The Role of the State in West Asia

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Reflections on the Linguistic Situation in Anatolia and Northern Syria from a Semitist’s Perspective

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In this article we are going to present some reflections on the linguistic situation in Anatolia among Arabic and Aramaic-speakers. It is obvious that the state – whether the modern states of Turkey or Syria or Iraq or their predecessors in Ottoman-empire – has played a decisive role in the formation of the groups that constitute the linguistic and ethnic landscape of present day Anatolia. We will concentrate our reflections to some specific parts of the Arabic-speaking area in Anatolia, from north to south: Sason, Siirt and Tur Abdin in Turkey, and the whole northern border region in Syria. These points of departure also represent the linguistic borders of a specific variety of spoken Arabic in Anatolia, which is called the *qaltu*-dialects. The *qaltu*-dialect group constitutes an ancient layer of Arabic, representing the first migration of Arabic-speaking people in this area after the Muslim conquest. This fact deserves a short background sketch.

**Historical background of the linguistic complexity in Anatolia**

At the time of the Muslim conquest, present day Syria and most parts of Anatolia were under the political control of the Byzantine empire. The degree of hellenisation of the common people was slight. ‘Only in the cities do there appear to have been sizeable numbers of Greek-speaking government officials’ (Holes 1995: 15). The vast majority of the indigenous population was peasants speaking various dialects of Aramaic (Donner 1981: 92–94). There were also nomadic Arab tribes inhabiting the Syrian desert that regularly visited the Syrian towns and traded with local merchants. This majority situation of an Aramaic-speaking sedentary population gradually changed in favour of the Arabic language in the centuries following the Muslim conquest in the middle of the seventh century. Today, there are only a few islands of the Aramaic speaking Christians in the Tur Abdin area in south-east Turkey. In this border region the linguistic complexity is great and we have the impression that nearly every non-Christian person in Tur Abdin speaks at least two languages today,

Kurdish and Turkish. Christians speak at least three languages, beside Kurdish and Turkish either Arabic or Turoyo (Neo-Aramaic), or both.

After the Muslim conquest it took many centuries of gradual evolution – political, administrative and socio-cultural – before the majority of the peoples in Syria was arabicised and islamised. In some of the peripheral areas neither arabicisation nor islamisation was ever completed. As we have been able to see for ourselves when we were travelling in northern Syria and in Anatolia, there are still groups of an Aramaic-speaking population in this area and among the native Arabic-speaking population there are still Christian groups, although they have lost the historical Aramaic vernacular.\textsuperscript{1}

The spread of the Arabic language in Syria is less fully documented than that of Egypt but it is safe to say that an Aramaic–Arabic bilingualism lasted for centuries. Aramaic was used at home and with other Aramaic speakers, Arabic for public and interethnic communication, especially outside the cities. And of course this bilingualism has left traces in the resulting Arabic dialects, which still bear Aramaic traits in their grammar that must be called an Aramaic substrate. The increasing prestige and use of Arabic as the language of government and state religion, together with the growth of mixed marriages and the bringing up of children as Arabic-speaking Muslims, were all factors that must have accelerated the disappearance of Aramaic.

A similar development is naturally discernible today in Anatolia, where Turkish is the language of the government and the officials, and is the only language permitted in the schools. Turkish has a long history as a spoken language in eastern Anatolia. Anatolia was opened up to a gradual penetration of nomadic Turks already with the Seljuk defeat of the Byzantine army at the battle of Manzikert north of the Lake of Van in 1071. From that time on, the eastern border of the Byzantine-empire was more or less open to the influx of Turks coming southwards and westwards from central Asia. This Turkish expansion would ultimately lead to the emergence of a new dynasty, the Ottomans, who by the end of the fifteenth century occupied the whole of Anatolia and the Balkans. The early Turkic tribes that conquered east Anatolia have, most probably, left some traces in the form of a cultural and religious substratum, but, linguistically, the exceptionally strong influence of Turkish on the Arabic dialects of Anatolia comes from modern Turkish. There are several reasons for this quick change. After the foundation of the republic of Turkey in the early 1920s, a process of ‘Turkification’ started. Two elements in this process are of a certain interest in this aspect and should be mentioned:

1. According to the Surname Act, \textit{Soyadı kanunu}, of 28 June 1934, all people living in Turkey must have surnames.\textsuperscript{2}

2. All names of cities, towns and villages must be derived from Turkish words. However, this principle was not effectuated by law but by recommendations from officials such as the local government commissioner, the local municipal council, etc.

