# ANSWERING THE KING. CONTEXT AND TONE OF COMMUNICATION IN NEO-ASSYRIAN LETTERS

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this article is to examine and analyze the tone of communication in selected examples from the Neo-Assyrian state archive, published in the State Archives of Assyria series, through the lens of Searle's Speech Act Theory. Participants in this communication include Assyrian kings who reigned during the 8th–7th centuries BCE, high-ranking officials and administrators, as well as members of the scribal elite, also known as scholars, at the royal court. The period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (10th–7th centuries BCE) marks a turning point in world history due to a number of significant innovations in administration and social regulation introduced by the Assyrian monarchs. The study of written communication sheds light on a more specific aspect of state governance, revealing essential elements of the hierarchical relationships between the ruler and his subordinates. These communications define the boundaries of what is permitted, but they also delve into issues such as professional conflicts and competition. Last but not least, they have the potential to reveal typical patterns of response in specific situations that remain hidden in more concise types of sources, such as Assyrian royal inscriptions.*

**Key words:** *Neo-Assyrian period, Assyriology, letters*

## Introduction

The Neo-Assyrian Empire (c. 900–612 BCE), one of the most formidable powers in the ancient Near East, left behind an immense and diverse textual legacy, encompassing royal inscriptions, legal decrees, diplomatic correspondence, and literary and ritual texts. These texts were not merely records of events or declarations of facts. Parallel to that, they were instruments of action, wielded by kings, officials, and scribes to command, persuade, intimidate, and legitimize their authority. This is primarily evident in the large number of letters stored in the royal

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palaces of the Assyrian capitals. In the territories governed by the Assyrians, a highly sophisticated Imperial postal system existed, which functioned through an extensive and well-organized network of interconnected roads collectively referred to as the *royal road* (*harrān šarri*). This infrastructure served as the primary communication artery of the empire, ensuring swift and reliable transmission of official messages and orders (Radner, 2015, p. 63-66). At regular and strategically chosen intervals along these roads, there were garrisoned relay stations known as *bēt mardiāte*. This relay system allowed for the continuous and expedited movement of imperial correspondence across vast distances, demonstrating the imperial administration's logistical capabilities and centralized control.

Working with the information in the Assyrian letters is a complex task nowadays. It is challenging for modern scholars to establish a precise chronological framework. The absence of explicit dates or fixed temporal markers means contextualizing the letters within broader historical developments, often requiring speculative reconstruction. Fales points out that evidence suggests a specific conception of time governed the Neo-Assyrian letters (Fales, 2010, p. 94).[2] The letters were written, sent, received, and read *now*. In this way, Fales explains the high occurrence of the words *uma* ('now') and *annurig* ('right now') in the texts. When read, the letters were kept as long as their topic was current.

This study aims to analyze the tone of communication in some Neo-Assyrian state archive letters using John Searle's *Speech Act Theory* as a theoretical framework (Searle, 1998, p. 135-163). This theory proposes a linguistic and philosophical approach that defines language understanding. According to Searle, language is not merely a tool for describing reality or conveying factual information, but it is also performative in nature. When people speak or write, they are not just saying things but *doing* them with their words. They issue commands, make promises, forge relationships, express intentions, or assert authority. By applying this perspective to Neo-Assyrian texts, the functional role of language as a means of action, rather than merely a means of communication, can be revealed. Searle's framework enables the analysis of the illocutionary force behind statements, including the kind of act being performed, the speaker's intention, and the desired effect on the audience. By organizing and interpreting Neo-Assyrian texts following Searle's theory, the paper aims to reveal the communicative intentions and political strategies embedded in the high-ranking correspondence, providing new insights into how power, diplomacy, and ideology were enacted through language.

