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# In Search of Meaning. Studies on the Akkadian Lexicon: Introduction

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## Abstract

Akkadian is one of the most extensively attested languages of the ancient world. From its earliest appearance in cuneiform sources from the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, it remained in use until the beginning of the Common Era. The corpus of Akkadian written sources is vast, varied, and continues to expand through new discoveries. With new material and methodologies, our knowledge of the Akkadian lexicon – the forms, origins, meanings, and usages of words and expressions – constantly improves. Our understanding of the language is in turn integral to our understanding of the Ancient Near Eastern world.

This dossier assembles seven studies by experts in the fields of Assyriology, Semitic Studies, and Digital Humanities, showcasing a variety of approaches available to us today in the area of what one might in simple terms dub “word studies”.

**Key-words:** Akkadian; Lexicology; Lexicography; Philology; Ancient Near Eastern Studies

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**En busca de significado. Estudios sobre el léxico acadio:  
introducción**

**Resumen**

El acadio es una de las lenguas mejor documentadas del mundo antiguo. Desde su primera aparición en fuentes cuneiformes a mediados del tercer milenio a.e.c., se mantuvo en uso hasta el comienzo de la era común. El corpus de fuentes escritas en acadio es vasto, variado y continúa expandiéndose gracias a nuevos descubrimientos. Con nuevos materiales y metodologías, nuestro conocimiento del léxico acadio, las formas, orígenes, significados y usos de palabras y expresiones, mejora constantemente. Nuestra comprensión de la lengua es, a su vez, fundamental para nuestro entendimiento del mundo del Antiguo Oriente Próximo.

Este dossier reúne siete estudios realizados por expertos en los campos de la Asiriología, los Estudios Semíticos y las Humanidades Digitales, presentando una variedad de enfoques disponibles hoy en día en el área de lo que, en términos sencillos, podría denominarse «estudio de palabras».

**Palabras clave:** Acadio; Lexicología; Lexicografía; Filología; Estudios del Próximo Oriente Antiguo

## 1 Instead of a history of Akkadian lexicography

The history of lexical research in Assyriology is inextricably linked to that of Assyriology itself, spanning over 150 years. More eloquent scholars than I have written on this rich history, most notably Erica Reiner (2002) and Rykle Borger (1984), each presenting the origins, trials and tribulations that lead to the completion of the two major Akkadian dictionaries still in use today, the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD) and the Akkadisches Handwörterbuch (AHw).

In lieu of another summary of these and prior attempts and accomplishments, I will limit myself to a few remarks that shall serve to paint a picture of where Akkadian lexicography stands, what defines it, and where we might want to lead it.

## 2 In search of the Akkadian lexicon

The two branches of linguistics that concern themselves with the lexicon are lexicology, the study of words in terms of morphology, semantics, and the complex relations between words; and lexicography, the study and practice of compiling dictionaries.

In Assyriology, these linguistic terms are seldom encountered in professional literature. Nevertheless, the pursuit of the lexicon is a constant concern for the philologist, be it the shape and meaning of individual words or taming them within the confines of the dictionary.

The corpus of Akkadian poses some unique challenges. It is not only the second largest ancient text corpus known to us today – surpassed only by Ancient Greek in size<sup>1</sup> – but also continuously growing through new archaeological discoveries. With its earliest written records dated to the 24<sup>th</sup> century BCE<sup>2</sup>, Akkadian is also one of the oldest languages known to us, with written sources spanning approximately 2,500 years until its extinction at the beginning of the Common Era. Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, it remained extinct, forgotten, and in need of decipherment, a process still ongoing today. The complexities an inspiring lexicologist faces are further compounded by the large geographical area in which Akkadian was written, and presumably spoken, although not always by native speakers. Additionally, the types and genres of surviving texts of all areas and periods show great variety, ranging from laconic administrative notes, to letters, scholarly works, and epic poetry. The image that emerges of the Akkadian lexicon is thus one defined by heterogeneity, both diachronically and synchronically, reflecting a long history, diversity of cultural settings, and variety of language registers.

Multiple areas of interest arise from this great variety of material. Synchronously, dialectal variation is one of them. The two main dialects of Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian, not only differed in terms of morphology and phonology, but also in their lexicon. While known in principle, the intricacies of these differences are laborious to glean from

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<sup>1</sup>See Streck 2011 with updates in Streck 2021b: 994-999.

