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Fieldwork in Neo-Aramaic

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Fieldwork is a term that is used in many disciplines, among them anthropology, biology and sociology, and describes the activity of gathering raw data. In the context of language it entails finding speakers of the language (termed ‘informants’), recording samples of their speech and asking them questions about the language. Later the fieldworker transcribes these sessions and analyses the data to build up a picture of the language, in particular its grammar and lexicon.

Fieldwork is not always a part of the work of linguists. When the language studied is dead, then of course it is not possible to find speakers of the dialect and one must depend on written sources. But in research on Neo-Aramaic fieldwork is essential, as the vast majority of dialects have no written form. What is more, there is a great deal of variation among the dialects, even from one village to the next, as Prof. Khan outlines in his paper. This may seem surprising, as languages are often viewed as monolithic entities with a single grammar and lexicon, laid down in books. This impression is encouraged by the spread of standard forms of languages, which are taught to children as the only correct form. In fact across the world, variation is the norm, in some places from region to region, elsewhere from village to village. The rise of literacy as well as improved communications and more centralised government tend to erode these differences, yet in many parts of the world they are still very marked. For instance a Syrian friend told me that he could tell whether people in his village came from the centre of the village or from the edge, only judging by their accent. My grandmother reported something similar for the small crofting area in Shetland where she grew up.

So the rich variety we find in Neo-Aramaic is nothing strange. Unfortunately dialectal variation is sometimes neglected in Linguistics. One might ask why it is so important to document all the different dialects of Neo-Aramaic. Surely it is enough to document one or two to get an idea of how the language works? But in fact it is often in the details that the most interesting facts emerge. In every dialect there are features that are new and features that are very ancient and each dialect that we look at casts some new light on the history of Neo-Aramaic. If we do not try to uncover
the full diversity that exists, then we may overlook some very interesting linguistic features, sometimes very old ones that can cast light even on the ancient Semitic languages.

The ideal, therefore, would be to record all the dialects of the villages and towns where Neo-Aramaic is spoken, or was spoken till recently, and this is what Neo-Aramaicists try to do. But there are constraints on such research. In an ideal world linguists would go to each of the villages in turn, recording the speech of the villagers in their community, making sure they had a cross-section of the generations. Due to the political situation, however, fieldwork in Iraq has not been an easy undertaking. This has not made research impossible however, as there are large communities living abroad, many of whom have only left their villages or towns in the last ten years. Therefore most fieldwork has been done outside Iraq in these exile communities: in London, Germany, Detroit, Chicago, Jerusalem and many other places. In the case of the Jewish dialects, fieldwork in situ is no longer even theoretically possible as there are no communities left in their original towns and villages, the Iraqi Jewish community having emigrated in the 1950s.

So fieldwork in Neo-Aramaic, unlike in other endangered languages, does not usually entail trips to very exotic places. Many linguists studying endangered languages go to the Amazon rainforest or Papua New Guinea, living with tribes in remote areas. My experience was rather more mundane: most of my fieldwork on the Christian dialect of Alqosh has been conducted on day-trips to Hampton Wick and Golders Green.

Of course, the disadvantage of doing fieldwork in exile communities is that the language is heard outside its native environment. The linguist misses out on an understanding of the cultural and material environment that comes naturally when one lives in a place. So it takes a greater effort to understand distinctions between, for example, one type of pot and another. I often have to rely on the speaker’s descriptions of things I’ve never seen, and try to find an accurate English translation. Another problem is that the variety of language use that we are able to record is limited. We hear natural, spontaneous conversation less, especially when the informant does not live with people from his own village. We also hear the language in a restricted variety of contexts. We may never hear what people say when they go into a shop, or when they greet each other on the street. Instead, we have to ask the speaker to describe these things and hope that their description and our interpretation are both accurate.

