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Old Aramaic and Neo-Aramaic: Some Reflections on Language History

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Aramaic is not among the oldest Semitic languages in a strictly chronological sense, but among those languages which are still spoken today, it has the longest continuous written tradition. The existing written documents span a period of three millennia and thus enable us to study language history in a long-term perspective. It is very important, in this respect, that the latest stage of development of Aramaic, Neo-Aramaic, still exists in a multitude of spoken varieties which can be studied *in vivo*. We can thus describe the phonetics and phonology of the modern varieties with more precision than is possible for the older language stages, which in turn enables us to draw conclusions on diachronic sound change. Likewise, we can study morphology and syntax not only from recorded texts, but we also have recourse to native speakers in order to clarify doubtful points. Thus the latest stage of Aramaic casts a strong light back into the past. It is therefore most unfortunate that many Aramaicists and Syrologists show so little interest in this living heritage.

The present paper addresses some of the changes which can be observed during the course of Aramaic language history. It presupposes the conventional subdivision of Aramaic into three historic stages, i.e., Old, Middle and Modern, with Biblical Aramaic belonging to Old Aramaic (like the closely related Imperial Aramaic), while Syriac as well as Jewish Babylonian Aramaic are classified as Middle Aramaic.¹ Modern or Neo-Aramaic (see figure 1) is subdivided into Western (WNA) and Eastern Neo-Aramaic (ENA). The enclave of Mandaic in Iranian Khuzestan is preferably not subsumed under ENA but treated as a separate variety, distinct from ENA as is WNA. The Western group (WNA) today comprises only the three Aramaic-speaking villages of the Qalamun mountains in Syria, some 60 kilometres northwest of Damascus, namely Ma'lūla, Bax'a and Ġubb'adīn. The Eastern group (ENA) is much larger, encompassing southeast Turkey, northern Iraq and northwest Iran. The westernmost member of ENA is Ṭuroyo, a language spoken in southeast Turkey in the so-called Ṭūr 'Abdīn, a region in the east

¹Cf. Beyer 1986: 43f.

of Mardin province. Between Ṭuroyo in the west and Mandaic in the south-east lies the largest subgroup of ENA, the so-called NENA (Northeastern Neo-Aramaic) group. It comprises a huge number of varieties, a good many of them yet uninvestigated. These can be further subdivided both geographically as well as on the basis of religion; especially in northeast Iraq and in northwest Iran, Jewish dialects differ considerably from Christian dialects of the same location.

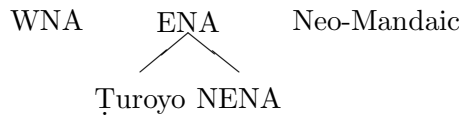


Figure 1: Subdivisions of Modern Aramaic

Looking at language change over a period of three millennia, one is surprised to observe a circular development by which some segments of language structure deviate more and more from an earlier stage only to finally enter a new configuration which bears more resemblance to the earlier stage than to the intermediate stages. This can be shown quite convincingly by examining a given consonant subsystem of stops and fricatives.

Proto-Semitic, in a stage immediately preceding the emergence of Aramaic as a separate branch, had the following labial, dental/interdental and velar stops and fricatives (not including the velarized [“emphatic”] and sibilant consonants), as shown in figure 2.

	labial		dental		velar	
stops	* <i>p</i>	* <i>b</i>	* <i>t</i>	* <i>d</i>	* <i>k</i>	* <i>g</i>
fricatives	–	–	* <i>t̤</i>	* <i>d̤</i>	* <i>x</i>	* <i>ǰ</i>

Figure 2: Partial inventory of Proto-Semitic stops and fricatives

During the emergence of Aramaic or in the earliest stage of Old Aramaic, the velar fricatives **x* and **ǰ* merged with the pharyngeal fricatives **ħ* and *‘, respectively. Somewhat later in the course of Old Aramaic, the interdental fricatives **t̤* and **d̤* merged with their respective plosive counterparts *t* and *d*. These two sound shifts reduced the partial inventory under discussion by four phonemes, as shown in figure 3.