Radner notes that the tone and formality of communication in the Neo-Assyrian letters varied significantly depending on the recipient's status and function (Radner ,2015, p. 61f). In particular, correspondence between the king and his magnates – leading officials who held key administrative, military, and often territorial authority – tended to be highly formal and structured. These magnates,

2 The author compares the letters to the spontaneity of phone calls nowadays, which happen in real time.

including governors, generals, and trusted royal advisors, played a crucial role in controlling the empire's vast territories. Their duties included tax collection, military command, local governance, and enforcing the king's decrees across distant territories, thereby deeply entwining their relationship with the monarch in the kingdom's governance. In contrast, communication between the king and the court scholars was often more informal in tone. The scholars were learned men responsible for interpreting omens and organizing rituals, composing and copying texts, advising on ritual and cultic matters, and maintaining the vast intellectual traditions of Mesopotamian knowledge. They occupied a crucial position within the royal court, serving as intermediaries between divine signs and the royal decision-making process. They are sometimes represented even as the king's counselors on political matters. The difference in tone between these two groups reflects the distinct nature of their roles as executors of royal authority and interpreters of the divine and intellectual order. The physical aspect – the scholars usually lived close to the king's reach – was also crucial for this difference in the attitude. In the following sections, selected Neo-Assyrian texts will be categorized according to the five types of speech acts identified by Searle.[3] The tone of these texts will be examined in terms of their illocutionary force and communicative intention.

**Assertives and Expressives**

Assertives are dominant and relatively easy to catch in the texts since many of the letters from the king's magnates are reports. For example, in SAA 5 002 Nashir-Bēl, the governor of the provinces Amedi and Sinabu during the late reign of king Sargon II, describes to the king the situation on the northern border against the kingdom of Urartu for which he is responsible:

> [To the k]in[g, my lo]rd: [your servant Nashir]-Bel. Good health t[o the king], my [lord]! [The land] of [the ki]ng is well; the for[t]s are well. The king, my lord, can be glad. As to the news of the Urarṭians, the messenger of mine [wh]om I sent [to] the governor opposite me has come back; he spoke to him as the king, my lord, wrote me, saying: "Why do you capture our forts, while we are at peace?" He said: "What should I do? If I have trespassed on your territory or your forts, call me to account. His troops are assembled with him; he is keeping watch in Harda. This was the news about them.

After his successful campaign against Urartu in 714 BCE, Sargon no longer conducted military operations deep within the territory of his northern neighbor.

3 These five categories are Assertive (statements, descriptions), Directive (commands, requests), Commissive (promises, commitments), Expressive (gratitude, apology), and Declarative (official announcements). An Assertive is when the speaker commits to the truth of a proposition, such as stating facts or making reports; a Directive aims to get the listener to do something, like issuing orders or making requests; a Commissive involves the speaker committing themselves to a future action, such as making a promise or offering assistance; an Expressive reveals the speaker's psychological state or emotion, often through greetings, congratulations, or complaints; and a Declarative is an utterance that, under the right institutional conditions, enacts a change in the external world simply by being spoken. In many cases, a specific Neo-Assyrian letter may contain more than one of these types (Searle, 1998).

Consequently, Urartian king Argishti II stabilized his authority in the kingdom and reclaimed lost territories as Assyria shifted its focus elsewhere. Nonetheless, the response from the Urartian governor seems overly provocative and impertinent. It could be that Nashir-Bēl presents the opponent's statement in a Thucydidian manner, highlighting political provocation and instability on the border. There is a contradiction in Nishir-Bēl's letter – the forts are secure, yet some of them appear to have been captured by foreign armies. The governor is likely attempting to mask recent failures, emphasizing the necessity of future conflicts in which he believes he could prove himself before the king. Observing the exchange of information between Nishir-Bēl and the king (SAA 5 001-020), one notes that the situation on the northern border is tense, making the governor's position both essential and delicate. From SAA 5 003, it can be inferred that numerous border garrisons also existed on the opposite Urartian side, and border conflicts frequently occurred. Salvini notes the expansion and aggression of the Urartian kingdom during the reign of Argišti, particularly in the north-northeast direction. Still, such an attitude can also be observed in its uneasy relationships with Assyria (Salvini, 2009). The following letter details previous military actions culminating in an Assyrian victory.

