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'Amīra’s Grammatica Syriaca: Genesis, Structure and Perspectives

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1. George Amira, the Maronite College and the Typographia Medicea

A concise biographical notice on George ’Amīra can be read, in Syriac, on the frontispiece of his Grammatica Syriaca printed in Rome in 1596: Gewārgīs bareh d-mīkāʾl men bēt ’amīrāʾ edēnāyā marīnāyā men ṭārā d-lebnān, that is «George son of Michael from the ’Amīra family of Eden, Maronite from Mount Lebanon». The Latin version adds some further information on ’Amīra’s status and education, qualifying him as philosophus and theologus and as a pupil of the Maronite College.

’Eden (Arabic Ehden), from where the bēt (house, family) ’Amīra came, is a village on Mount Lebanon, near Qannūbīn. Several pupils of the Maronite College came from the same village,1 or from its vicinity, from 1583 throughout the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.2

We don’t know much about ’Amīra’s childhood and early education, except that his uncle Yaʾqūb al-Duwāyḥī had initiated him into the Syriac language before his arrival in Rome in 1583.3 Then, he was one of the first pupils of the Maronite College, founded by Gregory XIII in 1584.

By the time of the publication of his Grammatica Syriaca, ’Amīra had been appointed bishop of ’Eden and had gone back to Lebanon, where he later became Patriarch of the Maronite Church (1635-1644).4

As a part of his apprenticeship at the Maronite College, ’Amīra copied a number of Syriac and Arabic manuscripts, among which were also various texts of the Syriac grammatical and lexicographical tradition. In the colophon of BML Or. 441,5 containing the Syriac lexicon by Eudochos (v. infra), copied ten years before the publication of the Grammatica Syriaca, Amira

1 Among which Sarkīs al-Rīzī, active in the copy of Syriac and Arabic grammatical manuscripts, who later participated in the printing of Tommaso Obicino’s Thesaurus Arabico-Syro-Latinus, printed in Rome in 1636.
3 This anecdote is cited in the Annales (year 1644) by the Maronite Patriarch Stephanos al-Duwāyḥī, quoted in Ibid., I, 343.
4 For further biographical information see Ibid., I, 343-348.
5 All of the BML manuscripts quoted in this paper can be viewed online on the website of the library: http://teca.bmlonline.it/TecaRicerca/index.jsp
describes himself as «a student in need of teaching, while I was writing (this manuscript)».

The Maronite College entertained frequent relations with the Typographia Medicea and its director, as is apparent from the numerous manuscripts copied by the pupils and acquired by Raimondi, today preserved mostly in the BML. As we will see, this was the case also for George 'Amīra, who copied various grammatical texts for Raimondi’s use. Moreover, he had translated five prayers from Latin into Syriac for the Missale Chaldaicum iuxta ritum Ecclesiae Nationis Maronitarum, printed by the Typographia in 1594.

In the preface to the reader, 'Amīra puts the composition and publication of his grammar under the auspices of Giovanni Battista Raimondi, who exhorted him to undertake such an enterprise. Indeed, as will be shown in §2, Raimondi was responsible for the whole printing process of the Grammatica Syriaca, which was published entirely at his own expense and with his own typeset, In Typographia Linguarum Externarum. Apud Jacobum Lunam.

1.1 Dedicatory and cultural context

In the dedicatory to Cardinal Caetani (1550-1599), 'Amīra describes the circumstances that led him to compose his Syriac grammar. First of all, he declares that he devoted several years to the study of the lingua Chaldaica sive Syriaca. In fact, as he explains a few lines further, he collected several notes on this subject and friends and scholars, eager to learn this language, urged him to write down in good order the institutiones of Syriac. Reference is also made to Pope Clemens V and to the Council of Vienne (1311-1312), whose decrees pushed 'Amīra to compose his grammar. The reference to Clemens V, the founder of the Studio di Perugia, is certainly meant to flatter Enrico Caetani, who studied jurisprudence in that university between 1569 and 1573. At the same time, 'Amīra was able to move from Clemens V to Clemens VIII, who was the Pope at the time of the publication of the Grammatica Syriaca. If Clemens V, at the Council of Vienne had ordered that teachings of the Chaldean language should be established all over Europe, Clemens VIII, faithful to the memory of his predecessor, showed a particular zeal in accomplishing the decree. Finally, the

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6 F. 135r ll. 12-13. A reference to 'Amīra’s apprenticeship is also found in the Grammatica Syriaca, in the preface to the reader, where he recalls the hardship of learning, due to the lack of an author that explained grammar with order and clarity.


8 Cf. the ownership statement in BML Or. 419, discussed infra in § 4.3.

9 Gemayel, Les échanges (as in n. 2), vol. 1, 459. Some manuscripts related to the preparation of the Missale are preserved in BNCF (Cl. III 74, 75, 78, 79), 'Amīra’s hand could possibly be recognized in some leaflets (III-XII) in Cl. III 78, and in Cl. III 79 ff. a-b, but all of these documents need more careful examination.

choice of Enrico Caetani as a protector is related to the memory of his old friend, the Cardinal Carafa (d. 1591). Antonio Carafa had been a patron of the Maronites and had been the praefectus of the Congregatio Interpretum Concilii Tridentini, a congregation that was responsible for the execution of the decrees of the Council of Trent.

The reference to the Council of Vienne, which is repeated also in the preface to the reader, established also a clear connection with Raimondi’s agenda, setting the Grammatica Syriaca within his broader printing project.

In general terms, the publication of grammars was an essential element in the project of the Polyglot Bible, that was sketched under the pontificate of Gregory XIII and pursued under his successors Sixtus V and Clemens VIII. A special Congregazione of prelates and scholars was created, of which Raimondi was a member and under the auspices of which he set the editorial activity of his Oriental Press, especially after he bought it in 1595. Didactic linguistic tools had to be provided for the reader, as it was the case, for example, in the Antwerp Polyglot printed by Plantin (1572). Within this plan, ‘Amīra’s Syriac grammar may have been intended to serve as a companion intended as a companion to the usage of religious and liturgical books (such as the above-mentioned Missale).

However, Raimondi’s linguistic program was even broader and it aimed at promoting the study of the Oriental languages in the West. In a number of documents preserved today in Florence and Rome, most which have been published and studied by Mario Casari, Raimondi illustrates parts of such a program, by enumerating the reasons for which Oriental languages should be taught in Rome, as well as by analyzing and praising the virtues of the Arabic languages.

Besides arguments in support of the Christian faith, as well as of humanistic interest in scientific texts, Raimondi introduces a very important point, which was admirably summarized by


12 Mario Casari has been the first to draw attention on such documents, by publishing and commenting upon such documents. Here follows a tentative list: Florence: BNCF Magl. III 81 fols. 5r-6v, 17r-18v; Magl. III 95 fols. 7r-8r, 9r-11r (Mario Casari: Eleven Good Reasons for Learning Arabic in Late-Renaissance Italy: A Memorandum by Giovan Battista Raimondi, in Renaissance Studies in Honor of Joseph Connors, ed. by Israëls and Waldman, Firenze 2012, pp. 545-557; ASFi Misc. Med. 719, all. 21; Misc. Med. 721 fols. 327r-328r, 331r-332r (Margherita Farina: Uno scambio epistolare fra Mario Schepani e Giovanni Battista Raimondi. Lo studio della lingua araba nel tardo rinascimento, interesse scientifico e curiosità, in EVO, 36, 2013, pp. 63-72). Another analogous document that has been attributed to Raimondi is found in Rome, Biblioteca Vallicelliana, N. 36, fols. 121r-124v (Mario Casari: «This language is more universal than any other». Values of Arabic in early modern Italy, in City, Court, Academy. Language Choice in Early Modern Italy, ed. by Del Soldato and Rizzi, Oxford, New York 2017, pp. 173-198, see infra fn. 16).

13 These are the main arguments of the documents published in Casari, Eleven Good Reasons (as in n. 12): the diffusion of the knowledge of the Oriental languages – Raimondi claims – would contribute to the spreading of Catholicism among the Eastern Christians, it would represent a powerful instrument in the confutation of heresies or of Islam. The
The importance of each language was also connected to its excellence in a specific domain or feature, which reflected man’s capital gift of speech (see Casari in this volume). Thus, in a lengthy celebration of Arabic, Raimondi describes it as «more universal than any other», because it spread greatly beyond its original geographic borders, has been used for writing about every science, and, by virtue of its diffusion, its vocabulary has been enriched by the contribution of eminent people of different languages and cultures.

