

„She was dumbstruck and took it to heart.“ Form and Function of Insults in Sumerian Literary Disputations between Women. Matuszak, Jana

Ever since the pioneering efforts by Miguel Civil, disputations between women have been established as a small but distinct sub-category of Sumerian literary debates.¹ While they were naturally perceived to resemble the disputations between male students (or future Edubba’s graduates) more than the ones between non-human protagonists, the disputations between women were generally regarded as inferior in structure, content, and style. Bendt Alster (1990: 8), for instance, arrived at the conclusion that a specific disputation between women, which forms the main focus of the present paper, had a comparatively unsophisticated structure and was “just [...] a model composition in which all possible insults are collected, without any specific reference to the actual speaker,” while Herman Vanstiphout (1993: 322f.) regarded all of what he called “essays and dialogues” as inferior to the precedence disputations: “It seems that the essays and dialogues are fairly unformed pieces, [...] while] the Dispute Poems [...] are generally well-composed.”

On the basis of these dismissive assessments, the present paper seeks to prove that, in fact, the disputations between women are highly complex literary compositions too, and not just a random collection of insults. In order to do so, I will first briefly introduce the best-preserved Sumerian disputation between women, a composition known by the modern titles *Two Women B* or *Dialogue 5* (henceforth *2WB*), and then present the results of an in-depth study of the form and function of the insults employed in this text. This will then allow me to address broader questions concerning the nature of the disputation and its didactic motives, and close with some deliberations on its ancient ‘Sitz im Leben.’

¹ Within the scope of the present paper, I will use the term ‘Sumerian literary disputations’ to refer to a select number of compositions. For the precedence disputations, I follow the definition of Mittermayer (2014: 21), who lists 8(-9) /**adamin**/. By ‘disputations between male students’ I mean *Dialogues 1-3*. While *Dialogue 1* has been edited recently by Johnson and Geller 2015, editions of *Dialogues 2* and *3* are currently being prepared by M. Ceccarelli. To date, the only known disputations between women are *Two Women B* or *Dialogue 5* (henceforth *2WB*) and “*Two Women A*” or *Dialogue 4* (henceforth “*2WA*”). A comprehensive edition of *2WB* can be found in Matuszak 2017; the appendix also contains a text reconstruction and score transliteration of “*2WA*” as well as copies of the unpublished manuscripts of “*2WA*.” The title has been put in inverted commas, as it is unclear how many individual compositions are among the fragments assembled under the umbrella term “*2WA*.”

1. Content and Structure of *Two Women B*

2WB bears the typical tripartite structure of disputations. 1) Beginning with an opening scene, in which one of the two contestants provokes her rival and thus initiates the debate, 2) the main part consists of alternating speeches, in which the two women hurl insults and reproaches against one another; each trying to prove that the other is not a ‘good woman,’ or more precisely, not a ‘good (house)wife.’ The housewife is indeed presented as *the* female profession par excellence, in parallelism to the scribe as the only profession befitting a man.² The disputation breaks off rather abruptly after a fatal accusation has been uttered by one of the contestants, and 3) the final part, in which the quarrel is settled, takes place at court. Indeed, we find here the longest and most detailed literary account of a lawsuit known in Sumerian literature – which alone could falsify assertions of an unsophisticated plot structure.

But who are the two contestants, and why does the quarrel get so terribly out of hand that a jury and a judge need to be consulted?

2. The Two Contestants, or: Sumerian “Rules for Ritual Insults”

It is true that, unlike some of the Sumerian precedence disputations, the two rivals are not properly introduced at the beginning. Only one of them is identified by the Sumerian name Ninkuzu (Emesal: Gašankuzu) towards the end of the text (l. 173); her rival remains anonymous throughout the entire composition. I will refer to her as Mrs. A – A for Anonymous, but also because she is the first speaker.³

Despite the lack of an introduction, however, one can still glean enough information to get a general idea of their personalities and physical characteristics, both from their behavior towards one another, and from certain telling accusations in the main part of the dispute. Thus, we learn that both women are married,⁴ and both women belong to the same social

² For a more detailed discussion, see Matuszak (2016: 250f.).

³ The fact that only one of the two contestants is named is unusual, since in other Sumerian disputations between two human peers either both are identified by name (as in *Dialogue 2* [Enkita and Enkihegal] and *Dialogue 3* [Enkimanšum and Ġirini’isa]) or both remain anonymous (as in *Dialogue 1* and all known fragments of “*2WA*”). While it cannot be excluded entirely that Mrs. A’s name is lost in a lacuna, the protocol of the lawsuit only necessitates the identification of the defendant (Ninkuzu), not the plaintiff (Mrs. A).

