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**The Problem
of the main**

One of the ways in which words in a language change meaning is by contamination. That is, the word is influenced by an homonymous or partly homonymous word to such an extent that the earlier meaning either disappears or is confined to a restricted area. We may illustrate this process by an example from English. The verb "dwell" now means "to reside." In Old English, "dwellan" means "to deceive, lead astray." This latter meaning resembles those of its Germanic cognates. The change in meaning was occasioned by contamination with the Old Norse dvelja which, in an intransitive and reflexive usage, means "to tarry, stay."¹ An example of this semantic contamination in Akkadian may be seen in the problems connected with the mahhû.

The problem of the mahhû is at once subtle and complex.² This solution is solved presently somewhat as follows.³ The mahhû is an ecstatic prophet. The word is considered a parrās form (GAG 55o) of the verb mahû (presumably "to rage, rave").⁴ The term muhhûm, known mainly from the Mari texts, is seen as

¹ The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, ed. C.T. Onions (Oxford, 1966), p. 296.

² The present article is an outgrowth of the author's unpublished M.A. thesis "The muhhûm/mahhû: A Lexicographic Study" (Columbia University, 1969).

³ It was first propounded by François Thureau-Dangin, Racc, p. 98, n. 2; cf. Edouard Dhorme, Religions, p. 216.

⁴ Von Soden, AHW, pp. 582b, 586b.

semantically and etymologically,⁵ if not phonetically,⁶ related to mahhû. The word mahhû is separated from the word lumahhu, "purification priest."⁷ This is derived from the Sumerian LÚ.MAĤ, a cultic priest who occupied a very high position in the Sumerian temple, possibly even high priest.⁸

While this analysis is quite attractive, many problems remain. In connected texts the logogram LÚ.MAĤ occurs four times, the phonetic writing lumahhu never. One may question the legitimacy of preferring the reading lumahhu to mahhû. The argument that the meanings are different is belied by a ritual tablet from Uruk, which states

maḥḥû (LÚ.GUB.BA) šalšišu ittišu ilamma [x x x] itebbīma
[x x x] šalšišu maḥḥû ittišu ilamma mē qātē inam[diin]

The mahhû goes about (in a circle) with it three times
...he rises and...three times does the mahhû go about
with it (and) pours water for the hands.⁹

This broken ritual description is part of an elaborate purification ceremony and has nothing to do with ecstatic prophecy.

Note also the famous akītu ritual commentary: mahhû (lú¹⁰maḥ-hu-u) ša ina mahar Bēlet-Bābili illakūni mupassiru (=mubassiru) šû ana irtiša ibakk[i], "The mahhû who goes in front of Belet-Babili, that herald cries at her breast."¹⁰ This text, which is of Assyrian origin, nowhere indicates that the ritual weeping is a precursor to ecstatic activity. While it is not excluded, the context does not favor such an interpretation.

5 B. Landsberger, GGA (1915), p. 365.

6 W. von Soden, WO 1 (1951), p. 400; cf. AHW, p. 582b.

7 AHW, p. 563a.

8 A. Falkenstein, NGSU III, p. 137; cf., however, D.O. Edzard in Fischer Weltgeschichte 2 (Frankfurt am Main, 1965), p. 85:

"'Ekstatikerpriester' (konventionelle Deutung des Sumerischen Wortes)."

9 A. Falkenstein, LKU, Pl. 18, lines 19-20.

10 H. Zimmern, KAR I, 143:28-29; idem, Neujahrfest II, p. 16; W. von Soden, ZA 51 (1955), p. 134.

One must also take into account the fact that the earliest attestation of the logogram LÚ.MAH favors a normalization mabbû. It occurs in an Old Akkadian letter of the Ur III period:

umma šarrumma ana Ur-Lisina qibīma 60 kur še'im ana LÚ.
MAH^{im} ša Ištar sa Girsu idin

The message of the king to Ur-Lisina, say! "Give sixty kôr of grain to the lumahhum (or mabbûm) of Ishtar of Girsu!"¹¹

The giving of special provisions to the mabbû of the Ishtar cult is well attested in Assyria.¹² Furthermore, the mabbû is especially connected with Ishtar, and female deities generally. The lumabbu, if the separate designation is warranted, is connected with male deities.

The remaining instances of the term lumabbu do not favor the distinction with the mabbû. It occurs once, in Gilgamesh VII:iv:47, but this passage may well go back to Old Babylonian, if not Sumerian, sources. As such it would refer to the Sumerian title and usage. The remaining two occurrences are in late Babylonian ritual tablets.¹³ The use of LÚ.MAH as a logogram may be an archaism, for the function of the priest in these passages is consistent with the function of the mabbû in the Uruk ritual tablet previously quoted.¹⁴

The connection of mabbû with mabbûm is also problematical. That they are connected is undoubted. We need only compare the OB Lu lexical list's

¹¹ E. Sollberger, TCS I, 53, no. 203.

¹² E. Ebeling, TuL, 50:27 (=LKA 70), duplicates H. Zimmern, ZA 25 (1911), p. 195 (K. 2001); S. Langdon, RA 13 (1916), p. 108, line 24.

¹³ Thureau-Dangin, RAcc, pp. 91:2, 119:28.