<sup>2</sup>See Sommerfeld 2010 and, on the material from Ebla most recently Kogan and Krebernik 2021a.

existing dictionaries and have not yet been studied exhaustively<sup>3</sup>. There can be no doubt that a wealth of dialectal variation must have existed within these two branches as well, although likely often obscured through formulaic aspects of text production and the syllabo-logographic nature of the cuneiform writing system<sup>4</sup>. Detailed studies of lexical material from regionally defined corpora promise to elucidate our current understanding of Akkadian dialects<sup>5</sup>. In a similar vein, corpora defined by language register can inform us on lexical features of various genres: Literary language is known to contain rare and archaic (or archaizing) words that presented challenges even to ancient scribes, influencing their lexical traditions<sup>6</sup> and scholarly commentaries. Scholarly works dealing with medical, mathematical, astronomical, or divinatory themes may contain specialized terminology pertaining to the fields of their practitioners.

Another important area of interest is the impact of language contact on the lexicon. Through its long history, Akkadian borrowed an estimated 1800 words from a great variety of donor languages<sup>7</sup>. Their study therefore requires in-depth knowledge of at least one additional (ancient) language, usually even less well understood than Akkadian, such as Sumerian, Hurrian, or Elamite. The ancient sources themselves sometimes provide assistance: some lexical compositions include notes on the origin of certain words, albeit not consistently from our modern point of view<sup>8</sup>; in late scholarly work, one

<sup>3</sup>One important study in this area is Kogan 2006 (with focus on the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian lexicon), revisited and summarized in Kogan and Krebernik 2021b: 397–403.

<sup>4</sup>See Wende 2022: 264–267 for a brief overview.

<sup>5</sup>Great strides have been made, for example, with a series of monographic treatments of the Old Babylonian material from Mari: Durand 2009 (on garments and textiles), Guichard 2005 (on vessels), and Arkhipov 2012 (on metallurgy); the lexicon of Middle Assyrian (of various regions) has recently been studied in de Ridder 2021. For additional bibliography I refer to that of the Supplement to the Akkadian Dictionaries (henceforth SAD): <https://www.gkr.uni-leipzig.de/en/draft/altorientalischs-institut/forschung/supplement-to-the-akkadian-dictionaries>.

<sup>6</sup>Evident, for example, in the lexical compositions *Erimhus* (Michałowski 1998) and *malku=šarru* (Hrůša 2010: 16–18).

<sup>7</sup>This number is a rough estimate based on the overview provided in Kogan and Krebernik 2021b: 413–463 and Streck 2021a: 92–96; for borrowings from Akkadian into other languages see ib. pp. 96–98. It remains important to note that the interpretation of loan words or foreign words is often uncertain.

<sup>8</sup>E.g. *malku=šarru* (Hrůša 2010: 544–548) or the pharmacological handbook *uru.an.na*.

may even come across explicit remarks<sup>9</sup>. In peripheral Akkadian, scribes would employ a “Glossenkeil” to mark a foreign word in some cases<sup>10</sup>.

In the realm of semantics, the development and usages of figurative language – idioms, hyperbole, metaphor etc. – offer intriguing yet little traveled avenues of research<sup>11</sup>. Semantic relations within the lexicon, such as hypernymy and hyponymy, synonymy and antonymy, represent near uncharted territory in Assyriology.

Finally, the Akkadian lexicon beckons to be studied diachronically. Historical developments are to be expected over its long period of use, from changes in morphology to shifts in meaning. New words emerge while others fall out of use and either disappear from the written record or are kept as archaic remnants in lexical lists and commentaries. An important factor in determining such trends is of course our dependence on the available textual evidence, which, while steadily growing, is unevenly distributed through time and space and will always remain incomplete.

Another defining characteristic of the Akkadian lexicon, although at first glance less obvious, is that of uncertainty. This is true of any historical language, but more so for one that had been extinct for such a long time until its rediscovery. Akkadian shares this fate with all cuneiform languages, as well as Ancient Egyptian among others. Uncertainty permeates Akkadian lexicology and lexicography – and philology in general – in all aspects, from the dating of its sources to the reading and parsing of individual words. The latter is in part due to the inherent ambiguities of the cuneiform writing system, which does not always differentiate voiced, unvoiced and emphatic consonants, nor consistently denote length of vowels and consonants. For the lexicographer, this creates difficulties in rendering the lemma headword, which serves as citation form within the dictionary and any works referring to it. The quest for the headword is a complex problem in historical linguistics in general<sup>12</sup>, not only concerning its morphological and phonological appearance. Considering a variety of factors, the lexicographer

<sup>9</sup>Example: *kussû ša šarrim ... ša šumšu jamanāja tu-ru-nu-us* Astronomical Diaries 3, -124 B r. 15 “the royal throne ... whose Greek name is ‘*thronos*’” (taken from SAD T s.v. + turunus “throne”, a rendering of Greek *thrónos*).

