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BUILDING A "NEW" SEMITIC LANGUAGE: LEXICAL ENRICHMENT IN MODERN ASSYRIAN AND ITS PROBLEMS

Abstract

This paper focuses on contemporary linguistic developments in that variety of Neo-Aramaic commonly called Modern Assyrian. Although widely used as an oral medium in a variety of domains belonging to everyday life, as well as in modern and traditional literature (both as an oral and a written medium), it is lagging behind in the expression of many modern concepts (such as in technology, politics, etc.). The lexical and phraseological problems faced by the community will be made evident through the analysis of multilingual (with Arabic and/or English alongside Modern Assyrian) political documents from contemporary Iraq.

1. Modern Assyrian: from endangerment to the creation of an *Ausbau* language[1]

All the Modern Aramaic varieties are certainly endangered, many of them probably extinct or nearly so. The gradual, centuries-long decline and language shift dramatically increased momentum in the last hundred years, with the physical massacre and displacement of many speakers of Northeastern Neo-Aramaic (henceforth: NENA): those who survived the First World War massacres – the *Qaṭlā ḏ-'amā sūrayā,* the Assyrian Genocide, in which from 500 to 750 thousand Assyrians found their death at the hands of Turks and Kurds and many others went into exile (Khosoreva 2007) – had to face over the years the endless persecution of the Turkish government against minorities. The situation is not much better in Iraq, where the dramatic political struggles that beleaguered

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[1] According to Italian academic regulations, we declare that Fabio Gasparini is the author of sections 1 ("Modern Assyrian...") and 2 ("*Ausbau* and Modern Assyrian: the data"), and Mauro Tosco is the author of section 3 ("Conclusions") of the present article.

this country pushed many speakers to emigration. Aramaic is better preserved among the rural population in the North, where adherents of the Church of the East (the "Assyrians") withstood the Arabization process that heavily involved Chaldeans (Savà and Tosco 2006). As remarked by Owens (2007), it is difficult in such a situation to apply Krauss' (2007) indicators of language vitality and endangerment (especially the most crucial one, intergenerational language transmission) due to sheer lack of updated, reliable data. Certainly, and notwithstanding the recent development in mother-tongue education which will be detailed below, illiteracy is widespread and native speakers tend to codeswitch with Arabic (Odisho 2003-2004).

Thus, if we apply these criteria to NENA, we see that apart from Barzani Jewish Neo-Aramaic – a by now extinct Iraqi Jewish dialect – and the definitely endangered Bohtan Neo-Aramaic – a dialect spoken in Georgia by a population originally coming from the Turkish Province of Şırnak, whose 1000 speakers are all over 60 years of age (while younger generations tend to use Georgian or Russian) no other NENA varieties are listed as endangered languages in the UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (Moseley 2010).

Language planning may try to "reverse language shift" (Fishman 1991) and forestall endangerment and imminent language loss through the creation of an official, standardized and unified variety. In this sense, there is an inescapable link (cf. Tosco 2011) between endangerment and an *Ausbausprache*, a "language by development" which has been deliberately reshaped in order to suit most (in principle, *all*) domains of modern communication (Kloss 1967). *Ausbauization* (cf. Tosco 2008) – the process of creation of an *Ausbau* language – is first and foremost concerned with the written domains, because within the Western culture and its nowadays global sphere of influence any conscious effort to language reshaping has to concentrate mainly on its written form. In a world of global interactions, virtually every variety is exposed to contact and influence coming from more widespread or "stronger" languages, and, for identity reasons, they may come to develop strategies to prevent the dominant identity to overwhelm their own (cf. Parpola 2004). They may opt for either conservative or innovative strategies. They may, e.g., resort to an old, even sacred language and try to revitalize and lexically enrich it, instead of developing their own vernacular. Within the Aramaic world, this is being done by members of the Syriac Orthodox church, where Classical Syriac (called *leshono khtobonoyo* – the "written language") is somehow used as a spoken medium. As remarked by Kiraz (2011), it is probably the absence of a literary variety of their own which prompted these Modern Aramaic speakers to resort to Classical Syriac.

