

“TO SPEAK KINDLY TO HIM/THEM” AS ITEM OF ASSYRIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Mio caro Simo, this small contribution is to celebrate some thirty-five years of great friendship and cooperation, and especially to recall a memorable meeting for the founding of the SAA among the wind, clouds and far-off waves of Helsinki, together with our friend JNP and our Teacher KHD, in 1986. For the future, I trust you and I will a thousandfold more joyfully exclaim “Look at the sea!” in your tongue – toasting to Assyria at sunset on the Baltic or on the Adriatic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political speech has, in all times and places, had its particular keywords, which often stem from the general and commonly understandable layers of language, but which are made to assume specific idiomatic connotations – denser, deeper, or wider – in relation to the circumstances of their application. Long-standing research on political lexicography of ancient and modern statehood has brought to light the many shifts to which particular terms were subjected over time, in relation to changing political circumstances and intended audiences: it may suffice to ponder on the term “democracy” in its many nuances throughout the present-day world to gain a preliminary idea. In research on the Neo-Assyrian period, political lexicography has, to a certain extent, been investigated as regards the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions (ARI), in their quality as official utterances of the Empire; but hardly at all on the corpus of the *State Archives of Assyria* (SAA).

Now, the texts of the SAA may be safely dubbed “everyday texts” – as they usually are – in the sense that they appear to have been made out on any possible day of the week, month, or year. On the other hand, if the aim of this label were that of underscoring a total and irreconcilable opposition in the quality of political discourse between these texts and the ARI, it would prove to be – at least in part – a misnomer. In point of fact, many of the SAA documents had implications for official policy-making in their own right, although they employed textual stylemes/modules not tied to the literary tradition, and which reflected – instead – the day-to-day linguistic variety of Neo-Assyrian, so as to be readily understandable both to the army officer in the far-off outpost and to the learned exorcist working in the

annex of the royal palace itself. Specifically, the letters traded between courtiers and the Assyrian king – which make up the majority of all NA epistolography, and thus form a large body within the overall SAA corpus – show the presence of a number of recurring expressions made of common terms in particular combinations: these expressions may be surmised to belong to a jargon of concepts or attitudes commonly shared by senders and addressees in the sphere of policy-making. They thus appear to deserve specific research, to the aim of unveiling the deeper, denser, or wider, meanings regarding particular institutional elements or political postures that lay beneath them.

I already once attempted to penetrate this deeper level, in an essay on the expression *bēt bēli* in a number of letters to/from various Assyrian rulers, suggesting that it referred to an Assyrian institutional concept, with a common denominator “domain” (cf., merely as a random frame of reference, the implications of Latin *dominium*) as applied to landed property, or to provincial administration, or even to the imperial administration itself, depending on the specific context and time-frame in which it was used.¹ Having duly warned that my conclusions were provisional and open to discussion, I was pleased to receive a critical rejoinder, included within the introduction to a volume of the SAA series.² Less convincing, to my mind, were the authors’ views, which advocated the return to what was described as a “simpler interpretation”, i.e. to a pure and simple rendering as “the house(hold) of the lord” – with the underlying implication that a sort of “fuzzy logic” should be preferably taken into account for the use of such “native” Assyrian ideological concepts, rather than positing – in view of the still limited evidence available to us – that the authors of letters might have had more specific institutional realities in mind.

If such a line of thought were to be considered the prevailing one, then, it would be probably advisable not to pursue investigation into such recurring expressions any further. On the other hand, it may be useful to recall that we modern interpreters are, some 2,600 years after the events, in the unique position of “peeping through the keyhole” as an unintended audience to a dense and intense correspondence which was in any case concerned with the conquest, consolidation, and maintenance of the first “world empire”. And one should perhaps also note that the overall historical image of Assyria – a polity which is still nowadays “essentialized” as utterly militaristic and ruthless³ – might benefit to some extent from an in-depth investigation into the many and interrelated political and institutional concepts and

¹ Fales 2000a.

² Luukko & Van Buylaere, Introduction to SAA 16: XL–XLII.

³ There is no possibility for me to go into this extremely rich, productive, and controversial theme on the present occasion, on which I am preparing specific critical contributions. For the moment, I can only refer to the very satisfying historical-cultural survey by Frahm 2006, although I do not share its somber conclusions. For a recent example of “essentialization” of Assyria in neo-Orientalist terms – albeit, quite surprisingly, penned by one of the most competent present-day experts on Neo-Assyrian – cf. Fuchs 2005.

practices which constituted its foundational elements. Perhaps, then, the problem merely lies in clarifying from the outset the methodologically varying outcomes which may result from research on the matter. While there is usually no particular doubt concerning the basic interpretation of these expressions – after all, they were written out in the letters so that the receiving party could understand them with no hesitancy – further curiosity may well urge the historian to seek out, beneath the primary linguistic level, possible secondary planes of interpretation as regards the semantic range of their application, in relation to particular historical-political contexts and situations, with the ultimate aim of making such expressions more meaningful to us.⁴

