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An Important Step in the Revival of Literary Syriac
Abrohom Nuro's *Tawldotho*[1]

The term revival is commonly used for the revitalization of Hebrew at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and occasionally for the modernization of Literary Arabic[2] and Literary Syriac[3]. In their written forms these languages have a long unbroken tradition and all of them have a major ancient literature. It is precisely these circumstances that enabled a number of dedicated persons to realize their aspirations towards a revival of Literary Syriac. One such dedicated person is Abrohom Nuro who for the last decades has contributed considerably to the teaching and lexical development of the language. His most recent work is the book under review.

Tawldotho is essentially a collection of neologisms aimed at those who write Syriac. It is normative rather than descriptive. The book falls into three parts termed Books (English version Volumes): In the introductory part the author discusses principles for the formation of neologisms (pp. 5-100), some of which will be commented on below. A number of word lists arranged according to content constitute the middle part (pp. 101-208). These include lists of professions, types of schools, science and mathematics, history, geography, medical science, law, arts, politics and economy, and international organizations. A concluding documentary part contains copies of letters and reprints of selected documents and articles (pp. 209-308), among others the

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1 Review article of Abrohom Nuro, *Tawldotho or Syriac Neologisms*. Priciples, Criteria and Examples. Title in Syriac, Arabic and English. ISBN 91-972935-0-4. Price 30 $ + postage (8 $). Address of author/publisher: Abrohom Nuro, c/o Samaan Kahlaji, Skarpbrunnavägen 85 1TR, S-145 64 Norsborg, Sweden.

2 Cf. J. Blau, *The Renaissance of Modern Hebrew and Modern Standard Arabic: Parallels and Differences in the Revival of Two Semitic Languages* (University of California Publications. Near Eastern Studies 18, 1981).

3 Cf. S. P. Brock, 'Some Observations on the Use of Classical Syriac in the Late Twentieth Century', JSS 34 (1989) 363 reprinted in the book under review p. 285; E. E. Knudsen, 'Lexical Innovations in Modern Literary Syriac', *Symposium Syriacum* VII 545 (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 256. Roma 1998), and the book under review front page (Syriac and Arabic text) and p.

author's "Terminologie syriaque: Les néologismes" in Langues orientales an-
ciennes. Philologie et linguistique 4 (1993) 191-197 (pp. 262-269) and Sebastian
Brock's "Some Observations on the Use of Classical Syriac in the Late Twentieth
Century" in Journal of Semitic Studies 34 (1989) 363-375 (pp. 285-297). The
book uses a wide variety of languages. The introductory part is written in
Syriac, though the lexical lists are quadrilingual Syriac, Arabic, French and
English. To the word lists of the middle part the author has added columns
with equivalents in German and Swedish. Interspersed in the text are short
paragraphs with photographs and biographies of the pioneers of the Syriac
language. These are usually marked by a border to distinguish them from the
main body of text.

   In the introductory part the author states the principles for the creation of
new vocabulary in a sequence of 42 numbered sections. The overall guiding
principles appear in the first five sections. Priority and preference are given to
native Syriac words and expressions (§ 1, p. 7, cf. p. 278) and retention of
foreign words with native synonyms is accepted, if they have been naturalized
in Syriac (§ 2, p. 8, cf. p. 278). However, the author suggests introduction of
international words already used in three or four languages of the Middle East
(Arabic, Turkish, French and English) (§ 3, p. 9f., cf. p. 278), if feasible in
Syriac garb (§ 4, p. 11) as in ܣܝܓܪܐ 'cigarette' and ܩܗܘܐ 'coffee' both of which
are documented elsewhere in modern texts. He also encourages the use of
words and idioms taken from 'colloquial Syriac,' i. e. Turoyo and Eastern
Neo-Aramaic (§ 5, p. 12f.). This source is poorly exploited in actual texts and
I do not remember ever to have seen any of Nuro's examples except ܥܣܒܐ
'grass, herb' (Turoyo. Classical 'straw') and, perhaps, ܒܒܥܘ in the sense of
'please' (cf. p. 38 No. 1). The latter is classical Syriac, even though it is listed
as 'Eastern.' It also occurs in Turoyo, apparently as a recent borrowing. It
appears from these guiding principles that the proposed language policy is
puristic. In communitites with strong cultural and national feelings language
purism is quite natural and it is my impression that Syriac authors and journalists
largely follow these principles.

