

On the Figurative Use of Numbers in Akkadian Letters. Approximation, Repetition, and Exaggeration in Iterative Numerals

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Abstract

This article investigates the figurative use of numbers in Akkadian letters from the Old to the Neo-Babylonian periods. Drawing on a corpus of over 60 examples, the study shows how numbers – particularly low iterative numerals (from one to ten) – are employed to convey approximation, repetition, and emphasis rather than exact quantities. Sequences such as “two times, three times” or “five times, six times” typically indicate vague frequencies and express reproach, anxiety, or proficiency. In contrast, round and large numbers – such as 100, 1000, or 3600 – are used hyperbolically in blessings and greetings, especially in hierarchical contexts, to amplify the sender’s goodwill or loyalty. The analysis highlights how social context shapes the pragmatic use of numbers, with more deferential tones toward superiors and more accusatory tones among peers or subordinates. Drawing on comparative linguistic research, the study highlights that

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this phenomenon is not unique to Akkadian but reflects broader patterns of numerical symbolism across languages. Ultimately, the article proposes that numbers in Akkadian letters function as rhetorical devices, enriching the expressive and communicative power of epistolary exchange.

Key-words: Cuneiform epistolary tradition; Akkadian letters; Iterative numerals; Hyperbole; Symbolic numbers

Sobre el uso figurado de los números en las cartas acacias. Aproximación, repetición y exageración en los numerales iterativos.

Resumen

Este artículo investiga el uso figurativo y no literal de los números en las cartas acacias desde el periodo paleobabilónico hasta el neobabilónico. A partir de un corpus de más de 60 ejemplos, el estudio demuestra cómo los números – en particular los numerales iterativos bajos (del uno al diez) – se emplean para expresar aproximación, repetición y énfasis, más que cantidades exactas. Secuencias como “dos veces, tres veces” o “cinco veces, seis veces” indican frecuencias imprecisas y expresan reproche, ansiedad o competencia. En contraste, los números redondos y altos – como 100, 1000 o 3600 – se usan de forma hiperbólica en bendiciones y saludos, especialmente en contextos jerárquicos, para reforzar la buena voluntad o lealtad del remitente. El análisis destaca cómo el contexto social influye en el uso pragmático de los números, con tonos más deferentes hacia los superiores y tonos más acusatorios entre iguales o subordinados. Basado en estudios lingüísticos comparativos, el artículo señala que este fenómeno no es exclusivo del acadio, sino que refleja patrones más amplios de simbolismo numérico en distintas lenguas. En última instancia, se propone que los números en las cartas acacias funcionan como recursos retóricos que enriquecen el poder expresivo y comunicativo del intercambio epistolar.

Palabras clave: Tradición epistolar cuneiforme; Letras acacias; Numerales iterativos; Hipérboles; Números simbólicos

1 The figurative use of numbers

Like in modern languages, numbers typically serve dual purposes in cuneiform texts. On the one hand, they have a mathematical or literal function, representing units of calculation and measurement¹. On the other hand, there exists a symbolic function of numbers in language. Numbers act as linguistic symbols, or arbitrary signs, when their primary content is used as a sign for denoting the content of something else². This happens when the numbers stated are precise but indicate an indefinite amount, corresponding to “few” or “many”, just like when we say “add a drop or two of vinegar” or “I must have told you a million times” in English. In their symbolic function³, “numbers convey information that is not purely numerical in a mathematical sense” (Lavric 2010: 141). In other words, at the discourse level, exact numbers are used in figurative, or non-literal expressions⁴, indicating approximate, or exaggerated quantities, either minimized or maximized, so that they can be considered hyperbolic⁵.

In Mesopotamian culture, there is various evidence of sequences of numbers or standalone numbers with a symbolic function⁶. For instance, numbers were deliberately exaggerated in propagandistic texts, as observed in the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions (De Odorico 1995). In myths or prayers, numbers may be indicative of a climax, exemplified by the numerous “lists” of seven elements⁷ or heptads⁸, symbolizing completeness. But

¹For an overview of numbers in cuneiform culture, see Friberg 1987-1990: 531-85, and Robson 2008.

²This definition of symbol is given by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2023: 346, in accordance with de Saussure 1959: 68.

³For studies on this topic, see Butler 1970; Luján Martínez 1994: 159-166; Revzina 1995: 619-641; Lavric 2010.

⁴For studies of figurative language in Akkadian, see, e.g., Geller, Mindlin and Wansbrough 1987, and Wassermann 2003.

⁵A hyperbole is “an expression that is more extreme than justified given its ontological referent”; see Burgers, Brugman, Renardel de Lavalette and Steen 2016: 176. According to Channell 1994: 79-89, approximative numbers can be plain, i.e., they indicate an interval of vague or hyperbolic numbers, i.e., they indicate exaggeration.

⁶For overviews of numbers in literary and non-literary Akkadian texts, see Goetze 1946: 185-202, Edzard 1980: 121-127, Edzard 2005: 98-107, Diakonoff 1983: 83-93, and Streck 1995.

⁷E.g., the seven days and seven nights in Atra-ḫašīs, or in OB Gilgamesh; see Lambert and Millard 1968: 96-97, iv 24-25, George 2003: 174-75, ii 48; 278-799, ii 8', and Goetze 1946: 192.

⁸E.g., the seven heroes, gods, stars, demons, etc.; see Kapelrud 1968: 494-99.

beyond literary texts in which various types of rhetorical figures are employed, there has so far been little insight on possible symbolic functions of numerals in contexts where language is not used for scholarly purposes.

A unique linguistic survey of approximative and hyperbolic numerals has been conducted in Lavric (2010), from a corpus of texts in colloquial French, and secondarily German, Italian, English, and Spanish. The author pointed out a distinction between approximative numerals on the one hand, i.e., low numbers (one to five), and numerals tending towards exaggeration on the other hand, i.e., medium (seven to 99) and round numbers (e.g., 100, or 1000). She also noted that the types of nouns paired with numerals are mostly units of time, distance, and money, or words expressing probability, iteration, or repetition, such as “time(s)”.

Piccin (2021) is the first, comprehensive study on rhetoric⁹ speech in Akkadian, putting the latter in dialogue with modern languages. In this book, Piccin presented a method useful to identify linguistic-rhetorical phenomena from texts only, and with a poorly understood rhetoric tradition. She defined the exaggeration as a device whose function is “to emphasize a substantial or formal element”, while hyperbole is “the expression of a concept or idea so exaggerated that it seems unlikely or absurd.” (Piccin 2021: 79-80).

More recently, Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2023: 367-403) analyzed specific numbers that can act as a symbol, i.e., their meaning can deviate from the literal one within a certain context. According to their study, numbers can be interchangeable in this function: one number can both mean “many” and “a few”, and several numbers at the same time can mean “many”¹⁰. Alternatively, they can be cultural symbols that exist outside the discourse level: as numerals can act like arbitrary linguistic signs, they depend on the culture which encodes them. This explains why every cultural system has specific numbers which embody either positive or negative qualities. For example, the number seven in Ancient Near Eastern

⁹“Linguistic phenomena that fall under the umbrella concept of rhetoric are expressive modes used by all individuals, often involuntarily, to make a picture, emotion, description, etc. more graphic and more effective.”; see Piccin 2021: 43.