In addition to these problems, the language of exiles is often changed by their residence abroad; it is influenced by the new languages that they speak and hear. So in Baghdad you would find many more Arabic loanwords, while in London or Detroit you may find English influence. In Detroit I found that they were not only borrowing English nouns, which are relatively easy to borrow, but even English verbs, despite the fact that the Semitic verbal system is very alien to English: lexical meaning is primarily expressed by a three-consonant ‘root’ while vowels primarily express
grammatical distinctions. One example I heard was ‘they charged it up’, which came out as *kemčarjila*, where English ‘charge’ has been completely adapted to the Semitic Neo-Aramaic verbal system, with prefixes and suffixes. Another example quoted to me was *kemkaneshluxla* ‘we cancelled it’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kem-čarj-i-la} & \text{ (root črj)} \\
\text{PAST-charge-they-it}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kem-kanešl-ux-la} & \text{ (root knšl)} \quad ^1 \\
\text{PAST-cancel-we-it}
\end{align*}
\]

In addition to influence from other languages, there may also be influence from other Neo-Aramaic dialects. Even when people live among their community, they may not necessarily use their own dialect on a regular basis. If their village dialect is not familiar to most of their community, they may modify it or switch dialect in order to be understood. This can also happen if they marry someone from a different village. So when we collect data from people living in this situation we have to understand that it may differ in certain aspects from the data we would collect in the village itself, were we able to go there.

While taking these difficulties into consideration, we have to work with the situation that we have. Fortunately, with a good informant, especially one who has only recently left the village and perhaps lives with family members who speak the same dialect, these difficulties are not too serious. They are further minimized if one can find a reasonable number of informants from the same village and confirm the findings with different people.

Wherever fieldwork is conducted, the basic methodology is the same. There are two main methods. One is to record samples of speech. The speaker is asked to talk about topics and is recorded as he or she talks. These samples, which we call texts, are later transcribed and the grammar and lexicon contained within them is analysed. It may be most useful to ask about aspects of village life, such as festivals, people’s professions, the food they eat, traditional clothing etc. Such topics tend to yield more Aramaic vocabulary, rather than, for example, Arabic loanwords, and they are also of ethnological interest. We also gather stories, which are useful for getting examples of the past tenses and can be of interest in themselves. I have gathered some traditional tales and also some true stories. For example, one such story tells how a traditional doctor healed a broken back; another recounts the story of the disappearance and death of the informant’s grandmother.

The other main method of research is to ask questions about the grammar or lexicon. We may ask straightforward questions like, ‘How would you say “I want to go”’ or ‘What does such and such mean?’ Or we may present them with two words or two sentences and ask what the difference is. If I wish to get the precise meaning of a

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1 ‘Cancel’ is interpreted as a four-consonant root, which is rarer than the standard three-consonant root.
word, I may ask the informant to think up typical situations or contexts in which it might be used.

Both these methods are indispensable for a good description. Texts provide samples of relatively natural speech where words and idioms can be heard in context, but even very large and varied corpuses will not provide the researcher with complete paradigms or exhaustive lexical lists. Questioning allows the linguist to fill in the inevitable gaps that arise and also to benefit from the informant’s native intuitions about his language. Problems can arise when the informant has preconceived ideas about what is correct, based on a prestige language or dialect, which may not reflect the actual way in which he uses his language. There is also the danger that he may translate too literally from English to his own language. But if the two methods are used in conjunction with each other, they complement each other and the fieldworker becomes aware of what data is suspect and must be checked.

If there are several informants, it often happens that they have talents for different tasks. Some people can be very shy when a microphone is put in front of them and they are asked to talk. The result may be that they are very hesitant and or that they may dry up altogether after a few sentences. I have found that older people are often better for this task. Over a lifetime they have gathered many anecdotes and polished them through much retelling. They enjoy having an audience and so talk enthusiastically and without too much hesitation. I visited one elderly lady with a long list of questions, expecting her to be a little shy, but I never reached the second question, as after the first she didn’t stop talking for an hour.

