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# Aspect as the Source of Diathesis in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic and Beyond with Remarks on Transitivity, Accusativity, Ergativity and Case

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## 0. Preamble<sup>i</sup>

Aramaic documents harken back to the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C.E. Most of them originate in Mesopotamia, Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean, but some stem in Anatolia, Georgia, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Chinese Turkestan and the area they delimit. The language, spoken and written continuously for three full millennia now, has been the official administrative tongue of Assyria, Babylon and Persia as well as the *lingua franca* of what is now known as the Near and Middle East. Around the beginnings of the Common Era, a dialectal distinction between Western and Eastern Aramaic appears which in fact had emerged much earlier (Greenfield 1968). Chapters, verses and expressions of the Hebrew Bible as well as major parts of the two Talmudim, the Zohar and many other essential Jewish texts are in different forms and stages of Aramaic. The classical written form of Middle Aramaic used by Christians is called Syriac.

The modern descendant of Aramaic is Neo-Aramaic, whose many dialects also divide into two major groups, Western (spoken in the Syrian villages of Ma'alula, Gub Abdin and Al-Suwayda) and Eastern, with its South-Eastern branch (Mandaic), spoken by an odd hundred people in Ahwaz, Iran. As for North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA), its dialects originate mainly in Kurdistan (currently shared between Turkey, Iraq and Iran), in Iranian Azerbaijan and in the former URSS where its speakers were called Aissor, *i.e.* Assyrians. Many of the 140-odd dialectal variants listed by the NENA Database Project at Cambridge display structural similarities, particularly regarding the reorganization of their verbal system, such that they might descend from a common dialectal ancestor (Fox 1994), probably Eastern Middle Aramaic. This hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that Western NA, spoken in Syria, does not partake of that reorganization and would thus continue Western Middle Aramaic. Indeed, it seems rather improbable that such profound similar innovations should emerge independently in each of those variants even if many of them experiment the linguistic pressure of one and the same language, Kurmanji Kurdish (henceforth KK), not exerted on Western NA. NENA is spoken by around half a million people: mostly Christians - Jacobite, Nestorian and Roman Catholic - most of whom call the language *Sureth* or variants thereof, and on the other hand some 20 thousand Jews, most of whom call it Aramaic save those of Northwestern Iraqi Kurdistan and adjacent Turkish territories who call it *li|a:na deni* 'our language' (Mutzafi 2002) or variants thereof. Among NENA speakers, most of the Jews have emigrated to Israel, where the layperson calls them 'Kurds', whereas many of the Christians, who call themselves 'Chaldeans' or 'Assyrians', have emigrated to the Americas, Australia and Europe, mostly Germany and France, where some 20 thousand of them reside in the Val d'Oise department.

A third, Central group of Neo-Aramaic, is spoken in Turkey, in the Tur Abdin or Turoyo area and in the village of Mlahso. As it shares with NENA some of the properties studied in this article, *Turoyo* will be treated here alongside with NENA.

As compared with earlier stages of Aramaic, North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) dialects display number of grammatical changes, which affect its structure so deeply as to make the language as different from its classical ancestor as the Romance languages are from Latin (although in the latter the main evolution concerns the noun and word order

whereas in NENA it concerns the verb and the structure of predication). Among those changes one may count, in the morphological and syntactic realms (1) the fact that NENA does not admit nominal sentences (*viz.* sentences whose predicate is a noun or a deictic), or, in other words, (2) that it has developed a conjugated copula, as well as a possessive verb, and (3) that the verbal system - except for the imperative and the infinitive - is founded upon two kinds of ancient participles<sup>ii</sup>, considered in classical Semitic grammar as active and passive respectively. Synchronically, in NENA, those participles function as such only when they bear the ancient definite article<sup>iii</sup>, which functions no more as such, whereas their non-definite form is the basis of the synchronic NENA verbal paradigms.

Indeed, NENA eliminated altogether the classical Semitic verbal conjugation - personal prefixes and suffixes for the imperfect and the perfect respectively - whose origins can be retrieved thanks to Akkadian, in which the permansive (stative) admits personal suffixes, confirming Jespersen (1924) according to whom the verb is a predicative *nexus* of a lexical root and a nominal or deictic element (cf. also Bopp 1816, Cohen 1984, Barner & Bale 2002, Parish & al. 2006).

Instead, NENA recreated a verbal system in which two sets of personal suffixes mark the only *actant*<sup>iv</sup> of the intransitive verb, as well as the agent, the patient (and a possible third *actant*) in transitive verbs. The suffixes of one of those sets are descended from autonomous personal deictics<sup>v</sup> in subject or predicate function (in Semitic, the very basis of syntax is the existence of noun-sentences, in which both subject and predicate are nouns and/or deictics, and if the sentence is at the unmarked tense both functions are equally (un)marked in terms of case). The suffixes of the other paradigm are descended from oblique personal morphemes appended to the preposition //-, which can be analyzed, synchronically, as being part of the suffix (but see n. 5 below) Both sets interchange functions depending on the stem to which they are appended, and it is this precise characteristic that allows speaking of split-ergativity in connexion with NENA, especially in its most conservative dialects: in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Jewish ones of Aradhin, Zakho and Amediyya (Mutzafi 2002) and that of Halabja (2002b), the Jewish one of Kerend, Iran, at the southernmost point of the NENA dialects area (Hopkins 1989, 2002) and the Christian one of Turoyo, Turkey, at the westernmost point of that area (Jastrow 1993, 1994, 2002a) as well as in the literary register of other dialects. In their oral register, however, Christian dialects tend to avoid indexation of the patient to the verbal basis in the perfect stem, save in the non-person (*cf.* also n. 5 below). The Christian dialect of Bospin, Turkey, allows indexation of the patient in the 1<sup>st</sup> person as well (Sinha 2000).