¹⁰For instance, “I must have told you a thousand times” is a synonym of “I must have told you a million times”; the following French expressions involve the same number but they are antinomial: “(monter/descendre) quatre à quatre”, “(to go up/down the stairs) four by four” (i.e., “to take several steps of the stairs at once”), and “quatre pas d’ici”, “four steps from here” (i.e., “only a few steps from here, quite near”); see Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2023: 369.

and Biblical tradition is probably one of the most prominently recognized mystical numbers in literature, associated with fate and divine will¹¹.

Inspired by the studies mentioned above, the aim of this article is to analyze the figurative use of numbers in the corpus of Akkadian letters. This large corpus of several tens of thousands of documents is extraordinarily varied in that it contains both private and official, even international correspondences, spanning from the beginning of the second to the middle of the first millennium BCE. The contents of these letters reveal a range of activities and relationships among members of householder-elites, especially during the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1500 BCE), and reports between imperial elites and subordinates in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 911-484 BCE). Akkadian letters often reflect diplomatic and polite language – with variations depending on the status of the sender versus that of the addressee – typical of well-educated scribes or scholars. Some recurring elements of correspondence are formulaic in nature, as evidenced by the modern identification of several practice letters used in scribal schooling¹². Still, the letters offered ample room for personal touches and are most likely to contain traces of spoken, perhaps colloquial, Akkadian. In addition, the long period of attestation of a millennium and a half saw not only political changes, but language change as well. For example, the letters found in Egypt at Tell el-Amarna attest to the varied and complex international correspondence of pharaoh Amenhotep IV, known as Akhenaten, with Babylonia, Mittani, Alashia, Amurru, Lebanon, Damascus, and Southern Canaan¹³. Written in cuneiform, these letters reveal the use of a diplomatic Akkadian language of the time, ca. 14th century BCE. The language was based on the Middle Babylonian dialect, influenced by various Ancient Near Eastern languages, to the extent that one can sometimes identify so-called Hurro-Akkadian and Canaan-Akkadian languages.

1.1 Approximation and repetition: pairs of numerals

The most striking occurrence of numbers in Akkadian letters is in mentions of activities being repeated one and two, two and three, three and four, or

¹¹E.g., Reinhold and Golinets 2008

¹²E.g., Sallaberger 1999, and George and Spada 2019: 9-72.

¹³For the latest editions and study of the Amarna letters, see Rainey 2014 and Lauinger and Yoder 2025, as well as online at the aemw/amarna project website <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/aemw/amarna/index.html>

five and six times. These sequences of low numbers convey the notion that an activity has been undertaken an undefined number of times, with a range of meaning from “a few” to “a lot”.

“Once (or) twice” = 1-(*en/ni*)-šu 2-šu, *ištē/iššu šinīšu*; *mala* 2-šu (see also CAD I/J 284 *ištīššu*, CAD M1 147 *mala* num., and AHW 592 *mala* II).¹⁴

1. AbB 6, 168, ll. 8-13 // AbB 10, 164, ll. 8-13 (OB)
iš-ti-šu u ši-ni-šu ilī-raḥê mār sabum ana baqārimma tappûšu
uštaddûšu [i]nanna ana baqārim panûšu ša[k]nu
 Once or twice, his partners prevented Ilī-raḥê, son of Sabum, from making claims. Now he intends to make claims.
2. AbB 7, 156 II, ll. 1-5 (OB)
iš-ti-iš-šu u ši-ni-šu aššu bilat eqlim u rikis bīti ašpurakkumma 5 GÍN
KÛ.BABBAR ul taškunam
 Once or twice, I wrote to you about the yield of the field and the contract of the house (but) you did not provide me five shekels of silver.
3. AbB 10, 34, ll. 7-8 (OB)
iš-ti-iš-šu ši-ni-šu maḥrīka aškun
 Once (or) twice, I put (Awīl-Nabium, the cook) before you.
4. FM 7, 48, ll. 10'-12' (OB)
aššum tēm bītātīm [u eqlētīm] ša aḥūka 1-šu 2-šu išpu[r]akku[m purus]
purussâmma
 Regarding the news of houses [and fields] that your brother sent me once (or) twice, [take] a decision!
5. SAA 10, 275, rev. 8-11; see also obv. 10 (NA)
dullušu kī ša ma-la 2-šú ēpušuni šarru eppaš
 The king will perform his ritual as he performed (it) once (or) twice.
6. OIP 114, 2, ll. 21-23, 29-30a (NB)
1-en-šú 2-šú lā kitta aḥtarša (...) tābtīja ḥussus
 Once (or) twice, have I unjustly made a withdrawal? (...) Remember my goodness.

¹⁴The use of *mala*, “as much as” as an iterative number meaning “once” is an Assyrian trait, attested in Old, Middle and Neo Assyrian; see Kouwenberg 2017: 374, de Ridder 2018: 328, and Leonhardt 2024: 282.

7. AOAT 414/1, 227, ll. 17-20 (NB)

1-*ni-šú* 2-*šú šipirēta altaprakka kī nakutti altaprakka*

Once (or) twice, I have written letters to you, out of concern I have written to you.

8. AOAT 414/1, 72, rev. 12'-16' (NB)

1-*en-šú* 2-*šú šipirtu ša bēlu išpuru ša danānu taššassu šipirtu babbanit[u] ana Balātu bēlu lišpur*

Once (or) twice, the letter the lord sent was difficult to read. May the lord send a good (written) letter to Balātu.

“Two times, three times” = 2(-*šu*) 3(-*šu*), *šinīšu šalašīšu*.

9 AbB 5, 92, ll. 25-29 (OB)

š[*i*]-*ni-šu ša-la-ši-šu-ú aqtabīkum ù anāku ina pī ramānija ši-ni-šu-ú aqtab[īk]umma ul tāpula[nn]i*

T[w]o times, three times, I have told you, and I myself have to[ld] you twice with my mouth (but) you did not ans[we]r me.

10 AfO 18, 370, obv. 11-16 (MA)

*nakārū [ana] aššur [x] 2-šu 3-šu enū[ni]*¹⁵ *ana libbi māt[išunu] ittallakū*
Enemies withdr[ew] [from] Aššur two times, three times, they went to [their] country again and again.

11 SAA 10, 315, rev. 4-6 (NA)

marhušu šū ša šamnī 2-šú 3-šú ana šarri bēlija ētapaš šarru uddāšu

I have made this lotion of oils for the king, my lord, two times, three times; the king knows it.

12 SAA 13, 127, rev. 4-5 (NA)

2-*šú* 3-*šú ana šarri bēlija assapra lā ušēbilūni*

Two times, three times, I have written to the king, my lord (but) they did not send (the lapis lazuli) to me.

13 SAA 15, 199, rev. 21-23 (NA)

anāku 2-šú 3-šú pan marduk-apla-iddina attalak (...) lā immaggar

I, two times, three times, have gone to Marduk-apla-iddina (...) (but) he has not agreed.

¹⁵For the meaning of *enū*, “to change”, in this context, see von Soden 1957-1958: 370.

- 14 SAA 18, 197, rev. 1-3 (NA)

*adi 2-šú 3-šú ana muḫḫi sísî ana bît bēlēni niltapar adû ina ṣabē qalti
ninamṣar*

For two times, three times, we have written to the house of our lords
about the horses; now we are keeping watch with archers (only).

- 15 OIP 122, 160, ll. 5-7 (NB)

2 3 šipirēti aštaṭar [ši]pirtaka lā āmur

I have written two, three messages (but) I did not see your [re]ply.

- 16 CT 22, 215, obv. 5-9 (AOAT 414/1, 52) (NB)

2-šú 3-šú kī ašpurrakka uṭṭata ul tušēbilu

Although I wrote to you two times, three times, you did not send the
barley.

“Three times, four times” = 3(-šu) 4(-šu).

- 17 SAA 5, 46, ll. 15'-16' (NA)

3-šú 4-šú ištu mār šiprija [assabar] baši tēmuma lā [iškun]

Three times, four times, [I have sent (the outrider)] with my messenger
(but) [he did] not [give] any news.

- 18 CT 22, 202, ll. 5-6 (AOAT 414/1, 135) (NB)

3 4 šanāti aḫātkunu ul āmur

(For) three, four years, I did not see your sister.

“Five times, six times” = 5(-šu) 6(-šu), *ḫamšišu šiššišu*.

- 19 AbB 11, 161, ll. 10-11 (OB)

*šatammī abarakkī u pašīšī ḫa-am-ši-iš-šu šī-iš-<ši>-šu nusanniqma ul
uštēšerūniāti*

Five times, six times, we checked the clerks, the stewards, and the
p-priests (but) they did not give us a good lead.

- 20 EA 29, 16-20 (MB)

*enū[ma min-ḫeperu-re^c] abūšu ša [ni]mmureja ana a[r]tatama aba
abīja iṣpuru u mārās[su] ša a[ba abīja aḫāt] abīja ite[r]ssi 5-šu 6-šu
i[l]tapar u ul iddinašši immatimē 7-šu [ana aba abīja ilt]apar u ina
emūqimma it[ta]dinši*

When [Min-ḫeperu-Re^c (i.e., Tutankhamun)], the father of
[Ni]mmureja (i.e., Amenhotep III), wrote to A[r]tatama, my

grandfather, and requested the daughter of [my] gr[andfather, the sister of] my father, he wrote five times, six times, and he did not give her. Whenever [he wr]ote [to my grandfather] seven times, then under such pressure he did give her.

21 SAA 17, 68, ll. 13-18 (NA)

mīnamma ultu [rēšu adi] akanna ana 5-šú ana 6-[šú] šipirtaka ammar u en[na] ultu bīt barsipiti [x] ana panikunu tallika 1-[en] mār šipriku[nu] ātamar

Why from [the beginning until] now for five times, for six [times] I have seen your message and n[ow] that Barsipitu has come to you, I have (only) seen one of yo[ur] messengers?

In the letters, the scribes employ sequences of numerals (n_1 n_2 times) to indicate approximation, when something has been done “many times”, more frequently than usual or necessary. The great majority of numerals are iterative as they express repetition¹⁶; rarely we find instances in which sequences of cardinal numbers are employed to count words, i.e., only for sent letters (*šipirtū*), and years (*šanātu*) (ex. 15, 18, 28, and 29). In both cases, the numerals are approximative.

Most of the expressions in which numerals are included convey not only an approximation but other nuanced messages according to the context. For example, contrast is a recurring element in letters where the sender occasionally reproaches the addressee for disregarding previous messages (Sallaberger 1999: 108-109). Contrast is conveyed primarily by expressions like “I did something n_1 n_2 times (but) I did not receive what expected” (ex. 2, 9, 12, 13, 15-17, 22). Sometimes the contrast is more implicit, as in ex. 14 where the sender says he has requested “two times, three times” (i.e., many times) to receive horses in order to keep his territory under control, but he is still constrained to manage everything with archers only.

When contrast is not involved, a few expressions imply that an activity has been performed enough times to demonstrate proficiency (ex. 5 and 11), e.g., “as I have already done something n_1 n_2 times, I know how to do it”.

¹⁶Akkadian iterative numerals are indicated by cardinal numbers (written either numerically or syllabically), sometimes preceded by the prepositions *adī/i* or *ana*, and followed by the adverbial suffix *-ī* and the pronominal suffix *-šu*. Multiplicative numbers (triple, quadruple, fivefold, etc.) are expressed similarly to iterative ones, preceded by the preposition *adī/i*; see von Soden 1995: 117-119, Huehnergard 2011: 242, and Streck 2021: 116-119.

The pairs of numerals consist of two consecutive numbers in ascending order (e.g., one and two, two and three, three and four, five and six), extending up to the number six. The rationale behind selecting these pairs remains elusive. One could argue that the chosen numbers roughly corresponded to probable occurrences of the actions being described (e.g., it was more likely to send letters one to six times rather than seven or more). Or that the scribe may either lack precise knowledge of the exact number of repetitions or consider it irrelevant. A few examples in this respect: in ex. 3, the sender tells the addressee that he has introduced him to a man “once (or) twice” – he maybe does not remember how many times. In ex. 4, the sender urges the addressee to take a decision regarding the purchase of a plot of land, about which he has already received news “once (or) twice” (i.e., likely too many times). In ex. 6, the sender rhetorically asks the addressee whether he has ever disappointed him “once (or) twice”: this is a case where the sequence of numbers is minimized to mean “never”. Indeed, the same sender mentions a lengthy episode to the addressee, in which he proved to be a faithful friend, exhorting the addressee to trust him (OIP 114, 2, ll. 24-28). In ex. 18, the sender claims that he has not seen the addressee’s sister for “three, four years” – certainly a long time. In ex. 20, we see multiple uses of iterative numerals: Tušratta recounts an anecdote concerning the international marriage negotiations from generations before his own, to press for the release of his messengers. The anecdote illustrates, almost proverbially, that Akhenaten’s grandfather, Tutankhamun, insisted not five, not six, but seven times (i.e., the maximum) for Tušratta’s grandfather to grant his own daughter to the pharaoh. This demonstrates significant vehemence on the part of his ancestors, unlike the perceived insufficiency shown by Akhenaten, who was almost deemed disrespectful by Tušratta.

