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The Two Neo-Aramaic Dialects from Urmi
in the Light of Language Contact

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present some interesting linguistic features of the two North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects of Urmi, with particular attention paid to language contact. One of the dialects is spoken by a Jewish community, the other one by Christians belonging in majority to the Chaldean Church, but also to the Assyrian Church of the East. Despite some significant differences, the dialects display many similarities. The linguistic analysis of the dialectal features is supported by taking into account the interaction of Jewish and Christian Urmi varieties with the surrounding non-Semitic languages like Modern Persian, Kurmanji Kurdish and Azerbaijani Turkish. This comparative approach suggests that certain phenomena of the two Neo-Aramaic dialects can be construed as a possible outcome of a language contact situation. At the same time, collating the data on the relevant languages enables us to see these languages in a broader perspective, inviting further studies, especially of the less extensively described varieties.

Keywords: Semitic dialectology, Neo-Aramaic, Christians, Urmi, modern Persian, Kurmanji Kurdish, Azerbaijani Turkish

1. Introduction

1.1. General remarks

The Jewish Urmi and the Christian Urmi dialects belong to the North-Eastern branch of Modern or Neo-Aramaic (henceforth NENA).[1] This language encompasses four branches,

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out of which NENA is the most internally diverse.[2] The speakers of the NENA dialects inhabited distant areas of Persian and Iraqi Kurdistan, the Jews dwelling mostly in cities, whereas the Christians were found chiefly in villages. In some cases, however, the Christian NENA communities moved to cities and lived side by side with the Jews and Muslim Kurds, each community preserving their own distinct language. The city of Urmi is a case in point and hence the two NENA varieties, of the Jews and of the Christians, spoken in the same town and yet displaying fascinating linguistic differences.

1.2. Historical background of the NENA communities

The first solid evidence about the Jewish settlements in Kurdistan comes from the twelfth century account of Benjamin of Tudela.[3] The Jews of Kurdistan were traders, peddlers and skilful craftsmen, but occupied themselves also with shepherding, farming and rafting. Some of the rich folklore and oral tradition they would put down to writing, in addition to producing and translating religious literature- in Hebrew and Neo-Aramaic alike. Mentions of the Christian communities in the region, however, go back to the second century C.E.[4]. They belonged to the Assyrian Church of the East and supported themselves mainly through farming and animal husbandry. In the early nineteenth century, the Assyrian Christians of Urmi received a lot of attention from western Christianity, resulting in missions from the Protestants and Roman Catholic Churches, the first one undertaken by the American Presbyterians to the town of Urmi in 1835.[5] The missioners took great interest in the language of the NENA Christians, they also introduced a printing press which contributed to the development of the literary NENA standard of Christian Urmi and a substantial literary output in this variety. With the establishment of the Chaldean Catholic Diocese in Urmi, the number of the Chaldean Christians in the town increased, whereas the Assyrian Christians constituted the majority among the Iraqi NENA communities and in the Urmi plains.

The region of Kurdistan and Persian Azerbaijan was not always a safe abode for the NENA speakers, although in Persia the situation was relatively better then in Iraq. Due to political tensions during the times of the Ottoman Empire, both Jewish and Christian NENA communities suffered persecutions and attacks, their villages and towns were

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the so far unpublished data on Christian Urmi. Any shortcomings of this article are, needless to say, entirely my own.

[2] For the classification of the Neo-Aramaic dialects see for example W. Heinrichs, *Introduction*, in: W. Heinrichs (ed.) *Studies in Neo-Aramaic*, Atlanta 1990, pp. xi–xv, O. Jastrow, *Old Aramaic and Neo-Aramaic: Some Reflections on Language History*, in: H. Gzella and M. Folmer (ed.) *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting*, Wiesbaden 2008, p. 1.

[3] Y. Sabar, *The Folk Literature of the Kurdistani Jews: An Anthology*, New Haven 1982, p. xvii.

[4] H. Murre-Van den Berg, *From a Spoken to Written Language: the Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century*, Leiden 1999, p. 31.

[5] Ibid., p. 1.

destroyed and the population driven away or killed.[6] At that period, the town of Urmi was several times taken over by the Turks. The most severe years for the NENA speaking Jews and Christians were during World War I when a great number of their communities was massacred. The heaviest blow to the Jews of Urmi was dealt in 1918.[7] As a result of persecutions, the Jewish NENA population was largely displaced, fleeing first to major Iraqi towns like Baghdad, and from there to Palestine. After the establishment of the State of Israel, nearly all NENA speaking Jews moved there.[8] As an aftermath of the two Great Wars, also most of the Christian NENA communities were displaced from Iraq and Turkey, and a substantial number of them left the town of Urmi already after World War I. The Chaldean and Assyrian Christians were dispersed across the western world, forming diasporas in the US, Australia and Europe. Some of them decided to remain in Kurdistan, their number is, however, difficult to estimate.

Although the speakers of the two Urmi NENA dialects have in majority left their original homelands, their spoken varieties have been exposed to contact with languages of Persian Azerbaijan over a long time span. Let us begin with a reminder that Aramaic was one of the official languages of the Achaemenid Empire. Later on, it was Modern Persian as well as the dialects of Kurdish, mainly Kurmanji and Azerbaijani Turkish that constituted the linguistic surrounding of the Urmi Neo-Aramaic speaking communities. The analysis and description of the NENA dialects would thus be incomplete without any attempt of investigating the dialects and the surrounding languages from a comparative perspective. This approach is, moreover, beneficial to the study of the mentioned Iranian languages and Azerbaijani Turkish as it places them in a wider context. Our attention here will be directed to selected features of the Urmi NENA dialects which stand out as innovations among the rest of NENA. It is the coming about of these new features that the contact situation might help to illuminate.

