JOHN L. HAYES

A MANUAL OF SUMERIAN GRAMMAR

AND TEXTS

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AIDS AND RESEARCH TOOLS IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN STUDIES

Editor: Giorgio Buccellati

This is an introductory pedagogical grammar, designed for readers with
no previous knowledge of Sumerian or its writing system, to be used either with
or without a teacher. It includes a general description of the language and its
writing system, and a series of 22 lessons. Each lesson includes: sign-list and
vocabulary; cuneiform text(s); transliteration, transcription, and translation;
linguistic commentary. The texts used are royal inscriptions of the Ur III period,
presented in photograph or autograph. A certain amount of historical, archaeological,
and cultural background is also included. While primarily meant for students
of Mesopotamia who already are familiar with Akkadian, it is also designed for
students of West-Semitic, who may know no Akkadian. For this latter audience,
emphasis has been placed on transliteration and transcription, to enable the
Manual to be used without learning the cuneiform signs.

PREFACE

Anyone who has ever tried to learn or to teach Sumerian faces a difficult task. First of all, knowledge of Sumerian is still at an imperfect stage, with fundamental questions yet to be resolved. Second, there is a lack of both scholarly and pedagogical tools. Although a recent descriptive grammar exists, there is no up-to-date sign list or dictionary, and there is no text-book of any kind. This situation makes it difficult for both student and teacher, and makes it virtually impossible for someone to learn Sumerian without a teacher.

The aim of this book is to help alleviate this situation. It is a textbook of the Sumerian language, based on the royal inscriptions of the Ur III period. It is self-contained, so that it will be of use to students with or without a teacher. It includes a general description of the Sumerian language and its writing system, and then a series of graduated lessons. Each lesson contains: sign-list and vocabulary; notes on selected vocabulary; text(s) in cuneiform, either photograph or autograph; transliteration, transcription, and translation; line-by-line commentary on the text. Each lesson concludes with discussions, arranged thematically, of grammatical issues raised by the text, and of the meaning, function, and historical context of the text. Later lessons also include supplementary texts for review and practice, with no new vocabulary or grammar. In each lesson the grammar has generally been presented inductively from the texts. Finally, there are several appendices, some treating more general topics, and some serving as reference; the last of these is an index to grammatical (and other) points.

This book has been designed for a one-semester, three-hour per week class. It can serve as an introduction to the language for students who will not pursue their study of Sumerian any further, but it will also prepare students for more advanced work.

Two possible audiences are envisaged. The first is composed of those students who are comfortable in Akkadian, and who wish to learn Sumerian principally because of their interest in Mesopotamia. The second is composed of those students who are more comfortable in West-Semitic, and who wish to learn Sumerian principally because of their interest in Ebla. The latter audience will either not have studied Akkadian at all, or will have studied it at some time in the distant past, and may have forgotten much. A certain amount of material for this latter audience is included which will already be known to those who are familiar with Akkadian. Throughout, a knowledge of basic linguistic terms and concepts has been assumed. Since the learning of cuneiform signs often seems like an onerous chore for those students primarily interested in West-Semitic, the book has been designed with sufficient emphasis on transliteration and transcription to allow it to be used without learning the signs.

This book is based on the language of the royal inscriptions of the Ur III period. It is thus a grammar solely of the written form of the language. It attempts to be purely synchronic, avoiding a mixture of synchronic and diachronic levels. At the same time, areas of disagreement about the language are pointed out. Some stress has been placed on the methodological principles involved in studying a language like Sumerian. Since many of the problems in understanding Sumerian phonology, morphology, and even syntax are

rooted in difficulties with the script, a certain emphasis has been placed on the nature of the Sumerian writing system.

In order to give an idea of the context in which the texts are rooted, some archaeological, historical, and cultural information is included. Similarly, typological observations about the Sumerian language have been pointed out, to show that there are other languages which work in ways similar to Sumerian.

Because of the limited subject-matter of the texts which are used here, not all features of the language are encountered. Some of these features are touched upon in Lesson 23, where some alternative views of Sumerian grammar are sketched. Appendix 5 discusses the ways by which students, including those working alone, can deepen their understanding of Sumerian. This book will be followed by a second volume, consisting of heavily annotated extracts from Inanna's Descent. The reading of a major literary text will introduce students to a number of problems not encountered in reading the rather stereotyped texts used in this book.

Appendix 4 is a basic bibliography of the most important and interesting books and articles on Sumerian. In order for students to become become acquainted with the names of some of the scholars in the field, a number of modern-day Assyriologists and Sumerologists are quoted throughout the book; all works so quoted are listed in Appendix 4.

