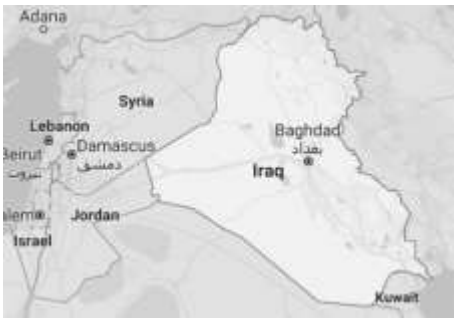
Your name:

The UK Linguistics Olympiad 2020

Round 1

Problem 2. Curious Cuneiform (5 marks)



Cuneiform is the oldest known writing system, dating back to about 3,400 BC. Its letters look like wedges (in Latin: *cuneus*) and were made with sharp sticks in clay tablets; they started out as pictures, but quickly became unrecognisable. It was invented in Babylon (in modern Iraq) and (unlike Egyptian hieroglyphs, which developed slightly later) it was used for writing several different languages - Babylonian, Assyrian and Sumerian. The signs shown below were used in the libraries of the seventh-century BC Assyrian king Assurbanipal for writing Babylonian words, but they have been slightly simplified, in that marks of vowel length have been missed out.

Note: *š* is pronunced 'sh'. In this table, the columns **do not** match; so (A) *maru* is **not** the pronunciation of Babylonian form 1.

Pronunciation and meaning	Babylonian	(A-H)
(A) *maru* 'son'	1. 𒈬 𒁹	
(B) *ruqu* 'distance'	2. 𒊭 𒈪	
(C) *qulu* 'silence'	3. 𒁹 𒆠 𒈪	
(D) *lušepisamma* 'I will get someone to do'	4. 𒈫 𒊭	
(E) *ubla* 'she brought'	5. 𒌋 𒈬	
(F) *lanu* 'form'	6. 𒆠 𒈪	
(G) *nubalu* 'chariot'	7. 𒈬 𒈫	
(H) *balu* 'without'	8. 𒈪 𒀀 𒀀 𒈬 𒈬	

Q2.1. Your first task is to work out how each Babylonian form was pronounced and to write the correct letter (A-H) in the third column.

Q2.2. Write the following in cuneiform:

9. *šeru* 'morning'	
10. *qula* 'shut up!' (addressed to a man)	

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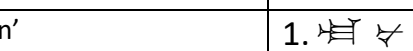
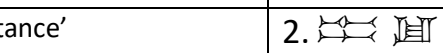
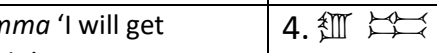
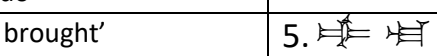
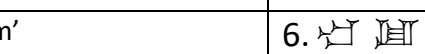
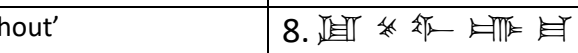
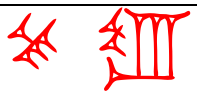
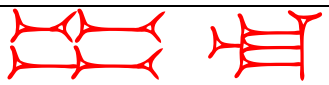
Solution and marking.

Scoring: (max 12)

- 1-8: 1 point for each correct pairing (max 8)
  - Accept the transliteration or the translation instead of (or as well as) the letter A-H.
  - But if the letter conflicts with the trans-literation or -lation, give priority to the letter.
- 9-10: 1 point for each correct character (each answer contains two characters). (max 4)
  - Be lenient over drawing skills, but insist on some indication of the 'leaves' as well as the straight 'twigs'.
  - Insist on the right order.

Pronunciation and meaning	Babylonian	(A-H)
(A) *maru* 'son'	1. 	F *lanu* form
(B) *ruqu* 'distance'	2. 	C *qulu* silence
(C) *qulu* 'silence'	3.	G *nubalu* chariot
(D) *lušepisamma* 'I will get someone to do'	4. 	B *ruqu* distance
(E) *ubla* 'she brought'	5. 	E *ubla* she brought
(F) *lanu* 'form'	6. 	H *balu* without
(G) *nubalu* 'chariot'	7.	A *maru* son
(H) *balu* 'without'	8. 	D *lušepisamma* I will get someone to do

9. *šeru* 'morning'	
10. *qula* 'shut up!' (addressed to a man)	

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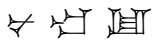
Commentary

There are several ways into this problem. The first thing to realise is that the cuneiform script cannot be writing letters, like English, because each word would have too few signs – we can deduce, therefore, that the signs must be writing syllables.

Perhaps the easiest way to proceed is to compare *nubalu* 'chariot' with *balu* 'without': if we can find two sign sequences which are identical except that one has an extra one at the front, we've very probably found our two words. On this basis, we can guess that:

3.  = G *nubalu* 'chariot'

6. = H *balu* 'without'

From this we have readings of three signs:

= *nu*

= *ba*

= *lu*

A good thing to do next is to look at the longest word in cuneiform and the longest word in Roman script: they very probably match. So we can guess that

8. = D *lušepisamma* 'I will get someone to do'

On this basis, we can deduce that

= *lu*

= *še*

= *pi*

= *šam*

= *ma*

Note how we now have *two* reasons for thinking that = *lu*. The two things confirm each other, so we can be pretty confident our reasoning was correct.

Now that we have the sign = *ma*, we can look for *ma* in the words in Roman script.

7.

starts with , so this must be

A *maru* 'son'

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(the only word that starts with *ma*). Which in turn means that 𒈬 must be *ru*.

Let's have a provisional recap of our list of words in cuneiform, of which we have already identified several:

1. 𒀀 𒀀	
2. 𒀀 𒇉	
3. 𒀀 𒀀 𒇉	G *nubalu* 'chariot'
4. 𒈬 𒀀	
5. 𒀀 𒀀	
6. 𒀀 𒇉	H *balu* 'without'
7. 𒀀 𒈬	A *maru* 'son'
8. 𒇉 𒀀 𒀀 𒀀 𒀀	D *lušepisamma* 'I will get someone to do'

That leaves the following words:

1. 𒀀 𒀀
2. 𒀀 𒇉
4. 𒈬 𒀀
5. 𒀀 𒀀

We know that 𒈬 is *ru*, so we can deduce that

4. 𒈬 𒀀 = B. *ruqu* 'distance'

This in turn gives us 𒀀 = *qu*, so we can now deduce that

2. 𒀀 𒇉 = C qulu 'silence'

which again confirms that 𒇉 is *lu*.

We are left with

1. 𒀀 𒀀

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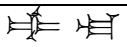
5. 

Which must (whichever way round) be

E ubla ‘she brought’
F lanu ‘form’

The sign that appears at the start of one word and the end of the other must be *la*, which tells us which of the two words is which. So 1 = (F) and 5 = (E)