On the Lexical Background of the Amarna Gloses

Abstract: The gloss phenomenon is one aspect of the Amarna letters that has attracted much interest from scholars. Most studies on these glosses have focused on linguistic features, comparatively few studies have attempted to understand their cultural background. Based on the identification of some glosses which appear to be unnecessary from a functional point of view, we would like to propose, as a hypothesis, the possibility that these types of glosses could be elements scribes extracted from lexical lists they had used in their training with the purpose of hinting at their professional background.

Keywords: Amarna letters, glosses, lexical texts.

1. Ever since the pioneering work of Zimmern (1891), the gloss phenomenon is one aspect of the Amarna letters that has attracted much interest from scholars.1 Izre'el (2003: 15) defines Amarna glosses as ‘words that are inserted within the sequence of the text either to clarify or to replace an Akkadian word or a Sumerian logogram which might be wrongly interpreted when read in Egypt. The glosses are usually indigenous lexemes, mostly West Semitic, but also Hurrian or other local languages, of unidentified origin. Glosses can sometimes be Egyptian, and Akkadian glosses (usually used for interpreting a Sumerogram) are not rare. One can even find glosses in Sumerian, serving as a reading aid for a logogram. … Glosses were usually marked as such by a special cuneiform sign … which is called a Glossenkeil (“a gloss-wedge”).’ Most studies on these glosses have focused on linguistic features,2 primarily because Canaanite glosses are viewed as linguistic evidence for Proto-Hebrew.3 Comparatively few studies have attempted to understand their cultural background, their raison d’être.4 In the last few

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1 This article is one result of the research project ‘Native Languages, linguae francae, and Graphics Traditions in Late Bronze Age Syria and Palestine: Three Case Studies (Canaan, Ugarit, Emar)’ (FFI2011-25065), funded by the Spanish Ministry for Economic Affairs and Competitiveness within the National Plan for Scientific Research, Development and Technological Innovation (I+D+I). I would like to thank Dr. Camille Lecompte (CNRS, Paris) for having taken the time to discuss with me some aspects of this paper and for his valuable comments. Abbreviations follows those found in the Reallexikon der Assyriologie 12 7/8; notice in addition: DS–NELL = Dutch Studies – Society of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, SEL = Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici, TA = Tel Aviv.


3 Cf., e.g., Izre'el (1995: 103); Steiner (1997: 146–147); Moran (2003: 343); L. Edzard (2011: 481).

years, however, authors such as Giano (1995), Izre’el (1995), van der Toorn (2000), von Dassow (2004) and Siddall (2005) have put forward some hypotheses to try to explain why Amarna glosses were used. It remains the case, however, as Izre’el (1995: 103) pointed out, that ‘no comprehensive evaluation of the gloss phenomenon has been undertaken’.

The following lines are also an attempt to contribute to the investigation of the use and cultural background of the Amarna glosses. Based on the identification of some glosses which appear to be unnecessary from a functional point of view, we would like to propose, as a hypothesis, the possibility that these types of glosses could be elements scribes extracted from lexical lists they had used in their training with the purpose of hinting at their professional background.

2. A study of the glosses for ‘dust’ provides a good introduction to the issue. Both Akkadian eperu and Canaanite ‘aparu, ‘dust’ (< Proto-Semitic *‘apar-; cf. Kogan 2011: 189), are used as glosses in six letters from four different localities: Beirut (EA 136:3, 141:4, 143:11), Mušišuna (EA 195:5), Yurza (EA 316:4) and Astartu (EA 364:8). The fact that they occur in the opening passages of the letters adds to their interest and highlights the question regarding what their function might have been.

Letters EA 141–143 were sent by Ammunira, the ruler of Beirut. The palaeographic unity of the three letters was already pointed out by Knudtzon (1907–1915: 1236). They share an identical format and script and were written by a single scribe. EA 136, sent by Rib-Haddi, king of Byblos, was written by this same scribe. The use made by