The genesis of this book goes back to my teaching of Sumerian at the University of California at Los Angeles. It is a pleasure to thank those who have helped out along the way. Thorkild Jacobsen was my first teacher of Sumerian; his influence can easily be seen throughout the book. Sara Denning-Bolle graciously drew the cuneiform signs used in the sign-lists and those scattered throughout the book; I am especially grateful to her. Barbara De Marco made a number of useful stylistic observations, and helped in the overall structure. Several individuals read earlier gestations; I would especially like to thank Daniel Foxvog, Samuel Greengus, and Stephen Lieberman. Other individuals read certain sections; I thank Denise Schmandt-Besserat and Russell Schuh. James Platt, who studied from this book, made a number of suggestions. Christopher Walker helped me attain access to a number of photos from the British Museum. Giorgio Buccellati helped in many ways, from the initial conception to the final product. And, I would like to thank the staff at Undena Publications, especially Frank Comparato and Patricia Oliansky. Faults remaining are my own; I would be very grateful to hear from readers with suggestions for revisions.

I would like to dedicate this book to my mother, for her support and encouragement over all the years.

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PART THREE: APPENDICES

TEXTS and ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Importance of Sumerian

For students of Mesopotamia, the need to study Sumerian is obvious. Alongside Akkadian, Sumerian is of prime importance for reconstructing many aspects of Mesopotamian history and culture. However, a knowledge of Sumerian is also useful for those students primarily interested in Semitic linguistics, and for those interested in biblical studies.

For Semitists, Sumerian is of importance because of its pervasive influence upon Akkadian – influence upon the phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Only through a knowledge of Sumerian can one differentiate between features of Akkadian which are a product of its Semitic ancestry, and those which have arisen secondarily under the influence of Sumerian.

Even though Eblaite has only been known for a short while, it is clear that its study will have a profound effect on Semitic linguistics. However, the majority of the texts found at Ebla are written in pure Sumerian, not in Eblaite. The remaining texts, although written in the Eblaite language, are couched in a Sumerian writing system which obscures many of the actual Eblaite forms. This means that a knowledge of Sumerian, especially a thorough understanding of the principles underlying the Sumerian writing system, is of importance for research in Eblaite.

Difficulties in studying Sumerian

Sumerian is not as well understood as is Akkadian; a number of features in the morphology and in the syntax are not clear. Although there has been considerable linguistic progress in the last two decades, enough still remains unsure so that scholars often have widely divergent views about Sumerian. Some of the reasons for these difficulties are summarized here; they will be discussed in more detail in the course of this book.

(1) Sumerian is not genetically related to any other known language, living or dead. By contrast, it was discovered early-on that Akkadian was a Semitic language. This genetic relationship aided early scholars in their reconstruction of Akkadian grammar and vocabulary. But in the case of Sumerian, there is no such help available.

(2) The writing system of Sumerian only imperfectly mirrors the spoken language; it does not indicate all the grammatical features which are known to have existed in the spoken language. This schematic nature of the script makes it very difficult to reconstruct the morphology.

(3) There are many instances of sentences which seem to differ only slightly in their morphology or syntax. But with no comparative evidence, and with no native speakers to turn to, it is difficult to determine what these differences in morphology and syntax may mean. There are undoubtedly many nuances of meaning which cannot be determined at all.

It has been remarked by Igor Diakonoff, "It is a joke well known among

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Assyriologists that there are as many Sumerian languages as there are Sumerologists" (1976:99). Similarly, Thorkild Jacobsen has recently said:

> Knowledge of Sumerian is still in a rudimentary, experimental stage where scholars differ on essential points, so that translations, even by highly competent scholars, may diverge so much that one would never guess that they rendered the same text. ... Scholars have not yet been able to agree on basic grammar and its restraints (1987:xv).

In certain ways, however, it is actually easier to study Sumerian than it is to study, for example, Akkadian. This is because Sumerian does not have (at least, there is not visible) a great deal of "morphology"; there are not a large number of grammatical forms to learn. There is nothing like the weak-verb systems of Akkadian and Hebrew, which require a great deal of sheer memorization. Rather, many students find the difficulties to be more conceptual in nature: the language works in ways different than English, or other languages which students are likely to have been exposed to. It is sometimes difficult to understand some of these principles, and even more difficult to observe these principles in action.

Historical background and texts used

The texts utilized here are all royal inscriptions of the Ur III Dynasty (approximately 2112–2004 BC), sometimes referred to as the Neo-Sumerian Dynasty. It grew out of the vacuum left by the collapse of the Dynasty of Akkad, which had been ruled by Akkadian-speaking kings of Semitic stock (approximately 2334–2193 BC).

