CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

Introduction

There were poets, philosophers, and other individuals in ancient Greece who claimed to know the real meaning of names. They understood "real meaning" to be the theological and cosmological truths hidden in language. Although the truths were plural and there was no consensus about what true names ultimately reveal, the theoretical assumptions of those individuals were essentially similar: they believed that language in general, but more specifically the names of the gods, contained crucial information about the cosmos. Classicists tend to think that those views were already present in archaic hexametric poetry and further developed centuries later by philosophers, sophists, and religious innovators of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.[1] But did Greek philosophies of language and the semantics of divine names effectively develop in isolation? In the present book I explore points of contact between Greek and Mesopotamian systems of thinking about language and reality. By comparing a selection of semantic models of Babylonian scholars with theories of signification of early Greece, I argue for the viability and importance of bringing into a dialogue cuneiform and Greek texts concerned with the cosmic function of language.

Unlike classicists, Assyriologists have often recognized similarities between Babylonian nominal semantics and the etymological inquiries found in Plato's *Cratylus* as well as the interpretation of divine names of the Stoics. Stephany Dalley, for instance, noticed two decades ago that the "Stoic techniques used to investigate connections between gods and earthly matter" use the same "kind of technique found in the Babylonian *Epic of Creation*, in which the epithets of Marduk are dissected one by one into various syllables and logographic elements, which can each be given independent meanings of their own."[2] This book follows the clues that

[1] For the idea of Homer and Hesiod as the source of Greek linguistic thinking, see e.g. O'Hara 1999; Pfeiffer 1968. See also Sluiter 1997 for a history of ancient Greek semantics and grammar that does not take into account cross-cultural contexts.
[2] Dalley 1998 p. 47; Maul 1999; van de Mieroop 2018b.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

Dalley uncovered. However, my purpose here is not to investigate the influence of Babylonian semantics on the *Cratylus* and the Stoics but to expand the horizon of comparisons for Greek texts which are earlier than Plato. I am particularly interested in situating the author of the Derveni papyrus in a wider translocal context, since his work influenced both Plato and the early Stoics.[3] The trajectory that I propose has not yet been followed and is a step towards future studies of the relationship between Greek and Mesopotamian linguistic thought.

Objectives and Methods

Here I investigate pre-Platonic ideas about the role of language in the universe and the relationship between divine names and cosmic history, restricting myself to Greece and Mesopotamia. The ancient question about the cosmic place of language, which appears many times intertwined with interrogation about the meaning of divine names, can be de-theologized and translated into its modern equivalent. In our times, one could ask why there is language in the world or, to be more precise, why the process that began with the Big Bang led to the evolution of life forms that can represent the world symbolically.

In the texts that I have chosen for this investigation, the ancient articulation of this question is answered in various forms, sometimes more directly than others. In *Enuma elish*, also known as the Babylonian *Epic of Creation*, language is presented as one of the foundations of the world, an *archē* as important as the temporal and spatial dimensions in which cosmogony takes place. In the *Theogony*, on the other hand, Hesiod tries to answer the problem of language by connecting it to Memory, a divinity that antecedes any form of communication. For the author of the Derveni papyrus, language is a purely human phenomenon: people name things arbitrarily, following their uncontrolled desires, but it is up to the wise to select from this random production of words those names that best represent reality. However different these approaches may be, they intriguingly rely on the analysis of divine names (either through wordplay or etymology) to articulate their answers regarding the place of language in the universe.

For heuristic reasons, I study here a limited set of ideas. I have made this choice to avoid an inventory approach that may lose force while trying to

[3] For Plato and the Derveni papyrus, see Anceschi 2007; Bergomi 2014; Kotwick 2019b. For the Stoics see, Casadesús 2011; Rodríguez 2018 with references.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

account for a variety of constructs. I focus then on selected ancient models about the origin of language, the importance of speech acts in the process of stabilizing reality and, particularly, on the idea of a universal god or goddess whose multiple names describe different aspects of the universe. This latter construct, the idea of a semantically unified polyonymous cosmos, is particularly suitable for this investigation because it is a rare theological experiment that stands out within ancient polytheism. Its strangeness and distinctness facilitate its differentiation from other notions and this in turn allows a focused comparison.

