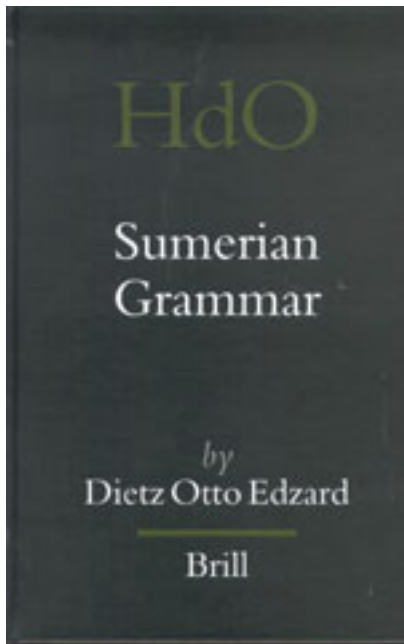


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Edzard, Dietz Otto

Sumerian Grammar

Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section 1: The Near and Middle East 71

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John Gee

Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, BYU
Provo, UT 84602

Sumerian used to be one of the most difficult languages in the world to study. There was no dictionary (and there still is none), the sign lists were oriented to something else, and there was little if any agreement on Sumerian grammar. So, the typical way to read a text was first to look up the sign in Nikolaus Schneider, *Die Keilschriftzeichen der Wirtschaftsurkunden von Ur III nebst ihren charakteristischsten Schreibvarianten* (Rome: Päpstliches Bibleinstitut, 1935) to find the Neo-Assyrian form of the sign. Second, find the value of the Neo-Assyrian form in one of the standard sign lists. Third, once one had the Sumerian value of the sign, one could find out the readings of the sign by looking in Proto-Ea in *MSL* 14. Fourth, each of the numberings for the readings would be assigned by looking in the appropriate place in the latest edition of Rykle Borger, *Assyrisch-babylonische Zeichenliste* (AOAT 305; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1978). Then one would look up the Akkadian equivalents by looking in Ea and Aa in *MSL* 14 or other lexical lists in *MSL*. The Akkadian would be translated with reference to *CAD* or *AHw* (perhaps having to look up the meaning of the German terms in the latter). Grammatical signs would be accounted for with the reference grammar Marie-Louise Thomsen, *The Sumerian Language: An Introduction to Its History and Grammatical Structure* (Mesopotamia 10; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1984). It could easily take

a dozen different books to get through a single line of text. Now the entire process can be simplified by using Rykle Borger, *Mesopotamisches Zeichenlexikon* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003) and the book under review by the late Dietz Otto Edzard. I regret that he is no longer around to thank personally for his superb efforts.

It has often been said that there are as many Sumerian grammars as there are Sumerologists (179). The last reference grammar for the Sumerian language, Thomsen's *The Sumerian Language*, took that approach to the extreme, presenting the various theories but often not advocating a preference among the various theories. For the new student, this was bewildering and discouraging. Fortunately, the situation has improved a little. Edzard has produced a superior book because it is more concise and considered and because, unlike Thomsen, Edzard has made reasoned choices on alternative theories.

The book is organized into chapters covering: the Sumerian language, how we read Sumerian, phonology and syllabic structure, words and parts of speech, substantives, adjectives, demonstrative particles, sequence of particles, pronouns, numerals, adverbs, verbs, conjunctions and subjunctions, exclamations, Emesal, the Sumerian-Akkadian linguistic area, and what is still missing. As might be expected, the chapter on the verb takes up almost half of the volume. An index to texts cited might have been useful but is missing, so one is appended to this review.

Edzard's long familiarity with Sumerian has produced an insightful volume. He is frank about the problems with the languages and sometimes the inherent ambiguity of the evidence for testing various solutions. There is much to learn and ponder even for one well acquainted with Sumerian. The breadth of sources used (both primary and secondary) is impressive, and the index appended to the review does not quite do justice to it.

Since we see Sumerian through an Akkadian glass darkly, Edzard also addresses the issue of the interrelationship between Akkadian and Sumerian, how they influence each other. In fact he "has endeavoured, as often as possible, not to describe Sumerian as a completely isolated body, but in connection with Akkadian, the language of those inhabitants of Mesopotamia who were the immediate neighbours of the Sumerians for a whole millennium or even longer" (179). This is a good thing and one of the strengths of his book. His comments on the issue are pertinent and well thought out.

The writing is very dense, and references to discussions fill the text. There are a number of inconsistent references, but nothing that would prevent one from finding the passage. A few of passages cited, unfortunately, have no references. Some of the works cited (e.g., Civil 1960 and Falkenstein 1944) are missing from the bibliography. There are a number

of typographical errors in the book, but surprisingly few compared to what one would expect for so technical a volume. The volume is also plagued with numerous inconsistencies (e.g. Inana in some places and Inanna in others, and numerous variant abbreviations for Gilgamesh and Huwawa), which shows that Edzard had been working on this grammar over a long period of time and needed better editorial help from Brill. Edzard acknowledges, however: “There is no end of addenda—and corrigenda” (179). Having helped edit many technical volumes, I appreciate the difficulty of the task and just appreciate that the volume is out.

Although we still lack a Sumerian dictionary, a good selection of books for teaching Sumerian would be the book under review even though it is a reference grammar rather than a teaching grammar; Konrad Volk, *A Sumerian Reader* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1997); and Rykle Borger, *Mesopotamisches Zeichenlexikon* (Kevelaer: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003). The latter can double as a glossary. The issue arising is that Edzard’s book costs more than the other two combined. Edzard costs \$0.63 for every page, compared with Volk’s \$0.17 per page, and Borger’s \$0.13 per page. I am grateful to have this book on my shelves, but can I in good conscience assign such an expensive book to my students? Perhaps Brill could issue a paperback edition of this book that students could actually afford.

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