⁴ Contra Alster (1990: 8 n. 18), who assumed that one contestant is married and the other is not. Mrs. A mentions Ninkuzu’s husband in l. 42 (**dam-a-ni in-TAR** “she keeps her husband short [or: she puts her husband to flight]”), l. 51 (**dam-zu tu⁹ nu-um-mu⁴** “your husband has no clothes to wear”) and indirectly in l. 99, where she calls Mrs. A “spouse of a slave” (**dam e-re-da**), while Ninkuzu denigrates Mrs. A and her husband in l. 140 (**mu-ud-na arka^bmuš^{en}-a** “wife of a bat”). Moreover, the court case revolving around Ninkuzu’s slander of Mrs. A, which had resulted in Mrs. A being repudiated by her husband, leaves no doubt about her marital status. Mrs.

class.⁵ However, Mrs. A is portrayed as a self-confident, assertive and authoritative person, who not only initiates the debate, but also dominates the disputation, and even ends the text with her final speech. Ninkuzu, on the contrary, is in a defensive position from the very beginning. Her attempt at averting the quarrel fails, and she has to argue her case as best she can. Despite the fact that her professional and rhetorical skills are inferior to those of her rival, she displays utmost contempt towards Mrs. A. This obvious imbalance between the two contestants is, however, typical for Sumerian literary disputations. Catherine Mittermayer (2014: 41ff. *et passim*) has convincingly demonstrated that Sumerian precedence disputations both anticipate and support the winner throughout the text, and use different techniques in doing so. The same can be observed in 2WB: While nobody, neither the ancient nor the modern audience, could or can be surprised by the fact that Mrs. A is ultimately going to triumph, the entertaining – and instructive – factor lies in discovering *how* she prevailed over her rival.⁶ This is directly linked to questions of content, style, and function of the insults exchanged during the debate.

In order to understand the relationship between the two adversaries better, and to comprehend why the quarrel gets out of hand, it is necessary to take a closer look at the content of their mutual insults and reproaches. It needs to be established if there are any insults that provide information about the two protagonists relevant to the progression of the dispute, or insults that directly influence the course of events. For this, a hermeneutic tool is needed to distinguish the “telling” accusations from those which fulfill other functions within the text, and William Labov’s (1972) differentiation between “ritual” and “personal” insults proved

A’s prosecution speech finally offers further evidence of both contestants being married: she points out their equal social status by stating: **dam-ĝu₁₀ dam-a-ni-gen₇** “My husband (is) like her husband” (ll. 159 // 167).

⁵ The women are designated as “neighbors” (**ušur**; ll. 206. 220) and as “social peers” (**dumu lu₂-tab-ba**; ll. 180. 196), but it is not entirely clear to which class they belonged. The corresponding Akkadian term *mārti awīlim* found in the bilingual manuscript X₆ (IM 13348 [TIM 9, 6]) rev. 8 (= 2WB 180) seems to be a misinterpretation of the Sumerian line (**dumu lu₂-tab-ba** has been broken up into **dumu lu₂** = *mārti awīlim* “daughter of a free citizen” and **tab-ba** = *tappātiki* “your equal”), and thus offers no conclusive evidence that the women belong to the class of free citizens (*awīlū*). The sum of the divorce payment stated in l. 189, 1/3 mina of silver, corresponds to the sum prescribed for a *muškēnum* in § 140 of Hammurapi’s law code. However, in practice the sum varied considerably (cf. e.g. Westbrook 1988: 23. 78 and CAD U-W 371 s.v. *uzubbû*), which again does not allow for a definite conclusion about the two women’s social status.

⁶ It must be conceded, however, that due to several lacunae in the final part of the text it remains unclear if she wins in all respects. Note that part of the preliminary verdict against Ninkuzu (ll. 188-96) is later contested by an unknown party (ll. 205 // 209) and that the payment of the divorce money imposed on Ninkuzu (l. 189f.) might imply the divorce was not or could not be annulled, whence the monetary compensation for Mrs. A. In any case, it is apparent despite the lacunae that the verdict does not mark the end of the lawsuit.

useful in this context. In his study of “Rules for Ritual Insults” in Black English vernacular, he observed that in verbal contests, “ritual”, i.e. “non-personal,” insults are generally grossly exaggerated and thus discernibly untrue, wherefore the addressee need not reply, deny or defend him- or herself against the allegation. If he or she does take the insult personally and reacts correspondingly, it normally amounts to an admission of guilt – as if there were some truth in the insult.

In the case of *2WB*, this can explain why most of the insults exchanged in the main part are never commented upon, but simply ignored. At the same time, the “ritual” insults are also among the funniest, since the absurdity of the exaggeration is likely to arouse laughter and applause by the audience. Consider, for instance, l. 51f.: “Your husband has no clothes to wear, you yourself are wearing rags: your butt sticks out from them!”⁷ Surely, Ninkuzu’s husband was not walking about completely naked, and who knows if Ninkuzu’s bottom was really visible through her clothes, but readers or listeners – then as now – probably gleefully exulted in the idea. Another malicious exaggeration is found in l. 98, and again it is Mrs. A speaking: “The lower millstone is her husband, the upper millstone is her child.”⁸ While the metaphor reflects the proportions of the big lower millstone and the small upper grinding stone, it alleges that Ninkuzu is all but married to her slave work, and has no time for a real family. This stands in obvious contradiction to the quips mentioning Ninkuzu’s husband, but the power of the image, denigrating Ninkuzu to the rank of a slave, apparently was deemed more important than the veracity of the assertion. The remark certainly hurt, but Ninkuzu did not feel compelled to reply. She could feel safe in the knowledge that she had a husband, and that the audience – thanks to other insults that presuppose her being married – knew that too.

“Personal” insults, on the contrary, whether they were intended or perceived as such,⁹ provoke reactions in the addressee. The most obvious example of an insult that was probably intended, but certainly perceived as a “personal” insult is the allegation of adultery in Ninkuzu’s final speech to Mrs. A.¹⁰ She calls her a “whore” and a “liar, who’s in constant

⁷ *2WB* 51f.: **dam-zu tu₉ nu-um-mu₄ ze₄-e tu₉aĝ₂-dara₂ mu₄-mu₄ / gu-du-zu am₃-ta-la₂.**

⁸ *2WB* 98: ^{NA4}**kinkin dam-a-ni(-im)** ^{NA4}**šu-šu₂ du₅-mu-ni(-im)**.