The symbolic functions of numbers in figurative expressions are quintessentially detached from the objective, naturalistic reality of numbers. For instance, cognitive psychologists consider hyperbole as a tool to convey the sender’s identity, irony, or “his reality”¹⁷, which does not necessarily coincide with the objective one. The same applies with approximative numbers: one may refer to ex. 7, where the sender himself admits to having written “once (or) twice” out of concern. In ex. 21, the king asks one of his servants to explain why he had recently received (only) one message instead of the usual five or six (i.e., enough, or a lot), just now that a female guest is

¹⁷I am here referring to Stempel 1983: 87-98, mentioned in Lavric 2010: 142.

staying with him (we do not know why). The servant then gives his master a detailed answer to justify his behavior with him (SAA 17, 68 obv. 18-24).

Somewhat different are the cases which do not concern letters or messages. In ex. 1, a son tells his father to buy a plot of land as soon as possible before someone else gets in the way – as someone has already tried to stop him “once (or) twice”. Whether the sequence of numbers is realistic or not, the iterative numerals here indicate not only approximation, but also the reaching of a limit. Further, if the numbers become larger than two, there seems to be a greater approximation: in ex. 10, the repetitiveness in the sequence “two times, three times” is enhanced by the verb *ittallakū*, a Gtn-stem preterit in the third person plural.

Thus, when a sender complains that he has done something “ n_1 n_2 times”, he/she is very likely referring to the way he/she experienced the facts, not to the objective number of times such actions have been repeated. Under these assumptions, the translation of the sequences of numerals in the letters as sometimes presented in SAA as “many times”¹⁸, is arguably inaccurate: since numbers may stand for cultural symbols, numerals should be translated literally to underscore specific sequences chosen by the scribes, thereby avoiding overgeneralization.

1.2 Non-sequential numbers

There are instances where less frequently encountered phrases involve sequences of numbers exceeding six, or the juxtaposition of non-sequential numbers, indicating further levels of approximation. In these cases – which are included below – the scribes opted for different sequences of numerals to give a stronger sense of repetitiveness (e.g., “one time, two times, five times, ten times”), or to amplify the degree of exaggeration (e.g., “one time, five times” or “ten times and twenty”).

22 AbB 9, 103, ll. 22-25 (OB)

*iš-ti-šu ša-la-ši-šu [tuppī] ušābilakkumma [meher] tuppīja ul tušābīlam
[epēšu]m annūm damīq*

One time, three times, I sent you [my letter] (but) you did not send me [an answer to] my letter. Is this behavior good?

23 ARM 1, 58, ll. 6-7 (OB)

iš-ti-šu 5-šu [ašp]urakkum u[k]a anniš u[l taṭrud]aššuma

¹⁸E.g., see SAA 5, 46, l. 15' and SAA 5, 162, rev. 5-6.

One time, five times [I wr]ote to you. T[he]¹⁹ you did not [sen]d him here.

24 FM 7, 39, l. 3, 5, 40-41, 43-44 (OB)

1-šu 2-šu 5-šu (...) *ana bēlija ašpuram* (...) *šumma urram šēram mimma hiṭ[itu]m ittabši bēli kām ul iqabbi* (...) *ammīnim ana šērija lā tašpuram*
One time, two times, five times (...) I wrote to my lord. (...) If in the future, there will be losses, my lord will not say this: “Why did you not write to me?”.

25 FM 7, 40, ll. 3, 5 (OB)

1-šu 2-šu [5-š]u 10-šu (...) *ana [bē]lija aštanap[par]*
One time, two times, [five t]imes, ten times (...) I wro[te] to my [lo]rd.

26 GCCI 2, 399, ll. 8-9, see BAW 30, 259 (NB)

4-šu 6-šu š[i]pirta] *ana bēli]ja aštapar?...]*
Four times, six times, [I sent?] a me[ssage] to [my] lord [...].

“Ten times and twenty” = *adī išrīšu u išrā*.

27 CCT 4, 12b, ll. 24-25 (OA)

adī iš-ri-šu u iš-ra tērti illik
For ten times and twenty, my instruction went (out).

Approximation not only denotes repetition but also concerns an indefinite amount of time. For instance, stating that something can happen in one, two or ten years (ex. 28 and 29) signifies that the precise timing of the event is irrelevant as long as it eventually occurs.

“One, two, ten years” = *ana šanat ana šittā šanāti ana 10 MU^{hi.a}*.

28 FM 7, 8, ll. 39-43 (OB)

[i]štu inanna *ana šanat ana ši-it-ta šanā[ti]* [an]a 10 MU^{hi.a} *awīlūtum šunu [a]na mātiya u namlakātiya [l]iṣhurūnim akassūšunūtima*
[N]ow, [l]et these men return in one year, two yea[rs], ten years, [t]o my country and my realms, and I will arrest them.

29 FM 7, 7, ll. 15-20 (OB)

ana šan[at an]a ši-i[t-ta šanā]tim [an]a 1[0 MU^{hi.a} an]a li[bbi mā]tiya

¹⁹For the meaning of *uka* in Mari, see CAD U/W 54a *uka*.

[l̄rubūn]im[ma] [l̄uks]ūšunūtima

In on[e yea]r, tw[o yea]rs, t[en years], [let them ent]er in[to] my
[co]untry, and I shall arrest them.

Ex. 28 and 29 are taken from two letters signed by the same scribe, Dāriš-libūr, an intendant of Mari who records the words of Yarim-līm, king of Aleppo and father of Hammurabi (Durand 2002: 175 and 177). In these two letters that preserve such unique expressions, one might witness the creativity of the scribe or of the sender: apart from conventional figurative expressions²⁰, any individual can create new figurative expressions with any numeral, as long as the addressee understands that the message is not literal. This use of numerals has been called “pseudo-approximative” by Lavric 2010: 130. Something similar can be said of examples ex. 24 and 25, in which the sender, Nūr-Sîn, an administrator of Mari properties in the West (Durand 2002: 176), uses the formulaic “one time, two times, five times”, which is found in his letters only. The fact that senders repeat the same sequences of numerals in different contexts confirms their symbolic function.

1.3 Exceeding from regularity: standalone numbers

Iterative standalone numerals may indicate an approximation akin to the examples provided in the previous sections. This is less likely for very low number: sending a letter “twice”, for instance, may well be a realistic number of repetitions, rather than approximate²¹. Other numbers are more likely to signify a repetition that goes beyond regularity. In other words, starting from the number three onwards, an approximation of numerals becomes more probable than a literal interpretation. And even if numbers smaller than ten can be literal when referring to simple repeated actions

²⁰Conventional figurative expressions are expressions that meet some established degree of figurativeness, such as idioms. Note that numerals do not have idiomaticity per se, but can be found in idiomatic expressions, i.e., connected to one or more elements of an idiom. An idiom is figurative language characterized by obvious re-semanticization (e.g., it has multiple synonyms, presupposes one or more mental images between what is said and what is meant) and stability (i.e., it exists diachronically and is “frozen”); see Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2023: 1-72.

