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Bar Zo‘bi’s Grammar and the Syriac “Texture of Knowledge” in the 13th Century¹

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

Within a conference and a publication devoted to the figure of ‘Abdīshō‘ bar Brīkhā, this paper attempts to contribute to the definition of the intellectual background of ‘Abdīshō‘’s works, by investigating the conception of language that was developed during the Syriac Renaissance and that was circulating in the 13th-14th century East Syriac milieu.

‘Abdīshō‘’s poetic summa *The Paradise of Eden* is rightly described as an extremely rich work, which has 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 by the Eastern Syriac ‘Abdīshō‘, as well as by the Western Syriac Barhebraeus?

As I will try to show 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, aiming at harmonizing 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),² the linguistic thinking of this time also harvests the fruits of the detailed lexicographic analyses of the Abbasid period. Language sciences are thus set in an organic framework, in which an effort is made to give back to the metalinguistic metaphor all its evocative potential and all its echo 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:³

- ‘Enanīshō‘ (7th cent.), who ܫܳܡܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ *sām šūhlāpā w-pūršānā d-qeryātā* “(com)posed the variety and the distinction of the readings” (p. 144).
- Ḥonayn ibn Ishāq (808-873), of which is said ܫܳܡܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ *sām w-hū grammāṭīqī* “he too composed a grammar” (p. 164-165).⁴
- John the Stylite (9th cent.): ܫܳܡܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ ܫܳܘܳܠܳܦܳܐ *bad w-hū grammāṭīqī* “he too made a grammar” (p. 256).⁵

¹ The author wishes to express her gratitude to Marianna Mazzola for her review and for her precious bibliographical suggestions, to Shelly Matthews for reviewing and correcting the English, to Angela Pieraccioni, for the long and fruitful conversations that contributed crucially to the shaping of this paper.

² A good example of this attitude is offered by the East Syriac manuscripts Berlin 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 Tirhān (11th cent.) and by Joseph Bar Malkon (12th 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 Reš‘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*, 321, n. 88).

³ Page numbers according to BO, III, 1. A modern edition of the catalogue, with an Arabic translation, is found in HABBİ, *Catalogus Auctorum*.

⁴ As this is the first mention of the term “grammar” in the *Catalogue*, the use of the form *w-hū* “he too” seems out of place. Would this be a reference to the fact that Ḥonayn composed mostly lexicographical works, but also a grammar, and so *he too* was to be considered as a grammarian?

⁵ The mention of John the Stylite (*Yūhannān Estūnāyā*) 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,

1681)¹⁴: ܪܘܟܒܐ ܕܠܗܝܡ ܠܐܡܠܘܬܐ *rūkābā d-laḥem la-mlīlūtā* “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 Mazzola¹⁵ has individuated the category of the “Woven-texture Chronicles”, characterized by a compilatory technique assembling together different and heterogeneous historiographical sources, arranging them in a harmonious composition. Such a technique appears to be specific of the Syriac Renaissance (Michael the Great – 12th cent., Anonymous Chronicle of 1234). Mazzola has pointed to explicit references to his own work as a *zqōrā*, in a remark by Michael the Great at the beginning of the thirteenth book of his Chronicle: “... 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*)”.¹⁶

Mazzola describes Michael’s technique as a “method of combining the extracts as fluidly and as homogeneously as possible”.¹⁷ 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.

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 word-play, 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 into a universal system. All the definitions and the notions presented in this text justify one another and are in a constant 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 Hūzāyā:¹⁸

“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,

¹⁴ See the description of the manuscript by G. Kessel on the website of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library: <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/132224> (visited 22 September 2019).

¹⁵ MAZZOLA, “A “Woven-Texture” Narration: On the Compilation Method of the Syriac Renaissance Chronicles (Twelfth-Thirteenth Centuries)”.

¹⁶ MAZZOLA, “A “Woven-texture” Narration”, 456.

