

Documentation of NENA varieties spoken in Urmiya (Krasnodar Krai, Russia)

Although the number of ethnic Assyrians in Russia is considerable (4421 according to the 2021 census), they are largely dispersed and there is only one settlement where they constitute the ethnic majority. This settlement is Urmiya, a large village in Krasnodar Krai in the North Caucasus. In our talk, we are going to discuss the goals, methods, challenges and preliminary results of a collective project (2019-present) aimed at the documentation of the linguistic landscape of Urmiya, formed by the speakers of several Christian Northeastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) varieties.

The project had the following premises. First, the dialectal composition of Urmiya had been obscure before the project was launched. There are two large groups of NENA speakers who identify themselves as *urməžnáyá* and *šapatnáyá*. While the former clearly belong to the Urmi dialect cluster and their lects are close to those extensively documented by Khan (2016), the latter do not directly correspond to any specific dialectal group known from NENA dialectology. However, the actual linguistic heterogeneity of Urmiya is deeper than the distinction between the two groups and has been shaped through the complex interplay of migrations and contacts. Second, the NENA varieties of Urmiya are severely endangered: language transmission has almost stopped, and fluent speakers are, for the most part, elderly people. Thus, language documentation is an urgent task that can also be viewed as a prerequisite for potential linguistic revival.

With these considerations in mind, our project was focused on five interrelated goals.

First, we undertook a large-scale sociolinguistic survey of the dwellers of Urmiya that was based on 95 in-depth interviews. The main goal of this subproject was to trace migratory processes that formed the current linguistic landscape of Urmiya and to prepare a basis for the analysis of specific variables in the speech of Urmiya dwellers.

Second, we assembled a dialectometric database using a specifically designed questionnaire. It covers 67 variables in the speech of 38 speakers belonging to diverse sociolinguistic groups. Interestingly, we found that not all the variables cluster along the dialectal lines: the distribution of some of them is largely blurred.

Third, we created the “Sound dictionary of NENA varieties spoken in Russia” (<https://nena-dict.ru/dictionary>). This resource makes it possible to see lexical as well as phonetic differences between the ways 460 lexical notions are represented in the lexicon of 6 speakers coming from the main sociolinguistic groups found in Urmiya. The dictionary also reflects some differences in the domain of morphology, since inflected lexemes were elicited in several basic forms.

Fourth, we are developing the “Corpus of NENA varieties spoken in Russia” (its preliminary version is available at <https://nena-dict.ru/corpus>). This corpus (as of 2023, it contains appr. 26000 word tokens) makes it possible to observe the actual use of linguistic forms in the speech of a heterogeneous community of Urmiya Assyrians and some speakers from other Russian cities. The corpus interface allows to search items by grammatical and lexical properties as well as to filter results by sociolinguistic features and to download interlinearized hits as .csv files.

Fifth, we explored a number of grammatical topics that were mainly analyzed in an (areal) typological perspective. These topics include plural formation, the distribution of verbal patterns, the structure of adnominal possessive constructions, serial verbal constructions, differential object marking, non-verbal predication, complementation strategies, etc.

Thus, in our talk, we are going to present the results of the documentation of the linguistic landscape of Urmiya in the following areas. First, we will provide an overview of the sociolinguistic situation in Urmiya, including dialectal diversity. Then we will present the created electronic resources, the sound dictionary, and the corpus. Finally, we will discuss the grammatical properties of the NENA varieties of Urmiya from a typological perspective.