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Intransitive clauses in NENA and Qəltu Arabic, and their implications for typology and diachronic change

Typically, large-scale word order studies focus on transitive verbal clauses,¹ but this results in a situation whereby only one type of subject is represented. This paper shows that in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic varieties (of a relatively conservative profile) and in their co-territorial Qəltu Arabic, the generalisation that SV is the statistically dominant order only holds for transitive, but not intransitive clauses. A broader word order typology of NENA must thus take into account transitivity, semantics and pragmatics (cf. Sasse 1987; Lambrecht 2000; Haig and Schnell 2016). The findings presented here demonstrate the explanatory power of corpus-based approaches to linguistic variation, including in Neo-Semitic.

In this paper, three corpora of North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic are compared quantitatively (from the *lišana deni* cluster, Christian Barwar and Urmi), as well as one Qəltu Arabic dialect (J. Aqra).² All doculects except C. Urmi represent the conservative VO profile, while C. Urmi is now tending towards OV (cf. Noorlander 2023). In this presentation, I show that in the VO varieties, the SV and VS permutations make up roughly 50% of all intransitive clauses.

Several pragmatic and semantic correlates of the word order permutations are then tested, including givenness, discourse-activeness and referential prominence. The distribution suggests that the preverbal position (in broad focus clauses) is associated with discourse-old information. The reverse order, however, is more complex, combining different information–structural functions.³ This situation in NENA and Arabic is then contextualised within cross-linguistic studies concerning the functions of the transitive versus intransitive subjects in discourse.⁴

In the final, diachronic dimension of the paper, I show that post-verbal subjects are increasingly infrequent in the NENA varieties that have now shifted to OV (cf. Noorlander 2023). The intransitive domain thus also provides indirect evidence for the radical impact of the VO>OV shift, which has taken place in the Eastern periphery of NENA.

¹ See, for instance, Siewierska (1997).

² For methods, see e.g. Glynn (2010)

³ See example (2).

⁴ See particularly Chafe (1987) and Kumagi (2006), and also Haig, Schnell and Schiborr (2022).

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Examples

(1) VS for a non-agentive, given subject (Molin 2021)

ša-ta *k-xalš* *-a-wa...*
year-F.SG REAL-end -3F.SG-PST

‘[Then] the year [cycle] would finish... (and we would start over).’

(2) VS for , agentive, reactivated discourse topic (Molin 2021)

Context: ‘We would buy sheep parts for processing and meat and bring it home.’

k-əθy-a-wa *yəmm-i* *g-māqəlw* *-à-* *wa-lu.* ’
REAL-come-3F.SG-PST **mother.F.SG-my** REAL-clean -A.3F.SG -PST-P.them

‘[Then] my mother would come and clean them.’