



BRILL

BRILL'S JOURNAL OF AFROASIATIC LANGUAGES
AND LINGUISTICS 14 (2022) 139–145

BAALL

brill.com/aall

Review Essay



Advances in Neo-Aramaic linguistics

Eleanor Coghill | ORCID: 0000-0002-0451-4397

Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

eleanor.coghill@lingfil.uu.se

Geoffrey Khan and Paul M. Noorlander (eds) (2021): *Studies in the Grammar and Lexicon of Neo-Aramaic*, Open Book Publishers

This collection of papers presents current linguistic research on modern Aramaic varieties, containing contributions from a majority of the scholars active in the field. It covers all the surviving branches of Aramaic: Western Neo-Aramaic, ʿUrōyo/Şurayt, North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) and, to a lesser extent, Neo-Mandaic. All these varieties are endangered and documentation remains a priority, so it is encouraging to see data from new fieldwork presented in many of the articles.

The book covers all the main areas of linguistic study, but most contributions deal with syntax or lexicon. There is a comparative-historical perspective throughout and questions of language contact are dealt with in many papers. The volume is not explicitly divided into sections, but articles with a syntactic focus are found at the beginning, issues of language contact are treated in the middle and, following a single phonological paper (Napierkowska), studies with a lexical focus are at the end. Abstracts of each paper are helpfully provided on pages xxi–xxvi. Linguistic examples are fully glossed throughout, according to the Leipzig Glossing Rules, with additional glosses explained. Most of the papers also engage with the general linguistic literature on their topics. Thus many contributions will be accessible and of interest to linguists from outside the field.

A History of the Intransitive Preterite of ʿUroyo: from a Property Adjective to a Finite Tense (Eugene Barsky and Sergey Loesov) looks at the historical development of the *Qaṭṭil form, from its beginnings in Central Semitic, via Biblical Aramaic and Classical Syriac, to its functions and distribution in ʿUroyo Neo-Aramaic. The paper shows how it developed from an adjective expressing permanent properties into a verbal adjective expressing states and dynamic events, which in Syriac could be used to express perfect aspect. Finally it progressed to expressing the basic past tense in ʿUroyo for the majority of intransitive verbs (especially motion and state-and-property verbs). The work is based empirically on tokens collected from corpora of Syriac and ʿUroyo and nicely complements recent work on the corresponding transitive *Qṭil li* construction (Coghill 2016, Noorlander 2021). One issue that could be further investigated is to what extent the system of expressing perfect aspect was actually symmetrical, as is suggested on p. 16. Although Syriac *qaṭṭil* may indeed express perfect aspect, it is doubtful whether it is as mature a perfect gram as Syriac *Qṭil li*, i.e. whether it could express experiential perfects, as *Qṭil li* does (Coghill 2016: 225, 259–261). The paper raises the question (p. 25) of whether *Qaṭṭil* ever was available for every intransitive verb in the ancestor of ʿUroyo. Given that *Qaṭṭil* was restricted to a particular set of intransitives in Syriac (Joosten 1989: 475–477) and is still not available to all intransitives in ʿUroyo, it seems unlikely to have had such a broad distribution at any intermediate stage of the language.

Towards a Typology of Possessors and Experiencers in Neo-Aramaic: Non-Canonical Subjects as Relics of a Former Dative Case (Paul M. Noorlander) is an extensive investigation of the varied ways that the semantic roles of possessor and experiencer are expressed in Neo-Aramaic dialects. As many of these involve reflexes of the Aramaic dative preposition *l-*, it starts by presenting the various functions of these reflexes, including marking agents, subjects, recipients, direct objects, external possessors/affectees and dative pronouns coreferential with the subject. Rather unusually, it ‘bridges the Tigris’ (cf. Talay 2009), systematically treating ʿUroyo and NENA together (and to a lesser extent the more distantly related Western Neo-Aramaic), uncovering their commonalities as well as differences. In the last section it presents a rich array of Neo-Aramaic constructions expressing possession, modality, mental states, and physiological states.

The Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Dohok: Two Folktales and Selected Features of Verbal Semantics (Dorota Molin) presents two fine folktales (‘A Man is a Wolf to a Wolf’ and ‘The True Lie’) from this hitherto undocumented dialect, with linguistic glossing of part of the first tale. The section on verbal semantics focuses on distinctive features of this dialect, as well as non-prototypical functions of the NENA verb forms. It offers insights into the historical develop-

ment of some of these forms, Jewish Dohok being at an earlier stage on some grammaticalization paths than other NENA dialects. Of particular interest are the two constructions expressing continuous aspect. While other dialects only have one or the other, Jewish Dohok has both but with different distributions.

Verbal Forms Expressing Discourse Dependency in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (Geoffrey Khan) examines three NENA verbal forms (Present Base forms with the prefixes *bāt-*, *qam-*, and \emptyset -) and looks at how their grammaticalization paths have led to the development of special discourse functions. With *bāt*-PRES, this involves an extension of its use in conditional apodoses (where the realization of the event referred to is dependent on the conditions in the protasis) to habitual events linked to a situation set up as a topic. It is interesting to note a possible parallel in the habitual function of English *would* (see, e.g., Tagliamonte and Lawrence 2000), which has travelled a similar grammaticalization path. The section on *qam*-PRES contributes new data and analysis to Pennacchietti's (1997) proposal that it grammaticalized from *qāyām* 'he gets up'. Fieldwork data from Harbole shows *qam*-PRES expressing not only past tense but also immediate future. Based on this, he argues that the past tense function developed via the immediate future function, within a narrative sequence. This marked type of sequence in Harbole has the implicature of mirativity, among other things. The use of the unprefixated Present Base (the subjunctive) in narrative is similarly linked to the extension of syntactic dependency to dependency on preceding discourse. This paper demonstrates the importance of looking beyond clause or sentence level in investigations of grammaticalization.

Conditional Patterns in the Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Zakho (Eran Cohen) is an important contribution to an understudied area of NENA syntax, firmly anchored in linguistic theory on modality and conditionals. The paper examines the different structures used to express conditional sentences in Jewish Zakho, as well as their different functions, and shows the distinctiveness of conditionals vis-à-vis other subordinate clauses, despite a degree of overlap in functions.

Language Contact and Ṭuroyo: The Case of the Circumstantial Clause (Michael Waltisberg) examines another area of syntax, in this case in Ṭuroyo. It presents the two main types of circumstantial clause, syndetic and asyndetic, both of which typically lack a copula. It re-examines the evidence for and against these being pattern borrowings from Arabic, looking at local Arabic varieties (which also have a copula at their disposal), the evidence from earlier Aramaic, and comparative evidence from NENA. Waltisberg concludes that the model of Arabic syntax played a role, if only in reinforcing already existing developments.

The Morphosyntactic Conservatism of Western Neo-Aramaic despite Contact with Syrian Arabic (Ivri Bunis) is anchored in the general linguistic literature on language contact, while also engaging with previous discussions of Arabic influence on WNA. Clearly presented and argued, its main findings are that, despite long contact with Arabic and abundant evidence of Arabic influence, verbal functions have to a large extent resisted influence from Arabic. Given that the verbal TAM categories are mostly cognate and similar in form (and speakers are evidently aware of the similarity), one might expect pivot-matching and a consequent adaptation of functions to match those of the cognate Arabic forms. That this has not happened is a counterexample to predictions on contact-induced change.

On the Afel Stem in Western Neo-Aramaic (Steven E. Fassberg) deals also with the absence of contact influence. In this case, however, it is a matter of innovation, rather than retention. A number of Aramaic verbs that were in the basic Peal derivational stem have shifted to the Aphel stem. In addition, Arabic verbs in the cognate basic stem I have been borrowed into the Aphel stem. It cannot be due to influence from Arabic dialects, as they have been undergoing the reverse development—shift from stem IV (cognate to Aphel) to stem I. Fassberg shows the internal factors already present in Late Western Aramaic varieties that are responsible instead, namely the emergence of prosthetic vowels due to retraction of stress, the reanalysis of the new forms as Aphel, and reinforcement from the existing overlap in semantics between Peal and Aphel verbs.

