CHAPTER TWO

ICONICITY AND GRAMMATICALIZATION

2.0. This chapter discusses the phenomena of iconicity - a concept originating from semiotics - and grammaticalization, and their relevance to Akkadian. It argues that in Akkadian gemination has an iconic nature, i.e., it reflects an extension in the meaning of the word as compared to the meaning of the corresponding simple word, and that where this is not readily observable this iconic nature has been eroded by a process of grammaticalization. Thus these two concepts are of fundamental importance to a correct understanding of the role of gemination in Akkadian.

2.1. Iconicity

2.1.1. Iconicity and arbitrariness

In semiotics\(^1\) an icon is a non-arbitrary sign which expresses a formal or factual similarity between the shape of the sign and what it stands for (the signans and the signatum). As such it is opposed to an index and a symbol. An index is based on a material relation (factual, existential contiguity) between signans and signatum (e.g. smoke is an index of fire). Examples of indexes in language are deictic elements and the expressive extensions to be discussed in 2.2.3 (see Lyons 1977: 106ff; Jakobson 1990: 386ff). A symbol is based on a conventional relation between signans and signatum, which has to be learned; a symbol is by definition arbitrary (see below). This triple division of the sign goes back to the founder of semiotics, C.S. Peirce, cf. Jakobson 1990: 408ff.

On the basis of this, elements in language which reflect in their form or structure the form or structure of their referents can be called iconic.

There are three kinds of icons, each of which plays a different role in language (cf. Ullmann 1962: 81ff). The first kind is the image: an image is an icon in which the "signans represents the 'simple qualities' of the signatum" (Jakobson 1990: 412). A picture, for instance, is an image of what it represents. In language onomatopoeic words are images: they represent natural sounds (phonetic iconicity), but are not exact reproductions of them: Anttila (1989: 14f) insists that onomatopoeic words are not completely iconic: their partly symbolic character is apparent from the fact that the same sound is rendered differently in different languages. The second kind is the metaphor, in which the similarity is based on a parallelism in meaning (semantic iconicity).

The third and for language most important kind of icon is the diagram: a diagram is a
complex sign, in which there is a correspondence between the different parts of the sign and those of the concept it represents (Haiman 1985: 9ff), or in which "the relations in the sign-nans correspond to the relations in the signatum" (Jakobson 1990: 412). The different parts of the diagram themselves may be, and indeed usually are, symbolic. A stock example quoted by Jakobson (1990: 412) is "two rectangles of different size which illustrate a quantitative comparison of steel production in the United States and the USSR (cf. Anttila 1989: 16)."

Since language is a network of relations on different levels (between words in syntax, between morphemes in morphology, between phonemes in phonology) diagrams play an essential role in it. Especially syntax and morphology abound in diagrammatic relations. Those in syntax mostly concern word order, such as the fact that events tend to be described in the order in which they occur, that what is more important or less predictable tends to be expressed with more coding material, and that elements which belong together tend to be placed together (cf. Haiman 1985; Givón 1990: 966ff).

Diagrammatic relations also play an important role in morphology. A very general diagrammatic phenomenon is the tendency to assign zero morphemes to basic, unmarked categories and explicit morphemes to marked ones (Matthews 1991: 234ff). Thus, plural forms tend to be longer than the corresponding singulars; in many Indo-European languages the superlative consists of more morphemes than the comparative, and the comparative of more morphemes than the positive: *high-higher-highest, altus-altior-altissimus, haut-plus haut-le plus haut* (Jakobson 1990: 414f; Haiman 1985: 4ff; Anttila 1989: 17).

It is evident that iconicity clashes with the arbitrariness of language, which, since Saussure, has been regarded as one of its "design features" (Lyons 1977: 70f). However, even Saussure himself, while advocating the fundamental arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, acknowledges signs which are "relativement motivé" (1964: 180ff; cf. also Ullmann 1962: 80ff; Lyons 1977: 105; Jakobson 1990: 415ff; Haiman 1985: 14f). These signs can be analysed, and to a certain extent their meaning can be inferred from their constituent parts. For instance, whereas a numeral like *vingt* "twenty" is unmotivated (arbitrary), *dix-neuf* "nineteen" is motivated since it consists of the (in themselves arbitrary) elements *dix* and *neuf; berger* "shepherd" is unmotivated, but *vacher* "cowherd" is motivated by its association with *vache* "cow". Likewise, plural forms as English *ships or houses* are also motivated in so far as the suffix -*s* is for speakers of English easily identifiable as a plural marker.

Such motivated words show diagrammatic iconicity: although their constituent parts are arbitrary, their combination makes them analysable and, to a certain extent, predictable in meaning.

The examples given above show how important the role of motivation is, especially in morphology. A regular morphological rule results in motivated words; such words are more economic and more transparent than unmotivated ones: more economic because they do not have to be learned and stored in memory as separate entities, but can be derived by means