

# EUPHEMISTICALLY "SPEAKING" AND A COVETOUS EYE

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## Introduction

Euphemisms abound in both Biblical (Paul, 1971, pp. 959-961) and Rabbinic literature (Rabinowitz, 1971, pp. 961-962; Melamed, 1968, pp. 119-148; 1983, pp. 3-17). In the latter there exist three different technical terms to express these "good words": לשון סגי נהור,<sup>1</sup> לשון נקי (ה),<sup>2</sup> לישנא לישנא,<sup>3</sup> Less studied, however, is their appearance in Mesopotamian literature (outside of the genre of love poetry).<sup>4</sup> Note, for example, the following three substitutions for otherwise indelicate expressions:

1) Akk. *mašrû*, "wealth, prosperity, riches" (*CAD*, M, I, pp. 385-387) is employed in a medical text as a surrogate for "excrement": *bāb mašrišu šamna tapaššaš*, "You smear his anus (i.e., "the opening for his excrement") with oil" (*CAD*, B, 3c, 1', p. 24; M, I, p. 385).<sup>5</sup> So, too, in a medical commentary, *maš-ri-šu* is equated with Sum. ŠĒ (DŪR)-*šu*, which represents Akk. *zû*, "excrement" (*CAD*, M, I, p. 385).<sup>6</sup>

2) The Akkadian phrase *damqam-inam*, lit., "beautiful eyes," serves as a euphemism for an abnormal condition of the eyes (either blindness

1. Aram. סגי נהור, סגי נהור, "full of light," is a euphemistic expression for a "blind man"; e.g., Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhoth* 58a; *Leviticus Rabbah* 34:13; Jerusalem Talmud, *Peah* 8, 21b (end).

2. Jerusalem Talmud, *Moed Qatan* 1, 80d; *Sotah* 1, 2, 16c; *Kethuboth* 1, 25c (end). See Lieberman (1950, p. 34, n. 39).

3. Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 76b; *Kethuboth* 65b; *Temurah* 30b.

4. See Paul (1995).

5. The citation is taken from Thompson (1923, p. 40, 5:8). This meaning for *mašrû* is not cited in *AHW*, p. 629 or on p. 95, under *bābu*.

6. The text is cited from F. Köcher (1955, p. 9, No. 32b iii 10). Compare the employment of Akk. *ûru*, "nakedness," as a euphemism for female genitalia.

[Jacobsen, 1973, p. 210] or albinism [*CAD*, D, p. 67]) in the following omen: *šumma sinništu damqam-inim ūlid*, "If a woman gives birth to a blind (?) child" (Handcock, 1910, 6 r. 1). This should be compared, in turn, with the Rabbinic euphemism for a blind person, סגי נהור, "full of light."<sup>7</sup>

3) One of the many ways in which "to die" is expressed is by the euphemism, *šimtu wabālu* (lit., "to be carried off by fate"), e.g., *arkāniš šimti ubilšunūti*, "Later they (the kings of Babylon) died" (Langdon, 1912, p. 291 iii 7).<sup>8</sup>

### I. Euphemisms Regarding "Speaking"

Euphemisms, moreover, are often resorted to in order to express intimate relations between a man and woman. Thus, in both Akkadian and in Rabbinic Hebrew, the expression "talking with" the opposite sex - Akk. *itti sinništi dabābu*, "to talk with a woman," and Heb. לדב/לספר עם "to talk with..." - may, at times, refer to sexual intercourse. As for the Akkadian, compare:

(a) *šumma amēlu itti sinništi ina muḥḥi erši idbubma ultu eli erši itbima zikarūtam epuš amēlu šuātu tūb libbi u rišātum iššakanšu ašar illaku kališ magir irmittašu iktanaššad*, "If a man 'talks' in bed with a woman (i.e., has sexual intercourse), and when he rises from the bed has an erection (i.e., maintains his sexual potency),<sup>9</sup> contentment and joy will be in store for that man; wherever he may go he will find acceptance in every respect. He will constantly attain his desire" (Gadd, 1927, 44:18-20).

(b) *[u] itti sinništi ina majāli idabbub*, "[If] he 'talks' with a woman in bed..." (*KAR*, 1923, 211:20; *CAD*, M, I, pp. 119f).