A literary variety of the vernacular has developed instead more to the east among speakers of NENA, who are mostly adherents of the Chaldean Church and of the Church of the East (traditionally – and mistakenly – called "Nestorians") – backed by a sizeable number of Jews. This unique development

of a Modern Aramaic written language goes back at least to the 17th century and the rise of the so-called School of Alqosh (Murre-van den Berg 1998), but received a decisive thrust only much later with the *koiné* developed towards the end of the 19th century in Urmia by Western missionaries, followed in its turn by the short-lived literary language used in the Soviet Union between the '20s and '30s of the past century. Among the many names used in literature to refer to this variety (reflecting the bewildering confusion of denominations for the spoken varieties of Modern Aramaic, on which cf. Heinrichs 1993), we stick to *Modern Assyrian*, probably the most common label.

Recently, changing cultural and political conditions have favoured a resurgence in Northern Iraq: starting in the early 1990s and following the First Gulf War, Modern Aramaic received a modicum of official recognition in the largely autonomous Kurdish areas. As aptly put by Odisho (2011: 57), 'there are strong indications that yet another revitalization has been in the making since early 1990s' (Odisho 2011: 57).

Backed by the *Assyrian Democratic Movement*, Modern Aramaic entered the school system, first in primary schools and later in higher education levels. As detailed in Odisho (2011), Modern Assyrian is used either as a medium of instruction (presumably, especially in primary schools) or as a subject in schools operating in Kurdish.

The results are impressive. All in all, Odisho (2011: 62) puts forward a figure of approximately 7,000 for the students currently enrolled in schools where Modern Aramaic is either the medium of instruction or a subject, and to over 10,000 the number of students who have gone through the new curriculum. What language is taught and used is not overtly clear: Odisho (2011) consistently speaks in his article of "Syriac," although he later qualifies the variety used in school as 'Standard Modern Aramaic enriched with more old Aramaic where necessary' (Odisho 2011: 64). The label "Modern Assyrian" (or "Assyrian" *tout court*), so frequent in nationalist writings, is avoided altogether.[2]

The same terminological ambiguity between the classical and the modern "vernacular" language(s) looms large in modern-day Iraq: thus, Article 4.1 of the Iraqi constitution, after declaring Arabic and Kurdish the official languages of the country, recognizes '[T]he right of Iraqis to educate their children in their mother tongue, such as Turkmen, Syriac, and Armenian,' and in article 4.4 establishes that '[T]he Turkomen *[sic]* language and the Syriac language are two other official languages in the administrative units in which they constitute density of population' (http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi_constitution.pdf).

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[2] The label "Assyrian" seems to be favored by adherents of the Church of the East (the so-called Nestorians) and the more radical political parties. The avoidance of this term is probably due to an effort to exclude any parochialism.

Of course, Syriac is, technically speaking, hardly anybody's "mother tongue." But also "Modern Aramaic" is, of course, an ambiguous label. Without taking into consideration the spoken varieties, even within the written language one may witness significant developments.

The 19th-century Urmia-based written language has not been without significant changes: itself a literary *koiné* based, as anticipated, upon the language of the Urmia Plain, it was linguistically changed and enriched after the tragic events of the First World War and the massive resettlement of Aramaic speakers in the urban centres of Iraq, leading to the usual phenomena of dialectal blending and leveling. Odisho (2003-2004, 2011) identifies a more recent *koiné 2*, characterized by a strong influence of Northern Iraqi Aramaic varieties, both of the mountain (*Ashirat*) and the Plain of Mosul. Odisho (2011: 64-66) elaborates on the differences between *koiné 1* and *koiné 2* and mentions as distinguishing lexical features of the latter its lexical enrichment through Syriac and a shift from Turkish and Persian as a source of loanwords to either Syriac-based neologisms or words used in the Iraqi colloquials.

Of course, here as elsewhere school and purist tendencies go hand in hand. Not surprisingly, according to Odisho (2011: 64) '[E]ven in grammar and syntax, *koiné* 2 is showing more of a tendency of aligning itself with Old Aramaic than *koiné* 1 did.' Examples of such puristic tendencies are of course well known in many minority languages, as well as the frequent correlation of purism with endangerment (cf. Tosco 2008, 2012).

Not much is known about the present development of Modern Assyrian out of the school system. Against any foklorization of the minority language (cf. Tosco 2011), Kloss (1967) stresses that is not so much belletristic literature that can make up a new *Ausbausprache*, but its use in a multiplicity of roles and functions: politics, ecomony, administration. The scarcity of political documents in Modern Assyrian available in the Net and analyzed in Gasparini (2011), and the parallel wealth of data stemming from Assyrian cultural and political movements and written in Arabic and/or English seem to point to a still insufficient lexical and phraseological development of Modern Assyrian in many fields of modern, "higher" communication.

