# Studies in the Grammar and Lexicon of Neo-Aramaic

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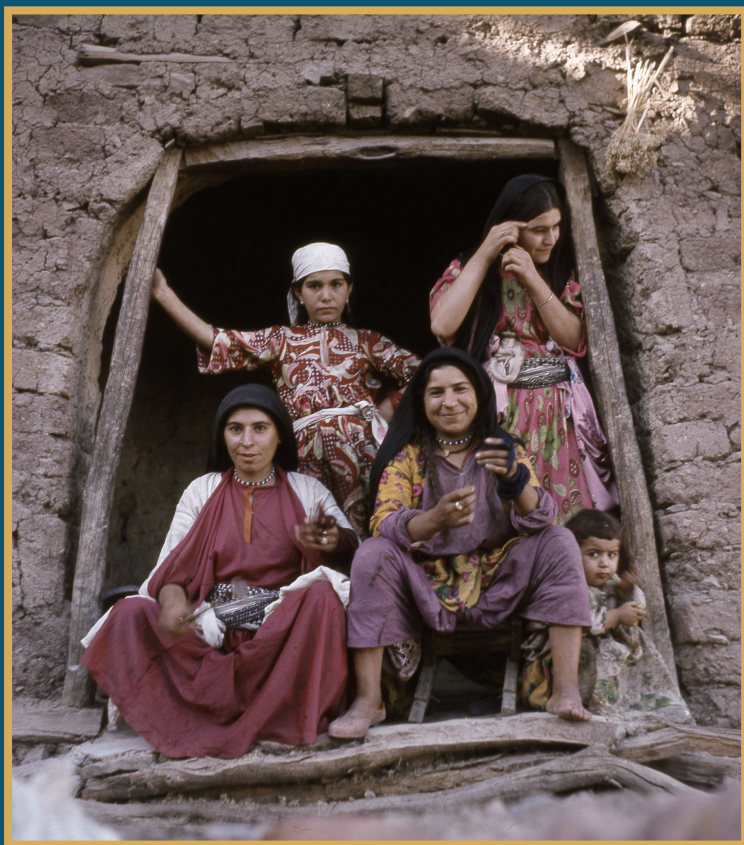


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Cover image: Women in the village of Harbole, south-eastern Turkey (photograph taken by Brunot Poizat in 1978 before the village's destruction).
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# THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE GENITIVE IN NORTH-EASTERN NEO-ARAMAIC[1]

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## 1. Introduction

A commonplace claim in historical linguistics is that languages change in cycles: morpho-syntactic markers appear to make a given construction clearer, then disappear when they are felt redundant, and then re-appear again in different guise. Maybe the best known case of such a linguistic cycle is the cyclic reappearance of pre- and post-verbal negation markers in various languages, a phenomenon that has been termed 'Jespersen's cycle' by Dahl (1979) following the earlier work of Jespersen (1917).

Yet in core morphological domains of language, such as case morphology, it is difficult to come across documented cases of cyclic change, most probably due to the long time spans in which core morphology changes. Aramaic, however, with its almost 3,000 years of documented history, provides one such case study, that I shall examine in this paper.

Based on the evidence from Akkadian and Classical Arabic, it is generally assumed that proto-Semitic exhibited a three-way case system, distinguishing nominative, accusative and genitive

cases. Yet Aramaic, from its earliest attested stages, shows no case system. The fact that Aramaic used to have a case system in its pre-historical stage, however, can be deduced from the Aramaic Samʾal inscriptions from the 8th century BCE, where masculine plural nouns conserve an archaic distinction between nominative and oblique cases (Dion 1978, 117).

The main cycle of change I shall describe here, based on my PhD thesis (Gutman 2016; Gutman 2018), is the re-emergence of the genitive case (and thus case-marking in general) in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic after about 2,500 years of absence of case marking. This cyclic change is accompanied by other cyclic morphological changes, that will be examined as well.

## 1.1. Terminology

I shall use here the term attributive construction to denote constructions in which a head nominal (the primary) is qualified semantically and syntactically by another nominal (the secondary). The prototypical attributive construction in Semitic languages is the annexation construction, also known as the construct state construction, in which the head noun is marked by a special morphological form called the construct state.

From a dependency grammar point of view, we may say that the attributive construction exhibits an attributive relation between the primary and the secondary (see Goldenberg 1987). From a morpho-syntactic point of view, however, this relation can be marked by different means. The different markers can be classifed on the following two dimensions, following the work of Plank (1995, 38ff.):

- Two loci of marking: primary and secondary.
- Two types of marking: relational (pure morpho-syntactic marking) and pronominal (marking that has a nominal referent).