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5 Izre'el (2003: 28), for instance, assumes that EA 195 would have come from Kumidi. However, as I intend to show in a forthcoming study, this letter likely would have come from Mušišuna.
7 See, in a similar sense, von Dassow (2004: 655 n. 32).
8 In a comment on letter EA 136, regarding which, see below n. 10.
9 EA 141 and 142 (which I was able to collate) are housed at the British Museum. One fragment of EA 143 (collated) is kept at the Vorderasiatisches Museum, another fragment (not collated) of the same letter is at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Regarding the petrographic analyses of the three tablets EA 141–143 see Goren / Finkelstein / Na'amani (2004: 162–163).
10 By the end of his rule as the king of Byblos, Rib-Haddi was exiled in Beirut, from where he sent letters EA 136–138 to the pharaoh. Knudtzon (1907–1915: 56 n. 2 and 1236) rightly pointed out that EA 136 shows an identical script and clay as the letters of Ammunira. Moran (1992: 217 n. 6) notes certain material and linguistic traits that differentiate EA 136 from the letters from Byblos, and van der Toorn
this scribe both of logogram SAḪAR.RA\(^\text{11}\) and of the gloss “dust” is summarised in the following table:\(^\text{12}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EA Letter</th>
<th>Logogram</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>141:4(^\text{13})</td>
<td>SAḪAR.RA</td>
<td>genitive</td>
<td>a-pa-ru</td>
<td>nominative(^\text{14})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143:4(^\text{15})</td>
<td>SAḪAR.RA</td>
<td>genitive</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143:11(^\text{16})</td>
<td>SAḪAR.RA</td>
<td>genitive</td>
<td>ḫa-pa-ru</td>
<td>nominative(^\text{17})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2000: 103) likewise concludes that this letter must have been the work of the scribe from Beirut. The petrographic analysis of the tablet assures that it comes from Beirut (Goren / Finkelstein / Na'aman 2004: 157 and 158). EA 136, therefore, cannot be considered part of the linguistic corpus from Byblos, as Giano (1990: 2) does.

\(^{11}\) The scribe of Beirut is the only one in the Amarna corpus who uses the variant SAḪAR.RA (on this script see also below n. 47). The correct interpretation of SAḪAR.RA was pointed out by Moran (1992: 228): ‘Read SAḪAR.RA [in EA 141:4], a frozen context form (“in the dust”), rather than SAḪAR-ra (epera), an erroneous accusative’. Cf. also CAD A/2: 166. Other scholars (cf. for instance Giano 1995: 68; Rainey 1996c: 179) believe it must be read SAḪAR-ra, in which case SAḪAR always seems to appear in the wrong case. It should be noted, however, that both EA 136:3 (SAḪAR glossed by eperi, correctly in the genitive) and EA 142:3 (eperi, also properly in the genitive, without SAḪAR) could suggest that the scribe indeed understood SAḪAR.RA as a noun in the correct genitive case. In EA 141:12, 17 and 20, the scribe uses eperu in the correct genitive (written i-pi-ri).

\(^{12}\) The table does not include EA 142:3 ([ḫu e-pè-r]ša 2 GÌR.MES,ša, if we accept the reconstruction by Knudtzon 1907–1915: 596), because the scribe does not seem to have used the term SAḪAR in this line and eperi, consequently, appears not to be a gloss.

\(^{13}\) um-ma Am-mu-ri-u / LŪ.\(^\text{186}\)PÙ+HÀ ša-ká ša SAḪAR.RA : a-pa-ru / ša GÌR.MES-ša (EA 141:3–5).

\(^{14}\) In EA 141:4 and 143:11, the two Canaanite forms ḫa-puru, in the nominative, would seem to be incorrect, in contrast to the correct use of Akkadian eperi in EA 136:3 (gloss) and 142:3 (no gloss). However, the use of the nominative as a neutral base case in enumerations, a usage also attested at Ugarit (see Tropper 2000: 308; Huehnergard 2008, Polyglot S’ Vocabulary: cf. Akkadian and Ugaritic columns), is correct, and the same pattern is used by this scribe in various other passages. In EA 136:18, e.g., LŪ.MEŠ.LUN : ma-sa-ar-ta, ‘garrison’ (Rainey 1996a: 36; regarding a possible alternative reading and interpretation of this logogram see also Moran 1992: 217 n. 3, and Giano 1995: 71), the Akkadian gloss is used in the correct accusative case, while in EA 141:44, BÂD-ši : ḫu-mi-tu, ‘its wall’, BÂD-ši is in the accusative case with a feminine singular suffix pronoun in the genitive (Rainey 1996a: 79): these elements (case and suffix pronoun) have no equivalent in the Canaanite gloss hûmîtu, which (like ḫa-puru) is in the nominative.