\textsuperscript{1} Holes 1995: 18. There are also large groups of Arabic-speaking Christians in central and south Syria, e.g. Greek Orthodox.
\textsuperscript{2} Lewis 2002: 289. See also Ball 1991: 65 and Arnold 2000: 357. People from the Siirt region said that the authorities sent officials to the villages with a list of Turkish names and every family had to choose one. The ones who did not chose were given a family name that the officials chose for them.
In the late 1940s, the young Turkish state started a process of building schools in south-eastern Turkey. Within twenty years, schools came to almost every village, and children had the chance to learn how to read and write. This occurrence took place at a time when Kurdish dominance, at least linguistically, was growing stronger in the region. It was a time when whole non-Kurdish villages shifted totally to Kurdish. As an example, one can mention the Neo-Aramaic villages in the Tur Abdin area. Kafr, a village in the district of Midyat, was in a stage of total transition to Kurdish. In the early 1940s, only people forty years or older could understand and speak some Neo-Aramaic. Another village is Karborân, also in the district of Midyat. No one from this village speaks Neo-Aramaic at the present time. Today, there is a community of Karborân people living in Västerås in Sweden. Children belonging to this community and who are born in Sweden have Kurmanji as their mother tongue. The adults attend a Sunday mass held in Kurmanji, although they are Christians belonging to the Syriac Orthodox Church.3

Television came to the region in the 1970s, although only to the cities. Today, television is part of the basic furniture of households in the villages. All television programs are either in Turkish or dubbed into Turkish. Radio programs are broadcast in Turkish and newspapers are all written in Turkish. Turkish became the language of educated people, consequently gaining high status. Those who spoke good Turkish were considered to be educated and hence had a higher social status in the community.

It is quite interesting to analyse our linguistic data from Arabic dialects in this area. In northern Syria, along the border to Turkey, which is the most southern location of speakers of the archaic qalütu Arabic, Turkish influence is barely discernible in the Arabic vernacular, limited to some Turkish loanwords. In the northernmost part of the Arabic-speaking area of Anatolia, in Sason and Hasköy, as far to the north as Muş, Turkish traits in spoken Arabic abound and penetrate the whole language system, including phonology, morphology, syntax and of course the lexicon. The same powerful Turkish adstrate influence on Arabic is also evident somewhere in between those geographic extremes, in the vicinity of Siirt.

Since the field studies of Otto Jastrow in the late 1960s, Turkish has become a natural medium of communication, not only for Turkish officials but for all people in the Arabic-speaking area, particularly in the south-east. But Kurdish has also gained influence, because of a continuous influx of Kurds into areas formerly dominated by Christians, and because of the increasing necessity for the Arabic-speaking minority to communicate with the Kurds. In the north, in the Sason region, Turkish seemed to have remained a medium only for official communication and mass media. In the streets, and in the restaurants and cafés, we heard only Kurdish and Arabic. The Arabic speakers in the Sason district constitute an isolated border area on the linguistic map of the Arabic language. They normally do not see Arabic television or radio, so there is practically no influence from Modern Standard Arabic. The linguistic situation in eastern Anatolia is complex. On the one hand, Turkish dominates mass media and official communication completely, while on the other hand, Kurds constitute not a minority but a majority in eastern Anatolia. Hence the Aramaic and Arabic-speaking groups tend to develop a solid competence in Kurdish side by side with the Turkish that is learnt at school.