The challenge facing the general linguist who observes those data is manifold. How should we interpret this new system, which by now is pretty well described (*cf.* the references dedicated to different dialects of NENA), inasmuch as it is founded upon participial forms: is it a wholly nominal system, as Nöldeke had it? And if we conclude *contra* Nöldeke that synchronically it is a verbal system nonetheless, how are we to interpret the inversion of roles between both sets of suffixes: do they keep their meaning while only their respective functions change (Garbell 1965, Hetzron 1969, Polotsky 1961, 1986, Hopkins 1989, Goldenberg 1989, Pennachietti 1994 *inter alia*)? Or should we rather consider it a verbal system with split-ergativity (Heinrichs 2002, Hopkins 2002, Jastrow 2002, Waltisberg 2002, Khan 2007) of several kinds? If we opt for the latter, the

most important split would depend on aspect inasmuch as (in most dialects) the agent of transitive verbs as well as the unique *actant* of intransitives is in the unmarked case in the non-perfect conjugation (which obtains by the addition of personal suffixes to the so-called active participle) and in the oblique case in the perfect-conjugation (which obtains by the addition of personal suffixes appended to the preposition *l-* to the so-called passive participle<sup>vi</sup>). We could also ask to which extent and in which ways does this wholly novel system - be its interpretation what it may - differ from the classical Semitic system: does it completely depart from classical Semitic grammar (Friedrich *ap.* Polotsky 1979) or is it a re-arrangement of linguistic material in a typically Semitic fashion (Polotsky 1979, Poizat 2008)? Now as far as its emergence is concerned, is it necessary or sufficient to prove that in Aramaic it is a structural *calque* from Old Persian (conclusive evidence is to be found in Kutscher 1965, inspired in Benveniste 1952)<sup>vii</sup>? Or rather, even if it be so, had we not better sought for a real linguistic *explanation*, *viz.* a functional-communicative-cognitive coherent process which would explain the emergence of the equivalent system in Old Persian itself, or, for that matter, in other languages in which, typologically as well as diachronically, an agent at the oblique case is indexed on a verb in the passive voice and in the perfect aspect? In many of the considered dialects (Hoberman 1989, Khan 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2007, Heinrichs 2002 *inter alia*) ergativity is fragile and there is a drift from split-ergativity to accusativity: how should we explain it? Last but not least, how are we to explain that in NENA one and the same form (the so-called *passive participle*) appears to have both a *passive* and an *active* sense?

I shall henceforth try and give some answers to these questions in the light of the bulk of the work published within the last generation - notwithstanding older publications - in three fields directly connected to our topic: (1) NENA dialectology, which shows that the characteristic verbal system of NENA is well attested even in recently described dialects (with nevertheless significant differences and a gradual but steady change); (2) (split-)ergativity, whose scope has considerably enlarged since Dixon (1994), thanks especially to the fact that diachrony has been taken into account, and (3) functional-cognitive-typological linguistics - which demonstrates that synchronic structural data have more often than not functional-communicative motivations - and specifically LUIT (Kirtchuk 1993, 1994a, 1994, 2004b, 2005b, 2007a) which shows that grammar, nay language, originates in pragmatics and not the other way round.

First, the three main ergative splits will be succinctly described (other splits are suggested in Khan 2007), which will then be illustrated by examples from dialects well described in the literature as well as by elicited examples furnished by my informant. Then, a brief incursion into diachrony will be made, with some remarks on the possible functional-communicative-cognitive signification of NENA data.

I will now present the paradigms.

Verbal Stems (Urmia, Polotsky 1979)

Imv	<i>ptux</i>	Imperative
Sbjn	<i>patx-</i>	Subjunctive (+ <i>k-</i> / <i>ki-</i> present, <i>bit-</i> future, <i>qam-</i> past)
Pf	<i>ptix-</i> ( <i>ptix-a</i> )	Perfect Perfect participle, f. <i>ptixta</i> , pl. <i>ptixi</i> )
Inf	<i>ptax-a</i>	Infinitive (+ <i>bi-</i> : gérund)

## Verbal Personal Suffixes

**I** indicates **Ag** with *patx-* (subjunctive and derivatives) and **Pat** with *ptix-* (perfect)

### I

	SG		PL		
	m.	f.	m.	c.	f.
1	-in	-an		-ax	
2	-it	-at	-itun		-etun
nop.	-Ø	-a	-i		-e

**IIa** indicates **Pat** with *patx-* (and *ptux*), **Ag** with *ptix-*.

It can also indicate dative with *intransitive verbs*. With *transitive verbs* the dative use of the II suffixes is restrained to the syntagm *gift-receiver*.

### IIa

	SG		PL
	m.	f.	
1		-l-i	-l-an
2	-l-ux		-l-oxun
nop.	-l-i		-l-un

**IIb** indicates **Pat** in the nominal stems *ptaxa* and *ptixa*; when used as a gerund, their subject is expressed by a participle of *hvj* ‘be’ ou par *it*.

### IIb

	SG			PL
	m.	c.	f.	
1		-i		-an
2	-ux		-ax	-oxun
nop.	-u		-o	-e

### Illustration

nop. sg. f.	I II	patx-a[-Ø]	I II	ptix-[Ø]-l-a
		that she open		she has opened

nop. sg. f	I II	patx-a[-l-a]	I II	ptix-[a]-l-a
		that she open it		she has opened it

naŋq-in-l-a	I II	
		‘that I (I) kiss her (II)’

nŋiq-in-l-a	I II	
		‘she (II) kissed me (I)’ (‘kissed-I-to her’)



Pf *ptix-*, INTRANSITIVE

6. rxiT-l-ox                    ‘you (m.) have walked’ (≈ n]iq-l-ox – ‘you (m.) have kissed’)  
walk, Pf-l-2m.sg

Therefore in this construction, the suffixes of paradigm II or *l-* suffixes index the subject of the verb, which does not agree with the *ptix-* theme in number or gender, and which – if the verb is transitive – governs a patient. If the patient is definite, it is represented by the index of paradigm I included in the verbal complex. This construction may be considered as ergative or quasi-ergative, especially if we bear in mind that the ergative mark in languages traditionally considered as such is identical in synchrony and/or descended in diachrony from an oblique case mark (instrumental, ablative, &c.). To put it boldly, if we look at languages traditionally considered as (split-) ergative through a diachronic prism, we can hardly refrain from adding most dialects of NENA (at least at specific periods and registers) to their lot. If and only if we judge ergativity on the sole synchronic criterion (identical treatment of the **Pat** of a divalent verb and of the Unique actant of a monovalent verb), does Hoberman’s remark (1989: 97, n. 2) endorsed by Goldenberg (1991: 171) apply which denies NENA split-ergativity. Such a static conception of language seems inadequate.

