

An introduction to Sumerian Cuneiforms

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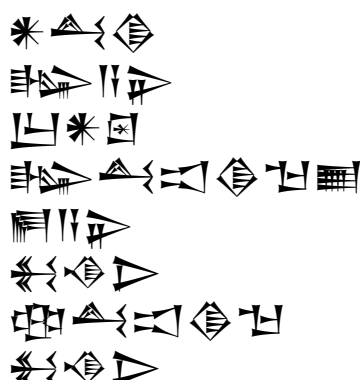
Marcus Santos

Sergio Teixeira

Chapter 1

Ur-Nammu-9

The Sumerian cuneiform script was the first writing system invented by humankind. Therefore, all educated individuals should learn this 5,000-year-old script. In this tutorial, we will learn how to read and reproduce the writing on the Ur-Nammu 9 Brick.



There are few grammar books for Sumerian. Unfortunately, Marie-Louise Thomsen’s “**The Sumerian Language**” does not use cuneiform, so I cannot recommend it. This leaves us with John Hayes’ Manual of Sumerian and Joshua Bowen’s Learn to Read Ancient Sumerian. Therefore, I advise you to buy “**A Manual of Sumerian: Grammar and Texts**” by Hayes to learn this ancient language in depth. It is also a good idea to acquire “**Learn to Read Ancient Sumerian**” by Joshua Bowen and Megan Lewis.

1.1 Disclaimer

The authors of this book are not a scholars in Sumerian studies in any sense. Therefore, they may not help serious students of cuneiforms to solve their pendencies and questions.

For scholars and graduate students who are writing their thesis, the authors recommend John Hayes' **Manual of Sumerian** and Joshua Bowen's **Learn to Read Ancient Sumerian**. Hayes' manual strong points are inscriptions and dedicatories, while Bowen and Lewis prefer literary texts.

1.2 Sentence structure

To discuss grammar, scholars use a transliteration of Sumerian cuneiforms to the Latin alphabet. Below, you will find the transliteration of the Ur-Nammu-9 document that we will study in this lesson.

```

1- [NANNA
2-     LUGAL.ANI].{(R)} #dat           -- For his king
3- [UR-NAMMU
4-     LUGAL.URIM5.{AK}].{E} #gen/erg -- the king of UR,
5- [E2.ANI].{Ø} #object                -- his temple
6- MU.NA.DU3 #verb                     -- he built
7- [BAD3.URIM5.{A(K)}].{Ø} #gen/obj    -- the city wall of Ur
8- MU.NA.DU3 #verb                     -- he built

```

1.3 Grammar functions in transliteration

In the transliteration, grammar functions are represented by indicators between braces. In the example, the grammar functions are:

- 1,2 The benefactive has an unwritten R, which is represented by {(R)}
- 3,4 The genitive ends in {AK} after consonant; the ergative ends in {E}
- 5 The object of the action has no ending, which is represented by {Ø}
- 7 The genitive has an unwritten K, which is represented by {A(K)}

Square brackets delimit a noun chain, i.e., a noun followed by a sequence of limiting qualifiers that may contain adjectives, apositives and a genitive. Example: [UR-NAMMU LUGAL.URIM5.{AK}].{E} means

[Ur-Nammu, Ur's king].{task-doer}

After the close square bracket, a braced symbol suffix indicates the function of the noun chain. For instance, .{E} shows that [UR.NAMMU...].{E} is the doer of the sentence's task. The {(R)} symbol shows that [NANNA...].{(R)} receives the benefits of the task: [God Nanna].{benefactive}.

The noun chain may contain a genitive, as was stated in the previous paragraph. If you don't know the role of a genitive, it is a grammar function that shows possession. In English, the Saxon genitive marks the possessor with apostrophe-s and comes before the noun: *Ur's king*. In Sumerian, the possessor follows the noun and is marked with {AK} after consonant and {K} after vowel: {URIM5 MA} .{K} is equivalent to *Ur's king*.





Braces represent the grammatical function endings. For instance, the ergative function-ending represents the doer of the task and is written as {E} #erg, where #erg is a comment that will be omitted in more advanced lessons. The person who receives the benefit of the action is called dative and is represented as {RA} #dat, where the #dat comment is usually omitted.

