

A Gentle Introduction to Sumerian Grammar



Keywords

Sumerian language grammar

[CDLI](#)

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§1 Introduction

§1.1 Organization of the grammar

¶1.1.1 This grammar hopes to provide an up-to-date, non-technical introduction to Sumerian, with a brief description of each grammatical phenomenon, an overview of the history of its study and a list of bibliographical references dealing with and keyed to each particular phenomenon. Main section numbers such as “§4 Genitive” will be treated as independent chapters and bibliographies may be found at the end of each. Individual topics will be indicated by numbered subheadings, e.g., “2.1.1.4 Evidence for the d/r phoneme in post-OB sources”. Once the broad outlines of the most prominent grammatical categories have been sketched out for the entire grammar, detailed work on the *history* of the study of each phenomenon will be undertaken.

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¶1.1.2 Above all, this grammar will describe the state of research among those who specialize in Sumerian, and will offer a few authentic examples of each grammatical phenomenon. Lengthy discussions of particular grammatical theories such as Minimalism, Lexical-Functional Grammar or Role and Reference Grammar will be avoided, unless they have played a significant role in the Assyriological literature. New interpretations or hypotheses will also, in general, be avoided. Bibliographies will be presented primarily according to year of publication rather than author in order to emphasize the history of the area of research.

¶1.1.3 All examples will be translated as fully as possible and provided with interlinear glosses, and all quotations of secondary literature in languages other than English will be offered in translation. No footnotes or endnotes will be used, and all references to secondary literature refer to the bibliographical notes within that particular section. In general, no more than three or four paragraphs should occur under any particular subheading, so as to allow for ease of reference, e.g., “§2.1.1.4, para. 3”.

¶1.1.4 Comments, offers of assistance, and all other communications having to do with the grammar should be addressed to Cale Johnson, cale@ucla.edu.

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§1.2 Orthographic conventions

¶1.2.1 This grammar will attempt to reflect Assyriological conventions as much as possible in its representations of cuneiform, but certain modifications will be adopted that make it easier to represent the writing system on the web. Where this grammar departs from Assyriological convention, it will generally adhere to the ASCII Text Format (ATF) conventions adopted by the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative and the Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary.

¶1.2.2 In dealing with Sumerian, Assyriologists use the word “sign” to refer to the cuneiform sign itself, whether on the original tablet or represented in a photograph or drawing. This usage corresponds to the term “character” in Sinological work and “glyph” in Mayanist practice. Assyriologists, however, also frequently represent cuneiform signs using a set of alphabetic codes known as “transliterations” such as the following:

[fig. 1: {PA} PA ZERO, pa "branch, leaf", ugula "boss" in table]

1.2.3 Each transliteration consists of one or more letters, all of which are in either upper or lower case. If the letters that make up the transliteration are written in upper case, e.g., “PA” in fig. 1, then the transliteration merely refers to or represents the cuneiform sign without making any claim about how the sign is pronounced. Letters in lower case, e.g., “pa” in fig. 1, presuppose a phonetic interpretation on the part of the modern text editor. “pa” is a close approximation of the pronunciation of the Sumerian word for “branch”.

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§1.3 Basic tools

There are a number of items that serve as standard reference works; they are subcategorized and [listed below](#).

§2 Phonology

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§4 Genitive

§4.1 What is the genitive case?

In general terms, the genitive case is used to code a relation between two noun phrases. The prototypical use of the genitive case is to indicate that the referent of one noun phrase is in possession of the referent of another noun phrase. There are two constructions in English that express possession:

(1) the king's child

[NP(possessor)]'s [NP(possessed object)]

(2) the leaves of a tree

[NP(possessed object)] of [NP(possessor)]

One may well object that the leaves of a tree are part of the tree rather than an object that is possessed by the tree. This slight incongruity highlights the essential property of the genitive case: at the most basic level, the genitive case codes any relation between two noun phrases, including possession, location and composition as well as a variety of extended syntactic functions.

Like English, Sumerian has two constructions for expressing genitival relations:

(3) dumu lugal.la

/dumu lugal-ak/

child king-GEN

“the king's child”

(4) gisz.a pa.bi

/gisz-a pa-bi/

tree-LOC branch-3POSS.NH

“the branch of a tree”

The example in (3) is generally considered the “ordinary” genitive construction in Sumerian, while the construction in (4) is usually termed the anticipatory genitive (AG).

Vocabulary (coming soon)

[Bibliography](#) (coming soon)

C. Johnson

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