Linguistic variables in NENA speakers from Urmiya, Krasnodar Krai: A dialectometric study

The study is part of a larger collective project aimed at the documentation of Christian Northeastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) varieties spoken in Urmiya, Krasnodar Krai, the only settlement in Russia where ethnic Assyrians constitute the majority. Despite its exceptional symbolic status for the Assyrians in Russia, the actual dialectal composition of Urmiya had never been explored in any detail. Based on self-identifications revealed in interviews, Urmiya dwellers mostly fall into two groups. The larger and more prestigious group is formed by *urməžnáya*. *Urməžnáya* clearly belong to the Urmi dialect group as extensively document by Khan (2016). Ultimately, all *urməžnáya* of Urmiya stem back to the Urmi plain in Iran, but there are further subdivisions. The lesser group is referred to as *šapətnáya*. The ancestors of these speakers came to Urmiya shortly after its foundation but ultimately they can be traced back to mountaineous regions in the present-day southern-eastern Turkey. According to a recent dialectological description by Ovsjannikova et al. (forthc. a, b), in terms of its actual dialectological features, the speech of the *šapətnáya* of Urmiya is close to the Van NENA dialect as documented in [Tsereteli 1963].

However, the actual distribution of linguistic variables in the speech of Urmiya dwellers cannot be reduced to the distinction between the two groups outlined above. First, there are some speakers who do not identify themselves with either of them. Second, the patterning of some variables is not fully consonant with the claimed dialectal affiliation on the part of the speakers. The aim of our dialectometric study is to resolve these complications based on the quantitative assessment of a systematically assembled dataset. Our ultimate goal is to unearth the processes that formed the actual linguistic landscape of Urmiya.

During the preparatory stage of our study, we identified 67 linguistic variables that can be analyzed in terms of discrete (mostly, although not exclusively, binary) values and displayed some variation in the elicited and spontaneous data collected in Urmiya. These variables belong to all major levels of the system, including phonetics (e.g. diphthongization of /u/ in stressed open syllables, cf. /xabúša/ vs. /xabúyša/ 'apple'), morphology (e.g. the shape of the 3PL L-suffix, cf. *ptáxlun* vs. *ptáxle* 'they opened'), syntax (e.g. synthetic vs. analytic expression of pronominal possessors, cf. *brúni* vs. *brúna di(yi)* 'my son') and the lexicon (e.g. *béta* vs. *bíyya* 'house'). We created a questionnaire containing 18 sentences in Russian, whose translations were expected to display the 67 variables.

We collected data from 27 speakers belonging to all major (sub)groups of NENA speakers in Urmiya and 11 Urmi and non-Urmi speakers dwelling in Verin Dvin in Armenia. We analyzed the data using several statistical techniques, including Multidimensional Scaling as implemented in R (R Core Team 2021) package `smacof` (de Leeuw – Mair 2009). The main results obtained are as follows.

i) Most of the analysed features do pattern with the reported dialectal affiliation of the speakers, as shown in Fig. 1, where individual dots represent speakers, the distances between the dots are based on aggregate dialectometric distances (all 67 features are given equal weight) and colors correspond to the reported dialect affiliation of the speaker.

ii) The groupings are not equally homogeneous. Whereas the *urməžnaya* speakers pattern together with respect to most variables, the few *šapətnaya* speakers display significant differences and can be close to speakers of some other dialects. This finding supports the hypothesis that *šapətnaya* is locally used as a cover term for all the speakers who can be traced back to variegated locations in the mountaineous regions in southeastern Turkey rather than a designation of a specific dialect.

iii) The variables are not homogeneous in terms of the patterning according to the reported dialect affiliation of the speakers. Phonetic and morphological variables tend to display stronger patterning, whereas lexical and syntactic variables are often blurred. In our talk, we are going to discuss the implications such distributions might have for the understanding of divergent and convergent processes in the development of NENA varieties.

Fig. 1. Dialectometric distances: speakers and dialects
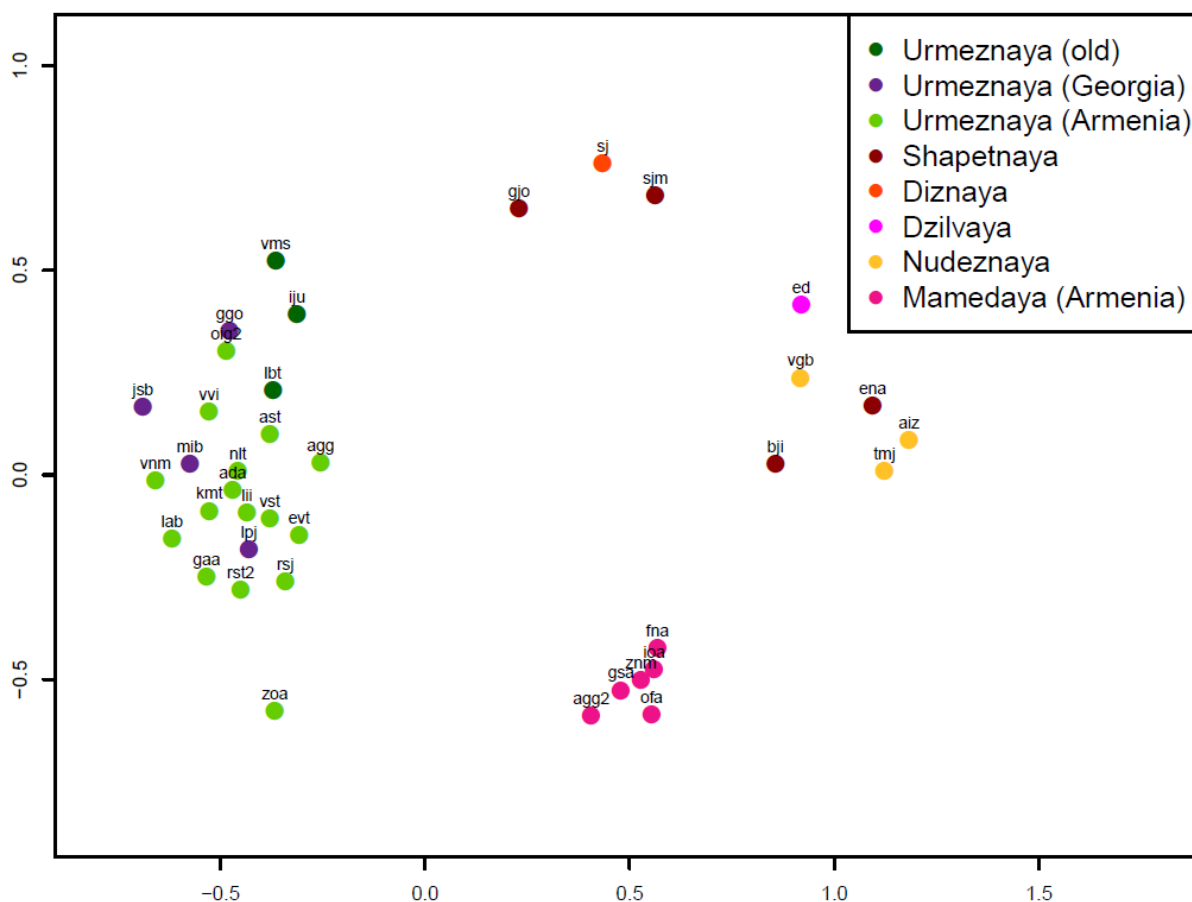
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