The same point of view on languages can be found also throughout the prefatory chapters of the Grammatica Syriaca. Here the primacy of Syriac is based on its identification with Chaldaic, as the pre-Bedic first language of humankind, which is supported by a powerful corpus of citation from biblical texts, as well as from classical authors. However, a certain subordinate status of Syriac is hinted at, in veiled terms, when it comes to universality. In the Praeludia to the grammar, 'Amīra explains that Syriac suffered a dispersion (rather than a diffusion), that gave rise to dialectal differentiations (according to a Bedic model) and the interruption of mutual understanding.

knowledge of Arabic would provide access to important scientific texts, such as the ones of Avicenna, Razi, Al-Farabi etc. Mention is also made of the necessity of complying with the requirements of the Council of Vienne.

14 Ibid., p. 551, Raimondi’s Italian text reads «È necessaria perché essendo Roma quasi un piccolo mondo dove concorrono huomini da tutte le provincie, et di diversi linguaggi, et da dove deveno pigliare regula et norma tutti, che si leghino et vi siano anco huomini et dottrina di detta lingua.» (BNCF Magl. III 81, f. 18v).

15 Le vie delle lettere. La Tipografia Medicea tra Roma e l’Oriente, ed. by Sara Fani/Margherita Farina, Florence 2012.

16 On the identification of the languages that constituted the humanistic cursus studiorum in the second half of the 16th cent. see Angelo Michele Piemontese: G.B. Vecchietti e la letteratura giudeo-persiana, in Materia Giudaica, 15-16, 2010-2011, pp. 483-500.

17 Casari, «This language is more universal than any other». Values of Arabic in early modern Italy (as in n. 12), esp. pp. 187-191. Although the attribution of the text to Raimondi is uncertain and questionable, according to Casari, the arguments it presents are clearly issued from Raimondi’s entourage: “although we cannot ascertain its authorship, we may suggest that this document is tied to Raimondi’s scholarship” Casari, ibid, p. 187.

18 In a letter to the Neapolitan physician Mario Schepani of 1611, Raimondi briefly compares Arabic to Hebrew, observing that the first one has a richer nominal morphology (more genders, more patterns for plural formation). Moreover, praising the variety and richness of Arabic vocabulary, he observes that «il leone ha nella lingua araba seicento et trenta nomi» («the lion has in Arabic six-hundred and thirty names»). In the same letter Raimondi encourages Schepani to learn Arabic because, through this language, he will also gain access to Persian and Turkish, by virtue of the great number of Arabic loanwords that they have received (cf. Farina, Uno scambio epistolare (as in n. 12), pp. 69-70).

19 Cf. the chapter De linguæ Chaldaicæ sive Syriacæ antiquitate. On the identification of Syriac as the first language, or the language of Eden, see Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet: La langue du Paradis, la langue comme patrie, in Les auteurs syriaques et leur langue, ed. by Farina, Paris 2018, pp. 9-25.

19 Cf. the chapter De linguæ Chaldaicæ, seu Syriacæ nominibus ac discrimine, discussed infra § 4.1.
From this point of view, we can consider 'Amīra’s Grammatica Syriaca also as a brick in Raimondi’s conception of a global (and hierarchical) representation of languages.

2. The printing process of the Grammatica Syriaca

2.1 Preparation of the book

In ASFi, several documents in the collection Miscellanea Medicea provide information on the various phases of the realization of 'Amīra’s grammar. The printing process took about three years, from October 1593, when the first leaf was printed, until 1596 year of the publication of the book.

Misc. Med. 718, *all*. 20, fol. 1v (see Appendix 1, below) gives detailed information on the timeline, materials and procedure for the printing of the grammar. The text begins:

La Grammatica Chaldaica ovvero siriaca tradotta et composta da Giorgio Amira Chaldeo Marronita fu incominciata à stampare cioè il suo primo foglio alli 29 d’Ottobre 1593 et fu finita di stampare l’anno 1596. Fu stampata a spese di me Giovanni Battista Raimondo et ne furono stampate n° 1250 mille et ducento cinquanta [copie].

From this note we understand that 'Amīra’s Grammatica was ready to be printed in 1593 (which, according to Raimondi’s methodology does not necessarily imply that the text was absolutely finished, but only that it was complete enough to begin printing parts of it). We also understand that the expense for the printing was undertaken entirely by Raimondi.

While we can set ‘Amīra’s grammatical studies in the late eighties of the 16th cent. and the process of preparation and print of his Grammatica Syriaca between 1593 and 1596, there is evidence suggesting that the project of a Syriac grammar had circulated in Raimondi’s entourage already around 1589. Misc. Med. 717, fol. 84r carries the following title «Spese fatte per la stampatura della Grammatica Chaldaica del padre fra Thomaso». This note refers to the Dominican friar Tommaso da Terracina, an orientalist who mastered Arabic, Persian and Syriac and who collaborated in many of Raimondi’s editorial projects. He was a member of the congregation for the censorship of Raimondi’s editions, among which 'Amīra’s grammar. His name often features in the list of borrowers of Raimondi’s books (Misc. Med. 718, *all*. 20) and the latter describes him as a fellow and a friend in the race for collecting oriental manuscripts in Rome (see doc.XXX). Fra’ Tommaso also features on the pay-role of Ferdinando I in 1589, with 7 scudi per month for the Arabic printing (Giovanni Valentino M. Fabroni: *Dei provvedimenti annonari*, edizione II, Firenze 1817, p. 113, fn. 1).
28 Gennaro 1589 à Clemente [Stangaporta] per 2000 spatii di più sorte per aggiustare la Latina Gregoriana con la Chaldea à 2 corpi, scudi 20». Other expenses follow, suggesting that in 1589 a text on Syriac grammar was ready to be printed. At present, no record of a Syriac grammar composed by Tommaso da Terracina has been found. However, the miscellany BML Or. 459 fols. 80r-94v contain the Latin translation of a portion of a Syriac grammatical text that seem to be Barhebraeus’ *Metrical Grammar.* These folios follow a Persian quire that Piemontese, in his catalogue, ascribes to Terracina’s hand. BML Or. 298, a copy of this grammar that Raimondi got from Ni’matullah, contains on fol. 7r a gloss that seems to be by Terracina’s hand. The only didactic text in Syriac that Raimondi printed before 1596 is the so-called *Alphabetum Chaldaicum* of 1592, which can hardly be described as a grammar, as it only contains the West-Syriac alphabet and a chrestomathy.

The last part of Or. 458 contains a hand-written draft of the *Grammatica Syriaca,* supposedly by ’Amīra’s hand, with censorship notes (scattered throughout the draft) and *imprimatur* by three Dominicans involved in the activities of the Typographia Medicea: Bartolomeo de’ Miranda (*Magister Sacri Palatii*, v. § 3 *infra*), Giovanni Battista Leopardus (also known as Hesronita, or al-Ḥaṣrūnī?) and Tommaso da Terracina.

The draft, whose current binding has misplaced some leaves, seems to be copied by a Western hand or, at any rate, a hand that was trained in the West in writing Latin and seems to be different from Raimondi’s hand, as attested by dozens of documents in BML, BNCF and ASFi (e.g. in the shape of the letters *f* and *l*). The Syriac portions of the draft, intertwined with the Latin text, can be ascribed to ’Amīra with certainty, hence it is safe to conclude that the latter was the copyist of this draft. It is also interesting to notice the clumsy and uncertain writing of the few Hebrew words on fols. 609r-v.

The draft is incomplete and contains portions of the introductory chapters (dedicatory, preface to the reader, on the usefulness of the Chaldaic language), of the third book on the verb, and of the fourth, fifth and seventh book. Some chapters feature twice, as fols. 572r-541r contain duplicates.

This draft clearly indicates that ’Amīra had an active role in the composition and redaction of the *Grammatica Syriaca.* The presence in the grammar of several quotations from Syriac authors

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22 «On the 28 of January 1589 to Clemente [Stangaporta] for 2000 spaces of various sorts, in order to match the Latin Gregorian with the Chaldea in two sizes».
whose works ‘Amīra had copied (see infra § 4) confirms his crucial contribution to the shaping of the text. A couple of annotations in Misc. Med. may contain some clue to the actual role that he played in the realization of Raimondi’s (and Terracina’s) editorial project. In 718, all. 20, fol. 1v quoted above, we read that the grammar was «tradotta e composta» (translated and composed) by ‘Amīra. Further on, in fol. 2r ‘Amīra is designated as «autore o vero traduttore» (author, that is to say translator). This evidence suggests, in my opinion, that ‘Amīra was employed by Raimondi to copy and to translate ancient Syriac (and Arabic, as we will see) grammatical texts, to be combined into a Latin grammar of Syriac.

2.2 The punches

Misc. Med. 718, all. 20, fol. 1v lists the costs for the paper, the composition, the print, the ink etc. ‘Amīra was paid 100 scudi «in contanti» (in ready money), but he also received 35 copies of the grammar (fol. 2r). The overall cost of the publication was 524 scudi.