> I went [t]o Ša-Aššur-dubb[u]; the ci[ty] was taken in [my] presence, and they brought garrison troop[s] into it. (SAA 5 004)

It appears that Nishir-Bēl skillfully plays his cards to persuade the king of his competence and reliability in managing the situation. By downplaying potential losses and amplifying the significance of his successes, he presents himself as a capable and effective official, carefully shaping the narrative to maintain royal favor and authority. Probably this gives him the confidence to assert his rights in a situation where he is disadvantaged or treated unfairly. The same governor is shocked or scared (*palāhu*) when he is alarmed that the king ordered him to give up some of his vast land holdings, possibly due to a claim by one Aššur-Remanni:

> [As to] the fields of the patrimony of Aššur-remanni, about which the king, my lord, wrote me, the royal bodyguard shocked me when he said: "Give up the pro[perty], the well, and the arable land!" (SAA 05 015)

A long explanation follows, reminding the king of the actual status of the lands, which serves as an answer to the king's bodyguard Directive. This letter is an example of a revelation of dissatisfaction from an official who strongly relies on the king's goodwill. Similarly expressed fear can be observed in the story of Esarhaddon's official in northern Phoenicia, Itti-Šamaš-balatu (SAA 16 127).[4] In his letter, the author alerts the king that the monarch of Arwad, Ikkilû (Iakin-Lū), does not permit boats to come to the king's port but has monopolized the entire trade for himself. According to the letter, Ikkilû claims they have written to him from the palace to do only what is good for him. The Assyrian official states further that many people from the king's entourage are part of Ikkilū›s schemes and that the merchants are systematically scaring him. As a liaison between Arwad's court

4 PNA I, p. 589 ff.

and the Assyrians, one Ilu-ma'adi from Ṣimirra is mentioned. He is said to have traveled back and forth to Assyria, gathering details about any matters and news, and then reported them to Ikkilū. The poor situation of Itti-Šamaš-balatu is also glimpsed in SAA 16 128 where he complains that:

> There is no fr[ien]d of mine here. I put my trust in the king, my lord. I do not give one shekel (or even) half a shekel to anybody but the king, my lord. May the king, my lord, not leave me in their hands.

In the last two examples, the Assertives are generously supplemented with Expressives, showing the official's loyalty to the throne. However, I think the most striking part of the texts is Ikkilū's claim that his actions are already coordinated with the palace. Can we be sure that Ikkilū is lying, or is Itti-Šamaš-balatu unaware of an ongoing communication? In my opinion, it is impossible to give a definite answer, but the fact that Ikkilū kept his position later during Ashurbanipal's reign may be revealing.

It is essential to note that the correspondence should not be considered for canonized literature and should not be analysed as such. The information in the letters often concerns the author's interests, which are often not explicitly mentioned. When the texts are studied, the individual factor must be considered first. Appropriate examples could be observed in the correspondence between the king and his scholars. In the letter SAA 10 051 the scholar Balasi, *ummânu* of prince Assurbanipal, wrote to king Esarhaddon:

> Concerning the planet [Venus] about which the king, my lord, [wrote to me: "I am] told that it has [become visible]" – the man who wrote (thus) to the king, [my lord], is in (complete) ignorance. He does not k[now] the [...], the cycle [...], (or) the (synodic) revoluti[ons of Venus] ... Who [is the man that write]s so [to the king, my lord]? I repeat: he does not understand (the difference) between Mercury and Venus

The Assertive *speech act* here is quite an accusation against one of Balasi's colleagues, possibly Issar-šumu-ēreš, because in SAA 10 023 he interprets the appearance of Venus before the king (Verderame, 2014, p. 718).[5] Balasi insists the king disregard the opinions of other scholars and ask him directly instead. It can be speculated that this situation was a private case. Still, when studied in its whole, the tone of Balasi in his letters is, as Verderame puts it, 'a characteristic one, peculiar to his style' (Ibid, p. 715). Verderame writes that Balasi's reaction is an unusual break in the court etiquette, which establishes that questions are directed from the king downwards (Ibid, p. 720). Irritation is often evident in his (and frequently in his colleague Nabu-ahhe-eriba's) responses to the king. Assertive elements are evident in his willingness to contradict the king's interpretation and expressive elements emerge through his irritation, irony and occasional sarcasm. For example, one can easily sense the irony in his tone in Balasi's responses to the king's reactions and questions after a storm and an earthquake:

5 The argument possibly ends with an agreement: "Concerning Mercury, about which the king my lord wrote to me: yesterday Issar-šumu-ereš had an argument with Nabû-ahhe-eriba in the palace. Later, at night, they went and all made observations; they saw (it) and were satisfied." (SAA 8 083)