It is possible that this same verb, *dabābu*, in the *šafēl* may also have euphemistic sexual overtones. In one of the Mesopotamian love charms there is a prescription for a ritual "to make a woman talk": *ana(!) sinništi šudbubi...sinništu šī ēma illaku iqabbāku la ikalla tarāmši*, "To make a woman 'talk' (you perform the following ritual). That woman, wherever she may go, will not be able to refrain from speaking to you. You can make love to her" (Biggs, 1967, p. 71, lines 22, 25).<sup>10</sup> It must be noted, however, that this ritual

7. See above, n. 1. For the grammatical construction of the Akkadian, see Reiner (1984).

8. For other examples, see *CAD*, A, I, p. 17. For the various ways in which premature death is expressed in the Bible and in the ancient Near East, see Paul (1994).

9. For the idiom *zikarūtam epēšu*, see *CAD*, E, p. 225. For *zikarūtu/zikrūtu*, see *CAD*, Z, p. 117, "referring to sexual potency"; *AHW*, p. 1527, "Mannheit...für coitus."

10. Biggs (1967, p. 71, lines 22, 25) remarks that the verb has a "special colloquial meaning, perhaps 'to make (a woman) agree (to make love)'."

incantation has also been interpreted in a non-erotic literal fashion, based on the analogy of a spell found in a Greek magical papyrus pertaining to "making a woman talk in her sleep" (Reiner, 1990, pp. 421-424).<sup>11</sup>

The euphemism may also exist in Sumerian. Cf. *SEM* 19:I lines 31-32 // II lines 26-27: "[May] he (i.e., Enmerkar) see a dream with Inanna at night. I (i.e., Enshuĕšdanna) will 'converse with' Inanna at her 'shining feet'" (gá-e 4inanna-da giri babbar-ra-na inim mu-da-bal-e). Klein (1976, p. 287, n. 22), who translated these lines, states in his footnote that the verb inim-bal, "to converse," lit., "to exchange words," is, "according to Å. Sjöberg (by oral communication), a euphemism for sexual intercourse.... In the present context, it could indicate intimate discourse."

Another euphemistic expression for copulation related to an oral activity is Sum. eme-ak, "to make tongue." In an emotional soliloquy, Inanna describes her coital marathon with her brother-lover, Dumuzi:

The brother brought me into his house  
 And laid me down on a fragrant honey-bed.  
 My precious sweet, lying by my heart,  
 One after another, "tongue-making" (eme-ak), one after another  
 My brother, of fairest face, made fifty times.  
 (Kramer, 1963, p. 509, lines 26-30; 1969, p. 104).<sup>12</sup>

This phrase, with its specific sexual connotations, is also present in a collection of Sumerian proverbs describing various social "bad manners":

To banquet without washing the hands,  
 To spit without stamping (upon the spittle),  
 To blow the nose without returning (the mucus) to the dust,  
 To "make tongue" (i.e., to cohabit) at noon without providing shade --  
 These are the abominations of Utu (the sun god).<sup>13</sup>

11. Reiner first cites, but does not accept, those who suggest the erotic interpretation, including Biggs; see n. 10 above.

12. For the text and another translation, see Jacobsen (1973, pp. 200-202; 1976, pp. 27-28) who interprets the relevant passage as the words of Geshtinanna, Dumuzi's sister, who relates to her brother Inanna's love sickness for him. For another example of a fifty-fold sexual union, see Biggs (1967, p. 30, lines 18-19): "[Like a ram eleven times], like a weaned <sheep> twelve times, like a partridge(?) thirteen times [make love to me, like a] pig fourteen times, like a wild bull fifty <times>, like a stag fifty <times>!"

13. For this translation, see Hallo (1985, p. 27). The Sumerian proverb is found in Falkowitz (1980, p. 156), who remarks that the expression "...seems to be a verb phrase with a sexual

Compare also, "My donkey was not created for racing; he was created for 'making tongue'."<sup>14</sup>

An additional Sumerian verb may also have similar overtones. In the hymnal prayer of Enheduanna - "The Exaltation of Inanna" (Hallo and van Dijk, 1968) - when Inanna, the goddess of love and fecundity, abandons her city, all lovemaking and cohabitation between husbands and wives cease (lines 55-56): "Its (i.e., the city's) woman no longer speaks of love with her husband. At night ad na-an-di-ni-ib-gi<sub>4</sub>-gi<sub>4</sub>." The Sumerian verb ad-gi<sub>4</sub>-gi<sub>4</sub> is translated by Kramer (*ANET*<sup>3</sup>, p. 580), "she whispered not (tenderly) with him." Hallo and van Dijk (1968, p. 22), on the other hand, render, "they no longer have intercourse," adding in a footnote (1968, p. 53, n. 20) that the verb is an "apparent double entendre which can imply 'taking counsel' and 'consorting together'" (see also p. 70).