²¹The iterative *šinišu*, “twice”, alone, has been found in the following instances: AbB 1, 37, l. 4’, AbB 2, 80, l. 15, AbB 2, 101, l. 15; AbB 5, 92, ll. 27’-29’, AbB 10, 151, ll. 9-10; FM 7, 13, l. 12; TCL 18, 87, ll. 21-25, TCL 18, 104, l. 9. These cases have not been considered together with the others presented in this article because it is highly probable that the number two is to be meant literally.

like sending messages, still they can have symbolic functions, on account of their customary use, i.e., they can still imply repetition, contrast, necessity, proficiency, etc.

The most frequent use of standalone numbers is, again, in iterative numerals, to convey approximation and contrast: within the established formulas of letters, mentioning the sending of a message three, five, seven, or ten times is deemed adequate for highlighting the addressee's shortcomings, a belief held by numerous senders (e.g., ex. 30-32, 34-37, 40-41, 43-46, 51, 53-56). Irony and irritation are also given in rhetoric questions. As stated by Piccin 2021: 93, "a rhetorical question does not expect an answer but a confirmation. It does not require extra information, but it comes to a yes or a no (the answer itself is implied in the question). Used as an approach to gain attention, the timing and positioning of a rhetorical question are carefully selected to surprise the respondent, invoke emotion, or appeal to one's sense of morals." Rhetoric questions can be found ex. 31 ("Why did you do this harm to me?"), ex. 41("Is this behavior good to you, my brother?"), and ex. 22 in the previous section, where the sender, Šamaš-ḥašir, asks rhetorically to the addressee, Belšunu, "is this behavior good?", to provoke a reaction from the latter, who did not send him the promised letters (AbB 9, 103 ll. 3-21). Also, anxiety is a reason for some senders to write letters more than usual, as sometimes the senders themselves say to have been writing "out of concern" (*kī nakutti*) (ex. 7, 33, 36, 38).

"Three times" = (*adī/i*) 3-šu, *šalašišu*; 3-*ta*.

30 AbB 1, 9, ll. 10-13, 35 (OB)

adī ša-la-ši-šu tuppī ušābilakkumma (...) ul tašpuram (...) ana lamādika ašpuram

For three times I sent you my letter (...) (but) you did not write to me.
(...) I have written for your information.

31 AbB 1, 118, ll. 6-10 (OB)

*ana 30 GUR tuḫḫī ablūti šūbulim una³idka u ša-la-ši-šu tuppātija ušābila[*kk*]um alpū ša^{itu}ŠU.NUMUN.A^{itu}NE.NE u^{itu}KIN.^dINNIN.NA ŠĀ.GAL lā ikulū baltū ana mīnim maruštam annītam tēpušanni*

I instructed you to send 30 gur of dry bran and sent [yo]u my letters three times. Are the bulls that did not eat food in the month of Du'ūzu, Abu and Ulūlu alive? Why did you do this harm to me?

- 32 AbB 2, 82, ll. 26-29 (OB)
adī ša-la-ši-šu tuppī ana abīja ušābilamma abī atta ša 1 GÍN
 KÙ.BABBAR ubbalū kīma aḥḥika ul tušābilam
 For three times I sent my letter to my father (but) you, father, like
 your brothers, did not send me (anything) that is worth one shekel of
 silver.
- 33 AbB 2, 178, ll. 5-8 (OB)
ša-la-ši-šu ana šēr šāpir nāri tuḥḥāku lemniš buzzuāku
 Three times I was brought to the presence of the governor of the river;
 I am under terrible pressure.
- 34 AbB 6, 70, ll. 9-14 (OB)
adī ša-la-ši-šu ašpurakkumma ul iqbūnikkum
 For three times I wrote to you (but) they did not speak to you.
- 35 AbB 6, 196, ll. 12-15 (OB)
ša-la-ši-šu tuppī ušābil[a]kkumma tēm bītija ul tašpuram
 Three times I se[n]t you my letter (but) you did not send me news of
 my house.
- 36 AbB 7, 92, ll. 17-19, 30 (OB)
adī ša-la-ši-šu gerrum illikamma šēna ul tušābilam (...) aḥtāšši
 For three times the caravan came (but) you did not send me a(ny)
 shoe. (...) I am worried for them.
- 37 EA 10, 12-15 (MB)
adi 3-šu ittalkūni u šulmāna banā mimma ul tušābilam u anāku-ma
šulmāna banā mimma ul ušēbilaku
 For three times they (i.e., the messengers) came and you did not send
 me any nice gift, and I did not send you any nice gift (either).
- 38 TCL 9, 123, ll. 6-10 (AOAT 414/1, 198) (NB)
3-šú šipirēt[u] ana bēlija kī ašpu[ru] gabri šipirti ša bēlija ul āmurma
ul abluṭ
 Although three times I wrot[e] a messag[e] to my lord, I did not see a
 reply message of my lord, and I was not well.
- 39 CT 22, 130, ll. 12-17 (AOAT 414/1, 96) (NB) [i]na 3-ta [šipirēti]
 [t]ēm[u ana] bēlij[a] [a]lt[apar] [mīn]a t[ēmu ša bēli]ja ul a[šme]
 [I]n three [messages] I have [written n]ew[s to m]y lord. [W]hy did I
 not [hear] n[ews of] my [lord]?

40 OIP 114, 10, ll. 7-9 (NB)

3-šú mār šiprija ana panika ittalka mimma ul tušēbila

Three times my messenger has come to you (but) you sent me nothing.

When alluding to everyday actions, the numbers five, seven, and ten could be more detached from reality, signaling increasing exaggeration, or hyperbole. These iterative numerals portray actions occurring “several times”, usually in vain and accompanied by exasperated responses (ex. 32, 40-41, 43-46, 51, 53-56).

“Five times” = (*adī*) 5-šu, *hamšiš(u)*.

41 AbB 7, 176, ll. 1-5 (OB)

*adī ha-am-ši-šu ana aḥīja kât[a] aštāpram tēmka rīqam ul tašpuram
annūm epēšu itti aḥīja kâta damiq*

For five times I have written to you, my brother, (but) you did not (even) write me an empty report. Is this behavior good to you, my brother?

42 AbB 9, 240, ll. 23-25 (OB)

*ša lā jāti mannu aḥātiki lū tākīim ha-am-ši-šu-ú-ma-an iḥtītanni
qibīšumma 1 GÍN KÙ.BABBAR lišābilam*

Who is your sister, isn't that me? It would have pleased you (even if) he had failed me five times. Tell him he should send me 1 shekel of silver!

43 AbB 10, 77, ll. 10-13 (OB)

u anāku ha-am-ši-iš aqbīkumma ul tāpulānni zubul tuz[a]bilanni

And I told (you) five times (but) you did not answer me. You kept me waiting!

44 AbB 10, 198, ll. 20-22 (OB)

*istū adī ha-am-ši-šu ašpurakkumma KÙ.BABBAR lā taddinu ana ša
aḥattū lū tīdē*

After I had written to you five times and you did not give the silver, for what I will miss – take warning!

45 AbB 11, 141, ll. 5-10 (OB)

ana 1/2 ŠE A.ESÍR ha-am-ši-šu-ú ašpurakkumma ul tušabba[l]am

I wrote to you five times for half a grain of crude bitumen (but) you do not send [d] (it) to me.