The Ur III Dynasty was founded by Ur-Nammu, who ruled in the city of Ur from about 2112 to 2095. He had previously been governor of Ur under the suzerainty of the king of Uruk, Utu-Hengal; he may have been a relative of the latter. At some point he declared himself independent. During his rule, and especially during the rule of his son Shulgi, the territory controlled by Ur expanded, until it reached most of the area previously controlled by the rulers of Akkad, that is, most of central and southern Mesopotamia. After three more descendants of Ur-Nammu, the dynasty collapsed in 2004, partially due to pressures from the intrusion of nomadic, Semitic-speaking tribes. Thus, the Ur III period lasted a little more than a century; with the fall of Ur, Sumerian civilization, for all intents and purposes, also fell.

Ur III was a period of relative calm and stability in much of Mesopotamia. Because of the blooming of Sumerian art and literature, which had been somewhat submerged under the Semitic dynasty of Akkad, this period is often called the "Sumerian Renaissance". Towns were fortified, many temples were rebuilt, and canals were dredged; trade with various foreign countries flourished.

The city of Ur itself, the capital of the Ur III Dynasty, was primarily excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley, perhaps the most famous of all Near Eastern archaeologists. The principal results were published by him and others in a series entitled Ur Excavations. Ten volumes have appeared: Volume I in 1929, and Volume VII in 1976 (Volume X appeared in 1951). Woolley popularized his results in a one-volume work entitled Ur of the

Chaldees (1929). After Woolley's death, P.R.S. Moorey revised and updated the work; it appeared as Ur 'of the Chaldees' (1982). This is a readable and interesting description of the city at different historical periods.

Many Ur III texts have been preserved. The vast majority are economic and administrative; these number in the tens of thousands. Unfortunately, there are very few texts of what might be called a "historical" nature. There is much that is not known about such matters as Ur-Nammu's rise to power, the internal politics of the Ur III Dynasty, or even the physical extent of the Ur III "Empire"; C. J. Gadd refers to the "tantalizing want of information due to the singular unwillingness of the age to record even the triumphs, much less the failures, of its kings" (1971:617).

Some original literary texts are also preserved from this period, as well as older works now committed to writing. Jacobsen says that the kings of Ur III, especially Shulgi,

> were much concerned to preserve extant older literary works and to encourage the creation of new ones. The court background of these works is unmistakable. ... A major portion of Sumerian Literature as we have it traces back to the court of the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur, where it was composed and performed by the royal bards (1987:xii, 277).

The royal inscriptions of the Ur III kings have been the object of study by W. W. Hallo. According to Hallo's definition, royal inscriptions are texts which "were dedicated either by, or to, or on behalf of the king" (1962:1). Hallo catalogued these texts, providing a standard system of reference. He also studied the different sub-types of royal inscriptions, categorizing them according to their function and according to their form.

These texts range in difficulty, from quite simple to very complex. They also contain a high degree of formulaity; many of the epithets of the king, for example, occur in a large number of the inscriptions. Even the phrasing of the verbal expressions is rather fixed. Since the genre of royal inscriptions existed both before and after the time of Ur III (in Sumerian and in Akkadian), a knowledge of the Ur III texts gives immediate access to other similar texts.

There has been much recent discussion about when Sumerian ceased to be a spoken language. This is not an easy question to answer; there are both historical issues and issues of general linguistics to resolve. (The subject is further discussed in Appendix 1.) Most Sumerologists would say that Sumerian was a living spoken language in Sumer during the Ur III period, although some would say that it was already starting to die out during the latter part of this period. A minority would say that spoken Sumerian was either pretty far on its road to extinction, or might even have ceased to be a spoken language by the end of the Ur III period. Even the proponents of this view, however, would admit that the language of the Ur III royal inscriptions is "good" Sumerian, unlike some Sumerian of later periods.

PART ONE: THE SUMERIAN LANGUAGE

CLASSIFICATION

Linguistic affiliation

Sumerian appears to be what is called a language-isolate, that is, it has no genetic connection with any known language, living or dead. Attempts have been made to link Sumerian with many different languages – the most popular have been Hungarian, Turkish, Caucasoid, Dravidian, and the Indus Valley language(s) – but none of these has found general acceptance. Such attempts have usually been based on surface-level resemblances with languages which are typologically similar.

