

Learn to Read Ancient Sumerian

Learn to Read Ancient Sumerian An Introduction for Complete Beginners

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Jacket art: statue fragment bearing incised cuneiform inscription of Amar-Sin, and statue of Gudea of Lagaš. Courtesy of The Met Museum, New York, NY. Images are in the Public Domain.

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PREFACE -

Why a Sumerian Grammar?

When we founded our YouTube channel, *Digital Hammurabi* in 2018, we wanted to make Ancient Mesopotamia come alive to people of all walks of life. As Assyriologists (people who study the languages and culture of ancient Iraq), much of our training is in two very important languages from the Ancient Near East: Akkadian and Sumerian. As Josh specialized in Sumerian in his PhD program, we thought that it would be a good idea to make a series of videos teaching people to learn to read the Sumerian language. Of course, we assumed that there would be little interest in the topic; I mean, who would want to learn to read Sumerian, other than a small handful of people that like living in the basement of a library? Boy, were we ever wrong!

From the moment that we published the *Learn to Read Ancient Sumerian* video course on YouTube, it has consistently been the most viewed series on the Digital Hammurabi channel. Every week someone new asks for a Sumerian grammar that they can use in conjunction with the video series. There are many excellent and scholarly

Sumerian grammars that brilliant Assyriologists have written, including books by Attinger, Thomsen, Edzard, Jagersma, Zólyomi, Foxvog, and Hayes;¹ however, there is no good introductory grammar to recommend for absolute beginners, particularly those who are working on their own. To date, the brilliant scholars who have written monumental Sumerian grammars have written them for people that already know Sumerian. These are the reference grammars that you use when you are translating through *Gilgamesh*, *Enkidu*, and *the Netherworld* or *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, and you come across an unfamiliar Sumerian grammatical form. You already know the Sumerian language, and you can translate through these difficult compositions; but there are always things that are challenging to understand. In these moments, you turn to a reference grammar like some of the ones cited above in order to figure out the answer to that unclear grammatical form.

Unfortunately, if you don't already know Sumerian, and you want to pick up a book, read through it, and learn the language on your own, you are out of luck. That is, *until now*. The goal of this book is to teach you to learn to read

¹ Full references to these publications can be found in the Bibliography.

Sumerian on your own (or in a classroom), even if you have had no experience or training in the language. This Sumerian grammar is truly intended for the lay person. Although this is a book about Sumerian linguistics, there is only as much complex and “scholarly” language as necessary. When uncommon terms are used, like “comitative” or “agent”, we’ve made every effort to explain exactly what that word means as it appears. There is also a glossary of grammatical terms at the end of the book so you can look up definitions if you need to! So, if you have always wanted to learn to read Sumerian, but you don’t have the time or the money to attend a university, then this is the book for you!

The chapters are organized in such a way that you will learn the basics of the language in small, manageable pieces. This book can also be used in conjunction with our *Learn to Read Ancient Sumerian* video series on YouTube, allowing you, the student, to hear the lessons explained in video format.² Once book one is mastered, the student can move on to book two, which provides intermediate-level details on the Sumerian language. Rather than explaining every detail of a particular topic (the verb, for example),

² This book contains expanded and updated exercises, so they will not match the videos exactly. The bulk of the lessons are, however, the same.

this book (the first in a three-part series on learning to read Sumerian) provides the basic information necessary to understanding the verb. More detailed information will be given in book two, and finally, in book three of the series,³ we will look at the advanced aspects of the language. However, the majority of the basic concepts necessary to read and understand the Sumerian language will be presented in book one.

Before we begin our grand adventure into learning to read Sumerian, a caveat should be stated. To the brilliant Assyriologist reading this grammar - this book is in no way intended to cover every detail of Sumerian linguistics. It is not intended to be a reference grammar, and should not be treated as such. Its purpose is to provide the interested student a way to access Sumerian without the direct instruction of a professor of the language. It is our hope that, with a resource like this, we will see a new wave of excited students, beating down the doors of our institutions, wanting to become experts in the field of Assyriology.

