

The Verbalization of the Copula in Neo-Aramaic

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North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA), which is a subgroup of dialects of vernacular Neo-Aramaic (Semitic), exhibits considerable internal diversity. In my paper I shall focus on the diversity that exists in the form of the copula in this subgroup. The Aramaic copula is historically pronominal. In NENA the copula has begun to acquire verbal inflection (Khan 2018). The paradigms of the copula in the various NENA dialects exhibit different degrees of convergence with verbal inflection. One can identify the following hierarchical scales in the tendency for the NENA copula to develop morphological properties of verbal inflection, in which the sign > is to be read ‘has a greater tendency to develop verbal morphology than’:

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|-------|--------------------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| (i) | 1 st and 2 nd person | > | 3 rd person |
| (ii) | Past tense | > | Present tense |
| (iii) | Negative polarity | > | Positive polarity |

These can be correlated with semantic properties of the subject and the clause that would be expected typologically to be most compatible with verbal predicates, in that they make a copula closer to the prototypical category of verb than a copula in which these are absent, viz. (i) saliency, agency or agent-worthiness of the subject. 1st and 2nd person subjects, referring to the conversation participants, are highly salient and at the top of the agency hierarchy (according to, e.g., Silverstein 1976; Dixon 1979).

(ii) saliency and informativity of the predication. This relates to the higher degree of focus and informativity of negated predicates. Such a heightened degree of informativity can be identified as a feature that is characteristic of verbs. The saliency of the predication is also increased by specific tense marking as in the case of the NENA past copula, which exhibits a greater tendency to develop verbal inflection than a present copula.

There is an areal progression in verbalization of the NENA from the western geographical periphery to the eastern periphery. There are also differences in verbalization according to different identity groups (Jews vs Christians). It will be argued that the various degrees of actuation of the internal potential verbalization of the NENA copula was induced by language contact. The operative factors are the degree of verbalization of the copula in contact languages and the degree of social identity of different NENA-speaking communities with the speakers of the contact languages.

Key words: Copula, Aramaic, contact, change of grammatical category,.

References

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