Sumerian

Sumerian was spoken in Sumer in southern Mesopotamia (part of modern Iraq) from perhaps the 4th millennium BC until about 2,000 BC, when it was replaced by Akkadian as a spoken language, though continued to be used in writing for religious, artistic and scholarly purposes until about the 1st century AD. Sumerian is not related to any other known language so is classified as a language isolate.

Sumerian cuneiform

Sumerian cuneiform is the earliest known writing system. Its origins can be traced back to about 8,000 BC and it developed from the pictographs and other symbols used to represent trade goods and livestock on clay tablets. Originally the Sumerians made small tokens out of clay to represent the items. The tokens were kept together in sealed clay envelopes, and in order to show what was inside the envelopes, they press the tokens into the clay in the outside.

Examples of the clay tokens

Over time they realised that the tokens were not needed as they could make the symbols in the clay. They also developed a numeral system to represent multiple instances of the same symbol rather than just inscribing them all. The symbols became stylised over time and eventually evolved into a complete writing system. The earliest texts come from the cities of Uruk and Jamdat Nasr and date back to 3,300BC.

The name 'cuneiform' means 'wedge-shaped' and comes from the Latin *cuneus* (wedge). It is based on the appearance of the strokes, which were made by pressing a reed stylus into clay. These type of symbol emerged in 3,000 BC.

By about 2,800 BC some of the Sumerian glyphs were being used to represent sounds using the rebus principle. For example, the symbol for arrow, pronounced 'ti', was used to represent the word for life (til). There were also many glyphs which were pronounced the same but represented different words. Later a system of determinatives, which gave you a hint at the category a word belonged to, and of phonetic components, which indicated how to pronounce a word, developed, and helped disambiguate the meanings of glyphs.

Here are some examples of how glyphs changed over time:

3000 BC	2800 BC	2500 BC	1800BC	600 BC	
					an (sky, heaven)
					ki (place; ground, earth, land, country)
					lu (who(m), which, man, ruler, person)
					munus (woman)
					kur (underworld, land, country, mountain(s), east, east wind)
					geme (female worker)
					saĝ (head, person, capital)
					kag (mouth)
					ninda (bread, food)

Source: *http://pandora.cii.wwu.edu/vajda/ling201/writingsystems/sumeriancuneiform.htm*
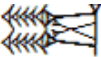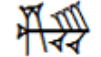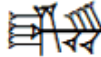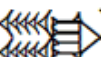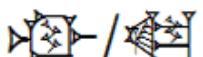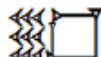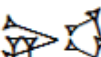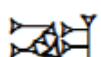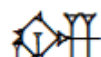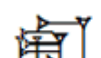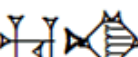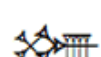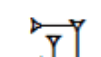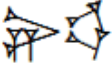
Notable features

- Type of writing system: semanto-phonetic - the symbols consist of phonograms, representing spoken syllables, determinatives, which indicate the category a word belonged to and logograms, which represent words.
- Writing direction: variable - early texts were written vertically from top to bottom, but by about 3,000 BC the direction had changed to left to right in horizontal rows. At the same time the signs were rotated 90° anticlockwise and started to be made up mainly of wedges.
- Number of symbols: between about 1,000 in older texts to 400 in later texts.
- Many of the symbols had multiple pronunciations.
- Used to write: Sumerian

