

## Christopher Woods

This past year, **Christopher Woods** was fortunate to serve as a fellow in the Franke Institute for the Humanities. The fellowship allowed him to finish his book, *The Grammar of Perspective: The Sumerian Conjugation Prefixes as a System of Grammatical Voice*, which appeared in June as volume 32 of Brill's Cuneiform Monograph series. In the book, Chris tackles the long-standing problem of the Sumerian conjugation prefixes, perhaps the most poorly understood and perplexing elements of Sumerian verbal morphology. Approaching the problem from a functional-typological perspective and basing his analysis on semantics, Chris argues that these elements, in their primary function, constitute a system of grammatical voice, in which the active voice is set against the middle voice. The latter is represented by heavy and light markers that differ with respect to focus and emphasis. As a system of grammatical voice, the conjugation prefixes provided Sumerian speakers with a linguistic means of altering the perspective from which events may be viewed, giving speakers a series of options for better approximating in language the infinitely graded spectrum of human conceptualization and experience. As a companion project, Chris also finished an article ("The Conjugation Prefixes, the Dative Case, and the Empathy Hierarchy in Sumerian") that looks at an important non-voice function of the system, namely, the relationship between the prefixes and the *animacy* of peripheral case referents, as typified by the dative case. Here, he argues that the prefixes served as a means to linguistically express the notion of *empathy* — the degree to which speakers identify or share common concerns with the people and things under discussion — and so as a system constitute a graded empathy hierarchy. The paper will be published as part of the proceedings of a conference on grammatical case, entitled *Variations, concurrence et evolution des cas dans divers domaines linguistiques*, held in Paris in April 2007.

The remainder of Chris' time at the Franke Institute was devoted to research on his second book, a study of Sumerian writing and its morphemic basis, as well as a paper on notions of mythological geography and cosmography in Sumerian and Akkadian literature. In September he will deliver a paper at the Chicago-Paris working group, *Rendre visible l'invisible: pratiques religieuses de la représentation*, on the physical manifestations of Sumerian concepts of *me* 'essence,' *nam-tar* 'fate,' and *me-lam<sub>2</sub>* 'aura.' Each of these notions, which play a central role in Mesopotamian religion, represents a fundamentally abstract concept, as the glosses suggest. Yet each was commonly conceptualized and represented in purely physical terms, as real world, tangible objects — a striking instance of *coincidentia oppositorum*, a cross-culturally observed mythological theme in which identity consists of opposing attributes. In this paper Chris explores the nature and limitations of this mapping between the abstract and the concrete, how it was understood by ancients and exploited for metonymic purposes in literature. In October he will give a talk at the University of Toronto on recent advances and prospects in Sumerian grammar. This was Chris' first year as the editor of the *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*. The journal is now published bi-annually; the second volume under his direction, 2007/2, appeared as this *Annual Report* went to print.

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