The following pages are devoted to a critical discussion of a few developments in the political language.

2. *Ausbau* and Modern Assyrian: the data

In Modern Assyrian all the usual mechanisms of language enrichment are found. They can be listed, *grosso modo*, under the rubrics of the *adaptation* of existing material (revitalization), the *elaboration* of new words through native (or, in case, borrowed) morphological machinery (derivation), *calquing*, and *borrowing*.

The linguistic sources for our work come from the Internet, direct sources being hardly available. The interest of these sources stems also from the fact that an Arabic or English version (or, in a few cases, even both) is available (actually, these languages are much more used than in Modern Assyrian in this kind of documents). The comparison with Arabic and/or English makes the special problems faced by the *Ausbauization* of Modern Assyrian all the more evident.

There is an abundance of Assyrian groups playing an active role all around the Net and ranging over a wide variety of subjects, from politics, to culture, to linguistics. This colonization of the web, an incidental effect of the diaspora, has established strong links between Assyrian communities around the world, contributing to strongly cement the nationalist bond connecting them and to keep the traditional culture alive. Assyrian political representation had various ups and downs starting from the American invasion of Iraq. Among the many political parties, the *Assyrian Democratic Movement* is the only one seating in the National Parliament. The first official elections to which Assyrian parties took part were those of 30th January 2005 for the election of the Constituent Assembly, where the ADM representative Yonadam Khanna was the only Christian member; in the legislative elections in Iraqi Kurdistan the Assyrian parties together with the *Kurdish Democratic Patriotic Alliance* won 5 seats (Gasparini 2011: 20).

Drawing mainly on Gasparini (2011), we will analyze the lexical enrichment of Modern Assyrian in the semantic field of politics. Our corpus will consist of two political declarations[3] from the *Assyrian Universal Alliance,*[4]

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[3] Text #1: http://www.aua.net/News/releases/2010/140.pdf ('Bēṯkūlyā Yūnaṯan, AUA Condemns the Barbaric Aggression of Our People in Iraq;' publication date: November 1, 2010; last accessed: October 25, 2011); text #2: http://www.aua.net/congress/27_2010/congress00.htm ('AUA - 27th World Congress;' publication date: December 4, 2010; last accessed: October 23, 2011).

[4] The *Assyrian Universal Alliance* (Assyrian ܚܘܝܵܕܵ ܬܒ݂ܝܠܝܵ *ḥūyaḏā taḇīliyā aṯūrayā*, Arabic الاتحـاد الأشـوري العـالمي *al-ittiḥād al-ašūrī al-ʿālamī*) 'is a leadership council comprised of representatives of Assyrian communities and organizations worldwide. The AUA was established in Pau, France, on April 13, 1968 to become a powerful voice for the Assyrian nation, committing itself to spreading, upholding, enhancing the Assyrian name around the world, and working to secure the sacred human and national rights of the Assyrian people in our homeland and in the Diaspora.

The AUA diligently advocates the Assyrian cause internationally and promotes the aspirations of the Assyrian nation. It urges democratic governments and international bodies to defend the rights of the Assyrian people in their ancestral homeland, Iraq, and to preserve their national identity, culture, heritage, language and religion' (http://aua.net/aua/aua_info.htm).

AUA is not a political party, as it operates in conjunction and in cooperation with national parties. Since 1991 AUA is a member of the UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization), 'an international, nonviolent and democratic membership organisation' whose 'members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and unrecognised or occupied territories who have joined together to protect and promote their human and cultural rights, to preserve their

and of a commemorative document and a poem[5] from the *Assyrian General Conference.[6]* The texts were written between 2008 and 2010.

Verbal morphology is by far the most complex part of the grammar of any Modern Aramaic variety. Semitic basic verbal conjugations 'were completely forsaken in favour of nominal forms of the verb,' (Kapeliuk 1996: 278) resulting in a bewildering number of new paradigms. In our texts one finds a clear preference for the Progressive (where a copula follows a Gerund or sometimes an Infinitive) over the Habitual Present (the Subjunctive verbal conjugation – derived from the former Active Participle, with the pattern $C_1āC_2(e)C_3$ in verbs of the 1st form – often preceded by a preverb -ܟ, *k-*). The Progressive forms are used to express the habitual present, too, and we find forms such as ܒܟܠܝܐ ܗ̄ܘܝܗ *b-kalyā ūyeḥ* 'we are about to finish' (Text #3) and ܒܛܠܒܐ ܝ̄ܘܢ *beṭlabā īwen* 'we ask' (Text #1) – with a Gerund form in a progressive meaning, or, still, ܓ݁ܪܘܒ݂ܐ ܝ̄ܢܐ *ğarūḇā īnā* 'they keep trying' (Text #2) – with the Infinitive form of the verb and a habitual value. This is in accordance with the situation found in almost all the present-day spoken varieties with the exception of the most archaic ones – such as Turoyo, Mlahso, Hertevin in Central Neo-Aramaic, and Qaraqosh and the dialect of the most ancient poems from the area of Mosul for NENA (Kim 2008).

