Lability drift in Modern Aramaic languages

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Aims of the talk

- To show that the (anticausative) P-lability is more widespread in Modern Aramaic than in earlier Middle Aramaic languages.
- To discuss the reasons for the increase in labile verbs in Modern Aramaic languages of different branches.

Roadmap

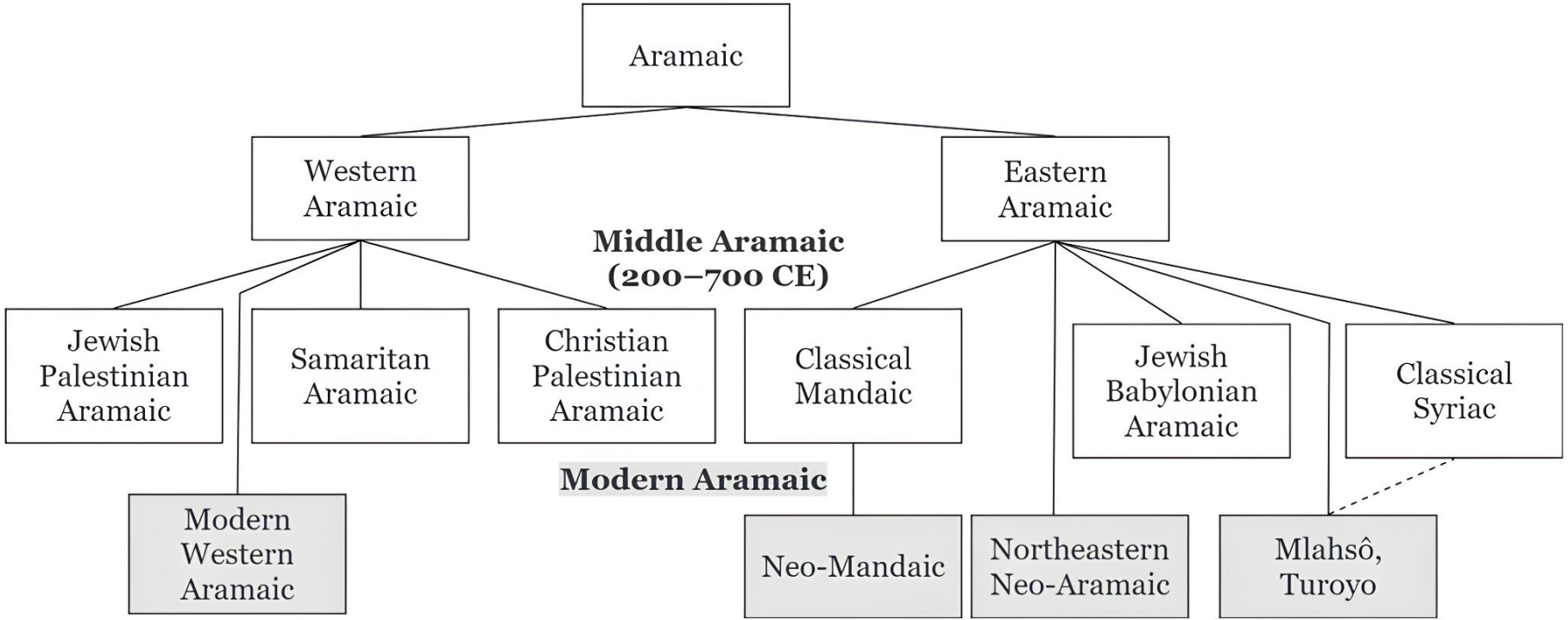
1. Introduction
    a. Classification of Aramaic languages
    b. P-lability
2. Transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages
3. Valency change in Aramaic languages
4. The loss of anticausative