The Re-Emergence of the Genitive in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (Ariel Gutman) starts by discussing cycles in linguistic change and the relative rareness, among such cycles, of loss and renewal of case marking. He claims that Aramaic presents just such a case, namely of the renewal of genitive case. Gutman presents the typology of attributive (genitive/possessive) constructions, before going on to show how the Aramaic linker *d=* has, via a complex path, developed into a marker of genitive case on demonstratives and determiners. He shows that influence from Kurmanji Kurdish likely had a role in this, even if *d=* was not generalized into an oblique marker to match the Kurmanji oblique case. In Jewish Sanandaj, however, it appears indeed to have developed into an oblique case, being used even for objects of verbs.

Modelling Variation in the Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Azran with Articulatory Phonology (Lidia Napiorkowska) illuminates NENA phonetics and phonology—and particularly variation within these—by showing how they can be analysed within an articulatory phonology model. This shows, in a more intuitive way than much phonetic analysis, how the reorganisation of gestures results in phonetic variation.

On the Origin of Some Plant Names in Şūrayt/Ṭūrōyo in Ṭūr ‘Abdīn (Aziz Tezel) discusses several edible plants, as well as words for tree and thorn bramble, with detailed discussion of their etymologies, as well as synonyms and translations in regional languages. This kind of in-depth lexicography based on extensive fieldwork is valuable and much needed for Neo-Aramaic studies. What would add to its usefulness is information about the precise scientific names of all the plants: for instance, when one looks up the words associated with ‘*arkūwo/qalqo*’ in better-known languages, such as English, Arabic and Persian, they refer to more than one type of plant, including *cynara cardunculus* and *gundelia*, so it would be interesting to know which (if either) of these the ‘*arkūwo*’ of the Ṭūr ‘Abdīn is. In any case, we hope for more such in-depth lexical contributions on Neo-Aramaic flora.

Remarks on Selected Exponents of the 208-Swadesh List in Ṭuroyo (Eugene Barsky and Yulia Furman) serves as a supplement to the list published in 2018, including exponents not originally included: BIRD, HEAD, HUSBAND, MAN (MALE), MAN (HUMAN BEING), SUN, WIFE, and WOMAN. Giving extensive examples in context, it contains useful insights into the relationships between apparent synonyms, as well as dialectal variation in these semantic fields.

Another excellent lexicographical work is *Neo-Aramaic Animal Names* (Hezy Mutzafi). This not only documents a large number of previously unattested dialectal forms and their referents, but also goes deep into their etymologies and semantic changes, relating these to the different geographical distributions of the various animals. Mutzafi shows how Neo-Aramaic zoonyms, like other lexemes, can be usefully classified into three chronological strata. It is amusing to see the creativity even in the latest lexical stratum, with expressions such as ‘cow of my Father God’ for ladybird, ‘snake’s pillow’ for snail and ‘water-bride’ for salamander, among others.

A Corpus-Based Swadesh Word List for Literary Christian Urmi (New Alphabet Texts) (Alexey Lyavdansky) is a valuable addition to the publications of (extended) Swadesh lists for Neo-Aramaic (the others being Furman et al. 2018, Barsky et al. 2018) and the first relating to the largest Neo-Aramaic family, namely NENA. Despite the extensive contact influence on NENA, including on its lexicon, Lyavdansky finds that over 90% of the meanings have exponents with clearly Aramaic origins. The other sources of lexicon are Persian, Kurdish, Azeri and unknown.

Lexical Items Relating to Material Culture in the NENA Dialects of the Aqra Region (Aziz Emmanuel Eliya Al-Zebari, in collaboration with Anjuman M. Sabir) is a presentation of dialectal lexicon from the dialects of the ‘Aqra (Kurdish Akrê) region. These dialects can be divided on the basis of phonetic innovations into two groups, the ones from south of the ‘Aqra mountain (SAM,

including 'Aqra itself) and those of the villages of the Nexla region, north of the mountain. The latter dialects originate elsewhere, which explains their distinctness. The presentation of the lexicon follows some of the lexical categories covered in Khan's (2008) grammar of Barwar, namely (1) Buildings and Structures, (2) Containers, (3) Miscellaneous Instruments and Tools, (4) Agriculture, (5) Sewing, Weaving and Spinning, (6) Hunting, (7) Fires, and (8) Clothes and Fabrics. In some cases distinct forms are given for Nexla and the SAM dialects. It is to be assumed that, where distinct forms are not given, the two groups share the same form, but it would have been useful for this to be stated explicitly—also for details to be given of the specific villages each form was elicited from. Nevertheless it is a very rich source of information on the lexicography of this region, particularly useful because of its comparability to the Barwar lexicon.