The empty ending of the object is commented as {} #obj or simply as {} #obj. In the example, the objects are the constructions of king Ur-Nammu:

```
[E2 A NI] .{ }           -- his temple
[[BAD3.URIM5] .{A(K)}] .{ } -- the city wall of Ur
```

Unwritten endings are placed between parentheses, such as {(R)}.

1.4 Line 1 & 2



The Ur-Nammu 9 document is divided into eight rectangles. In the first rectangle, the text    is written, which is the Sumerogram for the name of Nanna, the god of the Moon. The  symbol is read as *an* (or *digir*) and is determinative for deity. We will learn in the next paragraph that this word is in the dative case; therefore, the translation of the rectangle is “*For Nanna.*”



       


(tr an nanna lugal a ni)

For the god Nanna, his master,

   (d_{nanna}) the god Nanna

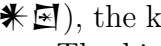


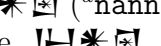

  (lugal) king, master






  (a ni) his


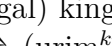
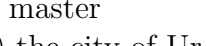




Sumerian uses symbols, called determinatives, to make the meaning clearer. The star  in front of a god's name is the determinative of divinity. In transliteration, the determinatives are represented as a superscript letter, such as ^dnanna.












The Emacs command (tr an nanna lugal a ni) is used to typeset Sumerian. There are instructions about this command on the page where you found this tutorial.



1.5 Line 3 & 4

The third line of the Ur-Nammu-9 document contains the name of Ur-Nammu () the king who rebuilt the temple of ^dNanna and is the document's author. The king's name is formed by  (ur), which means *man* or *dog*, and  (^dnanna), the Mother Earth of the Sumerians. Therefore, the king's name, , means "*The Man of Nammu.*" Note that the determinative of deity () precedes the goddess's name.

				
ur- ^d nammu	lugal	urim	ma	ke4
(tr ur nammu lugal urim ma ke4)				
<i>Ur-Nammu, the king of Ur,</i>				

 (ur-^dnammu) King Ur-Nammu
 (lugal) king, master
 (urim^{ki}) the city of Ur
 (ki) *determinative of places*
 (ma(k)) *dative after consonant M*
 (ke4) *contraction of dative with ergative*
 (make4) *genitive contracted with ergative*

The fourth line contains      (tr lugal urim2 ma ke4), where  (tr urim) represents the city that was the cult center of Nanna. It is formed by the Sumerograms (tr shesh) () and (tr unug) (). The Sumerogram  is the determinative for geographic names. Determinatives, such as  ("digir" - deity) and  ("ki" - place), are not pronounced. Their role is to make the meaning of the word clearer.

The genitive case denotes possession. Unlike the dative, English has a genitive case, formed by an apostrophe followed by "s." In English, one would say, "**Urim's King.**" In Sumerian, the genitive follows the possessor and is marked with {ak} after consonants and {k} after vowels. In this nominal chain, the "a" of {ak} was assimilated with the previous consonant, becoming  (ma). The Sumerogram  (ke4) represents the {k} of the genitive and the {e} of the ergative.

Sumerian is an ergative language, meaning the agent of transitive actions is marked. In Sumerian, the ergative marker is {e}. However, the subject of

an intransitive verb, like “to go” or “to sleep,” does not receive the {e} that marks the agent, whom linguists call ergative. Unmarked functions, such as the Sumerian subject of an intransitive verb and direct object of a transitive verb, are called absolutive and said to be marked with the null symbol {Ø}. In short, for the Sumerians and modern Basques, if the subject of a sentence does not perform a task, it cannot be called ergative.

1.6 Line 5

The fifth rectangle introduces the temple (22 - 𒂍) that Ur-Nammu built. The expression 𒂍𒀭𒀭𒀭 (e2 ani) means “*his temple*.” It is in the absolutive case and, therefore, receives the null symbol mark {Ø}, a technical way of saying it does not bear a mark. The noun chain 𒂍𒀭𒀭𒀭 (e2 ani) undergoes the consequences of the task performed. Thus, it is often called patient, accusative or target.

𒂍 𒀭 𒀭𒀭

e2 a ni
(tr e2 a ni)

his temple

𒂍 (e2 me esh) *plural*, houses, temples

𒂍𒀭𒀭 (lugal) king, master

𒀭𒀭 (a ni) his

1.7 Line 6

A verbal stem prefixed by a sequence of particles and possibly followed by a suffix is called a *verbal chain*. The verbal chain 𒄩𒄩𒄩𒄩𒄩 (mu-na-du3) can be translated as “*built*.”