⁹ Cf. Kochman’s (1975: 115) critique of Labov (1972), who points out the fluid boundaries between “ritual” and “personal” insults and emphasizes the crucial importance of the addressee’s interpretation of an insult, which determines his or her reaction.

¹⁰ *2WB* 152-56: **kar-ke₄ eš₂-dam-ma še-en lul mu-du₁₁-š.-du₁₁-š. dam tuku dam taka₄ / lu₂-tu-mu ga-ab-us₂ mu-tin-e-ne / galla₄^{la}-bi-še₃ e₁₁-da ama gan u₄-šu₂-□uš□-[(...)]-a / u[r] šu zi-ga egir mu-lu-ne-k[a (x)] / m[u-r]u-uš tur dag-ge₄-a til₃-la u₃ n[u-mu-u]n-ši-ku-ku** “The whore was constantly *disseminating* lies in the ešdam (tavern including facilities for prostitution). (Whenever) she’s married, she’s (quickly) divorced (again). / Liar, in (constant) pursuit of men. / It is this vulva which is being mounted – mother giving birth on a daily

pursuit of men,” which is why the young men in the neighborhood get no rest at night. The disputation breaks off abruptly after this speech, and the text sets in again with Mrs. A trying to clear her reputation and seeking satisfaction at court. She describes how Ninkuzu slandered her as a “whore,” which reached the ears of her – Mrs. A’s – husband, who consequently divorced her. Apparently, several people interpreted the insults not as exaggerated, untrue, “ritual” insults, but as “personal” ones, which gave rise to fatal rumors. Therefore, Mrs. A wants to defend herself, and since a divorce is a legal issue, she has to convince the authorities of her innocence. This also implies that Ninkuzu, if found guilty of slander, has to face the consequences.

Two aspects are of interest in this context.

1) First, one needs to understand what drove Ninkuzu to utter the fatal accusation. The key to this question seems to lie in her last speech, as it contains a curious and seemingly ridiculously exaggerated insult that might be the key to the conflict between the two women. Ninkuzu calls Mrs. A a “mother giving birth on a daily basis.”¹¹ This seems to be a direct reply to an insult Mrs. A had uttered in her previous speech, where she had mocked Ninkuzu as infertile: “(Too) small vulva, (but) very long pubic hair! Swollen genitals; person (with) a blocked, sick uterus!”¹² Interestingly, there is another instance where accusations of adultery promptly elicit allegations of infertility: In l. 47, Ninkuzu had said to Mrs. A: “Now (look!) You crept in through the window to (meet) men!,” to which Mrs. A had replied directly: “(Her ever so) pure womb is finished: (it means) loss for her house.”¹³

Throughout the text, it is always Mrs. A who mocks Ninkuzu as infertile and always Ninkuzu who accuses Mrs. A of adultery, and never the other way around. Despite the fact that some of the accusations sound very exaggerated and could thus be interpreted as “ritual” insults if taken out of context, the protagonists’ reactions show that they took them personally, and these reactions subsequently determine the course of events. While attempts at denial or aggressive “personal” counter-attacks are normally an admission of guilt, this – conspicuously – does not seem to be the case with Mrs. A. In the construed scenario of a literary composition, which was *supposed* to end in a court case for didactic reasons, Ninkuzu was apparently already so clearly marked as the ‘bad woman’ that nobody doubted Mrs. A’s

basis! / Dog raising (its) paw, (constantly) *pursuing* men. / The young men who live in the city quarter cannot sleep because of her.”

¹¹ See above n. 10.

¹² 2WB 148: **galla⁴la tur siki galla⁴la gid₂-gid₂ / pe-zi₂-ir HAR lu₂ ša₃ la₂ pa₄-hal-la.**

¹³ 2WB 47 (Ninkuzu): **u₄-da-am₃ lu₂ ab-ba ba-an-ku₄-re-en.** 2WB 48 (Mrs. A): **ša₃ ku₃ til i-bi₂-za e₂-a-na.**

innocence. Conversely, the audience was (and is) likely to believe that Ninkuzu, whom Mrs. A kept accusing of failing at every aspect of womanhood, was also infertile, and thus not a good wife. This unequal treatment of the two protagonists thus constitutes one of many examples for the text's favoritism towards the winner.

In any case, Ninkuzu's jealousy of her fertile rival seems to lie at the heart of the slander. We are hence dealing with an initially playful verbal contest about who's the better wife, which slowly turns into a serious relationship conflict based on long-standing personal grudges.¹⁴ The text, far from being a random collection of insults, thus provides us with psychological explanations of the protagonists' behavior and displays a logical progression of events unfolding on the basis of the two women's feelings towards one another.