Arabic Loanwords in the Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Ankawa (Salam Neamah Hirmiz Hakeem) deals with the large amount of Arabic lexicon in the contemporary dialect of 'Ankawa and its adaptation to the recipient language. The degree of influence from Arabic is at first sight surprising, as 'Ankawa is in a Kurdish-speaking region. It can, however, be explained by the role of Arabic media and social media in the lives of the Christian NENA-speakers of 'Ankawa. Thus many of these loans appear to be of recent origin, borrowed by a population highly competent in Arabic, and this is reflected in their relative lack of adaptation to Neo-Aramaic morphology, such as the retention in many cases of the Arabic plurals. Loans can be found both where there was no clear NENA equivalent and where there was (showing that the motivation is not simply filling in semantic gaps). The borrowings stem mainly from Standard Arabic, reflecting their source in the domains of media and education, rather than in interactions with Arabic-speaking Iraqis. This may change with the influx of Arabic-speaking Christians from Mosul since 2014.

Language Loss in the Şūrayt/Ṭūrōyo-speaking Communities of the Diaspora in Sweden (Sina Tezel) starts with a valuable overview of the present state of the language in the homeland, before examining developments in the diaspora, especially in Sweden. Two major developments in Europe are the production of neologisms from Classical Syriac (both to express new concepts and to replace loanwords) and the levelling of dialectal diversity, due to the mixing of people hailing from different villages. Typically where there were once several dialectal variants, now one dominates in the diasporic community. In many cases this is the variant from the town, Məḏyaḏ (Midyat), rather than the villages. In some cases, in contrast to the purist tendencies involved in neologisms, it is the loanword from Turkish or Arabic which is now preferred. At the same time as words are lost, meanings are also lost, especially where the cultural context is lacking

in Europe. This is all part of a larger process of language attrition, where the younger generation speak Šūrāyt/Ṭūrōyo only with the older generations and not with each other.

This volume is a fine contribution to Semitic linguistics, in its presentation of new data, new analyses and engagement with the general linguistic literature. Including significant contributions from both established Neo-aramaicists and relative newcomers, it demonstrates that the field of Neo-Aramaic continues to flourish, against the odds.

References

- Barsky, Eugene, Maksim Kalinin, and Sergey Loesov. 2018. "The Basic Lexicon of Mlaḥsô: A Comparative Study." *Aula Orientalis* 36 (2):209–235.
- Coghill, Eleanor. 2016. *The Rise and Fall of Ergativity in Aramaic: Cycles of Alignment Change*. First ed, *Oxford Studies in Diachronic and Historical Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Furman, Yulia, Eugene Barsky, and Sergey Loesov. 2018. "Two-Hundred-Word Swadesh List for a Modern Aramaic variety (Turoyo)." *Aula Orientalis* 36 (1):75–110.
- Joosten, Jan. 1989. "The Function of the So-called Dativus Ethicus in Classical Syriac." *Orientalia* 58 (4):473–492.
- Noorlander, Paul M. 2021. *Ergativity and Other Alignment Types in Neo-Aramaic: Investigating Morphosyntactic Microvariation*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Pennacchietti, Fabrizio A. 1997. "Al ha-etimologya shel ha-millit qam/kim- be-aramit chadasha (On the etymology of the Neo-Aramaic particle qam/kim-)." In *Gideon Goldenberg Festschrift*, edited by Moshe Bar-Asher, 475–482. Jerusalem: The Mandel Institute of Jewish Studies.
- Tagliamonte, Sali, and Helen Lawrence. 2000. "'I Used to Dance, but I Don't Dance Now': The Habitual Past in English." *Journal of English Linguistics* 28 (4):324–353. doi: 10.1177/007542420002800402.
- Talay, Shabo. 2009. "Bridging the Tigris: Common features in Turoyo and North-eastern Neo-Aramaic." In *Suryoye l-Suryoye: Ausgewählte Beiträge zur aramäischen Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur*, edited by Shabo Talay, 161–176. Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press.