But people who are good at speaking are not necessarily good at answering grammatical questions, however simply they are put. With some people, hypothetical questions about language are very confusing. If you ask, ‘How would you say, “It is cold”’, they will go and put the heating on. And when you ask, ‘How do you say “You are coming”’, then they say ‘I am coming’, because they think you are addressing them. But there are some who can look at the language from a distance, quite objectively. They can grasp hypothetical questions and can think consciously about distinctions in meaning. This does not always require a good grammatical education. Some people are just natural linguists.

If several informants are available, it is not a problem if some can only help in one of the above ways. The fieldworker simply uses some for recording texts and others for answering questions, according to their talents.

All the things that I have discussed above depend on one crucial thing: cooperation. The fieldworker cannot get very far if there are no speakers of the language willing to help. Fortunately most people are proud that you are showing interest in their language and culture and the Neo-Aramaic-speaking communities are no exception. I have found people of the Chaldean and Assyrian communities to be exceptionally generous in giving up their time to sit and work with me, for no
recompense. My main informant, Ghazwan Khundy, has given hours and hours of his
time over several years. Everywhere I have undertaken fieldwork, I have found
people to be welcoming and enthusiastic.

Of course, it is first necessary to make connections in the community and it
helps if one is introduced to new people by people they trust. Religious or community
leaders are invaluable in helping with this, as they know many people and are
generally trusted. When a colleague and I travelled to Detroit, the most useful
connection we made was a Chaldean priest, Father Emanuel Shaleta, who, with
apparently limitless energy, organised a busy social schedule for us and put us in
contact with many people from his congregation. After giving a service, he gathered
together some of the older members of his flock and lined them up outside his office,
summoning them one by one and asking them to tell a short story or anecdote in their
own dialect. They all seemed to be quite happy to oblige and we collected some
interesting stories. One woman entertainingly described her rather accident-prone
attempts to learn to drive in America.

Fieldwork in any discipline never goes entirely smoothly. It is important to
be aware of cultural sensitivities. For instance it may be difficult for a male
fieldworker to have access to female speakers. It can also happen that people suspect
the fieldworker’s motives, especially in Iraqi exile communities who had some reason
to be paranoid about people who came asking questions.

Problems can also arise when there is a difference in understood aims
between the researcher and the speaker. In the case of Neo-Aramaic, informants
sometimes assume a linguist wants the proper language, i.e. Syriac or the modern
literary form of Neo-Aramaic. Many people have prejudices about the colloquial
dialects, similar to the attitudes that Arabs have towards Arabic dialects: that they are
just slang, with no grammar or subtlety of expression. It is therefore important for the
fieldworker to make it very clear exactly what is wanted.

I have described the problems of gaining material for research. But of course
the greatest problems lie in dealing with the raw material - the processes of
transcribing and analysing recordings. One of the problems that causes the most
headaches for Neo-Aramaicists is how to devise a suitable transcription method. This
may seem quite simple. But the sound systems of Neo-Aramaic dialects are actually
very complex and it is impossible to have a system with a simple one-to-one
correspondence of sound with letter.

I mentioned above the oral texts that fieldworkers gather for their research. I
now include one to show one kind of text that is collected, and also to show the
language as it is transcribed by the fieldworker. I recorded this text in Baghdad in
2001 from Sa’id Shamaya, who is a member of the Alqoshi community there. The
story hinges on the ambiguity of the word nāşa ‘person’, which can mean
‘sombody’, as in ‘somebody important’, but can also mean ‘human being’, with the
implication of ‘humane’. 
THE STORY OF THE BAD SON
RECOUNTED IN THE CHRISTIAN DIALECT OF ALQOSH

(1) ǧ.da-ḥukkēθa men ‘alquis ‘iba ḥaxemθa mmaḥkēla ṭaloxu ‘axonoxu saʿid šāmāya.
A story from Alqosh which has a moral, which will be told to you by Saʿid Šāmāya.

