



**Mark E. Cohen**

***An Annotated Sumerian Dictionary***

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Mark E. Cohen's 2023 *An Annotated Sumerian Dictionary* is a large and heavy volume consisting of fifteen pages of front matter and 1,563 dictionary pages. The thin pages are just thick enough to provide an opaque background, and the Latin alphabet print is relatively small, so that one must strain to see the tiny subscript numbers that uniquely identify readings of Sumerian signs. No actual cuneiform signs appear. The entries most frequently reference the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* but also lexical texts, administrative texts, and literary compositions, for which pages xi and xii provide a list of abbreviations. Authors of Sumerian research articles or dissertations could use the many references as jumping-off points to make their work more thorough.

Cohen's book can be compared to other printed Sumerian dictionaries going back to the year 1905.

- Charles Fossey, *Contribution au Dictionnaire sumérien-assyrien*, 471 pp., 1905–1907  
Friedrich Delitzsch, *Sumerisches Glossar*, 324 pp., 1914  
Anton Deimel, *Sumerisches Lexikon*, vol. 3, *Sumerisch-Akkadisches Glossar*, 219 pp., 1934  
Shin Theke Kang, *Sumerian-Akkadian-English Glossary*, 654 + 706 pp., 2023  
Åke W. Sjöberg, *The Sumerian Dictionary* (vol. 2, letter B), 247 pp., 1984  
John Alan Halloran, *Sumerian Lexicon: A Dictionary Guide to the Ancient Sumerian Language*, 336 pp., 2006  
Nafiz Aydın, *Büyük Sümerce Sözlük*, 1,436 pp., with second half Turkish-Sumerian, 2013

Pascal Attinger, *Glossaire sumérien-français principalement des textes littéraires paléobabyloniens*, 1,307 pp. with 131-page bibliography, 2021

There is a major difference between Cohen's Sumerian dictionary and all of its predecessors: "The dictionary utilizes transcription, rather than transliteration, in the heading to each main entry" (viii). Cohen says that this organization helps one to understand a term with an unusual orthography. The heading of each main entry is a transcribed term in a large bold font. Beneath that appears "BASIC WRITTEN FORM: (*transliteration*)."

I was not initially familiar with this use of the term *transcription*, which to me refers to creating a line art representation of a clay tablet. However, Peter Daniels referred me to the 1954 Standard Operating Procedure for the Assyrian Dictionary, where I. J. Gelb compares "Transliteration of signs with indicated reading joined by hyphens" to "Transcriptions (linguistic elements) in connected writing" (63). Åke Sjöberg evidently knew the term as he explains that in his *Sumerian Dictionary* "Readings represent transliterations rather than transcriptions" (vi). The ePSD successor to Sjöberg does not use the term transcription, preferring the term citation form. Transcription forms or ideal linguistic elements constructed from hyphenated and transliterated written syllables were important for modern scholars dealing with Akkadian words because of the way that the Akkadians used certain signs of Sumerian cuneiform to write down the conjugated syllables of their spoken language. Akkadian is a conjugation language with words derived from generally triple consonant roots. It makes sense to use ideal transcriptions as head words in an Akkadian dictionary. It makes less sense to use transcriptions as headwords in a dictionary of an agglutinative language that has no conjugation and that has a large number of homophones featuring many single consonant words.

The consequence is that, on page 259, Cohen has **du (v) Ia**, BASIC WRITTEN FORM: du, EMESAL di, "to go." Twenty-three pages later, on page 282, Cohen concludes the **du** verbal section with **du (v) IXb**, BASIC WRITTEN FORM: du<sub>12</sub>, "to marry." These twenty-three pages list the **du** transcription with different Roman numerals and letters assigned here for the first time by Cohen, followed on pages 282 and 283 with **du** as a substantive (**s**) or adjective (**adj**). An excerpt from the middle of these pages has **du (v) IVf**, meaning "to caulk," followed by **du (v) IVx** [*sic*], meaning "to become confused."