In this light, then, I believe that it remains worthwhile to continue on the aforesaid line of investigation. In this contribution, I will tackle the expression *dibbī ṭābūti issīšu(nu) dabābu*, or similar expressions (e.g. with *šapāru*, etc.), which means “to speak kindly to (*lit.*, kind words with) him/them”. This expression is to be found in a small sampler of letters, either directly authored by the Assyrian rulers, or bearing *verbatim* quotes of his commands, or even describing actions which are considered to be authorized by the king himself. Many of the relevant attestations are, unfortunately, quite fragmentary, thus leaving various doubts as regards the general political context in which the clause under examination should be framed; thus, while quoting all cases known to me, I will restrict a detailed analysis to the better intelligible occurrences.

Even with these limitations, I believe that a preliminary result may be reached. In the following pages, I suggest that *dibbī ṭābūti issīšu(nu) dabābu* represented an item of political “shorthand”, used to describe the Assyrians’ institutional and economic takeover and/or control, through non-violent means, of a foreign polity – in other words, the imposition of *pax assyriaca* over political units lying in various ways “beyond” the institutional borders of the Assyrian provincial system.

2. THE EVIDENCE

The two earliest attestations⁵ of the clause *dibbī ṭābūti issīšu(nu) dabābu* derive from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III. The earliest example is that of the well-known letter from Phoenicia, ND 2715⁶, written by Qurdi-Aššur-lamur, possibly the governor of Šimirra,⁷ to be dated around 734 BC. As a rejoinder to the king’s command – quoted at the outset of the letter – concerning the king of Tyre, “Speak kindly to him” (l. 4:

⁴ In somewhat the same way as we try, on a daily basis, to make sense of, or read behind, the “fuzzy logic” with which the term “democracy” is used by blatantly non-democratic leaders.

⁵ I am very grateful to one of the Editors of this volume, Dr. Mikko Luukko (Helsinki – Verona) for his kind aid in cross-listing for me the available evidence for the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause, and for a friendly discussion of a number of implications of the clause itself.

⁶ Most recent edition: Saggs 2001: 155–158 (= NL 12).

⁷ Cf. PNA 3/I: 1021–1022.

DUG₄.DUG₄ : KI-šú lu DÜG.GA), the governor proceeds to describe a highly functional state of affairs, in which the people of Tyre are free to occupy the wharves on the Mediterranean, enter and leave the warehouses, conduct their business, ascend and descend Mount Lebanon, bringing down timber, on which the governor has taxes levied. In sum, Assyrian-appointed tax inspectors are said to be operating all over the Lebanon range, controlling the harbors (ll. 5–14).⁸

The second letter ND 2603⁹, by an unknown Assyrian official (but surely of high rank), stems instead from the Babylonian context of conflict during the years 732–730. In the letter, the king is apprised of hostile plottings on the part of Mukin-zeri of Bit-Amukkanni. This Chaldean chief had written to Marduk-apla-iddina (= Biblical Merodach-baladan) of Bit-Yakin, praising him as one of the most influential leaders of the Chaldeans, and urging him to enter into a common anti-Assyrian alliance; in the same breath Balassu, head of Bit-Dakkuri, was accused of being a rival, who could have brought the Chaldeans to a dire fate. The tablet bearing this message, however, was intercepted and conveyed to the author of the present letter, who was stationed (presumably with a part of the Assyrian army) near Balassu. The latter chieftain, upon hearing the words of the letter, showed signs of great worry, for fear that Mukin-zeri, being the son of his sister, could wreak havoc on his land, if he did not accept to enter into the planned alliance. At this point, as the author relates to the king, *d]i-^rib²-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ *i-si-šú ni-du-bu-ub* (r.5), “we spoke kindly to him”, and Balassu was urged to go to the aid of the people of Larak, as previously agreed.

Sargon’s reign has bequeathed to us the greatest number of cases for the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause. Two distinct but equally interesting ones are to be found in ND 2759 (SAA 1 1), penned by the king himself and sent to Aššur-šarru-ušur, the governor of Que.¹⁰ As for the first case, the king had received a previous report from his governor in the Cilician region, relating that a secret embassy sent by Urikki,

⁸ It is interesting to note that Qurdi-Aššur-lamur does not provide here a straightforward, “one-on-one”, answer to the king’s injunction to utter *dibbī ṭābūti* to the foreign ruler, as other officials of later periods will do. Should we perchance understand that only the initial words of a much longer and complex original message by Tiglath-pileser were quoted here on purpose – perhaps as a mere mnemotechnical device for the royal addressee? As a further item of interest, we may note that a certain substance for the implications of the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause is provided by the stern threats which – in the next part of the letter – the governor reports to have made to the less submissive Sidonians, who had chased away their tax-inspector: “Bring down the lumber, perform your work on it, (but) do not deliver it to the Egyptians or Philistines, or I shall no more let you ascend the mountain” (Obv. 24–29). This opposition between “kind” and “harsh” words as integrated instruments of a full diplomatic technique finds a full theorization in a later letter by Assurbanipal, ABL 571 (see below).