   It falls outside the scope of a review article to comment on all the remaining
sections. Several concern derivation of new words from existing word bases
and roots. Syriac like Arabic and other Semitic languages has a rich derivative
system and it is important to make use of this morphological feature which is
fairly unique among the languages of the world. In order to give the reader an
impression of the process of coining new lexical items I shall dwell in some
detail on the sections on compounding and borrowing from other Semitic
languages, including calquing from Arabic.

   Formation of nominal compounds is known from classical Syriac, though it

is not very common.[4] Adverbs, on the other hand, often have a complex morphological structure, as in the well-known Classical example (quoted p. 30 No. 7) ܗܳܫܳܐ 'now' ܗܳܢܳܐ ܥܶܕܳܢܳܐ. Phonological reduction is characteristic of some compounds and the author uses this feature in the creation of new words. One such instance is the term for 'electricity' ܟܰܚܪܐ and its derivatives 'to electrify,' 'electrification' etc. The term itself is stated as a compound of ܟܰܚܪܐ ܦܶܢܐ lit. 'gleaner (fem.) of bran' (p. 32). This may seem a bit far-fetched, but apparently the intention is to arouse phonetic associations to the European words. To the best of my knowledge the term has found no wide distribution. At least, I have seen only ܟܰܗܪܒܐ, a loan from Arabic, in this sense. Another example mentioned by Nuro and presumably of his coinage is ܡܰܕܪܟܐ 'motorcycle' (pp. 211 and 281) compounded of ܡܰܕܪܚܢܐ 'motor' and ܓܝܓܠܐ 'wheel.' The former element of the compound is an Afʿel derivative of the root ܪܕܐ 'to move' (Pe. intransitive, Af. transitive). Like the compound itself it is a calque from European languages, compare also Latin *moto* 'I move' (transitive).

Another means of creating new words, though of limited importance, is borrowing from older Semitic languages particularly Akkadian (sections 17 and 18, p. 40f.). Some of these words are ancient loans with a long history in Aramaic, others are modern. Classical ܐܶܣܛܪ 'handwritten deed' is assigned the slightly modified meaning of 'copy, document' taken over from earlier Aramaic. The Syriac term as well as its early Aramaic cognates go back to Akkadian *šaṭāru* 'written document' (Standard and Late Babylonian).[5] The orthographic forms of two items, ܕܰܓܠܐ 'detachment, troop' and ܣܓܢܐ 'préfet/governor, ruler' seem historically less adequate. I would prefer ܕܓܠܐ and ܣܓܢܐ in accordance with established rules of vowel pattern correspondences. The former, then, will reflect Imperial Aramaic *dgl* (same meaning).[6] The original meaning 'banner, military standard' is still preserved in Modern Hebrew *dégel* 'flag.' The latter is another case of an ancient loan from Akkadian: *sgn* (vowel pattern uncertain) Biblical Hebrew 'governor,' early Aramaic 'chief, prefect' (Jewish Aramaic 'deputy [high priest]') < Akkadian *šaknu* 'governor'.[7] The correspondence Akk. *š/k* : Aram. *s/g* shows that the source of the loan was the Assyrian dialect of Akkadian. In other cases the author draws directly on Akkadian by way of modern Assyriology. Thus he selects the word *šarru*

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4 Cf. T. Nöldeke, *Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik* (2nd ed. Leipzig 1898, reprinted Darmstadt 1966), § 141.

5 See S. A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic*, (Assyriological Studies 19. Chicago 1974), p. 101.

6 For references to texts, see C.-F. Jean & J. Hoftijzer, *Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'Ouest*, (Leiden 1965), p. 55.

7 Cf. Kaufman p. 97f.

'king' to form the basis of new compounds as ܥܡ̣ܝܕܒܐ 'minister of foreign affairs,' compare Modern Hebrew *sar ha-ḫuc/ḫuc* with the same meaning (lit. minister of the exterior) and Biblical Hebrew *śar* 'prince, high official of the king.' In spite of the Akkadian origin of its first member and the Hebrew parallel the compound is a calque from Arabic (وزير الخارجية). I know of none of these words from other sources.