A scholar who is working to translate a tablet will start out by preparing a line art transcription and by identifying each of the signs. At the back of my 2021 book, *How The Sumerians Became Rich*, appears a one-hundred-page Sumerian Cuneiform Sign List, in sign form order, where page 361 shows the DU sign, Unicode number 1207A, and lists the sign's possible transliterations or readings as de<sub>6</sub>, du, gub, ĝen, ĝin, im<sub>4</sub>, ir<sub>10</sub>, ku<sub>x</sub>, kub, kur<sub>x</sub>, lah<sub>6</sub>, men<sub>3</sub>, ra<sub>2</sub>, re<sub>6</sub>, ri<sub>6</sub>, ša<sub>4</sub>, tu<sub>3</sub>, tum<sub>2</sub>, and tumu<sub>2</sub>. The scholar must quickly evaluate the possible meanings of those different sign readings to see how the sign might fit into the sentence. Scholars who provide a lowercase transliteration for a tablet have made many executive decisions as to the intended readings, as opposed to just leaving in uppercase the unanalyzed cuneiform signs. It does not help such a scholar to have the meanings

for the readings of the DU sign conflated with those of other signs, signs that share the above popular homophone readings. On page 378, my book's Sign Reading Index lists the cuneiform sign location pages for the homophones du, du2, du3, du5, du6, du7, du8, du9, du10, du11, du12, du14, du17, and du24, all of which separate signs would be merged together under Cohen's transcription **du**. Cohen tries to facilitate finding the reading by listing the **du** transcriptions in sign number order, but within his verb section he jumps from du<sub>2</sub> to du<sub>7</sub>. The readings du<sub>3</sub> and du<sub>6</sub> appear later in the substantives section for **du**.

On the subject of unusual orthographies, Attinger discusses "le problème de la 'lecture correcte.'" Attinger deals with the problem of nonstandard orthographies by providing a forty-one-page list (62–103) of correspondences between such nonstandard signs and his glossary's "chosen" signs. If the user of his glossary does not find the sought transliteration in the main body, one should look in the list of correspondences. This keeps Attinger's *Glossaire* practical for working with tablets rather than introducing a new intermediary in the form of Roman numerals and letters for the scholar to master.

A compact and alternative way to handle variants is shown by Halloran's entries, modeled after an unpublished Sumerian word list for students by Miguel Civil, with the addition of Halloran's proposed etymologies:

sabad<sub>(2,3)</sub>, sad<sub>2,3,4</sub> [ $\hat{G}A_2 \times U$ ,  $\hat{G}A_2 \times BAD$ ,  $\hat{G}A_2 \times SIG_7$ ]; šab, sab [PA.IB]: hips, loins; middle (su, 'body', + bad, 'to open').

Attinger's notes quote references that support understanding sab to mean 'centre'. However, its Akkadian equivalent of *qablu(m) I*, 'hips; middle', has a homophone *qablu(m) II* meaning 'battle', which Cohen incorrectly decides should be the meaning of this Sumerian word.

Another issue for a printed dictionary, as opposed to a computerized dictionary, is that it is able to provide room to serve as a comprehensive reference for human readers who would like to explore the full range of possible meanings for a Sumerian word. When John Engle wrote, for *Review of Biblical Literature*, a review of my *Sumerian Lexicon: A Dictionary Guide to the Ancient Sumerian Language* (2006), he specifically noted that "the fullness of Halloran's entry again makes it extremely useful in identifying various nuances for the word that the other lexical tools simply do not provide." Cohen's organization initially provides just a single main meaning. This practice seems more suited to computerized translation of texts that must plug in rough-and-ready word translations. It is especially unfortunate, however, for Sumerian vocabulary, which is characterized by a high degree of polysemy. Polysemy is defined as the coexistence of many possible meanings for a word or phrase, seen especially in languages with small vocabularies, but even in English among shorter forms such as 'run' and 'set', that carry a large number of often unrelated senses. In contrast, Akkadian had a large vocabulary and lacked short word forms. I first saw the extent of

Sumerian polysemy when I was going through Deimel to extract the meaning of Sumerian words from their Akkadian equivalents, where Deimel lists sixty-four Akkadian equivalents for the Sumerian word ‘bar’. When presented with alternate polysemic meanings for a word, human dictionary users have the ability to consider the context, to judge between them, and to choose the most suitable meaning. Pages 156–58 of my 2021 book discuss how the monosyllabic Sumerian and Chinese languages are alike in having the meaning depend highly on context and how polysyllabic Akkadian became the lingua franca for the ancient Near East because it provided less possibility for misinterpretation when strangers from different backgrounds were communicating.

