub>-ak-e dal-le-bi saġ im-gi<sub>4</sub>  
 112. <sup>tu</sup>mar-uru<sub>5</sub> an-ša<sub>3</sub>-ga-še<sub>3</sub> bu<sub>4</sub>-bu<sub>4</sub>-gen<sub>7</sub> an-na mu-un-niġin<sub>2</sub>-niġin<sub>2</sub>  
 113. mušen-e gud<sub>3</sub>(U<sub>2</sub>.KI.SI<sub>3</sub>.GA)-bi-še<sub>3</sub> igi tab-ba a<sub>2</sub>-ur<sub>2</sub> ba-bur<sub>2</sub>-bur<sub>2</sub>  
 114. gud<sub>3</sub>(U<sub>2</sub>.KI.SI<sub>3</sub>.GA) ġar-ra u<sub>2</sub> si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>-ga-ni edin daġal i<sub>3</sub>-zukum-e  
 115. ka-bi nu-gig-gen<sub>7</sub> an-ša<sub>3</sub>-ga gu<sub>3</sub> mu-un-dub<sub>2</sub>-dub<sub>2</sub>-be<sub>2</sub>  
 116. mušen-e ku<sub>6</sub>-ra mu-un-niġin<sub>2</sub>-niġin<sub>2</sub> ambar i<sub>3</sub>-kiġ<sub>2</sub>-kiġ<sub>2</sub>  
 117. mušen-e ku<sub>6</sub>-ra engur-ra igi im-ma-an-du<sub>8</sub> ġeštu<sub>2</sub> ba-ši-in-gub

We can be sure that these eight lines (110–117) form a textual unit and that they also correspond to lines 102–109 for several reasons. Both passages begin with the standard discourse marker {u<sub>4</sub>-bi-a} “at that time,” and end by naming the two protagonists: {ku<sub>6</sub>-e mušen-ra} in line 109 and a double repetition of {mušen-e ku<sub>6</sub>-ra} in lines 116 and 117. Moreover, if we put line 104 back in its original position, yielding an eight line sequence in lines 102–109, then the eight lines in 102–109 can be seen to correspond to the eight lines in 110–117 in a number ways. The most dramatic of these parallels is clearly to be found in the fifth line in each eight line group (line 106 in the first section and line 114 in the second), which are almost identical.

#### (10) Fifth line in each eight line group, lines 106 and 114

106. U<sub>2</sub>.KI.SI<sub>3</sub>.GA ġar-ra u<sub>2</sub> si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>-ga-ni eš<sub>3</sub> lil<sub>2</sub>-la mu-un-sig<sub>3</sub>  
 114. U<sub>2</sub>.KI.SI<sub>3</sub>.GA ġar-ra u<sub>2</sub> si<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>3</sub>-ga-ni edin daġal i<sub>3</sub>-zukum-e

Both of the lines begin with a rather elaborate *figura etymologica* of the orthography for {gud<sub>3</sub>} ‘nest,’ which serves as one of the key orthographic puns that organizes lines 110–117. The historical context that led to the inclusion of line 104 is probably lost to us, but it seems fairly clear that a seven-line poem (102–103 and 105–109), which could easily have existed in a non-written form, was expanded at some point in the written tradition so as to bring it into alignment with the eight line section in 110–117. Therefore we should at least entertain

the possibility that lines 102–103 and 105–109 might well have derived originally from an oral poetic tradition, and that once it had entered the written tradition, the sound symbolism in these lines may have motivated a corresponding attempt at orthographic symbolism in lines 110–117, a topic that we must take up elsewhere.

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