



IRAN VII. NON-IRANIAN LANGUAGES (10). ARAMAIC

IRAN vii, concluded

(10) Aramaic

Aramaic has been documented since the early first millennium B.C.E. The following stages can be distinguished: Old Aramaic, ca. 950–600 B.C.E.; Imperial Aramaic, ca. 600–200 B.C.E.; Middle Aramaic, ca. 200 B.C.E.–250 C.E.; Classical (Late) Aramaic, ca. 250–700 C.E.; New Aramaic, ca. 700 C.E. onward.

Speakers of North-Eastern Aramaic have been in contact with Iranian languages in the western regions of the plateau and on the western side of the Zagros for some 3,000 years. Jewish settlement from Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia, by deportation or emigration, is documented since the eighth century B.C.E., mainly into rural and urban northwestern, central, and southwestern Iran, and their respective capitals Hamadan, Esfahan, and Susa.

Christian emigration and settlement from Mesopotamia into the same areas began during the Parthian period. The Gnostic Mandaean (q.v.) settled in southeastern Mesopotamia and adjacent Khuzestan at latest by the 3rd century C.E., probably migrating from Jordanian Palestine via Harran and Media (see [GNOSTICISM](#)).

In modern Iran, Neo-Aramaic-speaking Jewish and Christian communities are



or were found mainly in the rural areas and towns of Azarbaijan around Lake Urumiya and Kurdistan (and adjacent regions of Turkey and Iraq), as well as in major cities, Kermanshah (Bakhtaran), Hamadan, Sanandaj, as well as Tehran and others. Christian speakers belong to two confessional groups, both of which tend to be called “Assyrians”: (1) the East Syriac Nestorians belong to the Ancient Church of the East (“Assyrians” proper); (2) the Catholics belong to the Chaldean Church (“Assyro-Chaldeans”), having separated from the Nestorians in the 16th century and affiliated themselves with the Catholic Church.

Population estimates are problematic, due to both emigration and the lack of official census data. Macuch in his detailed account in “Assyrians in Iran” (q.v.) gives the following totals: Assyrians 24,500 and Chaldeans 30,000, not all of whom will have retained their Neo-Aramaic dialect. Even more problematic are estimates for Jewish and Mandaean Neo-Aramaic speakers (for the latter, *Ethnologue* 15 indicates ca. 500).

Events in the early twentieth century as well as more recent events have led to extensive emigration from the already small minorities in the various regions (in the early part of the 20th century to larger cities of Iran, further to Baghdad, Syria, Georgia, Armenia, Moscow, St. Petersburg; more recently to Israel and mostly Western countries). Field work was and is done among the diaspora speakers, in the republics of the former Soviet Union, Israel, Europe, and North America.

Linguistically, Neo-Aramaic has four main divisions: (1) Western Neo-Aramaic in Ma'lūla and two neighboring villages northeast of Damascus, Syria; (2) the Turoyo group in Ṭur 'Abedin in southern Turkey; (3) Neo-Mandaic in southern Iraq (Basra) and Khuzestan (Khorramshahr, Ahwāz); (4) North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA), with numerous scattered trans-Tigris dialects in Kurdistan and Azarbaijan (Iraq, Turkey, Iran).

Internally, the dialectology of NENA is fairly unusual. Dialectal divides are not only determined by geography, but equally so by confession. In certain regions, even for inhabitants of the same village or town, the Aramaic of Christian speakers is said to be often not mutually intelligible with that of Jewish speakers, so that communication is conducted in the majority language—Kurdish, Turkish, Persian, or any combination thereof. Bilingualism, as well as tri- and quadrilingualism, is the norm. S. Hopkins (1999) suggested the following geographic-confessional dialects: [Chart 1](#).



