The Neo-Aramaic dialects are modern vernacular forms of Aramaic, which has a documented history in the Middle East of over 3,000 years. Due to upheavals in the Middle East over the last one hundred years, thousands of speakers of Neo-Aramaic dialects have been forced to migrate from their homes or have perished in massacres. As a result, the dialects are now highly endangered. The dialects exhibit a remarkable diversity of structures. Moreover, the considerable depth of attestation of Aramaic from earlier periods provides evidence for the pathways of change. For these reasons the research of Neo-Aramaic is of importance for more general fields of linguistics, in particular language typology and historical linguistics. The papers in this volume represent the full range of research that is currently being carried out on Neo-Aramaic dialects. They advance the field in numerous ways. In order to allow linguists who are not specialists in Neo-Aramaic to benefit from the papers, the examples are fully glossed.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found here: www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: Women in the village of Harbole, south-eastern Turkey (photograph taken by Brunot Poizat in 1978 before the village's destruction).

Cover design: Anna Gatti
1. Introduction

The historical reconstruction of Aramaic from its earliest attestations to the modern-day dialects can, at times, be difficult. For example, how far back was the dialectal split between the eastern and western branches of Aramaic?¹ The reconstruction at other times, however, can be relatively straightforward. For instance, a basically linear development is discernible in the Aramaic of Syria-Palestine. One begins with the Middle Aramaic attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls, moves on to the Late Aramaic corpora of Jewish Palestinian, Christian Palestinian and Samaritan Aramaic, and concludes with Western Neo-Aramaic.²

The study of Western Neo-Aramaic began in 1863 with the publication by Jules Ferrette (1863) of transcriptions of a text and vocabulary items from Maʿlula. Since then, the dialect of Maʿlula has been fortunate that outstanding Semitists have turned their attention to it. The greatest of Semitists, Theodor Nöldeke, commented on Ferrette’s material already in 1867, and contributed more insights in an article from 1917–1918

¹ The split is fully evident in Late Aramaic (as delineated in Joseph A. Fitzmyer’s 1979 classification of the Aramaic periods), but there are indications of a dialectal divide already in Old Aramaic inscriptions. See Greenfield (1968, 1978); and most recently Fales and Grassi (2016). Margaretha Folmer (1995) has shown dialectal differences in the Official Aramaic corpus, which preceded Late Aramaic.

² Abraham Tal (1979, 1980, 1983) has demonstrated this in a series of articles dealing with different Western Aramaic grammatical phenomena.
following Gotthelf Bergsträsser’s publication of the texts (1915) collected by Eugen Prym and Albert Socin. Many scholars have investigated Western Neo-Aramaic, but three in particular have shaped the field: Bergsträsser with the publication of texts (1915; 1919–1920), a glossary (1921), and a short grammatical description (1928, 80–9), Anton Spitaler with a grammar (1938) and texts (1957), and especially Werner Arnold with an unparalleled wealth of oral texts (1989; 1990, 1991, 1991, 1992) as well as a synchronic grammar (1990, 1992), which includes not only Ma’lula, but also the two other Western Neo-Aramaic dialects spoken in the nearby villages of Bax’a and Jubb’adin. Moreover, Arnold has recently published a comprehensive dictionary of the three villages (2019). To date the comparative notes in Spitaler’s grammar remain the fullest historical treatment of Ma’lula. Since the publication of that grammar, however, thanks to the intensive investigation into the literary dialects of Late Western Aramaic and the rich material from Ma’lula, Bax’a, and Jubb’adin that Arnold has presented, scholars now have the wherewithal to investigate further the links between older Western Aramaic and Western Neo-Aramaic. A detailed diachronic description of the development of Western Late Aramaic into Western Neo-Aramaic remains a desideratum.

2. Afel

In general, the verbal system of Western Neo-Aramaic has diverged less from earlier Aramaic than have the verbal systems of other varieties of Neo-Aramaic. The morphosyntax of Ma’lula, Bax’a, and Jubb’adin is, on the whole, easily derived from older Western Neo-Aramaic forms, though it shares innovations paralleled in other non-Western varieties of Neo-Aramaic, for

---

3 Yet, there are some noteworthy changes from older Aramaic that are attested in Western Neo-Aramaic, e.g., the prefixing of pronominal morphemes to the old active participle and the penetration of the qattit nominal pattern into the verbal system.
example, the tendency of native Aramaic reflexive-passive t-stems to disappear, leaving behind only lexical traces.