<sup>10</sup>Example: *eqlīšu : ga-pa-lu-uš-a* QS 3, 4: 20 “who plundered his fields?”, where “:” marks a Hurrian word in an otherwise Akkadian text (taken from SAD K s.v. + kabal- “to plunder”).

<sup>11</sup>For bibliography on this topic I refer to Renze-Sepe’s article in this dossier.

<sup>12</sup>For an in-depth overview on methodological concerns in historical lexicography of German, Dutch, and English, see Reichmann 2012: 142–368.

decides on what is a lemma and what a variant, where to draw the line between homonymy and polysemy, and which words are perhaps entirely too poorly attested to be included.

The prime objective of assyriological word studies is to find the meanings of words and phrases as we encounter them in the cuneiform record, in order to facilitate a better understanding of the texts themselves and the cultures that produced them. This has never been an easy endeavor: In a letter to his student and friend Fritz R. Kraus, the great Assyriologist Benno Landsberger expressed his views on the prospect of this aspect of dictionary work in skeptical terms:

“Anyone who reads your speech must receive the impression that the future lexicon will contain the meanings of the Akkadian words. However, in most cases determining them is beyond our powers; true, if I were to work on it very intensively, perhaps a few meanings would come out. Leaving aside obscure plant names and the like, I can state that the meanings of 60% of the Akkadian words are unknown and that it is not even the aim of the Dictionary to establish them.”<sup>13</sup>

This quote from 1953 pre-dates the publication of both the CAD and the AHw. One might today consider Landsberger’s estimate too pessimistic – surely our dictionaries have since provided translations of more than 40% of the lexicon? That is undoubtedly true: While there are a few hundred words marked “meaning unknown” or “meaning uncertain”, they constitute a clear minority. Yet on closer scrutiny, a significant number of entries in any dictionary of Akkadian provide less of a translation and more of a rough estimate: “(a bird)”, “(a vessel)”, “(a foodstuff)”. Another large portion of entries gives meanings with question marks; many, perhaps depending on the lexicographer’s temperament, present as fact what is in truth an educated guess. Those using dictionaries are not always aware of these levels of doubt, at times accepting as fact what the manual asserts as much as what it proposes, committing both uncertainties and errors to philological tradition. As Rykle Borger observed critically:

“Dictionaries are all too often factually canonized, their information all to rarely critically reviewed.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>December 9, 1953, English translation cited after Reiner 2022: 3; the German original can be found ib. p. 84 note 19.

<sup>14</sup>Borger 1984: 75, English translation by the present author.

### 3 Finding meaning

Historical lexicography is not unlike detective work. The lexicographer collects evidence in the form of attestations, seeking meanings that fit all available contexts. This approach thrives when there is strength in numbers, but tends to falter in the case of rare words and hapax legomena. There is a variety of tools available to further help the process along:

The study of etymology is indispensable, both in terms of determining cognates in related Semitic languages and seeking the origins of loan words. While caution is required when attempting to base meaning on etymology alone, it is at times the only hint available to us<sup>15</sup>.

Archaeology may provide assistance in several ways: There are multiple examples of objects bearing inscriptions naming the object itself<sup>16</sup>. Pictorial representations give us an idea of the physical reality behind the texts, as do the remains of historical human activity and the environments in which it thrived. Even in modern day Mesopotamia, anthropology and natural sciences may help us better understand ancient realities<sup>17</sup>.

With the first contribution in this special thematic volume, Melanie Wasmuth expands this metaphorical tool box by exploring digital approaches to analyzing lexical material. Her focus on semantics, choosing the concrete example of “the foreign other”, further advances lexicological research in Akkadian.

Two contributions which could not be more different concern themselves with number words: Walter Sommerfeld takes a detailed didactic approach in tracing three separate number words and their various past interpretations through scholarship. Through precise re-evaluation of the evidence, morphological ambiguities are resolved.