In addition to the local dialects, a standardized literary language for Christian Neo-Aramaic, often called Classical Syriac, was developed in the 19th century, by the American Presbyterian Mission in the 1830s, and, separately, by the French Lazarist Mission and by the Russian Orthodox towards the end of 19th century, all based on the Christian vernaculars of the Urumiya region. In all modern dialects, most noticeable is the Kurdish layer, to which has been superimposed a Turkic layer in Azarbaijani-speaking regions. Much of the inherited ablauting (grammatical change of the nominal and verbal root; cf. Arabic) morphology has been retained. Also retained is gender distinction, which is supported by the gender distinction in Kurdish (as well as Iranian Gurani in southern Kurdistan and Zaza-Dimili in eastern Turkey), and the head-first syntax of noun phrases. As in similar contact situations, the verb system as well as sentence syntax and subordination are the grammatical areas most liable to change. For the lexicon of the Jewish dialects of Azarbaijan, I. Garbell (1965b) calculated the following combined percentages of Kurdish and Azarbaijani loans (out of a sample of 1,621 items): nouns, 68.96 percent; adjectives, 23.5 percent; verbal bases, 28 percent; prepositions, 59 percent; particles, 54 percent; derivational bound morphemes, 73 percent.

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The following mostly follows Garbell (1965a, b); for the quite different Christian Literary [Standard] Neo-Aramaic, see H. L. Murre-van den Berg (1999).

Phonology. Consonants. The Aramaic spirantization of postvocalic voiceless and voiced stops, $p \sim f$, $t \sim \theta$, $k \sim x$, $b \sim v$, $d \sim \delta$, $g \sim \gamma$, is still reflected in the dialectology of NENA. Most varied are the reflexes of the Middle Aramaic interdental fricatives, where the four main dialect groups differ in the treatment of $*t$ and $*d$; thus $*bayt$ - “house,” $*yad$ - “hand” appear as follows (note also the shift to final stress in the Jewish dialects): [Chart 2](#).

Contact. The pharyngeals t , s , and $'$ merged with t , s , $'$, while $h > x$: $p-t-h > p-t-x$ “to open.” The variants f , x , γ merged with Kurdish and Azeri f , x , $\gamma \sim q$; $v = \text{AzCJ } v$, but $> \text{KdCJ } w$. The palatals c , j [č j] and $ž$ are loan phonemes. AzCJ assimilated the strong palatalization of the Az velars k g , and shifted further to dental affricates [ts dz] regionally. Shifts from the literary consonantal system of (modern) Classical Syriac (CS) to that of NENA vernaculars may be shown as follows; note AzCJ v vs. KdCJ w (AzC: Murre-van den Berg, 1999; AzJ: Garbell, 1965a, b): [Chart 3](#).



Vowels. The original quality and length of the three vowels *i u a* were determined by the Semitic patterns of qualitative and quantitative ablaut of the basic consonantal root C-C-C. It is still reflected in the language. So are the later patterns of lowering and raising of the high vowels: $-i/ú > -e/o$, $-ín/ún > -ē(n)/-ō(n)$, and of diphthongal contraction: $-ay/aw > -ē/ō$. Most NENA dialects have the following phonemic vowels: [Chart 4](#).

Syllable structure. The basic structure is defined by the inherited Semitic ablaut of tri-radical and quadri-radical roots. The phonetic length and quality of the tense vowels, including loans, depend on stress and syllable structure. They are reduced in closed syllables and shortened when unstressed. Short *i u* may be elided: loaned Pers. (and Kd/Az) *n(i)muna* “example,” *t(u)fang* “rifle.” These patterns partially assimilate those of Kurdish, including initial CC clusters: Kd *brā* < *bīrā* “brother.” Clusters in loans are assimilated to the C-C-C structure: *fikr* “thought” > *fikir* (CiCiC) > *fkír*, but prevocalic *fikr-e*; ‘*ašr* “late afternoon” > ‘*á:sir* (CáCiC).

Suprasegmental features. Mostly in Turkic-speaking areas, the typical Altaic sound and vowel harmony is assimilated by a unique combination of the inherited suprasegmental pharyngeal feature and the Altaic front-back harmony. Called “synharmonism” in Neo-Aramaic terminology, it involves the inherited pharyngeals *ṭ, ṣ, ‘ayn*, but also *q* and long *ā*. Before their pharyngeal features were lost, the respective syllables, and later words as a whole, became “velarized” (also called “flat” and “hard”). This process resulted in the global division into velarized vs. non-velarized syllables and words: non-velarized *amra* “she says” vs. velarized ‘*amra* “wool” (< Mid. Aram. *āmrā* and ‘*amrā* respectively). It is sometimes reflected in non-formal writing: velarized *qtíl-li* > *qtól-le* “I killed,” fronted *kálbā* > *k’élba* “dog.” Representation varies. Thus Garbell (1965a) uses italics for velarization vs. non-italics for its absence: <*asr*> “late afternoon” vs. non-velarized “castle” (both with *s* < *ṣ*!). Mostly, consonants in velarized syllables or words tend to be marked in Semiticist tradition by underdotting, and to be paired with their non-velarized base in phonological tables (e.g., Younansardaroud, 2001).