This yields four principal marker types, that are presented in Table 1 together with the corresponding gloss label, that will be used in the examples below.

Table 1: Four AC marker-types

|  | **Primary** | **Secondary** |
|---|---|---|
| **Relational** | Construct state (CST) | Genitive case (GEN) |
| **Pronominal** | Possessive (POSS) | Linker (LNK) |

I reserve the notion of case to denote morphological marking of the dependent, i.e. the secondary. Hence, in the context of attributive constructions, the notion of genitive case is reserved for relational marking of the secondary, while the parallel marking of the primary is considered to pertain to the domain of *state marking*. The *construct state* is a morphological marking of a noun that indicates that it has a complement (i.e. it is a primary of an attributive construction), while a noun that is not thus marked is said to be in the *free state*. For an analysis of the category of state as a valid cross-linguistic category reflecting the *syntactic valency* of nouns see Gutman (2018, 32) as well as Creissels (2009, 74).

Pronominal markers are defined as markers that have referential power, substituting for a noun phrase, and thus can themselves serve as primaries or secondaries.

To clarify these terms, we can consider the following Turkish textbook example:

(1)     *oda-nın    kapı-sı*
        room-GEN   door-POSS.3

        'the door of the room' (Turkish, Göksel and Kerslake 2005: 183)

The suffix -*sı* marks the primary *kapı* 'door'. It is a pronominal marker, since the expression *kapısı* can stand by itself meaning 'its door'. The suffix -*nın*, on the other hand, is a pure relational marker of the secondary *oda* 'room' (though it also conveys the semantic value of definiteness), and therefore it is an example of genitive case.

## 1.2. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to investigate and explain language-change processes observed in NENA dialects. The claims made here are based on a detailed study of several different NENA dialects, of which text samples have been arranged in an extensive database, as described in Gutman (2016; 2018, 13ff.).[2] As this paper gives, however, a "bird-eye's view" of the processes involved, the best examples from different dialects will be presented in order to justify the different claims. I invite the interested reader to refer to Gutman (2016, especially §10.4; 2018, especially 320ff.) for a more detailed description.

Throughout the paper, I shall assume that a process of language change can ideally be attributed either to influence of some contact language, or be language-internally motivated. Of course, in most cases it is probable that both motivations exist to some extent.

As NENA is spoken in the same area as Kurdish dialects, both of the Sorani and Kurmanji types, I shall concentrate on these dialects as the main contact languages. As the point of departure of the changes in NENA, I shall take Syriac, a Classical Aramaic dialect spoken between the 2nd and 7th centuries (at least) as the backdrop for these changes, serving as an approximate 'Proto-NENA' (disregarding the question whether the NENA dialects stem in fact from a unique proto-language). Syriac was spoken in the same area as NENA is spoken, and many structural features of NENA can be traced back to Syriac constructions. Thanks to the extensive ancient literature that has survived in Syriac (due to its important role in the propagation of Eastern Christianity), it is a very well described and documented ancient dialect of Aramaic.

## 2. Attributive Constructions in Syriac

In Syriac we find three principal attributive constructions. The expression 'house of a/the king', for example, can be expressed in the following three ways:

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2    The database can be found online as part of Gutman (2016).

(i)     The *construct state construction* (=CSC), restricted mostly to idioms and fixed expressions. In this construction the primary noun is marked by the construct state:

(2)     *bēṯ       malkā*
        house.CST   king


The construct state can be in general identified as lacking the emphatic-state suffix *-ā*, which in Syriac marks free-standing nouns, such as the secondary *malkā* 'king' in (2). In older strata of Aramaic, this suffix marked definiteness, yet in Syriac it lost this function, and became instead a formal exponent of free-state nouns. Consequently, the construct-state form can be regarded as derived by *apocope* from the free-state noun.


(ii)    The *analytic linker construction* (=ALC), which is the most productive and frequent of the three. In this construction the primary is left unmarked (in the free state), but instead a proclitic *d-* particle, a linker, intervenes between the two nouns:

(3)     *bayta   d=     malkā*
        house    LNK=   king

(iii)   The *double annexation construction* (=DAC); in contrast to the former two constructions, this construction implies definite reading ('house of the king'). As the above construction, it is marked by the proclitic *d-*, but in addition to that the primary noun is marked by a possessive suffix co-referent with the secondary:

(4)     *bayt-ēh      d=     malkā*
        house-POSS.3   LNK=   king

Some authors have treated the *d-* proclitic as being a genitive case marker (see for example Doron and Meir 2013 or Bulakh 2009 regarding a similar Geˤez particle), yet, as Goldenberg (1995, 3–6) notes, since it is a pronominal element, it is distinct from a genitive case marker. Its pronominal nature is clear in examples where it completely assumes the role of the primary, in the absence of an explicit nominal primary:

(5)　　*habaw*　　*hākēl*　***d***=　　*qesar*　*l*=　　*qesar*
　　　　give.IMP.PL　then　　LNK=　Caesar　to=　　Caesar

　　　　*w*=　　　***d***=　　*alāhā*　*l*=　　*alāhā*
　　　　and=　　LNK=　God　　to=　　God

'Give then **that which** is of Caesar to Caesar and **that which** is of God to God.' (Peshitta, Matthew 22:21; Muraoka 1997, 71)

In Syriac, therefore, as in all Aramaic varieties of antiquity, there is no genitive marker.

## 3. Emergence of a Genitive Case in NENA

Following Cohen (2010), I have showed in Gutman (2016) and Gutman (2018, chapter 4) that the Syriac *d-* linker diversified into 3 different markers in NENA dialects:

1. A modern *d-* linker, with possible variations of its form

2. A neo-construct state suffix *-əd*

3. A genitive prefix *d-*

In what follows, I shall concentrate on the development of the two latter markers, and especially the genitive marker.

## 3.1. Stage I: Emergence of the Neo-CSC in NENA

Following Mengozzi (2005), one can trace the Neo-CSC of NENA dialects, in which the construct state noun is marked by an *-əd* suffix, back to the Syriac DAC, exemplified here by the expression *bayt-ēh d=malkā*. Judging by the evidence from the NENA manuscripts from the 17th century, the transformation process can be broken down into the following steps:

1. The possessive suffix *-ēh*, which in Syriac can inflect, becomes morphologically fossilised and attenuates phonetically to a schwa *-ə*.

2. The proclitic linker *d-* encliticises to the primary, resulting in a sequence *-ə=d*.

3. The resulting unit is reanalysed as a unitary construct state suffix.

As a result the NENA Neo-CSC emerges with the form *baytəd malka*.

The above is a description of the 'mechanics' of the change process. What, however, motivates it? One can postulate three motivating forces:

- A universal tendency of functional elements to become enclitics and subsequently suffixes (Lahiri and Plank 2010: 395).

- An areal preference for head-marked constructions (cf. Cohen 2015). See, however, Gutman (2017) and Gutman (2016, §10.3; 2018, 307) for a negative evaluation of the possibility that this is a direct pattern replication of the Kurmanji *ezafe* construction.

- The cognitive force of linguistic economy (cf. Slobin 1977, 186): a single-marked construction is simpler than a double-marked construction.

## 3.2. Stage II: Hopping of the *d-* segment back to the secondary

The process continues further. Judging by dialectal evidence, we see that the *d-* segment, now part of the CSC suffix, is phonologically not stable:

1. In environments where the secondary has an initial vowel (or a glottal stop), the final *-d* has a tendency to re-syllabify with the secondary: *\*ṣadr-əd awwa susa* 'chest of this horse' > *ṣadr-ə d-awwa susa* (Barwar, Khan 2008b, 397)

2. A final schwa following an open syllable is not stable, with the result that it is sometimes elided: *yal-əd axona* 'children of my brother' > *\*yal-ə -d=axona* > *yal -d=axona* (Qaraqosh, Khan 2002: 208)

3. Alternatively, to save the schwa, the [d] may geminate: *\*paqart-əd ane ḥawāwīn* 'neck of these animals' > *\*paqartə d=áne ḥawāwīn* > *paqart-əd d=ane ḥawāwīn* (Qaraqosh, Khan 2002: 208)

Note that in all the examples above, the primary noun is distinct from the corresponding free-state forms (*ṣadra, yala, paqarta*), thus the resulting constructions are different from the ALC, which still exists in the NENA systems.

## 3.3. Stage III: Reanalysis of the *d-* segment as a genitive prefix

The aforementioned stage is purely phonological, yet the crucial step happens due to a reanalysis of the added phonological material: when the *d-* segment is doubled, the *d-* prefix can be reanalysed as a genitive prefix.