- 46 AbB 12, 100, ll. 9-10 (OB)
tuppātija adī ḥa-am-ši-[šu ušābilakkumma] meher tuppātija ul
[tušābilam]
 [I sent you] my letters five tim[es (but) you did] not [send me] an
 answer to my letters.
 “Seven times” = (*adi*) 7-*šu*.
- 47 SAA 8, 447, rev. 1 (NA)
pūtu [a]di 7-šú našāka attalū ul iššakkan
 I guarantee [f]or seven times, an eclipse will not occur.
- 48 SAA 17, 102, rev. 16-18 (NA)
kī nakutti adi 7-šú ana šarri bēlija altapra
 Out of concern, for seven times I have written to the king, my lord.
- 49 OIP 114, 83, ll. 39-40 (NB)
kī nakuttu adi 7-šú aššu [am]ēluttu ana bēlija ašpuru
 Out of concern, for seven times I have written to my lord about a
 [sl]ave.
- 50 OIP 114, 43, ll. 23-24 (NB)
adi 7-šú an[a] aḥīja altapra
 For seven times, I have written t[o] my brother.
 “Ten (times)” = (*adi/i; ana*) 10(-*šu*), *ešrišu*; 10; 10-TA.ÀM (“ten each”).
- 51 AKT 3, 79, ll. 3, 29-31 (OA)
miššum awâtim lillâtim taštanapirīm (...) ana awâtim anniâtim tuppū
10 illikūnim awātī lā ...²²
 Why did you keep sending stupid words to me? (...) For this matter,
 ten tablets came (but) you did not ... my word.
- 52 TCL 19, 75, ll. 6-9 (OA)
adī 10 ana rubēm u šinaḥilim nēlīma umma anāku bēlī atta ḥarrānam
dīnam
 For ten times we showed up with the prince and the
 second-in-command, and I said: “you are my lord, let me go
 on a journey!”

²²The last verb in the line is broken: *tù-uš-ta-ki* x. A second person feminine singular is expected; in Bilgiç and Günbatti 1995: 130, a possible reading as *tù-uš-ta-qí-tí* from *šaqātu* is suggested, but the meaning is unclear (CAD Š2 14a *šaqātu*).

- 53 AbB 1, 128, rev. 4'-5' (OB)
adī eš-ri-šu ana bēlija ašpuramma tēmu ul iššaknam
 For ten times I wrote to my lord (but) no news came up to me.
- 54 AbB 2, 100, ll. 8-10 (OB)
adī eš-ri-šu aštapparakkumma di²tam ul tašālma ul tālīam
 For ten times I wrote to you (but) you did not ask for news and did not show up.
- 55 AbB 3, 15, ll. 10-12 (OB)
kīma iš-ti-iš-ši e-eš-ri-šu aštapparakk[im] ul tāpul[ī]n[n]i
 Instead of once, I have written to y[ou] ten times (but) you did not an[sw]er [m]e.
- 56 AbB 10, 8, ll. 17-19 (OB)
ana šala-šarrat ana eš-ri-šu aqbīšimma apālumma ul īpulanni
 I spoke ten times to Šala-šarrat (but) she did not give me any answer.
- 57 FM 1, “Vie nomade”, 117, l. 41 (OB)
ina bārtim 10-šu [ūšī]
 During the rebellion, [I escaped] ten times.
- 58 EA 19, 30-33, 69 (MB)
ana aḫīja kī ašpuru u aqtabi umma lū anāku-ma kīma mādūti dannīš
lū nirtana²am u ina berini lū ṭābānu u ana aḫīja aqtabi umma aḫīja el
abīja 10-šu lū ūtetteranni (...) u anāku 10-TA.ĀM ša aḫīja īrišu luddin
 When I wrote to my brother, and I have said “Let us always very strongly love one another and between us may we be in friendship”.
 And to my brother I have said “May my brother always surpass ten times what he did for my father!” (...) And I will give ten each more than what my brother requested.
- 59 SAA 10, 227, rev. 29-30 (NA)
ina gabbi aḫīja asseme adi eš-ri-šū
 With all my strength, I have hearkened to it (i.e., my king's orders) for ten times.
- 60 SAA 10, 29, ll. 3-4 (NA)
[īlānī ša šarri] bēlija lū uddū šumma adi 10-šū [šarri bēli] lā izkūni
 [The gods of the king], my lord, should know if [the king, my lord,] was not purified for ten times.

The scribe's or senders' choice of using specific numbers – three, five, seven, and ten – may have been influenced by the nature of the described action. For example, sending a letter three or more times could be deemed excessively time-consuming: in ex. 34 the sender tells his lord he has tried to write to him three times already but was not informed of his messages. The sender is trying to explain himself for not having yet delivered to his master the shoes he had demanded. One can therefore assume that three – whether literal or not – was enough to say that one had done their best. Moreover, the higher the number, the stronger the exaggeration or contrast the sender expresses to the addressee: in ex. 41, the sender reproaches the addressee (a peer or a brother) by pointing out his bad behavior in not answering his five letters. In ex. 51, a man asks his relative why the latter continues to send him “stupid words” (*awâtim lillātim*) – up to ten according to him. In ex. 55, the sender specifies that he sent the addressee not just one message, but ten. Whether the number ten is literal remains doubtful; however, the tone of the message seems to be rather peremptory: the sender laments the addressee's lack of trust in him, so much so that he concludes the letter by saying, *šumma haṭītam eppuš lā tamagarīnni*, “if I'm doing something wrong, you may disagree with me” (AbB 3, 15 ll. 27-28).

For other types of actions, the degree of approximation and repetition depends on the context. In ex. 42, a woman asks her sister to request a man named Kubbutum to send her money. It is not the first time she asked but received nothing from him²³, so she reproaches her sister by saying that it would have been fine for her even if Kubbutum had ignored her “five times”. In ex. 47, 57, 59, and 60, the iterative numerals seven and ten are used to express experience in something, like in escaping a revolt alive, in predicting eclipses, or in performing the purification rituals for a king.

The peculiar use of the distributive number ten written logographically (10-TA.ĀM, “ten each”) in ex. 58 is to be mentioned. Tušratta of Mittani asks Amenhotep III for gold to build a mausoleum and as a dowry for his sister, who was sent to Egypt as a wife for the pharaoh. Reference is made in the letter to what Liverani 1999: 328 has called “restituzione accresciuta anzi moltiplicata”. Namely, gifts that are exchanged from one court to another, sent and requested for specific occasions such as a wedding, should always be

²³Referring to Kubbutu, in the same letter (AbB 9, 240 obv. 7-9) she said: *eš-ri-šu ašpurakkumma ul te-NE-ma-an-ni* “I wrote to you ten times (but) you did not inform me”. The verb *te-NE-ma-an-ni* could be a writing or misspelling of *te-ṭe-ma-an-ni* from *ṭēmu*, “to inform” (CAD Ṭ 97 *ṭēmu*).

reciprocated by multiplying them. In this case, Tušratta asks gold for both the dowry and, as an extra, for the mausoleum. This pattern is evidenced by expressions containing iterative numerals, such as ten, for auspicious purposes, to increase the social prestige of both parties and to strengthen diplomatic ties²⁴.