With all of this in mind, it's time to begin your journey and learn to read the world's first written language, Sumerian... so come along for the ride!

³ Books two and three forthcoming.



Thanks and Acknowledgements

First and foremost, our heartfelt thanks to Dr. Paul Delnero who gave both of us a (painfully) rigorous grounding in the Sumerian language. It is truly no exaggeration to say that this book would not have been written without him. Josh would also like to thank Dr. Konrad Volk for his generous mentoring and support during his Fulbright year in Tübingen, Germany.

We cannot possibly acknowledge every Sumerologist whose work on Sumerian grammar has contributed to modern scholarship's understanding of the language, but we thank them wholeheartedly. We are proud and humbled to stand on the shoulders of such giants.

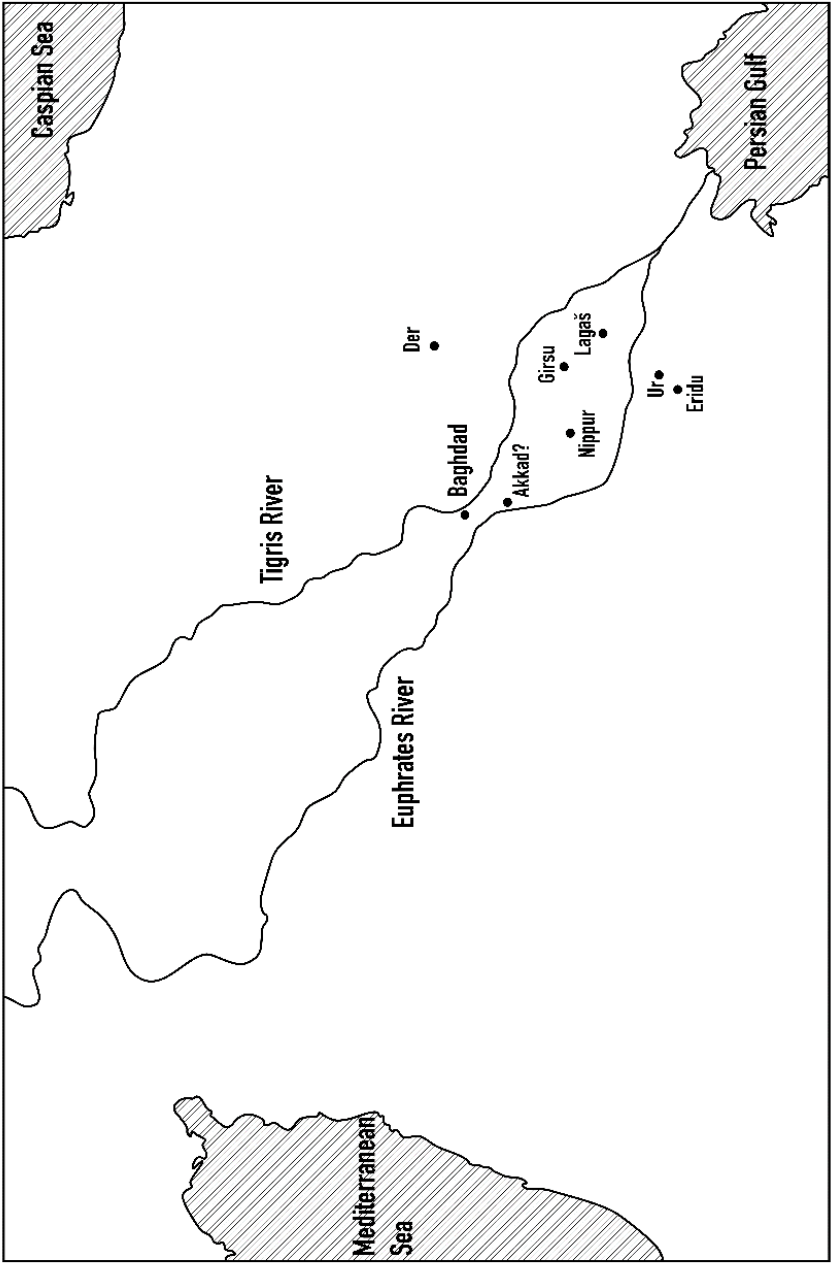
Thank you to the friends and colleagues who generously gave their time to read the manuscript of this book. Your corrections helped immeasurably. Errors contained within these pages remain our own!

