6. What is a Person?

The Hebrew pronoun provides the basis of the formal aspect of the language and it is there that we must start.

As in most languages, Hebrew personal pronouns are an etymological nightmare. They do, however, play a considerable role in the formal structure of the language and therefore deserve our most careful attention. This inquiry will also give us some insight into the growth of the language and the shifts in its sounds.

We shall begin by comparing the personal pronouns in Hebrew with those of Arabic on the one hand and Akkadian on the other (Table 6.1). The reader should be warned that while the transliteration of Arabic into Hebrew characters is relatively simple (since the Arabic alphabet is also a direct descendent of the Phoenician), the Akkadian transliteration is not quite so straightforward. Akkadian, you will recall, was written in a syllabary adapted from Sumerian cuneiform. It contains no glottal stop, but words can begin with the vocalic-like sounds. This means that in our transliterations of Akkadian, aleph (א) will be used only as an occasion for using a vowel sign.

It should be noted that both Akkadian and Arabic still retain the consonantal long *A* sound, symbolized as א, which in Hebrew has become a long *O*.

If we start with the gross phenomena, we can note that the plurals differ from the singulars by the addition of a מ or נ. Both these letters are commonly used in the formation of plurals of nouns as well as verbs in most of the Semitic languages, and they will be discussed in another place.

The first thing to strike one in Table 6.1 is the similarity among the languages. This similarity is, in fact, even greater than might appear at first glance. In Hebrew the letter נ is very weak and unstable. Thus when נ is accompanied by a resting shewa it becomes assimilated to the following letter. For example, instead of אַנְתָה one has אַתָּה, where the נ is hidden in the dagesh. Note that the assimilated נ was felt so strongly that a dagesh even appears in the second-person feminine in a manner that breaks every rule of syllabification, in that תְּ has now almost become a full syllable in its own right.

	Arabic	*Hebrew*	*Akkadian*
Singular			
3rd per. masc.	הֶוַ	הוא	שׁוּ
3rd per. fem.	הִיַ	היא	שִׁי
2nd per. masc.	אַתַּ	אַתָּה	אַתַּא
2nd per. fem.	אַנְתִ	אַתְּ	אַתִּי
1st per. c.	אָנָא	אָנֹכִי \ אֲנִי	אָנָאךְ
Plural			
3rd per. masc.	הֶמוּ	הֵם	שֶׁנֶ
3rd per. fem.	הֶנַ	הֵנָה \ הֵן	שֶׁנָ
2nd per. masc.	אָתֶמֶו	אַתֶּם	אָת
2nd per. fem.	אַנְתֵנָּאַ	תֵּנָה \ אַתֵּן	אַתִּנָ
1st per. c.	נַחְנֻ	אֲנַחְנוּ \ אָנוּ	נֵנֻ

Table 6.1. Semitic Pronouns

In Hebrew the letter ת is also considered weak. Its weakness lies in the fact that it tends to drop out when it is the feminine ending and stands as the final letter of the word.

From what we have seen so far, it appears that the root of the first person is אנך \ אנח and that of the second person, אנת. That may be the case, and yet if they are truly two independent roots, one is left to wonder why they should just happen have the first two root letters אנ in common, and differ only in the third. The problem will become even more confusing when we develop the verb.

We might gain insight from another Semitic language. In Ethiopian the first person singular of the verb based on the root ולד \ ילד is וָלַדְכֻ as one might have expected; but in Hebrew one finds יָלַדְתִּי, and most of the other Semitic languages agree in using the ת as the subjective formative for both the first and the second persons. On the other hand, in several other forms the כ will show up in the second person. One is then led to suspect either that אנת and אנכ are merely alternative forms of the same

root or, what is more likely, that the common root is אנת and the כ has crept in from a כה or כא, meaning *this* or *here*. During the course of the next few chapters, as we look at the verbs, we will see again that the formations of the first- and second-person forms are similar and quite distinct from the third-person form.

The Hebrew root אנת also appears in the preposition אֶת, which means *together with, in communion with,* or *beside* and which usually implies peaceful togetherness. People often sign covenants *with* (אֶת) each other; and God tells Moses, "There is a place with (אֶת) me." When endings are added to it, the ת always has a dagesh. For example, the word אִתִּי, *with me*, implies an earlier form אנתי, or again that the original root was אנת.

These reflections and discoveries would seem to suggest that the first and second persons were of common origin, an origin based on the notion of togetherness, and that only later was *I* distinguished from *you.*

Among the Semitic languages there is apparently greater diversity in the third-person personal pronouns than in the second-person personal pronouns. Hebrew and Arabic, however, are somewhat closer than would appear at first. The Arabic suggests that the old Hebraic form might have contained a vocalic א which was retained in the Hebrew script but not in the Arabic. The fact that most Hebrew words have at least three letters might have encouraged such a retention.

The root הוא is part of a cluster that include root הוה or היה, meaning *to be* or *to become.* Earlier we mentioned a difference between the first- and second-person verbal endings on the one hand, and the third-person endings on the other. The most fundamental difference is that the third person requires no verbal ending at all: כָּתַב means *he wrote*, just as כָּתַבְתִּי means *I wrote.* The first person requires a formative ending, but the third person requires nothing more than the bare root itself. This would imply that to speak means primarily to speak of a thing that is *found there*—that is, as a third person. From this point of view, *to be* means *to be a phenomenon*; and in fact Hebrew often predicates existence by saying such and such *is found* (or, as the context usually makes clear, *is findable*). To *be,* in other words, is to be a *that.* This facet of the world stands in contradistinction to the Cartesian notion that to *be* is primarily to be a *thinking subject.*