> As to what the king, m[y lord, wr]ote [to me]: "[In] the city of H[ar]ihumba lightning struck and ravaged the fields of the Assyrians" – why does the king look for (trouble), and why does he look (for it) [in the ho]me of a tiller? There is no evil inside the palace, and when has the king ever visited Harihumba? Now, provided that there is (evil) inside the palace, they should go and perform the (ritual) "Evil of Lightning" there.(SAA 10 042)

> Concerning the interpretation of the omen about which the king, my lord, wrote to me: „(It is said that) the king will be vilified amongst his magnates – what losses will ensue?" – interpretations of monthly omens are like this: one is never similar to another, their interpretations go separately. Was there no earthquake in the times of the king's fathers and grandfathers? Did I not see earthquakes when I was small? The god has (only) wanted to open the king's ears: „He should pray (literally, open his fists') to the god, perform the apotropaic ritual and be on his guard." (SAA 10 056)

The scholar responds to the king's concerns about ominous signs in both letters. In both cases, he is willing to challenge or reframe the king's interpretation, employing logic and rhetorical questions. In the case of the earthquake, he states that god Ea has created it, Ea can undo it – "He who caused the earthquake has also created the apotropaic ritual against it." (SAA 10 056) (Westenholz, 1998, p. 12). I find three points in the cited communication that are revealing for the tone. First, the king's anxiety appears deeply rooted in the importance of place and positioning in Assyro-Babylonian mantic and ritualistic traditions. Ambos notes a close correlation between passing through space and transitioning from one state to another, and that bad omens are mostly related to space rather than a person (Ambos, 2013, p. 41, 47).[6] Secondly, while the situation described is serious – queries from the king about possible divine punishment manifested through natural disasters – Balasi employs irony and perhaps even gentle sarcasm in his response. His suggestion of the appropriate ritual, "Evil of Lightning," is not offered in a panicked or deferential tone but is delivered with a sense of calm detachment, as if to underscore the king's overreaction. This rhetorical move functions to downplay the threat's scale and subtly critique the king's anxious interpretation, probably based on another scholar's opinion, thus making the social context similar to the case of the Venus visibility dispute, cited earlier. Still, he stresses the fact that it is only the owner of the field who will potentially suffer:

> In case the king, my lord, says: "How is it said (in the tablets)?" – (here is the relevant interpretation): "If the storm god devastates a field inside or outside a city, or if he puts down a ... of (his) chariot, or if fire burns anything, the said man will live in utter misery for 3 years." This applies (only) to the one who was cultivating the field (SAA 10 042).

Thirdly, the communication reflects a broader intellectual autonomy on the part of the scholar. Balasi introduces a corrective interpretative framework grounded in textual authority. He cites the authority of the tablets and ritual knowledge. In such a way, he is not just a messenger or technician performing rituals on command but a learned advisor who asserts interpretive control. This

6 Ambos deals specifically with interpreting eclipses, but one can look at the lightning as yet another astronomical cataclysmic event.

is further shown by the complementary explanation in SAA 10 069, where Nabu-ahhe-eriba echoes the idea that divine signs result not from arbitrary wrath but moral or cultic failures – in this case, the farmers' neglect of Adad:

> [Concerning] the large field [of the Ass]yrians [about which the king], my lord, wrote to me: "It was a very productive field; who is removing the grain?" – the farmers who seeded the fields do not revere Adad anymore; that is why he let a lightning bolt strike down (and devastate the field). Since the king, my lord, commanded (so), an exorcist should perform the (ritual called) "Purification of the Field," and he should at the same time [also] perform the (apotropaic ritual called) "Evil of a Stroke of Lightning."

As a result, Balasi and his colleague Nabu-ahhe-eriba managed to convince the king of the local rather than universal hazard of the natural disaster, and together they organized a local purification ritual for the field. However, more than diverting a danger towards the king, their rhetorical strategy, mixing assertive interpretation with expressive reassurance, allowed them to redirect royal anxiety into action and assert their expert authority.