\(^{15}\) [ši] SAḪAR.RA ša 2 G[IR.MES]-ša.

\(^{16}\) ti-pur LUGÁL, EN-ia / a-na İR.ša ū a-na SAḪAR.RA : ḫa-pa-ru / ša GÌR.MES-šu.

\(^{17}\) See above n. 14.
As noted above, the gloss for ‘dust’ is also used in letters from Mušḫuṣuna, Yurza and Aštaru. In EA 195:5 (Mušḫuṣuna), SAḪAR.MES : ep-ri, the scribe opts for the Akkadian variant epri. The scribe from Yurza also opts for the same variant, [SAḪAR’] : ep-[r]i (EA 316:4). The scribe from Aštaru, however, uses the Canaanite form ḫaparu, i.e., SAḪAR : a-pa-ru (EA 364:8). In this case, the nominative ḫaparu could be required by the syntax of the sentence, though it seems more likely that it would have functioned like the glosses ḫaparu and ḫōmītu from Beirut. The following table summarizes these data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EA Letter</th>
<th>Logogram</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EA 195:5</td>
<td>SAḪAR.MES</td>
<td>ep-ri</td>
<td>genitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA 316:4</td>
<td>[SAḪAR’]</td>
<td>ep-[r]i</td>
<td>genitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA 364:8</td>
<td>SAḪAR</td>
<td>a-pa-ru</td>
<td>nominative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Concerning the practical purpose of these Akkadian and Canaanite glosses of SAḪAR, in principle it could be assumed that ep(e)ri and ḫaparu provide some nuance or clarification of the primary meaning of the logogram preceding them. This possibility, however, should be ruled out based on the following facts: (a) in the aforementioned cases, SAḪAR and its glosses appear in the opening passages of the letters, that is, in set expressions found within a standardized context allowing little room for ambiguity; (b) the scribe from Beirut skips the gloss in EA 143:4, and hence, the scribe may have assumed an understood gloss. In this respect Moran (1992: 217 n. 5).

18 um-ma ri-ib,ŠIḪUR İR-ka / SAḪAR : e-pé-ri ša 2 GIR.MES-ka. In this case, SAḪAR does not have the element .RA, and the genitive case is correctly used in Akkadian eperi, which is thus probably an ‘equivalent gloss’ (cf. Gianto 1995: 68). Alternatively, it could be a ‘pronunciation gloss’ like that used by the scribe in line 28 of the same letter: DŪG.GA : ṭu-ka ‘alliance of friendship (EA 136:28); see in this respect Moran (1992: 217 n. 5).

19 A variation of Akkadian eperu, cf. also CAD E, 184, 195. The gloss should be understood as the (correct) plural oblique case (epri), cf. Rainey (1996a: 143).


21 ɑ-na-ku İR / LUGAL EN-ša / SAḪAR : a-pa-ru ša / 2 GIR.MES-šu, ‘I am the servant of the king, my lord, the dirt at his feet’ (EA 364:6–9).

22 See above n. 14.
apparently did not think it necessary for a better understanding of saḫar and of the formula employed; (c) over 60 Amarna letters from diverse localities use the term ‘dust’ written only syllabically in their introductions, while eight other letters (besides EA 143:4) use only saḫar (EA 226:4; 229:5; 366:5; 233:7; 234:5; 235:6; 241:5; 255:4).

Potentially relevant is also the fact that scribes from geographically distant localities share a common way of writing the glosses. The scribes from Beirut (EA 141) and Aštaru (EA 364) opt for the writing a-pa-ru, while the scribes from Mušḫuna (EA 195) and Yurza (EA 316) use ep-ri. Are these equivalences in the writing of the glosses mere coincidence?

4. One can also compare the use of the gloss išātu, ‘fire’, employed by different scribes from various localities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EA / RS Letter</th>
<th>Logogram</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EA 185:19.32</td>
<td>1Izi</td>
<td>i-ša-ti</td>
<td>Hazi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA 189:12</td>
<td>2Izi/SES</td>
<td>e-ša-te</td>
<td>Qadeš</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RS 16.111:12</td>
<td>1Izi</td>
<td>i-ša-ti</td>
<td>Amurru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA 306:32</td>
<td>3Izi/SES</td>
<td>i-ša-ti</td>
<td>Ashkelon / Gaza</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The scribe of letter EA 185 thought it necessary to gloss the logogram 1izi, ‘fire’, using Akkadian išātu in lines 19 and 32, i.e., (wašāru) i-na 1iži : i-ša-ti. In lines 24, 39 and 60 of the same letter, however, he uses išātu again in similar context, but without a gloss function.27 EA 185 and EA 189 would seem to suggest a northern origin of the gloss, an impression supported by the presence of the same gloss in the letter from Amurru, RS 16.111, where one finds (šakānu) i-na ša 1iži : i-ša-ti.28 However, much