An exception is provided by the poetic text, which obviously calls for a more classical register, as free as possible from modern influences (Gasparini 2011), and which sticks therefore to a more "canonical" Modern Assyrian usage in the verbal system: here we duly find such Habitual forms as ܟ݁ܡܩܝܡܝ *k-maqīmī* 'they honour' (with the preverb -ܟ, *k-*) or ܢܩܝܪܐ *nqīrā* 'he is marked' (both examples from Text #4).

Turning to the lexicon, we find various cases of revitalization in which semantic calquing is applied to material from Classical Syriac:

•ܣܝܩܘܡܐ *sīqūmā* 'date' (Text #2) is a Classical Syriac word meaning 'era' (Payne

Smith 1879: 2720), and ultimately from Greek σήκωμα. The expansion of the semantic field mirrors that of ܬܵܪܝܼܚ *tarīḥ* (Maclean 1901: 326), meaning both 'history' and 'date.' Although this Arabic loan is the usual term to express 'date,' its use is avoided here in favour of the Syriac word;

- ܓܲܒܵܐ *gabbā* 'political party' (Text #2), from the Classical Syriac root GNB 'to be on one's side' (Brockelmann 1928: 58), follows a process of figurative derivation similar to that of both English and Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth: MSA) – both language possibly playing a role here in influencing Modern Assyrian;

- ܒܹܡܵܐ *bēmā* 'forum' (Text #2) is a Classical Syriac word borrowed from Greek βῆμα 'pulpit.' It appears in the Assyrian name of a political party (ܒܹܡܵܐ ܕܝܼܡܘܼܩܪܲܛܲܝܵܐ ܟܲܠܕܵܢܵܝܵܐ, *bēmā dīmūqraṭayā kaldanayā*, *Chaldean Democratic Forum*)[7] and its use is not attested elsewhere. In Awde *et al.* (2007) one only finds the English loanword 'forum,' in an evident effort to get rid of which this Classical Syriac word has been resorted to. The result – implying a non negligible semantic shift – is at best dubious;

- ܐܵܬܝܼܪܵܐ *āṯīrā* 'atmosphere' (in its figurative sense) (Text #2), meaning 'air' in Classical Syriac (Payne Smith 1879: 286; cfr. Greek αἰθήρ). Following the same semantic expansion undergone by English 'air' and its counterparts in European languages, *āṯīrā* has therefore acquired in our texts more or less the meaning of 'general mood,' as shown in the following excerpt from Text #3: [ܓܘ ܐܵܬܝܼܪܵܐ ܡܣܝܼܡܵܢܹܐ ܘܒܲܢܝܵܢܹܐ...ܒܘܼܝܵܨܝܵܐ ܕܫܲܘܬܹܦܵܢܹܐ ܘܒܫܲܦܝܼܥܘܼܬܵܐ ܕܓܸܒܵܢܹܐ ܣܓܝܼܵܐ ܘܐܵܢܲܢܩܵܝܵܐ] (*gō āṯīrā msīmanē wu-banyanē...buyaṣyā d-šawṯefanē wu-bšafiʿūtā d-gibanē sagīā w-ānanqāyā):* 'in a positive and constructive feel...the participants to the debate discussed abundantly about many aspects and important issues'];

- ܙܘܼܥܵܐ *zūwʿā* 'movement' (in a figurative sense) (Text #2) from the Classical Syriac root ZWʿ 'to be moving' (cfr. Maclean 1901: 85 and Oraham 1943: 143), is another case of semantic expansion on the basis of the model of European languages. MSA حركة *ḥaraka* is of course another example.