The idea of a polyonymous god whose names reveal the essence of the cosmos first surfaces in Mesopotamia and seems to have spread from there to the Eastern Mediterranean. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann has noticed similar notions in Egypt, but he dates them later than their cuneiform counterparts; the same can be said about the Northwest Semitic texts.[4] Thus, my choice of Mesopotamian sources over other Near Eastern texts is primarily determined by problems of chronology. But besides the chronological aspect, I consider that a focused analysis is crucial for the type of comparisons that I pursue in this book. Adducing evidence from areas other than Greece and Mesopotamia, in which I am less proficient, would unduly complicate and dilute my argument. Clearly, my focus on two bodies of literature does not deny the existence of similar notions in other ancient Mediterranean cultures beyond Greece and Mesopotamia.

My approach is then predominantly comparative but also historically grounded. To some extent, I follow Johannes Haubold's premise that common interests and preferences underlie the connections that we perceive in texts of various ancient Mediterranean people.[5] These common interests must have formed throughout centuries, or perhaps millennia, of continuous interactions.[6] I also follow a modified version of Bruce Lincoln's *weak comparisons*, which he understands as the investigation of similar forms of engaging with problems that have arrived at similar solutions.[7] Although Lincoln does not pretend to seek a common source behind "two bodies of literature" or "imagine that one influenced the other," I argue here that

[4] Assmann 1996; for the Northwest Semitic world, see Sanders 2017; Smith 2008.
[5] Haubold 2002, 2013 pp. 18–72.
[6] In this respect see also López-Ruiz 2021 p. 38 who writes: "I am not alone in seeing the transfer and adaptation of motifs as a by-product of a more profound process of hybridity caused by long-term coexistence. (. . .) In other words, the literary and mythological entanglements, for the most part, followed the human entanglements. Cultural complexity brought the expansion of the literary, religious, and symbolic repertoire, while in every instance the success of the adaptations depended on the success in making the new version locally meaningful."
[7] Lincoln 2018 p. 113.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

Mesopotamian semantics had an impact on Greek conceptions about the nature of divine names. This impact, however, was mediated and conditioned by the social dynamics and shared beliefs of some Greek intellectuals who adopted Near Eastern motifs and ideas to make claims of innovation and, consequently, build symbolic capital.

Questions of Transmission

We know that there were intellectual exchanges between the Greeks and the people of the Near East, including Mesopotamia. However, we do not possess enough information to reconstruct how and in which terms the Greeks could have become familiar with a hermeneutic approach that coincides with what we observe in cuneiform texts. The obscurity that surrounds the transmission of ideas related to the ontological status of language and divine names from Mesopotamia to Greece holds true for other cultural fields. This applies equally to literary motifs and music, to a divinatory system like the study of the liver, as well as to the diffusion of ancient sciences like astronomy and astral magic.[8] But the comparison of non-material cultural goods – like ideas – clearly indicates that there were exchanges. Given the lack of detailed descriptions of the encounters that made possible the spread of ideas from one culture to another, it is helpful to consider some tentative, if hypothetical, models.

Several models of transmission have in fact been argued for different time periods and areas. Walter Burkert has suggested two main routes for the dissemination of knowledge from the Near East to Greece: the Phoenician and Anatolian. The former refers to the sea as a medium of contact, while the latter points to the networks of roads and towns that connected Mesopotamia to Asia Minor.[9] The roads that linked Anatolia, Syria, and the lands of the two rivers were used and expanded successively by the Hittite, Lydian, and Persian empires. In addition to the maritime and inland networks, Burkert famously hypothesized that craftsmen, itinerant priests, and poets played a central role in the diffusion of Near Eastern knowledge into Greece. He also proposed that the Greek archaic period witnessed the most intense communication and exchange with the Near East prior to the Hellenistic era. Burkert's model has been critically scrutinized, with the result that, while the idea of the two routes remains

[8] For literary motifs, see Burkert 2004; West 1997a; for liver divination see Bachvarova 2012; Furley and Gysembergh 2015; for the astral sciences, see Jones and Steele 2011; Rochberg 2004; Steele 2006; Stevens 2019. For the diffusion of musical scales, see Franklin 2002, 2006.

[9] See Burkert 2003.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

valid, the time frame had to be expanded.[10] There was not a single Orientalizing revolution, as he believed, but many.[11] The exchange of complex ideas in the area must already have begun in the second millennium, well before the archaic period. With the extension of the time frame, one should add Egypt as a place where the Greeks could have encountered ideas of various Near Eastern populations, including ones from Mesopotamia; nor should we neglect Greece itself, an area that saw the influx of immigrants throughout its history.[12]

