

Shabo Talay, Die neuaramäischen Dialekte der Khabur-Assyrer in Nordostsyrien. Einführung, Phonologie und Morphologie (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2008), in Orientalistische Literaturzeitung 105.4–5: 517 (Berlin)

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Talay, Shabo: Die neuaramäischen Dialekte der Khabur-Assyrer in Nordostsyrien. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008. 482+xxx pp. Semitica Viva 40. 98,00 €. ISBN 978-3-447-05702-8. Bespr. von Charles Häberl, New Brunswick.

The present work is the fruit of an extremely ambitious program of language documentation: a reference grammar documenting 25 Neo-Aramaic (NENA) dialects currently spoken in 34 villages and 3 hamlets along the banks of the river Khabur in the Syrian panhandle.¹ The author's research, which developed over the course of eight years from 1997 to 2005, took him from Syria to Turkey, Sweden, and the American cities of Chicago and Detroit, all of which host significant Assyrian diasporan populations. His informants are primarily middle-aged men between the ages of 30 and 50, although older and younger men and women are also represented, and his informants even included some children (which are largely unrepresented in Neo-Aramaic studies as most dialects have failed to be transmitted to the most recent generations).

The ancestors of his informants, representing several communities of Christians belonging to the Assyrian Church of the East and its Uniate counterpart, the Chaldean Catholic Church, had previously resided in the mountains of Hakkari (today in southeastern Turkey), but a series of massacres during the First World War displaced them from their homeland. They migrated to a series of refugee camps in Iran and then Iraq, where they remained for fifteen years until they were once again forcefully expelled in August, 1933.² From 1934 to 1937, the former League of Nations resettled roughly 10,000 Assyrians along the Khabur river in Syria, on fairly fertile but largely unpopulated territory. The Assyrians founded 34 new villages on the model of the villages that they had abandoned twenty years earlier, divided along the lines of their tribal and clan affiliation and retaining many of their traditional social structures. This undoubtedly contributed to the preservation of their ancestral dialects, which continue to be used in the home even to this day.

Talay divides the dialects spoken within these 37 villages and hamlets into five basic dialect clusters: Tiyari, Txuma, Hakkari, Šamməsdin, and two "outer" dialects similar to one another in some respects but not belonging to any of the four previous clusters. These clusters are named after the regions in which the ancestors of their speakers formerly resided, and are defined by phonological isoglosses (such as the treatment of interdental spirants or historical diphthongs), as well as morphological isoglosses (such as the form of various pronominal morphemes). After a description of the chief villages of the Khabur Assyrians (pp. 19–31), Talay provides a brief ethnography of their inhabitants (pp. 32–37) before discussing the synchronic and diachronic situation of the Khabur dialects within Aramaic (pp. 39–53).³

The bulk of the work is dedicated to the phonology (pp. 57–174) and the morphology (pp. 177–455) of the Khabur dialects. The treatment of the phonology of this wide array of dialects is necessarily both synchronic and diachronic, comparing the phonology of the dialect

clusters not only with one another and with other documented Neo-Aramaic dialects, but also with Classical Syriac. In contrast to the diachronic treatment of the phonology, Talay's description of the nominal and verbal morphology of the Khabur dialects is primarily synchronic. The heart of the discussion belongs to the inflection of the verb (pp. 232–305), which represents the most complex part of the morphology. The inflection of the noun is limited to pluralization (pp. 386–406), so the bulk of the discussion of substantives and adjectives is dedicated to word formation. Talay identifies the most common word patterns for substantives (pp. 333–406) and adjectives (pp. 407–422), as well as any derivational and inflectional morphemes.

The work provides a detailed and fairly comprehensive description of the phonology and morphology of the dialects under consideration. Each section is illustrated with numerous examples from representatives of each of the dialect clusters (an excellent practice which is unfortunately not always followed by authors of reference grammars), and the organization of the data lends itself extremely well to comparison with the other documented NENA dialects. Additionally, the attention to diachronic matters serves well to situate these dialects in the context of other attested dialects of Aramaic, including the classical dialects and other branches of Neo-Aramaic. Consequently, Talay's work will serve as an invaluable reference for the comparative study of Neo-Aramaic, and as a typological reference for linguists in other fields, thus making the Neo-Aramaic dialects more familiar to a wider audience.

This volume represents an immense contribution to our understanding of NENA, particularly given that the dialects of the Khabur region have developed in isolation from those spoken in other countries but have largely evaded documentation. While speakers of other NENA dialects in Iran, Iraq, Israel, and outside of the Middle East have come into constant contact with one another, influencing one another's speech and, in some cases, developing koinés, the strict division of the Khabur Assyrians along their traditional regional and tribal lines has minimized contact influence and precluded the development of a Khabur koiné. As a result, it is especially important that the dialects of the Khabur region be well-documented, and the only remaining desiderata for the documentation of dialects of the Khabur region are a discussion of the syntax, a lexicon, and a selection of texts. Fortunately, that this volume will not represent Talay's final word on the dialects of the Khabur region; he is currently in the process of producing a glossary and an extensive chrestomathy of short texts representing each dialect, thus addressing most of these desiderata.

¹ Of the twenty-five dialects represented by this survey, only Txuma Gawaya (Jacobi, Heidi: *Grammatik des thumischen Neuaramäisch (Nordostsyrien)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1973), Jilu (Fox, Samuel Ethan: *The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Jilu*. Semitica Viva 19. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), and Maha Xtaya of Bāz (Mutzafī, Hezy: “The Neo-Aramaic dialect of Maha Khtaya d-Baz: Phonology, Morphology, and Texts”. *JSS* XLV/2 (2000): 293–322) have received scholarly attention, although the latter two variants differ in some respects from those documented by Talay, as their speakers were not from the Khabur region and they had developed under the influence of other Neo-Aramaic dialects.

² See, among others, Stafford, R. S. “Iraq and the Problem of the Assyrians”. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931–1939)* XIII/2 (1934): 159–185. Talay documents the recent history of the Assyrian community in the Khabur region on pp. 11–19 of his work.

³ In his discussion of the surviving dialects of Aramaic, Talay notes (p. 40) that no new data on the dialect of the Mandaean in southwestern Iran (Neo-Mandaic) exists and that the language is probably extinct. Fortunately, this is not the case; immediately after the publication of the present work, I published the results of my own fieldwork in the same series; Häberl, Charles. *The Neo-Mandaic Dialect of Khorramshahr*. Semitica Viva 45. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009.