The cited examples show that scholars are far more persuasive and emotionally invested in their communications. This difference is largely due to the nature of court politics. Scholars at the Assyrian court were deeply entangled in intellectual competition and complex interpersonal dynamics. It has already been seen that their letters often reflect efforts not only to interpret omens or advise the king, but also to assert their authority, insight, and prestige. This rivalry led them to adopt more emotionally charged and rhetorically strategic language, especially when responding to sensitive issues such as ominous signs or divine warnings - occurances that could be differently interpreted. It should be noted, however, that this same competition among scholars largely contributed to the advancement of Assyro-Babylonian science. The need to stand out in a crowded intellectual field encouraged innovation, careful observation, refined methods of divination and exegesis, and increasingly sophisticated interpretive frameworks. During the 7th century B.C., they culminated in official editions of compendia and encyclopedias.[7] On the other hand, the governors' letters reflect predominantly bureaucratic matters required for the empire to function correctly.

## Commissives and Directives

Commissives are primarily found in letters related to planning and task management. These actions could vary between the logistics of building materials and an official visit. For example, in SAA 01 054 the chief treasurer Ṭab-šar-aššur

7 For example, such compendia are the so-called *Nineveh Medical Encyclopedia* (BAM 9), the *Enūma Anu Enlil* series on celestial omens (Rochberg, 2014), and the *Šumma Ālu* collection of terrestrial omens (Freedman 1998). These works represent the pinnacle of Assyrian scholarly efforts to systematize and preserve vast bodies of knowledge in fields such as astrology, medicine, ritual practice, and lexicography. Produced and maintained by highly trained scribes at the royal court, the writing served not only divinatory and ritual functions but also reflected an epistemological approach based on observation, classification, and tradition. The Assyrian scholars operated within a sophisticated intellectual environment where scientific knowledge, cultic duty, and political authority were deeply intertwined.

(PNA 1344) reports to the king his actions and schedule about the transportation of cultic objects to Aššur, including a ritual bed (*eršu*):

> The first day after we left the Palace, we stayed overnight in Ubasê. The boats are all right. On the next day, the gods of the king guarding, we shall safely arrive in [the Inner City], and I shall bring the golden [monster]s [...] into the temple of Aššur And [..... the b]ed, th[ere is a ritual] to put together for decorating and washing the bed. If the king, my lord, orders, we shall bring it into the temple of Aššur and perform our rites jointly together. There is room there, and it is suitable for our vigil.(SAA 01 054).

Luckily, we know what happened later, although the beginning, including the name of the sender, is broken:

> I arrived at the Inner City on the 18th. The inhabitants of the Inner City acted in the same way (as before): offering tables were set up and sacrifices were being made. They anchored the boats on the river before the Gate of Aššur. My canopy was set up aboard, and I am staying on the river and keeping watch until the day I depart. The king, my lord, can be pleased indeed. As long as the bed is aboard, regular sheep offerings are being made in front of it. Perhaps the king, my lord, [will say]: "[When are you] going to depart from the Inner City [.....]?" I am waiting [... for the] troops; right now [..... the governor] of Arrapha [..... (SAA 01 055)

Nissines connects the letters with the *quršu* love ritual of the goddess Mulissu, mentioned in Assyrian cultic rituals (Nissinen, 2001, p. 96). He notes that cultic use of beds is mainly restricted to two cases – in rituals during sickness and in the ancient sacred marriage ceremonies, aiming to bring fertility to the land. The tasks in SAA 01 055 are measured in a sequence of meaningful ritual and logistical actions – the arrival at the Inner City, setting up the bed, performing sacrifices, and waiting for accompanying troops from elsewhere. The events mark a sacred temporality that runs parallel to and interwoven with the administrative schedule, which describes overnight stops and boat anchoring. Thus, the text resolves into a Declarative, framing a new reality and marking a border between a normal and a festive state and between the physical and the spiritual worlds. In this context, the formed space of the boats carrying sacred objects can be understood as a *heterotopia* in the Foucauldian sense. This space exists outside of ordinary spatial and temporal coordinates yet reflects and inverts them. It is set apart from the mundane world and functions as a transitional zone where the profane and the sacred intersect, temporarily suspending normative structures and allowing for the embodiment of the symbolic order. The interplay between these temporal registers in the letter reflects a broader conception in which ritual efficacy is intimately tied to spatial timing and procedural accuracy. The movement of sacred objects and persons is thus meticulously regulated. Each journey phase must align with bureaucratic order and ritual preparedness, ensuring that sacred actions unfold precisely at the right moment and in the right setting. In my opinion, unrecorded factors stemming from religious perceptions of the topic additionally shape the tone and framing of information in the letters concerning ritual actions. It could be said that for ancient cultures, rituals are characterized as *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* ("a fearful and fascinating

mystery"), following Rudolph Otto's definition of religious experience in his "*The Idea of the Holy*" (Otto, 1958, Foucault, 1967). In this way, when considering the tone between the king and his officials regarding spiritual matters, one should consider the unspoken reverence for the godly world expressed by the participants in the communication. They are, however, tough to catch since the cultural context of the civilization is long gone.