⁹ Most recent edition: Saggs 2001: 25–26 (= NL 5). See also the commentary and the reconstruction of the chronological context by Fales 2005: 176.

¹⁰ The date and detailed political context of this letter are disputed: while the majority of scholars (e.g. Postgate 1973b, Muscarella 1998 [but 1987]) would date it to 709 BC on the basis of the information in the ARI, Lanfranchi (1988) suggested a date around 715 BC.

the ruler of Que, was proceeding toward Urartu for the purpose of anti-Assyrian alliance, but the group of 14 men was intercepted by Mitâ of Muški (= Phrygia) who turned them over to Aššur-šarru-ušur himself. This treacherous act on Mitâ’s part is received by Sargon with great joy:

My gods Aššur, Šamaš, Bel and Nabû have now taken action, and without a battle [or any]thing, the Phrygian has given us his word and become our friend! (SAA 1 1:7–10).

At this point, Aššur-šarru-ušur had asked the king for orders on how to cope concretely with the new situation of amity, which represented a full reversal on previous relations with Muški.¹¹ Should an envoy of the Assyrians be detached to the Phrygian court? Sargon’s reply on the matter is unequivocal: the peace process, once begun, must be “kept warm” with all usual diplomatic means for the immediate future:

I am now writing to (tell) you that you should never separate your envoy from the presence of the Phrygian (king).¹² You, write kindly to him (*dib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ *šup-ra-áš-šú*) and listen constantly to news about him (*ka-a-a-ma-nu mi-i-nu ša tē-en-šú-ni ši-m[i]*), until I have more time. (SAA 1 1:12–15).

The letter then goes on to deal with problems concerning two petty rulers of the Cilician area (Kilar, Urpala’a). A further case is that of one *B[a²-*, who had written to the governor – possibly to declare belatedly his obeisance to the king, after having been separated from his people.¹³ However as this may be, Sargon grants this individual’s son the right to be at the head of “his men”, and to take –obviously as an already pacified group – possession of specific territories in which to settle, either over the Taurus range or in lower Cilicia itself. Regarding the older chief, having heard his plea attentively, the king orders him to be brought into his very presence, where – Sargon says – “I will speak kindly to him and encourage him” (r.25–26; *dib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ *is-si-šú la-ad-bu-ub / lib-bu la-áš-kun-šú*¹⁴), even with

¹¹ The expression *a-na sal-mi-ni it-tu-ar* may, in fact, be literally understood as “has turned toward peace with us”.

¹² Obv. 13–14: LÚ*.A-šip-ri-ka TA* *pa-an* KUR.mus-ka-a-a / lu l[a t]a-bat-taq. This expression would seem to imply some urgency, in view of the fact that no actual *adê* with Mitâ had been yet formalized, and that Urikki could thus still attempt to regain the Phrygian’s favour. At least, this is the impression to be gained by comparing it with SAA 15 90:24–25 (for which cf. below), where a similar clause is applied by the Assyrian governor to the people of Zabgaga, who were in the process of swearing an *adê*, albeit under the condition that their city-lord be returned to them as their leader: *a-na* DI-mu [L]Ú.A-KIN.MEŠ-ni-šú-[nu x x] / [TA* *pa-ni*]-ia la i-b[a]-tú-qu, “For peace’s sake, they should not separate the[ir] messengers [... from] my presence”.

¹³ The situation of *B[a²-* vis-à-vis his people might thus not have been initially different from that of the “son of Bel-iddina” in SAA 5 210, below, and of the city-lord of Zabgaga in SAA 15 90, below; in both these cases – as in the present one – Sargon appears to conduct separate dealings of submission with the “people” and with their (former) ruler.

¹⁴ Courtesy of M. Luukko, entrusted with the new edition of the *Nimrud Letters*, it may be noted that the sign *šú* is in fact visible in r.26.

an eye to sending him back to his “household” (r.27: *il-lak ina ē-šú*). The contextual situation cannot be more precisely reconstructed.¹⁵

A somewhat similar political situation to the one just described – that of a specific population group which had bowed down to Assyrian suzerainty, despite its own ruler’s rebellious attitude – is portrayed in the letter ABL 208 (SAA 5 210). In this text, the deputy governor of the eastern province of Mazamua, bordering on Media, copies out for Sargon a message received through an envoy from his superior, Šarrumuranni, concerning the well-disposed subjects of the (unyieldingly insubordinate) “son of Bel-iddina”, i.e. the heir of the king of Mazamua. The message runs as follows:

I have spoken kindly to the countrymen of the son of Bel-iddina (UN.MEŠ KUR / *ša DUMU* ^{md}EN–SUM-na / *dib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ *i-si-šú-nu* / *ad-du-bu-ub*). The son of Bel-iddina (himself) is a criminal and a traitor; he does not obey [the king’s orders. I told them]: ‘Do your work, each in [his house and] field, and be glad; you are now subjects of the king.’ (LÚ*.ARAD.MEŠ *ša LUGAL* / *at-tu-nu*) (SAA 5 210:10–r.7).¹⁶

We may now turn to the Zagros-western Iranian region, starting with two letters to be dated around 708–707 BC, authored by the governor of Kar-Šarrukin, Mannu-ki-Ninua, who had succeeded Nabû-beluka in the post. As well clarified in the introduction to the SAA edition by A. Fuchs, the new governor chose a particular policy for the renewal of the oaths of loyalty (*adê*) with the native rulers of the territories which encroached upon his province: instead of calling them together in the provincial capital for a common ceremony, he visited them himself in specifically chosen venues, receiving their individual reaffirmations of fealty to the Assyrian king.¹⁷

The procedures of these renewed oaths between the vassals and Assyria are outlined in ABL 129 (SAA 15 90). The envoys of the vassals (specifically in this letter, of the city Zabgaga) received purple garments and silver bracelets as ceremonial gifts; then the reciprocal obligations were spelled out for them: they were to stand by the new governor, and provide him with useful information on the enemy, in exchange for Assyrian military protection and a positive report made on them to the king – but in this specific case in terms of “good words, words of praise” (*dibbī damqūti*)¹⁸:

¹⁵ The same may be said for the letter CT 53 502 (SAA 1 2):4’-5’, in which we find the expression TA*] URU.ar-pad-da-a-a di-i’b’-[bi] / [DÜG.GA.MEŠ *d]u-ub-bu*, “Speak [kindly to] (the king[?!]) of Arpad” in a very fragmentary context; not even the royal authorship of the text may be unequivocally posited.

¹⁶ A further case from Sargon’s reign is that of CT 53 138 (SAA 5 106), in which the setting is that of Kumme, and an Assyrian royal delegate (*qēpu*), hated by the local population, is involved. The expression *di-ib-bi* [DÜG.GA.MEŠ] / [*is-si-šú-nu li]d-bu-bu* occurs, in a quite fragmentary context, in r.23’–24’.

¹⁷ Fuchs, Introduction to SAA 15: XXVI; and see XLI for the date.

¹⁸ For this use of *dibbī damqūti* (but also again *īābūti*), with verbs meaning “to speak” (*qabū*,

[Just] as [you] previo[usly stood at the dis]posal of Nabû-belû-ka”[in, found out wha]tsoever there was to report and [tol]d it to him, [in like] manner [stan]d now at my disposal and send me whatever news of the Medes you hear! I shall protect you just as Nabû-belû-ka”in protected you and shall speak good words of you before the king, my lord. ([a-n]a-ku a-na-šar-ku-nu ù di-ib-bi-ku-n[u] / [š]IGš¹.MEŠ ina pa-an LUGAL EN-a a-qa-ab-bi) (SAA 15 90:28–r.6)

The envoys of Zabgaga reply unequivocally that they will comply, since they are “the king’s subjects”.¹⁹ The governor then goes on to inform Sargon in brief on the state of affairs concerning another local polity (the name of which is lost: r.12–21). In this case, preliminary messages of amity have been traded, and the locals are now asking for the actual conclusion of an *adê*, to be sworn at a border town, since “we have made peace” (*ni-si-lim*, r.20). Mannu-ki-Ninua thus sums the situation up for the king:

[Now], then, I am speaking kindly [to] them ([ú-ma-a] an-nu-rig di-ib-bi DÜG.GA.MEŠ [is-se-e]-šú-nu a-da-bu-ub) until the king, my lord, [se]nds me further instructions. (SAA 15 90 r.21–23).

The second letter by Mannu-ki-Ninua to Sargon (ABL 1454 = SAA 15 91) is also of some interest, since the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause seems applicable both to former allies and to those who – once enemies – have now chosen to make peace with Assyria:

[Con]cerning the city-lords [about whom the king, my lo]rd, wro[te to me]: ‘Speak kindly t[o them]! (*ma-a di-ib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ ‘is¹-s[i¹-šú-nu] / ‘du¹-ub¹’-[bu]) Your friend and yo[ur enemy] should not be discriminated (*lu la pa-ri-si*). [Honour] the messengers of [NN] and of Amakani, and give [them ...]!’ – [...] the wish, and I shall give them [...]. Just as [they previously] vis[ited] Nabû-belû-ka”in, so let them now vi[sit] me. (SAA 15 91:14’–22’).²⁰