2) The second aspect of interest is how the two adversaries argue their case at court. Mrs. A states in her prosecution speech that Ninkuzu and she quarreled (ll. 161-62 // 169-71), but implies that Ninkuzu went too far when she called her a whore, since this caused her – Mrs. A's – husband to demand a divorce.¹⁵ In other words, she appeals to the rule that in a verbal contest one should consciously exaggerate insults to mark them as “ritual” or “non-personal,” and thus prevent fatal misunderstandings and an escalation of conflict. As a matter of fact, she had announced her strategy of uttering false, i.e. “ritual,” accusations already in the initiation of the debate: “From now on I will make use of my falseness.”¹⁶

Ninkuzu in her defense (ll. 182-85) also stresses that they had a mutual fight, but points out that Mrs. A – unlike herself – took the insults personally: “She spoke to me: I didn't take it to heart. I spoke to her: she was dumbstruck (and) took it to heart.”¹⁷ She thus tries to downplay the slander and put the blame on Mrs. A for not knowing how to comport herself in a disputation. Interestingly, the judge does not seem to take Ninkuzu's attempt at self-defense

¹⁴ The introductory part of the text seems to allude to a certain conflict-laden pre-history. While Mrs. A seems to be greatly annoyed by Ninkuzu's arrival (possibly at Mrs. A's own house), which surfaces in her irritable initiatory question “Where are you coming from again?!” (2WB 1: **me-ta-am₃ am₃-di-di-in**), Ninkuzu states a few lines later: “You have *used violence* (before), (but) I have paid you back. (Still,) I cannot sleep because of you” (2WB 4: **a₂ mu-e-a-AK šu-bi na-ri-ge₄ u₃ ba-ra-ra-ku-ku-un**).

¹⁵ 2WB 161-62 // 169-71: **me e-ne-gen₇ in mu-un-tub₂ / kar-ke₄ ma-an-du₁₁ (/) dam mu-un-taka₄** “We mutually insulted each other. (But) she called me a ‘whore’ (and thus) caused me to leave (my) husband.”

It is interesting to observe that she expressly states that she herself left her husband, although in reality she was repudiated by him. The logic behind this curious phrasing seems to be grounded in the fact that it was Mrs. A's alleged adultery that prompted the divorce, making her the (unintentional) initiator.

¹⁶ 2WB 6: **a-da-lam na-aĝ₂-lu₂-tu-mu-ĝu₁₀ al-ĝa₂-ĝa₂-ĝa₂-an**.

¹⁷ 2WB 182-85: **u₃-mu-un-ĝu₁₀ ĝe₂₆-e e-ne-bi du₁₄ i₃-AK-en-de₃-en / in in-gen₇ in-tub₂-tub₂-bu-(un)-de₃-en / e-ne ma-an-du₁₁ ša₃-še₃ nu-gid₂ / ĝe₂₆-e in-na-du₁₁ zu₂ ba-an-keše₂ ša₃-še₃ ba-an-gid₂** “My lord! Me and her, we had a fight. We exchanged insult with insult. She spoke to me: I didn't take it to heart. I spoke to her: she was dumbstruck (and) took it to heart.”

into consideration at all – possibly another instance of favoritism towards the ultimate winner, Mrs. A.¹⁸ Since Ninkuzu did not deny the slander as such, the judge accepts it as a fact that she called Mrs. A a whore – regardless of context. Now his only duty is to find out if Mrs. A is innocent of adultery or not, and if the divorce should consequently be annulled or compensated. This suggests that the unwritten “rule of ritual insults” to which Ninkuzu appeals, namely the one that says one should not react to insults, is not valid at court. Mrs. A’s strategy hence has been wiser, since she had indirectly appealed to the universal rule that one should not slander a person in any given context: neither in a verbal contest by means of “personal insults,” nor in real life. Ninkuzu’s rule, however, is no longer applicable, because the insult has long left the confines of the verbal contest and entered real life, where it has assumed a new dimension. By taking the matter to court, Mrs. A has both ended the disputation and assured that the issue will be settled by higher authorities. Therefore, the rule that the one who speaks the last speech wins the disputation does not apply to *2WB* – precisely because the dispute is not finished yet, but is continued in a different setting. Rather than losing the verbal contest, as one might have assumed by Mrs. A’s silence after Ninkuzu’s last speech, Mrs. A proceeds to win it on a higher level.

To sum up the first part of this study, I would like to distinguish the different functions of insults in *2WB*.

- 1) First, we have seen that certain insults were intended or perceived as “personal insults.” They determine the course of action, and provide information about the protagonists.
- 2) Related to them are allusions to the lawsuit and the outcome of the quarrel, which have been inserted for the information of the audience at various places in the introduction and the main part of the text.¹⁹
- 3) By contrast, the majority of insults and reproaches in the main part of the text aim at indirectly defining an ideal wife. These fall roughly within the category of “ritual insults,” and will be studied in the second part of the paper.

¹⁸ See, however, the remarks in n. 6.

¹⁹ For constraints of time, they have not been studied here. For an example, see the next footnote.

3. Form and Function of Insults in *Two Women B*

Before studying the form and function of the insults in the main part of the text, I would like to take one step back and look at the overall structure of *2WB* again, where one thing immediately becomes apparent. Although the entire text consists of nothing but direct speech, and contains no narrative passages whatsoever, the three parts of the text outlined in section 1 form three distinct units, both stylistically and with respect to content. This is also reflected on the layout of the tablets.

The first twelve lines of the introductory part consist of a series of quick provocations and rebuffs, aimed at initiating the dispute. In sometimes quite long and complex assertions and questions, the two women threaten and provoke each other, and twice – for the information of the audience – allude to the outcome of the dispute. Apart from possible asides to the audience,²⁰ the heated dialogue seems to go its natural course, and Mrs. A succeeds in drawing Ninkuzu into a quarrel. Once it becomes clear that Ninkuzu must submit to her rival's desire to fight, they transition to the main part, or the disputation proper, which is set off from the introductory scene by means of double rulings.