Similarly in Rabbinic Hebrew both **דָּבַר עִם**<sup>15</sup> and **סָפַר עִם**, "talking/conversing with," are occasionally employed or interpreted euphemistically to express sexual intimacy.

### דָּבַר עִם

a) Mishnah, *Kethuboth* 1:8,

...ראוה מדברת עם אחד...רבי יהושע אמר...הרי זו בחזקת בעולה.

"[If] they saw her (an unmarried woman) talking with someone.... Rabbi Joshua said: ...'She is in the presumption of having had intercourse...'"

Moreover, in the ensuing Talmudic discussion in connection with the meaning of the expression **מדברת עם**, it is specifically stated by Rabbi Assi that this is a euphemism: **מדי מדברת? זעירי אמר: נסתרת. רב אסי אמר: נבעלה...לישנא מעליא** "What is meant by 'talking'? Zeiri said, 'She was hidden' (with a man). Rabbi

denotation." It is difficult, however, to accept his suggestion that "the only clue to its meaning is that the object of the phrase may have a prominent part which resembles the tongue (eme)." Geller (1990, p. 107) translates, "using the tongue (intercourse?) at noon without having shade." See also Alster (1993, p. 23): "'Made tongues' is a *double entendre*. First of all one would here think of making sweet words (or what is more), but it also means to cast a shade."

14. For this citation of eme-ak as a "euphemism for intercourse, sexual relations," see Klein and Sefati (1988, p. 138, n. 28). They also bring another example from Figula (1959, No. 23, pl. 36, face A).

15. Lieberman (1950, p. 34, n. 39) conjectures that the use may be of "Judean origin" based on the names of the Rabbis mentioned in the cited sources. He also refers to Mishnah, *Sotah* 1:2. Cf. Jastrow (1903, p. 278), who interprets the verb both in the Mishnah, *Kethuboth* 1:8 and 7:6 as "being on terms of intimacy with a man." See also Halivni (1968, pp. 215-217). For the two euphemistic expressions, see also Melamed (1968, p.140; 1983, pp. 7-8).

Assi said, 'She had intercourse.' (But according to Rabbi Assi why [does it say] 'talking'?) [It is] a euphemistic expression (lit., 'a good, more appropriate expression')" (Babylonian Talmud, *Kethuboth* 13a). The same response is also given in the Jerusalem Talmud where a variant term is employed: **מהו מדברת?** **נבעלת.** "What is the meaning of 'talking'? It means having sexual relations. Why then do we learn, 'talking'? It is a euphemism (lit., 'clean, pure speech')" (Jerusalem Talmud, *Kethuboth* 1, 25c).

b) Mishnah, *Ketuboth* 7:6,

**ואלו יוצאות שלא בכתובה העוברת על דת משה ויהודית... ואיזהי דת יהודית? . . . ומדברת עם כל אדם... ר' טרפון אמר: אף הקולנית. איזהי קולנית? לכשהיא מדברת בתוך ביתה ושכיניה שומעין קולה**

"These are to be divorced without receiving their *kethubah*...: A wife who transgresses upon Jewish practice.... And what is (meant by) Jewish practice?... One who talks with every man. Rabbi Tarfon said, 'Also one who screams'. Who is regarded a screamer? A woman whose voice can be heard by her neighbors when she speaks inside her house."

In the following Talmudic comments to this Mishnah in the Babylonian Talmud, *Kethuboth* 72b, the expression "talking with," though not termed a euphemism, as above, is nevertheless interpreted with an overtone of dalliance: **'מדברת עם כל אדם. אמר ר' יהודה אמר שמואל: במשחקת עם בחורים'**

"Rabbi Judah in the name of Samuel explained 'talking with every man' as one who sports with young men."<sup>16</sup>

And as for the interpretation of "screamer," the Babylonian Talmud, *Kethuboth* 72b remarks, **"א"ר יהודה אמר שמואל: במשמעת קולה על עסקי תשמיש** "Rabbi Judah said in the name of Samuel, 'One who makes her voice heard on matters of intercourse'." The Jerusalem Talmud, *Kethuboth*, 7, 31b-c, after citing this opinion, adds,

**איזו היא קולנית?... רב אמר: כל שקולה הולך ממיטה למיטה בשעה התשמיש**

"Who is a screamer?... Rab said: 'Any one whose voice may be heard from one bed to another when she has sexual relations'."<sup>17</sup>

16. See Lieberman (1967, pp. 291-292) for the different interpretations of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds and the Toseftah here.