In Christian dialects and many Jewish ones this scheme applies both to the transitive and to the intransitive verbs. The Jewish dialects of Iranian Kurdistan and some Jewish dialects of adjacent regions in Iraq (including Suleimaniyya and Halabja, Khan 2002a, 2002b) operate a split depending on *genus verbi*.

Many subtle TAM distinctions on which I shall not dwell obtain by prefixes to the *patx-* theme and by composed verbal structures with the auxiliary verb *hvj*. The copula – as well as the existence particle *it* – creates a number of conjugated predicative forms, *i.e.* verbs that indicate existence, inchoative existence (birth) and attributed existence (possession).

## 2. Split 2: Transitive vs. Intransitive verbs

Here an interesting difference exists in Iranian Kurdistan and adjacent regions between Jewish dialects on the one hand, Christian ones on the other (Hopkins 1989, 2002).

In most Christian dialects, verbs obey the inversion of roles of the suffixes belonging to paradigm I and to paradigm II respectively, whether they be transitive or intransitive. In other words, even intransitive verbs are conjugated, in the perfect aspect, with the subject indicated by a paradigm II suffix, *viz.* a personal oblique index appended to the preposition *l-* which represents the subject. Intransitive verbs thus align accusatively with the transitive ones, probably by analogy. The only difference is syntactic: transitives admit a patient, while intransitives do not.

In Jewish dialects, on the other hand, this is not the case: Even in the perfect, the subject of intransitive verbs is indicated by suffixes of Paradigm I or variants thereof, descended from autonomous personal deictics (in the subject-predicate ‘case’). In these dialects, the only difference between perfect and non-perfect in the intransitive verbs is the stem to which the Paradigm I suffixes are appended: *ptix-* for the perfect, *patx-* for the non-perfect<sup>x</sup>. In these dialects, the distinction between transitives and intransitives is both syntactic *and* morphological.

This morphological shibboleth, as Heinrichs (2002: 239, n. 9) rightly puts it, separates between on the one hand dialects in which there is no formal distinction in the

perfect between transitive and intransitive verbs as far as morphology is concerned, which are therefore known as *qimli* dialects (the unique *actant* of *qim-* ‘stand up’ is indexed in the perfect with the paradigm II suffixes, just like the agent of *nʃiq-* ‘kiss’ in the perfect), and on the other hand dialects in which transitive and intransitive verbs have a differential morphology, which are therefore known as *qimna* dialects (the unique *actant* of *qim-* ‘stand up’ is indexed in the perfect by a suffix from paradigm I, unlike *nʃiq-* ‘kiss’)<sup>xi</sup>.

	<u>Azerbaïjan</u>	<u>Kerend</u>
1	qim-l-i	qim-na
1f	qim-l-i	qim-a-n
2m	qim-l-ox	qim-et
2f	qim-l-ax	qim-a-t
nop.m	qim-l-e	qim-Ø
nop.f	qim-l-a	qim-a
1pl	qim-l-an	qim-ax
2pl	qim-l-(o)xun	qim-etu
nop.pl	qim-l-u(n)	qim-i

Illustration:

		Azerbaïjan	Kerend		
		INTR = TR (‘to expel = to go out’)	TR (‘to expel’)	≠	INTR (‘to go out’)
SG	1m	pliT-l-i	pliT-l-i		pliT-na
	1f	pliT-l-i	pliT-l-i		pliT-a-n(a)
	2m	pliT-l-ox	pliT-l-ox		pliT-et
	2f	pliT-l-ax	pliT-l-ax		pliT-a-t
	nop.m	pliT-l-e	pliT-l-e		pliT
	nop.f	pliT-l-a	pliT-l-a		pliT-a
PL	1	pliT-l-an	pliT-l-an		pliT-ax
	2	pliT-l-(o)xun	pliT-l-(a)xun		pliT-etun
	nop.	pliT-l-u	pliT-l-u		pliT-i

Thus,

Christian dialects: Pf rxiT-l-ox – ‘you (m.) have walked’ (*cf.* nʃiq-l-ox – ‘you (m.) have kissed’) Non-pf raxT-et – ‘may you (m.) walk’

Jewish dialects: Pf. rxiT-et – ‘you (m.) have walked’ (≠ nʃiq-l-ox – ‘you (m.) have kissed’) Non-Pf. raxT-et – ‘may you (m.) walk’

The Jewish dialects of Koy Sanjak (Mutzafi 2004) and Rustaqa (Khan 2002c) in Iraqi Kurdistan as well as, at the opposite end of the NENA territory, in the Turkish province of Siirt, the Christian dialect of Hertevin have both possibilities in the perfect,



perfect constructions as accusative as their non-perfect counterparts, tending to eliminate ergativity from the system. Another motivation may be the need to restore the patient into its rhematic (focal) role in the perfect too. Indeed, if it is expressed only by a verbal index, clitic and thematic (which is the case in the ergative construction), the patient loses its potential status of an informative novelty, *i.e.* its rhematic status (Kirtchuk 1993, 2004, 2005, 2007).

According to Khan (2002a, 2007), and this is confirmed empirically by my own elicited examples, the split-ergative system is unstable and tends to eliminate the *ptix*-past, the only past tense remaining being the one based on the subjunctive stem *patx*-with the appropriate TAM prefix. It is a tendency to reaccusativise the system by generalizing to all aspects, tenses and moods the constructions in which the agent is in the nominative and the patient in the oblique. In other words, the construction in *patx*- is eliminating the one in *ptix*-. This tendency is best represented in the dialect of Sena:ya (Iranian Kurdistan), in which ‘the preterite *psehle* ( $\approx$  *ptixli*, *PK*) neither takes final objects suffixes [...] nor does it inflect its stem to agree with a third-person object, let alone to indicate a first or second person Sena:ya is so far the only known NENA dialect in which the regular preterite is absolutely resistant to pronominal object marking. Consequently, the object preterite *tem-paseh-le* ( $\approx$  *qam-patix-li*) is essential to the functioning of the system’ (Heinrichs 2002:141). ‘This is due to (1) the greater simplicity of a system with a unique actantial pattern, *i.e.* without split, (2) the fact that in the non-person the construction based on the non-perfect, with indexation of both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> actants, is more explicit than the one based on the perfect, with implicit 2<sup>nd</sup> actant if it is an indefinite non-person.