¹⁷ ID, *Ibid.*

¹⁸ CONTINI, “Considerazioni interlinguistiche sull’adattamento siriano della *Techne Grammatikè* di Dionisio Trace”. On the tradition of the Greek text and on the 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 are in Greek as: ܐܘܢܘܡܐ ܘܡܘܬܘܟܐ ܘܐܪܬܘܐ ܘܐܢܘܢܘܡܐ ܘܡܘܬܘܟܐ ܘܐܪܬܘܐ ܘܐܢܘܢܘܡܐ ܘܡܘܬܘܟܐ ܘܐܪܬܘܐ ܘܐܢܘܢܘܡܐ *onoma, remake, metoke, arthro, antonima, protasis, epirema, sindesmos*” (Syriac text edited by MERX, *Historia artis grammaticae apud Syros*, *50-*51).

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 (participle), adverb, preposition, conjunction.”¹⁹

This first paragraph clearly situates the text in the domain of grammar, as opposed to that of logic. Syriac linguistic thinking developed, between the 5th and the 6th cent., by assimilating and adapting Greek materials stemming both from 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. The reference to the grammatical *genre* of the *Téchnai* is made explicit by the use of the expression “art of grammar” ܐܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ ܕܗܘܘܢܐ *’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 particle²⁰. Some East Syriac grammarians, such as Elias of Tirhān (d. 1049) and Iṣḏ‘yahb Bar Malkon (12th-13th cent.) had already adopted this theoretical model, as will also the West-Syriac polymath Barhebraeus (d. 1286), a generation after Bar Zō‘bī.²¹

Subsequently, Bar Zō‘bī moves to the logical philosophical level, giving a first definition of the noun, this time taken from Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias*:²²

“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.”²³

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 σηματικὴ κατὰ συνθήκην ἄνευ χρόνου, ἧς μηδὲν μέρος ἐστὶ σηματικὸν κεχωρισμένον.²⁴ The second half of Bar Zō‘bī’s statement re-elaborates instead from Aristotle’s remark in *Peri Herm.*, 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 ἔστιν ἢ ἦν ἢ ἔσται οὐκ ἀληθεύει ἢ ψεύδεται, τὸ δὲ ὄνομα ἀεί.²⁵

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*:

¹⁹ 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*, 3, DCCCCXCIX p. 1175). For a list of the manuscripts of Bar Zō‘bī’s grammatical texts see FARINA, “Manuscripts de grammaires et lexiques syriaques”, 249.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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”.

²² 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”.

²³ BL, Add 25876, f. 36r.

²⁴ Aristotle gives an analogous definition in *Poetica*, XX, 1457a.

²⁵ “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.”

“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.”²⁶

Having thus distinguished between sound and voice, Bar Zō‘bī presents a second definition of the noun, integrating Aristotelian and (Pseudo)-Dyonisian 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*.”²⁷

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 *edšē*) of the noun: the substantive nouns (ܐܘܢܐܝܢ *kyānāyā* lit. “natural”), the individual nouns (ܐܘܢܐܝܢ *qnūmāyā*), the nouns of accident (ܐܘܢܐܝܢ *gedšānāyā*) and the nouns of action (ܐܘܢܐܝܢ *sū‘rānāyā*) (Add 25876, f. 38r).²⁸

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*)²⁹ nouns are all those indicating the nature (or “essence”, or “substance”: *kyānā*)³⁰ of

²⁶ 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 ܐܘܢܐܝܢ *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 Paulos (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 is accessible in the following manuscripts: BL Syr. 9 (ff. 196v-197r), Ming. 420 (ff. 62r-63v), THRI 70 (ff. 56r-57r), for a complete list see Farina, “Manuscripts de grammaires et lexiques syriaques”, p. 245.

²⁷ MERX, *Historia artis grammaticae*, *51.

