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John bar Zō‘bī’s Grammar and the Syriac “Texture of Knowledge” in the 13th Century*

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to the linguistic thinking of John bar Zō‘bī, attempting at setting his grammatical work within the philosophical and theological framework of the Syriac Renaissance, as declined in an East-Syriac milieu. Bar Zō‘bī’s composition technique juxtaposing quotations from the previous Syriac tradition in a smooth, continuous discourse, progressively guides the reader to a universal system of knowledge, where the structures of language mirror those of creation and the rules of grammar respond to ontologic and theologic necessities.

Keywords: Syriac grammar; Well-Woven Fabric; Syriac philosophy; compilatory technique; Syriac compound-nouns; Syriac exegesis

1. Introduction: Syriac Grammarians in ‘Abdīshō‘ bar Brīkhā’s *Catalogue of Authors*

In a volume devoted to the figure of ‘Abdīshō‘ bar Brīkhā, this paper explores the intellectual background of ‘Abdīshō‘’s works, by investigating the conception of language that was developed during the Syriac Renaissance and which circulated throughout the 13th-14th century East Syriac milieu.

‘Abdīshō‘’s poetic summa, *The Paradise of Eden*, is rightly described as an extremely rich work, which expanded and exalted the expressive potential of the Syriac language. But what was the linguistic insight that energized the Syriac language, giving it the dynamism and versatility that we find in the East Syriac ‘Abdīshō‘ as well as in the West Syriac Barhebraeus?

As I will demonstrate in this paper, the grammatical production of the early 13th century, more specifically the one carried out by John bar Zō‘bī (12th-13th cent.), was characterized by an unprecedented effort of systematization that harmonized technical grammatical practices with the theoretical reflections of logics and natural philosophy. Besides a renewed interest in the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic logical-philosophical tradition in its first Syrian translations (6th-7th centuries),¹ the linguistic thinking of this time also harvested the fruits of the rich

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¹ A good example of this attitude is offered by the East Syriac manuscripts Berlin, SzB syr. 88 (olim Petermann 9) (dated 1260), one of the oldest extant East Syriac grammatical collections, which assembles (sometimes even in parallel columns) grammatical texts, such as Bar Zō‘bī’s metrical grammar, the treatises on punctuation by Elias of ʿŪrhan (11th cent.) and by Joseph Bar Malkōn (12th-13th cent.) and logical texts, such as the Syriac translations of Porphyry’s *Isagoge* (6th cent.), Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias* (6th cent.), Proba’s commentary to the *Peri Hermeneias* (6th cent.), Sergius of Rēš‘aynā’s commentary to Aristotle’s *Categories* (7th cent.) etc. (see HUGONNARD-ROCHE, “La tradition du *Peri Hermeneias* d’Aristote en syriaque, entre logique et grammaire”, manuscript description in SACHAU, *Die Handschriftenverzeichnisse der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, vol. I, 321-335). On the reelaboration of the logical-philosophical tradition by West-Syriac authors in the Abbasid period see also RASSI, “From Greco-Syrian to Syro-Arabic Thought: The Philosophical Writings of Dionysius Bar Šalībī and Jacob Bar Šakkō”.

lexicographic analyses of the Abbasid period. Language sciences were thus set within an organic framework, in which an effort was made to give back to the metalinguistic metaphor all its evocative potential and resonance in the other fields of knowledge.

A hint of the importance that ‘Abdīshō‘ assigned to Bar Zō‘bī’s grammatical work is found in the *Catalogue of Authors*. ‘Abdīshō‘ mentions the following Syriac grammarians:²

- ‘Enānīšō‘ (7th cent.), who ܐܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ *sām šuḥlāpā w-pursānā d-qeryātā* “composed the variety and the distinction of the readings” (p. 144).
- Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq (808-873), of which is said ܠܚܘܢܝܢ ܒܢ ܝܫܚܩܐ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ *sām w-haw grammāṭīqī* “he too composed a grammar” (p. 164-165).³
- John the Stylite (9th cent.): ܝܘܗܢܢܐ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ *‘bad w-hū grammāṭīqī* “he too made a grammar” (p. 256).⁴
- John bar Ḥāmīs the Bishop of Ṭamānōn⁵ (11th cent.): ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ *’āp* “also”. Assemani, in his edition of the *Catalogue*, interprets this very laconic note as “he too composed a grammar”, that is as well as the previous John (the Stylite, p. 256).
- Mār Elias I (Elias of Ṭirhan, d. 1049): ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ ܕܥܢܢܝܫܘܢ *takkes wa-‘bad psāq dīnē w-šū’ālē ‘edtānāyē w-me’mrē grammāṭīqāyē*

² Page numbers according to BO, III, 1. A modern edition of the catalogue, with an Arabic translation, is found in ḤABB, *Catalogus Auctorum*.

³ As this is the first mention of the term “grammar” in the *Catalogue*, the use of the form *w-haw* “he too”, or “this one as well” seems out of place. Would this be a reference to the fact that Ḥunayn composed mostly lexicographical works, but also a grammar, and so *he too* was to be considered as a grammarian?

⁴ The mention of John the Stylite (*Yōḥannān ‘Eṣṭōnāyā*) is quite relevant, as he is one of the few West-Syriac authors mentioned in the *Catalogue* (for other cases see the article by Sebastian Brock in this volume). However, the identification and floruit of this author is still a matter of debate. MOBERG, *Die syrische Grammatik des Johannes Eṣṭōnāyā*, sets him in the early 9th century, arguing convincingly that he was a follower of Jacob of Edessa’s linguistic theories. An identification with the late 7th-early 8th century John of Litarb has been proposed, but without conclusive evidence (see SUERMANN, *John the Stylite of Mār Z’urā at Sarug*). Assemani was puzzled by the epithet *‘eṣṭōnāyā* designating an author whom he considered to be East-Syriac. He supposed instead that it was derived from a place-name or from the name of a monastery (“ex patria potius, vel ex coenobio”, BO, III, 1, 256), stating that the ascetic practice of living on pillars was not diffused in the Church of the East. At present, the grammatical work by John the Stylite is known to us only through a few East-Syriac manuscripts from the convent of Our lady of the Seeds (Alqoṣ, Mosul), a collection today preserved at the Convent of the Chaldean Antonian Order of Saint Hormizd in Ankawa (Erbil). The oldest one (16th cent.) Vosté 290 (= Mosul, Scher 139) is lost at the moment, as current ms Haddad 890, which is supposed to correspond to Voste 290, has a different content from the one described by older catalogues. A second copy is Voste 293 = Scher 133 = Haddad 893 (19th cent.), I was recently able to see a digital reproduction of it in the context of a cataloguing project of some manuscripts from Our lady of the Seeds led by André Binggeli, in collaboration with the Scriptorium Syriacum Convent of the Chaldean Antonian Order of Saint Hormizd in Ankawa, to which I had the opportunity to participate. See VOSTÉ, *Catalogue de la Bibliothèque syro-chaldéenne du Couvent de Notre-dame des Semences près d’Alqoṣ (Iraq)*, p. 106 and HADDĀD, *al-Makḥūṭāt al-suryāniyya wa-l-‘arabiyya fī khizānat al-Rahbāniyya al-Kaldāniyya fī Baghdād*, 391-392. A third copy is found in the ms. 141 of the Chaldean Catholic Church. Archdiocese of Erbil (digitized by HMML), a grammatical sylloge containing the same texts as Haddad 893. Furthermore, in Florence National Library (BNCF) a manuscript bound at the end of Magl. 15.1.77 (a 16th cent. printed grammar of Syriac by Widmanstetter) contains a partial paraphrase of this text (or maybe a text written by memory?). It is a 16th cent. manuscript, copied by a hand that seems to be that of the Maronite scholar and Patriarch George ‘Amīrā, accompanied by a Latin interlinear translation. Mention of John’s grammar is also found in the *Grammatica Syriaca* of George ‘Amīrā (Rome, 1596), although his source is unknown (see FARINA, *Amira’s Grammatica Syriaca: Genesis, Structure and Perspectives*).

