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Ancient Treatises on Syriac Homonyms

Linguists often find it necessary to develop images or metaphors to illustrate their theoretical formulations. Syriac grammarians used a curious image to illustrate what we would call the form of the word. We find, in fact, a number of treatises on the *personae* (πρόσωπα, which in Syriac became *pršwṗ*): these are not the “persons” of the verb, as they were incorrectly translated by the first editor of the grammatical treatise of Jacob of Edessa (Phillipps 1869: 13), but rather, the *facies*, i.e., the word’s graphic or graphematic expression. The image is even more significant if we consider that the term *pršwṗ*, in the sense of “person”, comes from the religious vocabulary, where it played a central rôle in the theological disputes concerning the *persona* of Christ which caused the secession of the Nestorian church. The question is thus one of understanding what lies behind the mask (πρόσωπον) of the form, given that there are words which correspond in writing but differ in pronunciation, or which correspond in pronunciation but differ in meaning¹; as we will see below, the latter case (the homophones) also involves the written form.

The Syriac alphabet, like the Arab and Hebrew alphabets, represents only consonantal sounds, leaving to the reader the task of recognizing the vowels to be pronounced. At times, the vowels are represented by consonantal signs called *matres lectionis*, such as the *aleph*, *he*, *waw* and *yod*. Though the context is a sufficient guide in many cases, further assistance is needed in reading ancient or sacred texts. This assistance will be provided by the invention of signs indicating vowels². While a single system of indicating vowels became dominant in both the Arab and Hebrew alphabets, a number of different systems were developed in Syriac. Of these, the best known are the Western (Jacobite) and Eastern (Nestorian) systems. The former uses signs reminiscent of Greek letters, while the latter employs dots placed above and below.

1 With these words the Arab historian ‘Amr ibn Mattā (XIV century) describes a treatise on homonyms by Išo’yahb of Gadala (BO II 418). For biographical information on the authors quoted in this article, the reader is referred to Baumstark 1922, which also contains the entire bibliography known at that time. See also Duval 1907.

2 For example, *BRK* can be read as *brak* (he kneels), *bārek* (kneeling), *barrek* (he blessed) or *brāk* (the blessing). The simplest way to distinguish between the four forms is to use a diacritical point: in the first case under *B*, in the second case above *B*. In the third case a point is placed both above and below *B*, while in the fourth case no points are used (Barhebraeus, Great Grammar IV, 5,3).

The use of a system of vowel signs reveals a pedagogical concern: Syriac scholastic training began under the guidance of a "reading teacher" (*mqr̄yn*) and used the Syriac version of the Holy Scriptures as its first text. Only after reading the Bible did students pass to various Syriac translations of Greek patristic writings. As these texts are not provided with signs to express vowels, a first difficulty immediately arises: that of how to read the many terms of foreign origin, Greek in particular, which entered the Syriac lexicon in their original form, a form differing considerably from the Syriac nominal formation scheme. The second difficulty is that of the Syriac version of the Bible: the different versions which succeeded each other from the second to seventh century A.D. (*pšittā*, Philoxenian, Syro-Hexaplar and Harclean) all had their own linguistic characteristics. In order to read a text with no vowel signs, it was thus necessary to have a scholastic manual capable of satisfying two minimum requirements: to provide the exact reading of doubtful or difficult words, and to indicate the interpretation of obscure words. The first requirement was satisfied by following the biblical books verse by verse, collecting equivocal words or phrases, and indicating their vocalization with diacritical points. This collection, which was called a "copy-book of the words and readings (*q̄ryt*) of the Old and New Testaments", was provided with an appendix consisting of several tracts summarizing orthographic and grammatical rules to assist reading. In addition, brief lexicons were provided to explain terms of foreign origin.

These texts are referred to as "Masoretic"³ manuscripts because (though earlier in date) they resemble the philological activities (Masorah) of the Hebrew schools, who transmitted the biblical text to us. These manuscripts provide the material which will be expanded and commented upon by later Syriac grammarians. Indeed, the first work of Syriac lexicography (preserved only through quotations in subsequent lexicons) was the lexicon of Ḥunain ibn Ishāq entitled "Explanation of the Greek words in Syriac". Brief writings dealing with orthography, but in reality intended to assist correct reading, increased in scope to the point of becoming independent treatises⁴ until all of