A question arises as to why the scribes never used the numbers eight and nine figuratively in everyday texts, neither in sequences nor as standalone elements, although nine seems to have had some importance in literary texts²⁵. Apart from a possible lack of sources, one explanation could be the polysemy, or the multiple meanings associated with numbers in cuneiform culture. Lexical lists indicate that numbers were occasionally associated with nouns or verbs – not as synonyms but as some sort of underlying secondary conceptual meaning – and ancient scholars could have employed them in several ways. This usage is widely attested in areas such as the so-called speculative interpretation of names (E.g., Bennett 2021: 49-157) or in hermeneutical texts (Frahm 2011: 59-79). Ten and seven were equated with the Akkadian word *kiššātu*, “totality”²⁶, while three was a synonym for *napāšu*, “to expand”²⁷. These attestations indicate that well-educated scribes, familiar with lexical lists but also literary, mathematical, and other school texts which use the same language, may have exploited alternative meanings of numerals and integrated them into figurative language. In line with this hypothesis, performing an action three times in letters implies doing it many times, and doing it seven or ten times indicated reaching its utmost limit. Such usage of numbers could and should be more evident in

²⁴Other examples of such use of the number ten, also intended provocatively to emphasize a lack of gifts, are found in EA 23, 20-23, EA 26, 45-48, and EA 27, 12, 16-18, 37-40, again written by Tušratta.

²⁵E.g., in Akkadian legends, see the nine battles of Naram-Sîn and the use of iteration (*tešišu*, “nine times”) in the epic of Sargon: *ana ti-ši-šu awīlam alpam būla[m] u imēram ikmī*, “for nine times he took captive man, oxen, cattl[e] and donkey” (TIM 9, 48, iii 13'-15'); see Westenholz 1997: 71 ll. 65, 236-37. See also the contribution by W. Sommerfeld in this volume.

²⁶See the lexical list Proto or Old Babylonian Aa (MSL 9, 132, ll. 399-468), which explains the reading and meaning of simple Sumerian signs, and the Neo-Assyrian group vocabulary *šarru* III (CT 18, 29-32, obv. ii 21'-22'), which lists semantically related entries; see Veldhuis 2014: 178-82. Furthermore, five and ten are the basic numbers in a numerical system based on the hands' digits, so they might have been a preferred choice for this reason.

²⁷See the sign list *Á = idu* II (CT 11, 29-32, obv. ii 24-26) which gives Sumerian signs organized by their form, and followed by Akkadian readings; see Gong 2002: 85.

correspondence dated to the first millennium BCE, when scribal culture, literacy and hermeneutics became not only canonized, but also distinctive of a scholarly elite²⁸.

In this respect, it is worth noting the well-known example of the learned usage of the number seven in the diplomatic language of the Amarna letters, with seven understood as “maximum” or “completeness”. The consistently attested formula of prostration, of bowing at the feet of the rulers, includes doing so “seven and seven times”, usually with repeated iterative numerals 7-(*it*)-*šu* (*ù*) 7-*šu*, but also with one iterative and one distributive numeral 7-(*it*)-*šu* (*ù*) 7(-TA).AM, “seven and seven times each”, referring bowing seven times forward and seven times back. Sometimes one finds the cardinal numbers only, 7 *ù* 7, or simply “seven times”, 7-(*šu*), as the number of bows depends on the importance of the ruler in question (Liverani 1998: 58-59). The act of prostration is indicated primarily by the verb *maqātu*, “to fall”. In fact, the formula of bowing seven times appears only in cases where the sender is of lower rank than the recipient, i.e., when kings of smaller kingdoms write to Akhenaten. This type of greeting formula is absent from the Akkadian letters of Mesopotamia, where formulas using larger numbers and without prostration are found instead.

It should be mentioned that also in Lavric’s survey sequences of two consecutive iterative numerals are found up to six, and then only instances of “seven times” and “ten times” are attested (Lavric 2010: 148-55). The numbers eight and nine are absent as if they do not have a symbolic function in modern languages as well. Learning that something has occurred eight or nine times more likely leads an addressee to assume that the number of repetitions is literal rather than approximate. Also, Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen (2023: 371) noted that “nine enjoys this special status in only a few European languages, in contrast to many other languages that clearly prefer seven as a significant number symbol, in accordance with the dominant general status of seven in both earlier and contemporary culture”. The choice behind many numbers remains unsolved, and as the present survey is only a starting point, the corpus of sources can be expanded and analyzed from a cross-cultural perspective in further studies.

²⁸For the concept of canon and canonicity in Mesopotamian literature see, e.g., Lambert 1957.

1.4 Exaggeration: formulae to greet and wish good health

While low numbers convey approximation and repetition in everyday texts, the numbers used for greetings and blessings are round and significantly larger, or more akin to hyperboles. As exemplified by the quotations given below, the choice of 100, 1000, 3600, and 100000 to wish good health to the addressees not only mirrors the counting systems (Friberg 1987-1990: 533-535) used in Mesopotamia but it also involves deliberate exaggeration. Remarkable is the use of the number 3600: this hyperbolic numeral epitomizes maximization in a sexagesimal system such as the Mesopotamian one, and it is probably comparable to “centuries” or “forever” in English.

Hyperboles involving multiples of ten are very common in modern languages²⁹, and often 100 and 1000 are interchangeable; namely, “the meaning is always the same, the only thing that varies is the degree of exaggeration, of intensification” (Lavric 2010: 127 and 137-38).

“One hundred years” = (*adi*) 1 ME (MU.AN.NA^{meš}, *šanāti*).

61 SAA 10, 245, ll. 4-7 (NA)

aššur šamaš bēl zarpanitum nabû tašmetum ištār ša ninua ištār ša arbail 1 ME *šanāti ana šarri bēlija likrubū*

May Aššur, Šamaš, Bel, Zarpanitu, Nabû, Tašmetum, Ištār of Nineveh, Ištār of Arbela for one hundred years bless the king, my lord.

62 SAA 10, 249, rev. 2'-7' (NA)

[*ū*]mu ana *ūme arḫu* [ana *arḫi*] *šattu ana šat[ti]* *ša adi* 1 ME *ši[nāni]* *passurā[te]* *ša damqi u ḫū[d libbi ana]* *šarri bēlija* [*liqribāni*]

[D]ay after day, month [after month], year after ye[ar], up to one hundred, [may] good news of joy and happi[ness reach] the king, my lord.

“Thousand times” = *li³mīšu* (only NA).

63 SAA 10, 198, ll. 14-20 (NA)

ilāni (...) *ikribi annūti adu li-i²-mi-šu liššipū ana šarri bēlija liddinū*

²⁹See, e.g., the following greeting expression commonly used in standard Italian: “cento di questi giorni”, which in English translates into “a hundred of these days!” and corresponds to “many happy returns”.