Let us look at a line that appeared in Cohen’s 1981 translation of a hymn. At page 52 of Mark E. Cohen, *Sumerian Hymnology: The Eršemma*, (Cincinnati 1981), appears the line

13. za-pa-aĝ<sub>2</sub>-zu-še<sub>3</sub> kur-gal a-a <sup>d</sup>Mu-ul-lil<sub>2</sub> saĝ im-da-sig<sub>3</sub>-ge

translated on page 53 as, “At your cry the great mountain, father Enlil, lowers his head.” The book under review, *An Annotated Sumerian Dictionary*, would have you believe that the word za-pa-aĝ<sub>2</sub>, which Cohen translated as ‘cry’ in 1981, should now be translated as ‘breath’.

Because this is not a transliteration dictionary, entries starting with **za** conclude on page 1504. On page 1527, one finds

**zapaĝ (s) Ia**, BASIC WRITTEN FORM: za-pa-aĝ<sub>2</sub>

“breath”

See paĝ (v, s) D.2a

On page 1057, Section D.2a of **paĝ** reiterates the meaning “breath.”

If one drops down to section D.2b of **paĝ**, one finds the meaning “loud noise,” followed by nine phrases all showing za-pa-aĝ<sub>2</sub> in different contexts with nuanced variations of ‘loud noise’. These example phrases under **paĝ** all have the same written form starting with za and could have been put underneath **zapaĝ**.

All of the Sumerian dictionaries in the above historical list are transliteration dictionaries that list za-pa-aĝ<sub>2</sub> in alphabetical order. Already, at the top of page 362, Fossey (1905) has za-pa-ag<sub>2</sub> = RIGMU. You may wonder why I quote such an early work, but Fossey is so thorough that Deimel was heavily dependent. At the bottom of page 285, Delitzsch has za-pa-ag<sub>3</sub> = Dröhnen, Schall (= roar, sound). Page 115 of Deimel, volume 3, equates za-pa-ag<sub>2</sub> to RIGMU and Lärm (= noise). Page 1303 of Kang has za-pa-ág = rigmu “voice, noise, sound” (*YNER* 3 p. s.v. ; Gordon *Proverbs* 2.41<sup>3</sup>, 2.57<sup>2</sup> ; *SGL* I 56, 105; II 30); Šulgi B 67:3. Note that Kang’s dictionary, created at Yale with the assistance of William Hallo, dates back to the 1970s, but was not available until recently. It includes the added feature of hand-drawn cuneiform sign variants. Page 308 of Halloran has za-pa-aĝ<sub>2</sub>:

sound; breath; voice quality; roar, tumult, noise (za, ‘rhythmic sound’ or zi, ‘breathing’ transformed by vowel harmony + ‘puffing sound’ + ‘to mete out’; cf., šir<sub>3</sub>...aĝa<sub>2</sub>). Nafiz Aydın, on page 774, equates za-pa-ag<sub>2</sub> to Akkadian napištum rigmum and translates, sağlam, kusursuz, emin, güvenilir, geçerli, ses, anlam, gürültü (solid, flawless, sure, reliable, valid, sound, voice, meaning, noise). Pascal Attinger, on page 1144, devotes thirteen lines to references, starting with how in the hymns of Shulgi it means «cri, rugissement, grondement» (scream, roar, rumble). All of these Sumerian dictionaries disagree that ‘breath’ is the word’s primary meaning.

Now turning our attention to the compound verb in the sentence from Cohen’s hymn, involving saĝ, the word for ‘head’, one can eventually find on page 1108

C.31 saĝ sig<sub>3</sub> “to tremble”  
See sig (v) IIb C.2

where jumping to page 1152 provides text examples of trembling and shaking.

My 2006 *Sumerian Lexicon* lists the following in purely alphabetical order in the saĝ section:

saĝ...sig<sub>3</sub>: to tremble; to shake (the head) from side to side (with -da-) (‘head’ + ‘to shake’).