Finally, thank you to everyone who emailed, or left comments, suggestions, and questions on our YouTube channel, and Paul, who volunteered to produce additional learning resources to accompany the video series. You all confirmed that Sumerian is worth teaching outside of universities, and your feedback prompted the creation of this book.

Introduction

While some other ancient languages are relatively well-known (Greek, Latin, or even Biblical Hebrew), comparatively few people know (or are even aware of) Sumerian – the world’s first written language. Appearing mostly on small tablets made of clay, written with curious ‘wedge-shaped’ signs, Sumerian writing was in use (and has been preserved from) over five thousand years ago!

Sumerian was spoken and written in a geographical region known today as “Mesopotamia”, which corresponds roughly to modern-day Iraq. Sumerian was used primarily in southern Mesopotamia (“Sumer”), though cuneiform was used throughout all of Mesopotamia, as well as parts of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and the Levant. There were even letters written in cuneiform discovered in Egypt!



Map showing Mesopotamia, and the ancient cities mentioned in this book. The modern city of Baghdad is shown for context.

Sumerian was one of the most important languages in Ancient Mesopotamia. The Sumerian texts refer to their language as “Emekiengi” (/eme ki.en.gi/ “the language of Sumer”), as well as “Emegir” (/eme.gir₁₅/ “native language”). A dialect of Sumerian that was used by a specialized group of religious personnel was called “Emesal” (/eme.sal/ “thin/fine tongue”). There is no known language that is like Sumerian; scholars refer to it today as a “language isolate”. While many suggestions have been made concerning languages that could be in Sumerian’s linguistic “family”, no suggestion has been shown to be valid to date. However, there was another influential language in the region that interacted with it: Akkadian. Both languages utilized the same cuneiform writing system, and had significant influences on each other.

The earliest Sumerian documents were less glamorous and romantic than we might hope, and mainly recorded administrative transactions. Over the more than 3,000 years in which the language was used, many different types of texts were composed, including administrative, literary, legal, and liturgical texts, not to mention incantations, letters, sign lists, and royal inscriptions! While there are a number of literary compositions that were written in the third millennium, the vast majority were composed in the

first part of the second millennium BCE (known as the Old Babylonian Period). It is from this period that we have extensive evidence for scribal education in Mesopotamia, where students learned to read and write Sumerian by copying a wide variety of compositions, including a vast array of literary texts.

In spite of its versatility, Sumerian was not to last as a living language; it died sometime in the late third or early second millennium. Despite this, Sumerian continued to be used in scholarly and cultic circles (much like the modern use of Latin) following its death as a spoken language. In fact, Sumerian compositions were copied and utilized at least until the end of the first millennium BCE!

The cuneiform signs that were used to write Sumerian are a little tricky to learn. In each chapter of this book, we will introduce you to a handful of commonly used cuneiform signs for you to memorize and learn to recognize. Although you might want to jump right in and read everything in cuneiform, I have found that it is much easier to learn the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the language in transliteration first. After the basics are mastered, it will be much more manageable to read more complex cuneiform, as opposed to learning both the language and the full writing system simultaneously. There are also

several additional exercises in the appendices in which you can utilize your new-found knowledge of cuneiform signs, including a selection of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions.

Writing Sumerian in English characters (we refer to this as “transliteration”) can seem a bit strange, and there are some common conventions that are used throughout this book (for example, /e₂ gal/ represents the signs /e₂/ and /gal/). However, unless you’re already a trained Assyriologist, you’re probably not going to be familiar with them, so here’s a brief explanation to help! This book will often use forward slashes (/ /) to mark a syllable, word, phrase, or sentence as transliteration (for example, /lugal-e e₂ mu-un-du₃). If there are dashes (-) between syllables, this means that these are the actual signs that appear on the tablet; thus, if you see /e₂ gal-la/, you would know that if you went and looked at the tablet then you would see the signs /e₂/, /gal/, and /la/. However, if we want to *normalize* the Sumerian signs (that is, writing the grammatical structure they represent), we will place periods (.) in between the signs (for example, /e₂ gal.a/, showing the /a/ as the marker of the adjective). Other nuances in the notation system will be discussed as they come up in the lessons.