Stress is word-final, and non-phonemic, but may be so on the morphological level due to contractions: *zdé-lu* “they feared” and *zde-lú* “their fear.”

Morphology. Nominal morphology (Urumiya). Much of the inherited morphology and morphophonology has been retained. Masculine and feminine gender is distinguished in the nominal and verbal system.



Nominal system. The Semitic case inflection (nominative, genitive, accusative) was lost already at early pre-NENA stages. The nominal feminine marker is *-t-a*: *qliw-a/qliw-t-a* “clean,” *kliw-a/kliw-t-a* “written,” *xmar-a/xmar-t-a* “he-/she-donkey,” *rafiq/rafiq-t-a* “friend.” The basic plural marker is *-e*: *malim > malm-e* “teacher,” *lixm-a > lixm-e* “bread,” *sota > sot-e* “grandmother,” but there are numerous variant markers. Unassimilated loan adjectives show no gender: *kor naš-e* “blind people.” Of Kd loans, 66.7 percent have retained their gender; 66 percent of Az loans are assigned the gender of the corresponding Kd words (Garbell, 1965b).

Pronouns. The pronouns distinguish independent and possessive forms, and also continue the object set *< *li + suffix* already found in the Aramaic of the Achaemenid period and typologically supported by the Kurdish personal-possessive suffixes (but not the Turkic possessive suffixes, which do not express objects). Deixis is binary: [Chart 5](#).

The possessives supersede final vowels, thereby neutralizing number marking: *yal-a* “child,” plur. *yal-e, yal-xun* “your (2nd plur.) child//children.”

Demonstratives: [Chart 6](#).

Verbal system. Verbal stems are tri- and quadri-radical. Of the six stems in Classical Syriac, the three reflexive and passive stems have been lost. Reflexivity may be expressed by the term *jana* “self” (*< Pers. jān*). The tri-radicals have three stems: basic stem I; stem II with reduplicated middle consonant, *C-CC-C*; stem III with prefix, *ma-CC-C*. Stems II and III often serve as intensive and causative stems for stem I verbs: intr. *b-s-m* “to heal” and tr. *b-ss-m* “to heal”; intr. *r-d-x* “to boil” and caus.-tr. *ma-rd-x* “to boil.” The passive construction is based on the passive participle, *CCIC-ā + copula*.

Fully assimilated are compound verbs consisting of a nominal part and a small set of function verbs with intransitive and transitive distinction which are typical for Persianate languages, including Kd and Az: *mahtal piš-li* lit. “astonished I-remained = was” (*< mu’aṭṭal*), *mahdal xdīr-u* lit. “detained they-became,” *bašla-miš wīd-le* lit. “beginning (Az) he-made = he began.” A small number of loans are assimilated to the C-C-C pattern: Ir *baxš-* “to forgive, grant” *> b-x-š, bxīš-le* “he forgave,” Kd *jegar* “anger, angry” *> j-g-r* “to become angry.”

Copula. The copula is an old innovation, marked by endings derived from the



personal pronouns. In AzCJ the copula is *il-*, which together with forms of *h-w-y-* “to be, become” in the other tenses forms compound tenses. The existential verb is *it-*, unmarked for gender and number, negative *let-*. The indicative and subjunctive forms are: [Chart 7](#).