17. For **קולנית**, see also Epstein (1921, pp. 412-414). Though there are various different interpretations of **קולנית**, it is of interest to note that several of the later Talmudic commentators (e.g., **ר"י** and **רא"ש**) explain the term to refer to one who demands sexual intercourse in a loud voice.

2) סָפַר עִם<sup>18</sup>

This verb occurs as a euphemism in the following two passages:

a) ר' אליעזר...שלישית...תינוק יונק משדי אמו ואשה מספרת עם בעלה

"(According to) Rabbi Eliezer (the night has three [not four] watches. On) the third...the infant sucks its mother's breast and the wife 'converses' with her husband" (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhoth* 3a).<sup>19</sup>

b) מפני מה בניך יפיפין ביותר? אמרה להן: אינו מספר עמי לא בתחילת הלילה ולא בסוף הלילה אלא בחצות הלילה; וכשהוא מספר, מגלה טפח ומכסה טפח, ודומה עליו כמי שכפאו שד

(They asked Imma Shalom [the wife of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and sister of Rabbi Gamaliel II, who was affectionately called "Imma," "mother"]): "Why are your children so exceedingly beautiful?" She replied to them: "(Because) he (my husband) 'converses' with me neither at the beginning nor at the end of the night, but (only) at midnight; and when he 'converses,' he uncovers a handbreadth and covers a handbreadth, and it is as though he were compelled by a demon" (Babylonian Talmud, *Nedarim* 20b).<sup>20</sup>

Thus "speaking" and "conversing" both serve as part of the "discourse" of intercourse.

## II. Euphemisms Regarding A Covetous Eye

The expression "to lift the eye(s) towards" in both Akkadian, *ana...īna* (singular)/*īnā* (plural) *našū* (*CAD*, N, II, pp. 104-105, b; *AHW*, p. 762, c, β; Oppenheim, 1941, pp. 259-260; Gruber, 1980, pp. 595-596, n. 1), and Hebrew, נָשָׂא עֵינַיִם אֶל (*KB*, p. 685, 7; p. 773; *BDB*, p. 670, 4),<sup>21</sup> has several different connotations, among which is the idiomatic meaning, "to covet, desire." In Akkadian the object of the covetous glance ranges far and wide, from anything in general, e.g., "If you are truly (like a) father to me," *ana mimmūšu inka la tatašši*, "do not covet anything belonging to him" (*TCL* 18 122:21); to an "orchard" (*kirū*) (*TCL* 17, 15:12); "manors" (*ālāni*) (Scheil, 1908, pl. 11 ii 25);

18. Heb. סָפַר means "to converse, talk" in Rabbinic literature; cf., e.g., Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhoth* 18b, ושמע שתי רוחות שמספרות זו לזו, "He heard two spirits conversing with one another"; *Tanhumah*, Balak, 25, אדם ראשון בלשון ארמי ספר, "Adam spoke in Aramaic."

19. See the very cautious note of Melamed (1968, p. 140, n. 190).

20. See also Kohut (1966, p. 114).

21. Neither dictionary covers the full range of nuances. See also Jenni and Westermann (1979, pp. 112, 263).

"household goods" (*numātu*) (Driver and Miles, 1960, vol. 1, p. 20; 25:57-59),<sup>22</sup> "money" (*kaspu*) (*TCL* 3, 39:11); "valuables" (*makkūru*) (*BWL*, p. 102:85-86), etc. It is also employed when the object of the libidinous desire is a member of the opposite sex. Thus, Gilgamesh, after having killed the monster Humbaba and cut down the cedar trees, bathes, dresses in fresh clothes, and immediately becomes the object of Ishtar's sedulous and seductive ardor: *ana dunqi ša Gilgāmeš ina* (vars. *ini*, IGI.MEŠ) *ittaši rubūtu Ištar*, "Ishtar, the princess, looked covetously at the beauty of Gilgamesh" (VI:6). With unabashed forthrightness she gives vent to her cupidity: "Come to me, Gilgamesh, be my lover! Give me your fruit (*inbika*)<sup>23</sup> as a gift!" (VI:7-8). Gilgamesh rejects her amorous dalliances first by heaping insult upon insult upon her and then by recalling the tragic denouement and metamorphosis of all her previous lovers. A similar fate also befell Ishullanu, her father's gardener, the only one who previously had the audacity to reject her delectable desire: "You looked at him desirously (*ina tattašišumma*) and came to him: 'My Ishullanu, let us taste your strength (*kiššūtaki*).<sup>24</sup> Put out your "hand" (*qāka*)<sup>25</sup> and touch our vulva' (*hurdatni*)" (VI:67-69).<sup>26</sup>