Sometimes, the Commissive is put in the form of a Directive, which is especially characteristic of the king's urgent commands:

> 700 bales of straw and 700 bundles of reeds, each bundle more than a donkey can carry, must be at hand in Dur-Šarruken by the 1st of Kislev (IX). Should (even) one day pass by, you will die (SAA 01 026).

The threat at the end of SAA 01 126 should not be taken literally but rather understood as a signifier of the immediacy of the situation. Indeed, some of the kings' letters have a more friendly-sounding command, for example, in SAA 01 022: "Don't delay; leave your business and come straight away!" From various letters, it is known that missions are sometimes delayed due to different reasons often unspecified, for example in SAA 13 179 ("As for the work of the gods of the king in which I was e[arlier] delayed, I have (now) show[n him] the work.") and SAA 01 185 ("[I asked him]: "Why were you delayed?" He said: "He detained me for 12 days; Marduk-šumu-iddina will be coming right after me.").

To the other end of the commissives' spectrum, letter SAA 10 203 discusses the crown prince's planned visit after an earthquake.[8] Adad-šumu-uṣur writes to the king:

> Concerning the crown prince's visiting the king, my lord, is it because of the earthquake that he has said: "The crown prince should not go outdoors"? It is (already) a fortnight today since the earth quaked, the pertinent ritual has been performed twice, and the king, my lord, knows the relevant interpretation. As they say, what has it to do with this? The visit of [the crown] prince would be [perfectly] all right now.

According to Parpola, the purpose of the question was clearly to express astonishment – the earthquake didn't obstruct the prince's freedom to move around since the apotropaic *namburbi* rituals had been performed twice, and the predictions for the crown prince were not sinister (Parpola, 1981, p. 135). This earthquake and its cultic preparations could be possibly linked to SAA 10 010, in which Issar-šumu-ereš cites what is written in the tablets about apotropaic rituals.[9] In Assyro-Babylonian astrology, astral phenomena were important in determining everyday life at the royal court and identified with the court's realities. For example, the crown prince was identified with the planet Mercury, and, as

8 This letter is possibly connected to SAA 10 190 in which the king, cited by the letter's author, asks Adad-šumu-uṣur: "Is this month good? The crown prince should visit me — when would it be good?"

9 Hemerologies and omens interpretation affect the visit of the crown princes also in letters SAA 10 052 and 10 074.

Parpola puts it, sometimes there is an explicit moral content of displeasure towards the king's conduct (Westenholz, 1995, p. 127; Parpola, 1981, p. 40). Most of the information in the letters comes from the scientific compendia, and its meaning should be adequately understood to correctly assess the tone of communication. Returning to the cited letter SAA 10 203, could the question be understood as astonishment, relief, irritation, or even irony? In my opinion, the answer depends on the reader's choice on which phrase in the text to put a stress: on the expression about the duration ('already a fortnight'), on the reassurance that it is safe ('the pertinent ritual has been performed twice'), on the fact that the king has already received an explanation ('the king, my lord, knows the relevant interpretation'), or on the second question ('what has it to do with this?').

**Declaratives**

Declaratives are primarily found in letters concerning the appointment of officials. For example SAA 01 177:

> If it is acceptable to the king, my lord, let them send a letter to Nabû-uṣalla the prefect, and let me appoint Ia'iru the deputy as village manager there, and Sin-iddina, the major-domo of Adda-hati in Sazanâ, so they will attend to these road stations and fear the king.

