A corpus-based study of word order change in Neo-Aramaic

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keywords: word order change, Neo-Aramaic, OV word order, VO word order

This paper presents evidence of a shift from VO to OV, which can currently be observed across dialects of Northeastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) and Central Neo-Aramaic (Mlaḥso, Jastrow 1998; Ṭuroyo, Waltisberg 2016). Central Semitic is historically VO, but a sub-set of Neo-Aramaic varieties has shifted towards OV (e.g. Noorlander and Molin 2022). Examples (1) and (2) from the Jewish Sanandaj illustrate OV order, which is near categorical (>90% in the corpus). Drawing on a purpose-annotated sample of NENA and CNA varieties within the framework of the WOWA data base (Haig et al 2021), this paper aims to trace the gradient shift over a cross-section of varieties. This combines methodologies of corpus-based typology (Levshina 2019, Gerdes et al 2021, Schnell et al 2021) with qualitative analysis in order to propose a relative chronology of shifts.

(1) *ḥămam-ăke*   *mašxn-i-wa-la*
     bath.SG.F-DEF   make_hot-A.3PL-PST-O.3SG.F
     'They used to heat up the bath.' (Noorlander 2021, #325)

(2) *hez-ex*   *xa-bela*   *šqu-li*
     go.SBJV-1PL   INDF-house.SG.M   buy.IMP-O.1SG
     'Let's go and buy me a house!' (Noorlander 2021, #2191)

The highest frequency of OV is reported for the Jewish NENA dialect of Urmi (Khan 2020: 398). Indeed, OV word order is a characteristic of all Jewish varieties east of the Great Zab river (Noorlander 2021: 102), but as this paper will show, this also holds for Christian NENA dialects in north-eastern Iraq and western Iran, notably the dialects of Shaqlawa and Sanandaj, and southeastern Turkey, notably the dialect of "Bohtan" (Fox 2009). Whilst VO is the most robust in Ṭuroyo, possibly due to close contact with *qəltu*-Arabic, OV is more frequent among VO dialects of NENA in northwestern Iraq, such as Jewish Dohuk (Molin 2021: 363), and Christian Barwar (Stilo 2021). Others, while predominantly OV, exhibit a mixed OV/VO typology (Khan 2020: 398), e.g. Christian NENA of Urmi, Mlaḥso, and Bohtan.

The influence from OV languages on Aramaic can already be observed in early written forms of Eastern Aramaic, whose less rigid word order is presumed to be evidence of a partial transition from VO to OV, notably Achaemenid Aramaic (Kaufman 1974: 133, 160, Folmer 1995, 521–587, Gzella 2015: 177, 180). Early written forms are certainly not the direct ancestors of the spoken Neo-Aramaic dialects this paper is concerned with, but they suggest that the original situation in the east was presumably closer to a more flexible VO type.

Since Givón (1979), the belief that OV word order is diachronically less stable than VO has enjoyed wide currency. Gell-Mann and Ruhlen (2011) claim that, while diachronic shifts away from (S)OV to other orders are widely attested, shifts towards (S)OV have not been demonstrated, except under conditions of "diffusion", i.e. contact-induced word-order change (cf. Hock 2010: 68 for the same claim). The implication is that while internally-motivated syntactic change alone may be sufficient to tip OV towards VO, an established VO order will only shift away from this state when external factors—language contact—exert additional pressure precipitating a shift towards OV. Contact-induced syntactic change may in fact look no more random than internally motivated shift.

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