FOL. 1v mentions also «la spesa fatta nella gittatura del Carattere Chaldeo, del Carattere Latino, et del stagno comperato per detti Caratteri», hence referring to the production of the tin types.\(^{26}\)

The Grammatica Syriaca was printed with the Syriac type-set created in 1590 by Jean Cavillon for the Typographia Medicea,\(^{27}\) and used in 1592 for the Alphabetum Chaldaicum\(^{28}\) and in 1594 for the Missale Chaldaicum iuxta ritum ecclesiae nationis Maronitarum\(^{29}\). This type-set is identified as W7 in Coakley’s inventory of Syriac fonts (although there dated to 1592, on the basis of the first printed text in which it features).\(^{30}\)

3. The sales, distribution and readership

\(^{26}\) «Expenses for the gittatura of the Chaldean character, of the Latin character and of the tin bought for the above-mentioned characters.»


\(^{28}\) http://id.sbn.it/bid/BVEE074822 (viewed 19/05/2018).

\(^{29}\) http://id.sbn.it/bid/BVEE017650 (viewed 19/05/2018). The same font also features in the new edition of the Missale, of 1596.

\(^{30}\) J.F. Coakley: The Typography of Syriac: a Historical Catalogue of Printing Type, 1537-1958, London 2006, pp. 43-45. This type is also discussed in Borbone, Ancora sul «negotio chaldeo» (as in n. 27), esp. p. 230. At the pp. 2-3, ‘Amīra’s grammar contains an alphabetic chart in different Syriac scripts, where P.G. Borbone has recognized the first East-Syriac font of which we have notice, produced in 1587 for the Typographia Medicea, in the context of the so-called «Chaldean Business» Pier Giorgio Borbone: The Chaldean Business. The Beginnings of East Syriac Typography and the Profession of Faith of Patriarch Elias (Vat. Ar. 83, ff. 117-126), in Miscellanea Bibliothecae Apostolicæ Vaticanae, 20, 2014, pp. 211-258; Borbone, Ancora sul «negotio chaldeo» (as in n. 27).
Misc. Med. 718, *all.* 20. fols. 2r-v (see Appendix 1 below) gives us a list of people who received or bought ‘Amīrā’s grammar right after it was printed, between 1596 and 1598, and later in 1603. There are 35 copies. This list allows us to sketch a network of the people who were interested in such a work.

- 2 copies to the *Magister Sacri Palatii* 27 April 1596. This office belonged to a member of the Dominican order (Order of the Preachers), who lived in the papal residence. In 1596 this charge belonged to Bartolomeo de’ Miranda, who, together with Tommaso da Terracina and Giovanni Battista Leopardus, was also involved in the censorship process of revision of some of Raimondi’s editions, such as Avicenna’s *Canon* (1593) and Amira’s Syriac grammar (as we saw above, his signature features in the draft in BML Or. 458, e.g. fol. 541v).

- 1 copy to Monsignor Serafino. This person, which I have not yet identified, features also in the list of books lent by Raimondi, he borrowed a manuscript Latin version of Ptolemy’s *Perspettiva* on the 17th October 1598 (Misc. Med. 718, *all.* 24, fol. 3v).

- 2 copies to Monsignor Dossato(?) 29 January 1596, one for himself and one for monsignor di Perone

- 1 copy to Fra Tommaso, that is Tommaso da Terracina.

- 1 copy to Giovanni Battista Leopardus.

- 1 copy to Cardinal San Giorgio, that is Cinzio Aldobrandini (1551-1610).

- 1 copy to the abbot of Guastalla.

- 1 copy to Giacomo Luna (he also sold 3 more). The Lebanese Luna (Ya’qūb al-Hilālī) was the owner of the printing press that printed several of Raimondi’s oriental editions, after that he had to buy the *Typographia Medicea* from Ferdinando de’ Medici (1595).

- 1 copy to the fraiar Angelo d’Augubio agostiniano.


32 Elena Fasano Guarini: Aldobrandini, Cinzio, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. II, ed. by 1960, pp. 102-104. Pier Giorgio Borbone has informed me that this copy is today kept in the Bibliotheca Catheriniana in Pisa. Cardinal San Giorgio was involved in Raimondi’s activities, especially after the latter had bought the Typographia Medicea. In ASFi 721, all. 56, doc. 2, fol. 8v Raimondi recounts that Aldobrandini, on the occasion of an embassy to the Persian King that he had supervised, had requested and obtained several precious manuscripts, that were now in his possession, and that he planned to print. On the embassy see the article by Sara Fani in vol. I XXXX, and also Angelo Michele Piemontese: *Persica Vaticana. Roma e Persia tra codici e testi*, Città del Vaticano 2017, p. 381.

33 See Gemayel, *Les échanges* (as in n. 2), vol. 1 p. 74-77; Alberto Tinto: *La Tipografia Medicea Orientale*, Lucca 1987, pp. 82-84 and *passim.*
• 1 copy to the friar Gregorio Nonio agostiniano.
• 12 copies to Giovanni Paolo libraro a Pasquino per venderle in consegna. 2 copies to Giovanni Paolo Terrarossa\(^{34}\) May 1596, and 10 to be sold through the librarian Belardino.
• 1 copy sold to a priest of the Chiesa nuova.
• 1 copy sold to the friar Mario dall’Aquila.
• 1 copy gifted to Gerolamo Vecchietti 1598.
• 1 copy gifted to a Spanish carmelitian father in the house of the very illustrious Cardinal Dezza.
• 1 copy given for the Vatican Library November 1598, to the custode Marino. It could be Marino Ranaldi, one of the custodes of the Libreria Vaticana under the direction of Baronio.\(^{35}\)
• 1 copy sold to the treasurer of the Kingdom of Granada, for the bishop of Granada. In Raimondi’s days this was Pedro Vaca de Castro y Quiñones (1534-1623)\(^{36}\)
• 3 copies sold in Paris by a French librarian in 1603.
• 1 copy gifted to Fra Giovanni Bentivenga da Rimini cappuccino. This person borrows Raimondi’s copy of the Chaldean Grammar by Münster\(^{37}\) around 1599 (Misc. Med. 718, \textit{all.} 24, fol. 4v).
• 1 copy sold the 24 January 1598 to a German from Mainz, who later came back also to buy a Pontificale.

A copy of the grammar today preserved in the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence belonged to Jacopo Gaddi (FF.V.13204).

In April 1681 Jean François de la Croix translated into French the preface and the first two books of the \textit{Grammatica Syriaca}, which are today preserved in the manuscript BnF Syr. 264.

4. The content of the grammar

The \textit{Grammatica Syriaca} does not have a table of contents. Therefore, in order to make the text

\(^{34}\) Terrarossa will buy, in 1603, the privileges for printing the \textit{Canto Fermo} from Leonardo Parasole (see Tinto, \textit{La Tipografia} (as in n. 33), p. 65).


\(^{36}\) For his relation with Raimondi, see BNCF II.V.157, fols. 23r-34v presented by Sara Fani in vol. I \textit{XXXX}

\(^{37}\) «La Grammatica Caldea di Mostero stampata con cartoni et pelle lionata». 
more accessible, I have arranged a list of all the books, chapters and paragraphs in Appendix 2 of this paper.

4.1 The nature and identification of the Syriac language

In a recent publication, Robert Wilkinson has shown how the identification by Western scholars of Syriac as a specific dialect within the Aramaic linguistic group was a lengthy process, that occupied European intellectuals all through the Renaissance and the Early Modern period.38

In the prefatory sections of the Grammatica Syriaca, 'Amīra discusses at length the problem of the identification of Syriac as a language, and of its relation to other Aramaic denominations, such as Chaldaic.

In the dedicatory to Cardinal Caietani, Syriac is identified with Chaldaic and 'Amīra states that the latter was the language spoken by Jesus and by the Apostles: «quae Christo Domino, et Apostolis (...) vernacula fuerit, ac maternal» (on the second page of the dedicatory, unnumbered).