1. Introduction

Classification of Aramaic languages

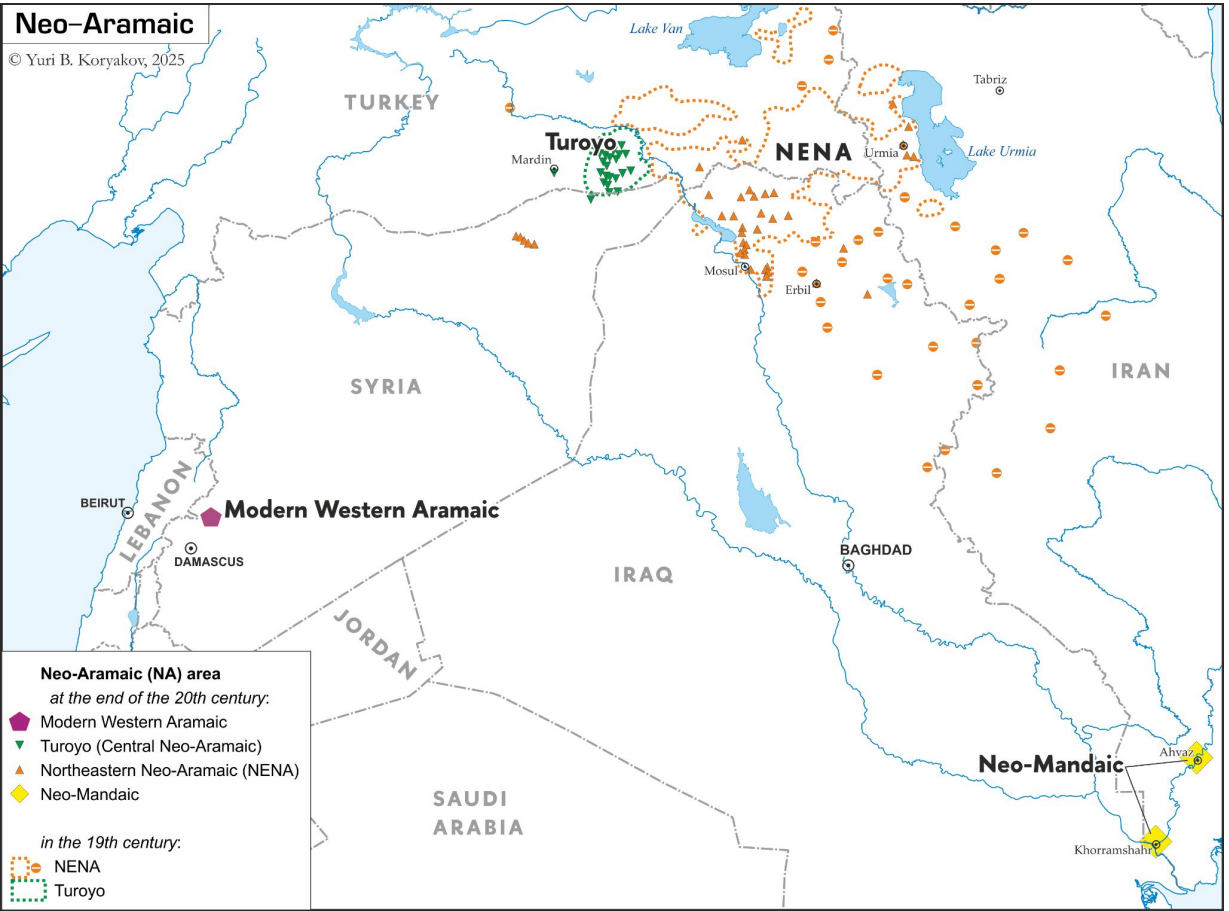
- Aramaic < Central Semitic < Semitic < Afro-Asiatic
- Genealogical classification:
  - **Western** Aramaic
  - **Eastern** Aramaic
- Chronological classification (Beyer 1986):
  - **Old** Aramaic (850 BCE-200 CE),
  - **Middle** Aramaic (200-700 CE),
  - **Modern / Neo-**Aramaic of the present day (the earliest texts are attested from the 16th century)

Middle and Modern Aramaic



(Hoberman 1989: 5)