### 5. Construction of the Agent with /l-/ and constituent order

These are important elements when we are about to classify certain verbal constructions in NENA as ergative. We have seen that the pronominal agent of a transitive verb, in the perfect aspect and in a culturally homogenous group of dialects, is indexed by an oblique personal suffix appended to the dative preposition /l-/, the result itself being appended to the perfecto-passive participle. However, in literary NENA the nominal agent also may be appended to the dative /l-/, *cf.* /l-ʔalaha hiw-a la-lew/: ‘[dat-God given,pcp-f dat-nop.sg.m >] God gave her to him’. When the patient is construed by /l-/ (accusative construction) it is post-verbal, whereas the nominal agent introduced by /l-/ is pre-verbal, so that there is no ambiguity whatsoever, *cf.* the NENA translation to Gn. 1,1: /bre ʃ it bri-leh ʔalaha l ʃ maja u l-ʔarʕa/, lit. ‘at the beginning, created God the Sky and the Earth’. Even assuming that the verb in the singular can refer to the element / ʃ maja/ ‘sky’, it is impossible to understand this sentence as ‘At the beginning, the Sky and the Earth created God’, on account of word order. Unmarked word order in NENA is SVO, with split-ergativity, whereas earlier stages of Aramaic, an accusative language, had the the VSO word order typical of Classical Semitic languages. This shift in word order corresponds perfectly to the typologically attested tendency according to which when a language changes its actantial patterns from accusative to (split-)ergative, word order changes accordingly<sup>xiv</sup>.

Present day NENA dialects do not construct the epexegetic agent with /l-/ if it is nominal. This reluctance may reflect the tendency to re-accusativization: even in the pf., the /l-/ construction is restrained to the pronominal agent.

## 6. Several constructions of the perfect participle

*ptixa*, Stative-(Perfective-)Passive TRANSITIVE (Poizat 2008)

20. gu do midbar xa binjan-le biny-a  
in dc desert a building-cop.m.sg buld, Pcp-nom.  
In this desert, there was one building [that was] built

21. [qil-li xa sako aval ki-xaz-in i-le lvi]-ta  
take,Pf-I-1sg. a coat,f but ki-see,Sbjn-Ag.1sg.m. cop-I-nop.sg.m wear,Pcp-f-nom.  
'I've taken a coat, but I see it's worn up'

*ptixa*, Stative(-Perfective-Passive) INTRANSITIVE (Polotsky 1979)

22. p[i-l-e cim-a 'He remained fasting'  
stay,Pf-I-nop.sg.m fast,Pcp-nom.

The following examples will show the supposed ambiguity of this participle:

23. qTila i-l-e min kalba 'He has been killed by the dog'  
kill, pcp cop-nop.sg.m from dog

The perfect participle can also describe the agent as having done the action. In these cases the participle is a resultative and stative perfect: ('I am in the state of having done').*cf.*

24. qTila i-l-e kalba 'He killed the dog'  
kill, pcp cop-nop.sg.m dog

This will be treated in the following section.

## 7. Diachronic remarks

In relatively recent publications (Jastrow 1988, Goldenberg 1993, &c.) the suffixal paradigm II is called 'possessive'. This comfortable and apparently innocuous term is problematic and rather than explaining diachrony, it seems to blur it altogether.

Indeed, the *//-* is the pan-semitic directive (allative) preposition which understandably enough assumes the function of the dative, thus confirming Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Langacker (1987), about grammatical relations being metaphors of spatial ones. Later, in certain languages, including among others Aramaic and Mishnaic Hebrew, it assumed, in certain conditions, the role of the accusative too. Now quite naturally, in the absence of a dative verb, the dative function (be its grammatical manifestation what it may: case ending, pre-, post-, or circumposition, &c.) indicates attributed existence, which can be semantically interpreted as possession, *cf.* Cl. Lat. *domus mihi est*, Fr. *la maison est à moi*.

As for the personal suffixes appended to this dative *//-*, they are nothing but the syntactically dependent, morphologically bound forms of the personal deictics, and as such they may be appended to any noun, noun-originated preposition or verb. Nothing in the *//-* suffixes of paradigm II in NENA allows to treat them as *possessive* – not the *//-*, not the personal suffix and not the sum of both. Kutscher (1964), inspired in Benveniste

(1952), considers this construction as a calque from the Old Persian construction *mana: kartam*, but then *mana:* is as much the dative of OP *adam* ‘I’ as its genitive. It is more appropriate to claim that the OP construction *mana: kartam* and its Aramaic counterpart imply a dative/agentive (i.e. a spatial/grammatical) attribution, cf. Fr. *tué à l’ennemi*, that can be interpreted as possession, cf. Fr. *la fontaine au roi*, rather than possession as such (i.e. a purely semantic interpretation of a grammatical relation).

In the verbal realm, a similar kind of attribution by the dative is current with verbs of perception, feeling, reflexion and the like - for *rʔy* ‘see’ and *h]b* ‘consider’ cf. in Bibl. Hebrew Lev. 14, 35 and Gn. 31, 15 respectively, cf. also Goldenberg 1991: 175 *in fine* - as it is outside of Semitic too, cf. *mihi placet, gefällt mir, il me semble, it seems to me, methinks*. In all of those cases the construction is pragmatically motivated, i.e. the human referent of the oblique personal deictic is given by the context and as such it is dispensable with. In Aramaic itself the first instances of the *mana: kartam* construction occur with the verbs of perception *ʃm* ‘hear’ and *xzy* ‘see’. It would be instructive albeit beyond the scope of this article to check whether in OP that construction really began with a verb as prototypically transitive as *kar* or with verbs of perception, stative verbs and the like.