⁵ A suffragan diocese of Nisibis (= the Arabic *Sūq al-thamānūn*); see FIEY, *Nisibe, métropole syriaque orientale et ses suffragants des origines à nos jours*, 110. I am grateful to Salam Rassi for this reference.

“he composed and made a juridical sentence, ecclesiastical issues and grammatical treatises” (p. 262).

- Elias Bar Šennāyā metropolitan o Nisibis (d. 1046), ܘܗܘܢܢ ܒܪ ܫܢܢܝܐ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ ܘܗܘܢܢ ܒܪ ܫܢܢܝܐ ܘܗܘܢܢ ܒܪ ܫܢܢܝܐ ܘܗܘܢܢ ܒܪ ܫܢܢܝܐ ܘܗܘܢܢ ܒܪ ܫܢܢܝܐ... *sām maktbānūtā zabnē w-me'mrē w-grammaṭīqī* “he composed a chronicle, discourses and a grammar...”, p. 266.
- Mār Išō ‘yahb bar Malkōn of Nisibis (12th-13th cent.) ܘܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܡܠܟܘܢ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ ܘܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܡܠܟܘܢ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ ܘܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܡܠܟܘܢ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ ܘܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܡܠܟܘܢ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ... *’ūt leh šu’ ’ālē grammaṭīqāyē* “he has grammatical questions”, p. 296.
- John Zō ‘bī (12th-13th cent.)⁶ ܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܙܘܒܝܐ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ ܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܙܘܒܝܐ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ ܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܙܘܒܝܐ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ ܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܙܘܒܝܐ ܕܢܝܨܒܝܫ... *kannēš syāmē grammaṭīqāyē wa-laḥḥem wa-’bad ḥad zqōrā* “he collected the grammatical compositions and he adjusted [them] and made one treatise (litt. “texture”) p. 307.

Even though indirect evidence of the authoritative status of grammarians can be inferred from the citations and chains of references found in single texts (for example, in the section on compound nouns of his Syriac grammar, Bar Zō ‘bī mentions the chain “Mar Aḥūhā d-emmeḥ (Aḥūhdemmeḥ), John Ešṭōnāyā and Joseph Huzzāyā” and, later on “Mar Elias of Šōbā”),⁷ ‘Abdīshō ‘s *Catalogue* provides the first explicit canon of East Syriac grammatical authors.

This canon, as the rest of the *Catalogue*, focuses on East Syriac authors and allows only one incursion by a Western author where grammar is concerned: John the Stylite (provided that his identification is correct). The modern reader is struck by the fact that, for example, Jacob of Edessa, considered both by ancient and modern scholars as the founder of Syriac linguistics, is only mentioned by ‘Abdīshō ‘ for his *Chronicle*.⁸

Bar Zō ‘bī concludes the series of the grammarians in ‘Abdīshō ‘s *Catalogue* and is presented as the culmination of all the previous authors in the East Syriac grammatical tradition.

2. The Texture of Bar Zō ‘bī’ Syriac Grammar:

⁶ According to TEULE, “Yohānnān bar Zo ‘bī”, Bar Zō ‘bī was still alive in 1246. This assumption is based on Joseph Assemani’s remark on a note in in Vat. sir. 194 (ASSEMANI and ASSEMANI, *Bibliothecae apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catalogus*, vol. I/III, 411) that should have been copied from a manuscript copied on that date. On f. 67r, a scribal note at the end of Bar Zō ‘bī’s greater Syriac grammar describes the author as still living. However, Vat. sir. 194 is a heterogeneous collection of grammatical texts, assembled by the pupil of the Maronite College in Rome, and future bishop, Sarkīs Rizzī around 1600. The date of 1246 can only be referred to the last text featuring in in Vat. Sir. 194, the lexicon by Bar ‘Alī: on f. 268v Rizzī reproduced the colophon of the apograph, which states that it was copied in Baghdad in 1246. The scribal note in Vat. sir. 194 f. 67r literally corresponds to a note found in the East Syriac ms. Vat. sir. 450 (f. 295v.), which is clearly the source for this portion of Rizzī’s copy. This manuscript, once belonging to the Qatoliqos Šem ‘on VII bar Mama (ownership statement on f. 371r, note on the frontispice mentioning the convent of Rabban Hormizd), was at some time the property of the Arabic College of San Pietro in Montorio in Rome (see note on the frontispice). It was probably part of a lot that arrived in Rome in the second half of the 16th cent., together with Vat. sir. 417 and Berlin Statsbibliothek Petermann 9 (see on this FARINA, *Circulation de manuscrits*, 113-116). Vat. sir. 450 is described succinctly in MAI *Scriptorum veterum*, V, 79. Vat. sir. 194 is described in ASSEMANI and ASSEMANI, *Bibliothecae apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catalogus*, vol. I/III, 410-414.

⁷ London, BL Add 25876, f. 54v and f. 55v, respectively.

⁸ BO, III, 1, 229. In his Arabic work *Uṣūl al-dīn* (“The foundations of religion”), ‘Abdīshō ‘ mentions again the *Chronicle* of Jacob of Edessa (*Ya ‘qūb al-Rūhāwī fī Tawārīḥihi*) in the section on key-dates in Christ’s life, in the chapter on Jesus’ public life (GIANAZZA, *I fondamenti della religione*, 254-255). I am indebted to Salam Rassi for this reference.

a. Well-Woven Fabrics

John bar Zō‘bī is not just the last of the grammarians listed in ‘Abdīshō‘’s *Catalogue*; he is also the one deserving the most detailed and careful mention. His work is described as a collection, a summa of all the previous grammatical compositions, but also as a *zqōrā*, a texture,⁹ which the author has adjusted (*lahhem*). The use of the terms *zqōrā* and *lahhem* is a clear allusion, in a poetic wordplay, to the title of one of Bar Zō‘bī’s work, the *Zqōrā mlahmā*, “Well-Woven Fabric”.¹⁰ This title is usually given to Bar Zō‘bī’s theological compendium on the orthodox faith entitled ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ *Zqōrā mlahmā d-‘al šarbā d-haymānūtā ‘örtōdōksyāytā*.¹¹

However, in the *Catalogue* it is clear that the “fabric” is a grammatical work. A scribal note in ms. Vat. sir. 450 f. 295v, at the end of the text of Bar Zō‘bī’s greater Syriac grammar, also goes in the same direction:

ܥܠܡ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ
ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ [sic] ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ
ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ [sic] ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ...

Here ends, by the help of our Lord, the *Well-Woven Fabric of the Grammatical Art (zqōrā mlahmā d-‘ummānūtā grammāṭiqāytā)*, that was made by the excellent eremite, the perfect monk and the miraculous ascetic, the upright priest, the wonderful abbot and the master of grace, that is Rabban John known as Bar Zō‘bī...¹²

A great number of the manuscripts containing Bar Zō‘bī’s Syriac grammar also feature a philosophical and theological treatise by the same author, entitled *On the Difference between Nature and Hypostasis and between Person and Face*.¹³ This latter work is also part of the theological exposition designated *Zqōrā mlahmā*.¹⁴ The verb *lahhem* also features in the title of another philosophical work by Bar Zō‘bī entitled *On the Composition and Dissolution of Causes: Naturally, Logically, and Grammatically*, in the Mardin manuscript CCM 22, f. 145v

⁹ After all, the same metaphor underlies the word *text*, in its Latin etymology.