2. The linguistic background and some restrictions

The territory on which the Urmi dialect were originally spoken is defined as one of the world's linguistic areas (or sprachbunds).[9] One needs, however, to be careful not to assume that due to an existing continuum, every similarity between languages can be automatically classified as a loan or calque. Linguists whose research concentrates on linguistic influence are themselves very cautious as to making definite statements and

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[6]   Y. Sabar, op. cit., S. Zora, *Some Outstanding Events in the History of the Chaldean Christians of the East (1551–1992)*, in: (ed.) R. Lavenant, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta 247, VI Symposium Syriacum 1992*, Rome 1994, p. 356.

[7]   A. Ben-Jacob, *Kurdistan Jewish Communities* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem 1961, p. 144.

[8]   G. Khan, *The Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Urmi*, Piscataway, NJ 2008, p. 1.

[9]   O. Kapeliuk, *Iranian and Turkic Structural Interference*, "Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam" 2004, Vol. 29, p. 184. For the English term and definition see S. Thomason, *Language in contact*, Edinburgh 2001, p. 97 and B. Heine and T. Kuteva, *Language Contact and Grammatical Change*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 172–174.

labelling a particular feature as a clear case of replication or outcome of external influence. Moreover, according to Heine and Kuteva,[10] grammaticalisation induced by language contact does not arise "ex nihilo" but rather uses the structures at hand, already existing in the language. These two points are borne in mind when describing the situation of the Urmi NENA dialects, in particular by drawing conclusions from the collated data.

Due to some formal limitations, only a number of questions will be addressed. It also needs to be remembered that a detailed account of the discussed features cannot always be provided. For example, in the section dealing with ergativity, it is more the ways of realising the linguistic concept itself that is relevant to the present article, rather than the morphosyntactic structure of particular constituents. Additionally, some simplifications in a cross-linguistic comparative study are unavoidable. For instance labelling the verbal suffixes as enclitic copulas instead of personal endings is a purely diachronic approach. The same holds for glossing all the past verbal bases in NENA as past participles.[11] Another question that needs to be put aside it the more precise semantic function of the verbal forms. What is, nevertheless, achieved by this somewhat thicker-grain study is hopefully a greater clarity of the overall picture.

3. Phonology

3.1. The reflexes of historical interdentals

The loss of the historical Aramaic interdentals has taken place in many NENA dialects but the mergers of the postvocalic *t and *d involved different phonemes in different areas. In the Christian dialect of Urmi (henceforth C.U.[12]), they merged with the corresponding stops, which is a rather common phenomenon in NENA. In Jewish Urmi (henceforth J.U.[13]) however, the old interdentals shifted to the lateral l. Kapeliuk argues for the Iranian origin of this sound shift[14] since the postvocalic d in Kurdish appears to be a weak consonant.[15] Indeed, the material she provides on Persian, Afghani and especially Kurdish is convincing enough to acknowledge the importance of the Iranian substratum and the possibility for such a shift. In addition, we find evidence for the

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[10] B. Heine and T. Kuteva, op. cit., pp. 45–46.

[11] It is customary to speak about bases in NENA rather than of stems as in Persian and Kurdish and the same term is employed here.

[12] The data on C.U. come from H. Younansardaroud, *Der neuostarämaische Dialekt von Sä:rdä:rïd*, Wiesbaden 2001 and G. Khan, *The Christian Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Urmi*, forthcoming.

[13] The data on J.U. come from I. Garbell, *The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Persian Azerbaijan. Linguistic Analysis and Folkloristic Text*, The Hague 1965 and G. Khan, *The Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Urmi*, Piscataway, NJ 2008.

[14] O. Kapeliuk, op. cit., p. 179 and further O. Kapeliuk, *Languages in Contact: the Contemporary Semitic World*, "Israel Oriental Studies" 2002, Vol. 20, p. 317 and *Iranian and Turkic Structural Interference*, "Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam" 2004, Vol. 29, pp. 176–149.

[15] E. McCarus, *Kurdish Phonology*, in: A. Kaye (ed.) *Phonologies of Asia and Africa (Including the Caucasus)*, Winona Lake 2009, p. 597.

close tie between *l* and *d* in other unrelated languages. In Kazakh, a Turkic language, the allomorph of the plural suffix is, next to the familiar form Anatolian Turkish *-lar* also *-dar*, the former appearing with /*r y w*/, the latter with less sonorous consonants. This morph-phonemic alternation between *l* and *d* in Kazakh clearly illustrates the proximity of the two consonants, at least when the position of the tip of the tongue is concerned.

The final link for the **d>l* in J.U. seem, nevertheless, to be missing as the mode of articulation of the dental stops and the liquid lateral *l* is not at all similar. Moreover, in this dialect we find a group of significant everyday words that do not comply to the general merger **t>l* and **d>l*, e.g.: *ʾit* 'there is', *⁺hudaa* 'Jew' (the notation with a superscript plus is explained below). Therefore the shift to the later cannot be regarded as a regular phonetic process and it is difficult to explain the situation in J.U. it solely by means of the influence from Kurdish. It is more than possible that the long-lasting contact situation has induced this sound change, but he final factor as well as the stages and scope of this shift are yet to be established.