Maria Teresa Renzi-Sepe takes a closer look at the use of iterative numbers in figurative language, creating a case study on the Akkadian

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<sup>15</sup> As an aid to etymological research I would like to direct those interested to an online tool coordinated by Leonid Kogan and Ilya Arkhipov: <http://sed-online.ru/> (Semitic Etymological Database).

<sup>16</sup> For example the lime stone troughs called *urātu* (MacGinnis 1989) and at least two *nahbaṣu*-jars (Walker 1980). The latter incidentally enables us to correct the translation proposed in AHw p. 714 for this word (“an oil mill”).

<sup>17</sup> A well presented recent example of combining ancient evidence, linguistic comparision, and modern botany in the identification of plant names is described and applied in Böck et al. 2023 (esp. pp. 50–52 on methodology).

equivalent of “I have told you a thousand times!” and related expressions in letters from all periods.

Leonid Kogan is an expert on Semitic Studies and comparative philology with a wide range of knowledge and experience in both ancient and modern Semitic languages. His contribution provides important new findings on the etymologies of 18 Akkadian and Eblaite words.

Michael P. Streck shares results from his ongoing work at the Supplement to the Akkadian Dictionaries. Lexical lists that had come to light after the completion of most volumes of CAD and AHw contain a wealth of new words and spellings not yet recorded in our dictionaries. This contribution presents 23 new terms for body parts and birds and systematically discusses their forms and possible meanings.

In her comprehensive study on the “verbs *darāru*”, Olga I. Sek disentangles the words *darāru* “to fall”, *nadruru* “to return”, and *darāru* “to intercalate”, illustrating at once the difficulties Akkadian can present when it comes to identifying and recognizing homonyms, and the importance of exhaustive collections of attestations.

Finally, Zachary Rubin reminds us of the role of the lexicon in aiding in cultural and historical studies. Starting from the basic morphology and meanings of the term *nubāttu*, he traces its nuances from 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Ebla to 1<sup>st</sup> millennium Babylon and explores its roles in religion, cult, and literature.

## 4 Outlook

While there has hardly ever been a time in the past century and a half where no-one was working on a dictionary of Akkadian, lexical studies have enjoyed a renaissance in recent years. This is in large part due to the emergence of digital tools and methods. Several such tools have made great strides in providing databases, digital text editions, and online glossaries, and are continuing to do so. The most prominent among them today are ARCHIBAB<sup>18</sup>, eBL<sup>19</sup>, and ORACC (with its many sub-projects)<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>18</sup><https://archibab.fr/>. On the development of the ARCHIBAB glossary see Arkhipov 2024.

<sup>19</sup><https://www.ebl.lmu.de/>, including an online dictionary modeled after the Concise Dictionary of Akkadian, itself largely based off AHw.

<sup>20</sup><https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/projectlist.html>, since this year also equipped with cross-corpus search capabilities: <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/search/>.

2013 saw the start of the *Etymological Dictionary of Akkadian* (EDA) lead by Manfred Krebernik (Jena) and Leonid Kogan (Moscow), as well as its sister-project, the *Supplement to the Akkadian Dictionaries* (SAD, Leipzig)<sup>21</sup>. The SAD has so far produced four volumes, providing additions and corrections to the standard dictionaries. Recognizing the need for a tool to navigate these many, often diverging lexicographical works, Walter Sommerfeld has been developing a *Digital Akkadian Lexicon* (DAL), which will provide an overview of the lexicon as it is currently recorded in dictionaries, databases and bibliographical reference works<sup>22</sup>. The work on the SAD made it increasingly clear that a new, complete reference dictionary is needed that could go beyond supplementation and would be built on a digital platform. I am thus privileged to write this introduction from the office of the *Leipzig Akkadian Dictionary*, a project lead by Michael P. Streck, where my team and I are creating just that<sup>23</sup>. During its remaining project run time of 16 years, the LAD will no doubt benefit from further developments in the field, ever richer digital resources, and fruitful cooperations.

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<sup>21</sup><https://www.gkr.uni-leipzig.de/en/draft/altorientalisches-institut/forschung/supplement-to-the-akkadian-dictionaries>.

<sup>22</sup>The first issue (P) is to be published on <https://dnms.org> this December (personal communication, November 2025).

<sup>23</sup>An early version of LAD will go online in a few months. In the meantime, an interview with the LAD team appeared on December 8th 2025 in *mar-shiprim*’s “In the spotlight”-series: <https://iaassyriology.com/in-the-spotlight-the-leipzig-akkadian-dictionary-lad-project>.

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