Spitaler (1938, §121) wrote of the tendency in Maʿlula for weak verbs to shift from one verbal category to another. This phenomenon is also true for earlier periods of Aramaic. Spitaler mentioned I-ʾ verbs influencing medial II-w/y verbs, and geminates influencing I-n. Of relevance to the discussion is the Afel-looking participle mōmar ‘saying’ from the root ʾmr, whose creation Spitaler (1938, §121, §162b) attributed to a similarity with the II-w/y Afel verbal forms and an imperfect analogy of the type

ōqem (Afel ‘he raised’) : mōqem (Afel ‘he raises’) ::

ʾōmar (Peal ‘he says’) : X

X = mōmar.4

Another germane example given by Spitaler (1938, §171b) is the Afel verb appi ‘he gave’, which is commonly derived from the

4 The vowel a is a reflex of the older Aramaic rule *i > a /__ guttural.
root yhb ‘gave’ (Bergsträsser, 1928, 84). According to Bergsträsser, a shift such as 3fs *yahbat > *yabbat led to an analogy of the type xassat ('she covered'; III-y root) : appat ('she gave') :: xassi ('he covered') : X
X = appi.\(^5\)

In his brief discussion, Spitaler did not include as examples of the shift from Peal to Afel the preterite Peal II-w/y áqam ‘he arose’ and ámet ‘he died’, but I believe that the initial vowels in these forms show an incipient move to Afel, like mōmar and appi mentioned above, and thus are relevant to the discussion at hand.

3. Explanation of the Phenomenon

Why is there a movement of older Aramaic Peal verbs and Arabic 1st stem verbs to Afel in Maʿlula? Is it the result of contact with another language? Is it an internal semantic development in Maʿlula, or can its origins be reconstructed back to an earlier period of Aramaic?

3.1. Contact with Arabic?

Because of the considerable influence of Arabic on Maʿlula and the widescale absorption of Arabic verbs into the vocabulary of Maʿlula, one might be tempted to seek the origins of the phenomenon in the centuries of contact that existed between Aramaic and Arabic in Syria. The mutual influences of the two languages have been described by Arnold and Behnstedt (1993). The authors noted that the Aramaic Afel is extremely productive in Western Neo-Aramaic, but that the Arabic 4th stem has mostly disappeared from the spoken Arabic of the Qalamūn area, and those 4th form verbs that have survived reflect the influence of literary Arabic, e.g., aslam/yislem ‘convert to Islam’ (Arnold and

\(^5\) As if from the root *npy (Bergsträsser 1928, 84). Spitaler noted that speakers could interpret the form as the Pael of a root *p'y.
On the Afel Stem in Western Neo-Aramaic

Behnstedt 1993, 57–58). In his description of the Damascene dialect, Heinz Grotzfeld (1965, 27) gave more examples of literary 4th stem forms that appear in the vernacular: ʾazhar ‘bloom’, ʾaḥka ‘speak’, ʾaznab ‘sin’, ʾamkan ‘be able’, ʾaṣbah ‘become’, ʾaṣṭa ‘sin’. Arnold and Behnstedt pointed out that sometimes the Aramaic Afel verbs of Arabic etymology are derived not only from 4th form verbs, but also from 1st form verbs and from nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Aramaic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ʿutma ‘darkness’</td>
<td>ʿačem ‘become dark’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ǧīriq fi nnawm ‘fall asleep’</td>
<td>ʿaġrek ‘fall asleep’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʿazam ‘invite’</td>
<td>aʿzem ‘invite’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bada ‘begin’</td>
<td>abət ‘begin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḋall ‘remain’</td>
<td>ōḏel ‘remain’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The merger of the 4th and 1st forms in many Neo-Arabic dialects has been attributed to phonetic factors—the aphaeresis of the initial alif in the Perfect (ʾafʿala > fʿal) and Imperative ʾafʿil > fʿel as well as the conditioned neutralisation of u and i, which led to blurring of the distinction between the Imperfect of both forms: yufʿil > yəfʿel.6 A confusion of 1st and 4th forms is known already in Middle Arabic texts, where it is especially common in geminates and other weak verbs.7 In the light of the movement from the 4th form to the 1st form in the Neo-Arabic of the region, it is clear that the Aramaic phenomenon in Maʿlula of the shift of Peal to Afel cannot be attributed to Arabic influence.