It might also be useful to briefly discuss an important online resource. In this grammar you will see references to

“ePSD”. While this might sound like some kind of disease, it stands for the “Electronic Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary”. This is an extraordinarily useful resource, which not only provides definitions of Sumerian words, but lists of all possible meanings attributed to a particular cuneiform sign, as well as images of the signs themselves. It also allows you to search for the word you are looking up in the online database of Sumerian literary texts simply by clicking on the link. The ePSD website can be freely accessed online – simply search for “epsd Sumerian” using a web browser of your choice!

With all of this in mind, we can now begin our journey in Learning to Read Sumerian!

Chapter One

Cuneiform Signs and Sounds

Cuneiform Signs and Sounds

Learning to read any ancient language begins with learning the signs or symbols that the language uses to write its words and phrases. With languages like Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, the task is relatively simple, as they each use an *alphabet*: a fixed set of individual letters or symbols that represent the basic sounds of the language. Sumerian, on the other hand, uses a system of writing called cuneiform, which is used to write *words* and *syllables* rather than individual letters. That means there are MANY more signs to learn than what you will find in a standard alphabet. Thus, instead of initially learning all the many signs that are used to write the language (the cuneiform), we will learn to read the language primarily in English characters. However, with each lesson, the student will learn a handful of cuneiform signs, building a *repertoire* of sorts that will allow them to read simple cuneiform texts.

First, we must learn the basic sounds that appear in the Sumerian language, not only to know how the words generally sounded, but also to be able to interact with other

people about the Sumerian language in a way that follows the general conventions of pronunciation.⁴ These are the basic Sumerian sounds:

a	f <u>a</u> ther
b	<u>b</u> oy
d	<u>d</u> og
e	se <u>t</u> , he <u>y</u>
g	g <u>i</u> rl
ḡ	si <u>ng</u> er
ḥ	<i>Lo<u>ch</u></i>
i	bi <u>t</u> , be <u>e</u>
k	<u>k</u> ite
l	<u>l</u> ong
m	<u>m</u> an
n	<u>n</u> ice
p	<u>p</u> ark
r	<u>r</u> un
s	<u>s</u> wim
š	<u>sh</u> ee <u>t</u>

⁴ How Sumerian was pronounced is an extremely complicated issue, and this “pronunciation guide” is in no way intended to weigh in on the discussion. Our only goal here is to provide the student with a basic understanding of how we generally think the sounds were pronounced, and to give them the ability to interact with others who read and study Sumerian.

t	-	<u>t</u> ime
u		m <u>oo</u> , fl <u>oo</u> r
w		<u>w</u> ater
z		<u>z</u> ebra

As you can see, some of the sounds can vary, depending on the word in which the sound appears. Let's go through some of the letters with either foreign or varying sounds.

/e/

The sound /e/ can be either short (as in “set” or “bet”), or it can be long (as in “hey” or “way”). In the Sumerian word eš, “shrine” (written with the cuneiform sign /eš₃/), the /e/ is short. The same is true for the grammatical marker -še, “to, toward” (written with the cuneiform sign /še₃/). However, the word e, “house” (written with the cuneiform sign /e₂/), is commonly pronounced like the /ey/ in the word “hey”.

/ḡ/

The nasalized /g/ sound is one that can give students some trouble. It is, generally speaking, an /ng/ sound, as in “singer”. Thus, the Sumerian word diḡir, “god”, is actually pronounced “dingir”. The word pirḡ, “lion”, is pronounced “piring” with two short /i/ sounds. When the /ḡ/ appears at the beginning of a word, such as ḡiš, “wood”, it is

pronounced “ngish”, although it tends to sound more like “nyish”.