3 Based on interviews both with informants in situ and informants now living in Sweden.
Map showing the location of Siirt in south-eastern Turkey (see arrow). Tillo is located 9 kilometers north-east of Siirt (source: Ahamed, F. *The Making of Turkey*, London and New York 1991. The map is slightly modified).
The rise of Kurdish political power occurred in the wake of the disintegration of the Arab empire in 1258. Kurdish self-rule was largely a product of the evolving process of social and economic change inside the territory we usually call Kurdistan. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Kurdish society experienced increasing detribalisation, sedentarisation and urbanisation. Small kingdoms were formed with armies and civil bureaucracies. By the end of the seventeenth century, Kurdistan was under the rule of some forty large and small states (Hassanpour 1993: 111). We can assume that there was linguistic tension during this time between Arabic, Persian and Turkish on one side and Kurdish on the other. This tension was shaped by both the cultural and religious power of the dominant languages and the relative weakness of Kurdish as a literary and official medium of communication. ‘The loosely integrated Ottoman and Persian empires could not rule over Kurdistan directly and, as a result, were not in a position to impose the Turkish or Persian language on the native speakers of Kurdish who were out of reach and largely illiterate’ (Hassanpour 1993: 111). In the mid-nineteenth century, however, the Ottoman and Persian states overthrew the rule of the many small Kurdish states. By recent estimations Kurdish is spoken by about twenty million people. ‘The numerical strength of the language has been undermined, however, by the forcible division of its speakers among five states – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the former Soviet Union – and therefore by the transformation of the Kurds into minorities of various sizes in these countries’ (Hassanpour 1993: 107). Exact figures of the Kurdish population in Turkey are not available, but a moderate estimate by McDowall for the year 1980 was 8,455,000 people (McDowall 1985: 7).

Both the state and the market are decisive in determining a linguistic dominance. According to Hassanpour (1993: 140) ‘The state is certainly not the only factor in the distribution of linguistic power. In a developed capitalist society the market is arguably the most powerful determinant of language use in business such as book publishing, journalism, broadcasting, and even higher education. In developing countries, however, the modern state plays a major role in the destinies of minority languages.’ In the case of eastern Anatolia, it is safe to assert that the Turkish state has adopted an extremely restrictive attitude towards all minority languages, specifically Aramaic, Arabic and Kurdish, including any willingness to call them minority languages at all. During our fieldwork in eastern Anatolia, we met an official who argued that the term ‘minority’ implies a political responsibility towards the minority group and, even worse, it may invite neighbouring states to lay claims on Turkey. He specifically mentioned the claims of Syria on the Hatay province and the instability of the Turkish–Syrian border (cf. Emma Jørum in this volume).

Migration to and from villages in Syria and Turkey

We journeyed several times along the Turkish/Syrian border, on both sides. South of the border, in the Syrian towns of Amuda and Tel Mozan you may, in good weather, see the beautiful mountains of Tur-Abdin and the ancient town of Mardin climbing the mountain slopes. From the Turkish side, you look down on the large plains of ancient Mesopotamia. On both sides you may travel quite close to the border. On the Syrian side, the road along the border may get as close to the border as fifty metres, so close that you are able to observe not only the railway track of the once famous Orient express but also the watchtowers of the Turkish border defence. But usually you see no Syrian defence forces or
Syrian watchtowers at this border. During our fieldwork, as we travelled from east to west as far as the border to Hatay within Syrian territory, we discerned considerable tensions in the region, expressed by fear or ill-feelings against groups considered to constitute a local religious, linguistic or ethnic majority. Our informants were either Muslim Arabs or Christian Aramaic speakers, and hence the cases do not reflect a Kurdish viewpoint or majority standpoints in general. Tensions were clearly linked to how people understood the role – ideally and in practice – of various states in this complex situation of regional minorities and majorities. In the 1970s Christian groups from this area have found a refuge in the USA and Europe, not least of all in Sweden, and this migration has caused a depopulation of many formerly Christian-dominant towns and villages. This has of course caused much distress and fear among the few Christians that are left in the area. The Aramaic speakers we met on both sides of the border felt that their culture was perishing. They expressed fear over what they perceived as the regionally growing power of the Kurds and concomitantly their own demise as a religious, ethnic and linguistic group.