Other attestations of the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause from this general area regard the people of Kuluman, with whom Mannu-ki-Ninua had concluded an *adê*, as reported in the first of the two letters already quoted.²¹ In two more letters (ABL 1046 = SAA 15

dabābu), albeit with the pronominal suffix attached to the noun with objective value (“concerning you”) and the addition of *ina pāni* + the indication of the person to whom the “kind words” are uttered, see also ABL 914 = SAA 17 3:4–6, a Babylonian letter – again by Sargon – addressed to one Bulluṭu of Uruk: “Bel-iqiša, the prelate, speaks words of praise of you in my presence” (*dib-bi-ka* / [DÜG.G]A.MEŠ i-na pa-ni-ia / [i]-dab-bu-ub). That this expression of praise was also of concrete political worth, and that it may have been fully intended by the king to be a counterpart/consequence of the atmosphere of friendly relations and encouragement engendered by the act of “speaking of kind words to” the opposite party, might be shown by the fact that Sargon goes on, in the quoted letter, to urge Bulluṭu to send him his messengers, and to open the gate to the Assyrian army (SAA 17 3:16–r.3). See also the case of SAA 15 159, below, where the conveyance of the “kind words” of the Assyrians to third parties is foreseen.

¹⁹ LÚ*.ARAD.MEŠ ša LUGAL, r.11 in break.

²⁰ A further occurrence of *dibbī ṭābūti issīšumu dabābu* might also occur at the very beginning of this partially fragmentary text (Obv. 2’).

²¹ SAA 15 90:7–8.

95; CT 53 320 = SAA 15 96) the governor quotes an identical order by the king concerning the Kulumaneans: “Speak kindly to them!”²² Of some interest is the fact that, in one of the two cases, the Assyrian official reassures Sargon with the answer that “I regularly speak kindly to them” (*ka-a-a-ma-nu di-ib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ / *is-se-e-šú-nu a-da-bu-ub*: SAA 15 95:11’–12’).²³

Still from the age of Sargon, but presumably from a slightly earlier period (± 710 BC) three further cases regard the Babylonian region. In a fragmentary report to the king which later mentions Opis (ABL 608 = SAA 15 159), a certain individual is mentioned as being on the way to attend the royal review of troops. Sargon is therefore subjected to a bit of friendly political advice, involving the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause, by the unknown author.²⁴ The aim is that of persuading this person to go back home and spread goodwill for the Assyrians in his land and among “his brothers” – thus possibly, Aramean tribesmen who were in the process of passing over to Sargon’s side after having sided with Merodach-Baladan:²⁵

Now [then] he has gone with Aḫu-nuri to [meet] the king, my lord. The king, my lord, should speak kindly to him (LUGAL *be-lī dib-bi ṭa-bu-u-ti* / *i-se-e-šú lid-bu-bu*), and the king, my lord, should give him confidence (*lu-šar-hi-iš-su*), so that he will come back (here) and convey the kind words to the people of his land and his brothers (*dib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ ... *liš-kun*). (SAA 15 159:4’–11’).

As a second case, a sadly broken text (CT 53 277 = SAA 15 210) provides us with a glimpse at dealings – or attempts thereof – between the Assyrians and an individual (an envoy or a relative?) representing “the son of Zerī” – as the letters of the age often dub Merodach-Baladan himself. The sole part which is preserved implies that Sargon had encouraged contact with this person:

[Concerning the *envoy*] of the son of Zer[ī about whom the king, my lord], wrote to me: ‘Speak [kindly t]o him ([*dib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ *i*]-*si-šú du-ub-bu*); the [...] of yours, do not [...]’ (SAA 15 210: 4’–7’).

²² SAA 15 95:8’–12’; and the partly broken SAA 15 96 r.2’–4’. In any case, the remaining parts of both texts show that they were not mutual duplicates.

²³ A final case occurs in a fragmentary letter, which has been ranged with the former ones as deriving from the Kar-Šarrukin region because of the mention of Mazamua: CT 53 62 = SAA 15 104 r.14’–19’. Here an unknown individual (possibly a local chief) is reported to have come to the author (perhaps the governor?) with some worried queries regarding Našib-il (a name identical to that of the governor of Bit-Amukkanni: cf. PNA 2/II: 934a), although “[he spoke] kindly to me” (r.15’: *dib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ *is-si-i[a i-du-bu-ub]*). The author claims to have set his mind to rest (r.16’–17’: *ša-bu* / *a-sa-kan-šú*), saying “[F]ear not! I will go [to] the Palace [...]”. At the end, the king is apprised of the fact that the man is coming to see him in person.

²⁴ The author could have been Il-iada’, an official of high rank – and sometime governor – under Sargon (cf. PNA 2/I: 515b–516b), author of numerous messages from the northern Babylonian region. The *dibbī ṭābūti* clause in this text, uniquely construed as an advice to the king, lends a certain further support to this view.

²⁵ See the overall historical framework provided by Fuchs, Introduction to SAA 15: XVIII–XIX.