3.2. Palatalisation and fronting of consonants

Whereas the shift discussed above cannot at this point be fully accounted for by external influence, there seems to be more solid evidence for the direct Iranian impact with regard to the palatalisation of the velar stops *k* and *g* in C.U. The palatalised realisation of these consonants is attested in the Iranian languages already on the level of Old Iranian, and so it is at the present stage in Modern Persian and Kurdish.[16] In the latter, the palatalisation often goes hand in hand with the fronting of the place of articulation of another pair of consonants, namely the affricates *č* and *j*. In other words, the chain sound shift renders the following pattern:

$$g > [g^j] \qquad\qquad j > [\widehat{dz}]$$
$$k > [k^j] \qquad\qquad č > [\widehat{ts}]$$

Moreover, the fronting of *k* and *g*, combined with rendering of the original *j* as [$\widehat{dz}$] is typical of the Persian speakers of Azerbaijani Turkish,[17] who formed a substantial group within the linguistic surrounding of the Urmi speakers. Although palatalisation resulting in marginal occurrence of the velar [kʰ] and [g] is well attested in other dialects of NENA, e.g. in the Christian Iraqi Koine,[18] the stronger degree of palatalisation and the resulting chain shift in the palato-alveolar series is characteristic of the Christian dialects close to Urmi. It could be thus suggested that this sound change in C.U., is straightforwardly explained by external influence. The process of fronting of the place of articulation of the

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[16] P. Skjærvø, *Old Iranian*, in: G. Windfuhr (ed.) *The Iranian Languages*, London 2009, p. 48 and G. Windfuhr and J. Perry, *Persian Phonology*, in: A. Kaye (ed.) *Phonologies of Asia and Africa (Including the Caucasus)*, Winona Lake 2009, p. 426, E. McCarus, op. cit., p. 596.

[17] E. McCarus, op. cit., p. 426.

[18] Cf. E. Odisho, *The Sound System of Modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic)*, Wiesbaden 1988, pp. 44–45.

palato-alveolar series could be regarded as an areal feature that developed in NENA under the influence of the Iranian languages and, to a certain extent, also of Azerbaijani Turkish.[19]

3.3. Synharmonism and fronting of vowels

Emphasis or pharyngealisation is a well known phonetic phenomenon of Arabic but it is not restricted to this language only. Also the NENA dialects have emphatic consonants displaying innate tendency for changing the quality of the neighbouring segments. In both languages, that is Arabic and Aramaic, the degree of emphatisation (or: emphasis spread), as well as its boundaries vary from one variety to the other. Also the primary source of this mode of articulation is referred to in diverse ways: from velarisation to glottalisation. Not surprisingly then, C.U. and J.U. also differ with regard to the phenomenon of emphasis in many ways and some of these differences relevant to language contact will be discussed.[20]

In both Urmi dialects, emphasis is a suprasegmental feature, no longer confined to a single emphatic consonant or even syllable, as it is the case in many varieties of Arabic and Iraqi NENA dialects. This results in a binary opposition between wholly emphatic and non-emphatic words; hence the term synharmonism,[21] i.e. the concord of all the segments with respect to front or back articulation. In other words, the presence or absence of emphasis is a non-segmental phoneme, differentiating between the words of the lexicon. The words that are emphatic throughout are usually marked in transcription with a superscript cross, e.g. +*raba* 'very much'. But whereas in C.U. the quality of the consonants plays still an essential role and results in the auditory effect of backness, synharmonism in J.U. is concentrated around vowels. Consonants in J.U. have indeed a 'potential' for back quality[22] but it is the vowels that are obligatorily back in the emphatic words.

Also the feature of aspiration, or rather the lack thereof, deserves a mention. In C.U., the obstruents like *t, p* and *č* are in some words pronounced unaspirated. Muscular tension required for this mode of articulation seems to be equivalent to emphatic articulation, thus a word containing an unaspirated consonant is often rendered thoroughly emphatic. It cannot be overlooked that these words are often loans from Kurdish, where the same consonants can be pronounced without aspiration. It is thus frequently a lexeme borrowed along with its Kurdish phonetic shape that enhances emphasis in C.U., e.g. +*qurmə́čta*> Kurd. *qermiç'andin* 'to wrinkle', +*portoqál*< Kurd. *p'irteqal* 'orange'.[23] The same holds

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[19] Cf. S. Talay, *Book Review of "Der neuostaramäische Dialekt von Särdä:rïd" von Helen Younansardaroud, 2001*, "Mediterranean Language Review" 2002, Vol. 14, p. 196.

[20] See H. Younansardaroud, *Der neuostaramäische Dialekt von Särdä:rïd*, Wiesbaden 2001 for the synopsis of synharmonism in the Christian dialects; and I. Garbell, op. cit. and G. Khan, op. cit., for J.U.

[21] This term is most likely a calque from Russian used for describing vowel harmony in the Turkic languages. In English it is used in the field of NENA and pertains to vowel and consonantal harmony alike.

[22] Khan, op. cit., p. 14.