The main part of the text differs considerably from both the introduction and the conclusion. Each of the two contestants gets ten speeches of varying length, and they are again marked by double rulings. The study of the more regulated, or – if you will – ritualized disputation will comprise most of the remainder of the present paper.

In the final part, both longer speeches and shorter exchanges of words follow the protocol of a court case. However, it still resembles the introduction with its natural dialogues and longer, more complex sentences, and thus stands in contrast to the main part. As in the introduction, double rulings marking the different speakers are largely missing due to the natural flow of the discourse. Information about the identity of the speakers can be derived from appellations²¹ and the use or non-use of Emesal, a special socio- or genderlect of Sumerian, which in non-cultic literary compositions was restricted to female speakers.²²

²⁰ Cf. *2WB* 7-8: **tukum-bi na-aĝ₂-lu₂-tu-mu-zu ni₂ ba-e-ĝ[a₂-ĝ]a₂-ĝa₂-an / ze₄-e-me-en e₂-a(-)na(-)te-ĝe₂₆-en [n]a-aĝ₂-lu₂-tu-mu-ĝu₁₀ [x]-NE al-la₂-e** “If you yourself (want to) make use of your falseness, you’ll be the one who won’t be allowed to approach (your) house – (but) *she will charge me with mendacity.*” Ninkuzu obviously alludes to the repudiation of Mrs. A by her husband and the ensuing lawsuit, in which Mrs. A accuses Ninkuzu of slander. The change from direct address in the 2nd singular to the 3rd person singular could indicate that the second part of the prediction (here in italics) was intended as an aside to the audience.

²¹ The judge is addressed as “my lord” (**u₃-mu-un-ĝu₁₀** by female speakers in ll. 165 and 182; **lugal-ĝu₁₀** // *bēlī* by male speakers such as the herald in l. 176). The herald is called by his professional title **niĝir** // *nāgir* in ll.

As indicated above, the remainder of the paper will focus on the disputation proper in the main part of the text – the most striking feature of which, perhaps unexpectedly, is the lack of any characteristics of a dialogue. Instead, we find a multitude of impersonal expressions, mainly in the form of non-finite verbal forms and nominal phrases. If we do come across ‘complete’ sentences, they are mostly descriptions of the opponent phrased in the 3rd person singular – and not, as would be customary in a dialogue, direct addresses to the opponent in the 2nd. The designation of the disputations between women as “dialogues,” which is even found in the most recent overviews,²³ is therefore misleading and should be reconsidered.

Consider, for example, Mrs. A’s first speech (ll. 16-22):

**uru₂ niĝen₂ kar niĝen₂ e₂-e₂-a ku₄-ku₄
 e₂ in-ku₄-ra šu bi₂-in-si
 e₂-ba e-ne-eĝ₃ bi₂-in-tuku
 dam dam-da im-da-an-kur₂
 du₅-mu ama-da im-da-ri
 e₂-ge₄-a da ušbur-ra-na-ka du₁₄-da mu-ni-in-ku₄
 im-me(-a)-e₁₁-de₃-en**

Roaming the city, roaming the harbor, entering all houses!

Of the house *she* entered *she* took charge;

In this house *she* took over command.

Spouse *she* alienated from spouse;

The children *she* snatched from (their) mothers.

The daughter-in-law *she* made enter into conflict with her mother-in-law.

174 and 197. Ninkuzu is being addressed with her full name and patronymic in l. 207 (^I[ni]n-ku₃-zu □ dumu-munus lugal-nir □-ĝal₂). Finally, one of the two women ironically addresses her rival as “my dear neighbor” (ušur kal-la-ĝu₁₀) in l. 220.

²² The use of Emesal in Dumuzi’s speech in *Dumuzi-Innana H* 15-18, where he is instructing Innana about the “lies of women” (**lul-la munus-e-ne**), actually proves rather than contradicts this point, as he provides Innana with a ready-made excuse for her mother, using Emesal forms. The fact that Dumuzi knows Emesal and speaks it openly has important ramifications for a possible performance of *2WB*, as it shows that it was not taboo for men to speak Emesal or play the part of women (suggestion by P. Attinger; see also section 4). For *Dumuzi-Innana H* see Sefati 1998: 185-93 and Attinger 2010/2015.

²³ See, for instance, Rubio 2009: 58 and Volk 2012: 220f. § 10.1. Both designations ultimately go back to the terminology employed in M. Civil’s *Catalogue of Sumerian Literature*, a revised version of which can be found in Cunningham 2007. “*2WA*” likewise contains mainly impersonal expressions and descriptions in the 3rd person singular, but an in-depth analysis needs to await the comprehensive edition of the individual text segments.

For that reason (alone) you are already *defeated*!

While she sets the scene by means of general, non-finite phrases, she then describes the wrongdoings of her rival in a series of quick, succinct assertions, which display an inherent logical progression. From “all houses” the focus zooms in onto one specific house, at the center of which stands the married couple – mentioned in the center of the speech, l. 19. The focus then widens again and finally encompasses the in-laws, who assume their position at the periphery of the core family. The only direct address to Ninkuzu is found in the final line of the speech, in which Mrs. A presents herself as self-confident about her ultimate triumph before Ninkuzu has even uttered a word.

