



## Introduction

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### ► To cite this version:

Alice Mouton, Ilya Yakubovich. Introduction. *Altorientalische Forschungen*, 2022, 49 (1), pp.125-127.  
hal-03692297

**HAL Id: hal-03692297**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03692297>**

Submitted on 9 Jun 2022

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Alice Mouton and Ilya Yakubovich

## Introduction

By the expression “religious discourse”, we designate all communication strategies (verbal and non-verbal) which are deployed in a specific cultural context for expressing religious worldviews, be it ritual speech or the so-called “profane” speech (political speech in historical records, for instance). This very inclusive definition can easily be supported by the fact that even non-religious texts of the Ancient Near East very often imply divine agency. Hence, we do not view “discourse” as a synonym for “language” or “speech”, but rather as a broader category gathering together the entirety of a system of thoughts and its communication in its social setting. Ultimately, religion can only be approached through its communication strategies. As Kocku von Stuckrad (2003: 263) rightly mentions, “[t]here simply is no escaping the fact that the only thing scholars of religion have as a basis for scrutiny is visible and *expressed* religion, i.e., religious propositions that are communicated in sentences, signs, and symbolic action”.

Due to the central role of language, i.e. verbal communication, in any human social interaction, the concept of religious discourse lies at the crossroads of anthropology and linguistics. The dialogue between these two fields gave birth to a specific field of research: linguistic anthropology, also called anthropology of language. Focusing on verbal communication from a holistic perspective, this discipline explores the relationship between human language and human behavior, as well as between language and mind. In other words, human language is scrutinized as a central component of human culture.

Many studies illustrate how prolific the combination of anthropological and linguistic approaches is for a better grasp of ancient religions.<sup>1</sup> As Ronald Langacker (2014: 47) puts it, “On the one hand, linguists need anthropology in order to properly assess and characterize the cultural basis of linguistic meanings. On the other hand, linguistic analysis (e.g. the study of metaphors) reveals the details of the mental constructions constitutive of culture”. Similarly, students of Ancient Near Eastern religions have much to gain from the linguistic exploration of ancient texts in general and of religious texts in particular. Since linguistics cannot be separated in this case from philology and epigraphy, the use of a linguistic filter on an ancient text can only enrich its comprehension. Reversely, linguists and philologists can gain a broader and deeper grasp of an ancient text through its anthropological analysis. More specifically, a holistic study of an ancient religious text can greatly contribute to the understanding of its language. As emphasized by Webb Keane (2004: 431): “Religious contexts can be especially revealing for the study of linguistic form and action since they can involve people’s most extreme and self-conscious manipulations of language, in response to their most powerful intuitions about agency”.

This is precisely what the authors of this introduction have been experiencing within the framework of the project “Luwili: Luwian Religious Discourse between Anatolia and Syria”.<sup>2</sup> The main aim of this project is to prepare the first philological edition of Hittite ritual texts containing Luwian incantations. Since the Luwian language still remains imperfectly deciphered, the interpretation of Luwian insertions must rely on the interplay of linguistic and anthropological approaches. The former includes combinatorial and etymological methods, while the latter implies addressing each incantation from the perspective of the rite it belongs to and striving to understand how it serves the goals of the respective rite. Study of the relationship between Hittite instructions and Luwian incantations depends in turn on the

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Demmer/Gaenszle (2007) w. literature.

<sup>2</sup> The Luwili project is co-directed by both authors of this introduction and is supported by the ANR (France, ANR-17-FRAL-0007-01) and DFG (Germany, YA 472/2–1).

typological comparison with other Anatolian and Ancient Near Eastern ritual traditions. A recent example of our joint work leading to an improved understanding of Luwian religious discourse is Mouton and Yakubovich 2019, which is based on a combination of linguistic and anthropological approaches.

Nevertheless, we are fully aware of the limitations of our own competence, and therefore a part of the Luwili project was the organization of an international colloquium “Religious Discourse in the Ancient Near East” convened by both of us in Paris on December 12–13, 2019 under the auspices of the Luwili project. The presented papers provided diverse and complementary highlights of what Ancient Near Eastern religious discourse may have looked like.

We would like to express our deep gratitude to all the participants of the colloquium, and in particular to those from outside Paris, who found their way to this gathering in spite of the difficult conditions caused by a general strike of transport workers in France. Unfortunately, the inconveniences of December 2019 only foreshadowed the subsequent upheavals linked to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of these adverse conditions, not all the participants of the colloquium were able to submit their papers in time for the publication of its proceedings. This in turn motivated our decision not to publish them as a separate volume, but rather to avail ourselves of the offer of *Altorientalische Forschungen* to submit them for publication in a special section of one of the issues of this journal. We would like to outline the submitted contributions of our colleagues and their relevance to the overall topic of the convened colloquium here below.

