Comparative Study on Ancient Syriac Grammars

Results in Brief

Team finds Syriac dialect connected Greek and Arabic thought

An EU project examined the evolution of thinking about Syriac grammar, specifically in relation to Arabic and Greek linguistic concepts.
Syriac is a literary dialect of Aramaic, a Semitic language once widely spoken throughout the Near East and Arabia. Along with Latin and Greek, Syriac is one of the languages associated with early Christian texts.

Several Syriac writers have contributed to grammatical theory, yet their work is understudied. Modern scholars almost abandoned the topic after a brief flurry of interest during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To date, about 80 % of Syriac grammatical texts have not been published as critical editions.

The EU-funded CSASG project rekindled the study of Syriac grammarians. The research detailed the interaction among Greek, Syriac and Arabic linguistic theories, and the Syriac authors’ descriptions of their language in those terms.

Syriac Renaissance

Researchers translated and analysed the works of three 12th to 13th century Syriac grammarians. This period was the so-called Syriac Renaissance, which witnessed a flourishing of both the language and grammatical ideas.

The first of the three was Bar Zo‘bi. He wrote a Syriac grammar, a tool for classifying and interpreting language, also intended as a foundation for more advanced studies.
in logic. Bar Zo‘bi drew heavily from the Greek linguistic tradition, specifically Aristotle, and strongly disagreed with the application of Arabic linguistic concepts to Syriac. Bar Zo‘bi’s student, Bar Shakko, reworked his master’s ideas into a more accessible form, and addressed several aspects of syntax. Finally, Barhebaeus aimed to teach correct Syriac writing. He thought that the works of logic help develop a better understanding of grammar rather than vice versa. Barhebaeus examined syntax in detail, combining the Syriac native tradition with aspects of Arabic thought.

The emphasis on correctness reflected a time of divergence and degeneration of spoken Aramaic dialects. Grammatical mistakes had become increasingly common, and the grammarians were interested in restoring an earlier standard.

“The most important general trend for us,” says CSASG researcher Dr Margherita Farina, “is the emergence of syntax as an independent component of linguistic thinking.” Earlier theories of Semitic grammar regard syntax as resulting from proper reading and pronunciation of a text. Since such languages are written without vowels, reading requires the reader to place them, thereby demonstrating understanding of words’ syntactical function and the ability to distinguish among words written the same but pronounced differently. “According to our historical Syriac writers,” adds Dr Farina, “syntax reflects the need to correctly attribute meaning and functional roles to the parts of a sentence.”

Converging theories

More generally, the project team found the Syriac tradition to be central to the linguistic dynamics of the medieval Middle East. The Syriac tradition served as a conduit between Greek and Arabic thought. The Syriac thinkers also inherited the Aramaic and Mesopotamian linguistic heritages. “By integrating two very different approaches to language description,” explains Dr Farina, “Syriac grammar is at the core of the encounter between Mesopotamian and Greek approaches to language description.”

CSASG created an open-source catalogue of Syriac grammatical manuscripts. The resource will be integrated into e-ktobe, a global database of Syriac texts.

Researchers continue working on a monograph detailing the project’s results, to be published at the end of 2019. Dr Farina also plans to progressively publish the remaining unpublished Syriac texts. She will further investigate the role of the Syriac grammatical tradition within the context of medieval oriental linguistic theories.

The study sheds new light on the evolution and interaction among schools of grammatical theory, and the importance of Syriac grammarians to the subject.

Keywords
CSASG, Syriac, grammar, language, Greek, Arabic, Aramaic, linguistic theories

Project Information

CSASG
Grant agreement ID: 701797
Project website
Status
Closed project
Start date
15 June 2016
End date
14 June 2018

Funded under
H2020-EU.1.3.2.
Overall budget
€ 173 076
EU contribution
€ 173 076

Coordinated by
CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA RECHERCHE SCIENTIFIQUE
CNRS
France

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