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.

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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).

Cover design: Anna Gatti
PREFACE

The Neo-Aramaic dialects are modern vernacular forms of Aramaic, which has a documented history in the Middle East of over 3,000 years, the earliest inscriptions being datable to approximately 1,000 BCE. The Neo-Aramaic dialects that have survived down to modern times are generally classified into four subgroups:

1. Western Neo-Aramaic (south-western Syria)
2. Central Neo-Aramaic (south-eastern Turkey West of the Tigris), represented by varieties of Ṭuroyo (also known as Ṣurayt) in Ṭur ‘Abdin and the dialect of Mlaḥso
3. North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (northern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey and western Iran), generally known as NENA
4. Neo-Mandaic (south-western Iran)

The Neo-Aramaic dialects are clearly closely related to the written forms of Aramaic of earlier periods. The Neo-Aramaic subgroups can be correlated broadly with dialectal divisions that are reflected in pre-modern written Aramaic sources from the first millennium CE onwards particularly during Late Antiquity, which are sometimes referred to collectively as ‘Middle Aramaic’ or ‘Late (Antique) Aramaic’. Central Neo-Aramaic, North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic and Neo-Mandaic are related to the eastern branch of pre-modern Aramaic, e.g. Classical Syriac, Classical Mandaic and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, whereas Western Neo-Aramaic is related to the western branch, e.g. Jewish and Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Samaritan Aramaic. No Neo-Aramaic subgroup, however, could be considered a direct descendent of the attested forms of the literary pre-modern Aramaic varieties.

Nine of the papers in this volume focus on NENA dialects, five concern Ṭuroyo varieties, two focus on Western Neo-Aramaic and one compares all three subgroups.
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 study and documentation of these dialects is thus of prime concern not only for the preservation of the speakers’ oral heritage but also for their identity. A number of contributors to this volume are native speakers of Neo-Aramaic (Aziz Tezel, Sina Tezel, Aziz Al-Zebari, Salam Hakeem). We hope this Open Access volume will be a source of inspiration for speakers to take pride in their linguistic heritage and seek ways to contribute to its preservation.

In recent years research on the Neo-Aramaic dialects has been flourishing. This has resulted in the documentation of many endangered dialects and the discovery of many fascinating aspects of linguistic variation and change. The dialects exhibit a remarkable diversity in all aspects of grammar. Moreover, the considerable depth of attestation of Aramaic from earlier periods provides evidence for 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 and advance the field in numerous ways. Many of them originated as papers presented at the last two international conferences of Neo-Aramaic (Warsaw 2016, organised by Lidia Napiorkowska, and Uppsala 2018, organised by Eleanor Coghill and Sina Tezel). The contributions to the volume cover a wide range of topics, including studies of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon. A large proportion of them, however, focus on syntax or lexicon. In order to allow linguists who are not specialists in Neo-Aramaic to benefit from the papers, the examples are fully glossed. Abbreviations for the glosses can be found at the beginning of the volume.

Several of the papers investigate the historical development of verbal syntax (Eugene Barsky and Sergey Loesov, Dorota Molin, Geoffrey Khan, Ivri Bunis), dative subjects (Paul Noorlander),
verbal stem morphology (Steven Fassberg) and nominal case morphology (Ariel Gutman). These papers demonstrate that Neo-Aramaic varieties are indispensable for the study of the historical development of Aramaic. Its long history is not only remarkable but also is instructive for understanding language change in general. The volume contains detailed case studies of, for instance, the shift from adjectives into verbs (Eugene Barsky and Sergey Loesov), from dependent into main clauses (Geoffrey Khan), dative into nominative subjects (Paul Noorlander), reanalysis of causatives as intransitives (Steven Fassberg) and the cyclic reinvention of case marking (Ariel Gutman).

Since the Neo-Aramaic dialects are so diverse, each variety requires a detailed description in its own right. Narrative texts like folktales are invaluable for preserving an endangered language without a written culture of its own. Moreover, they facilitate the study of language use in context. Detailed synchronic descriptions of language use in this volume include studies on non-canonical subject marking across Neo-Aramaic varieties (Paul Noorlander) and Tense-Aspect-Mood in NENA, particularly the negation of the future and continuous aspect (Dorota Molin), modality and discourse dependency (Geoffrey Khan) and conditional constructions (Eran Cohen). Dialectal variation is a challenge for linguistic analysis. One paper (Lidia Napiorkowska) applies an articulatory phonological model to describe the phonological variation in a highly endangered NENA dialect. Such synchronic variation points to diachronic processes in progress and holds important clues for the limitations of grammaticalisation (Dorota Molin), the reanalysis of modal verbal forms (Geoffrey Khan) and internal motivations besides language interference (Lidia Napiorkowska).

Neo-Aramaic variation has often arisen due to dialect mixing or contact. Syntax is particularly prone to change due to language contact. Since they belong to linguistic-religious minorities, Neo-Aramaic speakers are necessarily bi- or multilingual. Arabic-Aramaic contact is the particular focus of two papers pertaining to Turoyo (Michael Waltisberg) and to Western Neo-Aramaic (Ivri Bunis), both of which show the complexities of such language
contact situations. While pattern replication may seem evident, it cannot be easily identified using current frameworks of contact (Michael Waltisberg). Prolonged bilingualism among linguistic minorities can even show unexpected resilience against contact-induced change (Ivri Bunis). Two papers address central issues of morphological structures concerning verbal derivation in Western Neo-Aramaic (Steven Fassberg) and the genitive in NENA (Ariel Gutman). While the reanalysis of causative stem formations in Western Neo-Aramaic cannot be attributed to language contact with Arabic (Steven Fassberg), the re-emergence of the genitive in NENA is partially due to convergence with Kurdish (Ariel Gutman).

The papers on lexicon make important contributions to documenting particular semantic fields in various dialects, e.g. plant names (Aziz Tezel), animal names (Hezy Mutzafi) and material culture (Aziz al-Zebari). The papers of Aziz Tezel and Hezy Mutzafi also discuss the etymology of the items in the semantic fields they are concerned with. Two papers (Eugene Barsky and Yulia Furman, Alexey Lyavdansky) examine the profile of the core lexicon with a view to establishing historical relationships by applying the Swadesh list.

The final two papers in the volume focus on features of Neo-Aramaic dialects that reflect their attrition and incipient loss, in one case (Salam Hakeem) in northern Iraq, which is the historical heartland of Aramaic, and in the other (Sina Tezel) among the younger generations of Neo-Aramaic speakers in the diaspora communities of Europe.

We are very grateful to Open Book Publishers for all their efficient help. Their open-access initiative will allow this publication to be widely read not only by scholars but also by members of the Neo-Aramaic-speaking communities in the Middle East and in the diaspora throughout the world.

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