¹⁰ BROCK, “Yoḥannan bar Zo‘bi”.

¹¹ Cf., for example, the title page in the Mardin manuscript CCM 349, f. 3v. (15th century?).

¹² See fn. 7 above. Less explicit, but along the same lines, is the colophon of Cambridge Add 2819 (a collection of grammars including also Bar Zō‘bī’s works), f. 317v : ܥܠܡ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ ܕܠܫܪܒܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ “here ends ... this book of grammar ... that was collected and woven by the monk Rabban John known as Zō‘bī”, cf. WRIGHT, *A Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, vol. I, p. 669. I owe this information to MURRE-VAN DEN BERG, *Scribes and Scriptures*, p. 262, fn. 147.

¹³ The text is edited and commented upon respectively in FURLANI, *Yoḥannān Bar Zō‘bi sulla differenza tra natura, ipostasi, persona e faccia* and ID., *Giovanni Bar Zō‘bi sulla differenza tra natura ed ipostasi e tra persona e faccia*. For an English translation, see ESHAI, *The Book of Marganitha*, 82-91. This treatise accompanies the Syriac grammar in the great majority of manuscripts: Mardin, CCM 20; Tehran, TEH SJ1; Paris, BnF syr. 426; London, BL Add 25876; Berlin, SzB syr. 93 (olim Sachau 216); Mosul, Scher 106, 107 (SCHER, “Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques conservés dans la bibliothèque du Patriarcat chaldéen de Mossoul”).

¹⁴ See SELEZNYOV, *Yoḥannān Bar Zō‘bī and his “Explanation of the Mysteries”*, 12.

(copied in 1681)¹⁵: ܪܘܟܟܒܐ ܕܠܗܗܗܡ ܠܐܡܠܘܬܐ *rukkābā d-laḥḥem la-mlūtā* (“composition that he fashioned on logic”).

The metaphor of the woven fabric is also applied to other literary productions, by different authors. In the domain of historiography, Marianna Mazzola¹⁶ has identified the category of the “Woven-texture Chronicles”, characterized by a compilatory technique that assembles different and heterogeneous historiographical sources and arranges them in a harmonious composition. Such a technique appears to be specific to Syriac Renaissance writers such as Michael the Great (d. 1199) and the anonymous author of the *Chronicle to 1234*. Mazzola has pointed to explicit references to Michael the Great’s own work as a *zqōrā*, at the beginning of the thirteenth book of his *Chronicle*, where he states: “... we start increasing the texture (*zqōrā*) of the expositive discourse...” and, especially, “It is necessary henceforward to write out from the languages of [other] nations ... so that the texture (*zqōrā*) be not thinned out but that it be woven (*nezdaqar*)”.¹⁷ Mazzola describes Michael’s technique as a “method of combining the extracts as fluidly and as homogeneously as possible”.¹⁸ As we will show in the next paragraphs, the same compositional strategy seems also to underlie Bar Zō‘bī’s Syriac grammar. The application of the term to literary works in such a different field seems to point towards a specific stylistic feature and a precise technique of composition.¹⁹

b. The Definition of the Parts of Speech and the Noun

In what follows, I will try to show that ‘Abdīshō‘’s characterization of Bar Zō‘bī’s grammatical work is not just an allusive wordplay, but rather an accurate and efficacious description of the compilatory structure of this text. Indeed, Bar Zō‘bī’s grammatical summa is not a mere juxtaposition of previous Syriac sources, nor is it a digested compendium. Rather, it is a carefully planned harmonization of all previous Syriac linguistic reflection, intertwining logic and technical grammatical sources, in order to progressively guide the reader to a universal system. All the definitions and notions presented in this text justify one another and are in a constant state of interplay, which could well be described as a texture, or a fabric, a *zqōrā*.

Let us consider the first paragraphs of the grammar, where Bar Zō‘bī introduces the parts of speech and provides various definitions of the noun, issued from the logic and grammatical approaches to language. The text begins with a quotation that goes back to the Syriac adaptation of the Greek *Téchne Grammatikè* made in the 6th cent. by Joseph Huzzāyā.²⁰

¹⁵ See the description of the manuscript by Grigory Kessel in [HMML Virtual Reading Room: https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/132224](https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/132224) (accessed 22 September 2019).

¹⁶ MAZZOLA, “A ‘Woven-Texture’ Narration: On the Compilation Method of the Syriac Renaissance Chronicles (Twelfth-Thirteen Centuries)”.

¹⁷ MAZZOLA, “A ‘Woven-Texture’ Narration”, 456.

¹⁸ MAZZOLA, “A ‘Woven-Texture’ Narration”, 456.

¹⁹ Salam Rassi, personal conversation, pointed at interesting analogies with ‘Abdīshō‘’s compilatory composition techniques, see RASSI, ‘Justifying Christianity in the Islamic Middle Ages: The Apologetic Theology of ‘Abdīshō‘ bar Brīkhā (d. 1318)’. *Idem, Christian Thought in the Medieval Islamic World*.

²⁰ CONTINI, “Considerazioni interlinguistiche sull’adattamento siriano della Techné Grammatiké di Dionisio Trace”. On the tradition of the Greek text and its Syriac translation, see the recent synthesis by CONTI, *Les sources grecques des textes grammaticaux syriaques*. Here is the first paragraph of the Syriac *Téchne*: “So those who have knowledge of the Greek [language] say that the word is the small part of the composition of the speech. The speech then is a sequence of composition of the word that expresses a complete thought. The parts of speech are eight, that is noun, verb, participle, pronoun, preposition, adverb, conjunction that in Greek are: ܐܘܢܘܡܐ ܪܥܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܘܡܐ ܥܘܢܘܡܐ ܥܘܢܘܡܐ ܥܘܢܘܡܐ ܥܘܢܘܡܐ ܥܘܢܘܡܐ ܥܘܢܘܡܐ ܥܘܢܘܡܐ *onoma, remake, metoke, arthro, antonima, protasis, epirema, sindesmos*” (Syriac text edited by MERX, *Historia artis grammaticae apud Syros*, *50-*51).

The parts of speech, according to the thought of the Greek grammarians and according to what composition allows for in their language are eight. The Syriac masters, instead, those who were proficient in the art of grammar of the Greeks and tried it upon the language of the Syrians, found that the parts of speech are seven, according to what the Syriac language allows for. And these are: noun, verb, pronoun, verb of the noun [i.e. participle], adverb, preposition, conjunction.”²¹

This first paragraph clearly situates the text in the domain of grammar as opposed to that of logic. Between the 5th and the 6th century, Syriac linguistic thinking developed by assimilating and adapting Greek materials stemming from the logic and grammatical traditions. The individuation of the parts of speech was one of the characteristic features identifying the different streams of language theory. The Aristotelian and a part of the Stoic tradition subdivided speech into three categories: noun, verb and conjunction. The grammatical tradition, as represented by the (Pseudo)-Dyonisian *Téchne Grammatiké* (the most widespread grammatical reference in the Late Antique Middle East), enumerated eight parts of speech.²² The reference to the grammatical *genre* of the *Téchnai* is made explicit by the use of the expression “art of grammar” ܐܪܬܘܩܪܐ ܕܗܘܪܐܘܪܐ *ummānūtā d-grammaṭīqī*.