In a few cases semantic calquing goes together with the use of morphological derivation:

- ܪܲܗܝܼܒܵܝܵܐ *rahīvīā* 'terrorist' (text n.2) derives from the Syriac root RHB 'to be disquieted' (Oraham 1943: 474) but it is not reported in any dictionary. The same root provides in MSA إرحاب/-ي *ʾirḥāb/-ī* 'terrorism'/'terrorist.' The Arabic word is obviously the model for the Modern Assyrian neologism, which nevertheless keeps itself distinct from its Arabic source thanks to the use of native derivational morphemes;

- ܡܫܬܲܪܟܵܢܵܐ *mštarkānā* 'participation' (Text #2): in Maclean's dictionary (1901:

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[7] The *Chaldean Democratic Forum* is an Iraqi political party promoting the Chaldean national identity. It was founded in the United States in 2002. The current Secretary General is Dhia Poutros.

204), one only finds the verb ܡܫܵܪܸܟ *mšarik* 'to take part,' while the further derivation from the Arabic 8th form إِشْترك *ʾištaraka* (with a similar meaning 'to participate, to take part') is not to the best of our knowledge attested elsewhere in Modern Assyrian and is the basis of the further nominalization through the native suffix *-ānā* in order to obtain an abstract meaning;

• ܐܘܚܕܵܢܘܼܬܵܐ *ūḥdanūṯā* 'unity' (Text #3) is an innovation of Modern Assyrian from the Syriac root ʾḤD (*ḥueyadā* only is reported in Oraham 1943: 159). We find it as an element in the phraseological expression ܥܲܡܠܝܼܬܵܐ ܕܒܵܢܝܼܬܵܐ ܕܐܘܚܕܵܢܘܼܬܵܐ *ʿamlīṯā d-banīṯā d-ūḥdanūṯā* 'territorial unity', made up of *ʿamlīṯā* 'action' + *banīṯā* 'construction' + *ūḥdanūṯā* 'unity.'

We obviously find many loanwords, too, and again mainly from MSA:

• ܡܲܕܘܼܥܵܐ *madūʿā* 'issue' (Text #2) from MSA مَوْضوع *mawḍūʿ* (Wehr 1971: 1078);

• ܥܘܼܡܪܵܢܵܐ *ʿumrānā* 'building' (Text #1), from MSA عُمْرَان *ʿumrān* (Wehr 1971: 643);

• ܪܵܣܝܼܚܵܐ *rasīḫā* 'fixed' (Text #3), from MSA راسيخ *rāsīḫ* (Wehr 1971: 341);

• ܫܲܡܲܠܵܐ *šammalā* (Text #4): 'candle' (Awde *et al.* 2007: 89); one also finds Kurdish *šemal* 'light' (Chyet 2002: 573), although we would have expected the use of the common Semitic stem ŠMʿ as represented in ܫܡܘܼܥܵܐ *šmūʿā* 'candle' (Brockelmann 1928: 380); cf. also Persian شمع *šamʿ* (Steingass 1992: 760);

• ܒܲܝܕܲܓܵܐ *baydagā* 'flag' (Text #4), from Kurdish به يداخ *beydaḫ* (Oraham 1943: 50); cf. also Turkish *bayrak*;

• ܩܲܘܠܵܐ *qawlā* 'promise' (Text #4), from MSA قول *qawl* (Mclean 1901: 272).

The dependance on Arabic is even more evident (although less obvious to the speaker) at the phraseological and syntactic levels. Thus, we find in Text #3 a clear sign of Arabic influence in the omission of the relative pronoun ܕ- *d-* with an indefinite head – itself a typical MSA feature (Holes 2002), but foreign to NENA (Maclean 1889: 23): ܐܘܚܕܵܢܘܼܬܵܐ ܕܥܝܼܪܵܩ ܦܝܼܫܠܹܗ ܒܢܝܼܬܵܐ ܥܲܠ ܙܘܼܕܘܼܢܝ ܡܸܢ ܥܲܡܠܝܼܬܵܐ ܕܡܦܝܼܫܪܵܬܵܐ ܛܘܼܗܡܝܼܬܵܐ ܠܹܗ *ūḥdanūṯā d-ʿīrāq pīšlih bnīṯā ʾil zūdūnī min ʿamlīṯā d-mpišratā ṭūhmīṯā (d-)mšūrā lihi b-pramā d-simīlā* 'the unification of Iraq has been built on an interest for ethnic division which started with the Simele massacre'.

Finally, in Text #3 we have ܒܙܸܕܩܵܐ *b-ziḏqā* 'in favour of,' a calque from the MSA expression بحق *bi-ḥaqq*, and made up of the pan-Semitic preposition ܒ-/ـب *b-* and the word حق/ܙܸܕܩܵܐ *ḥaqq/ziḏqā* 'right; justice' (Oraham 1943: 141). As far as we know, such a use is not attested elsewhere in any Aramaic variety; it can be interpreted only as an instance of influence form MSA, the main communication language for "higher" domains.