These were not the only reductions in the phonemic inventory of Aramaic. There was also a shift of the Proto-Semitic velarized fricatives *t̤* > *t* and *d̤* > ‘ (intermediately represented by the grapheme {q}). The third sibilant of Proto-Semitic, **ś*, still distinguished in Biblical Aramaic, appears merged with *s* in Syriac. Thus, with the end of the Old Aramaic period and

	labial		dental		velar	
stops	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>g</i>
fricatives	–	–	–	–	–	–

Figure 3: Reduced partial inventory of stops/fricatives in later Old Aramaic

the emergence of Middle Aramaic varieties such as Syriac, the language had undergone a massive reduction of its phoneme inventory by at least seven consonant phonemes. However, there was already a new sound shift underway which eventually would restore some of the lost phonemes to Aramaic. This sound shift, which is conventionally referred to by the term “*Begadkefat* rule”, consists of splitting up six stops (*p, b, t, d, k, g*) into two allophones each, one a stop and one a fricative, as shown in figure 4.

labial		dental		velar	
/p/	> [p]	/t/	> [t]	/k/	> [k]
	[f]		[t̪]		[x]
/b/	> [b]	/d/	> [d]	/g/	> [g]
	[v]		[d̪]		[ḡ]

Figure 4: Appearance of fricative allophones in Middle Aramaic

By this process, a number of consonants which had once belonged to the older phoneme inventory before they were eliminated by sound shifts, now reappeared as allophones, namely the dental fricatives [t̪] and [d̪] and the velar fricatives [x] and [ḡ]. In addition, two new consonants were introduced, namely the labial fricatives [f] and [v].²

The original distribution of *Begadkefat* allophones follows a simple rule: stops are retained after a preceding consonant and word initially, fricative allophones appear after a preceding vowel. This distribution pattern, however, was already gradually weakened in Syriac, mainly due to vowel elision, as shown by the example in figure 5.

The fricative allophone [v] in **garivā* was caused by the preceding vowel *i*. After the elision of the vowel, however, it appears in a position which would call for a stop. As a result, Syriac *garbā* : *garvā* emerge as a minimal pair, thereby constituting a phonemic opposition between /b/ and /v/. In Syriac, the phonemic opposition between stops and fricatives resulting from the *Begadkefat* rule is still marginal. In the majority of cases, they appear according to their allophonic distribution. However, the beginning of a grad-

²[v] is the traditional Syriac pronunciation, most modern dialects have [w] instead.

	‘leprosy’	‘leprous’
(a)	* <i>garbā</i>	* <i>garībā</i>
(b)	* <i>garbā</i>	* <i>garivā</i>
(c)	<i>garbā</i>	<i>garvā</i>

Figure 5: Beginning phonemicization of allophones in Syriac

ual phonemicization can be observed. In Neo-Aramaic this development has reached its ultimate stage, resulting in the addition of six new phonemes (i.e., the former fricative allophones) to the phoneme inventory, as shown in figure 6 for Ṭuroyo.³

	labial		dental		velar	
stops	/p/	/b/	/t/	/d/	/k/	/g/
fricatives	/f/	/w/	/t̪/	/d̪/	/x/	/ġ/

Figure 6: Phonemicization completed in Ṭuroyo

As demonstrated by the examples in figure 5, the process of phonemization was often brought about by sound shifts (e.g., vowel elision) with concomitant changes in word structure. Another important factor was analogical restructuring of root consonants. This can be shown by the following Ṭuroyo examples (figure 7):⁴

root	present tense	past tense
* <i>ty</i>	<i>ote</i> < * <i>ātē</i> ‘he comes’	<i>ati</i> < <i>attī</i> ‘he came’
* <i>ytb</i>	<i>yotu</i> < * <i>yāteb</i> ‘he sits’	<i>yātu</i> < * <i>yattīb</i> ‘he sat’

Figure 7: The verbs ‘to come’ and ‘to sit down’ in Ṭuroyo

Obviously, both present tense forms, harking back to the old participle **pā‘el*, should have a fricative /t̪/, while both past tense forms, harking back to an old participial form **pa‘īl*, should have the stop /t/. In fact, however, the fricative has become paradigmatic in the verb ‘to come’, as the stop in the verb ‘to sit down’. Thus *ote/yotu* and *ati/yātu* in Ṭuroyo are

³In most Ṭuroyo dialects, *p* was shifted to *f*, thus *pofo* ‘face’ > *fofo*. The phoneme *p* was, however, reintroduced by Kurdish loans, e.g., *pīre* ‘woman, wife’ < Kurdish *pīr*.