3 These "Masoretic" collections were identified by J. P. P. Martin; a description of these treatises is provided in Moberg 1928. They do not contain the text of the Holy Scriptures, but only the words or phrases which require vowel signs. Known Masoretic manuscripts are as follows: Vat Syr 152, Barberini 118 and Borgia 117 in the Vatican Library (Rome); Add 7183, Add 12138 (Nestorian), Add 12178, Add 14482, Add 14667, Add 14684 and Add 17162 in the British Museum; manuscript 64 in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris); one in Marburg; one in Lund; manuscript l² in the Convent of St. Mark in Jerusalem; manuscripts 1, 2 and 3 of the Chaldean Patriarchate of Mossul (now in Bagdad). Martin also mentions another manuscript in Mossul or Damascus, but the situation of the ecclesiastical libraries in the Near East is not sufficiently known for this to be further confirmed.

4 Points used with a diacritical function to indicate vowels must be distinguished from points used for prosody, which are called accents. In this context see Segal 1953.

this material is once again collected together in the major grammars of the 13th century. Lists of homographs also appear amongst these treatises on orthography: groups of words differentiated only by the varying position of the diacritical point, with no indication of their meaning⁵. Independent treatises dealing with homographs and homophones, called *De aequilitteris* or *De vocibus aequivocis* (DVA), were also written in the same period as these Masoretic manuscripts, and came to occupy a place of unexpected importance in Syriac linguistic production.

“De vocibus aequivocis” and grammar

These titles were introduced by Assemani in order to describe the treatise on homographs of Barhebraeus, and later students of Syriac literature have followed Assemani in using the term DVA and his descriptions of these texts⁶. While the lists of homographs contained in the Masoretic treatises are not provided with explanations, never exceed two pages in length, and are rarely in alphabetical order, the DVAs extend for a large number of pages, list homographs in alphabetical order, and also provide explanations⁷. The DVA of Barhebraeus consists of 1336 seven syllable verses (Martin 1872: II 77-127), while that of ‘Abdišo’ has 900 verses (Hoffmann 1880: 49-70), where around 40 verses are devoted to each letter in the alphabet. The DVAs of ‘Enanišo’ and Hunain, on the other hand, are combined in a single, long prose text (Hoffmann 1880: 2-49). In addition to their wide-ranging contents, note should be made of the large number of manuscripts, including recent ones, in which these treatises have been transmitted to us: more than forty manuscripts for the DVA of Barhebraeus alone.

5 The treatises on points give us the rule for interpreting homographs, distinguished by the differing position of a diacritical point. An exemplary case is provided by the verbal form *QTLT* which in the perfect tense can be interpreted in three ways: *q̇alt* (with a point above: second person masculine singular), *qeṭlet* (with a point below: first person singular) and *qeṭlat* (with two points, one above and one below: third person feminine singular).

6 The note of Assemani repeats the information provided by Barhebraeus himself at the beginning of the commentary to the DVA: “ad calcem operis (i.e. the Metrical Grammar) subjungitur Tractatus de vocibus aequivocis ordine Alphabetico, cujus exemplar Syriace exstat in Bibliotheca Vaticana, qua de re alios quoque Syros auctores tum Nestorianos, tum Jacobitas Barhebraeus scripsisse observat, nimirum *Josue Bar-Nun, Honain medicum Isaaci filium, Josephum Huzitam, et Eudochum Presbyterum Meletinensem*” (BO II 308).

7 The only published “Masoretic” list is in Nestle (1876: 529-530): 65 groups of homographs for a total of 117 forms. These lists are sometimes accompanied by marginal glosses. Our description of DVAs is based on the editions of Martin (1872) and Hoffmann (1880); other examples are dealt with in the catalogues of Syriac manuscripts conserved in Europe (Baumstark 1922. 2-3).

DVAs are a conspicuous feature of the entire grammatical production, as it is apparent from a look at the historical span of Syriac literature. The table below shows an historical overview of Syriac grammar. For many authors, the name alone is known; in such case, either no title is indicated or it is shown in brackets.