In this letter, the governor of Ṣupat in the western Assyrian territories Bel-liqbi is organizing the government in one of the post stations in the region. The king has the final decision, although the case concerns matters far from the palace. Interesting documents from the palace – the so-called *appointment queries to god Šamaš* show that the appointment of officials was a procedure that should also have a religious justification. For example, SAA 4 156:

> Should Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, appoint [the ma]n whose name is written in this papyrus and placed before your great divinity, [to the po]sition which is written in [th]is papyrus? If he appoints him, [as] long as he holds this position, will he instigate an insurrection and rebellion against Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, and [Assu]rbanipal, the crown prince of the Succession Palace?

Interestingly, the candidate's name and position are not explicitly stated in the text itself, but instead referred to indirectly as being recorded "in this papyrus" accompanying the query. This practice reflects a deliberate choice – likely intended to maintain confidentiality or ritual propriety – especially given the sensitive nature of the question posed to the deity. The omission of the specific identity in the main body of the text and its substitution with a physical referent (the papyrus) suggests an institutionalized method of concealing details that could be politically volatile if publicly known. This structure aligns with the logic of Searle's theory of speech acts in an intriguing way. The query is formally a yes-no interrogative, but functionally it sets the stage for a declarative act – the appointment, contingent upon divine sanction. The speech act only becomes performative when interpreted by the appropriate institutional authority – the king, and also the divinity. This example speaks to Neo-Assyrian statecraft's

broader administrative and religious texts, where divine will and bureaucratic procedure are closely intertwined.

Concluding or breaking a treaty, which usually leads to a military conflict, could also be described as a Declarative. One of the most interesting texts in the royal archive comes from the copy of the original treaty between Esarhaddon and Baal of Tyre:

> [The treat]y of Esarhad[don, king] of Assyria, son of [Sennacherib likewise king of Assyria, with Baa]l, king of Tyre, with [..., his son, and his other sons and grandsons, with a]ll [Tyrians], young and old [...] (SAA 2 005)

The treaty includes elaborate curses and blessings that reinforce the commissive nature of the act. The text highlights the performative power of language within the Neo-Assyrian imperial system, where written texts could describe political realities and actively create and enforce them through ritualized speech. The history of Tyre during this period is very dynamic, ranging between peaceful years and Assyrian military occupation, recorded in the royal inscriptions. The invasion of the Assyrian army was caused by the termination of the contract by the Tyrians:

> In the course of my campaign, I set up fortifications against Ba'alu, the king of Tyre, who trusted in his friend Taharqa, the king of Kush, threw off the yoke of the god Aššur, my lord, and kept answering (me) with insolence (RINAP 34:13 f.)

The breaking of the treaty by Ba'al is presented not simply as a political act, but as a ritual and legal rupture – a reversal of the earlier declarative act that bound the two powers. This illustrates how deeply embedded the declarative and commissive acts were within the ideological and religious framework of the empire. In effect, treaties were speech acts with the weight of divine sanction – to violate them was to invite both human and supernatural retaliation.

## Conclusion

From the studied examples in the text, it can be concluded that the Neo-Assyrian state archive letters are more than mere instruments of administrative record. They are dynamic vehicles of power, persuasion, and ritual authority. Applying John Searle's Speech Act Theory to this corpus could uncover the multiple layers of performative meaning embedded in seemingly straightforward correspondence. Assertives and directives dominate the bureaucratic communication with governors and officials, where the primary concern is efficient administration, military control, and logistical precision. Commissives and expressives, though less frequent, reveal emotional tones, personal loyalty, and anxiety, particularly in moments of crisis or uncertainty. This identifies tone as a carrier of emotional nuance, but only in relation to specific speech acts. The declarative acts, most notably visible in appointments and treaties, offer the clearest example of how language was used to bring about change in the real world — not just to describe events but to enact them, usually with both political and religious implications.

A single letter can often contain multiple speech acts, depending on the recipient's status and situation. The contrast in tone between the royal correspondence with provincial governors and that with court scholars reflects the complex socio-political structures in the state. While governors operated within a strict hierarchical framework, scholars enjoyed greater rhetorical freedom to assert influence in matters of ritual and divination. In this context, language was not only a means of communication but also a powerful tool for negotiating identity and constructing political order. The Neo-Assyrian Empire, with its sophisticated communication network and deeply embedded ideology of kingship, provides a fertile ground for exploring the performative function of written language. Speech act theory, therefore, offers a valuable lens through which to analyze ancient texts, highlighting not just what was said but how it was done.

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