Modern Aramaic languages

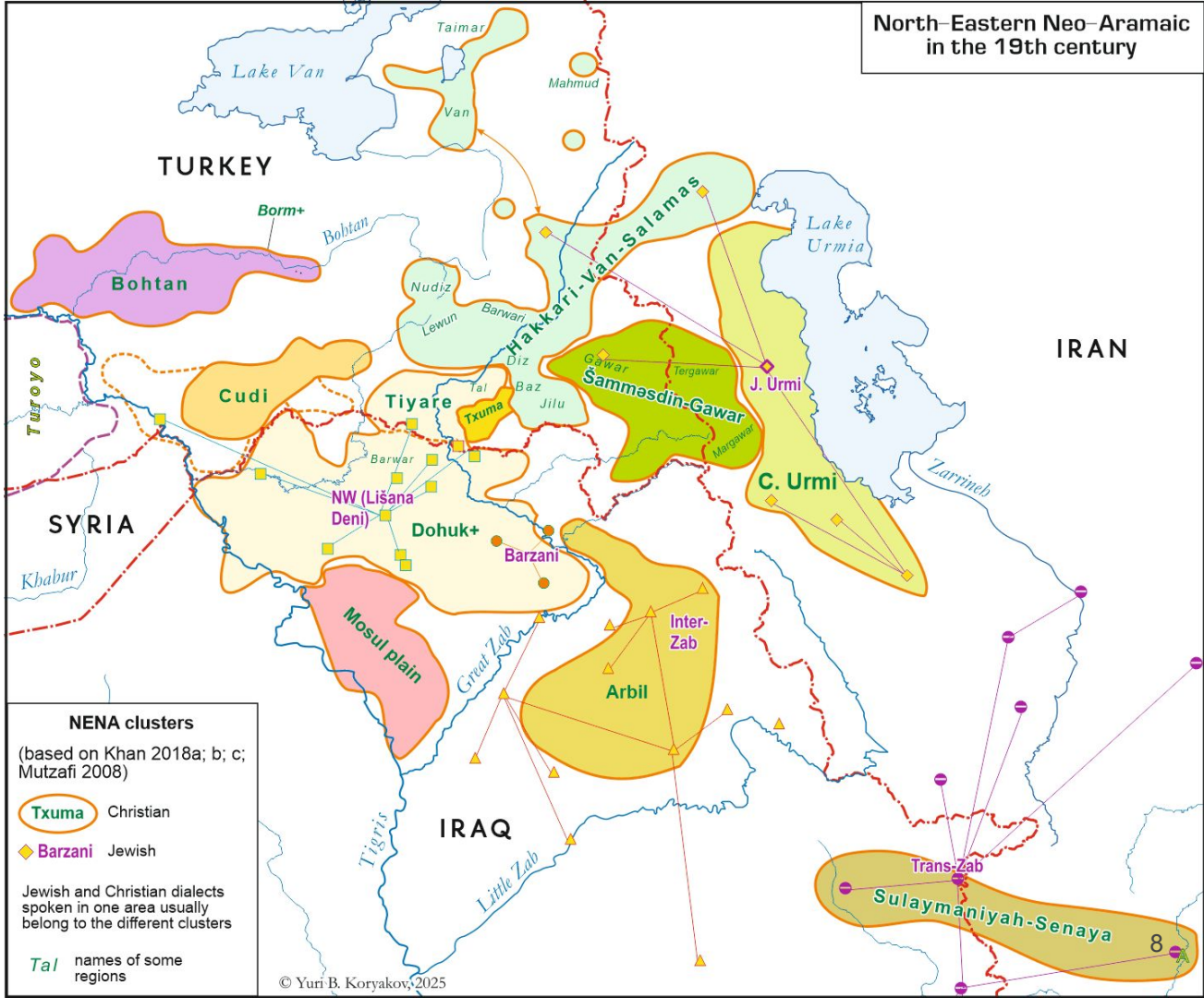


Modern Aramaic are

- **Modern Western Aramaic**
- Central Neo-Aramaic (**Ṭuroyo** and **Mlahso**)
- Neo-Mandaic
- **North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic** (NENA)

NENA

- **NENA** constitutes a complex dialect continuum of **~150 varieties**
- were spoken by Christian and Jewish communities in northern **Iraq**, north-western **Iran** and south-eastern **Turkey**
- most speakers left their original territories during the 20th century



Modern Western Aramaic

- Speakers lived until recently in three villages in southern Syria — **Maaloula**, **Bakhʕa** (Christian villages) and **Jubbʕadin** (Muslim), each with its own dialect.
- Bakhʕa was completely destroyed during the Syrian Civil War and subsequently abandoned.
- The other two villages have a population of around 10 000 (Duntsov et al. 2022: 359).

Modern Aramaic languages

- Nominative-accusative alignment
- Subject is obligatory marked on verb
- Differential object marking

P-lability

Labile verbs (or verbal forms) — verbs which can show changes in syntactic pattern (**valence alternation**) with no formal change in the verb

→ verbs which can be used **transitively** or **intransitively** without any formal change

→ Agent-preserving lability (A-lability)
John *drinks tea. /* ***John*** *drinks.*

→ Patient-preserving lability (P-lability)
I broke ***the stick****. /* ***The stick*** *broke.*

(Dixon 1994; Letuchiy 2010, 2013; Kulikov & Lavidas 2014; Creissels 2014)

P-lability

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→ anticausative P-lability

P-lability

(Anti)causative alternation — a transitivity alternation expressing **externally caused** (causal) vs. **spontaneously occurring** (non-causal) events.

(1) Christian Urmi (< NENA)

a. *beta* ***tləx-lə***
house break.PST-LS.3M
'The house collapsed'.

b. *ginavə* ***tləx-le*** *beta*
robbers break.PST-LS.3PL house
'The robbers destroyed the house'.

Transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages

- I examined how the anticausative alternation is coded in different Aramaic languages

2. Transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages

Transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages

- The transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages have been examined with the methodology proposed by Haspelmath (1993)

→ **31 verb pairs**

- boil (intr./tr.), freeze (intr./tr.), dry (intr./tr.), wake up (intr./tr.), die/kill, go out/put out, sink (intr./tr.), learn/teach, melt (intr./tr.), stop (intr./tr.), turn (intr./tr.), dissolve (intr./tr.), burn (intr./tr.), be destroyed/destroy, fill (intr./tr.), finish (intr./tr.), begin (intr./tr.), spread (intr./tr.), roll (intr./tr.), develop (intr./tr.), get lost/lose, rise/raise, improve (intr./tr.), rock (intr./tr.), connect (intr./tr.), change (intr./tr.), gather (intr./tr.), open (intr./tr.), break (intr./tr.), close (intr./tr.), split (intr./tr.)

Transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages

- Non-causal verbs in these pairs are patientive intransitive verbs with non-agentive meanings, typically changes of state.
- These verbs show cross-linguistic variation in coding of (anti)causative alternation.
- Types of coding (anti)causative alternation:
  - causative (C) — transitive verb is marked
  - anticausative (A) — intransitive verb is marked
  - **labile (L)** — the same form
  - equipollent (E) — both verbs are marked
  - suppletive (S) — different lexemes.

(Anti)causative alternation

Causative marking

(2) Christian Urmi

a. *miyya* *+rdəx-le*
water(PL) boil.PST-LS.3PL
'The water boiled'.

b. *brata* ***+mu**-rdəx-la* *miyya*
girl(F) CAUS-boil.PST-LS.3F water(PL)
'The girl boiled the water'.