At the same time, by establishing a clear link with the Syriac *Téchne* and with its Greek model, the reference to the seven parts of speech can also be interpreted as a rejection of Arabic linguistic theory. Indeed, Arabic analysis of language is also based on a subdivision of speech into three classes: noun, verb and particle.²³ Some East Syriac grammarians, such as Elias of Ṭīrhan (d. 1049) and Iṣō‘yahb Bar Malkōn (12th-13th cent.) had already adopted this theoretical model, as would the West Syriac polymath Barhebraeus (d. 1286) a generation after Bar Zō‘bī.²⁴

Once identifying the parts of speech, Bar Zō‘bī moves to the logical-philosophical level, providing a first definition of the noun, this time taken from Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias*:²⁵

Hence, the noun is a voice meaning by convention and timeless, no part of which is meaningful when taken apart. When it is found together with ‘was’, ‘is’ or ‘will be’ it expresses truth or falsehood.²⁶

²¹ Syriac text according to London, BL Add 25876, f. 35v-36r (WRIGHT, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired Since the Year 1838*, vol III, 1175). For a list of the manuscripts of Bar Zō‘bī’s grammatical texts see FARINA, “Manuscrits de grammaires et lexiques syriaques”, 249.

²² The Syriac tradition only retained seven out of these eight parts of speech. For the treatment of the parts of speech in Syriac grammars see FARINA, *La tradition grammaticale syriaque comme ‘extension’ de la grammaire grecque*.

²³ For a discussion on the differences between the logical Aristotelian tripartition and the grammatical Arabic one, see VERSTEEGH, *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking*, Ch. III, esp. 38-39.

²⁴ See MERX, *Historia artis grammaticae*. For the parts of speech and the Arabic model in Barhebraeus, see also FARINA, “La Grammatica Metrica di Barhebraeus (XIII sec.) e le sue glosse. Siriaco, greco e arabo in contatto”.

²⁵ For the Syriac versions of *Peri Hermeneias* see HOFFMANN, *De hermeneuticis apud Syros*; HUGONNARD-ROCHE, *La logique d’Aristote du grec en syriaque*, ID., “La tradition du *Peri Hermeneias* d’Aristote en syriaque, entre logique et grammaire”.

²⁶ London, BL Add 25876, f. 36r.

The first half of this paragraph is a literal quote from *Peri Herm.*, 2,16a19-20. The original Greek text reads: Ὀνομα μὲν οὖν ἐστὶ φωνὴ σημαντικὴ κατὰ συνθήκην ἄνευ χρόνου, ἧς μὴδὲν μέρος ἐστὶ σημαντικὸν κεχωρισμένον.²⁷ The second half of Bar Zō‘bī’s statement, however, is a re-elaboration of Aristotle’s remark in *Peri Hermeneias*, 2,16a32-16b5: τὸ δὲ Φίλωνος ἢ Φίλωνι καὶ ὅσα [16b] τοιαῦτα, οὐκ ὀνόματα ἀλλὰ πτώσεις ὀνόματος. λόγος δὲ ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα κατὰ τὰ αὐτά· ὅτι δὲ μετὰ τοῦ ἐστὶν ἢ ἦν ἢ ἔσται οὐκ ἀληθεύει ἢ ψεύδεται, τὸ δὲ ὄνομα ἀεὶ.²⁸

The text goes on with definitions of voice, of its genus and species, where Bar Zō‘bī incorporates material from Proba’s commentary on *Peri Hermeneias*:

And the sound is a blow in the air that is peculiar to the sense of hearing, and the voice is a blow in the animate being, that comes from the compression of the chest and lungs, when the air rising from the breath is constrained, and is diffused to the artery (larynx) and to the palate.²⁹

Having thus distinguished between sound and voice, Bar Zō‘bī presents a second definition of the noun, integrating Aristotelian and (Pseudo)-Dionysian materials: “So, call the noun rightly a voice endowed with meaning, that signifies man, horse, stone, or knowledge, instruction and intelligence.” Indeed, the examples given in this paragraph all belong to the Syriac translation of the definition of noun in the *Téchne*: “The noun is a part of speech that signifies either a body or an action. A body is like *man, horse, stone*, while an action is *instruction, knowledge, intelligence*.”³⁰

All the preceding definitions of the noun are subsequently integrated in the wider Aristotelian discourse on the distinction between speech and other non-signifying sounds, on the conventionality of language and on the distinction between noun and verb (unlike the verb, the noun does not express time).

c. Classifying Substantives and Classifying Substances

Bar Zō‘bī moves then to a classification of the species (ܐܕܫܐ *ādšē*) of the noun: the substantive nouns (ܩܝܢܐܝܐ *kyānāyā* lit. “natural”), the individual nouns (ܩܢܘܡܐܝܐ *qnōmāyā*), the nouns of

²⁷ Aristotle gives an analogous definition in *Poetica*, XX, 1457a.

²⁸ “The expressions ‘of Philo’, ‘to Philo’, and so on, constitute not nouns, but cases of a noun. The definition of these cases of a noun is in other respects the same as that of the noun proper, but, when coupled with ‘is’, ‘was’, or ‘will be’, they do not, as they are, form a proposition either true or false.”

²⁹ London, BL Add 25876, f. 36r-v. Bar Zō‘bī seems to have modified slightly but significantly Proba’s text, which reads: “The sound is a perceptible blow in the air that is proper to hearing. Whereas the voice is a sound of the animate being, when by the compression of the chest the air that has entered is constrained from the lungs, when it falls suddenly into the artery that is called ܩܪܘܝܐ *harzūptā* (?) and into the palate.” HOFFMANN, *De hermeneuticis*, 71 (Latin transl. p. 97). The inclusion of a physiological and mechanical description of the production of human speech within the preliminary definitions of language is proper also of other Syriac grammatical texts. For example, we find something similar, and even more detailed, in a fragment *On the Definition of Speech* by David bar Pawlōs (late 8th-early 9th cent.): “[Speech] is composed by the tongue in the cavity of the mouth. And with the breath it is formed and forged by the organs that are in the mouth, in order to shape, in meaningful speech, the things that by it are said and predicated, by the tongue with the teeth. And also, which are formed in the roof of the palate, and are released with the breath by the tip of the tongue, which is the key to language. And they have vowels like a fruit of breathing with the throat, by vibrations of the air that is taken in.” The text, published with some shortcomings by GOTTHEIL, *Dawidh bar Paulos, a Syriac grammarian*. For a new critical edition of David bar Pawlōs’ linguistic texts, including the above-mentioned one, see FARINA, *Les textes linguistiques de David bar paulos*.

³⁰ MERX, *Historia artis grammaticae*, *51.

accident (ܩܕܫܢܐ *gedšānāyā*) and the nouns of action (ܩܕܫܢܐ *su 'rānāyā*) (Add 25876, f. 38r).³¹

A very significant move is hence made from the organization of language to the organization of the *realia* that the language signifies: “And the natural (or “essential” *kyānāyā*)³² nouns are all those indicating the nature (or “essence”, or “substance”: *kyānā*)³³ of the things that are in this universe.”³⁴ On this simple sentence relies the essential organizing principle of Bar Zō‘bī’s theory of language, connecting the previous logical exposition to an ontological framework that he builds on heterogenous sources of Stoic, Aristotelian and, as we will see in the next paragraph, Plotinian ascendancy³⁵. As observed by Aristotle in his *Metaphysica*,³⁶ the investigation into “essence” can be conducted from two different points of view: one by considering the essence as matter (οὐσία ὡς ὕλη) and examining its composition, the other by considering it as *logos* (οὐσία κατὰ τὸν λόγον) and analyzing its definitions.³⁷