²⁸ This subdivision is then summarized by Bar Zō‘bī in a scheme, where each category of noun is followed by an example (Add 25876, f. 45v):

Noun	<i>kyānāyā</i>	<i>barnāšā</i> (man)
	<i>qnūmāyā</i>	<i>sōqrāṭīs</i> (Socrates)
	<i>gedšānāyā</i>	<i>’ūkāmūtā</i> (knowledge)
	<i>sū‘rānāyā</i>	<i>nagārūtā</i> (carpentry)

²⁹ See the entry in the grammatical lexicon in MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen: die grössere Grammatik des Barhebräus*, 50*.

³⁰ 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*

the things that are in this universe.”³¹ 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 ascendance³². As observed by Aristotle in *Metaphysica*,³³ the investigation on the “essence” can be conducted from two different points of view, one considering the essence as matter (οὐσία ὡς ὕλη) and questioning its composition, the other one considering it as *logos* (οὐσία κατὰ τὸν λόγον) and analyzing its definitions.³⁴

In Bar Zō‘bī’s perspective, the consequence of these two gnosiological 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 (ܩܘܫܐ *gūšmā*) and non-body (ܩܘܫܐ ܠܐ *lā gūšmā*). The non-body is divided by means of the difference between splendor (ܩܘܫܐ ܩܘܫܐ *nahīrūtā*), darkness (ܩܘܫܐ ܩܘܫܐ *hāšōkūtā*), and the union of three species: angels, demons and souls. And the body by means of the difference between animate (ܩܘܫܐ ܩܘܫܐ *mnapšūtā*) and inanimate (ܩܘܫܐ ܩܘܫܐ ܠܐ *lā mnapšūtā*). And the inanimate is divided by means of other distinctions into elements (ܩܘܫܐ ܩܘܫܐ *estūksē*) and those inanimate that are derived from them, that is earth, fire, water and air...³⁵

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.).³⁶

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.³⁷ 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.

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.

³¹ 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.

³² BOHAS, “Définition du substantif”.

³³ *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.

³⁴ BIGAJ and SEWERYN, “Le langage et l’essence des choses chez Aristote”, 92-93

³⁵ 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 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 Khamis Bar Qardahe, a different hand has added two circular diagrams, representing the causal relations described by Bar Zō‘bī’s aforementioned composition. For catalographic description (by G. Kessel) and for the images of the manuscript, see the website of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library <https://w3id.org/vhmdl/readingRoom/view/132224> (visited 22 September 2019).

³⁶ 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”.

³⁷ BOHAS, “Définition du substantif” points at the *Historia Animalium* and at the *Meteorologica*.

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 analyzed 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 (§ 2.a. above). In the case of Bar Zō‘bī, the compositional criterion is the principle of the correspondence between grammar, logic and natural sciences, governing the entirety of the East Syriac master’s work, and that has its most complete expression in the *Canon* “encompassing all things”.³⁸

Bar Zō‘bī’s theological perspective on language

a. Nature and substance: the hierarchy of nouns

The principle of the classification 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*,³⁹ framing all of the realia that were previously enumerated, and 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* (ܩܢܝܢܐ *gensā*) that is *genus* of *generas*, that gives its matter (ܗܘܠܐ *hūlā*) to many things that vary from one another in species (*edšē*). [...] Those which are generated from nature are named *species* and *generas*, that are under one another. [...] the species is something that stands by itself, the species of all species. And it gives its matter to the *generas*, that vary from one another only in number.⁴⁰

This last series of definitions is the philosophical seal, justifying the existence of the linguistic category of the substantive, or *natural*, or *essential* noun.

To my knowledge, before Bar Zō‘bī, the category of the *kyānāyā* noun is only mentioned by Dawīd Bar Pawlos (West Syriac, 9th cent.), in a very synthetic grammatical exposition “On the subdivision of natural nouns (*mkānāyā*) and on all sorts.”⁴¹ In this case,

³⁸ SELEZNYOV, *Yōhannān Bar Zō‘bī and his “Explanation of the Mysteries”*, 11.

³⁹ II,6-7, see BOHAS, “Définition du substantif...”, 38-39.

⁴⁰ BL Add 25876, f. 41v.

⁴¹ 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.

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 (by means of different morphological processes).⁴²

Whatever the origins of this nominal category may be,⁴³ 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 justifying and explaining its position within the broader class of the noun, as well as within the universe that nouns seize 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.⁴⁴ In his Metrical Grammar, the *kyānāyā* noun is still at the apex of the word-class of the nouns, corresponding to the substantive, a general noun, as opposed to all the other classes that are subsumed under the noun (Syr. *šmā*, Ar. *’ism*), in the terms of Arabic linguistic theory (which Barhebraeus programmatically adopts in the introduction of this text):⁴⁵ “And the noun is subdivided into four parts, no doubt: / substantive (ܩܢܘܡܝܝܐ *kyānāyā*), pronoun (ܩܘܠܘܒܐ *ḥlap šmā*), adverb (ܐܠܡܠܬܐ *al meltā*) / and participle (ܡܠܬܐ *mlat šmā*)... The accidents of the substantive noun are: genera, species, numbers, schemes and diathesis.”⁴⁶ 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 (*qnūmāyā*) ... when it refers to a single entity and to all that is similar to it, it is a general noun (*gensānāyā*). This, when it exists in⁴⁷ reality is called concrete (*sū‘arnāyā*), when it exists in the intellect, it is called abstract (*sūkālāyā*). 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 (*aynāyā*), such as “doctor”, “geometrician”.⁴⁸

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.”⁴⁹

⁴² Examples of the *kyānāyā* categorie are *’alāhā* (God), *mal’akā* (angel), etc., whereas examples of the derived classes are *’alāhāyā* (divine), *mal’akāyā* (angelic), *’aprānā* (earthy) 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 Dawīd’s examples seems to be derived. However, the term *kyānāyā* does not feature in the *Téchnē*.

⁴³ 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 *Tūrāš mamllā*, nor by 11th cent. grammarians Elias of Nisibis and Elias of Tirḥān.

⁴⁴ See MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen*, 50*.

⁴⁵ See MERX, *Historia artis grammaticae*, 232, FARINA, “La Grammatica Metrica di Barhebraeus (XIII sec.) e le sue glosse. Siriaco, greco e arabo in contatto”.

⁴⁶ MARTIN, *Œuvres grammaticales d’Abou’l’faradj “dit” Bar Hebreus*, II, 8-9.

⁴⁷ MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen*, *25

⁴⁸ MOBERG, *Le livre des splendeurs*, 7.

⁴⁹ MOBERG, *Buch der Strahlen*, *51.

Coming back to Bar Zō‘bī’s grammar, after having dealt with the *šmā kyānāyā*, the author moves on to treat the ܣܡܐ ܩܢܘܡܐ *šmāhē qnōmāyē* “nouns of individual”, rather than “hypostatic nouns” or substantives.⁵⁰

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: 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...⁵¹

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 (ܩܘܡܐܐ *paršōpā*) and face (ܩܦܐ *apē*)”:

Nature is distinguished from hypostasis by the quantity (ܩܡܝܘܬܐ *kmāyūtā*) that they possess. In fact, nature is universal, whereas hypostasis is singular. When divided, nature give 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.⁵²

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 (*ītūtā*) is one...⁵³

As we mentioned above (§2.a, fn. 12), this theological treatise, that is part of the *Zqōrā mlahmā*, often accompanies Bar Zō‘bī’s grammatical corpus in the manuscripts. This circumstance shows that the text was considered as closely connected to the scholar’s grammatical work. In fact, it constitutes the theoretical grounding and the theological premises on the basis of which the whole of Bar Zō‘bī’s linguistic construction needs to 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 and the structure of thought and language on the other hand that guarantees the possibility for man to understand and describe reality.

⁵⁰ 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”.

⁵¹ Add 25876, f. 42v.