(Anti)causative alternation

Anticausative marking

(3) Modern Western Aramaic

a.	*ʧ-ʁajjr-aθ*		*ħajoːθaħ*
	tD-change.PST-3F.SG		life.1PL
	‘Our life changed.’		
b.	*teknolodʒija*	*ʁajjr-aʧʧ-il*	*ħajoːθaħ*
	technology	change.D.PST-3F.SG-DO	life.1PL
	‘Technology changed our life.’		

(Anti)causative alternation

Labile verbs

(4) Christian Urmi

a. *kunya* ***mli-lə*** *miyya*
well(M) fill.PST-LS.3M water(PL)
'The well filled with water.'

b. *brata* *vadra* ***mli-la*** *miyya*
girl(F) bucket(M) fill.PST-LS.3F water(PL)
'The girl filled the bucket with water.'

Typological tendencies

Verbal meanings can be located on a **scale of the likelihood of spontaneous occurrence** (Nedjalkov 1969; Haspelmath 1993; 2016)

- more spontaneous ~ internally caused events (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995)

show a preference for **causative marking** (Haspelmath 1993)

- less spontaneous ~ externally caused events (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995)

show a preference for **anticausative marking** (Haspelmath 1993)

Spontaneity scale

Table 1: Five types of verb meanings on the spontaneity scale: Some examples

Transitive (most spontaneous)	Unergative	Unaccusative		Agentful (least spontaneous)
		Automatic	Costly	
'cut', 'wash', 'throw', 'eat', 'hit', 'see'	'talk', 'dance', 'walk', 'play', 'work', 'scream'	'melt', 'freeze', 'dry', 'wake up', 'sink', 'go out (fire)'	'break (intr.)', 'split (intr.)', 'open (intr.)', 'close (intr.)', 'change (intr.)', 'gather (intr.)'	'be cut', 'be washed', 'be thrown', 'be eaten', 'be hit', 'be seen'

(Haspelmath 2016)

Typological tendencies: labile verbs

- Haspelmath (2016: 53) writes that “almost no language allows labile verbs for meanings higher than automatic <...>. Thus, labile verbs actually have the same cut-off behavior as anticausatives.”
- Letuchiy (2010: 252) argues that the spontaneity parameter is not significant in the case of lability, as “lability partly functions as a compensatory mechanism: when a language has a causative marker, lability characterizes the anticausative zone, and vice versa”.

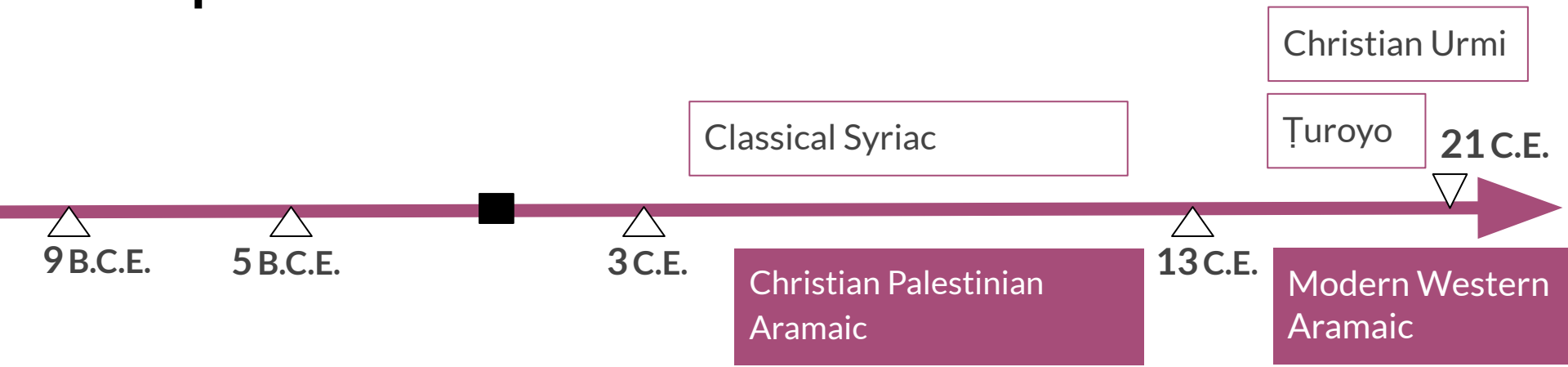
Transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages

- 10 Aramaic languages from various historical periods
- corpora & dictionaries + elicitation (for Modern Aramaic)
- If there was more than one verb with the required meaning, I chose the more frequent one, using the resource "The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon" (https://cal.huc.edu)

Transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages

- The whole study is described in (Shvedova, forth.).
- Today only 5 languages will be shown.
- The typological profiles of other Semitic languages are added for comparison: Modern Standard Arabic, Modern Hebrew (Haspelmath 1993), Maltese (Comrie 2006) and Amharic (Wakasa 2014).

Sample



Classification:

Western Aramaic

Eastern Aramaic

Research questions

- How many of the 31 verb pairs are expressed by labile verbs in different Aramaic languages?
- Is the spontaneity scale from (Haspelmath 1993, 2016) applicable for Aramaic languages?