In Bar Zō‘bī’s perspective, the consequence of these two gnoseological possibilities is that the universe and speech are united in essence (*kyānā*), and this justifies the possibility of language to seize and describe reality, as well as the possibility for mankind to seize and describe both the structure of language and of the cosmos. Hence, first of all, one has to define and describe essence (or *nature*, *kyānā*), and the cosmological system depending on it:

The nature of things is divided by means of the difference between two species: body (ܩܕܫܢܐ *gūšmā*) and non-body (ܩܕܫܢܐ ܠܐ *lā gūšmā*). The non-body is divided by means of the difference between splendor (ܩܕܫܢܐ *nahhīrūtā*), darkness (ܩܕܫܢܐ *hešōkūtā*), and the union of three species: angels, demons and souls. And the body by means of the difference between animate (ܩܕܫܢܐ *mnapšūtā*) and inanimate (ܩܕܫܢܐ ܠܐ *lā mnapšūtā*). And the inanimate is divided by

³¹ This subdivision is then summarized by Bar Zō‘bī in a scheme, where each category of noun is followed by an example (London, BL Add 25876, f. 45v):

| | | |
|------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| | <i>kyānāyā</i> | <i>barnāšā</i> (“man”) |
| Noun | <i>qnōmāyā</i> | <i>sōqrāṭīs</i> (“Socrates”) |
| | <i>gedšānāyā</i> | <i>’ukkāmūtā</i> (“blackness”) |
| | <i>su 'rānāyā</i> | <i>naggārūtā</i> (“carpentry”) |

³² See the entry in the grammatical lexicon in MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen: die grössere Grammatik des Barhebräus*, 50*.

³³ Brock’s illuminating considerations on the understanding of the term *kyānā* in the Church of the East are very relevant also for the understanding of Bar Zō‘bī’s approach to language hierarchy: “to the Church of the East, the term *kyana*, or ‘nature’ (corresponding to Greek *physis*) was understood as being close in meaning to *ousia*, or ‘essence’” (BROCK, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer”, p. 6). See also MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen*, *50: “wesentlich” but also “substanzbezeichend” that is “konkretes Substantiv”. The potential interchangeability of the concepts of “nature” and “essence” in Aristotle’s expositions is already remarked by the Stagirite in the *Metaphysica*, Δ, 4, 1014 b 36-37, see BIGAJ and SEWERYN, “Le langage et l’essence des choses chez Aristote”, 91 esp. fn 46.

³⁴ London, BL Add 25876, ff. 38r-41r. An edition of this portion of Bar Zō‘bī’s grammar (with French translation and commentary) was recently published by BOHAS, “Définition du substantif et catégorisation des choses qui sont dans l’univers chez Bar Zo‘bi”, with a careful identification of the Aristotelian sources.

³⁵ BOHAS, “Définition du substantif”.

³⁶ *Metaphysica*, A, 9, 992 b 1-2 ; Z, 10, 1035 b 12-13. See BIGAJ and SEWERYN, “Le langage et l’essence des choses chez Aristote”, 92-93, fn. 49-50 for a more extensive list of passage.

³⁷ BIGAJ and SEWERYN, “Le langage et l’essence des choses chez Aristote”, 92-93.

means of other distinctions into elements (ܐܫܬܘܟܨܐ *estūksē*) and those inanimate that are derived from them, that is earth, fire, water and air...³⁸

As was noted by Merx, this taxonomy does not follow any of the classical Syriac systems of classifying nouns, but is derived instead from the philosophical tradition, following the scheme of the nine last *Categories* and being a quote from Paul the Persian (6th cent.).³⁹

Then follows a very long and detailed description of all the sub-species of these categories, essentially built on Aristotle's *Categories* and on other works by the Stagirite.⁴⁰ Bar Zō' bī seamlessly shifts, from the grammatical and logical description of the properties of the noun, into a long and detailed classification of the species of a rather cosmological character. For sake of brevity we will give here only a brief example of the contents of this section, concerning the classification of the trees-plants:

... And the tree-plants are divided in trees that do not bear fruit, such as the Lebanon cedar and the plane tree etc. And the fruit tree such as the palm tree and the apple tree etc. And this is divided between those that have a shell, such as the almond and the walnut and the pomegranate; and those that do not have a shell, such as the plum and the fig and the raisins. And those having a shell are divided into three species, in sweet, such as the pomegranate, in sour such as the oranges and in oily, such as the almond and the walnut. Those not having a shell are subdivided in those with a hard core, like the tamarinds and the olives etc., and those without a hard core, like the figs and the apple and so forth...

In the passages of Bar Zō' bī's grammar that we have analysed so far, we have found excerpts from the Syriac adaptation of the Greek *Téchne Grammatikè*, Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias*, Proba's commentary on *Peri Hermeneias*, Paul the Persian's exposition of the last nine *Categories*, Porphyry's *Isagoge*, Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* and the *Meteorologica*. All these different sources are arranged in a continuous and fluid exposition, where the passage from one quote to the next appears to follow the logical necessity of a coherent system of knowledge. In this sense, they correspond to the feature of a "woven-textile", as enunciated by Michael the Great, according to Mazzola's reading (see 2.a. above). In the case of Bar Zō' bī, the compositional criterion is the principle of the correspondence between grammar, logic and the natural sciences, which governs the entirety of this East Syriac master's work, and that has its most complete expression in Bar Zō' bī's *Universal Canon*, "encompassing all things".⁴¹

³⁸ Cosmological outlines of this sort can be found elsewhere in Bar Zō' bī's philosophical works, often in combination with logical and linguistic explanation, for example in the text "On the composition and dissolution of causes: naturally, logically, and grammatically". A copy of this text is found in Mardin, CCM 22 ff. 145v-146v (a manuscript containing also Bar Zō' bī's grammar). In the first quire of the same manuscript, at the end of a poem attributed to Ḥāmīs bar Qardāhē, a different hand has added two circular diagrams, representing the causal relations described by Bar Zō' bī's aforementioned composition. For metadata (by Grigory Kessel) and images of this manuscript, see [HMML Virtual Reading Room: https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/132224](https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/132224) (accessed 22 September 2019).

³⁹ LAND, *Anecdota Syriaca* IV, 7,6, see MERX, *Historia artis grammaticae*, 162, MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen*, *50. On Paul the Persian and his philosophical compositions see HUGONNARD-ROCHE, *La logique d'Aristote du grec au syriaque*, 233-254 and ID., "Sur la lecture tardo-antique du *Peri Hermeneias* d'Aristote: Paul le Perse et la tradition d'Ammonius".

⁴⁰ BOHAS, "Définition du substantif" points at the *Historia Animalium* and *Meteorologica*.

⁴¹ [ܩܢܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ \(qānōnā gawnāyā d-hābeš kullā\)](https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/132224). For a description of the contents of this work see SELEZNYOV, *Yōhannān Bar Zō' bī and his "Explanation of the Mysteries"*, 11. See also SACHAU, *Handschriftenverzeichnisse*, I, 340-341.

3. Bar Zō‘bī’s Theological Perspective on Language

a. Nature and Substance: The Hierarchy of Nouns

The classificatory principle that was presented in the previous paragraph relies upon the hierarchical organization of nature and hypostasis, genera and species. After concluding his cosmological digression, Bar Zō‘bī introduces a series of definitions, taken from Porphyry’s *Isagoge*,⁴² framing all of the realia that were previously enumerated, thus providing the broader philosophical and, as we will see, theological context for his linguistic analysis:

Substance (*kyānā*, nature) is something that stands by itself and is a *genus* (ܩܢܝܢ *gensā*) that is *genus of generas*, that gives its matter (ܗܘܠܐ *hūlā*) to many things that vary from one another in species (ܐܕܫܐ *ādšē*). [...] Those which are generated from nature are named *species* and *generas*, that are under one another. [...] Species is something that stands by itself, the species of all species. And it gives its matter to the *generas*, which vary from one another only in number.⁴³

This last series of definitions provides the philosophical seal for the grammatical theory, the ultimate justification for the existence of the linguistic category of the substantive, or *natural*, or *essential* noun.