[23] Kurdish lexical entries, unlesss indicated otherwise, come from M. Chyet, *Kurdish-English Dictionary. Ferhenga Kurmancî-Inglîzî*, New Haven and London 2003, with their original transcription.

for words of Persian origin containing the low back vowel *ā* [ɑ] which, when borrowed into C.U., end up as entirely emphatic due to the back quality of the vowel,[24] e.g. Pers. *kārnāme*> C.U. ⁺*karnáma* 'notice'. In much the same way behave loans from Turkish that contain vowels from the back row, e.g. ⁺*sábun* < cf. Az. *sabun* 'soap'.

Shifting attention to J.U., we can observe that in addition to having close back rounded vowels, its inventory contains also fronted rounded back vowels. These opposite vowel qualities appear in complementary distribution, that is next to usual backing in emphatic words, obligatory fronting of vowels occurs in non-emphatic words. For example, we find the back allophones of *o* [o~o̞] and *u* [u~ʊ] in words like ⁺*kaló* 'bride' and ⁺*luwá* 'inside' on the one hand, and fronted [ø~œ] and [y~ʏ] in *noší* 'myself' and *belú* 'their house' on the other.[25] This allophony is an essential part of synharmonism in J.U., unlike the system of C.U. where no fronting of vowels occurs. Consequently, the phonological system of J.U., with the alternation of fronted and back vowel qualities and emphasis concentrated mostly back vowels and not consonants, resembles vowel harmony of Turkic languages, Azerbaijani Turkish included.

Since emphasis or 'backness' spread is also found in Kurdish,[26] it has been suggested that synharmonism of the Urmi dialects has arisen due to the Kurdish/Turkish influence.[27] Taking into account the existence of the back and also unaspirated segments in Kurdish, as well as the harmonic system of Azerbaijani Turkish, the influence is more than likely. However, the inherent potential for emphasis spread of the NENA dialects should not be overlooked. Emphasis spread occurs naturally when emphatic segments are present in the phonemic inventory, synharmonism can be then construed as another, albeit extreme, level of emphatisation. In this light, it would be the normal disposition for emphasis spread in NENA that has been taken to the level of synharmonism in J.U. and C.U. by external influence. To put it differently, the shift from emphasis spread to a suprasegmental feature, may have been in the Urmi dialects facilitated by the linguistic surrounding, building nevertheless on an existent potential. The phenomenon of synharmonism would thus be a result of two convergent currents: the internal capacity and the external induction. The extent of this influence is, however, different in the two Urmi NENA dialects. Whereas C.U. remains more faithful to the type of emphasis spread found in other Semitic dialects of Arabic and Iraqi NENA, emphasis in J.U. seems to be a step further in the typological

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[24]   G. Khan, *The Christian Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Urmi*, forthcoming.

[25]   G. Khan, *The Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Urmi*, Piscataway, NJ 2008, p. 23.

[26]   I. Garbell, *"Flat" Words and Syllables in Jewish East New Aramaic of Persian Azerbaijan and the Contiguous Districts (A Problem of Multilingualism)*, in: H.B. Rosén (ed.) *Studies in Egyptology and linguistics in honor of Hans Jakob Polotsky*, Jerusalem 1964, p. 93 and *The Impact of Kurdish and Turkish on the Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Persian Azerbaijan and the Adjoining Regions*, in: Journal of American Oriental Society 85 (1965), p. 164. As 'aynizatsja' it is reported by Kurdoev in K.K. Kurdoev, *Gramatika kurdskogo iazyka: na materiale dialektov kurmandzhi i sorani*, Moscow 1978, p. 29.

[27]   I. Garbell, *The Impact of Kurdish and Turkish on the Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Persian Azerbaijan and the Adjoining Regions*, in: Journal of American Oriental Society 85 (1965), pp. 101–103, O. Kapeliuk, *Languages in Contact: the Contemporary Semitic World*, in Israel Oriental Studies 20 (2002), p. 317 (provides further references) and *Iranian and Turkic Structural Interference*, in: Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 29 (2004), p. 179.

development. Since it advances towards vowel harmony, Azerbaijani Turkish with its harmonic system can be said to have influenced the Jewish dialect much more heavily than the Christian one.

3.4. Stress position in nominal forms

The placement of stress is one of the features that draws a dividing line between the NENA dialects. Stress position on the ultimate syllable in nominals is one of the common traits separating out the group of progressive Jewish dialects, to which J.U. also belongs. It is also noteworthy that the stress is retracted to the first syllable in vocative forms in J.U., e.g. *bratí* 'my daughter' vs. *bráti* 'o, my daughter!'.[28] This behaviour of stress remains in opposition to the rest of NENA dialects, C.U. included, were the default stress in nominals rests on the penultimate syllable. This position is unaltered in vocative forms.

These facts can be contrasted with the ultimate position of stress in the surrounding languages: Modern Persian,[29] Kurdish[30] and Turkish.[31] In addition, the stress shifts to the first syllable in vocative forms in the two Iranian languages, e.g.: Pers. *xonúm* 'lady' vs. *xónum* 'o, lady!', Kurd. *mamósta* 'teacher' vs. *mámosta* 'o, teacher!'.[32] We thus have a sound piece of evidence for the contact induced innovation. J.U. with regard to stress placement appears to be more influenced by the neighbouring languages[33] than the Christian variety, which preserves the more conservative stress position of the NENA dialects.

4. Morphology: Independent Personal Pronouns

The distinction of gender in the set of personal pronouns constitutes an important part of the morphosyntactic system of the Semitic languages. For Aramaic, separate masculine and feminine forms are attested in Imperial Aramaic and later in Syriac, the latter being the closest predecessors of Proto-NENA.[34] Also in the most conservative NENA dialects gender differentiating forms are maintained for all the persons, with the exclusion of the

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[28] The examples are based on the sources mentioned throughout this article but only direct uses of existing examples appear with references.

[29] G. Windfuhr, op. cit., p. 685.

[30] E. McCarus, *Kurdish Phonology*, in: Kaye A. (ed.) *Phonologies of Asia and Africa (Including the Caucasus)*, Winona Lake 1997, p. 703 and W. Thackston, *Kurmanji Kurdish. A Reference Grammar with Selected Readings*, http://fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Kurmanji/kurmanji_1_grammar.pdf, [17/08/2012], p. 45.

[31] M. Stachowski, *Gramatyka języka tureckiego w zarysie*, Kraków 2009, pp. 27–29.

[32] This example is from E. McCarus, op. cit., p. 703.

[33] G. Khan, *The Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Urmi*, op. cit., p. 8.

[34] D. Boyarin, *The Formation of the Middle Aramaic Dialects*, in: Y. Arbeitman and A. Bomhard (ed.) *Bono Homini Donum. Essays in Historical Linguistics in Memory of J. Alexander Kerns. Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, Amsterdam 1981, S. Fox, *North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic and the Middle Aramaic Dialects*, in: G. Khan (ed.) *Neo-Aramaic Dialect Studies. Proceedings of a Workshop on Neo-Aramaic held in Cambridge 2005*, Piscataway, NJ 2008.

1PL. The lack of the distinction in the 2nd persons is observed in the dialects on the NENA extremities, nonetheless, separate forms of the 3MS and 3FS are still maintained in a number of Christian Iranian dialects spoken as far as in western Iran and in south-eastern Turkey. Also in C.U. the distinction of the 2nd and 3rd SG is preserved. This is in contrast with J.U. where throughout the paradigm the former masculine forms are now used for both genders.

Bearing in mind the long attested history of gender distinction in the Aramaic pronouns, the collapse of this division in J.U. is a remarkable feature, especially in the 3SG. This fact, however, becomes a little less surprising when we examine the pronoun systems of the neighbouring languages. And so, Azerbaijani Turkish has one set of pronouns for both genders,[35] the same is applicable to Kurdish (at least in the nominative case).[36] Neither does Modern Persian differentiate between genders after losing the distinction for the 3rd persons by the stage of Middle Persian.[37] As a result of losing the distinction, the pronoun system of J.U. resembles the ones found in the surrounding languages, it is also fairly unified when compared with C.U. Next to paradigm similarity, the phonetic proximity of the 3SG pronoun in J.U. and the surrounding languages is not to be overlooked, all of them contacting either a back vowel or a close glide. Compare:

	3SG common	3MS	3FS
Modern Persian	*ū*		
Kurmanji Kurdish	*ew*		
Azerbaijani Turkish	*o*		
J.U.	*o*		
C.U.		-⁺ʾaw~⁺ʾawwa~⁺ʾawun~⁺ʾawin	ʾay~ʾayin~ʾeyya

Although the J.U. form *o* is well explained by the usual in NENA contraction of the diphthong *aw* (cf. C.U. below), there is clear convergence with the phonetic form of the Azerbaijani pronoun and proximity with the Persian one. It could thus be suggested that it was the linguistic setting of the J.U. dialect that contributed to the major change in the pronoun system. The external impact led to the collapse of an essential for Semitic languages category, one which had been retained over a remarkably long time.

The argument for the change induced by the Iranian and Azerbaijani substratum of the Iranian Kurdistan is based also on the distribution of the pronouns forms across the NENA speaking area. Separate forms for both genders in the 2nd and 3rd persons SG and PL are preserved in the NENA varieties spoken in Iraqi Kurdistan. Here it might have been the contact with the gender distinguishing system of Arabic that proved to be stronger than the influence of Kurdish and thus contributed to the preservation of gender distinguishing forms in NENA.

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[35] P. O'Sullivan, M. Severino, V. Volozov, *Azerbaijani-English Dictionary*, Kensington 1994, p. xv.

[36] W. Thackston, op. cit., p. 18. and E. McCarus, *Kurdish*, in: G. Windfuhr (ed.) *The Iranian Languages*, op. cit., p. 598.

[37] P. Skjærvø, op. cit., p. 208.

5. Verb morphology and morphosyntax

5.1. The origin of the NENA tenses

The collapse of the earlier Aramaic verbal system and the reshaping of it on the basis of verbal nouns in Pre-Neo Aramaic has been widely treated. It has also been argued that the new system of inflection resembles the one of the Indo-European languages and that it was created by analogy with Iranian languages.[38] This claim is based on the employment of an active participle combined with a copula and a passive participle with a genitive/dative element which we find in Old Persian and in Neo-Aramaic.[39] We shall see in a moment, however, that the similarities are even more evident when also Kurdish is taken into consideration.

It is not only the morphology of the verb but the valency of it and the distribution of the grammatical roles that deserves attention. Taking a step back to Middle Persian we observe that there was a consistent distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs in the inflection of the past, with the absolute type of inflection with the former and the ergative type with the latter. Modern Persian, on the other hand, lost the distinction between the two types of verbs and generalised the absolute type of inflection. Different treatment of inflection with transitive and intransitive verbs is also lacking form the central NENA dialects, and C.U. included. In contrast with Persian, however, it was the ergative type that was generalised in the central NENA group. Compare:

	transitive verb	intransitive verb	gloss
Modern Persian	*košte-am*	*āmade-am*	'I killed', 'I arrived'
	kill.PPTCP-COP.1SG	arrive.PPTCP-COP.1SG[40]	
C.U.	⁺*qṭəl-li*[41]	*dməx-li*	'I killed', 'I went to sleep'
	kill.PPTCP-1SG.OBL	sleep.PPTCP-1SG.OBL	

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[38] See, for example, E. Kutscher, *Two "Passive" Constructions in Aramaic in the Light of Persian*, in: *Proceedings of the International Conference on Semitic Studies held in Jerusalem, 19–23 July 1965*, The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 1969, pp. 132–151; O. Kapeliuk, *Is Modern Hebrew the Only "Indo-Europeanized" Semitic Language? And What About Neo-Aramaic?*, "Israel Oriental Studies" 1996, Vol. 16, pp. 59–70 and H. Polotsky, *Neusyrische Konjugation*, "Orientalia Suecana" 1984–1986, Vol. 32–35, pp. 323–332, G. Goldenberg, *Aramaic Perfects*, "Israel Oriental Studies" 1992, Vol. 12, pp. 113–137, M. Chyet, *Neo Aramaic and Kurdish. An Interdisciplinary Consideration of their Influence on Each Other*, "Israel Oriental Studies" 1997, Vol. 15, pp. 219–252.

[39] I.e. the *l-* suffixes according to Kutscher, E. Kutscher, op. cit., p. 135.

[40] These endings function as personal suffixes in Modern Persian, similarly in Turkish but for the benefit of our discussion they are treated from the diachronic point of view as the enclitic forms of the copula. The nominative (or direct) case is not marked but only the oblique (indirect) case for the sake of simplicity of glossing. The following abbreviations are used for glossing: PPTCP – past/resultative participle, COP – copula, SG – singular, PL – plural, OBL – oblique, M – masculine, F – feminine, NEG – negative/negator, PST – past tense form/stem, INF – infinitive, LOC – locative, DEIC – deictic, IMPRF – imperfect, PRES – present form/stem.

[41] *t* with a lower circumflex signifies an unaspirated stop [t].

The dialects of Kurdish, in turn, make a consistent distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs by employing a tense-split ergative pattern.[42] This pattern has a parallel in the tense system of J.U. and some other progressive dialects. Here, the nominative-accusative type is employed in the present for all the verbs and also for intransitive verbs in the past, for transitive verbs the ergative type is used instead, e.g.:

	transitive verb			**intransitive verb**	
Kurmanji Kurdish	*min*	*ew*	*kušt-Ø*	*ez*	*hat-im*[43]
	1SG.OBL	3SG	kill.PST-COP.3SG	1SG	come.PST-1SG
	'I killed him/her/it'			'I came'	
	min	*ew*	*kuštu-ye*	*ez*	*hatu-m*
	1SG.OBL	3SG	kill.PPTC-3SG	1SG	come.PPTC-1SG
	'I have killed him'			'I have come'	
J.U.	⁺*qtəl-li*			⁺*dməx-li*	
	kill.PPTCP-1SG.OBL			sleep.PPTCP-1SG.OBL	
	'I killed'			'I went to sleep'	
	⁺*qtil-én*			⁺*dmíx-en*	
	kill.PPTCP-COP.1SG			sleepPPTCP-1MS	
	'I have killed'			'I have gone to sleep'	

The examples presented above illustrate parallel distribution of the grammatical roles in J.U. and in Kurdish, making the Iranian origin of the NENA verbal system stand out even more. Note, however, that the preterite inflection in J.U. employs the ergative pattern with intransitive verbs as well. It is similar to the situation in C.U. but unlike the system of Kurdish. The system of J.U. can be therefore construed in two ways: either as declining or developing ergativity. Recent studies by Mengozzi on Kurdish dialects help interpret this matter: Mengozzi[44] demonstrated that there is now less consistency in Kurdish to employ the ergative construction in the past. This is additionally attested by Thackston[45] and Korn.[46] Mengozzi attributed this process to contact with Azerbaijani Turkish, which would allow us to regard the gradual loss of ergative inflection as another areal feature

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[42] E. McCarus, op. cit., p. 608, G. Khan, *The North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic Dialects*, "Journal of Semitic Studies" 2007, 52, Vol. 1, pp. 13–14.

[43] Examples for Kurdish in this section are based on W. Thackston, op. cit. and E. McCarus, *Kurdish Morphology*, in: A. Kaye (ed.) *Morphologies of Asia and Africa (Including the Caucasus)*, Winona Lake 2007, pp. 1021–1049. Cabolov derives the verbal endings from the copula, see R. Cabalov, *Očerk istoričeskoj morfologii kurdskogo jazyka*, Moscow 1978, p. 67.

[44] A. Mengozzi, *Neo-Aramaic and the So-called Decay of Ergativity in Kurdish*, in: *Proceedings of the 10th Meeting of Hamito-Semitic (Afroasiatic) Linguistics (Florence, 18–20 April 2005)*, Dipartamento di Linguistica Università di Firenze 2005, pp. 239–256.

[45] W. Thackston, op. cit., p. 52.