/h/

The sound that /h/ makes is akin to the /ch/ in the German word *Loch*. It appears at the beginning of a word in the very common verbal prefix *he-* (written with the cuneiform sign /*he*₂/). The word *hašhur*, “apple”, contains an /h/ in both the beginning and middle of a word, while *huluh* “to be frightened” has the consonant at the beginning and the end of the word. In each case, it is pronounced /ch/.

/i/

The vowel /i/ can be pronounced short (as in “*hit*” or “*knit*”), or it can be long (as the /ee/ in “*bee*” or “*knee*”). Thus, the word *nin*, “lady”, is pronounced with a short /i/. The /i/ in the divine name *Enlil* (written with the cuneiform signs /^d*en-lil*₂/⁵) is pronounced in the same way. However, the common word *ki*, “earth, land”, is pronounced like the word “key”, and the word *ensi*, “ruler”, is pronounced with a long vowel sound “en-see”.

⁵ The superscripted “d” in the name /^d*en-lil*₂/ is an Assyriological notation indicating the presence of the *di*gir cuneiform sign, which can be used to indicate that the name following following it is divine. More on this later!

/š/

The consonant /š/ sounds like the letters /sh/ in “show” and “sheet”. The preposition mentioned above, -še, is pronounced like the /she/ in the word “shed”. The city named Lagaš ends in a /š/, and is pronounced “Lagash”.

/u/

Finally, the vowel /u/ can be pronounced short (as in “floor”), or it can be long (as the /oo/ in “moo” or “boo”). Thus, the short /u/ in the word kur “mountain” is pronounced like the /oo/ in “floor”, while the word lugal “king” is long, pronounced “loo-gal” (with the /oo/ in “moo”).

What’s with the Subscripted Numbers?

What do those little subscripted numbers mean next to letters (e.g., /me₃/, /du₁₁/, /du₃/, /i₃/, /ḡa₂/)? Well, as you can imagine, representing Sumerian chicken-scratch...I mean, cuneiform, in English characters, can be difficult. Those subscripted numbers are a tool used by Assyriologists to make the process a little easier. I mean, learning Sumerian is hard enough as it is, am I right?

There are many cuneiform signs that are *pronounced* in the same way: they are *homophonous*, as in the English words *dear* and *deer*, *be* and *bee*, and *hey* and *hay*. Thus, there are different signs that are pronounced *du*, but mean different

things (e.g., /du₁₁/ “to say, speak”; /du₃/ “to build”; /du₁₀/ “to be good”). Each one is pronounced the same way, but they represent different cuneiform signs, and mean different things. Thus, in order to distinguish them when we write them in English, we put subscripted numbers next to them.











How Do Cuneiform Signs Work?

One of the most difficult aspects of learning Sumerian is mastering the cuneiform writing system. Cuneiform, or ‘wedge-shaped’ writing, was used to write both Sumerian and Akkadian, and could employ the use of several hundred signs in a particular period. While this may seem daunting at first, much of the fear and trepidation can be taken away if you realize that mastery of a basic set of signs will allow you to understand many Sumerian texts. In addition, with the resources available to us today (e.g., sign lists, online dictionaries, searchable databases), simply understanding how cuneiform signs “work” will go a long way. With that in mind, let’s take a look at the three basic ways that cuneiform signs can be used in Sumerian.

Single Words

𒀭 /e₂/ means “house” or “temple”, the sign 𒀭 /a/ represents “water”, and the sign 𒍪 /gu₄/ means “ox”. The individual sign was impressed onto the tablet to indicate that

particular word. Below is a list of cuneiform signs, the words that they correspond to, and their English translations:

	e ₂	house, temple
	lugal	king
	nin	lady
	tur	small
	dumu	son ⁶
	nita	male, man
	munus	woman
	ama	mother
	me ₃	battle
	kala	mighty, strong

⁶ A single cuneiform sign can have multiple meanings – the /tur/ sign can also be read as /dumu/!