To my knowledge, before Bar Zō‘bī, the grammatical category of the *kyānāyā* noun is only mentioned by David Bar Pawlōs (West Syriac, end of the 8th - beginning of the 9th cent.), in a very synthetic grammatical exposition entitled *On the Subdivision of Natural Nouns (mkānāyā) and on All Sorts*.⁴⁴ In this case, there is no theoretical definition of this class, which is characterized by means of synonyms (“primitive, natural, principal and self-existing”) and seems to indicate simple nouns as opposed to derived ones, that is, by means of different morphological processes.⁴⁵

Whatever the origins of this nominal category may be,⁴⁶ it is clear that Bar Zō‘bī broadens the scope of this concept, turning it into a crucial element of his linguistic thought. His theorizing effort aimed at laying out the (onto)logical foundations of a metalinguistic category, thus

⁴² *Isagoge* II, 6-7; see BOHAS, “Définition du substantif”, 38-39.

⁴³ London, BL Add 25876, f. 41v.

⁴⁴ Syriac text edited and translated into English by GOTTHEIL, “Dawidh bar Paulos, a Syriac grammarian”, cxiii-cxv. For a list of the manuscripts of this text see FARINA, “Manuscrits de grammaires et lexiques syriaques”, 245.

⁴⁵ Examples of the *kyānāyā* category are *‘alāhā* (God), *mal’akā* (angel), etc., whereas examples of the derived classes are *‘alāhāyā* (divine), *mal’akāyā* (angelic), *‘aprānā* (mortal/earthly) from *‘aprā* (dust) etc. GOTTHEIL, “Dawidh bar Paulos, a Syriac grammarian”, cxii, has individuated the sources of this subdivision in the Syriac *Téchnē*, from which most of David’s examples seems to be derived. However, the term *kyānāyā* does not feature in the *Téchnē*.

⁴⁶ The *šmā kyānāyā* is not mentioned in older Syriac grammars, such as the Syriac *Téchnē* nor in what is left of Jacob of Edessa’s *Turrāš mamllā*, nor by 11th cent. grammarians Elias of Nisibis and Elias of Țirhan. However, the expression *šmā kyānāyā* features in Bar Bahlūl’s *Lexicon* (10th cent.), under the lemma *mal’akā* “angel”: Bar Bahlūl states that “there is absolutely no natural name for an incorporeal entity” (DUVAL, *Lexicon Syriacum auctore Hassano Bar Bahlule*, II, p. 1087). Moreover, a definition of the noun (*šmā*) as *qālā kyānāyā* (in this case opposed to a voice “by convention”) is found in Proba’s commentary to the definition of the noun given by Aristotle in *Peri Hermeneias* (cf. HOFFMANN, *De Hermeneuticis*, Syriac texts p. 72, Latin transl. p. 98 and note 59 p. 124).

justifying and explaining its position within the broader class of the noun, as well as within the universe that nouns seize upon and define.

After Bar Zō‘bī, the great West Syriac grammarian of the 13th cent., Barhebraeus (d. 1286) mentions the “natural” or “essential” noun in both of his grammatical works.⁴⁷ In his *Metrical Grammar*, the *kyānāyā* noun is still the apex of nouns, corresponding to the substantive, or a general noun, as opposed to all the other classes that are subsumed under the noun (Syr. *šmā*, Ar. *’ism*), in terms of Arabic linguistic theory (which Barhebraeus programmatically adopts in the introduction of this text):⁴⁸ “And the noun is subdivided into four parts, no doubt: / substantive (ܟܝܢܐܝܝܐ *kyānāyā*), pronoun (ܠܗܘܐܝܝܐ *hlāp šmā*), adverb (ܐܠܡܬܐ *al meltā*) / and participle (ܡܠܠܐܝܝܐ *mellat šmā*)... The accidents of the substantive noun are: genera, species, numbers, schemes and diathesis.”⁴⁹ In this definition, the “natural” noun is not opposed to other subordinated categories, such as the individual (or hypostatic) noun, but rather to other morpho-syntactic classes. In the later *Ktābā d-šemḥē* (*Liber splendorum*), the *kyānāyā* noun is described as such:

Every noun, when it only refers to one [entity] is a noun of individual (*qnōmāyā*) ... when it refers to a single entity and to all that is similar to it, it is a general noun (ܟܝܢܐܝܝܐ *gensānāyā*). This, when it exists in⁵⁰ reality is called concrete (ܟܝܢܐܝܝܐ *su rānāyā*), when it exists in the intellect, it is called abstract (ܟܝܢܐܝܝܐ *sukkālāyā*). When the concrete noun designates something unqualified, it is a noun of substance (*kyānāyā*), such as “man”, “horse”, but when it designates something qualified, it is a qualificative (ܟܝܢܐܝܝܐ *’aynāyā*), such as “doctor”, “geometrician”.⁵¹

Here the category of the *kyānāyā* noun has completely abandoned the central position that it had in Bar Zō‘bī’s organization of the nominal class, and it has lost also the over-arching position that it had retained in Barhebraeus’ *Metrical Grammar*. Moberg attributes the causes of this drift to the different ontological framework of Barhebraeus’ grammatical theory, in which the opposition between substance (or “nature”) and accident no longer played a central role: “In BH I [= *Ktābā d-šemḥē*] war für diese letzte Distinktion kein Platz mehr, und darum wurde den (von Sev.?) herübergenommenen Termini ein anderer Sinn untergeschoben.”⁵²

Coming back to Bar Zō‘bī’s grammar, after having dealt with the *šmā kyānāyā*, the author moves on to treat the ܟܝܢܐܝܝܐ *šmāhē qnōmāyē*, “individual nouns”, rather than “hypostatic nouns” or substantives:⁵³

⁴⁷ See MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen*, 50*.

⁴⁸ See MERX, *Historia artis grammaticae*, 232, FARINA, “La Grammatica Metrica di Barhebraeus (XIII sec.) e le sue glosse. Siriaco, greco e arabo in contatto”.

⁴⁹ MARTIN, *Œuvres grammaticales d’Abou’lfaradj “dit” Bar Hebreus*, II, 8-9.

⁵⁰ MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen*, *25

⁵¹ MOBERG, *Le livre des splendeurs*, 7.

⁵² MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen*, *51.

⁵³ For the value of the term *qnōmā* in the doctrine of the Church of the East, cf. the following consideration by Brock: “When the Church of the East uses *qnoma* in connection with ‘nature’ it usually speaks of ‘the two natures’ and their *qnomas*, where *qnoma* means something like ‘individual manifestation’: a *qnoma* is an individual instance or example of a *kyana*” (BROCK, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer”, p. 6). On the same topic see also BROCK, “The Christology of the Church of the East”. Moreover, Bar Zō‘bī’s understanding of *qnōmā* as individual is connected with the association that is found in some East Syriac authors of *qnōmā* with Aristotle’s Primary Substance and *kyānā* with Secondary substance (*Cat.* V 2a11-4a2), the primary being individual and proper, the secondary universal and general. I am grateful to Salam Rassi for pointing this circumstance to me.

Then we speak about the nouns of individual that are distinguished one from the other by the species of nature. Thus, the nouns of individual are all those that are distinguished from one another by the species of the nature.

