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MLAḤSŌ: AN UNKNOWN NEO-ARAMAIC LANGUAGE OF TURKEY¹

OTTO JASTROW
UNIVERSITY OF ERLANGEN

In 1968 I discovered in Diyarbakır in South Eastern Turkey a previously unknown Neo-Aramaic language, which I shall call the Mlahsō language after the place where it was originally spoken. When I came across this language, I was engaged in a study of the Arabic dialects of South-eastern Turkey, the so-called *qaltu* dialects.² The westernmost extension of the *qaltu* dialects is called the Diyarbakır branch. It comprises the dialects of the Christian and Jewish communities of Diyarbakır and a few surrounding villages and smaller towns. Since the Jews emigrated to Palestine at an early date (in some cases before the actual foundation of the state of Israel), and the Christian population was almost exterminated during the Armenian massacres at the end of World War I, only very few surviving speakers of *qaltu* dialects can be found in Diyarbakır. While I was engaged in interviewing some of these surviving informants, an old man was introduced to me who allegedly spoke a Neo-Aramaic language different from Ṭūrōyo. Ṭūrōyo is the most important Neo-Aramaic language in present-day Turkey; it is spoken in the Midyat district of Mardin province, that is, more than 100 km as the crow flies from Diyarbakır. It is quite well known from the work of the late Hellmut Ritter and my own contribution.³ Apart from Ṭūrōyo, not much is left of the

¹ This article is based on a paper read at the All-Soviet Congress on Semitics, Tbilisi, December 1977; it has not been published so far.

² The result of this study can be found in my work *Die mesopotamisch-arabischen qaltu-Dialekte*, I. *Phonologie und Morphologie* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978), II. *Volkskundliche Texte in elf Dialekten* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1981), *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, XLIII, 4 and XLVI, 1.

³ Ritter, *Ṭūrōyo. Die Volkssprache der syrischen Christen des Tūr 'Abdīn*. A: *Texte*, 3 vols., (Beirut, 1967–71), B: *Wörterbuch* (Beirut, 1979); Jastrow, *Laut- und Formenlehre des neuaramäischen Dialekts von Mīdīn im Tūr 'Abdīn*

many Neo-Aramaic dialects which, at the beginning of our century, were still spoken in Turkey.⁴ The idiom which the old man spoke rather imperfectly sounded at first like Ṭūrōyo because of some phonetic features common to both languages which will be discussed later, but soon turned out to be quite different. This was my first encounter with the language of Mlaḥsō. The language was apparently spoken only in that village. Mlaḥsō was situated about 60 km north of Diyarbakır near the present district town of Lice, which belongs to Diyarbakır province. The village was inhabited by Christians, mainly of Jacobite faith, most of whom had the Mlaḥsō idiom as their mother tongue. They all seem to have been fluent in several languages, speaking, besides their mother tongue, Armenian, Kurdish, and Zaza, a West Iranian language different from Kurdish. The surrounding countryside was inhabited partly by Armenians and partly by Kurds and Zaza. Not only was the Armenian population exterminated during the Armenian massacres, but also the Arabic- and Aramaic-speaking Christian communities – a fact which has been taken little notice of so far, because these small isolated Arabic and Aramaic language areas had not even been known to exist before the massacres took place. In my research on this newly discovered language of Mlaḥsō I met with many difficulties, since only a few speakers had survived, and they were scattered over the whole Middle East. The data I was able to collect – about five hours of taped materials of medium to bad quality – do not enable me to write a comprehensive study. They will, nevertheless, be sufficient to draw a grammatical sketch of this most important but unfortunately almost extinct Neo-Aramaic language.

Naturally, the question of the classification of this newly discovered language can be asked only at the end of this paper, after I have described some of its more salient linguistic features. Nevertheless, I would like to start my short description by stating that the Mlaḥsō language is more closely related to Ṭūrōyo than to any other Neo-Aramaic language. It shares with Ṭūrōyo a number of typical features. Let me mention a few

(doctoral dissertation, Saarbrücken, 1967, reissued in 1985 by Otto Harrassowitz).