kur mountain



digir god





Syllables

There is only so far that a language can go, however, if you can only represent individual objects or ideas. Cuneiform signs developed to accommodate a broader range of writing by having the signs also represent *syllables*. As the individual signs represented particular words, those signs began to be used to represent *sounds*, not the individual words. For example, the sign /ga/ means “milk”, the sign /an/ means “sky, heaven”, and /du₃/ represents the verb “to build”. All of these signs can *also* represent phonetic values of those words, so the verbal form *gandu* (written /ga-an-du₃/ in cuneiform signs) does not mean “milk sky build”, but instead “Let me build”. Instead of creating a particular cuneiform sign to represent the verbal form *gandu*, they used the signs /ga/ and /an/ as *syllables* before the verb /du₃/ “to build”.

In other words, in the verbal form /ga-an-du₃/, /ga/ and /an/ are being used as syllables to represent the sound /gan-/ in the verb *gandu*. With this principle of using word signs (or

logograms) to represent phonetic values (e.g., /ga/ “milk” and /an/ “sky” to write /ga-an-/), the Sumerian language was able to represent a whole host of grammatical and syntactical forms, verbs declensions, case markers... you name it.









To briefly recap, in Sumerian, a cuneiform sign can represent:

1. A word:  /e₂/ “house”
2. A syllable:    /ga-an-du₃/, used to write the verb *gandu*, not to mean “milk-sky-build”.

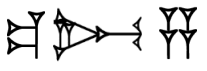

There is one final way in which a cuneiform sign can appear: as a determinative.


Determinatives

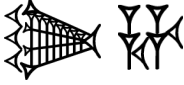
If you hadn't noticed, Sumerian signs can be a little... confusing, and not just for us reading them today. There were times that people writing Sumerian wanted to make sure that, when they wrote a word, it would not be confused with something else. For example, the word *guza* /gu-za/ means “chair”. If the writer wanted to let the reader know that the chair was made out of wood, they would write the


sign  /*ḡiš*/ (“wood”) before it (  ), which we write in English /*ḡišgu-za*/. The sign /*ḡiš*/ was not pronounced; it was simply written to let you know that the chair was made out of wood. The same was true for the names of gods. The name *Enlil* was given to one of the chief gods of the pantheon. When you wrote his name, you would not simply write /*en-lil₂*/; you would put the sign  /*diḡir*/ (“god”) before it: (  ).

Notice that the words for “wood” and “god” are neither pronounced nor translated; they are simply identifying the following word as belonging to a particular category (wood or deity). A sign that is used in this way is called a “determinative”; it “determines” what kind of word the noun will be. Signs that are used as determinatives can be written before or after the word that they are attached to. Below is a list of the most common determinatives, their meanings, and whether they occur before or after the noun they relate to:

- | | | | |
|-----------------|---|---------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. <i>ḡiš</i> |  | <i>ḡišgu-za</i> | made of |
| wood | before noun | | |
| 2. <i>diḡir</i> |  | <i>d_{en}-lil₂</i> | divine |
| being | before noun | | |

3. ki  eridu^{ki} place
name after noun


4. ku₆  suhur^{ku₆} fish
after noun

5. mušen  tu-gur₄^{mušen} bird
after noun


Notice that, when we write the determinative in English characters, we superscript the word (or the letter, in the case of /d/ for /diḡir/), in order to indicate that the sign is being used as a determinative. When you see a superscripted form like this, it will most often indicate a determinative... and they appear a lot!

To sum up, if you see a Sumerian cuneiform sign, it will almost always be functioning in one of three ways:

1. A word:


 /e₂/ “house”

2. A syllable:

 /ga-an-du₃/ “gandu”, not

“milk-sky-
build”



3. A determinative:

 den-lil_2 “Enlil”

Sumerian Nouns

We all remember from grade school that a noun is a “person, place, or thing”. The same is true in Sumerian (whew!). Nouns are the basic building blocks of the language, and understanding how they are represented in a sentence is a critical part of learning to read Sumerian.