(6)   *pumm-əd   d-aw        nāša*
      mouth-CST   GEN-DEF.MS    man

      'the mouth of the man' (Jewish Zakho, Cohen 2012, 107 (76))

This happens indeed with a select class of vowel-initial demonstratives and determiners, as shown by Cohen (2010). A partial selection of these elements is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Case inflected definite determiners in Jewish Zakho
(Cohen 2010, 88)

| Case | | Determiner | |
|---|---|---|---|
| −GEN | ʾ- | *aw* | MS |
| + GEN | *d-* | *ay* | FS |
| | | *an* | PL |

Following this reanalysis, the *d-* marked genitive forms appear in environments where the original phonological motivation is no longer present, but where genitive-case marking is expected, such as NPs following prepositions, or on phrase-internal demonstratives:

(7)   *mən   d-ay    xzēna*
      from   GEN-DEF  treasure

      'from the treasure' (Jewish Zakho, Cohen 2012, 108 (77))

(8)   *gnay-ət   tawra   d-o=        goṛa*
      fault-CST   ox      GEN-DEF.MS =  big.MS

      'the fault of the big ox' (Barwar, Khan 2008b, 517 [D2:19])

Yet the introduction of a genitive prefix is highly surprising, not only because it re-introduces a case system into Aramaic, absent for about 2,500 years, but also because it goes against the aforementioned universal tendency of suffixation. So a natural question is: What were the motivations for this re-analysis?

Several potential answers can be given. First, we note that the high frequency of vowel-initial demonstratives or determiners acting as secondaries (or the first elements thereof), makes the morphological re-analysis of the phonological realignment plausible.

A partial internal explanation, suggested by Khan (2009a, 71), may be the analogy of the *d-* marked demonstratives with independent genitive pronouns, which also start with a [d] segment such as Barwar *bɛθa diy-a* 'her house'. Yet such an analogy would explain only the genitive form of independent demonstratives, and not of determiners.

It seems, however, that the main driving force of this grammatical change lies in language contact, and more specifically in an analogy with the Kurdish Kurmanji demonstrative system.

As shown in Table 3, the Kurmanji demonstratives exhibit two cases: a nominative and an oblique case. It may be no coincidence that the nominative, as in Aramaic, is vowel-initial, while the oblique is consonant-initial.

Table 3: Kurmanji near-deixis demonstratives

|    | NOM | OBL |
|----|-----|-----|
| MS |     | *vî* |
| FS | *ev* | *vê* |
| PL |     | *van* |

It should be noted that the various contexts where the genitive-marked NENA demonstratives appear (i.e. marking attributive NPs or complements of prepositions) fit the usage of the Kurmanji oblique demonstratives. Thus, the emergence of a NENA genitive-prefix may result from a *pattern replication* process,

in the sense of Matras and Sakel (2007), of the Kurmanji system. Indeed, the geographical distribution of the NENA genitive prefix corroborates this hypothesis, since the prefix is present mainly in NENA dialects that are in direct contact with Kurmanji dialects.

Yet, as Cohen (2010, 90) notes, there is a difficulty with this idea, since the NENA genitive prefix, in contrast to the Kurmanji oblique case, does not mark complements of verbs. Does this difficulty refute the pattern-replication hypothesis? Not necessarily. It is quite possible that while replicating the Kurmanji pattern the NENA speakers did not generalise the occurrence of the *d-* segment outside its initial domain of appearance, but rather restricted its reanalysis to the attributive domain. The occurrence of the genitive prefix after prepositions is natural in this respect, as the construct-state suffix can appear on certain prepositions, as in the following example:

(9)    *mənn-ət   bela*
       from-CST   house

       'from the house' (Jewish Urmi, Khan 2008a, 196)

## 3.4. Stage III: Reanalysis of the *d-* segment as an oblique prefix

Interestingly, at least in one dialect, namely the peripheral dialect of Jewish Sanandaj, the *d-* prefix has completely replicated the Kurmanji pattern, as it is used not only as a marker of adnominal complements of nouns and prepositions, but also as a marker of verbal objects (preceding the verb as is the case in Kurdish), as the following three examples show:

(10)    *bela    d-o*
        house   OBL-3S

        'his house' (Jewish Sanandaj, Khan 2009b, 200)

(11) *reša    d-o*

on      OBL-3S

'on it' (Jewish Sanandaj, Khan 2009b, 224)

(12) *d-o        grəš-le*

OBL-3MS  pulled-A.3MS

'He pulled him.' (Jewish Sanandaj, Khan 2009b, 159)

In these three examples the form *d-o* is used as an independent pronoun, but it can also be used as a case-marked determiner of an NP. It is also worth noting that except these uses of the *d-* prefix (which are in fact optional), there are no other reflexes of the Classical Aramaic *d-* linker in this dialect.