⁵² FURLANI, “Yohannān Bar Zō‘bi sulla differenza”, 273, 279-280.

⁵³ FURLANI, “Yohannān Bar Zō‘bi sulla differenza”, 275, FURLANI, “Giovanni Bar Zō‘bī sulla differenza tra natura ed ipostasi e tra persona e faccia”, 233.

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

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, but also matching the doctrine of the accidents of the noun of the *Téchne Grammatiké* (genera, species, numbers, schemes, diathesis, cases).

In the section on the schemes (or figures, *’eskīmē*) of the noun, Bar Zō‘bī treats of the simple and compound nouns (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܩܘܪܘܢܐ *šmāhē mrakbē*), and classifies the possible strategies of nominal composition in Syriac.⁵⁴ This very technical subject is deconstructed 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 *’ab* (father), the compound is like *’Abrām* and the over-compound is like *’Abrāhām*. In fact, in its simple form [the noun *’ab*] declares the fatherhood that he [Abram] is going to have. Then, in its compound form, it indicates the fatherhood of the people that he will have through the birth of Ishāq. Finally, in its over-compound form, it shows the paternity over the peoples that he will have through the birth of the Messiah.⁵⁵

The three schemes simple (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ *pšītā*), compound (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ *mrakbā*), over-compound (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ ܩܘܪܘܢܐ *yatīr men mrakbā*), as well as the choice of the Abrahamic triad are derived from the theory of the schemes enunciated in the Syriac translation of the Greek *Téchne Grammatiké*, literally quoted in the first two lines.⁵⁶ The selection of the Syriac examples is based on a segmentation of the names *’Abrām* and *’Abrāhām* as composed respectively by *’ab* (father) + *rām* (elevated) “the Father is exalted” and *’ab* (father) + **rāhām* (“multitudes”?) “the Father of the multitudes”.⁵⁷ These examples are inspired by the passage of 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 to replace the original Greek ones, adapted to the morphological compositional strategies of that language:

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

⁵⁴ 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”.

⁵⁵ BL Add 25876, f. 54v.

⁵⁶ For the text of the Greek *Téchne* see LALLOT, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace* LALLOT, Jean, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace. Traduite et annotée par Jean Lallot. 2e édition revue et augmentée*, CNRS Editions, 1998. LALLOT, Jean, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace. Traduite et annotée par Jean Lallot. 2e édition revue et augmentée*, CNRS Editions, 1998., 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”.

⁵⁷ The latter is a paretymology retrospectively built on the passage of 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” has apparently prevented the Syriac translator of the *Téchne* from fully seizing 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 portion of the tradition, as some of his predecessors did,⁵⁸ Bar Zō‘bī choses 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 then introduced:

Moreover, in its simple form, it declares God Father; in its compound form, then, it indicates the hypostasis (*qnōmē*) of the Son and of the holy Spirit; finally, in its over-compound form, it shows the faith and the 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 and the son and the holy spirit. The ܗ (*he*), then, and the ܡ (*mīm*) indicate the faith and the baptism.

Here the schemes of the noun are set into a trinitarian and doctrinal framework, evoking a redemptional power of the over-compound form. The demonstration of the prefiguration of the coming Messiah within the name of Abraham is built upon an acrostic (almost Kabbalistic) reading, that can be represented as follows:

ܐ	<i>ālap</i>	<i>’ab</i> (father)	ܐܒܐ
ܒ	<i>bēt</i>	<i>brā</i> (son)	ܒܝܐ
ܝ	<i>rēš</i>	<i>rūḥā</i> (spirit)	ܝܫܘܥܝܐ
ܗ	<i>he</i>	<i>haymānūtā</i> (faith)	ܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ
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 in the knowledge of God:

And then its simple form declares the smallest quantity of knowledge over God, that the generations before Abraham had. 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 from after the house of Abraham had, until the raising of the Sun of justice, even if they considered God only as simple spirit, but they conceived him as limited. In its over-compound form, it shows the utmost level of the knowledge over God, that the world had with the arrival of the Messiah.