Calquing from Arabic is an important source of new vocabulary. The majority, if not the vast majority of journalists and other active users of the language are bilingual Arabic and Syriac and seem to use calquing almost unconsciously. This is, at least, the impression of an outside observer.[8] Calquing from Arabic is an effective, though at the same time unfortunate means of coining new vocabulary, since in the Aramaic diaspora more and more persons of the younger generations do not learn Arabic.[9] According to the author the possibility of calquing may be considered on the condition that the root of the word to be calqued has the same meaning in Syriac and Arabic and that there is a regular correspondence of meaning and morphologic pattern (§ 19, p. 42). The common ܪ̈ܕܝܬܐ 'automobile, car' is a calque from سيارة . It has a morphologic pattern cognate with Arabic $\{R_1aR_2R_2\bar{a}R_3+at$ (fem.)$\}$ and its root underlies the verb ܪܕܐ 'to journey, to travel' (Pe.) corresponding to Arabic سار (Form I) with the same meaning. A particular case is the likewise common ܩܛܪܐ '(railway) train' calqued from قطار. The older meaning of the Arabic term is 'train of camels with tails tied together,' compare the related verb قطر 'to tie (camels) in a file' (Form I). As shown by Syriac and Semitic etymology both noun and verbal root are loans from Aramaic, compare classical Syriac ܩܛܪ 'to tie, to bind' (Pe.) and the corresponding verbal noun ܩܛܪܐ 'tying.' The phonological correspondence of Arabic *ṭ* with *ṣ* in Akkadian *kaṣāru* and Ethiopic *qʷäṣärä* both meaning 'to tie, to bind together' shows that the Arabic verb and its underlying root are not native to the language. Thus calquing in this case constitutes the latest phase in the history of a verbal root which started its carreer in Aramaic including Syriac, passed into Arabic, and passed back to its Aramaic source in the form of a calque.

The book under review has several features in common with a language academy publication. It offers discussions of the principles for the formation of neologisms and comprehensive word lists. However, like language academy proposals Nuro's material has to stand the test of those who write the language. Whereas a large number of items in the word lists are of a special nature like

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8 Knudsen p. 547.
9 Compare the discussion and the statistics in E. Wardini, *Modern Literary Syriac: A Case of Linguistic Divorce*, *Symposium Syriacum* VII 517-525, particularly the conclusions p. 524f. (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 256. Roma 1998).

scientific and mathematical terms and names of international organizations and so are less likely to appear in ordinary texts, there are a significant number of items denoting everyday objects and concepts to suggest a test of the material against a well defined corpus of ordinary texts. Having been in charge of the Tur Abdin Project of the University of Oslo[10] I am in the lucky position of having access to the lexical innovations of such a corpus, albeit of a limited size, registered in a data base.

From the very beginning several years ago the Tur Abdin Project has had as its main purpose to register and describe lexical innovations in Modern Literary Syriac. It was evident from a perusal of even a few modern texts that these contained a significant number of common words not covered by the existing classical dictionaries. Our planned publication of an annotated list of lexical innovations will be similar to Nuro's work, though there will be some distinctive differences. Whereas his lists of new words are normative and, at least in principle, have application to any type of text, our lists are strictly descriptive and based on a closed corpus of texts. In addition we also consider, as far as possible, the Turoyo equivalents in order to determine the relationship between the written and spoken languages. The Tur Abdin Project has had limited resources, both personal and economical, and we had to decide work priorities. Therefore, we focus on texts published in Sweden, moreover on journalistic texts and school books rather than on literary texts. The evidence of schoolbooks is important for our purposes, since schoolbooks introduce words for common modern objects and concepts well known to any child. However, we added a selection of similar texts published or written in the Middle East.

Our corpus esentially includes the following types of text:

A. Selected articles from the journals *Hujådå* published by the Assyrian Federation of Sweden and *Bahro Suryoyo* published by the Syriac Federation of Sweden.

B. Reading books for the use in schools also published in Sweden. We excerpted data from *Safro Tobo* 1-3 (1982-1983) by Johanon Kashisho (affiliated to the Assyrian Federation), *Leshon* (1982) by Ishak Akan and Erdes Salci (affiliated to the Syriac Federation) as well as from Andreas Arsalan's *Darbo* 1 (1982) and 4 (1988). To this material we added a few issues of Abd Mshiho Naaman Qarabashi's *Herge* (handwritten Dutch edition 1985-1986) and Abrohom Nuro's *Suloqo* (Hengelo 1989).