In fact, the hypostasis (*qnōmā*) is distinguished from the nature in this [way]: nature is divided into many species, as we have shown above. The hypostasis then cannot do this, but rather is divided into limbs, that is the hands, the legs, the head and the other limbs. In fact, that nature is divided in species, and species in hypostasis...⁵⁴

This definition and its argumentative structure are reminiscent of the very first lines of another treatise by Bar Zō‘bī “On the distinction between nature (*kyānā*) and hypostasis (*qnōmā*) and between person (ܩܘܢܘܡܐ *paršōpā*) and face (ܩܘܢܘܡܐ *appē*)”:

Nature is distinguished from hypostasis by the quantity (ܩܘܢܘܡܐ *kmāyūtā*) that they possess. In fact, nature is universal, whereas hypostasis is singular. When divided, nature gives rise to species and hypostasis. Hypostasis, on the contrary, when divided disappears completely, because when you divide the hypostasis into parts it perishes and does not preserve its nature at all.⁵⁵

The philosophical argumentation on the hierarchical relations among nature, hypostasis, person and face is meant as a premise for the understanding of a trinitarian and Christological doctrine:

Everything that was said so far is a door and an introduction to the doctrine of God. When I say God, I mean the general nature (*kyān gawā*). When, instead, I say the Word, I talk about the hypostasis of the Word. When I say the Son, I demonstrate the person of the Word. That is, in nature and in hypostasis the Word is not distinguished from the general. The Word is distinguished through nature, because the essence (*‘ūtūtā*) is one...⁵⁶

As we mentioned above (§2.a, fn. 14), this theological treatise, which is part of the *Zqōrā mlahmā*, often accompanies Bar Zō‘bī’s grammatical corpus in the manuscripts. This suggests that the text was considered to be closely connected to the scholar’s grammatical work. In fact, it constitutes the theoretical grounding and the theological premise on which the whole of Bar Zō‘bī’s linguistic construction must be interpreted and understood.

It is the pivotal role of *kyānā* in theological exposition and its hierarchical relationship with the other Christological attributes that justify the position of nature at the top of the linguistic system. It is the correspondence between the description of the divine on the one hand and the structure of creation, thought and language on the other that enables man to understand and describe reality.

The divine principle, therefore, authorizes and legitimizes the operation of metalinguistic description, at a logical and grammatical level.

⁵⁴ London, BL Add 25876, f. 42v.

⁵⁵ FURLANI, “Yohannān Bar Zō‘bi sulla differenza”, 273, 279-280.

⁵⁶ FURLANI, “Yohannān Bar Zō‘bi sulla differenza tra natura ed ipostasi e tra persona e faccia”, 275, FURLANI, “Giovanni Bar Zō‘bī sulla differenza tra natura ed ipostasi e tra persona e faccia”, 233.

b. The Chapter on Compound Nouns

A clear example of the application of the principle of a theological foundation of grammar can be found at the end of the section on the nouns of individual of Bar Zō‘bī’s grammar. According to the definition presented above, the nouns of individual are those designating specific individuals, such as (but not only) proper nouns. The nouns of individual have a number of accidents, corresponding to the Aristotelian categories as well as the doctrine of the accidents of the noun in the *Téchne Grammatiké* (i.e. genera, species, numbers, schemes, diathesis, cases).

In the section on the schemes (or figures, *ʿeskēmē*) of the noun, Bar Zō‘bī treats simple and compound nouns (*šmāhē mrakbē*), and classifies the possible strategies of nominal composition in Syriac.⁵⁷ This very technical subject is parsed by Bar Zō‘bī into two sub-sections, the first one constituting a sort of scriptural and theological introduction to the second one.

The exposition begins as follows:

...the schemes are three: simple, compound and over-compound. The simple is like *ʿab* (father), the compound is like *ʿAbrām* and the over-compound is like *ʿAbrāhām*. In fact, in its simple form [the noun *ʿab*] declares the fatherhood that he [Abram] will have. Then, in its compound form, it indicates the fatherhood of the people that he will have through the birth of Isaac. Finally, in its over-compound form, it shows the paternity over the peoples that he will have through the birth of the Messiah.⁵⁸

The three schemes simple (*pšītā*), compound (*mrakbā*), and over-compound (*yattīr men mrakbā*), as well as the use of this Abrahamic triad, are derived from the theory of schemes formulated in the Syriac translation of the Greek *Téchne Grammatiké*, literally quoted in the first two lines.⁵⁹ The selection of the Syriac examples is based on a segmentation of the names *ʿAbrām* and *ʿAbrāhām* as composed respectively by *ʿab* (“father”) + *rām* (“elevated”), giving us “the Father is exalted”, and *ʿab* (“father”) + **rāhām* (“multitudes”?), giving us “the Father of the multitudes”.⁶⁰ These examples are inspired by Gen 17.5: “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations,” and are used in place of the original Greek ones, adapted to the morphological and compositional strategies of that language:

- simple (ἀπλοῦν), such as Μέμνων
- compound (σύνθετον), such as Ἀγαμέμνων
- derived from the compound (παρασύνθετον), such as Ἀγαμεμνονίδης, Φιλιππίδης

⁵⁷ London, BL Add 25876, f. 54v-57r. An extensive and detailed commentary on this section of Bar Zō‘bī’s grammar is found in FARINA, “Le traitement des noms composés par les grammairiens syriaques”.

⁵⁸ London, BL Add 25876, f. 54v.

⁵⁹ For the text of the Greek *Téchne* see LALLOT, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace*, p. 53, 12 §C. For the Syriac translation, see Merx, *Historia artis grammaticae*, p. 54*. See also FARINA, “Le traitement des noms composés par les grammairiens syriaques”, esp. 212 and 216-218.

⁶⁰ The latter is a paretyymology built on the passage from Genesis. The only known Hebrew word that could be involved is *hām/hāmot* “multitude”.

The choice of rendering the Greek παρασύνθετον as “more than compound” or “over-compound” apparently prevented the Syriac translator of the *Téchne* from fully seizing on the sense of this last category. The biblical passage offered a handy nominal trilogy, which belonged to the core of the exegetical teaching and was thus easily retained by students of grammar. However, from the point of view of Syriac morphology, there is no relevant difference to be grasped between the compound and over-compound examples.

Rather than dismissing this aspect of the tradition, as some of his predecessors did,⁶¹ Bar Zō‘bī chooses to adapt it to his own theological and epistemological agenda. The over-compound scheme “Abraham” is read in the light of a Christological prefiguration. A second level of interpretation is thus introduced:

Moreover, in its simple form, it declares God Father; in its compound form, then, it indicates the hypostases (*qnōmē*) of the Son and of the holy Spirit; finally, in its over-compound form, it shows the faith and baptism that is given to the peoples with the coming of the Messiah. In fact, ܐ (*ālap*) and ܒ (*bēt*) and ܝ (*rēš*) designate the father, the son and the holy spirit. The ܘ (*hē*), then, and the ܡ (*mīm*) indicate the faith and the baptism.

Here the schemes of the noun are set within a trinitarian and doctrinal framework, evoking a redemptional power of the over-compound form. The demonstration of the prefiguration of Christ in the name of Abraham is built upon an acrostic reading, which can be represented as follows.⁶²

| | | | |
|---|-------------|-----------------------------|---------|
| ܐ | <i>ālap</i> | <i>’ab</i> (father) | ܐܒ |
| ܒ | <i>bēt</i> | <i>brā</i> (son) | ܒܐ |
| ܝ | <i>rēš</i> | <i>rūḥā</i> (spirit) | ܝܚܘܝ |
| ܘ | <i>he</i> | <i>haymānūtā</i> (faith) | ܘܚܝܡܘܬܐ |
| ܡ | <i>mīm</i> | <i>ma’ mōdītā</i> (baptism) | ܡܘܕܝܬܐ |

Finally, the last interpretation of the triad is a teleological and soteriological representation of humankind’s progression towards knowledge of God:

And then its simple form declares the smallest quantity of knowledge concerning God that the generations before Abraham possessed. In fact, they considered God like a man. In its compound form it indicated the middle quantity of the knowledge of God that the generation after the House of Abraham possessed, until the raising of the Sun of justice, even if they considered God only as

⁶¹ Whereas John the Stylite relegates the Abramic examples to a small sentence at the end of his paragraph on compounds, Davīd Bar Paulos simply omits it, FARINA, “Le traitement des noms composés par les grammairiens syriaques”, 215-216.