⁴The past tense pattern *pa‘əl* < **pa‘īl* in Ṭuroyo exists only in the first stem (the old *Pe‘al*) and is lexically restricted to a number of mainly intransitive verbs, e.g., *ati* ‘he came’, *yātu* ‘he sat down’, *daməx* ‘he slept, lay down’, *kali* ‘he stopped’, *qayəm* ‘he stood up’ etc.

contrastive pairs demonstrating that /t/ and /t̥/ can appear in the same phonetic environment. Figure 8 contains some more minimal or contrastive pairs demonstrating the phoneme status of the former allophones in Ṭuroyo.

/t/:/t̥/	<i>kətyo</i>	‘there is’
	<i>kətyo</i>	‘she comes’
/d/:/d̥/	<i>admo</i>	‘blood’
	<i>adno</i>	‘ear’
/k/:/x/	<i>kəkwo</i>	‘star’
	<i>kəxlo</i>	‘she eats’
/g/:/ğ/	<i>mdaglo</i>	‘she lies (tells lies)’
	<i>rağlo</i>	‘foot’

Figure 8: Minimal and contrastive pairs in Ṭuroyo

To sum up the preceding discussion: The fricative phonemes *t̥, *d̥, *x and *ğ, which were lost during language evolution from Proto-Semitic to Old or Late Old Aramaic, reappear as new phonemes in Neo-Aramaic after an allophonic stage in Middle Aramaic. Ṭuroyo is, however, a very conservative Neo-Aramaic language which preserved *t̥, *d̥, *x and *ğ unchanged;⁵ in most NENA dialects they were subject to further sound changes by which some of them were again eliminated. Figure 9 shows the reflexes of Middle Aramaic *baytā* ‘house’ and *īdā* ‘hand’ in some NENA varieties.⁶

Thus besides retention in some conservative dialects, t̥ and d̥ have merged with other phonemes in the inventory, the shift back to dental stops being statistically the most important one. One can state that Middle Aramaic t̥ and d̥ which resulted from the fricativization of older t and d, have shifted back again to t and d in a good many dialects. This circular development of sound shifts can be illustrated most strikingly by the example of the existential particle, Old Aramaic *ītay*, Syriac *īt* ‘there is’. As can be inferred from the Hebrew cognate *yeš*, this word had a *t̥ in Proto-Semitic. During the Old Aramaic period, t̥ shifted to t, in Middle Aramaic t shifted to a fricative allophone t̥ which acquired phonemic status in Neo-Aramaic. Thus, e.g., *īt* in most dialects of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁷ In the more progressive Christian dialects of Azerbaijan (e.g., Urmī), t̥ shifted back to t, resulting in *īt*. The effect is almost that of a linguistic *perpetuum mobile*: t̥ > t > t̥ > t.

⁵The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for Western Neo-Aramaic.

⁶Cf. Hopkins 1999: 322.

⁷Ṭuroyo, on the other hand, although generally preserving the interdentals, here shows the irregular reflex *kīt* ‘there is’ (= *īt preceded by the present tense marker *k-*); the *t* was introduced in analogy to the negative *layt* ‘there is not’.

Middle Aramaic	<i>baytā</i> ‘house’	<i>īdā</i> ‘hand’
Iraqi Kurdistan — Christians	<i>betā</i>	<i>īdā</i> ^a
Iraqi Kurdistan — Jews ^b	<i>besa</i>	<i>īza</i>
Iranian Azerbaijan — Christians	<i>beta</i>	<i>ida</i>
Iranian Azerbaijan — Jews	<i>belá</i>	<i>ilá</i> ^c

^a In NENA vowel length is no longer phonemic, except for some marginal cases. It is therefore not indicated in transcription, although stressed vowels in open syllables are usually pronounced long, e.g., [bētā], [īdā].

^b These are the forms used in Zaxo, the largest former Jewish community in northern Iraq. In Jewish dialects further to the east, e.g., in the Province of Dehok, *t* and *d* were preserved (Mutzafi 2008: 15).

^c Jewish dialects in north-eastern Iraq and Iran are the only ones which have word stress on the final syllable.

Figure 9: Reflexes of Middle Aramaic **t* and **d* in some NENA dialects

A similarly circular development can be observed with the Proto-Semitic velar fricatives, **x* and **ǵ*, which merged with the pharyngeal spirants *ħ* and ‘ early in the history of the Aramaic language. The same sound shift was repeated in NENA for the later fricatives **x* and **ǵ* resulting from the *Begadkefat* split of stops and fricatives. Whereas Ṭuroyo preserved **x* and **ǵ* as shown by the examples in figure 8, they merged with **ħ* and *‘ in NENA. The situation is, however, quite complicated because the development of **ħ* and *‘ then took a different course.

