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Asymmetry in the historical development of the copula in Neo-Aramaic

Geoffrey Khan
University of Cambridge

gk101@cam.ac.uk

The focus of this paper will be the dialect group known as North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) (Khan 2007). NENA dialects, most of which are now highly endangered, were spoken until recently in south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq and western Iran. They have been in intense contact with non-Semitic languages for many centuries, mainly Kurdish, an Iranian language. The paper is concerned with the historical development of a pronominal copula to a verbal copula in the NENA dialects, which has been stimulated by replication of the model of the verbal copula of Kurdish. The various NENA dialects (many of them only recently documented) exhibit different degrees of development along the path of change from pronominal to verbal copula, which result in asymmetries within the individual dialects in the distribution of pronominal and verbal morphological exponents within the paradigms of the copula. Most dialects are in the process of transition and exhibit asymmetries in the copula paradigms, which consist of both pronominal and verbal forms. It is significant that the shift of pronominal to verbal exponents of the copula conform to implicational hierarchies, which include the following:

- (i) 1st and 2nd person > 3rd person
- (ii) negative > positive
- (iii) non-present > present

Categories on the left of these hierarchies have a greater tendency to have verbal exponents than categories on the right. The categories 3rd person, positive and present are recognized as being the unmarked members of these hierarchies (Greenberg 1966; Haspelmath 2006, etc.). So, their lesser tendency to develop into verbal forms can be correlated with their unmarked status. The paper will examine various possible explanations for these asymmetries in category shift. One possible explanation is that the unmarked status of the categories in question can be equated simply with frequency of occurrence. These categories would resist change and gain autonomy due to their higher frequency of occurrence (Bybee 2010; Haspelmath 2008). Frequency of occur-

rence does not, however, satisfactorily explain other hierarchical tendencies that can be identified in the shift to verbal exponents in the copula paradigms of the NENA dialects. An alternative explanation is, therefore, proposed. This is based on the notion that replication of the Kurdish verbal model is facilitated by congruence between feature specifications of the Kurdish model schema and those of the replicated schema of the NENA dialects. Replication of the Kurdish verbal model takes place primarily when there is congruence between specified features in Kurdish and NENA. When a category or structure is underspecified in NENA or Kurdish, or both, then the NENA dialect does not so easily replicate the Kurdish model, which results in the retention of non-verbal copula forms.

References: • Bybee, J.L. (2010): *Language Usage and Cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. • Greenberg, J.H. (1966): *Language Universals with Special Reference to Feature Hierarchies*. The Hague: Mouton. • Haspelmath, M. (2006): 'Against Markedness (and What to Replace It with)'. *Journal of Linguistics* 42: 25–70. • idem (2008): 'Frequency vs. Iconicity in Explaining Grammatical Asymmetries'. *Cognitive Linguistics* 19 (1): 1–33. • Khan, G. (2007): 'The North Eastern Neo-Aramaic Dialects'. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 52: 1–20.