Recently Mary Bachvarova has explored the Anatolian route in much detail, confirming that the transfer of ideas from Mesopotamia to Asia Minor began already in the second millennium via the Hittites, who not only adopted cuneiform as a writing system but also largely embraced Babylonian culture.[13] Despite the fact that the Mesopotamian body of knowledge that reached Hattusa was deeply embedded in a culture of writing, Bachvarova has shown that, parallel to the scribal lore that spread with the learning of cuneiform, there was an oral tradition shared by Mesopotamians, Levantines, Hurrians, and Hittites. This large body of knowledge must have been transmitted by multilingual individuals who were able to translate the narrative constructs from one culture to another. After the collapse of the Hittite world in the early twelfth century BCE, the oral traditions of Mesopotamia and themes developed by cuneiform scribes must have been transmitted orally in Anatolia and North Syria down the centuries.[14] Carolina López-Ruiz has studied the Phoenician route, emphasizing the role of Northwest Semites as cultural mediators between Greece and the Near East; she too proposes a wider historical period for the dissemination of ideas, starting in the second millennium and not in the archaic period. Like Burkert, she attributes to poets, who were experts in cosmogonies, a central role in the diffusion of Near Eastern narratives.[15] More than a decade ago, Robin Lane Fox reanimated the thesis that attributes to Euboean Greeks a crucial role in the transmission of Near Eastern cultural goods to Greece.[16]

[10] Bachvarova 2016; López-Ruiz 2010; Rutherford 2009. [11] Haubold 2013 p. 8.
[12] For the reception of Babylonian astronomy in Egypt, see Moyer 2011 p. 237. See Demetriou 2012 for the presence of Near Eastern population in the Greek polis.
[13] Bachvarova 2016. By the beginning of the second millennium, before the constitution of the Hittite empire, Assyrian merchants had already made inroads into Anatolia, where they founded the trading post of Kanesh, leaving hundreds of cuneiform private letters behind.
[14] See Gilan 2015, 2021 for the continuity of Hurro-Hittite literature in Neo-Hittite kingdoms of Syria like Aleppo.
[15] Bachvarova 2009, 2016; López-Ruiz 2006, 2010, 2021.
[16] Lane Fox 2008 who updates a theory popularized by Boardman 1980. See a recent critique of Lane Fox by López-Ruiz 2021.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

There were many possibilities for cross-cultural transfer at different levels in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is quite likely that all agents that scholars have considered so far, namely, Hurrians, Hittites, Phoenicians, Euboeans, and other populations, were involved in a deep process of cultural diffusion that contributed to the creation of a common Eastern Mediterranean repertoire of symbols and ideas. Moreover, not only poets, priests, and scribes enjoyed high mobility in the area, but also merchants, doctors, craftsmen, mercenaries, and sailors.[17] If we consider that the Greeks had cities in Western Anatolia that became part of the Persian empire, colonies in Egypt, and emporia in Syria, together with the presence of Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Persians in mainland Greece, it becomes clear that the chances for communication were high. Furthermore, direct contacts between Greeks and Assyrian and Babylonians should not be downplayed. Robert Rollinger has carefully documented how cuneiform records from the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Achaemenid periods register the presence of Greeks from Asia Minor and Cyprus in Northern and Southern Mesopotamia.[18]

Despite the scenarios of contact and exchange that scholars have reconstructed, we need to keep in mind that Ancient Greece and Babylonia were two distant nodes in a large network of societies. Distance then may account for the scarcity of descriptions about the interactions between Greek and Mesopotamian individuals. In a recent book, Kathryn Stevens has rigorously studied the transfer of astronomical ideas between Mesopotamia and Greece during the Hellenistic period while trying to identify the agents behind such exchanges.[19] Although Stevens' comparison of Babylonian and Greek astronomical methods shows that there was direct exchange between Greek and Mesopotamian experts, the people behind such exchanges became barely visible. Some names of Babylonian astronomers like Kidenas surface in both cuneiform and Greek texts, but the place and modality of the encounters that could have led to an exchange of ideas remain unknown. Stevens has suggested, as Bachvarova has also done for the Bronze and Iron ages, that such contacts could have taken place at royal courts. There are, in fact, consistent references in late biographers like Diogenes Laertius to Hellenistic royal courts acting as hubs of intellectuals.

[17] For patterns of mobility and exchange, see Hunter and Rutherford 2009; Kiriatzi and Knappett 2016; Niemeier 2001; Zaccagnini 1983; Ziemann 2019. On the Carian villages in southern Mesopotamia that may have been the home of mercenaries from Asia Minor, see Potts 2018 with references.

[18] See Rollinger 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2018; Rollinger and Korenjak 2001.