Sumerian syllabic glyphs

a	á	e	é	i	í	u	ú

ba	bá	bà	be	bé	bè	bi	bí

bì	bu	bú	bù	da	dá	de	dè

di	dí	du	dú	dù	du4	ga	gá

ge	gé	gè	gi	gí	gì	gi4	gi5

gu	gú	gù	gu4	gu5	gu6	gu7	ḫa

ḫá	ḫà	ḫa4	ḫe	ḫé	ḫi	ḫí	ḫu

ka	ká	kà	ke	ké	ki	kí	ku

kú	kù	ku4	la	lá	là	le	lé

li	lí	lu	lú	ma	má	me	mé

mè	mi	mí	mì	mu	mú	na

ná	nà	na4	ne	né	ni	ní	nu

nú	pa	pá	pe	pé	pi	pí	pì

pu	pú	pù	ra	rá	re	ré	ri

rí	ru	rú	rù	sa	sá	sà	sa4

se	sé	si	sí	su	sú	sù	su4

ša	šá	šà	še	šè	ši	ší	šu

šú	šù	šu4	ta	tá	te	ti	tì

ti4	tu	tú	tù	za	zá	ze	zé

zi	zí	zì	zu	zú

ab	áb	eb	éb	ib	íb	ub	úb

ad	ád	ed	id	íd	ud	úd	ag

ág	eg	ég	ig	íg	ug	aḫ	áḫ

eḫ	iḫ	uḫ	úḫ	ak	ek	ik	uk

al	ál	el	él	il	î	ul	úl

am	ám	em	im	ím	um	úm

an	en	èn	in	in4	in5	un	ún

ap	ép	ip	íp	up	úp	ar	ár

er	ir	ip	ur	úr	as	es	és

is	ís	ús	aš	aš	eš	éš

iš	íš	uš	úš	at	át	et	it

ut	út	az	ez	éz	iz	íz	uz

úz	ùz

Sample texts

Summary account of silver for the governor written in Sumerian Cuneiform on a clay tablet. From Shuruppak, Iraq, circa 2500 BC. British Museum, London.

Image by Gavin.collins - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sumerian_account_of_silver_for_the_govenor.JPG
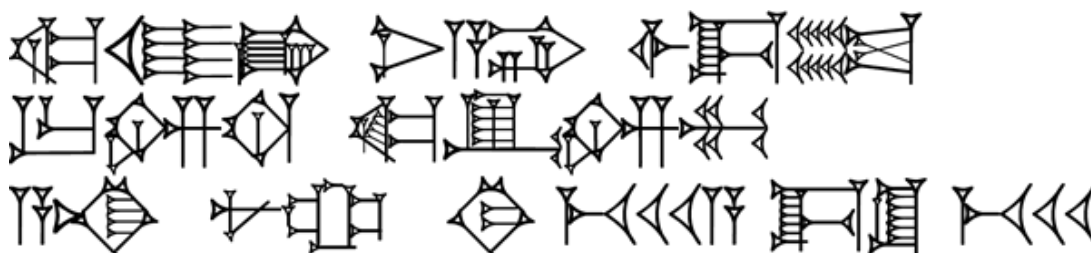
Translation

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
part of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Translation into Sumerian by Vincent Tsin

Sample videos in Sumerian

The Epic Of Gilgamesh In Sumerian

Links

Information about the Sumerian language and script:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuneiform_script
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuneiform
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumerian_language
http://www.sumerian.org/

Sumerian dictionaries
http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/
http://www.sumerian.org/sumerlex.htm

The Sumerian Word of the Day
http://sumerianwotd.livejournal.com/

Language isolates

Ainu, Basque, Bilua, Burushaski, Candoshi-Shapra, Chitimacha, Eskayan, Hadza, Haida, Karuk, Kawésqar, Keres, Kuot, Kusunda, Kutenai, Natchez, Nihali, Nivkh, Páez, Purepecha, Sandawe, Seri, Sumerian, Ticuna, Tiwi, Tunica, Urarina, Wardaman, Washo, Yaghan, Yuchi/Euchee, Zuni

Cuneiform scripts

Akkadian, Elamite, Hittite, Old Persian Cuneiform, Sumerian, Ugaritic

Semanto-phonetic writing systems

Akkadian Cuneiform, Ancient Egyptian (Demotic), Ancient Egyptian (Hieratic), Ancient Egyptian (Hieroglyphs), Chinese, Chữ-nôm, Cuneiform, Japanese, Jurchen, Khitan, Linear B, Luwian, Mayan, Naxi, Sawndip (Old Zhuang), Sui, Sumerian Cuneiform, Tangut (Hsihsia)

Other writing systems

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