(2) ʾetwā xa-bāba ‘u ʾetwālē xa-brona ʿazīza. māqad mjureble de-mdābēre b-dubāre ūwe!
There was a father and he had an only son. How hard he tried to bring him up in
good discipline!

(3) bronə ... la-wēwa dex de-b’ēle bābeḥ. rxēlē b-ʾurxāθa plime.
But his son was not as his father wished. He followed crooked ways.

(4) mā-qad kemnāṣhele. ‘u kem’āmēre. la-šmēle qāled-bābeḥ.
How often he advised him and spoke to him! But he did not heed his father.

Finally he left his home, ran away, his father telling him, ‘Son, you will never be a
human being {somebody}!’

(6) ‘u zelle ... l-²aθra raḥūqa, ’u fetle zona, ’u yemma bimāra ta bāba: xzi mā brēle
me-bronux!
He went to a far-away place. Time passed and his mother was saying to the father,
‘Find out what became of your son!’

(7) ‘u bāba ḫenne lebbeḥ, ’u qemle bejyāla l-broneḥ wel de-mṭēle le-ǧdaemonā ṭu
šmēle d-ile broneh b-e-mdīta.
The father relented and he started to search for his son, until he reached a town and
heard that his son was in that town. ...

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2 Originally b- but corrected by another informant to l-.
(8) 'an de-wêwa ... ^hurrâs^3 b-'e-mûta kem'ârele. man-iwet 'äyet? kud-île nexrâya.
Those who were ^guards^ in that town apprehended him (asking him), ‘Who are
you?’- as he was a stranger.

(9) 'u zelle mère ta ... wazîra. 'u 'o-wazîra brôneh-wêwa.
And they went and told the mayor. Now, that mayor was his son!

(10) mère tâleh: 'iθ xâ' nexrâya; hâdax-île, hâdax-île šêmmeh w-âdax-île šekleh.
They said to him, ‘There is someone, a stranger. He’s like this and such and such is
his name and he looks like this.^4

(11) 'ämerwa: so mûdole p-qešûða, 'u p-qapoxe, 'u bgo ... rpâsa, ... 'u b-'êna
mařetta.
He said, ‘Go and bring him with cruelty and blows and kicking, and without mercy.’^5

(12) zelle, kemqârele bâba-u kemmeθele qam brôneh-u^6 'âw mri'a 'u jehya 'u m'aðba.
They went, they called the father and brought him before his son, in pain, tired and
tortured.

(13) kud qemle, kemxâzêle brôneh, kemyâðêle.
When he rose, he saw his son and recognized him.

(14) mère: hâ kem'êḍettî! mère 'ê, kem'êðennux.
(The son) said, ‘Well, do you recognize me?’ He said, ‘Yes, I recognize you’.

(15) mère: hâ bâbi! la-'amretwa tâli: la-kpešêt nâsa? xzi m-iwen daha! daha wazîra
ğâîe-wen.
He said, ‘Well, father! Didn’t you used to say to me, ‘You will never be somebody
{a human being}’. ‘See what I am now. Now I am a great mayor’.

^3 ^..... ^ means that the enclosed words are in Arabic.

^4 Literally: Thus is his appearance.

^5 Literally: with a bitter eye.

^6 Originally bâbeh ‘his father’ but corrected by another informant.
(16) *mēre: bronī *āna la-mēri la-kpešet wazīra. mēri: la-kpešet nāša.*
He said, ‘Son, I did not say you would not be a mayor. I said you would never be a human being {somebody}.’

(17) *w-en hāwetwa nāša, la-kmeθetwāli b-aθ-hāl de-kemmeθeli p-qapoxe-u jʾāfa ’u p-šurta maretta. šukran.*
‘If you had been a human being {somebody}, you would not have brought me in this way that you brought me, with blows and pushing and scowling’. ^Thank you^.

**Further reading**
The following books give informative and entertaining accounts of linguists’ experiences of fieldwork:

University of Queensland Press.