At the beginning of the preface to the reader, Syriac and Chaldaic are opposed to Hebrew, in a criticism to some contemporary grammars that, claiming to describe Chaldaic, in fact extend to it features and categories of the Hebrew language.39

The first paragraph of the Praecludia is specifically devoted to the Syriac-Chaldaic denomination and identification: De linguae Chaldaicae, se Syriacae nominibus, ac discrimine. Here 'Amīra evokes some Syriac grammarians («quidam ex Syris Grammaticis»), who have related that, due to its great geographic dispersion and to progressive isolation, a confusion has arisen among the speakers of the Syriac-Chaldaic language, up to the point that people from different regions no longer understand each other. The source of this argument can be recognized as the Metrical Grammar by Barhebraeus (d. 1286), one of the most important Syriac grammars, that was available in Rome in various copies in 'Amīra’s time, certainly in the manuscript BML Or. 298 (v. supra §2.1). In a commentary to its very first section, Barhebraeus observes:

It should be known that, being dispersed and diffused in remote regions, the Syriac language has suffered great confusion, more than any other language, and has undergone all sorts of transformations. So that those conversing in the same language do not understand each other, but an interpreter is needed, as for those conversing in foreign languages.40

Geographic dispersion is also the cause of the variety of names given to the Chaldaic

39 'Amīra has been indeed credited by modern scholars as the first scholar in Europe to have delivered Syriac grammar from the Hebrew model (Riccardo Contini: I primordi della linguistica semitica comparata nell’Europa rinascimentale: le Institutiones di Angelo Canini (1554), in Annali di Ca’ Foscari, 33, 1994, pp. 39-56, esp. p. 24).
language. The oldest one is, according to 'Amîra, «Chaldaic» (Chaldaica), from the Chaldean region where the first confusion of languages occurred. This is also why the same language is also called «Babylonian» (Babyloniaca). Other denomination of the same language are Aramaic (Aramaica), Syriac (Syriaca) and Assyrian (Assyriaca). Moreover, as the Jews have used this language as their vernacular, this language has also been called Hebrew (Hebraica). In analogous manner, it can be called Christian (Christiana), because it was the language of Jesus.

The identity of Syriac, Babylonian and Chaldaic is supported by means of biblical quotations, among which is the famous passage of 2 Kings 18:26 where the superintendent of the king of Jerusalem recommends the envoy of the Assyrian king to speak in Aramaic, rather than in Hebrew, so that the people on the walls do not understand him: «Please speak to your servants in the Aramaic language, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall.»41 According to 'Amîra, the Assyrian messenger is asked to speak «non Iudaice audiente populo, sed Syriace». However, neither the Hebrew original text, nor the Syriac Peshitta translation display here any reference to Syriac. On the contrary, both versions say «in Aramaic» (Heb. 'arâmît, Syr. 'ărâmāʻît). The terms «syriace» and «iudaice» feature instead in the Vulgate, which appears to be 'Amîra’s reference.42

In spite of his claim on the unity of the Chaldaic-Syriac language, 'Amîra then distinguishes Syriac from other Aramaic dialects that are designated as «Chaldaic». This term, he explains at the second page of the Praeludia, is also used to designate the language of the Paraphrasis, that is the Targum.43 But in fact, targumic Aramaic is different from Syriac, and is described as a corrupted form of the language that underwent influence from Hebrew. In 'Amîra’s view, such an influence was the result of the habit of the Aramaic-speaking Jews of writing Aramaic with the Hebrew alphabet and punctuation system,44 that would have led people to read Aramaic as if it were Hebrew. However, 'Amîra adds, if one transcribes the consonants of the text of the Paraphrasis into the «Chaldaic» writing, removes the Hebrew vowels and substitutes the «Chaldaic» vowel signs, one easily realizes that it is indeed «Chaldaic», that is Syriac.45

41 New Revised Standard Version.
42 «Recamur ut loquaris nobis servis tuis syriace: siquidem intelligimus hanc linguam: et non loquaris nobis judaice, audiente populo qui est super murum.» The Latin text follows here the Greek Septuagint: Λάλησον δὴ πρὸς τοὺς πατὶνδας σου Συριστὶ, ὅτι ἀκοούων ἡμεῖς, καὶ οὐ λαλήσεις μεθ᾽ ἡμῶν Ιουδαίοτε, καὶ ἴνα τι λαλήσῃ ἐν τοῖς οὐσίν τοῦ λαοῦ τοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ σέχους.
43 That is Aramaic translations/paraphrases of the Hebrew Old Testament.
44 Like many Semitic writing systems, the Syriac and Hebrew alphabets only record consonants, whereas the notation of vowels is made by means of diacritical marks added above and below the letters. Between Hebrew and Aramaic, however, things went the other way around: the Jews borrowed the squared Aramaic letter shapes during the Babylonian exile (6th cent. B.C.), so what 'Amîra (and current modern denomination) considers as the Hebrew alphabet should actually be regarded as an original Aramaic one.
45 «si legatur cum punctis, ac vocalibus more Chaldaeorum; vel propriis Chaldaicis elementis conscribatur, rejectis omnino punctis, et vocalibus Hebraicis additisque Chaldaicis, facile quilibet linguae Chaldaicae, sive Syriacae peritus intelliget, ac declarabit.» (third page of the Praeludia).
As odd as it may seem, the exercise proposed by 'Amīra had illustrious predecessors among contemporary scholars.

In 1568, Immanuel Tremellius, an Italian scholar of Jewish origins, published a *Grammatica Chaldea et Syra*, in which he used the square Hebrew types and attempted at reconstructing a historical development within Aramaic, distinguishing a Targumic and a Syriac stage. His aim was to restore an «original» vocalization, to be used to recover a more genuine Aramaic reading of the Scriptures. Hence, after that, Tremellius published an edition of the Syriac New Testament, in which he used a vocalization corresponding to the «historical» Aramaic vowels that he had reconstructed in his grammar, as opposed to the one documented in the Syriac manuscripts. It is clear that here Tremellius is an underlying target of 'Amīra’s argument. Hence, he invites his reader to perform the opposite operation, taking Syriac as a starting point and restoring all extant Aramaic documents to their supposedly original Syriac form.

Finally, fourteen pages of the Praeludia of the *Grammatica Syriaca* are devoted to demonstrating that Syriac was the first language of humankind, before the confusion of Babel. With this chapter, 'Amīra and his patron Raimondi set the *Grammatica Syriaca* at the core of the debate on the first language of humankind (or of Adam), that engaged European scholars between the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 17th cent. 'Amīra’s argumentation is long and articulated. On this occasion, I will only summarize its main points.

First of all, 'Amīra only admits Chaldaic and Hebrew as potential candidates for the status of first language: all other languages must be ruled out. Moreover, he argues for the necessity of postulating only one language, common to all humankind, before the Tower of Babel. He thus refutes the theory of Philastrius bishop of Brescia (4th cent.), who maintained that, even before Babel, men spoke in a variety of languages, but God granted them a superior knowledge and mutual understanding.

Then, 'Amīra moves on to demonstrate that the first language spoken in Chaldea was Chaldaic and not Hebrew, or, rather, that before Babel Hebrew and Chaldaic were one and the same language. After enumerating a number of arguments in support of the antiquity of Hebrew, 'Amīra concludes that Chaldaic was the language that humanity spoke in its homeland of Chaldea, and that Hebrew represents a somewhat corrupted form of it, after the Tower of Babel. He is thus able to

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sketch a sort of line of descent of languages: Chaldaei, Hebraei, Aegypti, Phoenices, Graeci
novissimi, Romani. Finally, 'Amīra rehearses the arguments that he had adduced to maintain the
antiquity of Hebrew, and demonstrates how they all could be better applied to Chaldaic, that is
Syriac.

4.2 The Grammatica Syriaca and the Latin and Syriac linguistic tradition

The Grammatica Syriaca, the first complete grammar of Syriac written in Latin and published in
the West, reveals both in its structure and contents an interesting interweaving of Syriac and Latin
elements. This combination of models is programmatic and explicitly recalled in the preface to the
reader, where 'Amīra explains that, because the students of the Maronite College, to whom his
grammar is mainly directed, study Latin at the same time as Syriac and other languages, he has
deemed it useful to provide them with a Syriac grammar in Latin. Here the main interest of Latin
seems to be related to terminology, as 'Amīra proposes a grammar «in qua Syriacae Gramamticae
ternini una cum terminis Latinae coniungerentur, et illius regulae, huius vocibus explicarentur».

As was mentioned above in §1, 'Amīra got acquainted with both Syriac and Latin linguistics
in his youth, thanks first to the teachings of his uncle and then during his education at the Maronite
College in Rome.

The Syriac and the Latin grammatical traditions were both modelled upon the Greek one,
that they received and progressively adapted throughout the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.
Therefore, the two have a certain degree of compatibility that allowed 'Amīra to match, at least in
part, the expectations of a Western public, without diverting from his own linguistic tradition.

Moreover, from the 10th century, the Syriac grammars had begun to integrate several
elements from Arabic linguistics that in the course of time reshaped parts of the Syriac linguistic
theories, especially in the domain of syntax.

