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The Prepositional System of Classical Syriac and that of Sureth

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The author tries, by means of graphs, to envisage a theoretical frame in order to classify in a coherent and intuitive system of functional oppositions the adpositions (pre-/post-positions) of single languages, in particular the prepositions of Classical Syriac and those of Sureth (North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic). In this way the author points out the peculiarities of the prepositional system of Semitic languages such as Syriac, Sureth and Arabic, in comparison with the prepositional system of English, on one side, and the postpositional system of Turkish, on the other side. Last but not least the author illustrates the distinctiveness of the prepositional system of Sureth compared with that of Classical Syriac.

1. It can be assumed that each language has its own system of prepositions depending on the particular way in which the speakers analyze and link semantically the realities and events of the extra linguistic world. Nevertheless it is not yet clear on what principles a system of preposition is grounded.

The present article deals with a visual representation of prepositional systems which derives from a reshuffling of the theory on prepositions proposed in 1940 by the Danish linguist Viggo Brøndal (1887-1942)¹. This reshuffling was put forward in 1974, but has undergone further revision and updating in the course of the years until recently². Lucien Tesnière's Dependency Grammar³ and Silvio Ceccato's Correlational Grammar⁴ exerted decisive influence on the working out of the new theory.

The present visual representation is based on the intertwining of two couples of oppositions which are linked to the logic of action and to the modes of perception, by borrowing concepts peculiar to Cognitive Grammar such as **Figure** (*trajector*) and **Background** (*landmark*)⁵. The first of these couples of oppositions is plus or minus 'Applicativity', the second plus or minus 'Dimensionality'.

By 'Applicativity' we mean the capacity of a primary preposition to project a **Figure** on a **Background**, as the English primary prepositions *to*, *at*, *till*, *for*, *on* and *in* do, as well as the secondary, less abstract, prepositions *between*, *among*, *through*, *before*, *against* and *around*. 'Retroapplicative' is, on the contrary, a preposition which

¹ Cp. Brøndal 1967.

² Cp. Pennacchietti 1974, 1976b, 1978, 1981, 2005 and 2008; Tosco 2006.

³ Cp. Tesnière 1959.

⁴ Cp. Ceccato 1961.

⁵ Cp. Taylor 1993, 2002.

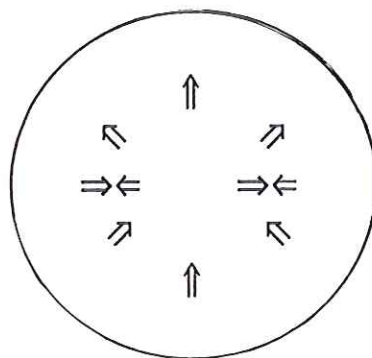
expresses that the **Figure** emerges from a **Background**, as done by the English primary prepositions *of, off, from, by* and *with*, but also by the secondary, less abstract, prepositions *besides, without, under, behind, along, beside* and *near*.

By 'Dimensionality' we mean the capacity of a primary preposition to express that **Figure** and **Background** accompany each other in the same temporal and spatial dimension, as the English primary prepositions *on, in, with* and *near* do, as well as *between, among, through, before, against, around, under, behind, along, beside* and *near*. On the other hand, when the coexistence of **Figure** and **Background** in the same temporal and spatial dimension is not relevant, as it happens with the English primary prepositions *to, at, till, for, of, off, from* and *by*, and obviously with *besides* and *without*, such a preposition is considered 'Non-Dimensional'.

2. Let us begin with the Graph 1. The white disc in its centre stands for the **Background** and is supposed to symbolize any part of speech which is fit for forming an Adpositional Phrase (AdP) together with a preposition or a postposition. The arrows inside the disc stand for the adposition (preposition/postposition) which is contained in the Adpositional Phrase (AdP). For instance, the AdP *to go* of the sentence *I want to go* can be visualized by Graph 1 with the disc (**Background**) standing for the infinitive *go* and with one of the arrows (we will later see which one of them) representing the preposition *to*. In its turn the AdP *to the farm* of the sentence *I want to go to the farm* is visualized in the same way with the disc (**Background**) standing for the Noun Phrase (NP) *the farm* and with an arrow representing the same preposition *to*.

In other words, in the case of English, the disc represents a NP or any other part of speech which is in a position to receive a preposition in front of itself. On the contrary, any arrow inside the disc symbolize the preposition required in a specific semantic context.

Graph 1

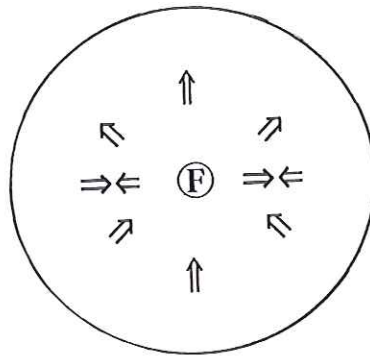


3. In order to complete the visual representation of a relation requiring the intervention of a preposition (or of a postposition) a smaller disc with the capital letter **F** inscribed in it has to be added in the centre of the bigger disc. It stands for the **Figure** and symbolizes any part of speech which governs an Adpositional Phrase. In the case of a sentence like *I want to go*, where the AdP is *to go*, and the **Background** is the infinitive *go*, the **Figure** is the verb *I want*. In the larger sentence *I want to go to the farm* the **Figure** is instead the segment *I want to go*. We obtain so the Graph 2.

Graph 2

(+/-)

(+/+)



(-/-)

(-/+)

3.1. The arrows put in the upper semicircle of the disc radiate with their tip directed outwards from around the smaller disc with the capital letter **F** inscribed in it. Let us imagine that these arrows are red and warm, and that for the reason that they represent prepositions whose task is - as it was said before - to fulfil the dynamic mental operation of projecting the **Figure** upon the **Background**; in other words they perform an 'Application', as the English primary prepositions *to*, *at*, *till*, *for*, *on* and *in* do.

The marks (+/-) and (+/+) put in the upper edges of the graph indicate to which class belongs an 'Applicative' preposition.

3.1.1. The prepositions represented by the NE-bound arrow are both 'Applicative' and 'Dimensional' (+/+). It is the case of the English preposition *in*. I can work *in* a farm only if *I* and *my work* (**Figure**) and *the farm* (**Background**) share the same temporal and spatial dimension.

3.1.2. The prepositions represented by the NW-bound arrow are instead both 'Applicative' and 'Non-Dimensional' (+/-). It is the case of the English primary prepositions *to*, *at* and *till* where the coexistence of **Figure** and **Background** in the same temporal and spatial dimension is not relevant. 'To work *at* school' and 'to work *in* a school' are not the same thing. In the latter case the localization is dimensional ('*inside* a school'), in the former the dimensionality is lacking. E.g. *to sit down at table; to stay at Mr Brown's; to be surprised at something; to be at work; to look at someone; the bicycle belongs to John; we walked to the top of the hill; the mummy crumbled to dust; I waited till four o'clock.*

3.1.3. As for the prepositions represented by the arrow directed northwards (vertical axis), they are simply 'Applicative', with neutralization of the opposition 'Dimensional' vs. 'Non-Dimensional'. This is the case of the English prepositions *for* and *on*. E.g. *there is a message for you; this region is famous for its wine; we met for lunch; he was born on December 14th; on her arrival she phoned the hotel.*

3.2. While in the upper semicircle of the **Background** the arrows radiate from around the **Figure**, the arrows put in the lower semicircle converge around the **Figure** with their tip directed towards it. Let us imagine that these arrows are blue and cold because they represent prepositions whose task is to express that the **Figure** emerges from a **Background**; it is not projected on it. In other words these prepositions perform an 'Retroapplication', as the English primary prepositions *of*, *off*, *from*, *by* and *with* do. 'Retroapplication' may be defined as the outcome of the mental processing of an 'Application'.

The marks (-/-) and (-/+) put in the lower edges of the graph indicate to which class a 'Retroapplicative' preposition belongs.

3.2.1. The prepositions represented by the SE-bound arrow are both 'Retroapplicative' and 'Dimensional' (-/+). It is the case of the English primary preposition *with*. I can write a note *with* a pencil only if *I* and *my writing a note* (**Figure**) and *the pencil* (**Background**) share the same temporal and spatial dimension. It can be said that the sentence *I am writing a note with a pencil* is the outcome of the processing of *I am using a pencil to write a note*. In this case the **Figure** is *I am using a pencil* and it is projected 'applicatively' on the **Background** *to write a note*. See also the following sentences and in brackets the sentences that seem to be their presupposition: *I smeared the wall* (**Figure**) *with mud* (**Background**) 'Retroapplication' (\Leftarrow *I smeared mud* (**Figure**) *on the wall* (**Background**) 'Application'); *the garden was swarming with bees* 'Retroappl.' (\Leftarrow *bees were swarming in the garden* 'Appl.'). and *I hit*

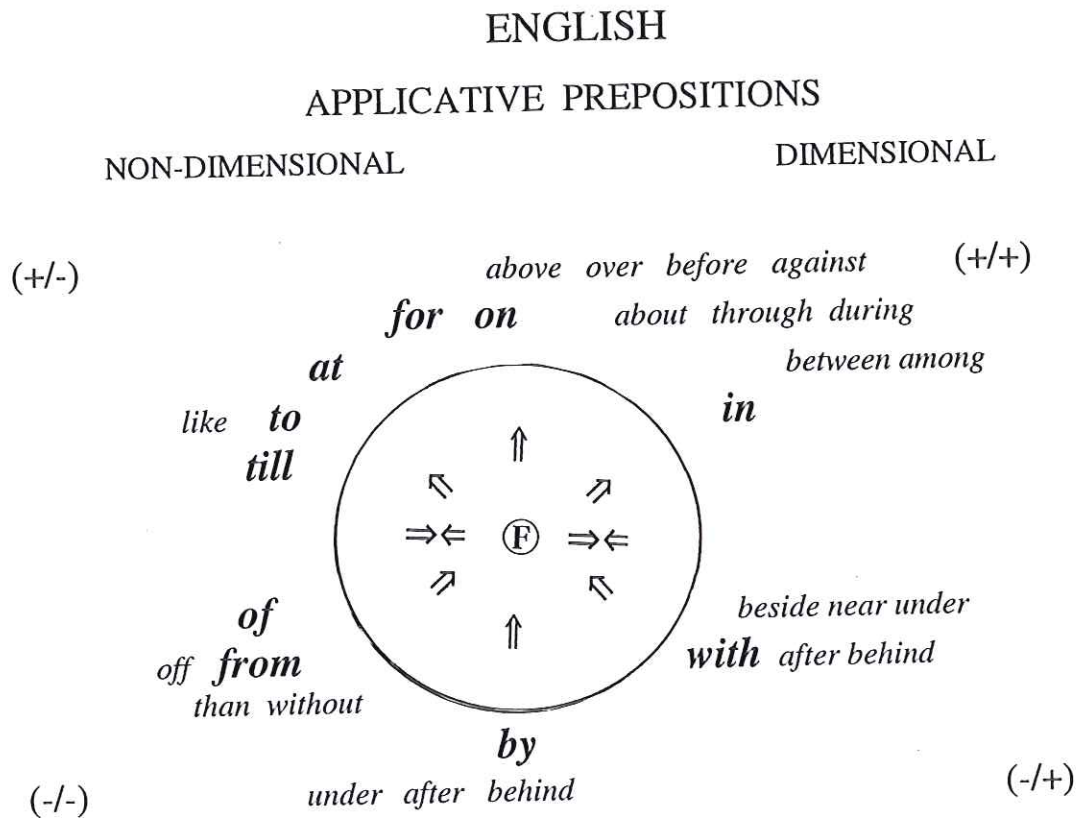
Harry with the stick 'Retroappl.' (\Leftarrow *I hit the stick against Harry* 'Appl.').

3.2.2. On the contrary, the prepositions represented by the SW-bound arrow are both 'Retroapplicative' and 'Non-Dimensional' (-/-). It is the case of the English primary preposition *of, off, from* and *by*. They express the both **Figure** and **Background** aren't necessarily present in the same space and time sphere. See the following sentences and in brackets the sentences that seem to be their presupposition: *John's (Background) bicycle (Figure)*, *the bicycle (Figure) of John (Background)* 'Retroapplication' (\Leftarrow *the bicycle belongs (Figure) to John (Background)* 'Application'); *he takes his jacket off the peg* 'Retroappl.' (\Leftarrow *his jacket was on the peg* 'Appl.>'); *John comes from London* 'Retroappl.' (\Leftarrow *John was in London* 'Appl.>'); *the door was opened by John* 'Retroappl.' (\Leftarrow *John opened the door* 'Appl.>'); *the use of drugs by athletes* 'Retroappl.' (\Leftarrow *some athletes use drugs* 'Appl.>'); *he was a butcher by trade* 'Retroappl.' (\Leftarrow *his trade was butchery* 'Appl.>'); *they came by bus* 'Retroappl.' (\Leftarrow *in order to come they took the bus* 'Appl.').

3.2.3. As regards the prepositions represented by the arrow directed southwards (vertical axis), they are simply 'Retroapplicative', with neutralization of the opposition 'Dimensional' vs. 'Non-Dimensional'. I have the impression that the only English primary preposition that tallies with this definition is *by*. On the contrary I cannot find any English preposition that coincide with the arrows put on the horizontal axis of the graph. But such prepositions are typical of Western Semitic languages like Aramaic, Canaanitic, North- and South-Arabic and Ethiopic. The preposition represented by the confronting arrows westwards is purely 'Non-Dimensional' (see Arabic *li-*), with neutralization of the opposition 'Application' vs. 'Retroapplication', whereas the preposition represented by the confronting arrows eastwards is merely 'Dimensional' (see Arabic *bi-*).

We get in this way the Graph 3.

Graph 3



RETROAPPLICATIVE PREPOSITIONS

4. In comparison with the visual representation of the prepositional system of the English language, the representation of the prepositional system of Classical Syriac, set up on the same principles, shows some peculiarities.

First of all, Syriac possesses two prepositions on the horizontal axis of the graph: one purely 'Dimensional', *be*¹, on the eastern side, and one merely 'Non-Dimensional', *le*², on the western side. The former can express both circumscribed location (an 'Application') and instrumentality (a 'Retroapplication'): see *Gen. 22,13: w-xzā w-hā dekrā xad axxīd b-sawktā b-qarnāteh* "... and he saw lo a ram caught in[*with] a thicket by[*in] his horns"); the latter expresses instead both destination (an 'Application') and agentivity (a 'Retroapplication'), e.g. *ktīb l-dawwīd* "written by David", but functions also as marker of the definite direct object of a verb.

¹ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, pp. 33-34; Brockelmann 1962, pp. 81-82.

² Cp. Payne Smith 1903, pp. 232-233.

Besides Syriac has no primary preposition in the NE-bound sector of the upper semicircle with the functions of English *in* ('Dimensional Applicative'). As a matter of fact, in order to express the equivalent of *in*, *within* and *inside*, Syriac has to recur to the compound preposition *b-gaw*¹. But only in Sureth (*b-*)*gaw* is evolving to become a primary preposition: *go* "in". On the contrary Arabic has the equivalent of English *in* since its oldest written evidence: *fī*².

In the NW-bound sector ('Non-Dimensional Applicative') the primary Syriac preposition '*ad* means "until, till, as far as, up to, as long as"³, whereas the conjunction/preposition *a(y)k* means "like, as, as if, almost, about"⁴. On the vertical axis the primary preposition '*al* (purely 'Applicative') means mainly "on, above, upon, against, to, unto"⁵. The secondary prepositions *baynāt/bēt*⁶ and *qdām*⁷ have a less abstract meaning since they indicate a specific situation: "between, among, within, in the midst" and "before" respectively.

As regards the primary prepositions of the lower semicircle, Syriac has only one of them in the SW-bound sector ('Non-Dimensional Retroapplicative'): *men* "from, out of, of, by, than"⁸, whereas in the SE-bound sector it has two 'Dimensional Retroapplicative' prepositions: '*am* "with, together with"⁹ and *lwāt* "near, in comparison with, regarding"¹⁰. Instead, on the vertical axis there are at least two Syriac secondary prepositions: *bātar* "after, following"¹¹ and *txēt / txōt* "under, beneath"¹², with a clear 'Retroapplicative' situative meaning. All this is shown by Graph 4.

¹ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 62, properly speaking "in the belly of, in the inner part of".

² The Arabic primary preposition *fī* "in", properly speaking "(in the) mouth of", appears in the 4th line on the grave inscription of Raqosh (A.D. 267), in al-Hijr, Saudi Arabia, and in the 3rd line on the grave inscription of Imru' al-Qays (A.D. 328), in an-Namāra, Syria, cp. Cantineau 1930, II, pp. 38-39, 49-50.

³ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 400a.

⁴ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 12.

⁵ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 413.

⁶ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 42b.

⁷ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 490b.

⁸ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 280.

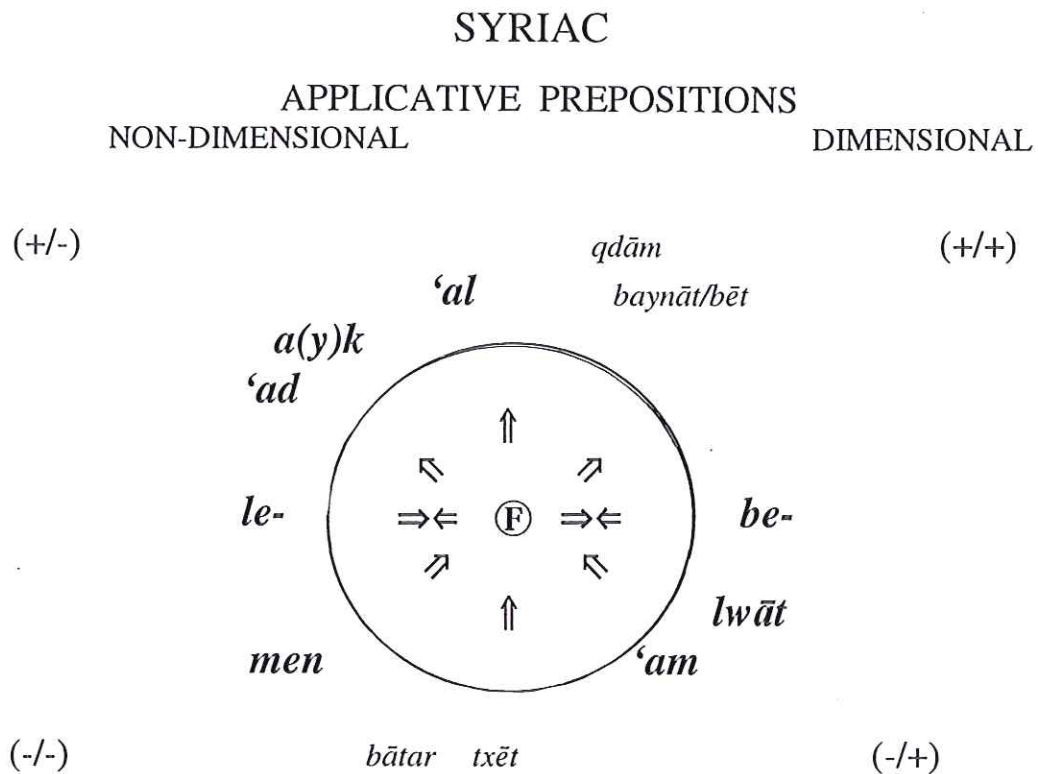
⁹ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 416a.

¹⁰ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, pp. 238-239.

¹¹ Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 57.

¹² Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 610a.

Graph 4



RETROAPPLICATIVE PREPOSITIONS

5. Compared with Graph 4, the representation of the prepositional system of Sureth shows the following features.

5.1. In the NE-bound sector ('Dimensional Applicative') of the upper semicircle emerges the primary preposition *go* "in"¹, which therefore enters into competition with the merely 'Dimensional' preposition *be-* "in; with"². The secondary (less abstract) prepositions *bēl* "between, among"³ and *qam* "before, in front of"⁴ replace Syriac *baynāt / bēt* and *qdām* respectively. In the NW-bound sector ('Non-Dimensional Applicative') a new preposition asserted itself, *tla / Tla / qa*⁵, which enters into competition with the purely 'Non-Dimensional' preposition *le-* not only as regards the meaning "to, for, in favour of, at", but also as marker of the definite direct object of a verb⁶. Another new preposition competing with

¹ Cp. Maclean 1895, pp. 170, 171-172; idem 1901, p. 45; Tsereteli 1970, pp. 70-71.

² Cp. Maclean 1895, pp. 169-170; idem 1901, p. 23.

³ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 171; idem 1901, p. 30b.

⁴ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 175; idem 1901, p. 270a.

⁵ Cp. Maclean 1895, pp. 172, 175; idem 1901, pp. 111, 267-268.

⁶ Cp. Maclean 1895, pp. 172, 175; idem 1901, pp. 111, 267-268.

le- is *la-* with the meaning “towards”¹. On the contrary the Sureth prepositions *hal* “up to, until”² and *(d/m)ak* “like, according to”³ replace Syriac *ad* and *a(y)k* respectively. In its turn, on the vertical axis the merely ‘Applicative’ preposition *al / ‘el*, “on, about, against”⁴, owing to the disappearance in Sureth of the first consonant [‘], tends to merge with the preposition *le-* in its variant *‘el-*⁵ and to be replaced by the new preposition *reš*⁶ (from *rēša* “head”).

5.2. In the SW-bound sector (‘Non-Dimensional Retroapplicative’) of the lower semicircle the Syriac primary preposition *men* “from” survives in the variants *men / m-*⁷, while a new preposition emerges, *but* “because of, for the sake of, concerning” (from Syriac *b-haw d-?*)⁸. Instead, in the SE-bound sector (‘Dimensional Retroapplicative’) the Syriac primary preposition *am* “with, together with” survives in the variants *am / ‘em*⁹. This preposition too, owing to the same phenomenon of the disappearance of the consonant [‘] mentioned above, tends to merge with another preposition. This time the preposition is *men / m-*, so that it happens that *men* can simultaneously mean “from” (with nouns of place or of agent, e.g. *pišlan berye men alaha* “we were created by God”) and “with” (exclusively with nouns of person, e.g. *alaha mennuk* “God be with you!”)¹⁰. In this case the position *men* “from / with” occupies in the visual representation of the prepositional system of Sureth is in the lower part of the vertical axis, together with the solely ‘Retroapplicative’ secondary prepositions *bar* “after”¹¹, *bē* “without”¹² and *(t)xut* “under”¹³. Moreover a secondary preposition appears in the SE-bound sector of the lower semicircle, replacing Syriac *lwāt*: *(l-)kes* “with, at, at the house of”¹⁴. This configuration of prepositions is represented by Graph 5.

¹ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 173; idem 1901, p. 143a.

² Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 172; idem 1901, p. 76b.

³ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 169, idem 1901, p. 10a.

⁴ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 174; idem 1901, p. 239.

⁵ Cp. Maclean 1901, p. 12a; Pennacchietti 1976, p. 651, No. 11b: *tope šišale’elli* “he shook his rifle towards me”; No. 13a: *beli w-’elle Turane* “between me and him (there are) mountains” (Barwari Bala).

⁶ Cp. Maclean 1901, p. 296°; idem 1901, p. 296a.

⁷ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 174, idem, 1901, p. 181.

⁸ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 170; idem 1901, p. 28b.

⁹ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 174, idem 1901, p. 240b.

¹⁰ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 174; idem 1901, p. 181.

¹¹ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 171; idem 1901, p. 41b.

¹² Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 170, idem 1901, pp. 23-24.

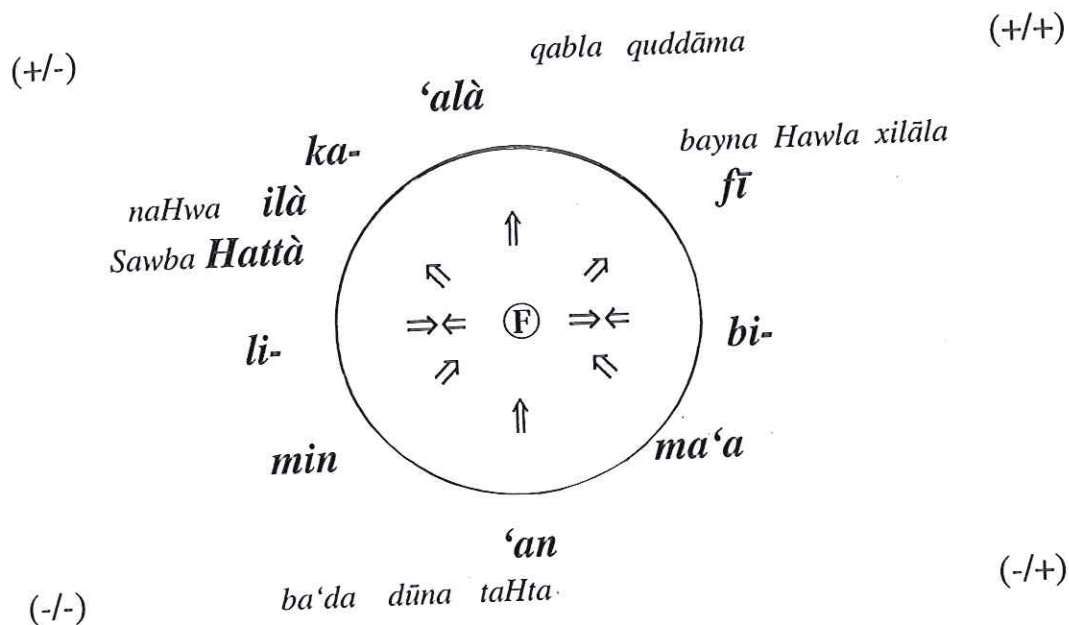
¹³ Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 175, idem 1901, p. 319a.

¹⁴ Cp. Maclean 1895, pp. 172, 173; idem 1901, p. 149a.

Graph 6

ARABIC

APPLICATIVE PREPOSITIONS
 NON-DIMENSIONAL DIMENSIONAL



RETROAPPLICATIVE PREPOSITIONS

7. Turkish, another important neighbouring language of Sureth, shows an adpositional system quite different. First, it has postpositions instead of prepositions. Second, apart from the endings $-[y]i$ (definite accusative) and $-[n]in$ (definite genitive), the adverbializing $-ce$ and the postposition $-siz$ "without", the Turkish adpositional system is dominated by only four postpositions: two 'Applicative', $-[y]e^1$ and $-de^2$, and two 'Retroapplicative', $-den^3$ and ile . But, whereas one of the two 'Retroapplicative' postpositions is 'Dimensional', ile "with", and the other is 'Non-Dimensional', $-den$ "from", the two 'Applicative' postpositions of Turkish are indifferent to the opposition 'Dimensional' – 'Non-Dimensional'.

7.1. The postposition $-de$ is therefore appointed to indicate any kind of location: that occurring in an object perceived as a 'point', e.g. *sizde bir kitap var* "you have a book", literally "in-you (*siz-de*) one book there-

¹ With its variant $-[y]a$.

² With its variants $-da$, $-te$ and $-ta$,

³ With its variants $-ten$, $-dan$ and $-tan$.

is”¹ (‘Non-Dimensional’), as well as that occurring in an object perceived as an ‘extension’ or a ‘volume’ (‘Dimensional’), e.g. *bu kitapta çok hikâye vardır* “in this book (*bu kitap-ta*) there are many tales”².

7.2. In its turn the postposition *-[y]e* is designated to express any kind of movement, attribution or destination: that occurring in relation to an object perceived as a ‘point’ (‘Non-Dimensional’), e.g. *o size bir kitap verecek* “he will give you a book”, literally “he to-you (*siz-e*) one book will-give”, as well as the movement into an object perceived as an ‘extension’ or a ‘volume’ (‘Dimensional’), e.g. *isminizi kâğida yazınız* “write your name on the paper (*kâğid-a*)!”; *şu kibritleri alınız ve kutuya koyunuz* “take these matches and put them into the box (*kutu-ya*)!”; *duvara çarpmak* “to knock against a wall (*duvar-a*)”³.

Moreover Turkish has a small number of secondary postpositions which follow directly their noun. They are *aşırı* “beyond, over”, *boyunca* “along, lengthwise, during”, *gibi* “like; nearly, almost”, *için* “for; because; about”, *kadar* “like, as much as” and *üzere* “just about to”⁴. Vice versa other secondary postpositions require the intervention of *-[y]e* or of *-den*, e.g. *kadar* with the meaning “till, until”: *ölüme kadar* “until the death (*ölüm-e*)”.

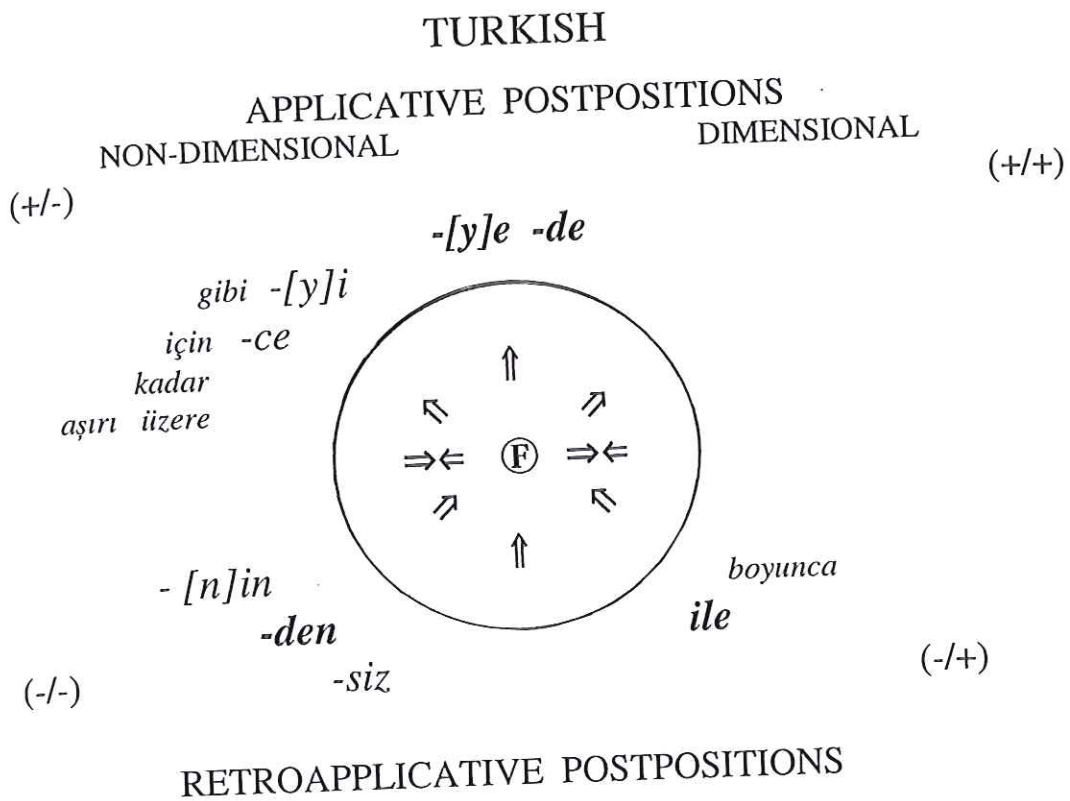
¹ Rossi 1963, p. 59.

² Rossi 1963, p. 69.

³ Cp. Rossi 1964, p. 53. Sometimes the ending *-[y]e* can indicate a location in time, e.g. *Başvekil akşama Ankara'ya gidecektir* “(This) evening (*akşam-a*) the Prime Minister will go to Ankara”, cp. *ibidem*, p. 53.

⁴ Cp. Rossi 1963, pp. 62-64. Yet, when these postpositions follow a pronoun, they require the intervention of the genitive ending *-in*, e.g. *senin kadar* “like you (*sen-in*)”, cf. *ibidem*, p. 63.

Graph 7



8. It should be desirable to extend the comparison of the prepositional system of Sureth with that of other non-Semitic neighbouring languages, in particular with that of the Kurmanci and Sorani varieties of Kurdish which were spoken as a second language by the Aramaic speaking Christian and Jewish communities living in Kurdistan. Unfortunately my lack of competence in this field prevents me from carrying out such a research.

Being based only on the intertwining of two couples of oppositions, plus or minus 'Applicativity', plus or minus 'Dimensionality', the visual representation suggested in this paper is unavoidably rudimentary, superficial and, what's more, subject to impressionistic evaluations. I think nevertheless, first, that the graphs produced in this paper allow scholars to get accustomed to the idea that even prepositions organize themselves in a system of functional oppositions; second, that these graphs enable scholars to seize at a glance the salient features of the adpositional system of a language - in this specific case the prepositional system of Sureth - in comparison with that of another language. The graphs make it clear that Sureth has developed a prepositional system in some ways similar to that of Arabic but richer and more articulate.

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