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Sumerian language, [language](#) isolate and the oldest written language in existence. First attested about 3100 BCE in southern [Mesopotamia](#), it flourished during the 3rd millennium BCE. About 2000 BCE, Sumerian was replaced as a [spoken language](#) by Semitic Akkadian (Assyro-Babylonian) but continued in written usage almost to the end of the life of the [Akkadian language](#), around the beginning of the Christian era. Sumerian never extended much beyond its original boundaries in southern Mesopotamia; the small number of its native speakers was entirely out of proportion to the tremendous importance and influence Sumerian exercised on the development of the Mesopotamian and other ancient civilizations in all their stages. (*See also* [Mesopotamia, history of.](#))

History

Four periods of Sumerian can be distinguished: Archaic Sumerian, Old or Classical Sumerian, New Sumerian, and Post-Sumerian.

Archaic Sumerian covered a period from about 3100 BCE, when the first Sumerian records make their appearance, down to about 2500 BCE. The earliest [Sumerian writing](#) is almost exclusively represented by texts of business and administrative character. There are also school texts in the form of simple exercises in writing signs and words. The Archaic Sumerian language is still very poorly understood, partly because of the difficulties surrounding the reading and interpretation of early Sumerian writing and partly because of the meagreness of sources.

The Old, or Classical, period of Sumerian lasted from about 2500 to 2300 BCE and is represented mainly by records of the early rulers of [Lagash](#). The records are business, legal, and administrative texts, as well as royal and private inscriptions, mostly of votive character; letters, both private and official; and incantations. These sources are much more numerous than those of the preceding period, and the writing is explicit enough to make possible an adequate reconstruction of Sumerian grammar and vocabulary.

During the period of the Sargonic dynasty, the [Semitic Akkadians](#) took over the political hegemony of [Babylonia](#), marking a definite setback in the progress of the Sumerian language. At this time the Akkadian language was used extensively throughout the entire area of the Akkadian empire, while the use of Sumerian gradually was limited to a small area in [Sumer](#) proper. After a brief revival during the 3rd dynasty of [Ur](#), the New Sumerian period came to an end about 2000 BCE, when new inroads of the Semitic peoples from the desert succeeded in destroying the 3rd dynasty of Ur and in establishing the Semitic dynasties of [Isin](#), [Larsa](#), and Babylon.

The period of the dynasties of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon is called the Old Babylonian period, after Babylon, which became the capital and the most important city in the country. During this time the Sumerians lost their political identity, and [Sumerian](#) gradually disappeared as a spoken language. It did, however, continue to be written to the very end of the use of [cuneiform](#) writing. This is the last stage of the Sumerian language, called Post-Sumerian.

In the early stages of the Post-Sumerian period the use of written Sumerian is extensively attested in legal and administrative texts, as well as in royal inscriptions, which are often bilingual, in Sumerian and Babylonian. Many Sumerian literary compositions, which came down from the older Sumerian periods by way of oral tradition, were recorded in writing for the first time in the Old Babylonian period. Many more were copied by industrious scribes from originals now lost. The rich [Sumerian](#) literature is represented by texts of varied nature, such as myths and epics, hymns and lamentations, rituals and incantations, and proverbs and the so-

called wisdom compositions. For many centuries after the Old Babylonian period, the study of Sumerian continued in the Babylonian schools. As late as the 7th century BCE, [Ashurbanipal](#), one of the last rulers of [Assyria](#), boasted of being able to read the difficult Sumerian language, and from an even later period, in Hellenistic times, there are some cuneiform tablets that show Sumerian words transcribed in Greek letters.

Rediscovery

Around the time of Christ, all knowledge of the Sumerian language disappeared along with that of cuneiform writing, and in the succeeding centuries even the name Sumer vanished from memory.

Unlike Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt, whose histories and traditions are amply documented in biblical and classical sources, there was nothing to be found in non-Mesopotamian sources to make one even suspect the existence of the Sumerians in antiquity, let alone fully appreciate their important role in the history of early civilizations.

When the decipherment of cuneiform writing was achieved in the early decades of the 19th century, three languages written in cuneiform were discovered: Semitic Babylonian, Indo-European Persian, and Elamite, of unknown linguistic affiliation. Only after the texts written in Babylonian had become better understood did scholars become aware of the existence of texts written in a language different from Babylonian. When the new language was [discovered](#) it was variously designated as Scythian, or even Akkadian (that is, by the very name now given to the Semitic language spoken in Babylonia and Assyria). It was only after knowledge of the new language had grown that it was given the correct name of Sumerian.

Characteristics

The linguistic affinity of Sumerian has not yet been successfully established. Ural-Altaiic (which includes Turkish), Dravidian,

Brahui, Bantu, and many other groups of languages have been compared with Sumerian, but no theory has gained common acceptance. Sumerian is clearly an agglutinative [language](#) in that it preserves the word root intact while expressing various [grammatical changes](#) by adding on prefixes, infixes, and suffixes. The difference between nouns and verbs, as it exists in the Indo-European or [Semitic languages](#), is unknown to Sumerian. The word *dug* alone means both “speech” and “to speak” in Sumerian, the difference between the noun and the verb being indicated by the [syntax](#) and by different affixes.

The distinctive sounds (phonemes) of Sumerian consisted of four vowels, *a, i, e, u*, and 16 consonants, *b, d, g, η, h, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, ś, š, t, z*. In Classical Sumerian, the contrast between the consonants *b, d, g, z* and *p, t, k, s* was not between voiced (with vibrating vocal cords) and voiceless consonants (without vibrating vocal cords) but between consonants that were indifferent as to voice and those that were aspirated (pronounced with an accompanying audible puff of breath). The semivowels *y* and *w* functioned as vocalic glides.

In the [noun](#), gender was not expressed. Plural number was indicated either by the suffixes *-me* (or *-me + esh*), *-hia*, and *-ene*, or by reduplication, as in *kur + kur* “mountains.” The relational forms of the noun, corresponding approximately to the cases of the Latin declension, include: *-e* for the subject (nominative), *-a(k)* “of” (genitive), *-ra* and *-sh(e)* “to,” “for” (dative), *-a* “in” (locative), *-ta* “from” (ablative), *-da* “with” (commitative).

The Sumerian verb, with its concatenation of various prefixes, infixes, and suffixes, presents a very complicated picture. The elements connected with the [verb](#) follow a rigid order: modal elements, tempo elements, relational elements, causative elements, object elements, verbal root, subject elements, and intransitive present–future elements. In the preterite transitive active form, the order of object and subject elements is reversed. The verb can distinguish, in addition to person and number, transitivity and intransitivity, active and passive voice, and two tenses, present-future and preterite.

Several Sumerian [dialects](#) are known. Of these the most important are *eme-gir*, the official [dialect](#) of Sumerian, and *eme-SAL*, the

dialect used often in the composition of hymns and incantations (see also [cuneiform](#)).

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history of Mesopotamia: Literary and other historical sources

Both Sumerian and non-**Sumerian languages** can be detected in the divine names and place-names. Since the pronunciation of the names is known only from 2000 bce or later, conclusions about their linguistic affinity are not without problems. Several names, for example, have been reinterpreted in Sumerian by popular