The interaction of these three models in 'Amīra’s text can be observed, for example, in the
discussion on the parts of speech, at the beginning of the Second Book (ch. 1, p. 56):

De partium orationis numero, quoniam inter Syros Grammaticos non levis est disceptatio: ideo antequam de
nomine agere incipiamus, earum numerum statuere debemus. Itaque quidam ex illis revocant omnes orations
partes ad tres śmā nomen, melē verbum et esārā coniunctionem; ita videtur sentire auctor Grammaticae
Arabico sermone explicatae. (p. 56)

48 «In which the terms of Syriac grammar were joined with the terms of the Latin one, and the rules of the first one were
explained with the words of the latter».
49 Introducing the parts of speech by discussing the diverging theories of various authors was also a topos in Latin
grammatical tradition. We find such a discussion in Quintilianus’ Institutio oratoria (1 4 18-20), in Priscianus’
Institutiones (see infra), as well as in Renaissance authors like Nebrija (Virginia Bonmati Sanchez: Les grammairiens
anciens et modernes dans les «Introductiones latinae» d’Antonio de Nebrija, in L’héritage des grammairiens latins de
As the passage observes, there is disagreement among the Syriac grammarians on the number of the parts of speech. Some of them claim that there are three: noun, verb and conjunction. This theory, originated in the Greek logic theory of language, that passed into Syriac from the 6th cent. through the translations of Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias* and the commentaries to this work. At the same time, the tripartite analysis of the language is the basis of Arabic linguistic theory, that was assimilated by certain Syriac authors, such as Barhebraeus (13th cent.) and Išoyahb Bar Malkon (12th-13th cent.) but was stigmatized by other grammarians like Bar Šakko (13th cent.).

A similar process took place in the Latin adaptations of the Greek grammatical theories, as Latin does not have a definite article either. However, Latin grammarians added the interjection to their list, reaching the number of eight parts of speech, as indicated also by Ḍamīra.

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50 For an overview of the debate on the parts of speech in the Greek and Syriac grammatical and logic tradition see Henri Hugonnard-Roche: La tradition du *Peri Hermeneias* d’Aristote en syriaque, entre logique et grammaire, in *Les auteurs syriques et leur langue*, ed. by Margherita Farina, Paris 2018, pp. 55-93.


52 Merx, *Historia* (as in n. 51), p. *50. Eight parts of speech (although not the same as those enumerated in the *Tēchne*, are also listed by Aristotle in *Poetics*).

53 My translation, on the basis of BL Add. 25876.
The 4th cent. Latin grammarian Aelius Donatus, in his *Ars grammatica* (*Ars maior*) devotes a chapter to each of the following eight parts of speech: *de nomine, de pronomine, de verbo, de aduerbio, de participio, de coniunctione, de praepositione, de interiectione*.

In the chapter *De oratione* of Priscianus’ *Institutiones Grammaticae* (6th cent.), one of the main references for Renaissance grammarians,54 we find a discussion of the parts of speech, presenting different theories of Greek origin, that have subsequently increased their number, from two even up to eleven. Priscianus accepts the addition of interjection, whereas he explains that the definite article is missing in Latin. He then lists and presents the seven parts that he recognizes, besides interjection. They are the same parts that we found in the *Tēchne Grammatikē*, in the same order. Each part of speech is dealt with in a specific section of the book, as can be seen in the table below.

On the Syriac side, a preliminary discussion of the different reckonings of the number of the parts of speech is found also in the Syriac *Metrical Grammar* by Barhebraeus (d. 1286), one of the most important Syriac authors. We already saw in §4.1 how the *Grammatica Syriaca* has drawn from this text in the prefaces. About the parts of speech, Barhebraeus says that:

Language ... is divided in three (parts): the noun, the conjunction and the verb. And the four other parts that the ancients have established in the books are (in fact) nouns and conjunctions, according to the real investigation. Therefore, we divide the exposition into four chapter, rather than in seven: noun, verb, conjunction and composition, that is the speech.55

A gloss on the margin, also by Barhebraeus, explains: «And you have to know that the ancients divided the discourse into seven parts: noun, verb, conjunction, pronoun, participle, adverb, preposition. And the main parts are the first three, and besides them there is no other part.»56

This text shows that the individuation of the parts of speech is crucial also for the structuring of the grammatical treatise. In the *Metrical Grammar*, Barhebraeus wanted to combine the traditional Syriac seven-parts model with the Arabic three-parts theory. Hence, he has subdivided his text into four sections: on the noun, verb and conjunctions, plus a section on syntax. However, the chapter on the noun includes a number of sub-sections devoted to the remaining parts of speech, namely pronoun, adverb, participle, a number of prepositions, so that the seven-parts Syriac tradition is not really rejected, but rather incorporated into the Arabic model.57

Let us now compare this structure with the table of contents of 'Amīra’s grammar. Besides

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55 Martin, *Œuvres grammaticales*, vol. 2, pp. 4-5.
the prefatory material, the text has seven books, but four of them are devoted to phonetics and orthography, metrics, punctuation and syntax. On the one hand, the parts of speech are all dealt with inside the first three books, and are all grouped around the categories of noun, verb and «other», in a structure that is much closer to the model of Barhebraeus than to that of Priscianus. On the other hand, the structure of the Grammatica differs both from the Latin and from the Syriac model in the distribution of the other parts of speech within this scheme: only pronouns are subsumed under the noun, whereas participle is treated together with the verb and adverb, preposition, interjection and conjunction are all considered as «other» and grouped in Book four.

The Grammatica Syriaca is structured as follows (see Appendix 2 for the detailed table of contents):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Amīra’s Grammatica Syriaca</th>
<th>Priscianus’ Institutiones</th>
<th>Barhebraeus’ Metrical Grammar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedicatory to Cardinal Enrico Caetani</td>
<td>Praefatio (et epilogus)</td>
<td>Proem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface to the reader</td>
<td>Generalia et uria</td>
<td>Definition and subdivision of the language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errata</td>
<td>De litteris</td>
<td>On the variation of the vowels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praeludia on the Chaldaic and Syriac language</td>
<td>De syllabis (etiam metrica ratione)</td>
<td>Chapter 1 – On noun (includes also paragraphs on pronoun, on adverb, on participle, on prepositions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epigram by Petrus Ureta</td>
<td>Generalia et uria</td>
<td>Chapter 2 – On verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book one – on the alphabet and on orthographic and phonetic matters</td>
<td>De oratone eiusque partibus</td>
<td>Chapter 3 – On conjunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book two – On noun (includes pronoun)</td>
<td>De nomine</td>
<td>Chapter 4 – On syntax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book three – On verb (includes participle)</td>
<td>De uerbo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book four – On the other parts of the discourse (adverb, preposition, interjection, conjunction)</td>
<td>De participio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book five – On syntax</td>
<td>De pronomine</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Book six – On metrics and poetry</td>
<td>De praepositione</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Book seven – On punctuation</td>
<td>De aduerbio</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>De interiectione</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>De coiunctione</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>De constructione uel syntaxi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The structure of the works by 'Amīra, Priscianus and Barhebraeus.

This rather detailed discussion on the parts of speech is intended to show how 'Amīra is deeply involved in issues that are crucial for the Syriac grammatical tradition, and how complex and well informed his presentation of the problematic to the Latin public is.

Donatus’ Ars grammatica is certainly a plausible source for 'Amīra’s interest in interjections, as well as for his conception of the parts of speech. Although we do not have any specific information on the Latin grammatical model followed by 'Amīra, among the books that were available in the library of the Maronite College, we find the following grammars.58

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58 Gemayel, Les échanges (as in n. 2), vol. 1, p. 176. Gemayel provides the list of the books available in the library of the Maronite College in 1584, on the basis of Vat. Lat. 5528, fols. 35r-47v.
- Donatus (12 exemplars);
- Grammatica Sidicini (1 exemplar) [that is the Latin grammar by Luigi Antonio Zompa (d. 1557), nicknamed «il Sidicino»);
- Grammatica Emanuilis in 4° (6 exemplars) [De institutione grammatica libri tres, an extremely popular Latin grammar by the Jesuit Manuel Álvarez (d. 1583), first printed in Lisbon in 1572];
- Grammatica Emanuilis in 8° - reformata (15 exemplars).

4.3 'Amīra’s Syriac sources

The Grammatica Syriaca refers frequently to older Syriac grammatical sources. Some of them are cited explicitly, as is the case for David bar Paulos (pp. 1, 7, 31 etc.), Elias Syrus (of Nisibis, pp. 9, 56 etc.) John the Stylite (p. 57, Ioannes Estunoio, Ioannes Syrus) and also a mysterious «auctor Grammaticae Arabico sermone explicatae/declaratae» (pp. 32, 40, 56 etc.) that I will try to identify in what follows.

Other important sources can be recognized, as we will see, even though 'Amīra has not mentioned them overtly.

A first assessment of 'Amīra’s sources can be based on the grammatical manuscripts that, as we mentioned before, he had copied in his youth. Two collections of Syriac grammars and one lexicon by 'Amīra’s hand are today kept in the BML:

- Or. 441, Syriac vocabulary (De vocibus aequivocis) by Eudochos (or Ebdochos) of Melitene (12th-13th cent.). Copied in 1586 (colophon fols. 134v-135r).
- Or. 419, Ktābā d-mnahrānūtā b-gramaṭīqi by Išo[yahb Bar Malkon (12th-13th cent.)
- Or. 100, collection of Syriac grammatical texts ascribed to Elias of Nisibis (11th cent.).