The idiom is also found in the Shamash Hymn where there is listed a series of dire punishments which will be inflicted upon, *ša ana alti tappišu iššū [inišu]*, "He who coveted his friend's wife" (*BWL*, p. 130:88). And, vice-versa, *sinništi ana išari šanīmma inā* (var. *ina*) *la našē*, "for a man's wife not to covet the penis of anyone else" (i.e., not to look with desire at another; *BRM* 4, 20:21; duplicate 19:10).<sup>27</sup> Compare similarly the following Akkadian potency incantation:<sup>28</sup> *šumma sinništu ina ana išari awili inašši*,

22. See volume 2, p. 161, note to line 59, for other references to coveting in Mesopotamian sources and Gen 39:7.

23. For *mbu* as a euphemism for sexual attractiveness and virility, see *CAD*, UJ, pp. 146-147. This is discussed further in Paul (1997). See also the important study of Lambert (1987, pp. 25-39).

24. For the employment of words meaning "power, might, physical strength," (e.g., *kiššūtu*, *CAD*, K, pp. 461-462) and their sexual nuances, see my forthcoming study.

25. In addition to the Akkadian word for "hand," *qātu*, Heb. **יָד**, Ugar. *yd*, and Eg. *ḏrt* also refer to the *membrum virile*. See (Paul, 1994).

26. The rare Akk. *hurdatnu*, "vagina," also appears in a medical commentary (Civil, 1973, p. 332:40), in a secular love song (Westenholz, 1987, p. 417, line 13'), and, most recently, in a lewd ditty of Ishtar (von Soden, 1991, p. 340:11). This erotic poem has also been studied in detail by Hurowitz (1994).

27. See Biggs (1967, p. 71). For a slightly different interpretation, see *CAD*, N, II, p. 105.

28. The text cited is *KAR* 61 (1915-19). On p. 71, note to line 67, Biggs (1967) cites Gilgamesh VI:6 and also notes *BRM* 4, 20:21.

"If a woman looks desirously upon a man's penis (i.e., desires another man, the following ritual is prescribed): You recite the incantation three times either <to> an apple or to a pomegranate.<sup>29</sup> You give (the fruit) to the woman and have her suck the juices. That woman will come to you. You can make love to her" (Biggs, 1967, p. 70, lines 7-10).

The sexual connotation of this idiom is also attested in Biblical Hebrew. The most audacious example is found in the unsuccessful seduction scenario between Joseph and his Egyptian "master's wife." In a manner worthy of flirtatious Ishtar herself, she brazenly and brusquely tempts Joseph: "After some time, his master's wife covetously eyed (ותשא...את עיניה אל) Joseph and said, 'Lie with me!'" (Gen 39:7).<sup>30</sup> (Note the exact same sequence of coveting and propositioning as in the Ishtar soliloquies above).

Yet another possible occurrence of this expression may be found in Ezekiel. Though the prophet usually relates the expression נשא עינים אל גלולים, "fetishes" (18:6,12,15; 33:25;<sup>31</sup> cf. somewhat similarly, 6:9, 20:24), in one passage there still echo overtones of the sexual nuance: "I will put an end to your wantonness and to your whoring in the land of Egypt. You shall no longer covet them (ולא תשאי עיניך אליהם),<sup>32</sup> nor remember Egypt any more" (23:27).

Though changes in linguistic taste and convention are prevalent in all languages and periods, it is always of interest to note how some euphemistic expressions, in particular those which pertain to discreet intimate relations, cross linguistic, cultural, and chronological boundaries - as exemplified by the examples cited above.

To Reuben, In Friendship, Shalom

29. Apples and pomegranates often function as aphrodisiacs in Mesopotamian love poetry and in the Song of Songs (Paul, 1995).

30. Most commentators and translators either render the expression literally or paraphrase it, without defining its exact meaning of desiring and coveting and without being aware of its Akkadian cognate. For rare exceptions, see Driver and Miles (1960, volume 2, p. 161, note to line 59) and Weinfeld (1975, p. 242).

31. In all these verses the nuance is "looking for help"; see also Ps 120:1, 123:1. Compare Jacob (1934, p. 729), who, on Gen 39:7, remarks, "ihre Augen zu ihm erhob, im Verlangen" and cites these verses along with others in Ezekiel. Compare also the Aramaic cognate נטל עינים in Dan 4:31; Ahiqar, 169.

32. This is alluded to by Gruber (1980, pp. 595-596, n. 1). Zimmerli (1979, p. 476, note to vs. 27) remarks, "For the usage here, cf. Gen. 39:7."



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