---

6 Nöldeke (1904, 36); Blau (1966, §51.2, n. 44); Fischer and Jastrow (1980, 46). In the Damascene dialect, the meaning of the 4th form, on the other hand, is taken over by verbs in the 2nd form (Grotzfeld 1965, 27).

7 Nöldeke (1904, 36); Blau (1966, §51.2); Hopkins (1984, §72).
3.2. Shift of Peal to Afel in Western Neo-Aramaic

A tendency of Peal verbs to shift to Afel appears to be unknown in the dialects of NENA, Central Neo-Aramaic, and Mandaic, but does occur in all three Western Neo-Aramaic dialects. Because we possess more oral texts from Maʿlula than from Baxʿa or Jubbʿadin, it is not surprising that there are more examples from Maʿlula than from the other two dialects.

Is the movement from Peal to Afel an internal semantic development in Maʿlula? In different Semitic languages the C-stem is sometimes intransitive with an ingressive nuance, i.e., entering into a state or condition, e.g., Hebrew הָלַךְ וְכָר ‘become red’, הָלַךְ וְכָר ‘become white’, Syriac ၊ ‘become leprous’, ၊ ‘begin to shine’ and Arabic ʾaqbala ‘approach’, ʾaslama ‘become a Muslim’. A weakening of ingressivity seems to have led on occasion to a blurring of the difference between verbs that occur in both the G and C stems, and this can be detected, for instance, in Syriac ၊ and ၊ ‘turn around’, and ၊ and ၊ ‘write’. The Hebrew of the Second Temple period—Late Biblical Hebrew, the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Rabbinic Hebrew—also testifies to the merger of Qal and Hifil. Some transitive and intransitive Qal verbs move to Hifil, e.g.,

- הָלַךְ וְכָר ‘despise’ > הָלַךְ וְכָר,
- הָלַךְ וְכָר ‘grow’ > הָלַךְ וְכָר,
- הָלַךְ וְכָר ‘mock’ > הָלַךְ וְכָר.

In the case of a weak verb like יָשִׂים ‘he will place’, the morphological ambiguity—it can be parsed as Qal or Hifil—led

8 Other shifts of stems are attested. For example, in Jewish Koy Sanjak (Mutzafi 2004, 75–77) some older Pael verbs have integrated into the Koy Sanjak Peal, while others have integrated into Afel; in Jewish Urmí (Khan 2008, 65–67) older Pael stem verbs have merged with Peal or with Afel; in Jewish Sanandaj (Khan 2009, 65–67) Peal has on the whole merged with Peal; in Bohtan (Fox 2009, 31–36) Pael includes some verbs from older Peal.

9 Wright (1896, §45); Leemhuis (1977, 38–42).

10 Duval (1881, §198). ၊ also retains its causative meaning ‘dictate’.

to a reinterpretation of the Classical Biblical Hebrew *Qal* in Late Biblical Hebrew as a *Hifil* and the subsequent creation of a passive *Hufal*. Yet, despite the semantic overlapping of G and C in some Semitic languages, I wonder if more is at play in Maʿlula, and a look at earlier Western Aramaic may provide the key.

### 3.3. Shift of *Peal* to *Afel* in Earlier Western Aramaic

I propose that the origin of the shift to *Afel* lies in the Late Western Aramaic dialects of Jewish Palestinian, Christian Palestinian, and Samaritan Aramaic. The latter two dialects evidence a general retraction of stress, which led to an increase in prosthetic vowels.\(^\text{12}\) Earlier Aramaic corpora have sporadic anaptyctic vowels before consonantal clusters involving sibilants and dentals, however, the helping vowel is not related to a retraction of stress, e.g., Biblical Aramaic אַדְרָע, ‘arm’, אִשְׁתִּיו, ‘they drank’, Syriac ṣuḫš, ‘he found’.

In the three dialects of Late Aramaic from Syria-Palestine the number of examples with prosthetic vowels grows considerably. In Christian Palestinian and Samaritan Aramaic the prosthetic vowel sometimes occurs before the word-initial cluster and other times breaks up the cluster.\(^\text{13}\)

(1) Jewish Palestinian:

אָשָׁקת, אַדוֹתָה, אֶדְרָע, אִשְׁתִּיו, אִדְמִיך, אָשָׁקו, אָשָׁקוּ, אֲדָמָה, אֵשְׁתִי, אָשָׁקוּ, אְדָמִיך, אֲדָמִיך, אֲדָמִיך, אֲדָמִיך


Historically, the insertion of a medial vowel in these two dialects is not the preservation of the original full vowel, but rather a secondary lengthening of a reduced vowel (*shewa mobile*). See Bar-Asher (1977, 421–482); Müller-Kessler (1991, §3.1.3.2); Ben-Ḥayyim (2000, §8.9); Tal (2013, §2.3.26). The examples listed here are taken from Bar-Asher (1977); Tal (2000); Sokoloff (2014); Sokoloff (2017).