23 References in Ebeling (1915): 1377 (aparru), 1404 (eperu), 1539 (uppu); Rainey (1978): 64 (aparru), 70 (eperu), 98 (uppu). EA 244:33 uses up-ri in the body of the message.
24 Regarding the location of Mušḫuna in the Beqa see Vita (2005).
25 This example and iša-ti in EA 306:32 (see below) are not preceded by a gloss mark. Rainey (1996a: 36) presents more examples of this kind.
26 RS = Ras Shamra.
27 The scribe does not use any more glosses in this letter.
farther to the south the scribe of the letters of Šubandu²⁹ (EA 301–306),³⁰ sent from Ashkelon or Gaza,³¹ also uses it in EA 306:32, i.e., (šarāpu) [i-na i zi]³² i-ša-ti. As in the case of sahar, however, it does not seem that it was actually necessary to explain or qualify i zi by means of i šātu. In similar contexts, scribes from Qaṭna (EA 55:41), Tyre (EA 151:56), Ḥašabu (EA 174:17) and Eniṣasi (EA 363:14) use exclusively i šātu,³³ whereas scribes (again) from Qaṭna (EA 53:39) and Ḥazi (EA 186:16.31), but also from Byblos (EA 126:52), only use i zi. In this sense, the usage of the scribe of EA 53 and 55 from Qaṭna is significant,³⁴ as in the former he uses only i zi, in the second only i šātu.³⁴

5. The glosses ep(e)rī/(ḫ)pāparu and i šātu show that Amarna scribes could use glosses that were unnecessary from a functional point of view, as they were not needed for a better understanding of the glossed term, of the immediate context thereof or of the overall message of the letter. Moreover, other cases can be added, such as the use of the noun pū, ‘mouth’,³⁵ as a gloss in letters from Amurru,³⁶ Byblos,³⁷ Beirut,³⁸ Sidon³⁹ and Mušiḫuna.⁴⁰ The use of (UZU) KA without a gloss actually posed no problems, as shown by another scribe from Byblos (EA 106:39: i š-tu UZU KA LÚ MEŠ-âtu) and one from

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²⁹ The king of a locality not mentioned in his correspondence.
³⁰ Letters EA 301–306 were written by the same scribe, as shown by Moran’s (1992: 347 n. 1) comment regarding EA 313.
³² Cf. also EA 176:13 (very fragmentary context), a letter from a king whose name is not preserved and whose locale is unspecified.
³³ EA 53 and 55 are indeed the product of the same scribe, as I was able to confirm in my collation of both tablets at the British Museum.
³⁴ The scribe of EA 62 from Amurru also uses only i zi-teMES (l. 19; Izr'e'l 1991a: 115).
³⁵ It is impossible to determine whether pū as a gloss is an Akkadian or a Northwest Semitic term; cf. also Izr'e'l (2003: 28).
³⁶ EA 160:12, 17: UZU KA pi-ì. In line 17 if one assumes the reconstruction i š-tu UZU KA [a pi-i].
³⁸ EA 137:72: KA pi.
Jerusalem (EA 290:26, 27: a-na KA-i). Once more, this gloss seems to have been unnecessary for the correct understanding of the message.

A further instance could be seen in the use of the Canaanite term kilābu, ‘cage, basket’, as a gloss of Akkadian ḫuḫaru, ‘bird trap’, in the context of the proverb ‘like a bird which lies in a ḫu-ḫa-ri : ki-.lu-bi trap : cage am I’. All attestations are found in five letters from Rib-Hadda of Byblos (EA 74:46, 79:36, 81:35, 105:9, 116:18), written by at least four different scribes. One of these scribes, however, that of EA 79, also uses this proverb in two letters (EA 78:13–16; EA 90:39–42), employing ḫuḫaru without the gloss, thus showing that the gloss kilābu was functionally unnecessary in the context of that proverb.