[19] Stevens 2019.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

In classical times, we also know of the Persian king hosting Greeks and other subjects from his satrapies in his court. For instance, Plato's stepfather, Pyrilampes, appears to have been an ambassador to the Persian court and to have shown off his Eastern connections.[20] In Persia, the Greeks who participated in such embassies could have met Babylonians like Belshunu, who acted first as governor of Babylon and became later the satrap of Syria.[21] Thus there were Babylonians in the Persian court, which some Greeks visited as high officials and for which others worked as craftsmen.[22] Visits to Greece by learned Babylonians are also reported in the ancient sources. According to Diogenes Laertius, Democritus studied theology and astrology with some Chaldeans and Persian *magi* who had moved to Abdera during Xerxes' invasion of Greece in 480.[23] In reference to an account of Philips of Opus, Philodemus writes that Plato received the visit of an unnamed Chaldean in the Academy.[24] Before the Achaemenid period, encounters in the Assyrian court also occurred. As Marcus Ziemann points out, "Cypriot kings were required to travel to Babylon to deliver tribute to Sargon II."[25] At a lower level, cuneiform records also indicate that Assyrian kings employed Greek carpenters and sailors for building and operating warships.[26] The poet Alcaeus from Mytilene famously reports that his brother served in the Neo-Babylonian army.[27]

Although I consider that this evidence is not only interesting but also very important, I do not attempt to reconstruct the institutions, geographies, and venues in which possible exchanges between Greeks and people from Mesopotamia may have taken place. Instead, I look at larger conglomerates of interests, tastes, and habits of ancient thinkers that made possible the transfer – from Babylon to Greece – of the idea of a semantically unified polyonymous cosmos, which could be understood via the analysis of its names. Throughout this study, I maintain that what linked Greece and Mesopotamia in the exchange of the ideas I discuss in this book was a shared interest in cosmological, theological, and semantic questions. This common interest must have formed as the consequence of long-term interactions, for the peoples of Greece and Southwest Asia "have

[20] Cf. Pl. *Chrm.* 157d–158a. [21] Stolper 1987, 1995.
[22] Rollinger 2018; Stolper 1995; Waerzeggers 2010.
[23] D.L. 9.34. In purely chronological terms, this report is problematic but not impossible: Democritus was born twenty years after the presence of Xerxes in the region, and this requires the Babylonian priests to have lived in Abdera for more than a quarter of a century.
[24] Philodemus, *History of the Academy*, *PHerc.* 1021 Coll. III.35–V.14. See Horky 2009 p. 48; Kingsley 1995 p. 203.
[25] Ziemann 2020 p. 364. [26] Rollinger 2018. [27] Haubold 2013 pp. 74–75.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

lived for millennia close to one another and must have shared practices and ideas."[28]

Entangled through common questions, we find in Greece and Mesopotamia stories, hymns, commentaries, and lists of words that focus, with similar emphasis, on the process through which language and the universe were constituted. A theme around which such texts tend to revolve is the *succession myth*, a way of portraying the evolution of the universe as the replacement of a divine ruler by another. In this book, I argue that this mytheme – as well as the tastes and dispositions accompanying it – was one of the main transmission vectors of the polyonymous cosmic god.

Perhaps unconventionally, I also regard a series of hymns to Ishtar that exalt and interpret the goddess' names as part of the same group of mythemes and interests that powered the dissemination of the polyonymous cosmic god and its names. I do so for several reasons. First, in some Sumerian and Akkadian sources Ishtar is regarded as a challenge to male divine rulers like Anu and Enlil and, consequently, as an alternative cosmic god. Second, Ishtar's names are interpreted in a manner similar to those of Marduk. And my third reason is that Hesiod embeds the interpretation of Aphrodite's names (Ishtar's counterpart) into his own instantiation of the succession myth that I discuss in detail in Chapter 3.

Similarly, I also consider a series of commentaries that engage with cosmological and semantic problems that belong to the same conglomerate or cluster. Foremost among these commentaries is the Derveni papyrus in which an anonymous Greek author of the fifth century BCE undertakes the exegesis of an Orphic cosmogony. This cosmogony shares several narrative elements with Hesiod's *Theogony, Enuma elish*, and the Hurro-Hittite *Song of Emergence*. The commentary on the text attributed to Orpheus is particularly interesting because it shows how the Derveni author reduces all gods to one by resorting to etymology and emphasizing a universal polyonymous divinity that he calls Nous (Mind). In this regard, another important text is the Assyrian commentary on the last tablets of the *Epic of Creation*, which also assumes that various theonyms of historically independent divinities are alternative appellations of Marduk, turning this divinity into something comparable to the Derveni author's cosmic god.