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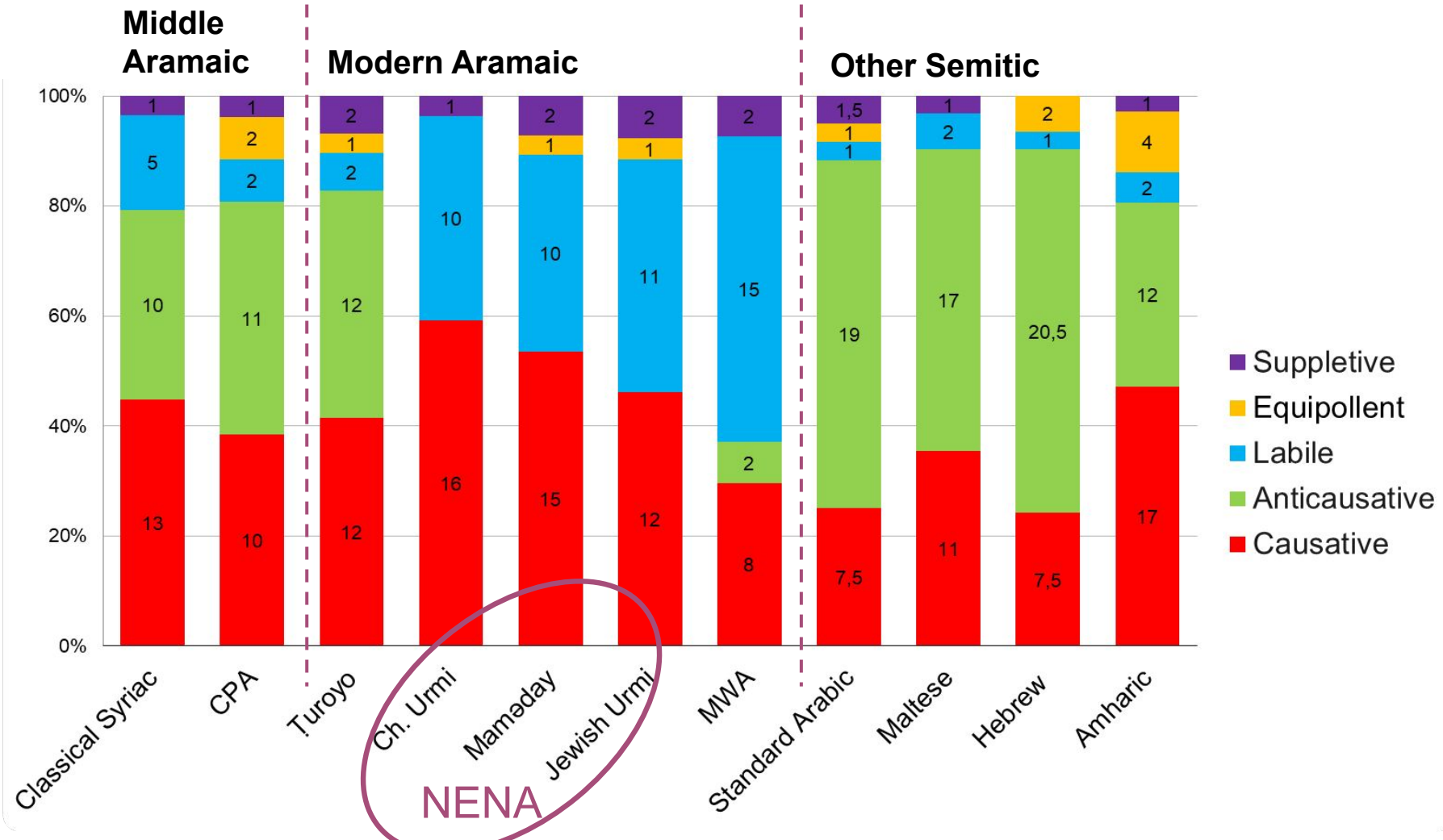
Middle Aramaic
Modern Aramaic
Other Semitic
100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%
Classical Syriac
CPA
Ṭuroyo
Ch. Urmi
Maməday
Jewish Urmi
MWA
Standard Arabic
Maltese
Hebrew
Amharic
NENA
Suppletive
Equipollent
Labile
Anticausative
Causative

Transitivity profiles of Aramaic languages

- In Middle Aramaic languages and Ṭuroyo mostly causative or anticausative marking is used.
- The percentage of labile verbs in NENA and Modern Western Aramaic has greatly increased compared to earlier Aramaic.

Research questions

- How many of the 31 verb pairs are expressed by labile verbs in different Aramaic languages?
- Is the spontaneity scale from (Haspelmath 1993, 2016) applicable for Aramaic languages?