Mrs. A maintains this general structure of 1) general statement employing non-finite verbal forms, 2) concrete accusations in the form of complete, descriptive sentences, and 3) a concluding direct address to the rival even in shorter speeches, such as her third (ll. 40-43):

tu7 gu7 ĝešĝušur BIL2 u5 gu7 ka tal2
ame2 nu-mu-un-ge-en e2 a-ra2-še3 nu-mu-ĝar
dam-a-ni in-TAR gu-ne2 gu tab-ba li-bi2-in-tuku
ta(-a)-aš ša3-zu al-kur4

Devouring soup, burning (entire) timber beams, wasting oil, opening the mouth wide!
She hasn't administered the women's quarters reliably. *She* hasn't run the household properly.

She kept *her* husband short; *she* only let him have clothes of bad quality.²⁴

Why are you (then) so arrogant?!

and her fifth (ll. 61-65):

a si a lu3-lu3(-a) zi3 ar3-ar3-ar3-ar3-ra
in-us2 in-tur-tur in-ar3-ar3-...²⁵
i-ni-in-du8 i-ni-in-bil2-bil2
aĝ2 šu du11-ga-ni a-ra2-še3 nu-mu-un-ĝar
ma-ni-ib2-gi4-gi4(-gi4)-in

Drawing water, muddying water, grinding flour non-stop.

She pounded (the grain), *she* shredded it, *she* ground it.

²⁴ Literally: She did not let his thread have a double thread.

²⁵ Cf. X4 (MS 3228) rev. 7: **mu-na-ar3-ar3-ar3-ar3-ra**.

She wanted to bake (bread), (but) *she* burned it completely.

She hasn't ever done anything properly.²⁶

(Can) you answer me anything at all to that?

While the third speech contrasts Ninkuzu's greediness with the stinginess she shows her husband, the fifth speech sneers at her incompetence. Her frequent failures are aptly expressed through reduplicated verbal bases (**lu3-lu3**, **tur-tur**, **ar3-ar3**, **bil2-bil2**), lending additional weight to the allegations – they are the Sumerian equivalent of exaggerated modern reproaches containing adverbs such as “always,” “constantly,” etc. The quadruplication of the verbal base “to grind” (**ar3-ar3-ar3-ar3-ra**), however, not only highlights the repetitive, strenuous task, but also has onomatopoeic qualities, and was surely employed for comic effect.

By contrast, the speeches of Ninkuzu are stylistically far less coherent. She freely mixes complete and truncated sentences, and some of her speeches even consist of nothing but non-finite verbal forms and nominal phrases without copula.

Compare, for instance, her first speech (ll. 23-28), where the use of phrases and complete sentences seems comparatively unsystematic, although she undeniably employs several interesting metaphoric expressions for alleging theft.

mu-zuh e2-a-na ur ġešSUG-da-na
še-en-ka6 ġe bešeġ-a-na šu-HA-da ba-an-du8
mu-KEŠ2 du9-du9 šu urin-(n)a an-su3-a
e2-kišeb-ba du8-du8 e2-a saġ-e mu-te-te
ġeškun4 ġešbala-gen7 e2-a ga-ga-ga
u4-da-am3 su ba-e-sis

Robber of *her* own house! Dog of *her* own trough!

Mongoose of *her* own basket – *she* has heaped up the (catch) of the fisherman (in it)!²⁷

Rocking the ..., (her) hand has been besmirched with blood.

Opening the storehouse; *she* repeatedly approached the slaves in the house.

Always bringing the ladder instead of the spindle into the house.²⁸

²⁶ Literally: She has not put the thing she touched on its (right) path.

²⁷ Since mongooses are portrayed as hungry and greedy in Sumerian literature (compare, e.g., the Sumerian proverbs SP 1.9, SP 8 sect. B 36, and SP 10.12 in Alster 1997), the idea could be that she ate the contents of her basket and then filled it up with the fisherman's catch, which again would imply theft.

Now you are vexed by this!²⁹

Ninkuzu's seventh speech (ll. 103-109), by contrast, contains next to no complete verbal clauses. The use of short phrases in quick progression documents an increasing loss of self-composure. The use of two enclitic demonstratives (**ka-bi** "this mouth" in l. 105; **gar3-bi** "this slave hairstyle" in l. 108) moreover suggests that she accompanied her rant with wild pointing gestures.

She rages at her rival as follows:

ni2-su-ub mu-lu e11-□de3 al² □-e11-de3 bala-bala
ka kur2 igi bala lu2 aĝ2-erim2-ma
in tub2-tub2-bu e-ne-eĝ3 ka-bi šub-ba
ga-ab-du11 ga-ba-gaz šaha2 mu-ge ur-gi7 lu2 tar-tar-re
ka sun7-na bala-bala al-IGI-IGI du5-mu lu2 nu-zu
gar3-bi e-ne-eĝ3 ba-ab-be2
in tub2-tub2-bu-ĝu10-gen7-nam ba-de-eĝ3-en

Lunatic, completely crazy imbecile, turning everything topsy-turvy!

Mouth changer, eye roller, person of evil!

Insulter! The word in *this* mouth is 'discarded.'

Informant, murderer, pig from a canebrake! Dog putting people to flight!

Uttering arrogant words, she is restless; a bastard child!

This slave hairstyle is being addressed.

(Can) you invent something like my insults?!

Ninkuzu's tendency to get carried away, and her incapability of composing her speeches as coherently as her rival, however, also becomes apparent in her fifth speech (ll. 66-73), which – on the surface – looks less intemperate than her seventh. However, it is the only speech that consists exclusively of complete sentences, and it is the only speech in which the audience is being addressed throughout, as Ninkuzu forgets that she should turn to her rival and speak to her directly in the concluding line.

ki-še-er nu-tuku na-aĝ2-munus-e la-ba-DI(sa2)/du7

²⁸ This line seems to contrast the expected care for the family by means of textile work (symbolized by the spindle) with the actual robbery of her own household (symbolized by the ladder, with which she can access things beyond her reach). Alternatively, the ladder could have been used to climb to the roof of the house in order to rest and hide from work.

²⁹ Literally: Now (your) flesh is bitter because of it.

siki nu-mu-un-da-peš₆-e ^{ĝeš}bala nu-mu-un-da-nu-nu
kiĝ₂-e šu nu-mu-un-da-sa₂ ku₄-ku₄ e₃-de₃ (a-)ab-la₂
e-sir₂-ra u₃-ba-gub in al-tub₂-tub₂-bu
ka-tar-ra un-bala ĝiri₃ KU ...
pu-uh₂-ru-um-še₃ an/un-us₂ mu-un-zi₂-id-e-ne
u₃-um-gur teš₂ nu-tuku □di ku₅-ru[?] □-me-en zu₂ al-bar₇-re
in-na-am₃ mu-un-tub₂-tub₂-be₂-en

She knows no limit; *she* is not fit for womanhood.³⁰

She cannot comb wool, *she* cannot operate a spindle.

Her hand can't keep up with *her* work: (the minute *she's*) entered, (*she's* already) leaving. (The result) is of poor quality.

Whenever *she's* standing on the street, *she* insults.

Whenever *she* has inversed praise, [...].

Whenever *she* has turned to the assembly, they will beat her.

Whenever *she* has contested the verdict,³¹ *she* (says) shamelessly: "I'm the one who renders the verdict," (and) laughs.

This is the insult I utter about her.

Since the second part of the speech alludes to Mrs. A's improper behavior at court, it possibly informs the audience about events yet to come.³² Incidentally, most allusions to the outcome of the quarrel are phrased as complete sentences, and all of them are describing the actions of the rival to a third party. One reason for this might be that they fall into the category of 'concrete accusations,' which are generally expressed in full sentences. Indeed, there is a certain pattern according to which non-finite verbal forms and nominal phrases on the one hand and complete sentences with finite verbal forms on the other are being used, clearly showing that content determines style.

Non-finite verbal forms and nominal phrases are suitable for:

permanent conditions, such as:

³⁰ Thus N₁₄, N₂₁ and U₃ (**du**₇). K₁, N₈ and X₄ write **sa**₂: "she has not (yet) reached womanhood."

³¹ Literally: when she returns.

³² Since the final part of the text contains several lacunae, this is, however, not entirely clear and no correspondences between reproaches and actual events described in the final part can be identified with certainty. Considering that it is the 'loser' Ninkuzu speaking, some of the apparent predictions could also be wrong (for instance, in l. 191 the judge orders Ninkuzu to be flogged and not Mrs. A).

- character traits
e.g. 2WB l. 58: **aĝ₂-kur₂ du₁₁-du₁₁ ka lul-la bala-bala** “constantly uttering hostilities, always telling lies”; **hulu de-ĝa₂ nu-ga nu-nus-e-ne** “evil one, unworthiest of women”
- physical characteristics
e.g. 2WB l. 139: **saĝ-du kur₄ siki šal** “square head (but) thin hair”
- status in society
e.g. 2WB l. 45: **lu₂ kiĝ₂-ša₄ (a-)AK ... mu uku₂-re-ne** “lowly worker, offspring of paupers”

as well as

- repeated actions
often expressed by means of multiple verbal bases: e.g. 2WB l. 61: **zi₃ ar₃-ar₃-ar₃-ar₃-ra** “grinding flour non-stop”

Finite verbal forms are suitable for:

- concrete accusations
e.g. 2WB l. 67: **siki nu-mu-un-da-peš₆-e ĝeš^{eš}bala nu-mu-un-da-nu-nu** “She cannot pluck wool, she cannot operate a spindle.”
- descriptions of a logical sequence of actions
e.g. 2WB ll. 62-63: **in-us₂ in-tur-tur in-ar₃-ar₃-... / i-ni-in-du₈ i-ni-in-bil₂-bil₂** “She pounded (the grain), she shredded it, she ground it. / She wanted to bake (bread), (but) she burned it completely.”

4. Conclusion

Comparing the composition of Mrs. A’s deliberate and well-structured speeches with Ninkuzu’s less coherent and more intemperate ones, one can arrive at a set of rules governing form and style of 2WB:

1) Accusations and insults should generally be phrased as descriptions of the rival in the 3rd person singular and thus only indirectly be addressed to her.

The insults and reproaches are aimed at both informing the audience and influencing their opinion on the respective opponent negatively. At the same time, the indirect mode of communication between the two contestants hardly allows for direct replies or attempts at

defending oneself against accusations and slander, since the affected person only *overheard* what her rival told the audience. However, with the comparatively rare, but nevertheless systematic direct addresses to the rival, the contestants do acknowledge each other's presence, and thus *want* their opponents to overhear their scathing remarks.³³ In the case of *2WB*, the only way of winning the favor of the audience is by fighting back in the same manner. As a result, only the contestant who can denigrate her rival most convincingly will triumph in the end.