𒄩𒄩𒄩𒄩𒄩

mu na du3
(tr mu na du3)

he has built for the god

𒄩 (du3) to build, to make, to plant

𒄩𒄩 (mu) *conjugation prefix (CP), ventive prefix*, here

𒄩𒄩 (na) *cross-references the dative*

The verbal chain of the example has two prefixes and a stem:

𒄩 — Ventive Conjugation Prefix (CP). The Ventive CP indicates that the action occurs here, close to the speaker.

𒄩 — Dimensional Prefix (DP) cross-referencing the dative. Sumerian has a DP for each sentence component, except the ergative and the absolutive cases.

𒄩 — verbal stem, *he has built*

1.8 Line 7 & 8

The noun phrase 𒂍𒄩𒄩𒄩𒄩𒄩 (tr bad3 urim ma) means “*wall of Ur.*” The sumerogram 𒂍 (tr bad3) means “*city wall.*” The {(k)} of the genitive is omitted, meaning it is not expressed because it was not pronounced at the end of a nominal phrase.

𒂍	𒄩	𒄩	𒄩	𒄩	𒄩	𒄩
bad3	urim		ma	mu	na	du3
(tr bad3 urim ma mu na du3)						
<i>the city wall of Ur, he has built</i>						

𒄩 (ra) ra, *dative ending*

𒄩 (na) *reference to dative*

1.9 Reading the brick

Let's read the whole brick inscription.

1. (tr an nanna) (𒀭𒄩𒄩) – ***For the god Nanna...***
2. (tr lugal ani) (𒌦𒌦𒄩𒄩) – ***his master***, The word ‘lugal’ means king or master. It is formed from ‘lu2,’ (𒌦) which means ‘man,’ and ‘gal,’ (𒄩) which can be translated as ‘great.’ The expression ‘a-ni’ (𒄩𒄩) is equivalent to the possessive pronoun ‘his.’
3. (tr ur-nammu) (𒌦𒀭𒄩) – ***Ur-Nammu,***

4. (tr lugal urim ki ma ke4) (𒌦𒀭𒌦𒀭𒌦𒀭𒌦𒀭) – *the king of Ur*,
5. (tr e2 a ni) (𒂗𒀭𒀭𒀭) – *his temple*, Remember that you already learned the meaning of ‘a ni.’
6. (tr mu na du3) (𒄩𒀭𒄩𒀭) – *he has built*.
7. (tr bad3 urim ma) (𒂗𒀭𒀭𒀭𒀭𒀭) – *The wall of Ur*,
8. (tr mu na du3) (𒄩𒀭𒄩𒀭) – *he built for Nanna*.

1.10 Translation

The meaning of the whole document is something like this: ***“For the god Nanna, his Master, Ur-Nammu, the King of Ur, built his temple. The king also built the city walls of Ur for Nannaa.”***

1.11 The method

I will use the method I employed in this first chapter to introduce a few other documents. In other words, each chapter will contain grammar, vocabulary, syllables, and essential Sumerograms for reading a Sumerian document. This methodology ensures you can handle a manageable amount of information initially.

After discussing how to read a Sumerian inscription, each chapter contains an in-depth presentation of the Sumerian grammar. Initially, you can do without reading this final grammar section. You can return to return to it after practicing Sumerian with a few inscriptions.

1.12 APPENDIX: Grammar notes

Congratulations. You have finished the first lesson. This appendix gives further details about the case elements, the noun chain and the verbal chain. If you don’t feel like it, you don’t need to read it now. You can return to this lesson after completing a few Sumerian documents.

Case elements

The subject of a sentence is the topic of the conversation. Besides the subject, the sentence may have other marked components called case elements. Case

Ergative: ~~the~~ {e} task doer

(tr lugal e bad3 urim ma mu na du3)

Dative: 𐎠𐎫𐎼𐎿 {ra}/ 𐎠𐎡𐎹 (-na-) for

(tr nin a ni ra lugal e bad3 urim ma mu na du3)

Locative: $\nabla \bullet \{a\} / \nabla \bullet (-ni-)$ in, on

(tr lugal e uru a e2 mu ni du3)

Terminative: 止 • {še}/止 • (-ši-) in order to

(tr ê26 e uru êu10-my she-goal ga shi êen)

I will go there to my city.