Encoding types of individual verb pairs

← Spontaneity scale →

No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	19	21	22	24	26	27	28	29	30	31
Verb pair	boil	freeze	dry	wake up	die/kill	go out/put out	sink	learn/teach	melt	stop	turn	dissolve	burn	be destroyed/ destroy	fill	finish	begin	roll	get lost/ lose	rise/raise	rock	change	gather	open	break	close	split
Cl. Syriac	C	L	C	A	S	C	C	C	C	L	C	C	C	A	L	C	L	A	C	A	C	A	A	A	A	A	A
CPA	-	-	C	E	S	C	C	C	C	L	A	C	C	E	A	C	L	-	C	C	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Ṭuroyo	C	C	C	L	S	C	A	C	C	C	E	C	C	C	A	C	L	A	A	C	A	A	S	A	A	A	A
Ch. Urmi	C	L	C	C	S	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	L	L	C	L	L	C	C	L	C	C	L	L	L	L
MWA	L	S	L	L	S	C	C	C	C	L	L	C	L	L	L	C	L	L	C	A	L	A	C	L	L	L	L

C — Causative, A — Anticausative, L — Labile, E — Equipollent, S — Suppletive

Encoding types of individual verb pairs

- In general, the Aramaic material is consistent with the hypothesis of the spontaneity scale as a predictive factor.
- The frequency of anticausative marking in Middle Aramaic and Ṭuroyo increases towards the end of the list, where situations typically requiring an external agent are located.

Labile verbs in Middle and Modern Aramaic

Some verbs were labile already in earlier varieties of Aramaic

→ their lability is a shared retention in both Eastern and Western Modern Aramaic varieties.

Encoding types of individual verb pairs

“Old” lability

← Spontaneity scale →

No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	19	21	22	24	26	27	28	29	30	31
Verb pair	boil	freeze	dry	wake up	die/kill	go out/put out	sink	learn/teach	melt	stop	turn	dissolve	burn	be destroyed/ destroy	fill	finish	begin	roll	get lost/ lose	rise/raise	rock	change	gather	open	break	close	split
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CPA	-	-	C	E	S	C	C	C	C	L	A	C	C	E	A	C	L	-	C	C	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Ṭuroyo	C	C	C	L	S	C	A	C	C	C	E	C	C	C	A	C	L	A	A	C	A	A	S	A	A	A	A
Ch. Urmi	C	L	C	C	S	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	L	L	C	L	L	C	C	L	C	C	L	L	L	L
MWA	L	S	L	L	S	C	C	C	C	L	L	C	L	L	L	C	L	L	C	A	L	A	C	L	L	L	L

C — Causative, A — Anticausative, L — Labile, E — Equipollent, S — Suppletive

Labile verbs in Middle and Modern Aramaic

The second group of verbs had **anticausative marking** in Middle Aramaic languages, but are coded by **labile verbs** in most Modern Aramaic varieties

→ a **parallel development** (or drift) in Western and Eastern Aramaic.

Semantics: less spontaneous ~ externally caused events.

Encoding types of individual verb pairs

“New” lability

← Spontaneity scale →

No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	19	21	22	24	26	27	28	29	30	31
Verb pair	boil	freeze	dry	wake up	die/kill	go out/put out	sink	learn/teach	melt	stop	turn	dissolve	burn	be destroyed/ destroy	fill	finish	begin	roll	get lost/ lose	rise/raise	rock	change	gather	open	break	close	split
Cl. Syriac	C	L	C	A	S	C	C	C	C	L	C	C	C	A	L	C	L	A	C	A	C	A	A	A	A	A	A
CPA	-	-	C	E	S	C	C	C	C	L	A	C	C	E	A	C	L	-	C	C	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Ṭuroyo	C	C	C	L	S	C	A	C	C	C	E	C	C	C	A	C	L	A	A	C	A	A	S	A	A	A	A
Ch. Urmi	C	L	C	C	S	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	L	L	C	L	L	C	C	L	C	C	L	L	L	L
MWA	L	S	L	L	S	C	C	C	C	L	L	C	L	L	L	C	L	L	C	A	L	A	C	L	L	L	L

C — Causative, A — Anticausative, L — Labile, E — Equipollent, S — Suppletive

Labile verbs in Middle and Modern Aramaic

What happened to the anticausative marking?

3. Valency change in Aramaic languages

Valency change in Aramaic languages

- As in other Semitic languages, valency change is coded by the verbal **“stems”** (also called *templates, ʔawzān, binyanim*) in Aramaic.
  - Verbal root consists of consonants and carries some general lexical meaning.
  - The “stem” determines the inflectional paradigm of the verb ≈ Indo-European conjugations.
  - Besides determining the whole inflectional paradigm of a verb, stems are associated with certain argument structures.

Valency change in Aramaic languages

Christian Urmi (< NENA) verbal stems (Khan 2016)

Stem	**I** (basic)	**II** (causative)	**III** (causative)	**QI** (quadriliteral)
Root	*d-m-x* ‘to sleep’	*b-s-m* ‘to heal’	*m-dm-x* ‘to cause to sleep’	*ɟ-rɟ-š* ‘to drag’
Present	*daməx-*	*basəm-*	***m**adməx-*	*ɟarɟəš-*
Past	*dmix-*	*busəm-*	***m**udməx-*	*ɟurɟəš-*
Resultative participle	*dmixa*	*busma*	***m**udməxxa*	*ɟurɟəšša*
Progressive	*bədmaxa*	*basumə*	***m**admuxə*	*ɟarɟušə*

Valency change in Aramaic languages

Classical Syriac verbal stems (Muraoka 2005)