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59 On which see Rolf Kemmler: The First Edition of the ars minor of Manuel Álvares’ De institutione grammatica libri tres (Lisbon, 1573), in Historiographia Linguistica, 42, 2015, pp. 1-19. We are not able to identify which of the numerous editions and compendia of this grammar were adopted in the Maronite College.


David bar Paulos (9th cent.), Yuḥannān the Bishop, ‘Eninīshō’ (7th cent.) and other anonymous fragments. Undated.

We have already seen that the copy of Or. 441 was part of ’Amīra’s training at the Maronite College. The manuscript contains the Syriac lexicon of Eudochos, a treatise on the homographs, that is words that have the same consonantal writing, but different meaning. ’Amīra’s draft in Or. 458 carries several annotations along the margins coming from Eudocho’s work (Ebdocos, fols. 718v, 716r, 672r, 666v e.g.), aiming at clarifying the spelling and vocalization of verbal forms.

From a note on lent books in Raimondi’s diary (Misc. Med. 718 ins. 24 fol. 3v), we learn that Giovanni Battista Leopardus borrowed on the 3rd of July 1596 «a vocabulary of the anomalous voices declined, written by messer Giorgio Amira, Chaldean. And also, the entire great Chaldean grammar». This note must refer to the manuscript BML Or. 441, which contains the vocabulary on the Syriac homonyms by Eudochos, and, of course, to Amira’s Grammatica Syriaca. If Raimondi had this manuscript in his possession, it was most probably copied for him, at his request, or possibly he had acquired it from ’Amīra for his own proposes.

Or. 419 contains the Ktābā d-mnahrānūtā b-gramaṭīqī, a Syriac grammar in Syriac and Arabic by Išo’yahb Bar Malkon (12th-13th cent.). We don’t know of any other copy of this text in Rome. As we will see, there are good reasons to identify the text of Or. 419 with the Syriac grammar Arabico sermon explica that ’Amīra frequently quotes in the Grammatica. In Or. 419 we do not find any mention either of the author or of the title of the text it contains, it is possible that ’Amīra was copying from an exemplar that lacked such information, and that would explain why he could not find a clearer way to refer to this text in his grammar. On verso the second guard-leaf of this manuscript we find the following ownership statement, by the hand of G.B. Raimondi: «Di Gio: Ba:tta Raimondo. comparato». The note was perhaps meant to distinguish this manuscript from those that were bought for the Typographia Medicea and thus belonged to Ferdinando de’ Medici.

Ms. Or.100 contains various grammatical texts. The first two are two well-known treatises by Elias of Nisibis (11th cent.), one of the most important Syriac grammarians. Then follow three
compositions that ’Amīra attributes to David bar Paulos (9th cent.?), among which only the first one is attested elsewhere, in the ms. India Office 9 of the British Library. This text, a treatise on the origins of the Syriac alphabet, is cited on p. 1, at the very beginning of the chapter on the Syriac alphabet, as a source for the three styles of the Syriac writing («in suis quibus notationibus in Grammaticam», in his annotations on grammar). The other two texts, dealing respectively with conjunctions and with punctuation, to my knowledge are not documented elsewhere.

After David bar Paulos follow: an excerpt «from the Canon of grammar of Yuḥannān the bishop», otherwise unknown (but see n. 41), a text attributed to the Syriac grammarian ’Eninīshō’ and a few other anonymous linguistic remarks.

What is most striking about these manuscripts is that they contain texts that, with very few exceptions, are quite rarely attested and are not documented elsewhere in Rome, nor in Italy. Thus, it is not possible to retrace ’Amīra’s manuscript models.

In analogous manner, the reference to John the Stylite in the Grammatica Syriaca is intriguing as we only know of one copy of his grammatical work, documented in Alqosh at the beginning of the 20th century, so it is not clear how ’Amīra could have access to this text.

A very good example of the way ’Amīra has used and combined his models is the definition of the noun, Book II, ch. II, p. 57-58. Here three definitions of the noun attributed to different Syriac grammarians (Elias of Nisibis, John the Stylite and the «Grammar in Arabic language») are quoted, both in their Syriac form and in Latin translation, and then compared. The latter one, that ’Amīra considers as the most complete and the clearest, is then discussed and commented upon in detail. Such a definition, in ’Amīra’s Latin translation, reads: «Nomen est vox significative in perfectione, quae sine tempore est, qua pars cum separatur, non significat aliquid.» (p. 58). One can easily recognize here a literal translation of the definition of the noun given in Aristotle’s Peri Hermeneias (16a, 20). And indeed, the text presented by ’Amīra corresponds word-by-word to the

second one is a short text on conjunctions that does not seem to be attested elsewhere (see Margherita Farina: Manuscrits de grammaires et lexiques syriaques in Les auteurs syriaques et leur langue, ed. by Farina, Paris 2018, pp. 243-254, p. 246).


This phrasing closely resembles the title that ’Amīra gives to the grammatical text on the alphabet that he has copied in BML Or. 100: «by David bar Paulos, from the grammar that he made».


«The noun is a completely meaningful voice, that is timeless and a part of which, if taken apart, does not mean anything.»

Ονόμα μὲν οὖν ἐστὶ φωνή σημαντική κατὰ συνθήκην ἄνευ χρόνου, ἢς μηδὲν μέρος ἐστὶ σημαντικὸν κεχωρισμένον-
Syriac translation of Aristotle’s definition, the way it features in Išô’yahb Bar Malkon’s Syriac grammar (e.g. BML Or. 419, fol. 3r). 74

It is interesting to observe that copies of such a Syriac translation were available in Rome, that Ἄμιρα could have perused, for example BML Or. 174 (Ass. 183), copied in 1592 by Melchisedech of Ḥiṣn Kīfā from Vat. sir. 158. 75 Ἄμιρα does not seem to have recognized the source of his grammatical model.

4.4 Syriac tradition and Western linguistic perspectives

In a number of passages, Ἄμιρα’s grammar reveal a comparative attitude and the search for a method of linguistic comparison, setting the study of Syriac in a broader context of linguistic observation.

a) The first section of the Praeludia auctoris, entitled De linguae Chaldaicae, seu Syriacae nominibus ac discrimine, discusses the various designations Chaldaeae, Chaldatica, Aramaea, Syriaca, Assyriaca. Such a variety calls the unity of the language described into question: «dubitatio est, an una, et eadem sit, licet varia habeat nomina; an vero pro variete nominum, ac distictione, varia sit, ac distincta, ita ut Chaldaica sit lingua distincta a Syriaca et haec ab illa». 76 In order to answer this question, Ἄμιρα distinguishes between essential and accidental differences, and sets to demonstrate that all these denominations are not based on essential linguistic features. These latter are identified as «characteribus, litterarum pronuntiatione, sono vocalium, verborum coniugationibus, affixis, dictionibus et tota fere structura orationis». For two languages to be one and the same, they have to share all of these elements. According to Ἄμιρα, Chaldaic and Syriac share essential features. 77

In this way the grammarian establishes precise phonetic, morphological and syntactic criteria for comparing two languages and assessing their correlation. Such criteria correspond more

74 The two extant Syriac versions of this text can be found in Johannes G. E. Hoffmann: De Hermeneuticis apud Syros Aristoteleis, Leipzig 1873, pp. 22-24. On the Syriac tradition of Peri Hermeneias see and Henri Hugonnard-Roche: La logique d’Aristote du grec au syriaque : études sur la transmission des textes de l’Organon et leur interprétation philosophique, Paris 2004 and Hugonnard-Roche, La tradition (as in n. 50). The definition of the noun given in Peri Hermeneias is used, with variable degree of paraphrasing, by several 12th-13th cent. Syriac grammarians, such as Bar Zo’bí and Barhebraeus.


76 The pages of the prefatory section of the Grammatica Syriaca are not numbered. This quote, as well as the one that follows, come from the first page of the section.