Anonymus	VI century	Translation of Dionysius Thrax's Greek grammar
Aḥudemmeḥ	VI century	
Išo'dnaḥ	VI century	
Joseph Huzaya	?	
Thomas of Ḥarqel	VI/VII century	List of accents
Išo'yahb of Gadala	VII century	(DVA)
ʿEnanišoʿ	VII century	DVA
John bar Penkaye	VII century	(Grammar?)
Jacob of Edessa	640-708	Treatise on points; letter about orthography; fragments of a grammar
John of Litarba	† 737	(Grammar)
Ramišoʿ	VIII century	(Treatise on points)
Išoʿ bar Nun	† 828	DVA
Ḥunain ibn Ishāq	† 876	DVA (lexicon; grammar; treatise on points)
John bar Kamis	IX century	(Grammar)
Andrew	X century	(Treatise on points)
Išoʿ bar ʿAli	† 1001	Lexicon
Abu-l-Ḥasan bar Bahlūl	X century	Lexicon
Elias of Ṭirhan	† 1049	Grammar; two treatises on accents
Elias bar Šinaya	† after 1049	Grammar; lexicon and DVA
John bar Zoʿbi	XIII century	Prose grammar; metrical grammar
Išo'yahb bar Malkon	XIII century	Grammatical questions; treatise on points
David bar Paul	XIII century	Fragments of a grammar
Eudochos	?	DVA
Jacob bar Šakko	† 1241	Prose grammar; metrical grammar
Gregory Abu-l-Faraḡ (= Barhebraeus)	† 1286	Prose great grammar; metrical grammar; (summary)

Beyond the historical period of Syriac literature in the strict sense (from the second to the thirteenth century A.D.), we also have the DVA of ʿAbdisoʿ of Gaz-

arta (d. 1570)⁸. The survival of this literary genre confirms that the different systems which were invented for vocalic representation did not meet the needs of the schools, because the classical texts and the versions of the Bible were written without vowel signs. The grammars as well are chiefly concerned with providing rules for reading. Consequently, the Masoretic collections are the principal source of the material taken into consideration by the grammars and DVAs: hence the difficulty in establishing the real situation of the Syriac language and its dialectal variants from these texts.

Syriac treatment of homonyms would seem to have been influenced by Greek and Latin grammar; indeed, some authorities place the Syriac DVAs within the sphere of influence of the Hellenistic and Latin collections of similar terms (περὶ διαφορᾶς λέξεων and *de differentiis*, or περὶ ὀρθογραφίας and *de orthographia*)⁹. Between DVAs and these Greek or Latin treatises, however, there is a fundamental difference which also distinguishes the Syriac treatises from contemporary homonym research: the Greek and Latin works compare similar lemmas differentiated only by a single letter or the accent, whereas the Syriac works record cases of homography or homophony occurring in the inflexion of a root. This type of homonymy could be termed contextual: the different conjugated or inflected forms of the same root, which are effectively used in written texts, are collected in a purely alphabetical list where, by contrast with modern dictionaries of Semitic languages, the words are not grouped under the lemma of their common root. To find analogies, we must turn to the other Semitic languages: indeed, Hebrew and Arabic have also devoted attention to the homonyms in their sacred texts¹⁰.

8 The reference to Barhebraeus given above (note 6) does not imply that Joseph Huzaya composed a DVA. The Vatican Library possesses three DVAs which have not been studied (Vat Syr 194, 419 and 450).

9 For all this section, the reader is referred to Hunger 1978: 18-22 and 48-50. In the treatises *de differentiis* we find words which differ slightly in form: *acerbus-acervus*. Ammonius offers the following example: "ἄγροικος (countryman) and ἄγροικος (boor) differ as follows: with a circumflex on the penultimate syllable, it is one who lives in the country; with the accent on the antepenultimate syllable, it is one with coarse manners".

10 In Hebrew, we have the well-known Masoretic collection entitled 'oklāh wē'oklāh which contains some 400 alphabetical lists of words with common characteristics, or pairs of words which differ in a detail. The title is taken from the beginning of the first list which contains words that occur twice in the Bible: once with an initial *w* and once without. Amongst the Hebrew grammarians who dealt with homonyms, mention should be made of Judah ibn Qurayš (IX century), Menahem ibn Sarūq and Aaron ben Moses ben Ašer (X century), Judah ibn Bal'am and Abu al-Farağ Hārūn (XI century). Amongst the Arabs, mention should be made of al-Ašma'i (d. 828). Arabic manuscript 663 in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris) bears witness to the "Masoretic" handling of the Koran.