3. Conclusions

The speakers of Modern Assyrian live in a heterogeneous bi- and multilingual situation, where different sociolinguistic influences are at work, and where Neo-Aramaic plays but a secondary role (cf. Bausani 1976). This bears many a consequence.

First, and not surprisingly, we find in our texts a few neologisms followed, in brackets, by the corresponding Arabic or Kurdish synonyms or, to the contrary, Classical Syriac in order to explain an Arabic or Kurdish loan:

•ܐܒ (ܛܒܚ) *āḇ (ṭebaḥ)*: ´month of ripening of fruits; August᾽. Both names come from the old Semitic lunisolar calendar, but *aḇ* is the only one still actively used and part of both the Levant Arabic and the Hebrew calendars. *Ṭebaḥ* is used nowadays in Kurdish; obviously, its status as an ancient but also essentially a "foreign" word, unknown in Arabic, is a precious asset in the identity-building and culture-reshaping process inherent in the creation of an *Ausbau* language;

•ܪܣܝܚܐ (ܡܚܘܠܢܐ) *rasīḥā (mḥawlanā)* ´fixed:᾽ the former, a loan from Arabic, is the word in common usage, followed in brackets by a Syriac suggested rendering;

•ܐܘܚܕܢܘܬܐ (ܐܬܪܐ) *ūḥdanūṯā (aṯrā)*: as anticipated, *ūḥdanūṯā* 'unity' is an innovation from the Syriac root ᾽ḤD. *Aṯrā* (actually, 'place') clarifies the abstract concept 'territorial unity' that *ūḥdanūṯā* tries to express.

All this is a clear sign of an incomplete process of standardization and seems to imply a situation where the authors, well aware of the serious lexical gaps still to be filled, are uncertain about their readers' ability to understand the neologisms.

Second, calquing processes seem also to imply a knowledge of European languages (especially English), and we see this knowledge in the construction of new figurative meanings for Syriac lexemes.

Third, Classical Syriac, though not envisaged as the official medium of the community, seems to resist as a reference point for the lexical and phraseological enrichment of Modern Assyrian, but with strong driving forces towards innovation: on the one hand undeniable influences from Arabic persist, and more, as exemplified above, at the phraseological than at the lexical level. On the other hand, a deliberate intention is evident to "Syriacize" the texts, as witnessed by the productive use of Aramaic inflectional and derivational morphemes with native MSA terms.

The topic has obviously a direct bearing on the lexicon used in the texts: when a religious or classical vocabulary (as in Text #2) is used, the result is a language comparatively easy to follow and understand (both for the foreign scholar, thanks to the help of standard reference works and, we assume, for the educated native speaker). The same applies, *a fortiori*, to Text #4, a poetic

text for which a standard lexicon of reference and an immense stylistic and phraseological wealth is provided by Classical Syriac and by a century-old tradition in the vernacular itself. But where the author has to use a strictly political lexicon, tending to lexical abstraction (as is the case of Texts #1 and #3), there is no available lexicon of reference, and the problem of a still insufficient lexical enrichment makes itself sadly felt in all its gravity. As in all those minority and endangered languages which are on their way from sociolinguistic dialects to full-fledged means of expression (cf. Tosco 2008, 2012), we suspect that native speakers are still unable to pass from the use of a dialect to that of a standardized national language: our texts, so to speak, show them discussing and searching for a shared vocabulary and identity – certainly strong in its nationalist expression but also, by necessity, constantly renegotiated with the strong cultures around and their linguistic means of expression (Gasparini 2011).

Any *Ausbausprache* is to a good extent artificial, and in the end its acceptance and success lie on the community of speakers itself. In Odisho's (2011: 67) words, '[T]he significance of the recent surge lies in the fact that raising a new generation of young literates immersed in Aramaic [...] will prolong the life of the language at least up to two future generations,' and this process is a natural result of the growing debate within the Assyrian community on the creation of a stronger ethnic identity through a renewed interest in the Assyrian culture, history and language. What is true of any revitalization process applies to the future of the Modern Assyrian surge as well: it will strictly depend on socio-political factors; in our case, of paramount importance will of course be the future of the minorities amidst the unstable political situation of contemporary Iraq and the whole Middle East.

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