Many languages distinguish between masculine and feminine nouns. For example, in Spanish, *el chico* “boy” is masculine, while *la chica* “girl” is feminine. Sumerian has no such distinction. Instead, Sumerian distinguishes between *animate* and *inanimate*: humans (animate) vs. animals and objects (inanimate). This is visible, for example, in the possessive suffixes used by Sumerian. Instead of a male/female distinction, Sumerian uses the ending -ani to mean “his” or “hers”, and the ending -bi to mean “its”. Thus, the language distinguishes between animate and inanimate, or person and non-person.

There are two types of nouns that will appear in Sumerian: “single-sign nouns”, and “compound nouns”. Single-sign nouns are just what they sound like: a single cuneiform sign is used to represent a word; we have seen many of these in this lesson. For example,  /e₂/ “house, temple”, and  /lugal/ “king”. Compound nouns are formed with two or more signs that usually have independent meanings.⁷ For example, the word /dub/ means “tablet”⁸ and the word /sar/ means “to write”. However, when you put them together, a /dub.sar/ is a “tablet-writer”, or a “scribe”. The word /e₂/ means “house”, and when it is combined with the sign /gal/ “great”, it means “palace” (“great house”).

Plurals

Now that we know how nouns are formed, we can look at how Sumerian makes these nouns plural. In English, we usually put an /s/ on the end of a word to make it a plural (not always, obviously). Sumerian also has an ending that it attaches to the noun in order to make it plural; that ending

⁷ This is distinct from two or more signs that are strung together with a reading that is different from the individual signs (called a DIRI compound by Assyriologists). A good example is the writing of the name of the city Lagaš (ŠIR.BUR.LA^{ki}). DIRI compounds will be covered in book two of this series.

⁸ The kind that you write cuneiform on!

is -ene (written /e-ne/). So, if /lu₂/ means “man”, then /lu₂.ene/ would mean “men”.

It would be nice if this ending were simply attached to all of the nouns that we see, wouldn't it? Alas, it can never be so simple. When we think about how English plurals are formed, we can't simply put an /s/ on every word either; sometimes we have to put /es/ instead. For example, the singular form “car” goes to “cars” in the plural, but the singular “box” is not written “boxs” in the plural; it is written “boxes”. A similar type of variation occurs in Sumerian as well.

As the ending -ene starts with a vowel sound, it is often not simply attached to the noun. Thus, you will rarely find “gods” written /diġir-e-ne/; it will usually appear /diġir-re-ne/. The /r/ that is attached to the first /e/ of /-ene/ represents the consonant found at the end of the noun.

Repeating the /r/ in the first syllable of the ending /.ene/ makes pronouncing the ending easier. We refer to the final consonant of a word (or syllable) as an “auslaut” (from the German word *Auslaut* “final position”). So, we would say that the word /diġir/ has an /r/ auslaut.

There are other ways in which Sumerian can make a word a plural. A rather intuitive way was simply to repeat the

noun; if /lugal/ means “king”, then /lugal-lugal/ meant “kings” or “all the kings”. They would also make a noun plural by reduplicating the adjective (we will learn about adjectives shortly). The word /lugal/ means “king”, and /gal/ is the adjective “great”. If you write /lugal gal/, it means “great king” (the adjective comes *after* the noun). If they write the adjective twice (/lugal gal-gal/), it means “great kings”.

Finally (and unfortunately), there are many instances in which a word written by itself can be either singular or plural. For example, if the word /lugal/ “king” appears in a sentence, it could either mean “king” or “kings”, depending on the context.

Adjectives

Adjectives are words that describe something about the noun that they go with (or modify). When we say “the big dog” in English, “big” is an adjective that modifies “dog”. What kind of dog? A *big* dog. The same is true in Sumerian. In English, the adjective comes *before* the noun, but in Sumerian, it comes *after* the noun. So, if /lugal/ means “king”, and /gal/ means “great”, then /lugal gal/ means “great king”.

There are certain clues that can tell you that you are looking at an adjective in a Sumerian sentence. Our first clue is word order; if a word comes after a noun, we should look to see if it is an adjective. Another clue is that many (not all) adjectives have an /-a/ attached to the end of them. If we wanted to say “good woman”, we would write /munus sag₉-ga/.⁹ Notice that the final /g/ of the adjective /sag₉/ (the auslaut), is duplicated in the following syllable, and is used to “attach” the /-a/ that is used to mark /sag₉/ as an adjective.