The third case is represented by a Babylonian letter (CT 54 39 = SAA 17 111), again quite fragmentary, in which Sargon is informed that one Kalbi-Ukûa²⁶ has left for the royal audience – possibly as a representative of a Southern Mesopotamian polity – where he is expected to show his acquiescence to Assyrian overlordship. In a further passage, the author of the report – who could have been Aqar-Bel-lumur, an official in charge of information on Bit-Yakin and other polities for Sargon – seems to comply with the king’s command to establish good relations with a local group, the name of which is lost:

I shall speak kindly t[o them, give them] orders²⁷, and make them confident (*ú-šar-ḥaš-su-nu-ti*²⁸). (SAA 17 111 r.8–10).

The seventh century BC presents an undoubtedly much lower ratio of attestations for the clause under examination – but the few cases available are of particular interest. Specifically, Esarhaddon’s reign has not bequeathed to us any epistolary occurrence of the full clause, including the verb(s) meaning “to speak”: however, the combination *dibbī ṭābūti* occurs in one of the many queries to the Sun-god – to be answered through extispicy – which were penned under this king, concerning the different ways by which a foreign fortified city could be taken and subjected to the Assyrians (PRT 11 = SAA 4 101). As has been convincingly shown by I. Eph’al²⁹, the group of queries with this particular subject-matter, when “collated” in their many different constituent clauses, provides us with a vast repertoire of all possible means employed by the Assyrians to conquer a foreign outpost (camp, town, city) – including peaceful means. This is where the *dibbī ṭābūti* option is quoted:

[Should Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, send NN with his me]n, ho[r]ses, and an army, as (great as) he wishes,...]? [If he sends him, should he with men, horses, and an army, (as great) a]s he wis[hes, go to take the city ..., and will he, be it] through friendly words (*lu-ú ina dib-bi ṭa-b[u-ti]*) [... or] by means of ramps, [or by means of battering-rams, or by ladder]s, [conquer that city,...]? Will it be delivered to him? (SAA 4 101:1’–8’).

This case, as said, is unique – as well as occurring in a quite fragmentary exemplar. It may be asked, however, whether much the same combination of terms should not be retrieved in various other similar queries which invoke, as non-violent means to obtain the enemies’ surrender, the parallel options of KA (OR DUG₄) DÜG.GA and *sa-lim/si-lim/sa-la-mi ṭu-ub-ba-a-ti*, “friendly utterance and amity of goodwill”.³⁰ In fact, recalling the graphemics of text ND 2715 quoted above, it might even be

²⁶ For the name, cf. PNA 2/I: 598a–b.

²⁷ Or possibly also: “[hear their] news” (Obv. 9: *ṭe-em a-[]*), where *šakānu* – as suggested in the SAA edition – is certainly possible, but *šemû* – as in SAA 1 1, above – might not be totally ruled out.

²⁸ Notice the use of the causative stem of *raḥāšu* A, “to make confident” (AEAD, 91b) as in SAA 15 159, above.

²⁹ Eph’al 1997.

³⁰ Cf. SAA 4, nos. 30, 31, 43, 44, 63, 102, 267, for the best-preserved cases.

suggested that KA/DUG₄DÜG.GA could have represented exactly *dibbī ṭābūti* in a very abbreviated form of logographic writing. If so, our sole outright exemplar would be paralleled by many other cases showing an entirely new scenario in which “kind words” could be spoken by the Assyrians to foreign polities – i.e., on the battlefield, or beneath the walls of the besieged city.

A final case of some interest derives to us from a Neo-Babylonian letter from Assurbanipal’s reign. In ABL 571, the king addresses a number of individuals who were presumably part (or representatives) of “the citizens of Babylon” during the difficult times of the war with Šamaš-šumu-ukin (652–648 BC).³¹ The ruler reminds the people of their formerly expressed intention to go before “their brothers” inside the city to plead for a shift of allegiance in favour of Assyria – especially taking account of the great danger that a negative outcome of their plea would pose for Babylon. To this aim, Assurbanipal urges these men to use any possible means of persuasion, whether with “kind” or “harsh” words; this passage thus provides a somewhat novel slant on our expression, implying that *dibbī ṭābūti* could have formed part and parcel of a complex set of diplomatic techniques set in place in order to accomplish the compliance of the counterpart:

If kind words (are in order), then speak (to them) kind words; if harsh words (are in order), then speak to them harsh words (*ki-i šá dib-bi* DÜG.GA.MEŠ *dib-bi* / DÜG.GA.MEŠ *du-ub-ba ki-i šá dib-bi* / *šep-šu-te dib-bi šep-šu-ú-te* / *it-ti-šú-nu du-ub-ba*). (ABL 571 r.9–12).³²

3. EVALUATION

As seen above, the expression *dibbī ṭābūti issīšu(nu) dabābu*, including all its variants and abbreviated formulations, shows a great vitality in 8th-century Assyrian epistolography, while – for reasons perhaps tied to the political circumstances themselves, or to the vagaries of the documentation at our disposal, or even due to varying choices of lexicon and style over time – it seems to be less productive in the subsequent period. The following chart attempts to shed light on the evidence previously discussed, by listing the recipients of *dibbī ṭābūti* with the area of their residence/operation, the temporal status of the good relations displayed by the texts (i.e., whether the evidence refers to an incipient relationship, to a long-standing one, or to none of the two), and finally the activities or attitudes which are said to be

³¹ Most recent analysis by Barjamovic 2004: 60; cf. also Parpola 2004: 229, for a translation.

