The Volume
of the 4th Syriac Language Conference

Beth Mardotha – Duhok
2009

IRAQ
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 recently\(^2\). Lucien Tesnière's Dependency Grammar\(^3\) and Silvio Ceccato's Correlational Grammar\(^4\) 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

\(^{3}\) Cp. Tesnière 1959.
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 (-/+4) 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’ (← I smeared mud (Figure) on the wall (Background) ‘Application’); the garden was swarming with bees ‘Retroappl.’ (← bees were swarming in the garden ‘Appl.’), and I hit
Harry with the stick ‘Retroappl.’ (⇐ I hit the stick against Harry ‘Appl.’).

3.2.2. On the contrary, the prepositions represented by the SW-bound arrow are both ‘Retroappplicative’ 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’ (⇐ the bicycle belongs (Figure) to John (Background) ‘Application’); he takes his jacket off the peg ‘Retroappl.’ (⇐ his jacket was on the peg ‘Appl.’); John comes from London ‘Retroappl.’ (⇐ John was in London ‘Appl.’); the door was opened by John ‘Retroappl.’ (⇐ John opened the door ‘Appl.’); the use of drugs by athletes ‘Retroappl.’ (⇐ some athletes use drugs ‘Appl.’); he was a butcher by trade ‘Retroappl.’ (⇐ his trade was butchery ‘Appl.’); they came by bus ‘Retroappl.’ (⇐ 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 ‘Retroappplicative’, 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, Canaanatic, 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. ‘Retroappplication’, whereas the preposition represented by the confronting arrows eastwards is merely ‘Dimensional’ (see Arabic bi-).

We get in this way the Graph 3.
ENGLISH

APPLICATIVE PREPOSITIONS

NON-DIMENSIONAL

(+/-)
(+/+)

above over before against
for on about through during
at

between among
like to
in

of
off from

than without
by

beside near under
with after behind

(-/-)
(-/+)

under after behind

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-xzz ẖ̱̱ dekṟ̱̱ xad axx̱̱̱ b-w̱̱̱̱̱̱̱̱ b-qarṉ̱̱̱̱̱̱ “... 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. kîh l-dawwîd “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.

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 bgaw. 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: fi.

In the NW-bound sector (‘Non-Dimensional Applicative’) the primary Syriac preposition ‘ad means “until, till, as far as, up to, as long as”, whereas the conjunction/preposition a(y)k means “like, as, as if, almost, about”. On the vertical axis the primary preposition ‘al (purely ‘Applicative’) means mainly “on, above, upon, against, to, unto”. The secondary prepositions baynā/bēl and qdām 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”, whereas in the SE-bound sector it has two ‘Dimensional Retroapplicative’ prepositions: ‘am “with, together with” and lwāt “near, in comparison with, regarding”. Instead, on the vertical axis there are at least two Syriac secondary prepositions: bātar “after, following” and tsēl / tōl “under, beneath”, with a clear ‘Retroapplicative’ situative meaning. All this is shown by Graph 4.

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1 Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 62, properly speaking “in the belly of, in the inner part of”.
5 Cp. Payne Smith 1903, p. 413.
SYRIAC

APPLICATIVE PREPOSITIONS

NON-DIMENSIONAL

(+/-)  
\[ \text{qdām} \]

DIMENSIONAL

(+/-)  
\[ \text{baynāt/bēt} \]

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 verb\(^6\). Another new preposition competing with

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3 Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 171; idem 1901, p. 30b.
4 Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 175; idem 1901, p. 270a.
le- is la- with the meaning “towards”\(^1\). On the contrary the Sureth prepositions hal “up to, until”\(^2\) and (i/h)nak “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 res\(^6\) (from reša “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. piššan 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 hwät: (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 šišcle ’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. 296a; idem 1901, p. 296a.
\(^7\) Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 174, idem, 1901, p. 181.
\(^8\) Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 170; idem 1901, p. 28b.
\(^11\) Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 171; idem 1901, p. 41b.
\(^13\) Cp. Maclean 1895, p. 175, idem 1901, p. 319a.
6. A short mention should be done to the visual representation of the prepositional system of Arabic\(^1\) in order to show the features Sureth shares with this important neighbouring language. Setting aside the numerous secondary prepositions of Arabic, most of whom produce the adverbial-accusative ending –a of status constructus (bayna “between, among”, Hawla “around”, xilāla “through”, nāHwa “in accordance with”, Sawba “in the direction of”, qabla “before”, quddāma “in front of” ‘Applicative’; ba’da “after”, dūna “apart from”, tāHta “under” etc. ‘Retroapplicative’), one can notice a certain analogy between the prepositional system of Arabic and that of Sureth. The main difference lies in the peculiar usages of the Arabic ‘Retroapplicative’ preposition ‘an\(^2\), which are beyond comparison among other Semitic languages. In any case the NW-bound sector of the upper semicircle (‘Non-Dimenisonal Applicative’) of Sureth displays a larger amount of prepositions than that of Arabic. See Graph 6.

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7. Turkish, another important neighbouring language of Sumerian, 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 adverbalizing –ce and the postposition –siz “without”, the Turkish adpositional system is dominated by only four postpositions: two ‘Applicative’, -{y}e" 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,
is’” (‘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”.

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 (*si-z-e*) one book will-give”, as well as the movement into an object perceived as an ‘extension’ or a ‘volume’ (‘Dimensional’), e.g. *isminizi kâgidâ yazınız* “write your name on the paper (*kâgid-a*)!”, *su 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*)”.

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 *üzüre* “just about to”. Vice versa other secondary postpositions require the intervention of *-y[e* or of -*den*, e.g. *kadar* with the meaning “till, until”: *ölüm-e kadar* “until the death (*ölüm-e*)”.

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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 aksama Ankara’ya gidecektir* “(This) evening (*aksam-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-în*)”, cf. ibidem, p. 63.
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 Kurnanci 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.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