A. Leo Oppenheim has pointed out:

> The fact that Sumerian is a complicated though very well understood language which cannot be linked to any other known language has created during the past hundred years a large literature attempting to relate Sumerian to practically all languages between Polynesia and Africa. The authors of such studies unfailingly "prove" that either their own language or a language in which they happen to be interested is related to ancient Sumerian (1971:219).

Sir Gerard Clauson has summed this up: "Sumerian ... has every appearance of being a 'loner', in spite of numerous attempts to foist relatives upon it, some grotesquely improbable"(1973:38).

The possibility that a connection might be found with some other language is slim. Any related languages have probably died off without leaving any written records. The original homeland of the Sumerians is unknown, so it is not even clear where its possible linguistic relatives might be located. Wherever such a homeland might be, it was probably not in an area where writing developed very early.

Dialects

The Sumerians referred to their own language by a term often transliterated as: eme-gir$_{15}$. The value of the second sign is not sure, and so the term is variously transliterated as eme-gi$_7$, eme-ku, etc., especially in older secondary literature. eme means "tongue" in Sumerian. The meaning of gir$_{15}$ is unsure. Older scholars thought that it meant "Sumer"; in that case, the term would mean "language of Sumer". More recently it has been argued that the term means something like "noble, prince"; eme-gir$_{15}$ would then mean "the noble language". Because of the uncertainties in reading this word, the term "Main Dialect" is often used instead.

There is also a "dialect" called eme-sal. The meaning of the second element of the name is uncertain; it may mean "fine, thin". The "status" of this dialect is also uncertain. It has traditionally been called a "women's language", because it appears in literary texts of the Old Babylonian period, used by women when speaking to other women. For example, in the myth "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld", when Inanna speaks to her aide Nin-

Shubur, she does so in Emesal. There is no consistency in this usage; in other texts Inanna may speak in Main Dialect. Moreover, in texts of the later Old Babylonian period Emesal is also used for specific genres of text. Certain kinds of lamentations are always written in Emesal, even though recited by male priests. (Texts in some of these genres were preserved and even composed in schools for a thousand years after Sumerian had ceased to be a spoken language.) This use by men makes it difficult to determine exactly what Emesal is, and whether or not it should be classified as a "dialect".

Emesal is well-attested from the beginning of the Old Babylonian period on. However, there appear to be at least one or two Emesal forms in the Gudea texts, and there has been a recent attempt to see Emesal forms in a group of texts written in an unusual orthography from Tell Abu Salabikh (approximately 2600 BC).

Emesal differs from Main Dialect in phonology and in the lexicon, but not apparently in morphology. In phonology, the Emesal forms often appear to be older. For example, the word for "lord" in Main Dialect is /en/, in Emesal /umun/. It is difficult to say exactly what the more original form was; it may have been something like */ewen/ or */uwun/. In any case, the Emesal form appears more conservative than the Main Dialect form. According to other scholars, however, Emesal forms are linguistically the more innovative; Emesal forms result from consonants being shifted to a more fronted or to a higher place of articulation. For example, Main Dialect /g/ › Emesal /b/; Main Dialect /d/ › Emesal /z/, etc. But there are several exceptions to these general principles, and there are a number of details of Emesal phonology which are not clear. As an example from the lexicon, the Main Dialect word for the interrogative "what?" is /ana/; the Emesal form is /ta/. These are apparently two etymologically distinct words.

It has been claimed that Emesal shares certain characteristics of "women's languages" which occur elsewhere in the world. In particular, women's languages are said to differ from "standard" dialects in phonology – the women's dialect being more conservative than the standard dialect – and in the lexicon. More work needs to be done in defining the characteristics of Emesal, and in comparing Emesal with other women's languages.

Not much is known about geographical variation within Sumerian. The extent of the Sumerian-speaking area is unsure; Sumerian texts are preserved from only a rather limited area. Moreover, the nature of the Sumerian writing system makes it difficult to see such variation. Only traces can be found, particularly in the later periods. There was undoubtedly more dialectal variation present than the writing system allows us to see.

Similarly, although Sumerian was spoken over a long period of time, there does not appear to be much variation before the Old Babylonian period. More differentiation is noticeable in post-Old Babylonian periods, when Sumerian was no longer a spoken language. But here the differences may reflect the practices of different scribal schools and scribal centers, and not differences which were originally in spoken Sumerian.

There are occasional references in late Sumerian texts to what are apparently specialized languages, or jargons of particular occupations. For example, there are passing references to eme-utula, "the language of shepherds", and to eme-má-laḫ₄-a, "the language of sailors". It is hard to say what these dialects or jargons were like. Similarly, there are only passing references to what may be some kind of "literary dialects": eme-gal, "great