Fear of dominating groups is not limited to Christians, of course. According to the informants from Tillo, in the region of Siirt more than fifty per cent of the Arabic-speaking population had migrated in less than two years. The reasons for leaving Tillo may vary but two reasons are often mentioned in the material, namely: ‘There is no other place like our home village, both concerning weather and (concerning) everything else. It only has two disadvantages: In Tillo there is no water and there is no work’. The informants are careful not to put politically sensitive information on tape but when our tape-recorder was off these Arabic speakers voice a fear and dislike of the growth of the Kurdish-speaking population in their villages. Kurds, according to an informant, have many children, while they – the Arabic speakers, only have a few. Kurds, furthermore, are willing to do any kind of work for only half the wages asked by the Arabic-speakers. ‘Twenty to twenty-five years ago life in Tillo was much better than now. Today Tillo has been mixed (with other people). The way Turkey is a mixture of people, there too it is the same. Tillo has been mixed’ (quotation from an informant).

We also visited the village of al-Jalame, a couple of kilometres from the Hatay border. In that village, only about twenty families were Arabs (sunnı Muslims) and the rest, seven hundred families, were Kurds. The Arabs were of Bedouin origin but are now hadar (sedentary people). All male Arabs in the village speak Kurdish, and express that they are afraid of the continuous ‘expansion of the Kurds’. In the village of Deir Balute, only some hundred metres from the border to Hatay, there were only three or four Arab Muslim families. The rest were Kurds. But five kilometres to the south, only five hundred metres from the border to the Hatay, in the village of Atme, the whole community was Arabic. This community spoke neither Kurdish nor Turkish.

Migration from the Siirt region is occurring so rapidly that the Arabic speakers are worried that soon none of them will remain in their home villages, and that both their language and their culture will vanish. Such an anxiety is often observed in the recorded material. This anxiety is conspicuous when one studies some lines from an informant now living in Istanbul. He starts by saying: ‘I am teaching my daughter Arabic, but after her what will happen? Now my daughter goes to school where everyone else is a Turk’. He goes on by saying: ‘Now I have three daughters. These three daughters, if in the future they have four children each this makes them twelve. Everyone will then leave for a
different place. In such a situation we will get mixed with the Turks. We will get mixed with Turks and then what will happen? And he ends by saying ‘This is what will happen. We will forget ourselves. We will forget our origin and we will vanish. The lineage will come to an end’.

The difficulty in maintaining a language in ‘exile’ can be illustrated by the worries voiced by a fifty-five year old woman who moved to Istanbul nine years ago: ‘because people here in Istanbul talk like this (Turkish) we also do so. Nevertheless, our Arabic (talk) is much better and nicer.’

On 11 April 2002 we visited Tall Abyad, a small town about one hundred kilometres north of ar-Raqqa, on the Syrian–Turkish border with a frontier station. According to an Armenian informant, people here are divided into three distinct groups: Arabs, Kurds, and Christians (divided into Armenian and Syriac Orthodox). The Christians originate from Urfa (Şanlı Urfa). He said that there was a tension between the groups in Tall Abyad.

In April 1999, while travelling along the border, Isaksson visited three border towns, Amuda, Darbasiyye and Ras al-Ayn, located on the Syrian side of the border to Turkey, respectively 30, 56 and 116 km west of Qamishli. The towns are located in a border region where the effects of two dialect types are clearly perceptible. On the one hand, there are deeply felt roots in the Mardin area with its special kind of qalutu-Arabic and on the other, there is a strong influx of a more prestigious central Syrian tongue. The speakers in the recordings were mostly Christians of the Syriac Orthodox Church. In addition to Arabic, most of them also spoke a Neo-Aramaic dialect, Turoyo (Lahdo 1999). They all view themselves as native Mardilli speakers with historical roots in the Tur Abdin area in south Anatolia, with varying degrees of literacy (and the resulting influence from Modern Standard Arabic). Their own view of the dialect is expressed in a passage from Ras al-Ayn: ‘the way we are talking now, the speech we use belongs to the Mardin district and its environment. By environment we mean the villages, Qsor, Çefetlek, l-Manuriyye, Bnebil, and Qalat Mara’. In these three towns there is an increasing influx of Kurdish speakers. In all three towns there are also autochthonous Muslim Arab inhabitants that speak the same dialect as the Christians. But there is a generation gap. Younger speakers no longer master the native dialect: ‘I can tell you that this dialect is no longer used by those who are under thirty years. We have forgotten our dialect, I mean, in the same way as we have forgotten our first language (= Aramaic) we have forgotten our dialect also’.

