Sacred Exchanges:
Akkadian, its Semitic Language Family, and Religious Convergence
Akkadian – History and Culture

- Akkadian was a Semitic language spoken in the ancient Near East.
  - First attestations ca. 2500 BCE.
  - Written in cuneiform; adapted from Sumerian into a logo-syllabary.
  - Scribal culture: institutional multilingualism.
  - It is the third-oldest attested language on record (after Sumerian and Egyptian).

- Had long and sustained contact with Sumerian, leading to convergence of structure and culture.

- Was the language of trade, diplomacy, and religious authority by 2000 BCE.
  - Egyptians, Hittites, and others all used Akkadian from ca. 1800 – 1000 BCE.
Akkadian and Sumerian of Mesopotamia

- Proto-Akkadian speakers were nomadic pastoralists during the ancient Mesopotamian period.

- Also frequently seen in proper names of merchants in early Sumerian records.

- Cultural prestige of Sumer was extreme → drew many peoples into its orbit.

- Long-standing trade, intermarriage, and urbanization of East Semitic speakers into Sumer created a convergence area.
Afro-Asiatic

- The Semitic Family is part of the larger Afro-Asiatic Family.

- This family’s internal groupings are highly contested: long recorded histories for some, but not all.

- Major “Branches”:
  - Semitic
  - Berber
  - Egyptian
  - Chadic
  - Cushitic
  - Omotic (controversial; likely)
Semitic Family

- Features from Afro-Asiatic:
  - VOS word order
  - Emphatic consonants
  - Singular Feminine \(-t\) suffix for nouns
  - Verb prefixes for PGN related to sounds /ʔ, t, n, y/

- Family-Specific Features:
  - Verb morphology: triliteral root structure $C_1C_2C_3$
    - S-L-M example in Arabic: PSem ‘to be secure’
      - 1. salam ‘peace’
      - 2. muslim ‘one who accepts’
      - 3. islam ‘acceptance; entrusting to Allah’
      - 4. taslim ‘to give thanks/submission’
  - Nouns marked for:
    - Number: singular, dual (archaic/specific), plural
    - Gender: masculine and feminine
    - Case: nominative, genitive, accusative
The seven groups of Semitic languages are shown in different colours. There is not clear distinction between Aramaic and Cananaean in the earliest known documents. Some of the languages listed are more likely to be dialects, notably in the Aramaic group. Broken lines reflect ancient languages still used.
# Proto-Semitic Inventory

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<th>Labial</th>
<th>Interdental</th>
<th>Dental/Alveolar</th>
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<th>Velar</th>
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The sounds: [s], [z], [s’], [l], [l’], [θ’] may have been realized as the affricates: [ts], [dz], [ts’], [tl], [tl’], [tθ’] 

Vowels: /i/, /iː/, /u/, /uː/, /a/, /aː/
## Akkadian Sound Inventory

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labial</th>
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<td>Low</td>
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Proto-Semitic to Akkadian – Sound

• Akkadian seemingly lost the consonants: ħ, ħ, h
  • No cuneiform syllabaries ever confirm them.
  • Simplification seen in other Semitic languages; seen “natural” change.
  • Their loss likely gave rise to the Akkadian vowels /e/ and /e:/ through coloring.

• The lateral fricatives ɬ and ɬ’ merged with the sibilants (s and f)
  • No direct correspondence; likely a lot of initial allomorphy.
  • Eventually, the sibilants themselves merged and reduced to just /s/ with [ʃ] as allophone.

• The Proto-Semitic trill /r/ is a little messy in Akkadian cuneiform:
  • It may have merged with /ʁ/, like in some French dialects.
  • The phonetic realization seems to have varied according to dialect and time.
## Akkadian Dialects – Assyrian and Babylonian: Sound

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proto-Akkadian (pre-2500 BCE)</th>
<th>Old Akkadian (2500 – 2000 BCE)</th>
<th>Old Babylonian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Assyrian</td>
<td>2000 – 1500 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle Assyrian</td>
<td>1500 – 1000 BCE</td>
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<td>Neo-Assyrian</td>
<td>1000 – 600 BCE</td>
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<td>600 BCE – 100 CE</td>
<td>Late Babylonian</td>
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- **Proto-Semitic diphthong *ay:**
  - Went unchanged from PSem. \(\rightarrow\) Akkadian
  - Assyrian /be:tum/ vs. Babylonian /bi:tum/ \(\rightarrow\) ‘house’

- **Infix -t- becomes emphatic after /k’/ in Middle Assyrian:**
  - MidA /ik’tabi/ vs. MidB /ik’tabi/ \(\rightarrow\) ‘he (has) said’

- **Akkadian initial sound cluster wa-:**
  - Akkadian /wardum/ ‘servant (m)’ and /waʃa:bum/ ‘to sit’
  - MidA /ardu/ and /aʃa:bu/ vs. MidB /urdu/ /uʃa:bu/
Akkadian Dialects – Assyrian and Babylonian: Structure

- Akkadian is the most structurally divergent of the Semitic languages.

- Major structural changes were a result of convergence with the socially prestigious Sumerian language:
  - Akkadian word order SOV (unlike common Semitic VOS); Sumerian SOV.
  - In both languages, parataxis gives way to using subordinate complements.
  - Syntactic operations regarding the use complement phrases shows overt intentions of scribal convergence.

- Legal terminology: Akkadian and Sumerian bilinguals had to specifically address verbs of “proving” or “establishing” legal ties; provides social context of convergence.

Akkadian

\textit{kir-\texttt{âm}} \textit{u bit-\texttt{am}} \textit{ana PN ubir\texttt{rû}}

\textit{orchard-ACC and house-ACC to PN they.established}

\textit{‘they established the orchard and the house to PN’ (Schorr 1913: 259: 29)}

Sumerian

\textit{é PN-ra ba-na-gi-in}

\textit{house PN-to is.established to him}

\textit{‘the house is established to PN’ (NG 106: 14)}
Pantheon Changes

Deities lost by Old Akkadian:

- PSem *ʔilu ‘Sky God (m); god’ > Akk /ilu/ ‘god’
- PSem *ʕattaru ‘God of Agriculture/Creation (m) > no attestation in Akk
- PSem *warixu ‘Moon God (m); moon’ > no attestation in Akk (/si:n/)

Changes From Sumerian System:

- PSem *ʃmʃ ‘Sun God (f); sun’ > Akk /ʃamaʃ/ ‘Sun God (m); sun’
- Akkadian reinterpretations of Sumerian deities:
  - Akk Anu < Sumerian An ‘Sky god; sky’
  - Akk Ea < Sumerian Enki ‘Lord of the Earth’ (God of Fertility!)

Ancient Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses, Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus, UK Higher Education Academy.