Stem	**G** (basic)	**D** (intensive/ causative)	**C** (causative)	**tG** (detrans.)	**tD** (detrans.)	**tC** (detrans.)
Past	*CCaC-Ø*	*Ca**CC**eC-Ø*	*ʔ**a**-CCeC-Ø*	*ʔe**t̲**-CCeC-Ø*	*ʔe**t̲**-Ca**CC**aC-Ø*	*ʔe**tt**-**a**-CCaC-Ø*
Non-Past	*ne-CCoC*	*n-Ca**CC**eC*	*n-**a**-CCeC*	*n-e**t̲**-CCeC*	*n-e**t̲**-Ca**CC**aC*	*n-e**tt**-**a**-CCaC*
Infinitive	*me-CCaC*	*m-Ca**CC**āCu*	*m-**a**-CCāCu*	*m-e**t̲**-CCāCu*	*m-e**t̲**-Ca**CC**āCu*	*m-e**tt**-**a**-CCāCu*

Neo-Aramaic verbal stems

Semitic label	Arabic	General meaning	Cl. Syriac	Ch. Urmi (NENA)	Ṭuroyo	MWA
G[rundstamm]	I	basic	*pəʕal*	I	I(tr); I(in)	I
D[opplungs-stamm]	II	causative/ "intensive"	*paʕʕel*	II	II	II
K[ausativ]	IV	causative	*afʕel*	III	III	IV
tG		detransitive	*et̲pʕel*		I(p)	I(2)
tD	V	detransitive	*et̲paʕʕal*		II(p)	II(2)
tK		detransitive	*ettafʕal*		III(p)	IV(2)
L	III					III
tL	VI	detransitive				III(2)
N	VII	detransitive				I(7)
Gt	VIII	detransitive				I(8)
St	X					I(10)

Valency change in Aramaic languages

- Earlier Aramaic **detransitive stems** (*t*-stems: tG, tD and tC)
  - were completely lost in NENA varieties,
  - but have been preserved in Modern Western Aramaic (not very productive).
- Modern Western Aramaic also borrowed four additional stems from Arabic, three of which are detransitive (Duntsov et al. 2022: 369).

Valency change in Aramaic languages

- Given that detransitive stems have been preserved in Modern Western Aramaic, why was anticausative marking replaced by labile verbs in Modern Aramaic languages of different branches?
- Why and how exactly did the loss of the anticausative in NENA happen?
- Was it due to the **phonetic loss** of the *ʔeṯ-* prefix, or was there another reason?

4. The loss of anticausative

The loss of anticausative in the literature

- “There are no patterns that are direct descendants of the intransitive T-patterns *ʾeṯpəʿel*, *ʾeṯpaʿʿal* and *ʾettapōʿal*. Some of these coalesced with the surviving patterns **due to the loss of the /t/ element** … with the result that many verbs in these latter patterns are labile, i.e. they have both a transitive and an intransitive function” (Khan 2016a: 262)
- “In NENA the derived passive classes **have disappeared**, and in most dialects the passive is expressed periphrastically” (Fox 2009: 30)
- “A shared innovation of this group is complete loss of the old Aramaic t-stems, **possibly due to the frequent assimilation of the t-prefix to the following consonant**, a phenomenon already widespread in Middle Aramaic” (Kuzin 2024: 20)

The loss of anticausative in the literature

- “In the course of time the anticausative marker (the t-infix) was lost and some, and possibly a large proportion, of former anticausative alternation pairs seem to have come to be expressed by labile alternation in NENA <...>This mostly seems to have occurred in stem I alternation, **probably because either the -t- of the anticausative verb assimilated, or the anticausative merged with stem I for some other reason.** However, the history of t-stem verbs (and especially of the Dt- and the Ct-stem) needs to be investigated further.” (Göransson 2015: 224)
- “**Due to the profound transformation of the verbal system** in Aramaic, anticausative alternation has been lost. As a result of the old anticausative stems merging into the modern stem I, labile alternation evolved (or became at least greatly enhanced). NENA stem I alternation thus seems to have replaced the anticausative alternation of earlier Aramaic.” (Göransson 2015: 229)

The loss of anticausative

- Preliminarily, I would argue that the anticausative was lost in NENA not for phonetic reasons, but due to **a reorganisation of the verbal system**.

Reorganisation of Modern Aramaic verbal systems

- **NENA** and **Central Neo-Aramaic**: old finite forms have been completely lost. New system is based upon the non-finite verbal forms of the older Aramaic: the active and passive participles, verbal adjectives and infinitives.
- **MWA**: old finite forms preserved, the earlier Aramaic active and passive participles grammaticalized into new Perfect and Present tenses.