¹⁴ Von Soden's attempt to connect the lumabbu with the lumakku known from lexical lists (AHw, p. 563a; JNES 27 [1968], p. 218) is far-fetched. The change of a doubled fricative to a doubled plosive is unexampled in Akkadian, and comparisons with other Semitic languages do not encourage such a view. Furthermore, lumakku is written lu-mak-ku, while the supposed lumabbu is written lú-mah-hu. While this difference in sign is explicable, it does little to remove doubt concerning their connection.

LÚ.GUB.BA=mu-úb-bu-ú (Tab. A 23) to the later Lu's LÚ.GUB.BA=maḥ-bu-u (IV:ii:117). The first problem is that the OB Lu also lists LÚ.SAR.RA=ma-ḥu-ú-um (pt.10,14). Are the mubḥû and ma(b)ḥûm of the Old Babylonian lists related, or is this merely a fortuitous coincidence? The other, and more important problem, is that of the genetic relationship between the words mabḥû and mubḥû. Landsberger considered mubḥû a purrus form of the verb maḥû indicating physical deformities.¹⁵ This is in line with the belief that the mabḥû is an ecstatic prophet. Von Soden, however, feels that mubḥû illustrates the West Semitic shift of long a to long o in accented syllables.¹⁶

This interpretation is extremely dubious, for the only other example of such a Canaanite shift that may be quoted is from the stela of Yahdun-Lim, viz., ḥamūšam iḥmušma, "he plundered greatly...." In this connection, as von Soden notes,¹⁷ the use of the accusative is typically Assyrian. This is hardly surprising, as Assyrian influence at Mari is not unknown. The most common example is, of course, the use of waššarum for wuššurum, though other examples exist such as piššaš for piššuš. It is possible that the form ḥa-mu-ša-am represents an Assyrian D infinitive ḥammušam and that either this or iḥmuš is incorrect. This Canaanite shift proposed by von Soden seems, therefore, uncertain. Therefore, it is best, at least provisionally, to accept Landsberger's interpretation. Unfortunately, the presently accepted solution to the problem of the mabḥû cannot explain the shift of mubḥû to mabḥû, nor can it account for the different functions which the mabḥû performs.

The best solution of this enigma is semantic contamination. During the Sumerian period there existed two offices, the LÚ.MAH and the LÚ.GUB.BA.¹⁸ The former was borrowed into Akkadian as mabḥû, as evidenced by the Ur III letter and the Gilgamesh passage

¹⁵ GGA (1915), p. 365; cf. A. Malamat, Eretz-Israel 4 (1957), p. 75, n. 10.

¹⁶ Von Soden, WO 1, p. 400.

¹⁷ GAG 150a.

¹⁸ Cf. H.H. Hackman, BIN 8 Name Index.

cited previously. The latter was translated mubbû.¹⁹ Because of their semi-homonymy, mabbû absorbed the meanings associated with mubbû. The word mabbû survived probably because it did have the apparent form of a profession name (parrās). In Babylonia, mabbû denoted merely a purification priest, true to its Sumerian origin. In Assyria, with the profusion of prophetic activity, the mabbû (particularly in the Ishtar cult) was associated with dream prophecy. Thus we see that an independent designation lumabbû need not exist, and that mabbû denotes both purification priest and dream prophet.²⁰ This solution, incidentally, does not depend upon the acceptance of Landsberger's interpretation of mubbû. Were we to accept von Soden's unlikely theory of vowel shift, the form mubbû would merely be an example of popular etymology, as is the case of the šabrû mentioned in Ashurbanipal.²¹

Finally, a word must be said about ecstasy in Mesopotamia. A careful survey of the textual material has not produced a single credible description of ecstatic behavior in Mesopotamia. The situation is much like that of Ugarit, where dream prophecy alone is described. It cannot be gainsaid, however, that etymologies of many Akkadian and Sumerian priestly titles point very strongly to the likelihood that ecstatic activ-

¹⁹ Note that l ú . g u b . b a occurs in an Old Babylonian letter: VS 16, 144:18 (this passage was overlooked by von Soden in AHw, p. 582). On the basis of the OB Lu and the Mari texts, we apparently must transcribe it as mubbûm.

²⁰ It may be apposite to note that in Greece, purification rites and ecstatic activity coexisted. Martin P. Nilsson, A History of the Greek Religion (Oxford, 1949), pp. 203ff.; W. C. Guthrie, The Greeks and their Gods (Boston, 1954), pp. 192ff.

²¹ A.C. Piepkorn, AS 5, p.66 (V:50), cf. AHw, p. 407b sub i/utûlum. In this passage the šabrû is a dream prophet. This usage is influenced by the Assyrian infinitive šabrû, "to see a vision." During the Sumerian and Old Babylonian periods the šabrû was a high administrative official in the temple (J. Renger, ZA 58 [1967], p. 140, cf. p. 170). The word šabrû is a Sumerian loanword. It is generally believed that the Sumerian word ŠABRA is itself a loanword from Akkadian *šāpirum (A. Goetze, JCS 2 [1948], p. 100; B. Landsberger, MSL 3, p. 144; *idem*, MSL 5, p. 51:12; A. Falkenstein, NSGU III, p. 159; I.J. Gelb, MAD 3, p. 281).

ity was known in Mesopotamia.²² Nevertheless, etymologies are rather treacherous and cannot be relied on in the absence of a firm contextual basis.

²² Cf. CAD, Z, p. 7 (sub zabbu); E, p. 271 (sub eššebû); V. Christian, WZKM 5 (1958), p. 10.