Other Amarna glosses equally attested to in two or more letters could be studied from this perspective.

6. What might have been the ultimate reason for scribes to use the glosses discussed above? For our part, we are not, at least for now, in a position to give a clear and unequivocal answer to this question. Speculative as it may seem, we would like nevertheless to put forward the following possibility. While the aforementioned glosses (and other glosses which might be in the same situation) do not seem to have been necessary from a functional point of view, that is, they do not meet the functions traditionally attributed to the Amarna glosses (cf. §1), perhaps their raison d’être rests on more symbolic ground. An explanation can be perhaps sought in the training of the scribes, in the sense that these glosses could somehow directly reflect elements from the lexicographical education of the scribes. The scribes who used the kind of glosses discussed above may have wished to hint in their letters at their training as writing professionals and their expertise as scribes. This would be a form of intertextuality

41 For the reading, see Rainey (1978: 87), Moran (1992: 334 n. 4).
42 The proverb shows some variation (cf. CAD ḫ, 225), though gloss and the glossed term are identical in all five letters. Regarding this gloss see Sivan (1984: 237) and Gianto (1995: 69, ‘individuating gloss’).
43 As will be shown in a forthcoming study.
44 See Knudtzon’s observations on ḫuḫaru in EA 78:14 (1907–1915: 387 n. l) and EA 90:40 (1907–1915: 427 n. c).
45 The terms ep(e)ri, išātu and pû, for example, were all part of various Mesopotamian lexical lists, some also attested to in Canaan in the Bronze Age; cf. Tadmor (1977), Huehnergard / van Soldt (1999), Horowitz / Oshima / Sanders (2006: 42-43, 73-74).
among letters and lexical lists similar to that already noticed in Mesopotamia, for instance, between lexical and literary texts. Some indications could possibly point in this direction, though this explanation leaves important questions unanswered. We, however, believe that this could be a fruitful line of investigation, already begun, from a different perspective, half a century ago by Artzi (1963), though (as far as I know) it has not been adequately developed subsequently.

If this hypothesis should prove correct, some of the Amarna glosses, such as those discussed in this paper, may be of assistance in the identification of underlying lexical texts and, consequently, to a more accurate reconstruction of the curriculum of Canaanite scribes.

46 See Veldhuis (1997: 125–128; 2004: 95–106). Concerning the composition Nanše and the Birds, Veldhuis (2004: 105) points out that ‘(t)he text seems to be designed in a way that connects to typical knowledge texts, to suggest that there is a claim to knowledge here’ (my italics).

47 Pairings such as SAḪAR : ḫaparu or ḫaḥari : kilābi could also be a reflection of Mesopotamian lexical lists from the 14th century, locally adapted and with the addition of a Canaanite column (similar to the way other lexical texts from the 13th century found in Tell Aphek and in Ashkelon are produced; see Rainey (1975: 125–128), (1976: 137–139); Horowitz / Oshima / Sanders (2006: 29-32, 42-43); Huelnegard / van Soldt (1999). The writing SAḪAR.RA (cf. n. 11) could reflect a Sumerian genitive (attested, e.g., in Hh VII B 27: GIŠMAR-SAḪAR.RA = mar e-pi-ri, MSL VI, 117; CAD E, 185); this would not necessarily indicate knowledge of Sumerian on the part of the scribe, at least not extensive knowledge, but might rather be understood as an oblique scribal reference to lexical texts that had formed part of his training, where the Sumerian genitival form SAḪAR.RA was related to eperu.

48 For instance, what criteria could have been adopted by each scribe when extracting from the lexical lists certain terms (and not others) or certain equivalences (and not others) and placing them in letters as glosses.

49 Based on a comparative study of glosses mainly in Akkadian texts from Ugarit, Artzi (1963: XVI) pointed out among other conclusions that, ‘It must be stressed that the Canaanite translations … are used in a way analogous to the Akkadian ones, also present in the EA Tablets. The background of these latter is known: it can be found in lexical texts. Therefore it seems clear that the method of employing the Canaanite language as “translation” is a local innovation influenced by the Akkadian lexicographical, scribal, and traditional approach. … The author suggests that these translations are signs of such quasi-lexicographical activity and proposes to call them “forerunners” and “partial representatives” of lexical units.’ Some echoes of Artzi’s proposal can be found in bibliographical summaries, e.g., in that by D.O. Edzard: (1985: 259 n. 78).

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