The verbal system of aspect, mood, tense and *Aktionsart* has been completely restructured, and is distinctive for NENA. It has long been suggested that the original innovations evolved in contact with Iranian. The limited use of the syntagm with passive participle *CCīC* with ergative-type inflection is documented since Achaemenian times: Babylonian Aramaic *šəmī' l-ī* “by me was heard = I heard”; cf. OP *-mai kṛ-tá-m* “by me it was done = I did” (Folmer, 1995, p. 710, on the eight morphological and word order characteristics of the eastern branch of Official Aramaic suggested by Kutscher, 1970, p. 362). Even in the modern dialects, the original passive connotation of transitive participles is still retained, so that the verb forms are ambivalent; thus, from the root **p-t-ḥ* “to open”: *ptíx-eli* < **ptíx + ili* “he has opened” (ergative preterite) or “it is open(ed)” (passive present).

The basic Semitic system of inflected imperfective/perfective *qatal-a/ya-qtul-u* was lost early in Aramaic, and survived only in the imperative. It was replaced by a nominalized system based on participles: (1) present < active participle; (2) preterite < passive participle, absolute state; (3) perfect < passive participle, emphatic state; (4) durative, or continuous < infinitive. There are the following types of person marking: (a) inflected; (b) predicative, i.e., person markers directly added to the base; (c) ergative, i.e., a distinct set of person markers indicating the agent in transitive preterites; (d) copulative, i.e., compound forms with the copula *il-* and forms of *h-w-y-*: *iw-*, *hawy-* “to be, become”; thus with AzJ *g-r-š* “to pull”: [Chart 8](#).

The basic paradigms are shown in Table 6 (northern forms for perfect, intransitive *qím-* “having stood up, be standing,” transitive masc. *gris-é*, fem. *gris-t-é* “having pulled”).

The durative, the unmarked imperfective, and the resultative-stative aspect distinguish not only present and past, but also future and subjunctive/conditional forms. Future is marked by *kā-/k-*, e.g., *k-w-/k-iwy-* “will be” (masc./fem. bases < *kā + hawy-*). The subjunctive in periphrastic verb forms is marked by *h-w-y-*; the present subjunctive is identical with the indicative. Negation is marked by *la*. It precedes the predicative and ergative verb forms, but the auxiliary verb forms of “to be” in the compound tenses.



The verb systems in the dialects of Azarbaijan are fully assimilated to that of Azeri Turkish. The AzC dialects, such as Sardrudi (Younansardaroud, 2001) and Literary Urumiya Aramaic (Murre-van den Berg, 1999) have the same distinctions, but differ somewhat in their morphology. Thus, Sardrudi has retained the preposition *b-* “to, in” in the habitual locative construction and pre-poses the auxiliary *h-w-y*; Literary Urumiya has an alternative preterite, *qām* + general present/subjunctive. Table 7 compares the formations in AzJ (Garbell, 1965a); square brackets marks Aramaic forms only mentioned for AzJ.

Syntax. Noun phrase. Nominal syntax is right-branching: noun-dependent noun and noun-adjective. There is gender and number agreement: *gilas-t-a smuq-t-a* “the red cherry,” *rakox-e gill-e* “soft grass(-es).” A small set of evaluative adjectives may precede the noun: *xa zor-a bel-a* ~ *xa bel-a zor-a* “a little boy” (cf. Persian *xub kār-i kard-i* “you did a good thing”).

Numerous prepositions and prepositional phrases are borrowed: *ba* “to, for,” Kd *gāl* “with,” *bo* “for, because,” *bo-d mā* “for what?”

The relative determinative *-d* marks the genitive, prepositional conjunctions, and relative clauses. It is usually attached to the head: *brá-t-it šultan-a* “the daughter of the king,” *ktáb-id b-id-ew* “the book that (was) in-hand-his.” Subordination with *-d* is obligatory with demonstratives: *ba-d-ay* “to, for this (on),” *minn-(i)d-o šula* “from” = “than that matter,” *qam min d-o* “before from that” = “before” (conjunctive). However, personal pronominal suffixes are directly attached: *ba-i* “for, to me,” *reš-ew* “on, regarding him” (*reš* “head,” cf. Pers. *sar-e u*).

TABLE 6. Basic AzJ inflection.

TABLE 7. Comparative AZ Turkish and AzJ Aramaic tenses.