⁴ An isolated dialect which I discovered near Pervari in Siirt province is described in my article 'Ein neuaramäischer Dialekt aus dem Vilayet Siirt (Ostanatolien)', *ZDMG* 121.2 (1971) 215-22.

of them: In both languages, Aramaic *ā* has become *ō* both in stressed and unstressed syllables, e.g. M(laḥsō) *nōšō*, Ṭ(ūrōyo)⁵ *nōšo*⁶ ‘person’ (cf. O[ld] S[yriac] *nāšā*);⁷ M *ḥmōrō*, Ṭ *ḥmōro* ‘donkey’ (cf. OS *ḥmārā*). The Aramaic phonemes *ḥ* and *ʿ*, that is the voiceless and voiced pharyngeal fricatives, have been preserved in both languages, e.g. M and Ṭ *ḥā* ‘one’ (cf. OS *ḥad*); M *tar’ō*, Ṭ *tár’o* ‘door’ (cf. OS *tar’ā*). Geminated consonants have been reduced to single consonants, with concomitant lengthening of the preceding vowel, e.g. M *’ēzō*, Ṭ *’ēzo* ‘goat’ (cf. OS *’ezā*); M *rābō*, Ṭ *rābo* ‘great, big’ (cf. OS *rabbā*).

There are, however, a number of phonological features which distinguish Mlaḥsō and Ṭūrōyo. Some of these show Mlaḥsō as a very conservative language; in some other respects, however, Mlaḥsō is more progressive than Ṭūrōyo. Generally speaking, in its vocalism and word-structure Mlaḥsō is more conservative; in its consonantism it is more progressive than Ṭūrōyo. Thus in Mlaḥsō, the original Aramaic stress on the last syllable has been preserved, whereas in Ṭūrōyo stress has been shifted to the penultimate syllable. In addition to the preceding examples, let me cite the following: M *baytō*, Ṭ *báyto* ‘house’; M *dōmēx*, Ṭ *dōmāx* ‘he sleeps’; M *dōmxi*, Ṭ *dámxi* ‘they sleep’. Another conservative feature of the Mlaḥsō language is the preservation of long vowels in closed syllables, which are shortened in Ṭūrōyo both in stressed and unstressed position. Compare the following data: M *dōmxiina*, Ṭ *dámxiina* ‘we sleep’; M *dōmxi*, Ṭ *dámxi* ‘they sleep’; M *mūn*, Ṭ *mān* ‘what’; M *rhīmle*, Ṭ *rhámle* ‘he loved’; M *māšgno*, Ṭ *māšgno* ‘I wash’; M *zābēnli*, Ṭ *mzābālli* ‘I sold’; M *ḥwla*, Ṭ *ḥūla* (< **ḥáwla*) ‘she gave’. The Ṭūrōyo form *mzābālli* points out to yet another feature distinguishing Mlaḥsō from Ṭūrōyo. In Ṭūrōyo, the older short **e* phoneme has yielded short *a* in stressed syllables, whereas in Mlaḥsō it has been preserved. Compare the following data: M *dōmēx*, Ṭ *dōmāx* ‘he sleeps’, but: M *dōmēxno*, Ṭ *dōmāxno* ‘I sleep’; M *zābēn*, Ṭ *mzābān* ‘he sells’, but M *zābēnli*, Ṭ *mzābālli* ‘I sold’. The same shift has taken place in noun forms too, e.g. M *’esrō*, Ṭ *’ášro* ‘ten’ (cf. OS *’esrā*); M *’envé*, Ṭ *’ánwe* ‘grapes’

⁵ All Ṭūrōyo forms quoted are taken from a village dialect (Mīdin).

⁶ Unstressed word-final *ō* in Ṭūrōyo is pronounced as a short to medium-long vowel, and is conventionally written without a length mark.

⁷ To illustrate the sound changes that have taken place in the two languages, the corresponding forms of Old Syriac (OS) – in a somewhat archaizing phonetic rendering – are cited.

(cf. OS *'enbē*). The above data also cast some light on the relative chronology of sound shifts in Ṭūrōyo: first the stress was shifted to its present position, and only afterwards did stressed *e* change to *a*. Thus the originally stressed *e* in *dōmāx* (cf. OS *dāmēkē*) was preserved as *ə* because it became unstressed first; on the other hand, the originally unstressed *e* in *'āsro* (cf. OS *'esrā*) changed to *a* after receiving the word stress.

Whereas the vocalism shows Mlaḥsō to be more conservative than Ṭūrōyo, we gain the opposite impression when we turn to the consonantism. It is true that both languages have preserved the pharyngeal fricatives *ħ* and *'*, and in addition one could even point to the fact that the old *p*, which has usually yielded *f* in Ṭūrōyo, seems to have survived a little better in Mlaḥsō, compare for instance M *pēmō* 'mouth' with Ṭ *fēmo*.⁸ Apart from this, however, the consonantism of Mlaḥsō has been subjected to substantial changes. Thus the emphatic consonants *t* and *s* have been merged with non-emphatic *t* and *s* respectively. Compare the following data: M *safrō*, Ṭ *śafro* 'morning' (cf. OS *śapṛā*); M *tlīble*, Ṭ *tlāble* 'he demanded' (the verb is an old loan from Arabic). Another interesting feature of Mlaḥsō is the shift of *t* and *d* (the fricative allophones of Aramaic *t* and *d*) to the sibilants *s* and *z*. Compare the following data: M *tlōsō*, Ṭ *tlōto* 'three' (cf. OS *tlātā*); M *šensō*, Ṭ *śanto* 'sleep (noun)' (cf. OS *šentā*); M *īzō*, Ṭ *īdo* 'hand' (cf. OS *īdā*). The fricative allophone of Aramaic *b* – whatever its exact phonetic value may have been – has yielded bilabial *w* in Ṭūrōyo, but labio-dental *v* in Mlaḥsō, e.g. M *šav'ō*, Ṭ *śaw'o* 'seven'; M *gnīvle*, Ṭ *gnūle* (< **gnāwle*) 'he stole'; M *gōnēv*, Ṭ *gōnu* (< **gōnaw*) 'he steals'; M *gōnēvno*, Ṭ *gōnāwno* 'I steal'. Since we do not know exactly how the fricative allophone of *b* in Aramaic was pronounced, we cannot tell which of the two languages is more conservative in this respect.

Turning to morphology, I should like to single out just one important difference between the two languages. The pronominal suffix of the third person singular masculine in Ṭūrōyo is *-e*, in Mlaḥsō, however, it is *-āv*, thus e.g. M *baytāv*, Ṭ *báyte* 'his house'; M *duksāv*, Ṭ *dákte* 'his place'; M *mēnāv*, Ṭ *mēne* 'from him'. This is not the place to discuss the different forms in which the suffix of the third person singular masculine

⁸ Note, however, that Ṭūrōyo dialects are not completely uniform in this point. A form *pēmo* has in fact been reported for some of the villages in the Rāite region south of Midyat.

appears in the various Neo-Aramaic languages. It is sufficient to point out that the ending *-āv* which must go back to older **-aw* is reminiscent of the ending *-ew* in the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialect of Persian Azerbaijan as described by Irene Garbell.⁹ The ending is, however, not found in any dialect of Ṭūrōyo.