[46] A. Korn, *Split Ergativity, Mix-Ergativity and Ex-Ergativity in Iranian* (handout from a course in Iranian).

of the discussed sprachbund. As far as the chronological order is concerned, Mengozzi argues for the archaic origin of the split ergativity system in both Kurdish and NENA. This stance is also assumed by Khan.[47]

We can thus conclude that ergativity in NENA is an ancient phenomenon and that its loss is an innovation, common to Modern Persian and the central NENA varieties. The somewhat surprising conclusion is thus that the otherwise progressive J.U. retains a conservative type of inflection. In this light, the NENA dialects displaying the ergative type of inflection form a peripheral relic area, with the innovative ergativity loss spread in the centre of the dialectal continuum.

5.2. The present perfect tense

From the more general overview of the tense system, let us proceed to examining in more detail two specific verbal constructions. The first one to deal with is the present perfect tense. Both Modern Persian and the NENA dialects build it around the past/ resultative participle combined with the copula the position and form of the copula, however, reveal important differences. The more conservative among the NENA dialects place the copula in its full form before the verbal constituent, others allow next to this construction also an enclitic form attached to the participle. In C.U., the former construction is available with different types of the copula (e.g. deictic) but with the 'basic' copula only the cliticised form is allowed. In J.U. in turn, only the construction with the enclitic placed after the verbal constituent is available. We can observe the same order of constituents as in J.U. is found in Modern Persian and in Kurdish, e.g.:

Modern Persian	*ū*	*košteh*	*ast*	
	3SG	kill.PPTCP	COP.3SG	
	'he has killed'			
Kurmanji Kurdish	*wî*	*ez*	*kuštu-m-e*	
	3SG.OBL	1SG	kill.PPTC-1SG-COP	
	'he has killed me'			
C.U.	*⁺qṭil-ələ*		*dule*	*⁺qṭila*
	kill.PPTCP-3MS.COP		DEIC.COP.3MS	kill.PPTCP
	'he has killed'			
J.U.	*⁺qtil-é*			
	kill.PPTCP-COP.3MS			
	'he has killed'			

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[47] Cf. G. Khan, *Ergativity in North Eastern Neo-Aramaic Dialects* in: *Alter Orient und Altes Testament. Studies in Semitics and General Linguistics Honor of Gideon Goldenberg*, (334) 2007, pp. 147–157.

It is worth remembering that also in Azerbaijani, although no parallel construction with a past participle is found, the copula is placed after the verbal constituent. This follows from the basic S-O-V order in Azerbaijani and also the two Iranian languages discussed.

The similarities between Kurdish and Modern Persian and J.U. become even more apparent when we examine the negated forms of present perfect. The dialect of C.U. behaves like the majority of NENA and employs the negative copula in its full form before the verbal constituent. J.U., on the other hand, displays again a much tighter bonding of the copula[48] which remains attached to the participle and the construction is preceded by the usual verbal negator, employed also for simple verbs. This ordering of constituents can be collated with the one found in the surrounding languages, e.g.:

Modern Persian	*na-košteh*		*ast*
	NEG-kill.PPTCP		COP.3SG
	'he has not killed'		

Kurmanji Kurdish	*wî*	*ez*	*ne-kuštu-m-e*
	3SG.OBL	1SG	NEG-kill.PST-1SG-COP
	'he has not killed me'		

C.U.	*lele*		*⁺qṭila*
	NEG.COP.3MS		kill.PPTCP
	'he has not killed'		

J.U.	*la*	*qtil-é*
	NEG	kill.PPTCP-COP.3MS
	'he has not killed'	

In this light, the postverbal position of the copula and its preference for the cliticised form in the Urmi dialects can be again construed as a change induced by the linguistic environment. Especially J.U. displays close similarities with the Persian and Kurdish copulas, which from the NENA perspective are clear innovations. It was, however signalled above that the development of the more progressive features in NENA is gradual and here it would mean selecting one out of the two possible constituent orders and generalising it. Language contact would have thus prompted opting for the ordering available also in the surrounding languages. We could again speak of external induction rather than direct replication of grammatical structures.

5.3. The present progressive tense

The next construction to discuss is the present progressive tense and it will be shown below that much the same can be said about the behaviour of the copula in the Urmi dialects as above. We can begin by pointing out that some NENA dialects employ the

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[48] Cf. M. Tomal, *Studies in Neo-Aramaic Tenses*, Kraków 2008, pp. 108 and 120.

copula preceding the present base, like the Christian dialect form Hertevin in south-eastern Turkey. This construction is reminiscent of the Modern Persian present tense which can accommodate both general and actual or progressive present, e.g.:

Modern Persian	*ū*	*mī-gīr-ad*
	3SG	IMPRF-pull.PRES-3SG
Hertevin	*hole*	*garəš*
	COP.3MS	pull.PRES.3MS

'he is pulling'

A more direct parallel with the surrounding languages can be drown, however, when we analyse other NENA varieties like the Urmi dialects. The innovation of the northern NENA is the use of the infinitive instead of the present base for the expression of the present progressive, this is also combined with the copula. Whereas C.U. has again some other types of the copula preceding the verbal constituent like it is in Hertevin as well, the usual construction is with the infinitive with the basic copula cliticsed to it. In J.U. we find the parallel order of the constituents with the present perfect tense, that is again only the construction with the enclitic on the infinitive is allowed. This construction of the Urmi NENA dialects can be compared with the present progressive in Kurdish and Turkish, where the enclitic follows the infinitive. With respect to constituent order, J.U. has more correspondence with the surrounding languages than C.U. However, the construction found in Kurdish is often combined with the locative element "in, with", which is in turn similar to the preposition *bi-* preceding the infinitive in C.U. Examples of the present progressive tense are presented below:

Kurdish	*la*	*řōyštin-ā-yn*[49]		
	LOC	go.INF-LOC-COP.1PL		
	'we are going'			
Turkish	*gitmek-te-yiz*			
	go.INF-LOC-COP.1PL			
	'we are going'			
J.U.	*kalow-ex*			
	write.INF-COP.1PL			
	'we are writing'			
C.U.	*bi-čtav-əx*		*dux*	*bi-čtava*
	LOC-write.INF-COP.1PL		DEIC.COP.1PL	LOC-write.INF
	'we are writing'			

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⁴⁹ The example is from E. McCarus, op. cit., p. 619, Kapeliuk gives further examples, see O. Kapeliuk, *The gerund and gerundial participle in Easter Neo-Aramaic,* in: "Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung" 1996, Vol. 51, p. 286.

Also Azerbaijani Turkish is reported to build the present progressive tense by combining the infinitive in the locative case with the enclitic copula, unfortunately no example clear enough for our purposes could be find in the sources.[50]

In the light of the similarities of the constituents and their alignment in the present progressive construction outlined above, we could again attribute the novelty traits in the Urmi dialects to the influence from the outside. In the first place, that would be the use of the infinitive for this construction and secondly, the employment of the enclitic copula. The tendency for placing the copula after the verbal base in all verbal constructions could also be ascribed to the impact of the Kurdish and Turkish varieties. It was, nevertheless, already mentioned above that this type of ordering emerged gradually and is not a direct replication. It also needs to be recognised that such ordering of constituents results in a unified and symmetrical pattern of inflection, where all the inflectional suffixes as well as the copula follow the verbal constituent. One should also recall here the linguistically widespread tendency for expressing a progressive aspect with a locative element.[51] It could be thus that the language contact situation served more as a factor accelerating the shifts already on its way in the Urmi dialects, rather than argue for a case of direct replication.

6. Syntax: word order

The position of the copula is closely related to the syntactic notion of default word order. Much the same can be therefore said with regard to the tendencies in NENA here as above. Thus, the more conservative dialects use the V O ordering, like they place the copula before the verbal constituent. Certain flexibility in positioning the object is a feature of some central dialects, C.U. among them but V O remains the default and unmarked order. By contrast, the more progressive dialects, J.U. included, have O V as their basic word order. The selection of the V O sequence as default in J.U. can be again compared with the situation in its linguistic environment, consisting of verb-final languages, e.g.:

Modern Persian   *man īn ketob rā xarīdam*   'I bought this (definite) book'
                                      O   V

Kurdish   *tanhā yak kitēb kiřī*[52]   'I bought only one book'
                                  O   V

Azerbaijani Turkish *man četob-e oldəm*[53]   'I bought the book'
                                   O   V

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[50] See P. O'Sullivan, M. Severino, V. Volozov, op. cit., p. xxv.

[51] Cf. J. Bybee, R. Perkins and W. Pagliuca, *The Evolution of Grammar. Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World*, Chicago and London 1994, pp. 129–130.

[52] E. McCarus, op. cit., p. 616.

[53] This example comes from my Azerbaijani consultant.

J.U.	*⁺ktāb šqəlli*		'I bought a book'
	O	V	
C.U.	*zvənli čtava*		(unmarked, default)
	V	O	
	čtava zvənli		(marked)
	O	V	'I bought a book'

We could observe here the same dynamics of development as suggested above, that is when a step-by-step shift progresses from one structural pattern, through the stage of two possible variants, leading finally to the consolidation of the more innovative pattern as the default one. Thus rather than copying of an external pattern, the fixing of the O V order as basic took place in J.U. It is clear from our analysis that J.U. is in total deeper influenced by the linguistic setting and better integrated within this sprachbund, sharing more of its areal features than C.U.

7. Conclusions

It was suggested in the present paper how certain features of the NENA dialects from the Urmi region can be analysed in the light of language contact, especially their innovative traits. The influence of Persian, mainly Modern, as well as of the dialects of Kurdish and of Azerbaijani Turkish was pointed to as a possible source of the new developments. This suggestion about the external impact is not based on the mere similarity of features but further borne out by their geographic distribution. It was here proposed that the occurrence and intensity of the innovative features often overlaps with the exposure of the Urmi NENA varieties to the Iranian and Turkic languages, standing in contrast with more conservative features observable in areas where the contact with Arabic is more intense.

An essential part of this presentation was recognising the underlying capacity and potential of the NENA dialects for the independent development of the innovative features. This approach suggests external induction- or reinforcement-type of evolution, rather than replication or calquing of linguistic phenomena.

Hopefully, it is not only the NENA dialects, and the two of Urmi in particular, that benefit from the above comparison. Also other linguistic varieties, lacking fine-grained description like Kurdish and Azerbaijani were brought to attention. Needless to say, further research is required for a more systematic account of these languages. With more studies undertaken, this somewhat sketchy comparison of the Iranian languages, Azerbaijani and the NENA dialects could be expanded and improved, leading to an enhanced picture of the Eastern Anatolian sprachbund on the one hand, and to a better understanding of the mechanisms of linguistic change on the other.