Except for a small group of dialects in eastern Turkey, the best-known of which is that of Hertevin,⁸ after the merger of **x* and **ħ* to **ħ* the resulting **ħ* shifted to *x*. This is illustrated by figure 10 below; note that **x* and **ħ* are kept apart in Ṭuroyo.

Middle Aramaic	Ṭuroyo	NENA (Hertevin)	NENA	
<i>māħē</i>	<i>moħe</i>	<i>maħe</i>	<i>maxe</i>	‘he hits’
<i>ħamšā</i>	<i>ħamšo</i>	<i>ħamša</i>	<i>xamša</i>	‘five’
<i>bāxē</i>	<i>boxe</i>	<i>baħe</i>	<i>baxe</i>	‘he weeps’

Figure 10: Middle Aramaic **x* and **ħ*

NENA *‘ (resulting from the merger of **ǵ* and *‘) shifted to a glottal stop ‘ and, in the more progressive dialects, to a glide (*w* or *y*) or \emptyset , as illustrated by figure 11 below. Betanure (Mutzafi 2008) is a conservative

⁸Cf. Jastrow 1988.

Jewish dialect from central northern Iraq, Čāl is a more progressive Christian dialect of the same area, but situated in Turkey right across the Turkish-Iraqi border.⁹ Ṭuroyo has again preserved ‘ as a pharyngeal fricative.

Ṭuroyo	NENA (Betanure)	NENA (Čāl)	
<i>šaw‘o</i>	<i>šō‘a</i>	<i>šawwa</i>	‘seven’
<i>be‘e</i>	<i>be‘e</i>	<i>beye</i>	‘eggs’
<i>bə‘to</i>	<i>bə‘ta</i>	<i>beta</i>	‘egg’
<i>tar‘o</i>	<i>tar‘a</i>	<i>tarṛa</i>	‘door’

Figure 11: Neo-Aramaic *‘

The impression of repetitive or circular linguistic evolution is not restricted to phonology, but can also be seen in the realm of morphology. A good example for such a circular development, although yielding a somewhat different final result, is the history of the definite article in Aramaic. I devoted a paper to this subject (Jastrow 2005) of which figure 12 below presents a short summary.

Old Aramaic (Ya’udic)	<i>tără‘</i>	‘a door/the door’
Biblical Aramaic	<i>tərá‘</i>	‘a door’
	<i>tar‘ā</i>	‘the door’
Syriac	<i>tar‘ā</i>	‘a door/the door’
Ṭuroyo	<i>tar‘o</i>	‘a door’
	<i>u=tar‘o</i>	‘the door’

Figure 12: History of the definite article in Aramaic

The earliest varieties of Old Aramaic do not yet have a definite article as can be seen from the Ya’udi textual evidence. In the course of Old Aramaic, a postpositional element *-ā* was introduced as a definite article; in Biblical Aramaic forms without and with *-ā* are used exactly according to the criterion of definiteness and indefiniteness. In Middle Aramaic, the previously definite form with *-ā* became the unmarked form of the noun, and the distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness was once again lost. Finally, in the Neo-Aramaic dialects, various strategies were pursued to reintroduce a marker of definiteness but only Ṭuroyo developed a full-fledged new definite article. It has the following forms: m. sg. *u=*,¹⁰ f. sg. *i=* and pl. c. *aC=*. (“*C*” in the plural form stands for the doubling of the word initial consonant,

⁹The Čāl data are quoted from Talay, forthcoming. For the form *tarṛa* ‘door’, where **r*’ assimilated to *ṛ*, there are dialects which have *tarra* without velarization and others in which ‘ was simply elided, causing a short *ä* vowel in an open syllable: *tāra*.

¹⁰The symbol “=” indicates a stress compound, the main stress is on the last syllable of the first element, e.g., *u=tar‘o* [‘ü-tar‘o] ‘the door’.

e.g., *gawre* ‘men’, *ag=gawre* ‘the men’.) For words with an initial vowel the definite article of the plural has the form *ann=*, e.g., *aḥunone* ‘brothers’, *ann=aḥunone* ‘the brothers’.¹¹ Thus, when overlooking the three thousand years of recorded Aramaic language history, we observe two stages with a definite article (and a clear-cut definiteness/indefiniteness distinction) and two stages without an overt definite article. Here again, we note a certain circularity in language history, although there are two morphologically different markers of definiteness: in the first stage, a postpositional element *-ā*, in the second stage a prefixed definite article which distinguishes between a masculine and feminine singular and a common plural.