(Hoberman 1989; Coghill 2016; Noorlander 2021 among others)

G-stem (*pəʕal* in Syriac / stem I in NENA)

Syriac label	**Syriac form** (3M.SG)	**Syriac TAM meanings**	**Urmi label**	**Urmi form** (3M.SG)	**Urmi TAM meanings**
Suffix Conjugation	*CCVC*	Past perfective	—	—	—
Prefix Conjugation	*ne-CCVC*	Irrealis, future	—	—	—
Active Participle	*CāCeC*	Irrealis, future	Present	*CaCəC*	Irrealis, future
Passive Participle	*CCiC*	Stative / Perfect	Past	*CCəC-lə*	Past perfective

tG-stem (*ʔeṯpəʕel* in Syriac)

Syriac label	**Syriac form** (3M.SG)	**Syriac TAM meanings**	**Urmi label**	**Urmi form** (3M.SG)	**Urmi TAM meanings**
Suffix Conjugation	*ʔeṯ-CCeC*	Past perfective	—	—	—
Prefix Conjugation	*neṯ-CCeC*	Irrealis, future	—	—	—
Active Participle	*meṯ-CCeC*	Irrealis, future	(Present)	—	(Irrealis, future)
Passive Participle	—	(Stative / Perfect)	(Past)	—	(Past perfective)

Reorganisation of Modern Aramaic verbal systems

Situation in Modern Aramaic languages:

the new verbal form has grammaticalized (passive participle > Perfect > Past), but verbs in t-stems do not have this form

→ t-stems have disappeared (NENA) or are disappearing (Modern Western Aramaic)

→ t-stems coincide with active stems in this form (Ṭuroyo)

→ these stems use the form of active participle in this function (Mlahso)

Reorganisation of Modern Aramaic verbal systems

In Ṭuroyo, the verbs in the stems labelled as anticausative are actually labile in the perfective (based on Noorlander 2021: 303).

	Active		Mediopassive (p-stems)	
	Imperfective	Perfective	Perfective	Imperfective
I(tr)	*qoṭəl-*	*qṭil-*		*mə-qṭol-*
I(intr)	*doməx-*	*damix-*		
II	*m-zabən-*			*mi-zabən-*
III	*m-a-dməx-*		*m-t-a-dməx-*	*mi-t-a-dməx-*
Q	*m-farqə ʿ-*			*mi-farqə ʿ-*

Conclusions

- There is a trend towards an increase in the number of labile verbs in both Eastern and Western Modern Aramaic languages.
- Only a few labile verbs (such as ‘fill’) can be described as shared retention.
- As a result of the parallel development of the two branches, verbs from the "anticausative pole" of the spontaneity scale have become labile.
- Preliminarily, I argue that the anticausative was (or is being) lost not for phonetic reasons, but due to the reorganisation of the verbal system — specifically, the grammaticalisation of the passive participle into new finite forms.

Thank you!

Acknowledgments

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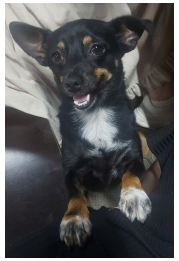


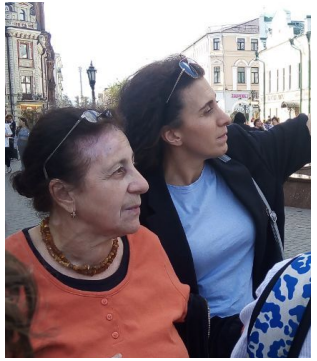
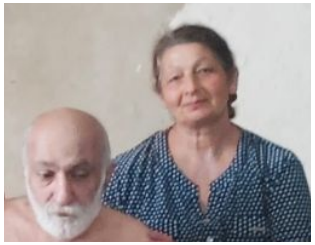





Beyond the scope of this talk: labile verbs of other origins

- There are also labile verbs of other origins both in Eastern and Western Aramaic.

Beyond the scope of this talk: labile verbs of other origins

- Besides the mentioned classes of labile verbs, there is the third class in Modern Western Aramaic.
- These labile verbs denote the situations from the causative pole of the scale and are actually causatively marked (they have forms in the causative stems).

Beyond the scope of this talk: labile verbs of other origins

MWA innovation

← Spontaneity scale →

No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	19	21	22	24	26	27	28	29	30	31
Verb pair	boil	freeze	dry	wake up	die/kill	go out/put out	sink	learn/teach	melt	stop	turn	dissolve	burn	be destroyed/ destroy	fill	finish	begin	roll	get lost/ lose	rise/raise	rock	change	gather	open	break	close	split
Cl. Syriac	C	L	C	A	S	C	C	C	C	L	C	C	C	A	L	C	L	A	C	A	C	A	A	A	A	A	A
CPA	-	-	C	E	S	C	C	C	C	L	A	C	C	E	A	C	L	-	C	C	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Ṭuroyo	C	C	C	L	S	C	A	C	C	C	E	C	C	C	A	C	L	A	A	C	A	A	S	A	A	A	A
Ch. Urmi	C	L	C	C	S	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	L	L	C	L	L	C	C	L	C	C	L	L	L	L
MWA	L	S	L	L	S	C	C	C	C	L	L	C	L	L	L	C	L	L	C	A	L	A	C	L	L	L	L

C — Causative, A — Anticausative, L — Labile, E — Equipollent, S — Suppletive

Beyond the scope of this talk: labile verbs of other origins

- I analyzed the Urmi (< NENA) verb lexicon of 1797 verbs. According to the dictionary, there are 159 P-labile verbs in Christian Urmi.
- In NENA, the large class of labile verbs is not homogeneous. It is impossible to derive morphological causatives from verbs of stems III and QI. → Originally intransitive verbs of stem III and QI have become labile.
- In Urmi, other types of lability (passive, reflexive, reciprocal, A-lability) also have become widespread.

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