The gods (...) for a thousand times double may give these blessings to the king, my lord.

“Three thousand six hundred years” = MU.ŠÁR(.KAM).

64 AbB 5, 165, ll. 4-5; 181, ll. 4-5; 190, ll. 2'-4'; AbB 11, 190, l. 4; AbB 14, 110, ll. 4-5; 144, l. 5; 150, ll. 4-5; 172, ll. 5-6 (OB)
DN (*u* DN₁, DN₂, etc. *aššumija*) MU.ŠÁR(.KAM) *liballit* (*ū*) *ki/a*

May DN (and DN₁, DN₂, etc., for my sake) grant you good health for 3600 years!

“A hundred thousand years” = 1 ME(-at) *li-im* MU^{meš}(-ti), *me²at līm šanāti*.

65 EA 21, 39-41 (MB)

u ana 1 ME-at *li-im šanāti ana tikki ša aḫīja lū nadī*

And may it (i.e., the necklace of lapis lazuli) rest on the neck of my brother for a hundred thousand years!

66 EA 23, 26-27 (MB)

šauška bēlet šamē aḫīja u jāši liššurannâši 1 ME *li-im šanāti*

May Šauška, the lady of the sky, protect us, my brother and me, for a hundred thousand years.

It is difficult to determine why low numbers are used to express repetition and contrast, and round numbers express blessing. It is certain, however, that the meaning of hyperboles in general – and hyperbolic numerals as well – depends on how the sender wants to be understood by the addresser³⁰. Hence, one could assume that scribes did not spare blessings (ex. 61-66) but stuck to a certain realism in the case of reprimands or pleas.

2 Some thoughts on the social context of the letters

As outlined in the introduction of this article, the chosen texts belong to very different historical situations, covering a period of more than one

³⁰For the interactive nature of hyperbolic numerals see, e.g., McCarthy and Carter 2004: 149-84.

millennium. The relations between the correspondents of the letters are different: from kings, to officials, servants, or relatives, the content and the purpose of the messages necessarily change. Expressions containing numbers with symbolic functions operate as illocutionary acts and depend on the type of relation between the correspondents – a relation which is often asymmetrical. Moreover, the senders and the addressees do not necessarily coincide with the subjects of the letters: professional scribes were often asked to report conversations that the senders have had with third persons with whom they have different relationships. Therefore, the overview provided here concerns the relations between senders and addressees of any kind of communication, as recorded in the letters, and where numerals with symbolic functions are found.

Many communications occur between family members (ex. 1, 4, 23, 27-29, 32, 51, 57) and individuals of the same social status, like business partners (ex. 6-8, 15, 16, 22, 33, 36, 40-41, 42-46, 50, 53, 55-56). The latter address each other as “brother” (*ahū*) without there necessarily being a family relationship. In these cases, the tones of the communications are relatively informal as they include reproaches, requests for money, complaints, and sometimes even warnings. Also, in Amarna letters (ex. 20, 37, 58, 65-66), the relationships between the senders and addressees were mostly symmetrical, i.e., from king to king, falling within the realm of international diplomacy. In all Amarna letters mentioned – except the one written by Burna-Buriash II (ex. 37) – the sender is Tušratta of Mittani. Although we do not have the letters that the pharaohs wrote to this king, we do know that Tušratta’s negotiations with Egypt extended throughout the reigns of Amenhotep III and Akhenaten. Hence, his letters all concern marriage arrangements, recriminations over insufficient amounts of gold, or the release of messengers (Liverani 1999: 366-405). As a non-literal use of numbers is attested almost exclusively in Tušratta’s letters, one wonders whether such use is strictly connected to his zeal due to his urgent need for money.

More informal language is used also in cases where senders address their subordinates (e.g., ex. 2 and 31). Unless it is the king addressing one of his servants or officials; in that case, the tone is neutral and suited to deliver information or orders (ex. 10, 1, 21, 35).

If, instead, one addresses a person of higher rank, referred to as “lord” (*bēlu*), the tone becomes more subdued. Senders express blessings and courtesy inquiries to their recipients, and they concern themselves with why

they have not received responses, or whether they have done everything they were supposed to (ex. 26, 30, 32, 34, 38, 39, 52, 53).

Finally, when addressing kings, the tones are polite, and senders take care to bless the king, justify themselves if necessary, or demonstrate accuracy and loyalty (ex. 5, 11-14, 24-25, 48, 60, 63, 65-66). There is only one case where an unjustly offended vassal request to the king to defend him (ex. 17), and four scholarly letters, i.e., letters that Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian scholars wrote to the king about divination (e.g., ex. 47) or rituals of purification (ex. 59-62).

3 Conclusions

Drawing from linguistic surveys regarding the use of numbers in language, the purpose of this article was to catalog and contextualize the symbolic function, or the use of numbers in figurative expressions in Akkadian letters from the Old to the Neo-Babylonian period.

From the collected examples, 66 in total, it emerged that standalone numbers and sequences of numbers (mainly iterative numerals) have a symbolic function in Akkadian letters. Low numbers (one to ten) primarily indicate approximation. This is especially evident in pairs of iterative numerals, sequential (“once (or) twice”) or not (“four times, six times”), or sequences of iterative numerals (“one time, two times, five times”), always in ascending order, which well express the idea of something being repeated “several times”, “many times”, or “too many times”. In the case of standalone numerals, it is sometimes difficult to define whether there is a symbolic function of the numbers, especially if numbers are low, such as three or five. In these cases, only a more in-depth contextualization of the letters can help in determining if there is a non-literal use of the numbers. In the present context, it is notable that the use of numbers in Amarna letters is similar to that of the other Akkadian letters discussed, though with different underlying intentions or assumptions.

The approximation and repetition of low numbers is used to convey contrast, anxiety, reproaches, disappointment, warning, or experience. The actions referred to are mainly writing letters to which addressees have never responded, or activities carried out to no avail (e.g., “I did something n_1 n_2 times (but) I did not receive what expected”). Based on the relation the correspondents have, the type of illocutionary act also changes: if relatives or peers strongly reproach one another for a missed response, no sender

would ever address a king in such manner but rather beg him to respond because they are concerned.

It should be noted that, to indicate approximation, the numbers used range from one to seven, ten, and only in one case, twenty. The reason why low numbers like eight and nine are virtually absent remains to be determined. However, the choice of this or that number may depend either on the cultural meaning of numbers outside the letters (e.g., in lexical texts where numbers are associated with secondary conceptual meanings), or the individual's creativity in crafting figurative expressions.

The use of numbers in figurative expressions emerge from everyday texts, as they are tied to the underlying message to be conveyed to the addressee, whether positive or negative. It is hoped that the question posed, and the catalog built in this article can aid the study of numbers and their non-literal meanings in the Akkadian language. At the very least, it is hoped that it can open various possibilities for further cross-cultural investigations, or in other types of Akkadian written sources.

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