It would be wrong, however, to create the impression that the entire history of the Aramaic language follows the same pattern of eternal repetition. Especially in morphology there are also linear developments which take the language to completely new horizons. This will be illustrated by the most important innovation of Neo-Aramaic, the re-formation of the past tense system. This innovation is only attested in two central branches of Neo-Aramaic, i.e., in the two ENA subdivisions, Ṭuroyo and NENA; it is absent in both WNA and Neo-Mandaic. In the two central branches, the older Aramaic perfect—*qətal*—has completely disappeared and has been replaced by a construction based on the old passive participle, *qtīl* (in the old *status absolutus*). The passive character of the participle entailed an ergative verbal construction in which the logical object appears as grammatical subject (‘he was killed’) whereas the logical subject is expressed by the preposition *l-* followed by a pronominal suffix, e.g., **qtīl-l-ī* ‘he was killed by me’ > ‘I killed him’. Figure 13 gives a few forms of the simple past tense in Ṭuroyo and NENA.¹²

Ṭuroyo	NENA	
<i>grášlī</i>	<i>grášlī</i>	‘I pulled him’
<i>grášlan</i>	<i>grášlan</i>	‘we pulled him’
<i>grášxu</i>	<i>grášloxun</i>	‘you (pl.) pulled him’
<i>grīšóli</i>	<i>grīšáli</i>	‘I pulled her’
<i>grīšólan</i>	<i>grīšálan</i>	‘we pulled her’
<i>grīšálxu</i>	<i>grīšáloxun</i>	‘you (pl.) pulled her’

Figure 13: Past tense in Ṭuroyo and NENA

¹¹Historically, this definite article derives from the personal pronouns *hū*, *hī* and *henn(ōn)/henn(ēn)* preceding the noun in order to express definiteness, e.g., **hū gabrā* ‘he, namely the man’ > *u=gawro* ‘the man’.

¹²Older **ī* was shortened and lowered to *ə* in closed syllables (hence *grášlī*), whereas in open syllables it is preserved as *i*. In Ṭuroyo older **ā* in open syllables was shifted to *o*, e.g., *grīšóli*, but in closed syllables it was shortened to *a*, thus **grīš-ā-lxūn* > *grīšálxu*.

In addition to the past tense, most NENA dialects (excepting Ṭuroyo) developed a perfect tense which is also based on the passive participle, but in the old *status emphaticus* (*status determinatus*), m. *qt̄lā*, f. *qt̄ltā*. In this construction, the particle is ambivalent as to diathesis and mostly expresses active voice. The perfect is inflected predicatively by means of a copula derived from the old existential particle *īl* followed by **-l-eh*, yielding forms such as **-īleh* > *ile* ‘he is’. Thus we find perfect constructions like **grīšā-īleh* > *grīšele* ‘he has pulled’ and **grīštā-īlah* > *grāštela* ‘she has pulled’. Both the past and perfect tense can be transposed into the remote past by means of a past marker *-wa-* (< Middle Aramaic *həwā* ‘he was’). Thus we find forms such as NENA *grāšwali* ‘I had pulled him’ and *wewa grīša* ~ *grīšewa* ‘he had pulled’, *wawa grāšta* ~ *grāštawa* ‘she had pulled’.

Thus a completely new inflectional system for the past tenses has arisen in Neo-Aramaic. Its complexity cannot even be sketched, but only alluded to in the present paper. In this respect Neo-Aramaic has definitely moved away for good from the morphological patterns of older Aramaic. One could speculate about the reasons why, during a period of three thousand years, Aramaic phonology tends to move in circles while in morphology spectacular developments from older patterns occur. The reason, I think, lies in the very structure of language. Every natural language operates with a restricted inventory of phonemes; there are lower and upper limits for the number of phonemes which are not exceeded. Thus after a period which witnessed a drastic reduction of phonemes there must by necessity come another period in which the number increases again. Morphology, on the other hand, is a much more open system. New grammatical categories can be introduced and expressed by newly created morphological paradigms, while older grammatical categories may sink into oblivion.¹³

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¹³There is, e.g., no fixed rule that every language must have a definite article. This can easily be verified by reviewing some of the better-known languages: Ancient Greek has it, whereas Latin does not, but the Romance languages which emerged from Latin have developed a definite article. Among modern languages one can cite Russian and Turkish which do not have a definite article. This explains why Aramaic, in the course of its history, was able to alternate between stages with a definite article and stages without it.

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