The homographs

The most famous and complete DVA is the metrical DVA of Barhebraeus, which is included as an appendix to his small metrical grammar and hence is sometimes erroneously called the “fifth chapter” of the grammar¹¹. The method followed by Barhebraeus consists of comparing two homographs, generally in two contiguous verses. Meaning can be established from the context; for example: “I will not build (*bn*) a stumbling block (*bn*)” (v. 868a). The text in verse is accompanied by a marginal commentary in prose whose nucleus originates with Barhebraeus but which was extended several times with Arabic glosses. The commentary preserves a large number of linguistic observations, which often originate with earlier authors. The comment to the verse quoted above reads: “I will build (*bn*) houses, palaces, cities; stumbling block (*bn*), i.e. a column or construction in the middle of the road”. This explanation is similar to that of the DVA of Eudochos, whom Barhebraeus numbers amongst his masters: “stumbling block, for example a column, i.e., a small construction”. In the metrical text, Barhebraeus presents other methods of indicating the meaning of a verbal form. The most frequent, which is often used in the commentary, consists of connecting a conjugated form to a specific nominal formation of the same root, as exemplified by v. 1016: “from prayer (*thnnt*) comes: he made supplications (*thnn*); and from piety (*hnn*) comes: he found grace (*thnn*)”. Here we have two verbal forms, the simple and the causative, of the same root *HNN*.

As these examples show, the method used to present the same material is not uniform. ‘Enanišo¹² writes the word, explains it, and then offers biblical examples: “MR (with a point underneath to indicate the perfect tense): speech addressed to others at a precise moment, for example: the Lord spoke (*mr*) to Moses, Jesus spoke (*mr*) to the crowd of Judaeans”; this is followed by MR with a point above to indicate the active participle, and so on. At the lemma B, Eudochos presents the following formulation: “dads (*bh*) is said for carnal fathers,

11 This work is the subject of a specific study by Illich (1885). The title of the DVA of Barhebraeus is as follows: “Concerning the appearance (*pršwp*) of readings (*qryt*) and equivocal (*mtpšknýt*) words: we will collect a few and speak of them briefly” (vv. 865–868). This is a reference to the different ways of reading (*qryt*) the same consonantal text: that of the easterners (Nestorians) and that of the westerners; this term also occurs in the title of the Masoretic collections cited (note 3). The prose comment on the title of the DVA of Barhebraeus runs: “on phrases made up of similar (*dmyyt*) and equivocal (*mtpšknýt*) words, that is, nouns and verbs”. Amongst the expressions appearing in both the DVAs and the Masoretic treatises, mention should also be made of: “variation (*šwḥlp*) and distinction (*prš*) of readings (*qryt*)”.

12 Though the text of ‘Enanišo has been combined with that of Hunain, the contributions of each author can be distinguished, given that Hunain, an expert translator from the Greek, describes synonyms on the model of the Greek treatises with which he was familiar. For instance, he asks: “what is the difference (cf. διαφέρει) between Creator and Maker?” (Hoffmann 1880: 11). For ‘Enanišo see also Gottheil 1889.

and father (*ḥbt*) for spiritual fathers; carnal dad (*ḥ*), Father (*ḥ*) Macarius". The difference between the two pronunciations of *ḥ* is indicated by a diacritical point, in the first case placed above the line and in the second case below. Elias bar Šinaya, who devotes the last section of his lexicon divided by topic to homographs, also distinguishes in this case between three terms, providing the Arabic translation for each: *ḥ* referring to God as father, *ḥ* in the sense of carnal father and *ḥ* for parent (Obicini 1636: 346)¹³.

If we compare these ancient prose treatises with the metrical DVA of ʿAbdišoʿ of Gazarta, who wrote in a period in which Syriac had long ceased to be a spoken language, the artificiality of the construction is immediately apparent. Without the help of diacritical points it would be difficult to understand the following sentence in Syriac: "dad (*ḥ*) you say, and father (*ḥ*) and then fruits and fruit (*ḥ*)". Such difficulties in comprehension led later to the composition of an anonymous prose commentary (Hoffmann 1880: 70-84), which explains the example quoted above thus: "father (*ḥ*) when ʾ has the vowel *a* and *b* is plosive; thus for example, we call Our Father father, in Arabic *al-ab*; fruit (*ḥ*) when ʾ has the vowel *e* and the plural, in other words all fruits, is fruits (*ḥbn*), i.e. *pēkātā*, in Arabic *al-fākiha*" (Hoffmann 1880: 50 and 70). We have transliterated the Syriac *pēkātā* because this nominal formation clearly indicates its Arabic origin, which leads us to an important observation: these DVAs (published by Martin and Hoffmann) have provided material for R. Payne Smith's *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford 1879-1901) and in some cases, including *pēkātā*, are our only evidence for the existence of certain Syriac words.

