

The cuneiform Script grew up through a long course of history. As a result it has quite a number of peculiarities. Many of these have to be picked up gradually, but an explanation of some of them should make the task of learning easier.

As originated by the Sumerians the writing doubtless began as a series of pictures, which gradually came to indicate more or less abstract ideas rather than individual objects. Since the writing was done with a stylus on clay tablets, in most cases the signs soon developed in such a way as to lose all similarity to the objects originally represented. In addition, in the development of the writing the signs came to be turned over on their sides, further decreasing the similarity to the original pictures.

The cuneiform system is not well suited to represent the Accadian language. It was invented by the Sumerians, who spoke a language of an entirely different type. This causes certain marked peculiarities in its application to Accadian. Thus, the Sumerian language does not distinguish at the end of a syllable between the sounds of b and p, between those of g, k and q, between those of d, ṭ and t, or between those of z, s and ṣ. In the Accadian language these distinctions are important, but the system of writing has no clear way of indicating them. There is also sometimes a lack of clear distinction at the beginning of a syllable between some of these sounds, particularly b and p, z and ṣ, or d and ṭ.

The cuneiform writing, as invented by the Sumerians, has designations for individual vowels, but none for individual consonants. There are signs that indicate a consonant followed by a vowel, and others that indicate a vowel followed by a consonant. There are also signs that represent a combination of consonant plus vowel plus consonant. In addition there are many signs that represent complete words. Sometimes such a sign could be pronounced in more than one way. Most of these "logograms" (sometimes called "ideograms") were originated by the Sumerians, and therefore may represent either the Sumerian word or its Accadian equivalent. Their use in Accadian is similar to the English custom of writing Latin abbreviations, such as "etc.", which might be pronounced "et cetera" as in