In the light of this, Kutscher’s formula (1964: 125) ‘*mana:* is genitive/dative of *adam* ‘I’ and equals the Aramaic *li:*, *kartam* is a passive participle’ which is the *communis opinio* to our day as far as the diachronic origin of the perfect construction in Aramaic is concerned seems inaccurate in two crucial points: firstly, Aramaic *li:* is not the exact equivalent of OP *mana:* since the former is only dative and not genitive<sup>xv</sup> to begin with, whereas in OP it is both, moreover one does not see why in OP itself the genitive function should prevail over the dative either diachronically or synchronically; secondly, *kar-ta(m)* – as all IE participles in *-ta/*, cf. Macdonell ([1916] 1981) - is as much a *perfect* as it is a *passive*. Here again, one does not see why the latter should prevail over the former either diachronically or synchronically. In both cases, it is the opposite that seems to be the case<sup>xvi</sup>. Cardona (1970) seems to be inaccurate, then, when stating that ‘the Old Persian data require that *mana krtam* be classed as a passive construction’. He is right, however, when he adds ‘the construction Iran. *mana krtam*, Ind. *mama krtam* arose through contact between nominal and verbal syntactic patterns as a variant of an older Indo-Iranian construction in which agent was denoted by an instrumental nominal form’. While unaware of it, Cardona could be pointing at the source of ergativity as such. Bynon (2005) claims, *contra* Cardona, that in Indo-Iranian the instrumental replaced a genitive and that the ergative construction was originally anticausative and evidential. In fact, this is close to the passive interpretation inasmuch as both passivization and evidentiality allow for a diminution of the information known and/or disclosed<sup>xvii</sup> and of the speaker’s personal responsibility respectively. Besides, *passive*, *evidential* and *possessive* may participate in one and the same construction. Which means that her interpretation is self-consistent, not that it is necessarily correct. Indeed, the opposition *Ich habe den Krug zerbrochen / Mir ist der Krug zerbrochen* that she cites (*ibid.*) in order to show the difference between intentional and unintentional action is also an excellent illustration of the *dative*, not *genitive* character of the construction... (see below). Yet as soon as we grasp that (1) the genitive function is a specialization (or, rather, a stabilization) of the dative one, which in turn is nothing but an application of the directive-spatial relation, and that (2) possession is nothing but attributed existence, it becomes clear that Bynon’s

interpretation does not contradict Cardona's but completes it. The prototypical ergative construction would be: *patient-oriented, patient-topicalized, non-animated syntactic subject, non-finite and non-dynamic verb, oblique agent*. The emergence of ergativity in many languages seems to comfort this view (e.g. amerind Katukina, Queixalós pers. comm.). Aramaic, at any rate, followed such a path inasmuch as it displays contact between nominal and verbal patterns, and, in the perfect, an agent being denoted by an oblique personal form.

It will be noted that while compatibilizing and corroborating Cardona's and Bynon's explanations, I do not adhere to their implied contention according to which ergativity (1) is diachronically posterior to accusativity; (2) results from the deverbalisation of verbal structures; (3) results from the passivization of active structures. Such an interpretation would imply that *verb* is prior to *noun* and that *active* is prior to *passive*, in other words that *transitivity* and *voice* are central categories which have been there from the very start. This is clearly not the case.

Indeed, the implication of the aforementioned considerations is that what is currently called *passive participle* in Aramaic is perfect rather than passive<sup>xviii</sup>; that it only assumed the passive value secondarily, in order to permit the omission of the agent and let another *actant* play the subject role instead. This implies in turn that diachronically, transitivity itself is a later development. When verbs were only intransitive, syntactically speaking – in other words when verbs still were nothing but lexemes with agglutinated person indices whose sum constituted a predicative nexus (*cf.* the Akkadian permansive; *cf.* also D. Cohen 1975, 1984), there was no diathesis opposition but an aspect opposition only. It is with the emergence of transitivity as a grammatical category that the perfect participle assumed also, in certain circumstances, the role of passive while the non-perfect one assumed that of active. It is this state of affairs that NENA seems to reflect. This is the true explanation for the paradoxical statement according to which in Aramaic the so-called 'passive' participle may have 'an active meaning', a rather incoherent formulation found in many an author who dwells on the subject, *cf.* Kutscher (1964: 135) 'the passive participle used with an active meaning'; Gutman (2008) does not really innovate since he is as attached as his predecessors to an either-or solution which presupposes voice as a given category. Mistakenly, as it were. Li (2008) seems to be troubled by this state of affairs, as it is apparent from his rather awkward wording when suggesting that 'Aramaic appears to have two forms to express the passive of the active participle. That is, not only do the active stems possess both an active and a passive participle, but the t-stems, which can express the passive voice, also possess a participle...'. Yet he begins to have an insight as he suggests that 'at the diachronic stage of the language attested in the Aramaic of Daniel, the so-called passive participle is primarily a verbal adjective that is developing into a resultative participle, whereas t-stem participles are the true passive (and reflexive) counterparts to the active participle.'

Let us have it properly formulated: there is indeed a link between aspect and voice, but aspect comes first. If the so-called 'active participle' needs the t-stem to form its passive / reflexive counterpart, then this so-called 'active participle' is by no means active, in other words it has nothing to do with diathesis. It is simply a non-perfect, while the so-called 'passive participle' is the perfect ('resultative') one. If we assume that the participle in question is not passive to begin with but perfective and as such it can serve as an *active* (of intransitive verbs but also of transitive verbs when it is the state of the