77 Further on (third and fourth page in this section) Ἄμιρα lists a number of «accidental» differences between Chaldaic and Syriac, which are mainly phonetic and phonological and seems to correspond to the dialectal differences between East and West Syriac.
or less to the sections of grammar, also in their hierarchical presentation, and are thus meant to cover different domains of language. In this respect the absence of nouns and of lexical elements in general from this list is quite remarkable, as it implies that not all of the components of language are equally meaningful for linguistic kinship.

b) In the section of the *Praeludia* devoted to demonstrating the antiquity of Syriac, 'Amīra discusses a number of possible etymologies of the word «Hebrew» («lingua Hebraea denominata, et populus Hebraeo»). Here he refutes a derivation from the name *Abraham*, basing on a comparison between three cognate forms: Syriac حِبْرَأَيَّ (ʾebrāyāʾ), Hebrew שֵׁם (ʾibri) and Arabic عِبْرَانِي (ʾibrānī). In all of these forms, 'Amīra observes, the first consonant is a ʿayn (pharyngeal fricative), whereas the name Abraham begins with an ʿālaph (glottal stop), hence the etymology has to be rejected.

c) In Book I, chapter VII, treating the use of *garšūnī* (Arabic language written in Syriac script) and of Syriac in Arabic-speaking countries of his day, 'Amīra introduces a comparison with the use of Latin in Italian-speaking regions: Christian speakers of Arabic use the Syriac writing just like Italian speakers use the Latin one, with the important difference that Arabic also has a writing of its own: «... illud tamen certissimum est, linguam Arabicam nunc se habere ad Chaldaicam, ut Italicam ad Latinam; et sicut Italica Latinis, sic Arabica Chaldaicis communiter a Christianis scribitur elementis; quamquam Arabica proprietis (ut dictum est) habeat characteres.» (p. 23)

This apparently mechanical and somewhat naive remark is based on a number of interesting assumptions. On the one hand, the status of Syriac as a cultivated language, comparable to Latin, encourages the use of its writing to record also the Arabic of Syriac Christians. On the other hand, Italian language is viewed as a vernacular, that borrows a writing system from Latin. Finally, 'Amīra seems to observe that the same condition of cultural diglossia proper of the Syriac Christians of his time also characterizes Italy. All of these considerations are merely synchronic and there is no reference to a historical derivation of Italian from Latin.78 Finally, this remark also recalls a similar observation made by Raimondi in one of his praises of the Arabic language (v.

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78 In Book I, chapter VII, 'Amīra gives an interpretation of the so-called garshuni writing, that is the practice of writing Arabic (or other languages, such as Amenian or Turkish) in Syriac alphabet: «It is clear that the Arabs do not use these Chaldaic letters. Indeed, they have their own characters - on which v. the Alphabetum of the very learned and very expert G.B. Raimondi - Nevertheless, all and only the Eastern Christians use them. I think the reason they applied the Syriac characters to the Arabic language is as follows. Among the infidels they would be spotted, the Arabic language being common to Christians and infidels. On the other hand, many of our sacred texts and our Christian rites are written in the aforesaid language, for the people who know only this one; for this reason it has been conceived to write these things and others of the same kind with Chaldaic letters, which the infidels ignore.» This is potentially the first time that the phenomenon of *garshuni* is interpreted as a sort of cryptography, that Syriac Christians would use not to be understood by their Muslim fellow citizens, and might be the source for all other modern theories along the same lines.
supra, §1.1), where he distinguishes between the literary and vernacular variants of Arabic: «In quella [sc. lingua arabica] vi è la literale, qual è sotto regule gramaticali domandata Sarfu Nahum e la volgare detta Arbi zicachj. E vi è tanta differentia tra l’una e l’altra, quanta tra la nostra volgare, e la latina».

d) In Book II, ch. XI, p. 128, while treating of the pronunciation of consonants in nouns (De lenitate et asperitate nominum), ‘Amīra discusses the treatment of Greek loanwords in Syriac. This section is particularly interesting, because, in my opinion, both in terms of method and of visual display, it shows some first signs of a comparative approach to language relations. ‘Amīra compares groups of Greek and Syriac letters (not of sounds), establishing regular correspondences:

tres litterae apud Graecos, quae tenues appellantur, scilicet π, κ, τ, apud nos convertuntur in has tres litteras, α, ω, ο, & λ [p, k, t], duras quamquam communiter duae ultimae κ videlicet, in θ [q], & τ in υ [t] commutati soleant, ut ὀσιοῦχος. Petrus: quod nomen a Graecis, ut vides, scribitur cum π, quae in θ [p] durum convertitur, & cum τ quae in υ [t] commutatur ; et nomen κυρίλλος, Cyrilus, quod scribitur cum κ, quae similiter in θ [q] commutatur. Illae vero, quae aspiratae dicitur, scilicet φ, χ, θ, sunt lenes, ut in supradictis patet vocibus. Illae demum, quae mediae appellantur, ut β, γ, δ, modo sunt asperae, modo lenes, prout postulat pronunciandi suavitas… (p. 128)".

The letters are grouped according to the traditional Greek grammatical classification based on their mode of articulation. The choice of the verb convertuntur «are converted» deserves special attention, as it suggests a somewhat mechanical operation, but also implies a certain idea of development in time (a very different alternative would have been, for example, the concept of replacement). Even though the passage is devoted to loanwords, and exclusively in their written form (‘Amīra here is not concerned with sounds), there is a clear study of regular and systematic correspondences between classes of letters in two different languages. The search for a rule is the more evident, as exceptions such as Petrus and Cyrilus are immediately discussed.

Modern studies of the first attempts at linguistic comparison focused mainly on the search for clues to an awareness of the relation of kinship between the most distant Indo-European

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79 Rome, Biblioteca Vallicelliana, N. 36, fols. 121r-124v (Casari, «This language» (as in n. 12)), Appendix.
80 «In that one [sc. the Arabic language] is the literary one, that is called Sarfu Nahu according to the grammars, and the vernacular one, called Arbi zicachj. And there is as much difference between them, as there is between our vernacular and Latin».
81 «Three letters that among the Greeks are called tenues, that is π, κ, τ, among us are converted into these three letters, α, ω, ο, & λ, duras, although more often the two last objects are converted κ into θ and τ into υ, like ὀσιοῦχος. Peter: name which, as you can see, is written by Greeks with π, that is converted into θ durum, and with τ, that turns into υ, and the name κυρίλλος, Cyril, that is written with κ, that in analogous manner turns in λ. Others, that are called aspiratae, that is φ, χ, θ, are lenes, as it shows in the above-mentioned words. Finally, those called mediae, like β, γ, δ, become sometimes asperae and sometimes lenes, according to the requirements of pleasant pronunciation.»
82 Such a classification had been adapted to Syriac at the end of the 7th cent. by Jacob of Edessa (d. 708, Rafael Talmon: Jacob of Edessa the Grammarian, in Jacob of Edessa and the Culture of his Day, ed. by Ter Haar Romeny, Leiden 2008, pp. 159-187 and Margherita Farina: La théorie linguistique de Jacques d’Edesse, in Les auteurs syriaques et leur langue, ed. by Margherita Farina, Paris 2018, pp. 167-187), but there is no hint that ‘Amīra could have access to his grammatical works.
languages.\textsuperscript{83} ‘Amīra’s approach to Greek loanwords seems to show that the mechanisms that will be adopted by the first comparatists were already familiar to the Orientalists and that it was the prolonged contact between different linguistic systems that had triggered them.

Linguistic historiography – with some illustrious exceptions, such as Contini (1994) – has long considered the first Syriac grammars produced in the West as a secondary phenomenon, modeled upon Hebrew grammars and relevant only for the domains of Biblical and religious studies.

On the contrary, a careful examination of texts such as ‘Amīra’s \textit{Grammatica Syriaca} shows that they are largely inspired by the medieval Syriac tradition, duly adapted to the descriptive strategies of Latin grammar generalized in the West.

Moreover, as I have shown in this paper, the authors and readers of these grammars were involved in a vast cultural debate on the relations between the languages of the world and on their structures, which will culminate in the first attempts at linguistic comparison.

Appendix

1. Misc. Med. 718, all. 20

(fol. 1v)
La Grammatica Chaldaica ovvero siriaca tradotta et composta da Giorgio Amira Chaldeo Marronita fu incominciata à stampare cioè il suo primo foglio alli 29 d’Ottobre 1593 et fu funita di stampare l’anno 1596.
Fu stampata à spese di me Giovanni Battista Raimondo et ne furono stampate n° mille et ducento cinquanta.
Si spese per ogni foglio
Per carta resime 2 et meza à ragione di
Giulij 13 la resima ---- d 3-25
Per compositura----- d 1-50
Per tiratura ----- d -70
Per inchiostro e mazzi ---- d -15
Che sono ---- d 5-60

Ogni Grammatica è fogli 65 multiplicati n° 65 per d 5-60
fanno ---- d 364
Hebbe il detto Giorgio Amira
In contanti --- d 100

Che sono tutti ---- d 464
Resta la spesa fatta nella gittatura del Carattere Chaldeo, del Carattere Latino, et del stagno comperato per detti Caratteri.
Il piggione della casa.
Il salario dato ad’un’homo per la
Bagnatura, della carta compratura (?)
Sceglitura, spanditura, et facitura
Di volumi. Il tutto si stima per q.a (?)
Gram.ca sola scudi 60 dico d 60-

Resta anco il guadagno che haurebono fatto da mano à mano che sono spesi q(uest)i danari dal’anno 1593 finché si vendiranno tutte o vero quanto importa il detto danaro per essere in certo non si mette. Et hebbe anco il detto Giorgio delle dette Grammatiche n° 35.