³² Two further attestations in NB script may be quoted: in ABL 943:4, a grateful courtier writes king Assurbanipal that he has heard the *dib-bi ṭa-bu-tú šá* LUGAL EN-*ia*, but the context is fragmentary; in CT 54 49, a very fragmentary letter of which both the writer and addressee are unknown, r.5 runs as follows: *a-na-ku [x x di]b-bi ṭa-bu-tu DUMU-šú* [. Neither of these two cases would seem to be connected to the general semantic sphere investigated in this essay.

tied to the action of “speaking kind words”, both in parallel and as a consequence, and both on the part of the Assyrians or their counterparts.

TEXT – king	Recipients of “kind words” and their locale	Status of good relations	Related activities or attitudes
ND 2715 – Tp III	King of Tyre	consolidated	Economic control: Tyrians free to work, go in/out, up/down the Lebanon for timber industry, but taxes levied by Assyrians
ND 2603 – Tp III	Balassu of Bit-Dakkuri	consolidated	Renewed encouragement for alliance, urge to pro-Assyrian action in war
SAA 1 1 – Sg	Mitâ of Muški	fully initial	Presence of Assyrian envoys at M.’s court; monitoring of his movements; alliance in the making
SAA 1 1 – Sg	B[a, a ruler in Cilicia	initial	People submitted; to be (re) settled. Ruler encouraged.
SAA 5 210 – Sg	People of the “son of Bel-iddina” – Zagros	initial	People to be (re)settled; encouraged to rejoice, as subjects of the king
SAA 15 90 – Sg	People of ... – Kar-Šarrukin province	initial	People: preparation for an <i>adê</i> . Ruler: status uncertain.
SAA 15 91 – Sg	People of ... – Kar-Šarrukin province	fully initial	Gifts for foreign envoys; possible preparation for an <i>adê</i>
SAA 15 95 – Sg	People of Kuluman – Kar-Šarrukin province	consolidated	regularity in good relations
SAA 15 159 – Sg	Aramean tribal chief (?) – N. Babylonia	fully initial (?)	Encouragement; hope for the diffusion of Assyrian message of goodwill to his tribe
SAA 17 111 – Sg	Polity in S. Babylonia	initial	Encouragement
SAA 4 101 – Esh	any	theoretical	Submission as an alternative to violent reprisal against fortified city
ABL 571 – Asb	(indirectly), a group of Babylonian citizens	To be resumed	“kind” or “harsh” words of persuasion to Babylonian assembly to be used for submission, as alternative to violent reprisal against city

Three points may be essentially made out from this chart – in some correspondence with the contents of the three columns to the right. The first point is that all the foreign groups or polities involved seem to be tied to the Assyrian state through clientship, vassalage, or alliance in wartime, but in any case through political or institutional relations which differ from that of a full-fledged incorporation into the Empire. Tyre in the mid-8th century was an independent state with a philo-Assyrian policy³³; the city-lords on the fringes of the Eastern provinces of the empire or the Aramean tribal leaders in the Babylonian sector were – in not necessary continuous

³³ Cf. recently Niemeyer 2000: 103.

ways – linked to Assyria through agreements or *adēs*; and, finally, Balassu of Bit-Dakkuri as well as the Babylonians are depicted in the process of enacting a pro-Assyrian policy during a phase of armed conflict. Thus, in a nutshell, it may be stated that the expression *dibbī ṭābūti issīšu(nu) dabābu* consistently refers to a backdrop of political relations meant to extend the range of action of Assyrian suzerainty beyond the strict confines of its provincial system.

The second point regards the relative timing for the use of the expression vis-à-vis the specific political situations portrayed. As may be seen, it is not rare to employ the clause “to speak kindly to him/them” in the *initial* stages of a diplomatic agreement between the foreign partner and Assyria – whether such an agreement was deliberately thought out, as in the case of Midas of Phrygia, or brought about by the circumstances, as in the case of smaller polities of the Zagros and Babylonia caught inside the mesh of Assyrian territorial expansion or warfare. In this case, then, the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause has the specific implication of “opening friendly/peaceful relations”. On the other hand, the very same expression was also used to refer to *consolidated* situations of peaceful agreement, such as in the – apparently smoothly functional – ones of Tyre and of the Kulumanians; as well as in instances of troubles which had somewhat perturbed the relationship with the Assyrians, as in the case of Balassu of Bit-Dakkuri with his attack of “cold feet” caused by the threatened enmity of Mukin-zeri.³⁴ Here, then, we may understand the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause as bearing the nuance of “maintaining friendly/peaceful relations”. Finally, the attestation from the Esarhaddon “queries to the Sungod” shows that even a “last-minute” dialogue of agreement, when the Assyrian were already stationed beneath the walls of a besieged city (cf. n. 36, below) could be proposed; i.e. that a further nuance of our clause should be that of “offering friendly/peaceful relations” – with the ever-present alternative of speaking *dibbī šepšūti*, “harsh words”, and thereupon recurring to the force of arms.