agent as having accomplished the action that is described, and not the state of the patient as having been its object) and/or as a *passive* (of transitive verbs, when it is the state of the patient that is described), the paradox is resolved. If instances such as (Western Aramaic) *ʃmiʕa ʔan* mean either ‘I have heard’ or ‘I am heard’ according to the context and without contradiction, it is because the participle *ʃmiʕa* is, in itself, neuter as far as diathesis is concerned. The same holds for the equivalent ergative forms in NENA. Note that Eng. *finished, done* and the like behave in an analogous way, and for the very same reason: *I am done / finished [with this paper]* describes the state of the agent, not of the patient, under the condition that there be detransitivisation of the verb (indeed the patient is non-obligatory and not even implied; if present, it is demoted and construed as an oblique complement); if the verb is used as transitive, then the auxiliary must be *have* and not *be*: *I have done / finished this paper*. If on the other hand the participle describes the patient, the latter must be the participle’s subject: *this paper is done / finished*. Instead of pretending that in the first of the three instances *done* and *finished* are ‘passives used actively’ (?) we should understand that those participles are nothing but perfects whose application differs according to the different constructions. This is not limited to English or to specific verbs, cf. in Spanish *haber* ≠ *ser/estar* + *leído, entendido, bebido, &c.* Only thus do we avoid contradiction and obtain a *perfectly* articulated system. The different uses produce no ambiguity whatsoever, since linguistic as well as extralinguistic context allow to give the identical forms the relevant interpretation. Ambiguity rests more often than not within the peculiar way in which both linguists and otherwise outstandingly competent specialists influenced by linguistic methods analyze language, as if it were independent of both co-text and context (in the field of NENA, cf. respectively Hopkins 2002: 286 ‘Since the preterite and the perfect are based upon old passive participles, [they] are diathetically ambiguous...’ and Poizat 2008: 105). The fact that speakers-hearers use those forms without impediment for fluent communication, moreover that speakers-hearers favoured the emergence of those clearly distinct uses of identical forms, show that there is no ambiguity whatsoever (except if it is voluntary, e.g. for a ludicrous purpose). If the forms are identical - but not the constructions in which they appear, nor the uses they serve; if in other words morphology is identical, but syntax and pragmatics are not, it is because essentially those forms share one and the same function whose application varies. The element to which this essentially identical form and function applies in each case is determined by construction and use, namely by syntax and by pragmatics.

Besides, if the paradigm II suffixes are termed ‘possessive’, then what we are dealing with synchronically are nouns and not verbs. That was Nöldeke’s opinion alright, but it is undefendable on syntactic grounds. What we have here synchronically are predicative conjugated forms, in other words *verbs*, whose subject is in the dative, and not noun phrases of the type *possessum-possessor*. In this respect NENA agrees with the classical Semitic (and general, cf. Kirtchuk 2007b) procedure of creating verbs as a morphological category, which is the addition of personal elements to lexical elements, with phonological cliticization and often morphological truncation of the personal element, cf. Akk. *sarra+['ana]ku* ‘king + I = ‘I rule’ , Ar. *katab + [ʔan]ta* = wrote + thou = thou wrote’ Gk *μαχο-μαι* ‘might + I = ‘I mighty > I fight’, Guaraní *xe-henda* ‘I + look = I look’...). It differs from the classical Semitic procedure inasmuch as a preposition separates both kinds of elements. This is all the more clear when one recalls that one of

the characteristics of NENA is the elimination of noun phrases as such: for a nominal to be predicative, it requires the presence of a copula.

The fact that in NENA a possessive construction developed which includes the existential particle *ʔit* plus *ll-* plus personal endings is not sufficient to consider the sum of *l-* + *personal ending* as being possessive in itself: it is the whole complex e.g. *ʔitli* ‘there is + to + me’ = ‘I have’ that expresses possession. Moreover the verbal construction developed way before the possessive verb did: the first instances of *ʃmiʕli*, *xzili* are from the fifth century B.C.E., a period in which possession in these languages is still expressed as attributed existence (cf., *inter alia*, Jøüon 1923). It would be anachronistic, then, to suppose that the verbal construction with *ll-* is of possessive origin.

Finally, typology supports the dative rather than possessive interpretation of the paradigm II suffixes inasmuch as in many languages with ergative or split-ergative constructions, the ergative morpheme harkens back diachronically or is identical synchronically with the dative, instrumental, ablative &c. - not with an originally genitive morpheme as such.

As it is often the case with dynamic and functional explanations, they shed new light on synchronic data which may otherwise seem contradictory, ambiguous and obscure.

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<sup>ii</sup> This is not a typological rarity - cf. the Slavic preterit, stemming from an old participle + a subject index.

<sup>iii</sup> The definite and indefinite forms of the ancient participle are traditionally called 'emphatic' and 'absolute' respectively. Those terms are inadequate both from the Semitic and from the general linguistics viewpoints. In Semitic phonology 'emphatic' applies to the post-glottalized or pharyngalized phonemes and in general syntax it often refers to focalized (and sometimes to topicalized...) elements (Kirtchuk 2005b). As for 'absolut(iv)e', in Semitic morphology it refers to the noun at the autonomous (non-construct, non-clitic) state and in general morphology it names the non-ergative case whereby the patient is most commonly marked. The burden cast upon the terms 'emphatic' and 'absolut(iv)e' is therefore both too heavy and too vague to bear. Goldenberg ([1991] 1997: 580) suggests to call both forms of the noun 'full' and 'short' respectively, undoubtedly better terms than the traditional ones. 'Definite' and 'indefinite', are both simple and adequate. Terms are not 'just' words; they are of the utmost importance since they explicitly convey theoretical positions which both writer and reader may be unaware of while implicitly adhering to them. Therefore I will deliberately use a terminology that I deem both adequate and consistent with LUIT (Kirtchuk 2007).

<sup>iv</sup> I use this term, coined by Tesnière (1959), since it is a better representation of linguistic reality than 'argument'. The former is dedicated to linguistic facts, whilst the latter is borrowed from the realm of logic. Now language and logic are not isomorphic and it is inappropriate to imply such a fallacious isomorphism. As for the term 'participants', used by Hopkins (2002), though undoubtedly better than 'argument', it blurs the difference between grammatical and semantic-referential entities (Hagège 1982). Besides, it is Tesnière's *Éléments* that laid the quantitative and qualitative bases, to a large extent adequate and useful to our day, for debates on voice, actancy, valency and the like.

<sup>v</sup> Kirtchuk (1994a, 1994b, 2004b, 2007) shows the inadequacy of the terms 'personal / demonstrative pronouns'. Here they will be called '[personal / demonstrative] deictics', which is what they really are.