Another common example is the adjective /kala(g)/ “mighty, strong”. Notice that there is a final /g/ that is written in parentheses at the end of the word /kala/. This means that the word /kala/ has a /g/ auslaut, but the /g/ is not always written in cuneiform. Often, these types of auslauts will only appear when an ending is attached to the word (like the /-a/ used to mark the adjective). So, if we see /lugal kala-ga/, and we know that /lugal/ means “king” and /kala(g)/ means “strong”, then the /-ga/ must represent the /g/ from /kala(g)/, while the /a/ is the adjective marker.

It is very important to remember the word order in Sumerian, as there are a number of adjectives that often do

⁹/munus/ “woman”; /sag₉/ “good”

not appear with an /-a/ adjective marker. For example, /lugal gal/ means “great king”, even though it does not have the /-a/ adjective marker. The key is to remember:

1. Adjectives come after the noun they modify
2. They will sometimes have an /-a/ attached to them (usually with the auslaut consonant)
3. They may be unmarked (no /-a/).

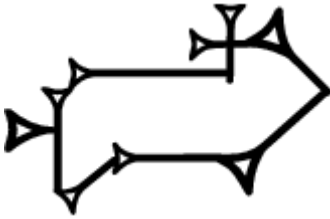
Vocabulary

ama	mother
diḡir	god
dub-sar	scribe
dumu	son
e ₂	house
gal	big, great
ḥur-saḡ	mountain
kala(g)	mighty
kur	mountain
lugal	king
maḥ	magnificent
me ₃	battle, combat
nin	lady
nita ₂	man, male
tur	small, young
ur-saḡ	hero

Cuneiform Signs



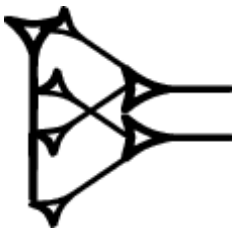
an, diğir



maḥ



gal



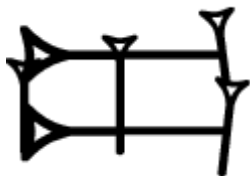
dumu, tur



e2



kur



kala(g)



lugal



la



re



bi₂, de₃, ne



ki

Exercises

Normalize and translate the following sentences. Answers and explanations for all exercises in the book can be found in Appendix B – no peeking!

1. e_2

2. lugal

3. lugal maḥ

4. nin

5. dub-sar

6. dub-sar-re-ne

7. kur

8. lugal gal-gal

9. nita₂ kala-ga

10. me₃ gal-gal-la

11. ḥur-saḡ

12. kur gal-la

13. e_2 maḥ

14. kur-kur

15. dumu-e-ne

16. dumu tur

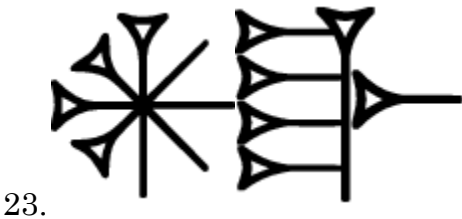
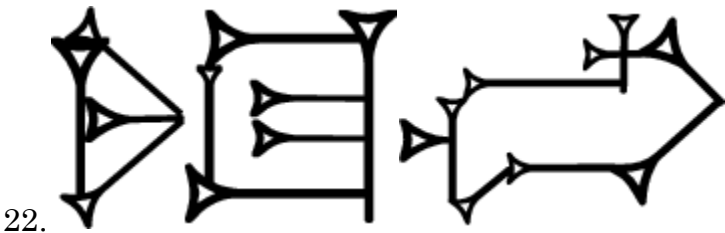
17. diğir

18. diğir-re-ne

19. ur-sağ kala-ga

20. ama gal

Transliterate¹⁰ and translate the following cuneiform:



¹⁰ Write each sign that you can see!

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