Our data are registered in a data base and copied to three different files, a

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10 For an interim report on the Tur Abdin Project, see Knudsen pp. 545-551. The first publication of project material is E. Wardini, *Neologisms in Modern Literary Syriac: Some Preliminary Results.* University of Oslo 1995 (thesis). Forthcoming publication in Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph (Beirut), of which the first part appeared 1997 in vol. 53 (1993-1994) 403-566.

working file (termed PreFile), a file (termed SyrFile) set aside mainly for security reasons and a file (termed EntFile) containing the lexical entries corresponding to the entries of a dictionary. Besides we keep a particular Turoyo base with translations of the lexical entries. At the time of writing the Syriac base now numbers 6 944 cards (records), including 2 524 lexical entries.

A test of the lexical material presented in the book under review against our data reveals that there are 209 items of shared vocabulary. Of these 7 items are synonyms. In addition Nuro's material includes 165 items not documented in our sources, but of which we have attested synonyms. Among these 165 marginal items there are as much as 35 synonyms. It should be noted, however, that our data include items attested in other works by Nuro excerpted by us, of which the most important is his textbook Suloqo. The shared vocabulary mostly covers everyday terms like words for football, cinema, telephone or television, but also a number of geographical terms and terms of particular interest for Syriac social life in the diaspora like words for club, journal, kindergarden or sport. The unusual high number of marginal items, all of them being synonyms of items in our data, is another language academy feature of the book. Apparently the author's intention is to let those who write the language make their own choice. Future usage will then decide which term or terms will survive.

Modern Literary Syriac borrows freely from European languages, though mostly in the form of calques (loan translations). Among the test vocabulary, however, there are several items taken over as loans, either directly or by the way of Arabic. In some cases we find variant forms combining the two alternatives. Thus ܕܝܡܘܩܪܐܛܝܐ 'democracy'[11] passed directly into Syriac from European languages, while the variant form ܕܝܡܘܩܪܐܛܝܐ (Hujådå) was influenced by Arabic as shown by its vowel pattern. Influence from Arabic is not restricted to the form of loan words, it may even affect Syriac spelling. In ܪܐܕܝܘ 'radio'[12] and the orthographic variant ܪܐܕܝܘ (attested in several sources including Nuro) and in ܠܐܛܝܢܝ 'Latin' (pp. 116 and 161) and the synonymous ܠܐܛܝܢܐ (Bahro Suryoyo) the spelling with olaf is due to influence from Arabic راديو and لاتيني respectively. Contrast the variants ܪܕܝܘ (Hujådå) and ܠܛܝܢ (p. 212 lower text section) written defectively. In the former case defective spelling may be explained by or at least is supported by Turoyo *radyo* with a short vowel in its first syllable. On the other hand, a treatment of the entity *tele-* as in Turoyo *talafûn* 'telephone' and *talav/wizyôn* 'television' is unparalleled in our data.

In a publication involving lists in several languages errors are inevitable.

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11 *Tawldotho* 82 No. 26, 178 No. 37, cf. variant spellings pp. 278 No. 3 and 265.
12 *Tawldotho* 2,29, 9 No. 1, 278 No. 3, also attested in *Bahro Suryoyo*.

However, I have noted only a few disturbing errors. On p. 126f. are listed a number of terms relative to history. In No. 25 (cuneiform) read German Keilschrift instead of keilförmig and Swedish kilskrift instead of kilformad (in compounds like Keilschrifttexte etc.). We can document two of Nuro's four items, viz. ܟܬ̈ܝܒܐ (Darbo, Hujådå) and ܚܘܝܕܐ (Hujådå). P. 131 No. 110 (commune) read English column as county. P. 176f. No. 21 (liquid) at least the former item ܚܠܐ (Herge) is a noun and the German and Swedish columns should be corrected to Flüssigkeit and vätska respectively. P. 188f. No. 221 (ministry of communications) read Swedish column as kommunikations-departement. In a number of items on these pages the entity – minister should be corrected to German – Ministerium and Swedish – departement. Several polyglot word lists are not arranged according to content and a set of indexes would have greatly enhanced the usefullness of the book.

To sum up *Tawldotho* is an impressive collection of neologisms and it represents an important step in the revival process of Modern Literary Syriac. The book is the fruits of many years of assiduous work, for which active users of the language will be very grateful to the author.