Kang already provided the same information, including the comitative case -da- infix, in the 1970s. The modern translation, then, which sometimes omits the terminative case postposition -še<sub>3</sub> from the Sumerian text, says,

“Your crying makes great mountain father Enlil tremble.”

This was an Emesal dialect text in which the god Enlil is called Mullil. Speaking of Emesal, I am sorry to say that I find no Emesal lemmas in Cohen’s dictionary, where examples from the *Sumerian Lexicon* include **u**, Emesal dialect for **lugal** and **en**, ‘lord, master; lady; king’; **u<sub>5</sub>**, Emesal dialect for **ĝiš/ĝeš**, ‘tree; wood’, as well as **i<sub>3</sub>**, ‘fat, cream, oil’; **em<sub>3</sub>**, **im<sub>3</sub>**[AĜA<sub>2</sub>], Emesal dialect for **niĝ<sub>2</sub>**, ‘goods, property’; **ba<sub>4</sub>**, Emesal dialect, cf., **ĝa<sub>2</sub>**, ‘house’; **ma**, Emesal dialect for **ĝal<sub>2</sub>**; **ĝa<sub>2</sub>**; **me**, Emesal dialect for **ĝa<sub>2</sub>-e** and **gin<sub>6</sub>/gen<sub>6</sub>**; and so on. Under **ĝa (s)** Ia Cohen has EMESAL ma and under **ĝa (pron)** Cohen has EMESAL me, but no dictionary listings for the user under either **ma** or **me**.

Cohen’s dictionary follows conservative tradition, since the time of Delitzsch, in omitting Sumerian prefixes, infixes, and suffixes, which are part of the Sumerian language’s agglutinative word formation. In his review of my work, Engle works with a text that includes šuku-bi and e-lá, where his other sources had no translations for the suffix -bi or for the prefix e-. He gives me credit for having five meaning listings for -bi and a little over four columns of meanings for e as a prefix, infix, suffix, and a free-standing form. After finding what he needed, Engle says, “The third e- entry

he defines as “OS form of conjugation prefix i3-.” I3- in its turn yields “impersonal verbal conjugation prefix, opposite of mu-, indicates distance from the speaker, or social distance between actor and a person of lower social standing.” The budding Sumerologist tends to master the different cases and their roles in agglutination when taking classes in Sumerian language and grammar. However, other than creating more work for the dictionary author, there is no reason not to include these forms in a Sumerian language reference work.

Cohen’s 1981 line of text included -še<sub>3</sub>. Nowhere in Cohen’s dictionary does the še transcription show the written form še<sub>3</sub>. Kang’s dictionary gets credit for listing it with the meaning “towards, because of” and describing it as a postposition and verbal infix (for ši) on his page 1052. Dictionary users should be able to look up and see an entry, as included in Halloran:

-še<sub>3</sub>

terminative case (AKA directive case or allative case) postposition /eše/ - to; unto; as far as; up to; going, but not there yet; as regards, concerning; because of, for the sake of; until.

It is said that computer programmers program for themselves or for their users. Programmers who create a clunky interface do so because it suits them, not because they are thinking about what is best or easiest for the user. There are classes now that try to guide programmers into a user-centered design approach. That is an apt parallel.

At the end of its introduction, I described not only the features that made the *Sumerian Lexicon* more user-friendly but also its principal shortcomings. Cohen has now addressed the first shortcoming by providing examples of usage. Yet to be addressed, however, is how “the lexicon rarely indicates the source period or the provenance of words or their different meanings during the language’s long history.” This relates to using the genre and context of a text to narrow down the intended meanings. Texts from Umma or Drehem often employ words in particular ways that distinguish them from the texts of other times and places. One suspects that future dictionaries will be assisted by artificial intelligence that can add the complexity of genre and context to help organize word meanings. Cohen the dictionary maker has done much work that is in-depth and sophisticated, that provides valuable data both for current human users and for the artificial intelligence engines of the future. Cohen’s dictionary is assuredly a large trove containing many enlightening informational nuggets that will reward those who have a love for Sumerian.