According to the informants, in Darbasiyye there are about 55,000 people, of which 25,000 live in the town proper. 90 per cent are Kurds, 40–45 families are Christian and the rest are Arabs of Muslim confession. The Arabs come from Central Syrians cities and are officials of various professions, teachers, policemen, civil servants etc. The linguistic situation has changed rapidly in Darbasiyye. Before 1967, the portion of Christians speaking the traditional Mardilli was about 70 per cent, and before that the dominance of Christians was even greater: ‘Once all al-Darbasiyye was Christian. There were about five or six Arab families, or four, five Turkish families, some of them were from Diyarbakir and some of them from Berke’.

Ras al-Ayn has about 80,000 inhabitants, of which 50,000 live in the central part of the town. 2,500–3,000 are Christians. Two-thirds of the Christians are Aramaic speakers belonging to the Syriac Orthodox Church. There are also Christians of the Armenian Church in Ras al-Ayn.
During our field work we also came to the Turkish town Idil, with the Arabic name Azax, close to the Tigris river on the way between Midyat and Cizre, not far from the three state border crossing point of Turkey, Iraq and Syria. In Idil we encountered a few autochthonous Arabic speakers of the ancient qalatu-variety. They were all in all twenty-two persons from nine families. They were Syriac–Orthodox Christians, but did not speak Neo-Aramaic. They claimed that although they felt that the Turkish government seemed to be changing its policy towards the Christian minority, they were still called gavir, ‘infidels’, by people in the streets.

In a mountainous area in the Mardin district, in south-eastern Anatolia, there is a big village. This village has about 450 houses and three churches, with the houses largely in ruins. We visited this village 30 October 2000. Here, too, the people speak the ancient variety of Arabic, qalatu-Arabic. However, the informants tell us that their grandparents could speak the indigenous Aramaic dialect of the area, Turoyo. Now only two Christian families live (a total of seven persons). The rest of the inhabitants have, ‘for some reason’ emigrated to the United States, Brazil, Germany, Holland and Sweden, where the majority live on the outskirts of Stockholm. A young male informant told us that he and his mother had made several attempts to emigrate to Sweden, but that they were not successful. He was sad and could see no future in the village, but also claimed it would be difficult to leave his parents. Both he and his parents were afraid because his uncle was killed some years ago for the sake of money. In January 2003 his father died and hence the number of the Christian inhabitants of this village decreased by one-seventh.

During a field trip in October and November 2000 we also made a survey in Anatolia and visited the mountainous Sason region, where there are several more or less isolated villages, some of which were not accessible by car. This area has been the centre of power for the PKK, the Kurdish Workers party. The Kurds are still powerful outside the main roads and towns. In urban areas and main roads, however, the Turkish military presence is strong.

The autochthonous grown-up people in the Sason area seem to speak three languages: Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish. We asked several people when they learn those languages. Arabic is learnt at home, as vernacular, without any knowledge of writing. Turkish is taught in school. The children in Arabic villages apparently did not speak Kurdish. But as soon as they are of the age when they can visit the town alone, they start to learn Kurdish. It should be kept in mind, of course, that the Kurds constitute the vast majority in this area and that very few Kurds speak Arabic. Some of the Arabic speakers we met in Sason considered themselves Kurds: ‘Our parents and grandparents were Arabs but we are Kurds’.

We also visited Hasköy on the highway between Tatvan and Muş. As far as we know, Hasköy is the northernmost Arabic-speaking location in Turkey. We stayed one day in Hasköy and got a recording from an approximately thirty-year-old Arabic informant. This informant was furious when we met him because he was involved in a lawsuit with the authorities of agriculture. He had been granted a loan for one year and it had turned out that the harvest during the present year was bad. He claimed he had no chance of paying back the loan and hence would be sent to jail. We often heard that the state never invests anything in this region and that the authorities during harvest time bought wheat, tobacco and wine grapes for low prices and sent them to the western part of the country. The state did not bother to build, for instance, a tobacco factory or a winery in
the region. All investments are directed to the western part of the country. Such complaints were heard from Arabic-speaking Muslims and express a feeling that the region is neglected by the state. Linguistically, the most conspicuous characteristic of the samples of text from Sason is the heavy Turkish and Kurdish influence, especially Turkish.

Bibliography


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