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:⁵⁹

The saint Mar Elias of Šōbā⁶⁰ and others with him divide the scheme in two sorts, 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, come ܝܗܘܐ ܐܘܪܝܢܐ *Yāhū-’āḥāz*. Some

⁵⁸John 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”.

⁵⁹For a complete discussion of this passage see FARINA, “Le traitement des noms composés par les grammairiens syriaques”.

⁶⁰As it was already observed by GOTTHEIL, *A Treatise on Syriac Grammar by Mār(i) Eliā of Šōbhā*, 10 n. a), the passage is not found in Elias’ *Tūrāš memllā*. Gottheil questions the attribution to Elias and observes that the content of the passage closely follows the *Téchne grammatiké*.

others (are composed) by a complete and an incomplete noun, like *mlek malkē*⁶¹ (king of kings), *pīl tayšā* (lit. elephant-goat), *'anez 'aylā* (lit. goat-deer > *hircocervus*). Some others (are composed) by a nominal verb (verb-noun) and an incomplete noun, like *'ahīd-kul* (all-holding) *qaddīš-kul* (all-holy).⁶² Some others (are composed) by a verb and a complete noun, like *šātē-ḥamrā* (wine-drinker), *pālah-'ar 'ā* (earth-plougher)...⁶³

As we showed in a former publication,⁶⁴ this second section resumes all previous Syriac technical grammatical reflection on compound nouns. The dropping of the category of over-compounds nouns, in favor of a bipartite scheme simple/compound “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 the extensive discussion devoted to the group *'ab-'Abrām-'Abrāhām* should not be underestimated. They have a clear propaedeutic function and they represent, once again, the conceptual background, the theological and ontological premise for 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* and provides guarantee for 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 the Trinitary treatise “On the difference between nature and hypostasis and between person and face”. This theological premise guarantees the possibility of the nominal composition itself, the legitimacy through divine authority. It guarantees the possibility that a compound such as *'anez 'aylā* (lit. goat-deer, a kind of antelope)⁶⁵ formed by the human language, corresponds to a real entity.

3. Conclusions: the sources of metalanguage and the re-semantization of Syriac

From what has been said so far, it can be seen that the scope of Bar Zō'bī's work far exceeds the grammatical description, to project itself into a dimension that is at once logical, cosmological, ontological and theological. However, the science of language is constantly brought back to the center of the exposition, through textual references to *Téchnē* and Bar Zō'bī'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, *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, extended in turn.⁶⁶ The language of knowledge is thus a network in which all disciplines are interconnected,

⁶¹ The reading *mlek malkē* is found in CCM 20 f. 24r. 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 *seyame* would have been expected.

⁶² The expressions *ahīd kul* and *qaddīš-kul*, “all-holding” > “almighty” and “all-holy”, are calques of the Greek compounds *παντοκράτωρ* and *πανάγιος*, respectively. Analogous formation is found in the Syriac compound *ahīd 'ālmā* “ruler of the cosmos”, a calque from Greek *κοσμοκράτωρ* (cf. CIANCAGLINI and ALFIERI, “Iranian and Greek influence on the Syriac lexicon: the emergence of compound words”, 126).

⁶³ Add 25876 f. 56r.

⁶⁴ FARINA, “Le traitement des noms composés par les grammairiens syriaques”.

⁶⁵ 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.

⁶⁶ 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.

on the base of culturally and historically determined epistemological foundations. The significant power and evocative force of linguistic metaphors depend on the possibility of accessing these foundations.

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, in the course of transmission of Greek culture in the East through 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 observe in Bar Zō'bī's Syriac grammar is the attempt to re-establish epistemological, linguistic, scientific and, from its point of view, ontological links that could guarantee the effectiveness of the linguistic metaphor. It is, so to speak, a "re-semantization" of language, which finds its rationale in an organic system of knowledge in which *tout se tient*.

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