<sup>vi</sup> One could argue that, as the personal indices appended to *l-* are integrated to the verbal complex along with that preposition, the verbal suffix in synchrony is a single unit constituted of both elements. Such an

analysis, structural *avant la lettre*, would display two pitfalls from the functional-cognitive-typological viewpoint: firstly, it would obliterate the diachronic process whereby the new verbal system of NENA emerged; secondly, it would blur the synchronic functional identity of the *l-* preposition in that paradigm as the mark of the oblique agent and as the of mark dative/accusative. NENA speakers probably feel that synchronic link, but even if not all of them do, the linguist's job includes shedding light on relations in language of which the naïve native speaker is not necessarily aware. The fact that *l-* as dative/accusative morpheme may have also, outside of the verbal complex, a morpho-phonemically larger variant *'ell-* does not refute my analysis, quite the opposite: the short form *l-* is the unmarked one; in certain pragmatic, semantic and grammatical contexts it may display a longer, non-clitic version. Suffice it to think of the complementary distribution of clitic and non-clitic or predicative and non-predicative allomorphs of one and the same morpheme or lexeme cross-linguistically. The fact that many NENA dialects append the index of the non-person *actant* to the non-clitic variant, thus isolating it from the verbal complex, also confirms my analysis, inasmuch as the non-person, being totally distinct from the true linguistic and grammatical, i.e. the dialogic (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>) persons (Kirtchuk 2007), is distinct in this connexion too. In other words, the fact that in the verbal complex, in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> persons the preposition *l-* appears at its unmarked allomorph whereas at the non-person it displays the marked one shows both forms to be distributionally conditioned variants of one and the same morpheme. Accordingly, *l-* can be analyzed as a unit of its own even in the framework of the suffixes appended to the verbal stem.

<sup>vii</sup> Many Indo-Iranian languages including Kurmanji Kurdish, in which most of the NENA speakers are fluent too, display the same construction. Among the speakers of NENA, those who are bilinguals in KK preserve split-ergativity more than those who are not.

<sup>viii</sup> In the literature abbreviations differ, creating some confusion; e.g., in Hetzron (1969) O represents the imperative (= order); in Hoberman (1989), Fox (1997) and Mutzafi (2004), among others, J represents the subjunctive (= jussive), and other capital letters represent both functions and morphemes (A = Agent; L = /l-/ preposition, by which the paradigm II suffixes begin). The abbreviations I use are meant only to (hopefully) facilitate understanding, and they are the following: Ag (agent), Dc (deictic), Imv (imperative), Inf (infinitive), Int (interrogative), Pat (patient), Pcp (participle), Pf (perfect, represented also by *ptix-*), Sbjn (subjunctive, represented also by *patx-*), U (unique *actant* of an intransitive verb). As for what is traditionally termed 3<sup>rd</sup> person, I hold it a non-person (Kirtchuk 2007, § 3, see n. 6 above) and so it will be abbreviated by *nop*. In the data, slight (especially phonetic) differences due to dialectal variation may persist, although here too I preferred simplicity and thus uniformity – to some extent artificial – for comprehension's sake. For typographic reasons, Semitic pharyngalized ('emphatics') are transcribed by capitals, 'ayin by /'/, aleph/hamza (glottal stop) by /?/ and the pharyngeal unvoiced constrictive by H.

<sup>ix</sup> Bohas (2000) and, independently, Kirtchuk (2004a) show the Semitic root to be biphonemic and not triphonemic to begin with. Here, the triphonemic view is maintained nonetheless, for simplicity's sake. Semitic linguistics traditionally uses a steady three-phoneme root to illustrate morphological templates. This root varies from one Semitic language to the other, although two of them are used for the Semitic family as such: *qTl* 'kill' and *f'l* 'make'. The latter provides the names of the different verbal schemata commonly known by the Hebrew term *binyanim*. The widespread usage of the former in Semitic linguistics – whence it spread to general linguistics – is due not to its being more than other roots, as it is often suggested, but to its resemblance to Greek κτείνω 'id.' (an etymological link at a Nostratic or Eurasian level is hard to prove: *qTl* is but one expansion of Semitic *qT* 'cut' while κτείνω is an expansion of κτείνω 'id.' by *\*ad* and metathesis, cf. Dunkel 2007; in my mind, both *qT* and *\*ken-* are originally onomatopoeic, cf. Kirtchuk *i.p.*). Indeed *qTl* has been in use to illustrate morphological schemata, to which transitivity is, by and large, irrelevant, long before this very notion was elaborated as such. Save occasionally I shan't use this root for the following reasons: (a) its patient being animated by definition, hence semantically salient, it is by no means prototypical; moreover in many languages animacy of the patient entails morpho-syntactic consequences (cf. *Lingua* n° 118, 2008, entirely devoted to this topic): 'build', 'eat', 'drink' &c., more frequent and representative of real language, are quite as transitive without having such a salient patient; (b) the binary semantic transformation of the patient that this verb conveys – *animate* becomes *inanimate* – far from enhancing the verb's prototypicality, only makes it even more marked than its patient; (c) this verb is incompatible with quite a few TAM, voice and person categories and combinations thereof; (d) if transitivity equals efficiency, TbH 'slaughter' would be even more transitive and thus more appropriate to illustrate grammatical templates; (e) besides providing linguists with genuine satisfaction, language also conveys meaning: I won't have linguistic killing proliferate especially when dealing with

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speakers, languages and regions that get more than their share of extra-linguistic killing as it is. Particular Semitic languages use additional roots to illustrate grammar: in Akkadian linguistics it is *pr̄s* ‘cut > decide’ and in Ethiopian linguistics *ngr* ‘speak’. The roots most commonly used in NENA are *ptx* ‘open’ and *nʃq* ‘kiss’ and so shall they be used here.