⁶² This unusual procedure, which is not found in any other Syriac grammar, has a quite close parallel in the 12th-13th cent. Western habit of acrostic etymologies, such as HOMO = Habens Omnia Manu Omnipotentis or DEUS = Dans Eternam Uitam Suis, FLOS = Fundens Late Odorem Suum etc., see Klinck, *Die lateinische Etymologie*, 67-70. I am grateful to Anne Grondeux for pointing this reference to me.

simple spirit but conceived of him as limited. In its over-compound form, it shows the utmost level of the knowledge concerning God that the world possessed with the arrival of Christ.

This first section of clear theological scope is followed by a second, strictly technical one, approaching nominal composition in the classical terms of the Syriac grammatical tradition:⁶³

The holy Mār Elias of Nisibis⁶⁴ and others with him divide the scheme into two kinds, according to what is better suited to the Syriac language: simple and compound ... And the composition is in different ways: some are composed by two complete nouns, like ܝܗܘܐ ܐܗܐܝܘܢ *Yāhū-’āhāz*. Some others [are composed] by a complete and an incomplete noun, like ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ *mlek malkē*⁶⁵ (“king of kings”), ܦܝܠ ܩܕܝܫ *pīl tayšā* (lit. “elephant-goat”) and ܢܝܘܢ ܐܝܠܐ *’nez ’aylā* (lit. goat-deer > *hirco cervus*). Some others [are composed] by a nominal verb [i.e. verb-noun] and an incomplete noun, like ܕܠܗ ܕܡܝܢ ܕܡܝܢ *’ahhīd-kul* (“all-holding”) ܕܠܗ ܕܡܝܢ ܕܡܝܢ *qaddīš-kul* (“all-holy”).⁶⁶ Some others [are composed] by a verb and a complete noun, like ܫܘܬܐ ܗܡܪܐ *šātē-ḥamrā* (“wine-drinker”) and ܦܠܗܐ ܐܪܐ *pālah-’ar’ā* (earth-plougher)...⁶⁷

As I have shown elsewhere,⁶⁸ this second section summarises all previous Syriac technical grammatical reflections on compound nouns. The dropping of the category of over-compounds nouns in favor of a bipartite scheme of simple/compound that was “better suited to the Syriac language”, introduces an approach to nominal composition based on the morphological structure and grammatical classification of its components.

However, the prominent position and extensive discussion devoted to the group *’ab-’Abrām-’Abrāhām* should not be understated. They have a clear propaedeutic function and represent, once again, the conceptual background and theological and ontological basis of the understanding of the compositional process. The choice of the biblical example traces the creation of compound nouns back to divine speech: God creates the compound *’Abrāhām*, thereby guaranteeing both its ontological and historical meanings. At the same time, the Christological interpretation given by Bar Zō’bī turns the triad into a figure of the same hierarchical framework that he had explained in his Trinitary treatise *On the Difference between Nature and Hypostasis and between Person and Face*. This theological premise affirms the possibility of the nominal composition itself by invoking divine authority. It guarantees the

⁶³ For a complete discussion of this passage, see FARINA, “Le traitement des noms composés par les grammairiens syriaques”, 217-218.

⁶⁴ As has already been observed by GOTTHEIL, *A Treatise on Syriac Grammar by Mār(i) Eliā of Sôbhā*, 10 (fn. a), the passage is not found in Elias’ *Turrāš mamllā*. Gottheil questions the attribution to Elias and observes that the content of the passage closely follows the *Téchnē grammatiké*.

⁶⁵ The reading *mlek malkē* is found in Mardin, CCM 20 f. 24r. London, BL Add. 25876 has the form *mlek malkā*, and the text seems to have been erased and corrected between the *-l-* and the *-k-* letters, where the *syāmē* would have been expected.

⁶⁶ The expressions *’ahhīd kul* and *qaddīš-kul*, “all-holding” > “almighty” and “all-holy” respectively, are calques of the Greek compounds *παντοκράτωρ* and *πανάγιος*, respectively. An analogous formation is found in the Syriac compound *’ahhīd ’ālmā* “ruler of the cosmos”, a calque from the Greek *κοσμοκράτωρ* (cf. CIANCAGLINI and ALFIERI, “Iranian and Greek influence on the Syriac Lexicon: The Emergence of Compound Words”, 126).

⁶⁷ London, BL Add 25876 f. 56r.

⁶⁸ FARINA, “Le traitement des noms composés par les grammairiens syriaques”.

possibility that a compound such as 'nez 'aylā (lit. goat-deer, a kind of antelope),⁶⁹ which is formed by the human language, corresponds to a concrete entity.

3. Conclusions: The Sources of Metalanguage and the Re-Semantization of Syriac

From what has been said so far, it is evident that the scope of Bar Zō'bi's work far exceeds grammar; rather, it is at once logical, cosmological, ontological and theological. Nevertheless, the science of language is constantly brought back to the center of the exposition, through textual references to the *Téchne* and Bar Zō'bi's predecessors in the field of grammar.

The philosophical excursus thus has the effect of reconnecting with the ideological source of the linguistic metaphor (as we have seen in the case of *kyānā*), or even redefining the sources of metalanguage on a theological basis (as in the case of the compound noun, ܡܪܟܒܐ *mrakbā*).

The grammatical lexicon, like all technical lexicons, is based on the metonymic and metaphorical extension of common terms, or of technical terms from other fields, which are extended in turn.⁷⁰ The language of knowledge is thus a network in which all disciplines are interconnected and based upon culturally and historically determined epistemological foundations. The significant power and evocative force of linguistic metaphors depend on the possibility of accessing these foundations.

The result is that the chronological distance and the accidents of transmission end up disturbing the links that hold together the current lexicon and metaphors of the technical language. This is what happened, for example, over the course of the transmission of Greek culture into the Syriac-speaking world throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The intense lexicographic work carried out by Syriac and Arabic scholars in the early Abbasid period, which was a prelude to the Syriac Renaissance, testifies to an effort to recover the linguistic foundations of scientific knowledge.

The operation that we have observed in Bar Zō'bi's Syriac grammar is an attempt to re-establish epistemological, linguistic, scientific and, from its author's point of view, ontological links that could guarantee the effectiveness of the linguistic metaphor. As such, one could describe this approach as a "re-semanticization" of language, which finds its rationale in an organic system of knowledge in which *tout se tient*.

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⁶⁹ This is the Syriac rendering of the Greek compound *τραγέλαφος*, see also BROCKELMANN, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 535. However, the term seems to have also indicated a kind of antelope: CIANCAGLINI and ALFIERI, "Iranian and Greek Influence on the Syriac Lexicon: The Emergence of Compound Words", 130.

⁷⁰ A clear example of this is all the sub-denominations and classifications of the name, such as the name *gensānāyā* "generic", which comes from *gensā* (borrowed from the gr. *γένος*), which indicates the sexual gender, grammatical, the relationship of filiation, as well as the category of gender opposite to that of species.

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