Barhebraeus and the homonyms

In addition to the treatment provided in his DVA, Barhebraeus dealt with homonyms in his two grammars: the small metrical grammar and the great grammar in prose, which have come down to us in a large number of manuscripts. The grammars are divided into four parts. The first three follow the scheme used by the Arab grammarians: noun, verb and particles; while the fourth part consists of syntax (Metrical Grammar) or of questions connected with phonetics (Great Grammar). Within this structure, we find that the material comes from the brief treatises appended to the Masoretic collections: it comes as no surprise that the examples are drawn almost exclusively from the Bible or from Syriac translations of the Greek Fathers of the Church.

13 In Arabic, *allāh al-ab*, *ab-ḡusadāniyy*, and *al-ab al-wālid* respectively. The arrangement used for the items in these lexicons shows that these grammarians seem to regard what we would consider polysemous words as a set of different but homophonous words.

The fourth part of the Great Grammar is divided into six chapters dealing with the following topics: alphabet and phonetics, plosive or fricative pronunciation of *bgdkpt* in nouns and verbs, vowel signs, points with various functions, and accents. In connection with vowel-points (IV 4,5), Barhebraeus distinguishes between the western (Jacobite) and eastern (Nestorian) pronunciations; in reality, these are not two different dialects, but different “readings” (*qryt*) in the sense of textual criticism. When he examines diacritical points in the strict sense, Barhebraeus speaks of “western signs which distinguish the appearance of the word (*pršwp*)”. Though it is not explicitly mentioned, the examples are taken from the DVAs, the treatises on points, and the brief lists of homographs in the Masoretic collections (IV 5,3).

The interest for the relationship between phonological and graphical systems is apparent on a number of occasions in the Metrical Grammar: one might be tempted to call this text a “reader’s manual”. An entire paragraph of the first chapter (vv. 189-201) is devoted to the “letters (*ṭwt*) which distinguish (*pršn*) similar nouns (*dmyy*)”. Once again, we find the characteristic nomenclature of the DVAs, but with a new term: *ṭwt*, which doesn’t indicate the consonants, but the graphemes. Barhebraeus writes: “we say *ḥbn* (fruits) as distinguished from *ḥn* (I will build), and *q* clearly distinguishes *mpqqyn* (to speak in vain) from *mpqyn* (to cause the removal), and likewise *l* distinguishes *gl* (waves) from *gl* (twig) ... Also included amongst distinguishing letters is *ḥnn* (us, we), which in writing distinguishes *šbyn ḥnn* (we want) from *šbyynn* (we want); and *ṭwn* (you plural) distinguishes *šbyn ṭwn* (you want) from *šbyṭwn* (you wanted)”.

The treatise on homographs also includes homophones, an example being the third person feminine plural of the perfect tense, which can be written in two different but homophonous ways: *qtl* and *qṭly*. In this case, the advice given by Barhebraeus in the second chapter is as follows: “write all these with the letter of the feminine gender: it is *y*, is quiescent, goes at the end of the word, and is sufficient to distinguish between masculine and feminine in writing by form. It also removes doubts regarding the meaning. Do not listen to those (i.e. the Nestorians) who hinder distinctions for the written word and attempt to confuse the reading when there is no exact indication (vv. 444-449)”.

The insistence on orthography returns in the fourth chapter, which lists different ways of distinguishing between subject and direct object. The first four apply to both the spoken language and written texts: the subject precedes the object, the object is preceded by *l*-, the sense of the action expressed by the verb, and the agreement in gender between subject and verb. The fifth method (vv. 838-840), however, takes a case of homophony which can only be resolved in a written text: the sentence, “the servants outraged (*šrw*) the master” could also be read as “the master outraged (*šr*) the servants”. Only the presence of the gra-

pHEME *w* at the end, with the purely graphic function of distinguishing between the forms, makes it possible to recognize that the subject is plural.

Moberg, in translating the Great Grammar of Barhebraeus, remarks that the object of the Syriac grammars is the written text and the correct reading thereof (1907: 18*). If we wish to find an explanation for Moberg's observation, we must bear in mind the underlying need to preserve the religious text and to respect the exact pronunciation of the words used in the ritual. This need is likewise implicit in the grammar of Pāṇini for the Vedic texts, as well as in Hebrew or Arabic grammar. If a canonical text is sacred, so is the language in which it is written; consequently, we must exercise caution in using these grammars which attempt to establish or justify norms from a text which has been handed down, often acritically, by tradition, rather than reflecting the actual usage of the living language.

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