<sup>x</sup> No author gives a possible reason for the fact that the Jewish dialects are clearly more conservative. It could be due to the continuous presence in the everyday life of Jewish NENA speakers – as in that of any observant Jew – of Babylonian Aramaic as a language of study and prayer alongside Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew. Jewish speakers of NENA are therefore aware of the grammar of this earlier stage of Eastern Aramaic, whereas the contact of Christian speakers’ with classical Syriac texts and their grammar is more tenuous. Thus, their dialects are more subject to drift due to both external and internal factors such as foreign influence and analogy respectively. Yet the fact that the speakers of Turoyo, who are Christian, also preserve split-ergativity pleads for a determinant KK influence on all of those conservative dialects.

<sup>xi</sup> Note that in Biblical Hebrew (as well as in Arabic) too, the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs has a morphological expression (Kirtchuk 1989): in stem I, the perfect of the former is *paʿal-* (*Ar. faʿala*), impf. *yipʿol* (*yafʿul<sup>u/a/ʃ</sup>*), ‘active’ participle. *poʿel* (*fa: ʿil<sup>u/a/i(n)</sup>*), ‘passive’ participle *paʿu:l* (*mafʿu:l<sup>u/a/i(n)</sup>*), while those of the latter are *paʿel/paʿol* (*faʿala/faʿula*), impf. *yipʿal* (*yafʿal<sup>u/a/ʃ</sup>*), participle *paʿel/paʿol*. The identity of the perfect and the participle in the intransitives suggests that the aspect category precedes the diathesis one, since in the intransitives, though diathetic distinction is inexistent, an aspectual one does exist nonetheless.

<sup>xii</sup> In this respect, NENA is not radically different from Amharic. Modern Semitic languages may share common features that distinguish them from their classical ancestors. In addition, under the influence of the particular ad-, super- or substrate, many of them have developed specific features, *cf.* in Amharic, under Cushitic influence, the constituent order determiner-determined (M. Cohen 1970), at the opposite of classical Semitic syntax. All this does not affect the belonging of both NENA and Amharic to the Semitic branch of Afro-Asiatic, for linguistic kinship depends on genealogical not typological grounds (*cf.* Greenberg 1949: 79-83). To quote D. Cohen (1983) in his response to Ullendorff’s question ‘What is a Semitic Language?’ (1958), ‘Une langue sémitique est une langue sémitique’ (see also, in the same spirit, Goldenberg 1996, Kapeliuk 1996). *Mutatis mutandis*, this also applies to Contemporary Hebrew (CH), a Semitic language despite nonsense preferred here and there according to which it would be of Yiddish and/or Slavic, hence IE, descent. This contention rests on the inclusion of nonlinguistic evidence in establishing linguistic kinship, violating the second principle of linguistic genetic classification (Greenberg 1950: 57-58). One must carefully neglect studying as many tongues as possible, both living and ancient, both Semitic and otherwise, in order to indulge in such fantasies. Hebrew has been reactivated, after two millennia of lethargy, by people who had a thorough knowledge of its older stages as well as a good acquaintance with other Semitic languages, be their own mother-tongues what they might have been. They applied – albeit in order to construct, not to analyze or classify – Greenberg’s third and final principle of genetic classification, that of multilateral comparison (1954: 406-408). Thus, present-day Hebrew remains more akin to its older layers and related languages than it would have, had it evolved normally. For the sake of comparison: Hindi, German, English, Swedish and Albanian are all Indo-European despite the first’s split-ergativity, the second’s different position of the verb depending on the status of the clause, the third’s quasi-isolating morphology, the fourth’s tonal system and the fifth’s massive borrowings from Turkish, and notwithstanding the many cultural, religious and other differences that separate their speakers.

<sup>xiii</sup> Surprising as it may seem, copulae may be not only formally ergative but syntactically transitive, *cf.* *ka:na wa-ʔaxawa:tu:ha* (‘[the verb] *be* and its sisters (= parasyonyms)’ in Arabic, whose predicative complement is in the accusative (or rather ad-verbal, *cf.* Kirtchuk 1993) case.

<sup>xiv</sup> I thank Denis Creissels for having called my attention upon this change as well as upon the importance of the construction of the nominal agents with /l-/ (which in NENA is rare).

<sup>xv</sup> In Semitic, the genuinely genitive function is expressed by morphosyntactic and phonological means, in the construction known as *ʔiḏa:fa* (*xaqiqiyya*) or *satus constructus*, a noun phrase in which a nominal term qualifies another nominal term immediately preceding it, which in certain circumstances is truncated. The construction bears only one phonological stress; if definite, only the second term bears the definiteness morpheme, while congruence with elements external to the noun-phrase is only with the first term. Thus, Bibl. Heb. often refers to king David as ‘ben yiʿay’, pl. *bʿney yiʿay* ‘son[s]-of Yiʿay’, while /ben lʿ-yiʿay/,

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litt. ‘son dat.-Y.’ means ‘a son to Y.’, i.e. - in the absence of a dative verb or a coming-to-being verb - ‘one of Y.’s sons’, and - in the presence of such - ‘a son to Y. [was given, born, &c.]’.

<sup>xvi</sup> Indeed the Saussurean binary distinction between diachrony and synchrony is no longer appropriate or sufficient as such. Both axes can be separated only on methodological grounds. Linguistic reality itself is not just synchronic or diachronic, it is dynamic. Other and as legitimate aspects of the dynamics of language are ontogeny, phylogeny, diatlottics, neology, creolization and grammaticalization.

<sup>xvii</sup> Which is why the Arab grammarians call the passif /maghu:l/, i.e. ‘[agent] ignored’.

<sup>xviii</sup> Goldenberg (1989) is a profound study of the affinity between *perfect* and *passive*. It is therefore all the more surprising that GG should consider the paradigm II suffixes as ‘possessive’ (Goldenberg 2002). This is probably due to the fact that his analysis remains structural and synchronic (functional-cognitive and diachronic-dynamic factors are not really taken into account). Accordingly, he rejects the ergative interpretation of the construction with paradigm II suffixes in the perfect aspect (personal correspondence). Hopkins (2002), who accepts this interpretation, terms the perfect participle not *passive* but *past/passive*, which is, undoubtedly, a step in the right direction. Yet it fails to account for the so-called ‘active’ uses of this participle, which are neither passive nor limited to the past. Again, the term *perfect* and the process it implies (aspect > diathesis) seems the most adequate.