One can trace a continuous engagement with the succession myth and related texts since the second millennium BCE in populations that ranged from central Anatolia to Southern Mesopotamia, passing through the

[28] Lardinois 2018 p. 896.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

territories of Hurrians and Canaanites. In the first millennium, the Greeks appear in the textual evidence joining the conversations around the succession myth, adding their modifications, interpretations, and critiques. If we collect all these texts, from the various regions and genres, we find a very high degree of similarity but also much variation both across cultures and within the same cultural settings. I think that such points of coincidence and discrepancy should be taken as the traces left behind by ancient cosmologists in their dialogical interactions with other peers and, as such, they should be viewed as evidence of transcultural conversations.[29] The biographical details and minutes of how those conversations took place are unfortunately lost, but this is not a situation unique to the ancient world. In more recent times, we also find that intertextual relationships are often the only surviving remains from the exchange between thinkers.

Theory, Etymology, and Wordplay

In this study I use the term *theory* in a broad sense, granting that theory existed before the emergence of ancient Greek science and philosophy. As Assyriologists have demonstrated, Assyrians and Babylonians developed forms of theorizing comparable to what we would understand as philosophical or scientific theory.[30] Concomitantly, classicists have abandoned the narrative scheme that sought to explain the rise of Greek philosophy as a progressive evolution from religion to rational discourse. These developments in Assyriology and classics reflect the impact of anthropology and ethno-history, disciplines that have largely contested the confinement of theory-building to Western science and philosophy. Accordingly, I read the texts I have selected for this study as representative of complex views about the world.

The theories of language and signification I investigate are constructs strikingly different from current theoretical approaches to signification. Nevertheless, they coincide at times with modern views on semantics and pragmatics. An instance of the juncture of the unfamiliar and familiar that ancient views on semantics can present to us is the model of the cosmic polyonymous god. This construct is articulated around the concept of meronymy, which has received much attention in modern semantics.[31]

[29] Myerston 2022. [30] Robson 2008; Rochberg 2017; van de Mieroop 2015, 2018a.
[31] A good example of the use of the concept of meronymy in the present is the Wordnet project (https://wordnet.princeton.edu/), which employs the concepts of hyperonymy and hyponymy, but also holonymy and meronymy, for describing the semantic relations between words. See also Pribbenow 2002 with references.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-28992-4 — Language and Cosmos in Greece and Mesopotamia
Jacobo Myerston
Excerpt
More Information

Through the lens of the polyonymous cosmic god, some ancient thinkers conceptualized *meaning* as a process that results from the continuous shifting from the whole to the part, and vice versa. Using meronymy, for example, a god could be understood as composed of parts or aspects that could be referred to through its multiple bynames and epithets, while the principal name was thought to point to the totality of the parts. Thus, understanding polyonymous divinities implies finding out how the whole relates to the parts and the other way around. What at first appears to be a theological interpretation is essentially an exercise in semantics. This model is augmented and radicalized when integrated into a pantheistic view, according to which all gods can be subsumed under one. This is the case of the Derveni papyrus, in which Ouranos, Kronos, Zeus, Aphrodite, Peitho, and many others are seen as designators of the multiple aspects of Nous (Mind). Various hymns to Marduk and Ninurta attest for similar views among Akkadian poets and scholars.

As the reader may have already perceived, something peculiar about the theories of signification that I investigate is their reliance on nominal semantics. Put in another manner: it is common to find ancient writers engaging in the analysis of names when developing their theories of signification. This also occurs in modern philosophy of language that often focuses on the relationship between proper nouns and reality.[32] Modern philosophical semantics does so without indulging in what today we call folk-etymology. Unlike modern philosophers, ancient thinkers tried to figure out how the sounds in words could replicate reality, taking flights that strike us as sheer fantasy. So far, this ancient inclination has often been seen as the naive liking of wordplay and wild speculation, a position that blurs, to an important degree, the internal boundaries of ancient systems of thinking.

In this book I argue that various Greek and Akkadian authors use etymology and wordplay in a distinctive manner. This is not the view held by many classicists, who consider wordplay a form of ancient etymology.[33] In my view, wordplay and ancient etymology serve different functions, even in early Greek corpora like the Homeric and Hesiodic poems. By this I mean that what appears an undifferentiated phenomenon held together by linguistic naiveté (i.e., folk-etymology) is in fact built on meaningful distinctions.

Recently, Athanassios Vergados has shown that Hesiod constructs his conceptions of language by using, among other things, the tension between

[32] As in Kripke 1980, 2013.
[33] For example, Kanavou 2015 pp. 8–13; Nagy 1994; O'Hara 1999; Rank 1951; Stanford 1952; Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org