The third point concerns the practical implications of “speaking kindly” to someone: what related activities or outcomes may be made out from the passages regarding this “key-expression” of Assyrian foreign policy? To my mind, there is no doubt that the contexts analyzed above for the *dibbī ṭābūti* clause point to a comprehensive picture of the political, social, and economic effects which the imposition of *pax assyriaca* brought about on “outer” polities. In a nutshell, through the action of “speaking kind words” to its clients, vassals, and allies, i.e. by guaranteeing (or encouraging them to accept) political protection and physical safety from outer dangers, Assyria obtained in return a situation of “law and order” in these communities, and the self-established right to exploit their potential in many different areas – from the levy of men and horses for the army to tithes on their specific agricultural products or on their native industries.

³⁴ Or, in the fragmentary texts CT 53 138 and CT 53 62, above.

In sum, these three points would seem to show that the expression *dibbī ṭābūti issīšu(nu) dabābu*, albeit elementary in its linguistic make-up, conceals in point of fact a relatively complex political backdrop, in which we see the opening, maintaining or final offer of diplomatic or in any case friendly relations between Assyria and a number of polities beyond its “inner” borders, for the purpose of a peaceful *modus vivendi*, destined to create ever-spreading areas open to unrestricted movement of people and goods. That this overall mechanism of *pax assyriaca* along the borders of the Empire went also, to some extent, to the benefit of the governed, may be gauged from the earliest text on Tyre as well as from contemporary archaeological evidence, as I have written elsewhere.³⁵ Indisputably, the situation was extremely profitable for the Assyrians in terms of political control and economic exploitation; but on this count it may be recalled that many subsequent imperially decreed *paces* have functioned in the same essential way in history, from antiquity down to the present.³⁶

³⁵ For a recent survey on the notion and practice of *pax assyriaca*, cf. Fales 2008, with previous bibliography.

³⁶ As a final point in this enquiry, a question may be raised: which, exactly, could have been these “kind words” which the Assyrians so many times quote as being uttered to their counterparts? The relevant attestations are, as we have seen, silent on the matter, with one exception (cf. below). In order to gain at least a general idea of an Assyrian king’s possible *dibbī ṭābūti* as uttered to a foreign community, I therefore suggest to turn to a totally different collection of texts. In *2 Kings* 18:17–36, as is well known, it is related how, during the reign of Sennacherib, three Assyrian Magnates (the Tartan, the Rabсарis and the Rabshakeh) arrived with the army to invade Judah, and specifically came to besiege Jerusalem, thereupon summoning King Hezekiah to their presence, who sent high-ranking personnel in his stead. Perhaps because of the king’s absence, the first speech of the Rabshakeh on behalf of the Assyrian ruler (18:19–25) held nothing but “harsh words” – in the sense seen above – against Hezekiah and his vain trust in saving himself and his people. On the other hand, after having moved to address (in Aramaic) the people of Jerusalem gazing from the top of the city wall, the Assyrian official delivered a quite different message, first urging them to separate their fate from that of their king, who was deceiving them with his vain confidence, and then changing abruptly his tone into what were presumably intended to be “kind words”: “Thus said the king of Assyria: make your peace with me and come out to me, so that you may all eat from your vines and your fig trees and drink water from your cisterns, until I come and take you away to a land like your own, a land of grain [fields] and vineyards, of bread and wine, of olive oil and honey, so that you may live and not die” (*2 Kings* 18:31–32). Of course, as is well known, countless compositional problems must be addressed before a text such as this may be accepted as reflecting a realistic utterance on the part of an Assyrian ruler; specifically, no real parallel in the NA corpus may be summoned for the virtual eulogy of deportation which constitutes the second part of the official’s speech. On the other hand, it may be noted that (1) Judah was a “client” state of Assyria which had recently shown signs of insubordination, (2) the small corpus studied in this essay presents various cases of the Assyrians’ dealings – through “kind words” – with the “people” separately from their rulers; and finally (3) a vague resemblance to the initial part of the Rabshakeh’s speech may be found in the sole example of *dibbī ṭābūti* which has come down to us, viz. the governor’s words quoted in SAA 5 210: ‘Do your work, each in [his house and] field, and be glad; you are now subjects of the king’. Thus, there may be general agreement – from the Assyriological side of things – with the view concerning the Rabshakeh’s speech put forth by Ben Zvi (1990: 86): “Whatever we may think about authorship and date, it is clear that such a speech could be written only in a world where this kind of speech occurs”.