Khan (2009b, 158) explains the usage of the *d-* prefix as a verbal-complement marker, as being a sub-case of the prepositional-complement marker, since it can also appear after the accusative preposition *həl*:

(13) *həl=    d-o        grəš-le*

ACC=    OBL-3MS  pulled-A.3MS

'He pulled him.' (Jewish Sanandaj, Khan 2009b, 158)

Thus, Khan (2009b, 158) explains example (12) as resulting from the simple omission of the preposition *həl*. Yet, given the above outlined development path of the case-marking *d-* prefix in NENA dialects, it is plausible to analyse this development as the final step of replication of the Kurmanji pattern, in which the *d-* prefix assumes completely the role of an oblique case-marker. Interestingly, this happens in the dialect of Jewish Sanandaj, which is not in direct contact with Kurmanji (the Kurdish spoken in Sanandaj is of the Sorani type, in which there is no case-marking). As the origin of the pattern replication must be in the

Kurmanji-speaking area, this seems to be an indication that the speakers of Jewish Sanandaj came originally from that area.

## 4. Renaissance of the Apocopate Construct State

The reanalysis of the *d-* prefix as a genitive marker has led in some dialects to the reanalysis of the apocopate primary form as a new construct state formation. In the following example, the form *brāt* can be contrasted with the free-state form *brāta* 'daughter', effectively being a construct-state form:

(14) *brāt*      *d-ay*      *baxta*
daughter.CST    GEN-DEF.FS    woman

'the daughter of the woman' (Jewish Zakho, Cohen 2012, 110)

It is worthwhile noting that the new apocopate construct state is formally similar to the historical construct state, as both are formed by apocopation, yet as some irregular forms show, it is distinct from it. For example, the Syriac construct state of the noun *brāta* is *bat*.

Once the new form has been reanalysed as a new kind of construct-state marking (on a par with the neo-construct-state suffix *-əd* marking), it spreads to contexts where no *d-* prefix is found:

(15) *ʾaqlās*      *xa*      *mənn-u*
feet.PL.CST    one    from-3PL

'the feet of one of them' (Jewish Zakho, Cohen 2012, 115)

This development marks again a closure of a cycle. In the earliest strata of Aramaic the apocopate construct state was

the standard way of marking the attributive relation. Later, in Syriac it lost its expressive power and became confined mostly to idioms, yet in NENA it re-emerges as a standard way of marking the attributive relation, alongside other morpho-synactic means.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper I have drawn attention to the existence of two important cycles of morpho-syntactic change in the nominal domain in the long history of Aramaic:

1. The disappearance of the case system of the earliest strata of Aramaic followed by the re-emergence of case marking (genitive or oblique) in NENA dialects, about 2,500 years later.

2. The decline of the apocopate construct state in Syriac, followed by the development of suffixed neo-construct-state marking in NENA dialects, which in turn led to the emergence of a neo-apocopate construct-state marking in some dialects.

These cycles are accompanied by a phonological cycle, in which a proclitic element (the *d-* linker) becomes a suffix (in the construct state suffix) and then shifts back to being a prefix (as a genitive case-marker). Yet a key observation is that phonological re-arrangements (cliticisation, resyllabification) cannot by themselves cause a morpho-syntactic change of the linguistic system. Rather, they must be followed by a process of reanalysis of the phonological material in order for them to have a lasting effect.

From the point of view of the marking quantity of the attributive constructions, we can observe another abstract cycle. The double annexation construction of Syriac, in which the primary is marked by a possessive suffix and the secondary by a pronominal linker, transforms into a single-marked construction (the suffixed construct-state construction of NENA), which in turn transforms back in some environments and dialects to another double-marked construction, in which the primary is

marked by the construct-state (either apocopate or suffixed) and the secondary is marked by the genitive case. Intriguingly, we see that while the original double construction used pronominal markers on both loci, the modern double construction uses relational markers on both sites.

The history of Aramaic permits us to corroborate the old idea that languages do indeed change in cycles, yet we see that these cycles do not constitute exact repetition. The fluctuations in marking-quantity corroborate the idea that two opposing forces shape language: economy, on one hand, and clarity, on the other hand. In slightly different terms, this idea has been neatly summarised by Slobin (1977, 192):

> The first two charges—clarity and processibility—strive toward segementalisation. The other two charges—temporal compactness and expressiveness—strive toward synthesis, however. As a result, Language constantly fluctuates between the poles of analyticity and syntheticity, since none of the charges can be ignored.

The details of the various processes should, in principle, be attributed to specific motivations, either language-internal motivations or, as is often the case, to language-contact. Yet even in the most pristine 'laboratory' conditions of language change, which Aramaic with its richly documented history approaches, not all details of change can be accounted for. This is since the various forces operating on the development of a language are ultimately mediated by the creativity of its speakers.

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