2) Speeches should consist of a balanced choice of complete sentences and succinct phrases.

Ideally, a speech should begin with a more general or abstract remark using non-finite verbal forms or nominal phrases, and proceed with more concrete accusations in the form of complete sentences. Short phrases with multiplied verbal bases can be used effectively, as we have seen in the example of **zi3 ar3-ar3-ar3-ar3-ra** "grinding flour non-stop," but long sequences of short insulting expressions at the expense of complete, coherent sentences are a mark of bad style.

3) The last line, or 'punchline,' of a speech must be phrased in the 2nd person singular and thus directly addressed to the opponent.

While the 'punchline' can be used to deliver a fatal blow, sum up the argument, provoke the rival further, make statements about the disputation performed so far, or settle the power relations between the two speakers to the detriment of the opponent, the direct address also fulfills the discourse-structuring role of regulating the *turn-taking*.³⁴ By finally turning to face the rival and addressing her directly, the speaker signals that her speech has ended and invites her rival to take her turn.

Out of these three rules, at least the first seems to be specific to *2WB* ("*2WA*" still awaits in-depth analysis in this regard). The Sumerian precedence disputations in particular contain far more direct accusations and insults in the 2nd person singular. However, this need not be altogether surprising, since they seem to have been composed for the entertainment of an audience who is invited to observe which of the complementary, non-human contestants can

³³ Incidentally, this seems to fit the concept of "dropping remarks" on the Barbados described by Irvine (1993: 127), who observed: "The target is supposed to overhear what is said but, being excluded from the conversation, cannot easily protest."

³⁴ For turn-taking see, e.g., Sachs et al. 1974.

prove their greater utility. In other words: there the joy lies primarily in sitting back and watching, without the immediate urge to judge fellow human beings and contemplating what lesson can be learned for one's own conduct. By this, I do not at all want to exclude the possibility that the precedence disputations also teach moral values, which they certainly do. It just seems to be a little less pronounced than in the disputations between male students and women, as the identification with non-human protagonists is less straight forward. In any case, the fact that the two protagonists of *2WB* systematically avoid addressing each other directly during the actual verbal contest unless they utter their final 'punchlines,' speaks against classifying the main part of the text as a dialogue. Instead, the speeches are designed to inform the audience about the misconduct of the respective rival.

Moreover, the different styles of the disputation proper on the one hand, and the introduction and conclusion on the other, had a direct effect on the audience. While the natural dialogue and interaction between the speakers at the beginning and the end of the text force them into the role of a passive observer, the direct address to the audience in the main part invites them to form an opinion on the two contestants, and lets them assume the role of a judge. This invitation to active mental participation also strengthens the didactic purposes of the text: the audience as a moral judge is indirectly encouraged to lead moral lives themselves. The exaggerated nature of the "ritual" insults and allegations in particular makes it easy to condemn the behavior of the protagonists, and the condemnation of the protagonists by the audience should henceforth prevent them from committing similar lapses in return.

But who was the audience? All we know for sure is that the *2WB* had its 'Sitz im Leben' in the Old Babylonian school. It is attested on over 60 exercise tablets from the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE, copied out by students in the advanced stage of the curriculum. Moreover, we have seen the text's immense didactic potential: teaching students rhetoric, the specific socio- or genderlect spoken by female protagonists in Sumerian literature, the characteristics of an ideal wife, and the procedure of a lawsuit in all its different stages. Furthermore, striking similarities with the Sumerian school disputations in terms of content and structure,³⁵ combined with the fact that girls rarely enjoyed a scribal education,³⁶ make male authors and a predominantly male audience very likely. In other words: despite the fact

³⁵ For an assessment of the similarities between Sumerian disputations between women and those between male students, see Matuszak *in press*.

³⁶ The scarce evidence for girls learning how to read and write in the Old Babylonian period has been assembled by Lion and Robson 2005.

that the text features two housewives as its main protagonists, it was probably written by male teachers for mainly male students. Finally, since the manuscripts we have stem from a time when Sumerian was no longer spoken, the relevance and accessibility of the text outside of the school, where Sumerian was learned as a dead language, was probably negligible. However, it is precisely the lack of natural dialogue between the protagonists in the main part, presupposing an audience as the real addressee of the speeches, which constitutes the most important indicator that the text had at least the *potential* to be performed on stage.³⁷ It therefore seems legitimate at least to *entertain the idea* of a scholastic stage production, enacted by schoolboys, of the fateful dispute between Mrs. A and Ninkuzu, the incompetent and infertile housewife, who is convicted for her jealous slander of the competent and fertile Mrs. A, who – understandably – took the insults to heart.

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³⁷ Further indicators are the use of demonstratives, which could have been accompanied with pointing gestures (already mentioned in section 3), as well as changes of scene (from Mrs. A's house, where the dispute likely took place, to the meeting place of the city assembly in the final part of the text) and gaps in the text that needed to be filled with gestures in order to ensure a logical progression of events. Despite the text-immanent evidence suggesting that the text could have been performed, external evidence is lacking. A comprehensive assessment, taking into account previous studies by van Dijk 1953: 76, Römer 1990: 22, Wilcke 2012 and Mittermayer 2014: 218f., can be found in Matuszak 2017, chapter 4.2.

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