[In verticale a fianco, margine sinistro:] 

Il danaro dunque certo speso in detta Grammatica è come si vede in questo conto Δ 524.
Finiti di spendere l’anno 1596 et scudi d 362_68 à ragione di 7 per 100 l’anno dal detto anno 1596.

(fol. 2r)

Esito delle Grammatiche Chaldee fatte stampare da me nell’anno 1596.
A di 27 d [sic!]

Al magister Sacri Palatij n° 2

A di 27 d’Aprile 1596.
Al messer Giorgio Amira authore, o vero traduttore, oltra li scudi cento, che hebbe in contanti, hebbe delle dette grammatiche n° 35

A di
A monsig.or Serafino n° 1

A di 29 di Gennaro 1596.
A monsignor Dossato una per se
Et un’altra per monsignor di Perone
n° 2

A di
Al padre fra Thomaso n° 1
A dì
Al padre fra Giovanni Battista Leopardi n° 1

A dì
Al’Illustrissimo Cardinale San Giorgio n° 1

A dì
Al signor Abbate di Guastalla n° 1

A dì
A messer Iacomo Luna stampatore n° 1

A dì
Al p. frat’Angelo d’Augubio Augustiniano n° 1

A dì
Al p. fra Gregorio Nonio Augustiniano n° 1

A dì 17 di Novembre 1597.
A messer Giovanni Paulo librarò à pasquino per venderle in consegna n° 12

(fol. 2v)

A 29 d’Aprile 1596.
A messer Giovanni Paulo Terrarossa n° 2

A 21 di Maggio 1596.
A messer Giovanni Paulo Terrarossa per darli à vendere à Belardino librarò n° 10

A di
Vendute per mano di messer Iacomo Luna n° 3 per prezzo di scudi 4-50. dico n° 3

A di
Venduta ad un padre della Chiesa nova per prezzo di scudi 1-50 n° 1

A di 18 di settembre 1598.
Venduta al padre fra Mario dell’Aquila(?) per prezzo di scudi 1-50 n° 1

A di 28 di settembre 1598.
Donata al signor Gerolamo Vecchietti n° 1

A di
Donata ad un padre spagnolo carmelitano in casa del’Illustrissimo Cardinale Dezza (?)
n° 1

A 7 di Novembre 1598.
Donata per la libreria Vaticana à messer Marino custode n° 1

Venduta al signor Tesoriero del Regno di Granata per il Vescovo di Granata n° 1 scudi 1-50

A 11 di Gennaro 1603.
Sono vendute delle dette Grammatiche
n° 2 scudi 3
d’un libraio francese di Parigi.

al Padre fra Giovanni Bentivenga da Rimini cappuccino n° una in dono fù à 8 d’Agosto 1603.

{Vertically, on the left margin}

A 24 di Gennaro 1598 ad un todesco di Magonza venduta una Grammatica per prezzo di scudi 1-50
Ritornò poi in Roma à 13 di Novembre 1598 et pigliò un Pontificale.

2 Index of the *Grammatica Syriaca* (1596)

Dedication to Enrico Caetani

*Praefatio ad studiosum ac benevolum lectorem*

*Errata*

*Praehudia auctoris in grammaticam*

  - De linguae Chaldaicae, seu Syriacae nominibus ac discrimine
  - De linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae antiquitate
  - De linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae dignitate, ac praestantia
  - De Chaldaicae linguae utilitate
  - Epigram by Petrus Burgensis

*Georgi Amirae Syri Edeniensis e Libano Grammaticae linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae*

*Liber primus*

  - De litteris chaldaicis seu Syriacis et de earum divisione – caput primum* p. 1
De harum litterarum nominum significatione - caput secundum p. 2
De numero harum litterarum – caput III p. 6
De divisione, pronunciacione, et ordine ipsarum litterarum – caput III p. 7
De simili, vel dissimili figura et sono litterarum – caput V p. 10
De modo numerandi ipsis litteris – caput VI p. 12
De usu litterarum Chaldaicarum in scribenda lingua Arabica – caput VII p. 22
De litteris, quae in vocibus quibusdam scribuntur et non pronuntiantur – caput VIII p. 24
De litterus quae non scribuntur et proferuntur – caput IX p. 27
De litteris quibusdam quae interdum permutantur – caput X p. 28
De litteris, per quas similes voces ab invicem differunt – caput XI p. 29
De vocalibus – cap. XII p. 31
De lineola, quae sub quibusdam litteris scripta reperitur – cap. XIII p. 38
De quaedam alia lineola, quae dicitur mhaggayana et marhtana – caput XIV p. 40
De punctis numeri multitudinis, tam in nominibus, quam in verbis – caput XV p. 47
De punctis, tempora, personasque indicantibus – caput XVI p. 51
De ceteris punctis, quae passimi vocibus, nunc apposita, nunc ad latus cernuntur – cap. XVII p. 53

Georgi Amirae Syri Edeniensis e Libano Grammaticae linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae
Liber secundus

De numero partium orationis – caput primum p. 56
De nominis definitione ac divisione – cap. II p. 57
De iis quae generaliter ad nominis accidunt – cap. III p. 60
De genere nominum – cap. IV p. 61
De numero nominum – cap. V p. 75
De domesticatione, seu specie nominum – caput VI p. 104
De derivatione nominum faeminini generis a nominibus masculini generis – caput VII p. 110
De figura nominum - cap. VIII p. 114
De qualitatibus nominum – caput IX p. 115
De casibus nominum – cap. X p. 117
De lenitate ac asperitate nominum – caput XI p. 124
De diminutione nominum – cap. XII p. 143
De contractione nominum – caput XIII p. 146
De ad aliquid, seu de relatione – cap. XIV p. 165
De affixis nominum – cap. XV p. 172
De nominibus numeralibus – cap. XVI p. 223
De pronomine – cap. XVII p. 238

Georgi Amirae Syri Edeniensis e Libano Grammaticae linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae
Liber tertius
De verbi definitione – caput I p. 249
De verbi accidentibus – cap. II p. 250
De constitutione, appellatione, ac definitione coniugationum – cap. III p. 256
De primo genere coniugationum – cap. IV p. 258
De secundo genere coniugationum – cap. V p. 281
De tertio genere coniugationum – cap. VI p. 315
De quarto genere coniugationum – cap. VII p. 325
De quinto genere coniugationum – cap. VIII p. 339
De verbis anomalis et defectivis – caput IX p. 356
De verborum affixis – caput X p. 368
De primi generis coniugationum affixis – caput XI p. 372
De secundis generis coniugationum affixis – cap. XII p. 378
De tertiis generis coniugationum affixis – cap. XII [sic!] p. 391
De quartis generis coniugationum affixis – cap. XIV p. 395
De quintis generis coniugationum affixis – cap. XV p. 403
De verborum, quae habent duplex & et desinunt in $\approx$, cap. XVI p. 407
De modo, quo inherentia sint transmigrantium, et transmigrantium iterum transmigrantium – cap. XVIII p. 414
De verbis iteratis – cap. XVIII [sic!] p. 418
De verborum lenitate et asperitate – cap. XX p. 419
De verbo nominis, seu participio – cap. XX [sic!] p. 425

Georgi Amirae Syri Edeniensis e Libano Grammaticae linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae
De reliquis partibus orationis liber quartus

De supra verbum seu adverbio – caput I p. 430
De quorumdam expropositis adverbii significatione et constructione – caput II p. 435
De praepositione – cap. III p. 441
De significatione et constructione quorumdam praepositionum – caput IV p. 444
De interiectione – cap. V p. 448
De coniunctione – cap. VI p. 449

Georgi Amirae Syri Edeniensis e Libano Grammaticae linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae
De syntaxi, seu constructione partium orationis liber quintus

Quid et quotuplex sit syntaxis – caput I p. 453
De constructione nominum, vel inter se, vel cum verbis, quibus veluti agentia praeponuntur – caput II p. 454
De particulari quorundam nominum inter se constructione – cap. III p. 457
De constructione verborum cum nominibus, quae in obliquo veluti patientia post se admittunt – cap. IV p. 460

Georgi Amirae Syri Edeniensis e Libano Grammaticae linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae
De arte metrica, ac poetica liber sextus
De vocalibus, quae dicuntur esse longae, vel breves – caput I p. 465
De longitudine, ac brevitate vocalium praedictarum – caput II p. 466
De carminum generibus, ac modo, quo fiunt – cap. III p. 470
De necessitate metrica licentiaque poetica – caput IV p. 473

Georgi Amirae Syri Edeniensis e Libano Grammaticae linguae Chaldaicae sive Syriacae
De interpundae [sic!] orationis ratione liber septimus

Quaenam sint notae ac nomina punctorum – caput I p. 475
De officio singulorum punctorum praecedentium - cap. II p. 476
De punctis varios animi affectus significantibus - cap. III p. 479