Connectives include not only Ir *u* ~ *w* “and,” *yā* “or,” *hām . . . hām* “as well as,” but also the Kd enclitic *-iš* “also, as to,” and even the Az comitative postposition *-InAn* “with, and”: *gor-á-inan bax-t-a* “man with = and wife.” Sentence connectives include the subordinating relative *d-*, and inherited as well as loaned conjunctions: *en*, Ir *agar*, “if,” Ar *sabab*, Ir *cunki* “because” (+/- *d-*).

Word order. The verb-final word order, SV, includes the copula and auxiliaries, and agrees with that of Kd and Az. It is already found in Aramaic



of the Achaemenid period: *reš-ox qity-a xadir*, lit. “head-your (2nd sing. masc.) cut will-be (perfect participle *qity-a*).”

With direct and indirect object suffixes, sequencing is allowed in a number of dialects in verb forms with copulative inflection; some show restrictions. AzJ has fully developed the Kurdish, and Persian, pattern of subject/agent marker + object/patient suffix marked by *l-* (cf. Pers. *did-am-at* “I saw you”): *šmé-li-lxun* lit. “heard-I-you (2nd plur.)”; *garoš-a wé-le-la* lit. “pulling was-he-her.”

With object noun phrases, the unmarked word order shifted to SOV (from SVO at earlier stages of East Aramaic): *xa talm-a m-dím-un* lit. “one pitcher bring (2nd plur.)!” *jull-it šultan-ul-a mi-lbiš-lu-le* lit. “robes of (-it) royalty dressed-they-him in,” i.e., “royal robes.” Assimilated from Az (cf. also Pers. *-rā*), indirect and definite direct objects are marked by *il-*, obligatorily with demonstratives: noun, *il-bra-t-a diwqál-a*, lit. “the girl he-seized”; demonstrative, *xzéz-la-le l-d-ay*, lit. “saw-her-he, this one (*ay* fem.)” = “he saw this one (i.e., the woman)” (likewise found at earlier stages).

Similar to Kd and Az, directional, but not locative, noun phrases often are postverbal: *zíl-le bel-a* “he went home” (Kd *cu māla*, Az *git-di ev-in-a*).

Complex sentences. Subordination is finite or nominal. Finite clauses follow the Persianate pattern of Kd:

(1) Relative clauses are introduced by Pers. *ki* and/or by the Aram relative *-d*, and also with demonstrative *ay-it*, which is calqued on the Kd relative particle construction; typically, non-subjects require the anaphoric pronoun: subject, *kud otay ki it-wa g-bel-ew* “every room that was (*it-wa*) at house-his”; object, *bra-t-it ki midy-á wa-lu gäl-ew*, “that girl whom they had brought with him,” lit. “that girl that had-they (*wa-lu*) brought her (*midy-á*) with-him (*-ew*)”; genitive-possessor, *gor-it bron-ew qtíl-wa-le*, “the man whose son he had killed,” lit. “the man that son-his killed had-he.”

(2) Other types of clauses similarly follow the Ir pattern: (a) purpose clause, *zíl-le, lixma axil* (subjunctive) “he went to eat his dinner”; (b) conditional clause, *agar od-étun-u, gor-an*, lit. “if do = fulfill-you (2nd plur.)-them (i.e. the conditions), marry-may/will-I (fem.).”

Nominal clauses assimilate the Az pattern: (1) Infinitive, CaCoC-e: (a) temporal, *waxt-it izal-aw, mi-spitállu l-li* lit. “time-of going-her = when she went, handed-she-them to-me”; (b) purpose clause, *zíl-le, yalop-e* “went-he learning = to



learn” (cf. Az *git-di öyrenmä-y-ä* (dative) < Az inf. *-max*). (2) Gerund, *píš-lu, xa l-xa xyar-a* “remained = stood-they, one-to-one = at each other looking” (cf. Az *gal-dī-lar birbiri-n-ä bax-a*). (3) Conjunctive postposition Az *-IkAn* “being, while,” *xlul-a la wíd-t-á-ikän* lit. “the wedding not having-been-made-while/being = even before the wedding.”

Quotation. Following the Kd pattern, direct speech is marked by repeated bracketing with *'m-r* ‘to say’: *míre ba-ew šultan-a, míre* “he-said to him (-ew) king, he said” = “(then) the king said to him.”

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