\(^{12}\) Stress may have shifted back also in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, but there is no direct evidence for this.

\(^{13}\) Historically, the insertion of a medial vowel in these two dialects is not the preservation of the original full vowel, but rather a secondary lengthening of a reduced vowel (*shewa mobile*).
(2) Christian Palestinian:


(3) Samaritan:

אדם ‘the blood’, azbân ‘time’, אסתב ‘winter’, אשתה ‘six’, שומיא ‘heavens’, åbā̊dåt ‘she made’, anbā̊qu ‘they (m.) left’, anbā̊qi ‘they (f.) left’

The creation of prosthetic vowels in Peal stems was probably more extensive in Late Aramaic speech than in the written texts that have survived. The assimilation of the t of t-stems in verbs in these dialects (e.g., Jewish Palestinian אשתה > אשתלב ‘he was found’; Fassberg 2012, 30) may also have been interpreted by speakers as Peal intransitive forms with prosthesis. From the vocalisation of Jewish Palestinian, the Samaritan oral tradition, and the use of matres lectionis in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, one sees that there were three prosthetic vowels i, a, and a; the first two appeared more frequently before sibilants.

I would like to suggest that it was the retraction of stress and the subsequent creation of initial epenthetic vowels, a phenomenon that began in Late Western Aramaic, which led in Western Neo-Aramaic to the reinterpretation of Peal verbs as Afel forms. Ma’lula and Jubb’adin preserve verbs of the *qatila type, i.e., intransitive verbs that have a reflex of e in the base of the verb in the perfect: iḏmex ‘he slept’, išme‘ ‘he heard’, isleq ‘he ascended’.14 The retraction of the stress and the creation of a prosthetic vowel may have led speakers to associate Peal intransitive verbs of the shape Vqtel with Afel preterite forms. I surmise that this process began with intransitive verbs and then was extended to transitive

---

14 In Bax’a speakers have tended to shift *qatila verbs into the pattern of *qatala: idmax (but still išme’). See Arnold (1990, §3.1.1).
verbs of the *iqtal* type. I think that indirect corroboration for this reconstruction can be found in the fact that many of the verbs which show up in *Afel* in Maʿlula are indeed intransitive, as noted by Spitaler. Additional pressure for the reinterpretation of *Peal* forms as *Afel* would have come from the IV-w/y *Peal* verbs in which the retraction of stress created *Afel*-looking forms, e.g.

áqam `he/they arose’ vs. older Aramaic qām

ámet `he died’ vs. older mīt

Although Arabic dialects of the region cannot be responsible for this development, it is curious that the creation of prothetic vowels before word-initial consonantal clusters in *qatila* verbs can be found in an Arabic dialect in Syria. As pointed out to me by Simon Hopkins, Palmyrene Arabic shows the curious form ʾönzel `he descended’, which developed from nazila > nizil > ʾönzel.15 Unfortunately, Aramaic inscriptions from the same area but from a much earlier period and written in Palmyrene Aramaic give no written indication of prosthesis and a retraction of stress.

4. Conclusion

The shift of *Peal* verbs to *Afel* in Western Neo-Aramaic dialects may have begun in an earlier period of Western Aramaic, probably Late Western Aramaic, in which there was a widespread retraction of stress and subsequent creation of prothetic vowels that resolved word-initial consonantal clusters. This situation might have led in Proto-Western Neo-Aramaic to the reinterpretation of *Peal Vqtel* (< *qatila*) forms as *Afel* forms. This reanalysis would have been reinforced by the overlap between *Peal* and *Afel* verbs in expressing state and condition. *Peal* and *Afel* did not merge completely in Maʿlula, but a trend, which may have begun much earlier in Western Aramaic, increased significantly in Western Neo-Aramaic.

15 Cantineau (1934, 121). Cf. katab `he wrote’ (< *qatala*).
References


Studies in the Grammar and Lexicon of Neo-Aramaic


