

Grammaticalization of a past tense gram in Neo-Aramaic from a verb of movement and its cross-linguistic parallels

Talk, general session

North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) is the largest remaining branch of the Aramaic language family (Semitic/Afroasiatic), although most surviving dialects are now endangered. The immense dialectal diversity, documented with increasing urgency in the last three decades, allows one to trace the emergence of new grammatical forms at different stages of grammaticalization.

One of these involves a prefix (QAM-, dialectal variants *qam-*, *kām-*, *qām-*, *gām-* etc.) which apparently converts a present subjunctive into a past perfective. It exists alongside another, older past perfective form, but in many dialects the newer form with QAM- has become specialized for pronominal object indexing (the older form usually cannot take a full set of pronominal object suffixes).

Scholars since the 19th century have offered a variety of theories as to the origin of this strange tense-aspect marker. One theory, which I will develop, is that it originates in the NENA verb-form *qāyām* ‘he gets up’, used as a historic present (i.e. in lively oral narrative). This was proposed by Pennacchietti (1994, 1997), supported by historical, dialectal and cross-linguistic evidence, including the Catalan go-past *vaig cantar* ‘I sang’. Recently Fassberg (2015) has argued against this theory and proposed that the *kām-* variant originates in a metanalysis of the indicative prefix *k-* (also in a historic present function) before the initial *m-* of certain verbs, with epenthetic vowel (i.e. *k^ə-m-* > *kām-*).

The present paper will evaluate the theories, as well as show that the criticisms of Pennacchietti’s proposal are not well-founded. It will further bring new NENA data (both historical textual evidence and newly documented dialectal data) and cross-linguistic evidence from Romance and other language families which support a grammaticalization path from *qāyām* ‘he gets up’ as part of a serial verb construction used as a narrative technique. It will also show how verbs cognate to *qāyām* have been grammaticalized as discourse markers in other Semitic languages, most likely through a similar scenario (though with a different end result). The Neo-Aramaic case throws light upon how such grammaticalization paths work, as well as the particular circumstances under which the gram could be recycled for an additional use in facilitating object-indexing on the verb.

References

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