Elisabeth Rieken studies the poetics of several Luwian and Hittite incantations, thus illustrating once again how rhetoric is at the heart of ritual speech: through elaborate selection of phonetic shapes of the words used in the performance, the ritual speaker claims symbolic power and authority over the ritual event. The poetical rhetoric of ritual speech has been observed all over the globe and throughout time as a widespread component of religious discourse.<sup>3</sup> This strengthens the author’s suggestion not to treat these rhetorical devices as a Mesopotamian borrowing in Luwian-speaking Anatolia. The poetical rhetoric of ritual speech generally constitutes its perlocutionary force according to John Austin’s (1962: 101) terminology, i.e., in the context of Ancient Near Eastern rituals, it mainly aims at persuading the divine addressee(s).

Laura Puértolas Rubio examines Luwian curses as a specific category of religious discourse, namely malevolent ritual speech. In Ancient Anatolia, such speech events seem to have required combining them with ritual gestures in order to increase their power of persuasion. Indeed, the relevant texts illustrate the central role of divine agency in the ritual procedure of a curse: only the gods have the power to actually harm a mortal. Therefore, the main function of the ritual practitioner is to try to convince the relevant divine addressee(s) to intervene in human affairs. Naturally, he or she can hope to achieve it only if his/her ritual competence is acknowledged by his/her human client. Without this recognition, there is no “authorized language” (Bourdieu 1975).

Along the same line of thought, while focusing on ritual discourse and its efficacy according to the Ancient Mesopotamian ritual texts, Claus Ambos insists on the need for divine validation of the ritual procedure. Moreover, ritual discourse claims divine origin and even divine agency. This trait is not exclusive to Ancient Mesopotamia: the same claim can also be made for the Hittite ritual texts.<sup>4</sup>

Susanne Görke strives to distinguish between the Luwian and the Hurrian cultural spheres in the religious discourse of Southeastern Anatolia in the Late Bronze Age, mainly focusing on ritual gestures and paraphernalia. She argues that Kizzuwatna cultic ceremonies

<sup>3</sup> Demmer/Gaenszle (2007: 12) w. previous bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> On ritual agency and divine authorship of Hittite rituals, see Mouton forthcoming.

show little Luwian influence, whereas Hurrian features are predominant. If one agrees with her suggestions, it would mean that, in Kizzuwatna religious texts, religious discourse went hand in hand with ethno-linguistic identity of the local elites. The interest in provincial rites on the part of the Hattuša literati could reflect a political decision: trading ritual knowledge was certainly an efficient way of enhancing social cohesion within a unified polity. In other words, ritual knowledge was probably seen as an “appropriate vehicle for intergroup relations”, to paraphrase Suzanne Oakdale (2009: 162).

Sylvia Hutter-Braunsar presents an overview of the religious texts relating to the neighboring cities of Iṣtanuwa and Lallupiya, both apparently situated in the northwest of Asia Minor. She emphasizes the possible similarities between the religious ceremonies originating from these cities and those known from the Hattian milieu. In particular, the Iṣtanuwa-Lallupiya song culture makes extensive use of choral songs, as do the Hattian cultic ceremonies. A similar tradition is also well-known in Ancient Greece, as already mentioned previously (see Hutter-Braunsar’s contribution for references). Combining this aspect with the coexistence, both in the Ancient Aegean and in Ancient Anatolia, of the practice of bull-leaping, the author implicitly pronounces herself in favor of a cultural *koiné* between these two areas.

Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault offers a vast overview of religious discourse in Ancient Mesopotamia as being at the intersection between religion and royal ideology. She illustrates how religious discourse gradually came to be institutionalized in order to legitimize political power. Ancient Mesopotamian religious discourse was also a depository of knowledge, which is the most efficient instrument of power. Furthermore, through her analysis of Ancient Mesopotamian mythological texts, the author exemplifies the approach advocated by Edmund Leach (1982: 5), who stresses the necessity to study the mythological texts of a given cultural zone as a unified corpus.

Many ideas presented at the Paris colloquium directly affected our way of thinking about the Hittite-Luwian ritual texts and thus will hopefully contribute to the overall success of the Luwili project. Even in those cases where we found it impossible to agree with some of their stances, they motivated us to refine the presentation of our own views. Yet, quite aside from this particular application, we believe that the presentations outlined above represent a fine and cohesive collection of self-contained research, which should be of interest to anyone who studies Ancient Near Eastern religions under the prism of discourse analysis and linguistic anthropology.

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