At the end of this short survey, let us briefly consider the lexicon. Here again Mlaḥsō strikes us as being much more conservative than Ṭūrōyo. A number of very common words in Mlaḥsō hark back directly to the corresponding Aramaic forms, whereas Ṭūrōyo has modified them considerably or even replaced them with loan words. Thus for 'today' Mlaḥsō has the form *yōmān* (cf. OS *yawmān[ā]*), whereas Ṭūrōyo has prefixed a demonstrative element to the older form, yielding the form *ādyawma*. The Mlaḥsō word for 'in, into' is *lgāv* (cf. OS *lgaw*), whereas Ṭūrōyo has reconstructed the word considerably, arriving at *lāwǧal*. The word for 'brother' in Mlaḥsō is *āḥō* (cf. OS *aḥā*), whereas Ṭūrōyo has generalized an originally diminutive form: *āḥūno*. For 'why' Mlaḥsō has preserved the form *lmūn* (cf. OS *lmūn*); Ṭūrōyo has instead a loan word from Kurdish: *qay*. For 'much, many' and 'very' Mlaḥsō has the form *sāy* (cf. OS *saggī*); here again Ṭūrōyo has a loan word, this time from Arabic, namely *ǧalabe*. Finally, the word for 'town' in Mlaḥsō is *mḥitō* (cf. OS *mḥittā*), whereas Ṭūrōyo has again an Arabic loanword, namely *walāye*.

Let us now summarize our findings: with the language of Mlaḥsō, yet another Neo-Aramaic language has been discovered on Turkish territory. Although Mlaḥsō is situated at a considerable distance from the Ṭūrōyo-speaking area of Midyat – more than 110 km as the crow flies – the newly-discovered language shares so many linguistic features with Ṭūrōyo that it should be entered next to Ṭūrōyo in any classification. It would thus be an addition to the so-called *Zentrale Gruppe* of the modern Aramaic languages, according to the classification worked out by Konstantin Tsereteli.¹⁰ But even so, a few questions still remain open. How is the relationship between Ṭūrōyo and Mlaḥsō to be viewed? Should they be seen as two independent branches or should one rather be considered as the ancestor of the other? There can be no doubt that, in many

⁹ *The Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Persian Azerbaijan* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), 59.

¹⁰ 'Zur Frage der Klassifikation der neuaramäischen Dialekte', *ZDMG* 127.2 (1977) 244-53.

respects, Mlaḥšō represents a much older stage of development than Ṭūrōyo. This is especially true of the word stress, the vocalism, and the lexicon. The changes in the consonantism which occurred in Mlaḥšō are, to my mind, not of the same importance because they can be explained by the influence of the non-Semitic adstrate languages. The shift from interdental fricatives to sibilants is not unique in Semitic dialects. It occurred, for instance, in some isolated Arabic dialects in Anatolia¹¹ and is also reported for the Neo-Aramaic dialect of the Jews of Zāxo.¹² The loss of emphatic consonants is of course a rare phenomenon in modern Semitic dialects – compare, however, Maltese and Cypriot Arabic – but here again we might assume a recent development caused by the overwhelming non-Semitic environment.

Evaluating all the linguistic data, I would still say that Mlaḥšō represents an older stage of development than Ṭūrōyo, but I would not maintain that Mlaḥšō is the direct ancestor of Ṭūrōyo. After all, the language of Mlaḥšō is spoken (or rather, was spoken) only in a single village, whereas the Ṭūrōyo area, in 1950, comprised the town of Midyat and about forty villages. In addition to this, one could also point out that Mlaḥšō is located much more on the periphery, being the northernmost Aramaic-speaking place ever reported. Finally, a few forms in both languages – like the the suffix of the third person singular masculine mentioned above – apparently do not reflect a common origin. The people of Mlaḥšō themselves have an oral tradition which is worth mentioning in this context. It says that several centuries ago, two brothers from Midyat had a dream in which they were ordered to leave Midyat and build a church in a place that would be shown to them. They obeyed and eventually came to Mlaḥšō, where they built the church of Mār Šmūni. This church remained in existence throughout the centuries until 1915–16, when most of the inhabitants of Mlaḥšō were slaughtered by their Muslim compatriots. Whatever one thinks of this old tradition, the linguistic evidence points in the same direction. It suggests that Ṭūrōyo and the Mlaḥšō language may have formed a linguistic unit at an earlier date but must have separated at least some centuries ago, each language taking its own different course of development.

¹¹ Cf. Jastrow 1978 (cited in n. 1 above) 34 ff.

¹² Hans Jürgen Polotsky, 'Zakho', in Franz Rosenthal (ed.): *An Aramaic Handbook*, Part II. 1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967) 13 ff.