

## Morpho-phonological Alternations in Maaloula Aramaic Feminine Nouns

Maaloula Aramaic (a Western Neo-Aramaic dialect) has two interesting morpheme-specific alternations that occur in feminine nouns. The feminine marker shows the alternation  $-ta \sim -ča$  (e.g., *ṣaymṭa* ‘cloud’ vs. *ḡrōrča* ‘quern’), and the plural marker shows the alternation  $-ōta \sim -yōta$  (e.g., *ḏukkōta* ‘places’ vs. *maščuyōta* ‘weddings’). Although these alternations have been described in grammars (see, e.g., Spitaler 1938: 103–104, 108; Arnold 1990: 290–298; Rihan 2017: 87), these previous accounts leave a number of problems unsolved. First, at the descriptive level, the generalizations provided by these grammars are incomplete. For instance, the phonological environments that determine the distribution of  $-ta$  vs.  $-ča$  are not clear. Second, at the methodological level, the proposed generalizations often leak and call for quantitative empirical research that may be able to account for the gradience in the variation. Third, at the theoretical level, the generalizations presented are entirely language-specific and lack a perspective that speaks to broader issues in morphological or phonological theory.

To address these gaps, we investigate these alternations by conducting two corpus-based studies. In each study, we examine the distribution of the alternants, and formulate phonological or morphological rules that account for the alternation. In the first study, we examine the  $-ta \sim -ča$  alternation in a data set containing 618 feminine nouns that we collected from the Maaloula Aramaic Speech Corpus (MASC, Eid et al. 2022) (for the primary data, see Arnold 1991a, 1991b, 2003). From a formal perspective, we propose that there is one {FEMININE} marker that has two phonologically conditioned allomorphs which are the result of a spirantization rule yielding [ta] and a palatalization rule yielding [ča]. We demonstrate that a combination of three variables can correctly predict the distribution of the two allomorphs for the vast majority of nouns (95% accuracy): the preceding CV structure, the morphological pattern, and sonority.

In the second study, we investigate the plural alternation  $-ōta \sim -yōta$ , using 337 feminine nouns for which we have both plural and singular forms gleaned from the MASC corpus or elicited from a native speaker consultant. We show that the plural marker is  $-yōta$  if the base has an underlyingly long vowel and does not end in /y/, and it is  $-ōta$  elsewhere. The quantitative results support Rihan's (2017: 87) generalization. From a formal perspective, we consider this alternation to be a case of phonologically conditioned allomorphy and argue that the morphological (rather than the phonological) component produces the two allomorphs. The presented analysis provides support for the view that when an alternation is not phonologically motivated or optimizing, a morphological account is to be preferred to a phonological account (see, e.g., Kalin 2022).

## References

- Arnold, Werner. 1990. *Das Neuwestaramäische: V. Grammatik*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Arnold, Werner. 1991a. *Das Neuwestaramäische: III. Volkskundliche Texte aus Ma'lūla*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Arnold, Werner. 1991b. *Das Neuwestaramäische: IV. Orale Literatur aus Ma'lūla*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Arnold, Werner. 2003. Semitisches Tonarchiv (SemArch). Heidelberg University. Available online at <http://semarch.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/>.
- Eid, Ghattas, Esther Seyffarth, Emad Rihan, Werner Arnold & Ingo Plag. 2022. The Maaloula Aramaic Speech Corpus (MASC). Düsseldorf: Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6496714>.
- Kalin, Laura. 2022. Infixes really are (underlyingly) prefixes/suffixes: Evidence from allomorphy on the fine timing of infixation. *Language* 98. 641–682.
- Rihan, Emad. 2017. *Aramiyyat Maaloula al-muqaddasa: Al-aramiyya al-gharbiyya al-haditha [The holy Aramaic language of Maaloula: Western Neo-Aramaic]*. Vol. 1. Damascus: Muassasat Maaloula.
- Spitaler, Anton. 1938. *Grammatik des neuaramäischen Dialekts von Ma'lūla (Antilibanon)*. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus.