Geoffrey Khan

Jewish Neo-Aramaic in Kurdistan and Iran

1 Preliminary remarks

Jewish Neo-Aramaic was spoken until the 20th century in Kurdistan and the adjacent regions of Iran and continues to be spoken today, mainly in Israel, by the older generation of immigrants. It is the vestige of the Aramaic that was spoken more widely by Jews in the Middle East at earlier periods. Distinct Jewish varieties of Aramaic begin to be attested in written sources in the first half of the first millennium CE. These contrast in particular with specifically Christian varieties of the language, which emerge into history at approximately the same period. This communal split between Jewish and Christian dialects has survived in the Neo-Aramaic dialects.

1.1 Names of the language

The Neo-Aramaic that is spoken by Jews is generally referred to by modern scholars as Jewish Neo-Aramaic. The speakers used a variety of native terms to refer to their language, which varied from region to region and reflected internal dialectal differences. Conscious of the historical connection of the language with earlier literary forms of Jewish Aramaic, some members of the communities refer to the language as *lišanət targum* 'the language of the Targum'. Many speakers refer to their language simply as 'our language' in their particular region's dialect, e.g., *lišana deni* (Zakho and surrounding region), *lišanət nošan* (south-west Kurdistan), *lišana noša* (western Iran), *lišana didan* (north-west Iran), *lišān dideni* (Barzan region). Some names reflect the consciousness of it being a specifically Jewish language, e.g., *lišan hozaye* 'the language of the Jews' (Zakho), and *hulaula* (western Iran), which is an abstract noun meaning 'Jewishness/Judaism' (< **hūḏāyūṯā*). Some names contain characteristic words of the Jewish dialects, arranged in pairs, e.g., *lišanət ʾaxča-wʾačxa* 'language of "so much, so much"' (Arbel region). In Georgia, the Georgian-speaking Jews used the term *lax-lű́x* to refer to the Aramaic-speaking Jews, and referred to their language as *laxluxe-bis ena* 'the language of the *lax-lű́x*'.[1] This term is likely to have its origin in the so-called L-suffixes (consisting of the preposition *l-* and a pronominal suffix), which are a distinctive feature of

1 I am grateful to Reuven Enouch (personal communication) for informing me of this Georgian term.

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Neo-Aramaic past verbal forms. Aramaic-speaking Jews in Israel sometimes refer to their language by the term *kurdit* 'Kurdish', which relates to the regional origin of the community rather than its linguistic origin.

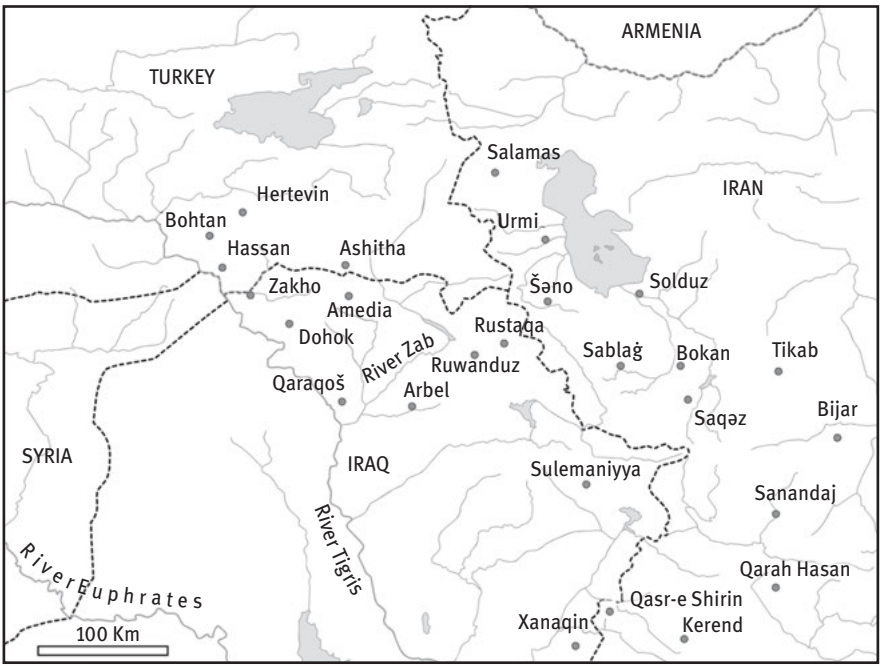
1.2 Linguistic affiliation

The Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects belong to the North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) subgroup of Neo-Aramaic dialects.[2] This is a highly diverse group of over 150 dialects, spoken by Jews and Christians originating from towns and villages east of the Tigris in northern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey, and western Iran. The NENA subgroup is distinct from three other subgroups of Neo-Aramaic. These include the western subgroup spoken by Christians and Muslims in the villages of Maʿlula, Baxʾa, and Jubʾadin in the region of Damascus; the Ṭuroyo subgroup, spoken by Christians in the Ṭūr ʿAbdīn region of south-eastern Turkey; and Mandaic, spoken by Mandaeans in the cities of Ahwaz and Kermanshahr in Iran. None of these subgroups is as diverse as NENA. Within NENA itself one may identify a number of subgroups. There is a fundamental split between the dialects spoken by the Jews and those spoken by the Christians. This applies even to cases where Jewish and Christian communities lived in the same town, such as Urmi (northwestern Iran), Sanandaj (western Iran), Koy Sanjak, and Sulemaniyya (both in northeastern Iraq). Within Jewish NENA dialects themselves a number of subgroups are identifiable.

1.3 Regions where language is/was spoken

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Aramaic-speaking Jews lived in thriving communities in villages and towns throughout the original NENA area. During the upheavals of the First World War, the Jews of southeastern Turkey and the adjacent region of northwestern Iran underwent considerable hardship and, like the Aramaic-speaking Christian communities of the region, permanent displacement from their original places of residence. Some Jews, notably those from the region of Salmas (Salamas) in the far northwestern tip of Iran, fled into the Caucasus and settled in Tbilisi (Mutzafi 2014a). They suffered further under the regime of Stalin, who, in 1950, moved virtually the entire community to Almaty in Kazakhstan, where a large proportion of the Jews speaking the Salmas dialect can be found to

2 The term was coined by Hobermann (1988: 557).



Map 1: NENA dialect area

this day. A few elderly Salmas Jews can still be found in Tbilisi. Other dialects of Jewish communities who were displaced during the First World War have become extinct, such as those from the region of Gavar.

Since the 19th century, several Jews of the region emigrated to Palestine through religious motives. This emigration increased after the First World War in the first half of the 20th century, due to the activities of the Zionist movement. In the early 1950s, after the foundation of the State of Israel, this migration turned into a mass exodus. As a result, the vast majority of surviving Aramaic-speaking Jews are now resident in Israel. After this exodus, virtually no Aramaic-speaking Jews remained in Iraq. The few who did remain were mostly women who had converted to Islam.[3] In western Iran, however, some remained during the time of the Shah but left after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In Sanandaj, for example, only about 1,000 Jews of a total population of approximately 4,000 migrated to Israel in 1952. Over the subsequent two decades, there was a gradual emigration of the Jews from the town either to Tehran or abroad, mostly to Israel. After the

3 Cf. the story of the sister of Yona Sabar, narrated by his son, Ariel Sabar (2009).

Iranian Revolution in 1979, most of the remaining Jews left Sanandaj, the majority settling in Los Angeles in the USA and the remainder in Israel or Europe (Ben-Yaʿqov 1980: 149; Khan 2009: 1).

1.4 Attestations and sources

There are some written sources of Jewish Neo-Aramaic, which are datable to the 17th century onwards. These are mainly manuscripts of homilies and Bible translations. Literature of this type was also transmitted orally, and after the migration of Jews to Israel a larger corpus was committed to writing.[4] This written material is an important source for the study of the history of Jewish Neo-Aramaic, since it often contains a more archaic form than is found in the surviving spoken dialects. The literature, however, only reflects a limited range of the dialectal diversity. Serious documentation and study of the spoken NENA dialects began only in the second half of the 19th century. Much of the early work was carried out by missionaries, whose main concern was the dialects of the Christians, e.g., Stoddard (1860) and Maclean (1895). Some data on the dialects of the Jews were, nevertheless, published by scholars during this period, together with material from the Christian dialects, e.g., Socin (1882), on the Jewish dialect of Zakho; Duval (1883), on the Jewish dialect of Salmas; and Maclean (1895: 340–344), on the Jewish dialect of Urmi.

Systematic work on the Jewish dialects did not begin, however, until the second half of the 20th century, after the Jews had left their original places of residence and migrated to Israel. So far, several monograph-length descriptions of dialects have been published, including Garbell (1965a: Jewish Urmi and related dialects), Mutzafi (2004a: Jewish Koy Sanjak), Mutzafi (2008a: Jewish Betanure), Fassberg (2010: Jewish Challa), Greenblatt (2011: Jewish Amedia), Cohen (2012: syntax of Jewish Zakho), Khan (1999: Jewish Arbel), Khan (2004a: Jewish Sulemaniyya and Ḥalabja), Khan (2008a: Jewish Urmi), and Khan (2009: Jewish Sanandaj), in addition to numerous shorter sketches and studies. Several scholars, especially Mutzafi, Hopkins, and Khan, have gathered extensive data on most of the other surviving dialects. Much of this material is gradually being made accessible in an online NENA database at the University of Cambridge.

4 A large amount of this literature has been edited and studied by Yona Sabar in his numerous publications, e.g., Sabar (1976, 1985, 1991a, 1983, 1988, 1991b, 1994). See also the work of Rees (2008). Sabar was instrumental in having many of the tradents of the oral traditions commit them to writing. Yosef Rivlin also played a role in this respect; see, for example, Rivlin (1959).

1.5 Present-day status

All of the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects are now on an inexorable trajectory of extinction as living vernaculars within the next couple of decades or so. As remarked, some are known to have already become extinct; in some cases, descriptions of these have, fortunately, been published, e.g., the Jewish dialect of Challa (Fassberg 2010), or at least unpublished data have been collected for future study, e.g., Jewish Nerwa (Mutzafi). The communities who spoke the various dialects in their original locations were of varying sizes. Some dialects were spoken only by a handful of Jewish families, and it is these that have now become extinct or are in particular danger of extinction, such as Challa in southeastern Turkey (Fassberg 2010), Aradhin (Mutzafi 2002a), Dobe and Hiza (in Iraq). The dialects that were spoken by larger communities in their original locations are in a healthier state, but every year the number of good speakers dwindles and opportunities for systematic linguistic documentation vanish with them.

2 Historical background

2.1 Speaker community: Settlement

There are only scant sources for the history of the Aramaic-speaking Jewish communities. The main written historical sources have been described by Brauer and Patai (1993) and, in greater detail for each community, by Ben-Yaʿqov (1980). It is assumed by these authors that the communities have very deep historical roots, but the first clear historical reference to an Aramaic-speaking Jewish population is by the medieval traveller Benjamin of Tudela (12th century), who states that the Jews of the region spoke the Targum language (Brauer & Patai 1993: 58). Mann (1931, 2: 16) publishes letters datable to the beginning of the 16th century that mention villages in the highlands of Kurdistan that had Jewish communities. Some of these had been abandoned by their Jewish population by the 20th century or the number of Jewish inhabitants had been considerably reduced, reflecting the fact that the Jewish population of the region declined after the 16th century. One reason for this reduction is likely to have been the forcible conversion of some Jews to Islam, especially in the 19th century in some areas (Soane 1912: 186). After the First World War and the setting of the border between Iraq and Turkey by the League of Nations in 1925, some Jewish communities that fell within Turkish territory moved down into Iraq. Fieldworkers on the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects have gathered a number of oral accounts from older speakers about the recent history of their communities. These frequently talk of migrations

around the region, especially from villages into towns. This applies, for example, to the Jews of the towns of Sulemaniyya and Sanandaj, which were founded in the Ottoman period (Khan 2004a: 3, 2009: 1).

2.2 Phases in historical development

The history of the Aramaic-speaking Jewish communities is reflected also in the linguistic history of the Jewish NENA dialects. These are not direct descendants of any of the earlier literary forms of Aramaic (except, of course, for the written forms of Jewish NENA extant from the 17th century onwards), although they exhibit close affinities to Syriac and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. The dialects rather have their roots in a vernacular form of Aramaic that existed in antiquity in the region of northern Mesopotamia, which differed from the vernacular underlying the literary languages of Syriac to the west and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic to the south. This is shown by the fact that, although exhibiting numerous innovations, they are more conservative than Syriac and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic in some features (Khan 2007a; Fox 2008). Some of the dialects, moreover, have preserved lexical items of apparently Akkadian origin that do not appear in dictionaries of the earlier forms of literary Aramaic.[5] Structural differences among the NENA dialects are likely to reflect, to some extent, migrations of communities in the northern Mesopotamian region. The clear structural distinction between the Jewish and Christian dialects has been brought about by different migration patterns, as well as social divisions. Within the Jewish dialects, migration history is reflected by concentrations of structural diversity. The greater degree of diversity within the structure of dialects in Iraq from those in western Iran, for example, suggests that Iraq was the original heartland of the Aramaic-speaking population and the communities on the eastern periphery in western Iran were the result of migration from this heartland. The Jewish NENA dialects of western Iran also reflect a greater degree of innovation in their structure.

2.3 Sociolinguistic description, community bilingualism, public functions

In the first half of the 20th century, the Aramaic-speaking Jews of the region mainly lived in towns. Many of these appear to be very old urban settlements.

5 For Christian dialects, see Krotkoff (1985) and Khan (2002: 515), and for Jewish dialects, Sabar (2002: 12).

The structural differences between the Jewish and Christian dialects of some towns, such as Urmi in northwestern Iran, can be correlated with the fact that Christians were recent arrivals from the villages, whereas the Jewish urban settlement had deeper historical roots (Khan 2008a: 1). Some of the Jewish urban population of other towns is, however, known to have migrated from villages in relatively recent times, as is the case in Sanandaj and Sulemaniyya. Most of the Jewish town dwellers were small traders, goldsmiths, tailors, weavers, and dyers. Some of the traders were shopkeepers, while others were peddlers who hawked their wares around the surrounding countryside. Some of the Jews who remained in villages until the 20th century, such as the communities of the villages of Betanure, Shukho, and Sandu, were agriculturalists (Mutzafi 2008a, 2014b).

All Aramaic-speaking Jews were bilingual, and in many cases trilingual. In addition to their Aramaic community language, they also spoke the language of the majority local population. Throughout most of the NENA area, this was Kurdish. In northwestern Iran, it included also Azeri Turkish. Kurdish and Azeri, therefore, have had a particular impact on Jewish NENA. In addition, many Jews spoke the official languages of the modern nation states. This applied in particular to the Jews of Iran, who spoke Farsi, which was the language of education. The knowledge of Arabic by Aramaic-speaking Jews in Iraq in the 20th century was more limited. It appears, however, that Arabic was more widely spoken in the region at earlier periods, and this has survived in the Arabic vernaculars spoken by some of the Jewish communities, such as Sendor, Arbīl, and Aqra (Jastrow 1990a, 1990b). Some features of Jewish NENA in Iraq can be explained as the result of contact with Arabic at earlier periods. All Aramaic-speaking Jews in the region had some knowledge of Hebrew. This was more extensive among the learned members of the communities, but there was a general "Hebrew component" in the vernacular used by all speakers. After their migration to Israel, all Jews rapidly acquired Israeli Hebrew, and this has an impact on the speech of virtually all surviving Aramaic speakers today. The surviving speakers of the Salmas dialect in Almaty in Kazakhstan also use Russian, even among themselves, and this is rapidly overwhelming their Aramaic dialect.

Researchers have documented sporadic differences between the speech of men and women in Jewish NENA-speaking communities. Garbell (1965a: 33), for example, refers to the fact that the speech of many of the older women among her informants differed from that of men, with regard to the phonological feature of suprasegmental emphasis. The older women tended to extend this feature to all items in the lexicon, whereas men distinguished between emphatic and plain lexical items. Among the surviving Jewish NENA speakers today, some men who have been active in communal activities, including religious leaders, exhibit some aspects of dialect-mixing in their speech, which is rarely found in the speech of women.

In their original homeland, the Aramaic-speaking Jews did not have any clear communal organization across the region, but in Israel they have aligned themselves into three broad social groups. These include: (1) Kurdistani Jews, who include those from Iraqi Kurdistan and Iranian Kurdistan (i.e., western Iran). (2) Nash Didan (*nāš didán* 'our people'), which consist of Aramaic-speaking Jews from northwestern Iran (Iranian Azerbaijan), mainly the town of Urmi. (3) Aramaean Jews, which consist of a few hundred Jews from Iranian Kurdistan who regard themselves as Aramaean and reject the Kurdistani identity that other Jews from the same area adopted after their arrival in Israel (Mutzafi 2014b).

3 Structural information

3.1 Relationship to non-Jewish varieties

The Jewish NENA dialects are divided into two main subgroups: (1) The so-called *lišana deni* subgroup, which was spoken in the northwest of Iraq in locations to the west of the Great Zab river, such as Zakho, Dohok, Amedia, and Betanure, and just to the east of the river around the Turkish border, such as Nerwa in Iraq and Challa in southeastern Turkey. (2) Dialects spoken in locations east of the Great Zab river in the Arbīl and Sulemaniyya provinces of Iraq (e.g., Rustaqa, Ruwanduz, Koy Sanjak, villages of the plain of Arbel,[6] Ḥalabja, and Sulemaniyya; also the village of Dobe, which is on the western bank of the Great Zab), in the West Azerbaijan province of Iran (e.g., Urmi, Salmas, Shino, Naghada [Solduz], Sablagh [Mahabad]), and further south in the Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces of Iran (e.g., Saqqiz, Sanandaj, Kerend, and on the Iraqi side of the border in Khanaqin). This subgroup is generally referred to as trans-Zab (following Mutzafi 2008b). In addition, there was a small cluster of dialects in the region of Barzan, located in Iraq between these two areas, which exhibit a linguistic profile that is transitional between the two main subgroups (Mutzafi 2002b, 2004b).

As remarked, the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects exhibit numerous differences in their structure from the Christian dialects of the region. The Christian dialects spoken east of the Tigris and the Jewish dialects do, however, clearly exhibit shared innovations and belong to the same Neo-Aramaic subgroup, viz., NENA.

6 The Jews in the town of Arbel itself spoke Arabic (Jastrow 1990a).

One of the most conspicuous innovations of the NENA subgroup is the replacement of the finite verbal forms *yiqṭul* (prefix-conjugation) and *qṭal* (suffix-conjugation) of earlier Aramaic with conjugations based on the active and passive participles, respectively. The NENA dialects are distinguished from the adjacently located and closely related Ṭuroyo subgroup by several shared innovations. These include the phonological shift **ġ* > ʿ > ʾ > ø. The voiced velar fricative **ġ* (the erstwhile fricative allophone of the */g/*) has been lost in NENA (with the exception of a few lexical items), and has the reflex /ʾ/ or zero, e.g., Jewish Amedia *peʾla*, Jewish Arbel *pela* 'radish' < **paġlā*. The /ʾ/ developed from an early pharyngeal /ʿ/, which is preserved in a few words, e.g., Jewish Amedia *ṛaʿola* 'valley' < **rāġōlā*. A shared innovation of NENA in the verbal system that distinguishes it from Ṭuroyo is the loss of the middle voice so-called T-stems, which have survived, albeit in reduced form, in Ṭuroyo. There are also a variety of shared lexical innovations in the Jewish and Christian NENA dialects, the most conspicuous one being *baxta* 'woman' (of uncertain etymology, but see Mutzafi [2005: 99 n.79]), as opposed to the conservative Ṭuroyo *ʾaṯṯo*. These innovations of NENA are of a considerable historical time-depth. The lexical item *baxta*, for example, appears in an 11th century source (Khan 2007a: 11).

In general, the trans-Zab subgroup of Jewish NENA is more innovative than the *lišana deni* subgroup, due to a greater degree of convergence with the non-Semitic languages of the area. The trans-Zab dialects exhibit a greater degree of difference from the neighboring Christian dialects than is the case with the *lišana deni* subgroup. This is a consequence of the fact that the Christian dialects have, in general, not undergone the degree of convergence with contact languages that is found in trans-Zab dialects. Conservative features found in Jewish *lišana deni* and the neighboring Christian dialects include, for example, the preservation of interdental consonants (in some dialects) and the preservation of a predominant SVO word-order, which are not features of Kurdish, the predominant contact language in the region. Trans-Zab dialects, on the other hand, have converged with Kurdish and Azeri Turkish with regard to these features, in that they have lost the interdentals and have a predominantly SOV word order. Moreover, there is a greater proportion of loanwords in their core lexicon than is the case in *lišana deni* dialects. Nevertheless, there are numerous differences between Jewish *lišana deni* dialects and the local Christian dialects. This can be seen in the chart below, which compares the Christian Barwar dialect (Khan 2008b) with the neighboring Jewish dialect of Betanure (Mutzafi 2008a), together with two other Jewish *lišana deni* dialects, Amedia (Greenblatt 2011) and Nerwa. As can be seen, the Jewish dialects exhibit considerable similarities among themselves, which contrast with the Christian dialect:

Table 1.1: Comparison of the Jewish *lišana deni* dialects with the Christian Barwar dialect

	C. Barwar	J. Betanure	J. Amedia	J. Nerwa
loss/preservation of laryngeal	*balota* 'throat'	*baloʾta*	*baloʾta*	*baloʾta*
reflex of **ay*	*lɛša* 'dough'	*leša*	*leša*	*leša*
reflex of **aw*	*tawra* 'ox'	*tora*	*tora*	*tora*
2s independent pronoun	*ʾati*	*ʾahət* ms. *ʾahat* fs.	*ʾahi*	*ʾahət* ms. *ʾahat* fs.
3pl. pron. suffix	*-ay, -ɛy, -ey*	*-u, -ohun*	*-u, -ohun*	*-u, -ohun*
genitive particle	*diye*	*dide*	*dide*	*dide*
reciprocal pronoun	*ġðaðe*	*ʾəxðe*	*ʾəġde*	*ʾəxde*
deictic copula	*hole*	*wəlle*	*wəlle*	*wəlle*
indicative prefix	*i-*	*k-*	*k-*	*k-*
'tomorrow'	*təmməl*	*bənhe*	*qadöme*	*qadome*
'now'	*diya, hadiya*	*ʾatta*	*ʾatta*	*ʾatta*
'last year'	*šetət wirra*	*šətqel*	*šətqel*	*šətqel*
'quickly'	*jalde*	*hayya*	*hayya*	*hayya*
'big'	*goṛa*	*ʾəṛwa*	*ʾuṛwa*	*ʾuṛwa*
'to descend'	*ṣlaya*	*kwaša*	*kwaša*	*kwaša*
'to stand'	*klaya*	*ḥmala*	*ḥmala*	*ḥmala*
'to sleep'	*ṭlaya*	*ṭwaʾa*	*ṭwaʾa*	*ṭwaʾa*
'to grow up'	*mqărone*	*ṛwaya*	*ṛwaya*	*ṛwaya*
'to speak'	*mṣawoθe*	*mḥakoye*	*mḥakoye*	*mḥakoye*
'he wants'	*băye*	*gbe*	*gbe*	*gbe*
'he knows'	*yăðe*	*kiʾe*	*kiʾe*	*kiye*

3.2 Particular structural features unique to the Jewish variety

A feature that is unique to all Jewish NENA dialects and contrasts with Christian dialects is the masculine single form and plural form of the adjective 'big', which are *rurwa/ruwwa* and *rurwe/ruwwe* respectively. This has developed by levelling from the original plural form **rawrḇē* (the original masculine singular form being **rabbā*) (Mutzafi 2014b).

The *lišana deni* dialects exhibit a distinctive feature that stands in contrast to the neighboring Christian dialects and the trans-Zab Jewish dialects in the formation of the independent genitive pronominal form. In most of the *lišana deni* dialects, the singular of this is formed by adding pronominal suffixes to the base *did-*, whereas the plural is formed by adding suffixes to the base *d-*. The singular suffixes are monosyllabic and the plural suffixes are bisyllabic, in some cases lengthened, with the result that the paradigm is bisyllabic in all persons:

	Jewish Betanture	Christian Barwar
3ms	*did-e*	*diy-e*
3fs	*did-a*	*diy-a*
2ms	*did-ox*	*diy-ux*
2fs	*did-ax*	*diy-əx*
1s	*did-i*	*diy-i*
3pl.	*d-ohun*	*diy-ey*
2pl.	*d-oxun*	*diy-ɛxu*
1pl.	*d-eni*	*diy-ən*

Most features that are unique to the Jewish dialects are found in the innovative trans-Zab dialects. As remarked above, most of these have arisen through a greater convergence with contact languages. These features can be divided into those that are general to all trans-Zab dialects and those that are found only in particular dialects of trans-Zab.

Innovative features that are general to trans-Zab include the shift of the interdental consonants /ϑ/ and /ð/ to the lateral /l/, e.g.

Christian Barwar	Jewish Arbel		
bɛ́ϑa	*belá*	'house'	< **bayṯā*
ʾéða	*ʾelá*	'festival'	< **ʿēḏā*

Similar sound shifts have been identified in Kurdish (Kapeliuk 1997). As can be seen from the indication of stress position in the table above, the trans-Zab dialects have word-final stress. This contrasts with the general penultimate stress that is found in Jewish *lišana deni* and the Christian dialects, and is likely to be induced by contact with the word-final stress position of Kurdish (Khan 2007b: 200).

Another general innovation, under the influence of Kurdish or Azeri Turkish, is the elimination of the distinction between genders in third person singular pronouns, e.g.:

Christian Barwar	Jewish Arbel		
ʾaw	*ʾo*	'he'	< **hāhū*
ʾay	*ʾo*	'she'	< **hāhī*

The trans-Zab dialects in and around the Arbīl province of Iraq are, in general, more diverse in their structure than those in Iran and also are, in many cases, more conservative. As remarked above, it is likely that Iraq is the original heartland of

the subgroup. This Iraq subgroup of trans-Zab includes dialects such as Koy Sanjaq, Qalʿa Dəze, Rwanduz, Rustaqa, Dobe, and the Arbel plain. The trans-Zab dialects in Iran may be divided on the basis of shared innovations into (i) the northwestern Iran subgroup, which includes the dialects in the West Azerbaijan province of Iran (e.g., Urmi, Salmas, Shino, Naghada [Solduz], Sablagh [Mahabad]), together with the now extinct dialects that were spoken over the border in southeastern Turkey (e.g., Bashqala [Başkale] and Gavar [Yüksekova]); and (ii) the western Iran subgroup, which includes dialects of the Kurdistan and Kermanshah provinces of Iran (e.g., Saqqiz, Tikab, Bokan, Sanandaj, Kerend) and adjacent dialects over the border in Iraq (e.g., Sulemaniyya, Ḥalabja, Khanaqin). The dialects of this latter west Iran subgroup are referred to by their speakers as *hulaula*.

In phonology, these two Iranian subgroups exhibit unique innovations in the development of the emphatic consonants. These include the developments associated with the original emphatic consonants **ṭ* and **ṣ* and also more recently evolved emphatic phonemes, such as the sonorants */ṛ/*, */ḷ/* and labials */m̩/*, */b̩/*. Such emphatic consonants involve a coarticulation of pharyngealization. In the Christian dialects of Iraq and also the Jewish *lišana deni* dialects, the emphatic consonants maintained their status of pharyngealized consonantal segments, with the phonetic spread of pharyngealization to adjacent vowels and consonants. In the Iraq subgroup of trans-Zab, the pharyngealization is weakened but can still be identified. In the western Iranian subgroup, however, an innovation has taken place whereby the pharyngealization of the emphatic segments has ceased to be a coarticulatory feature, but rather surfaces as a pharyngeal segment in the word. This may either be a historical pharyngeal, which has lost its pharyngeal articulation in non-emphatic contexts, e.g., Jewish Sanandaj *tamʿa* 'she tastes' < **ṭāmʿā* vs. *šamya* 'she hears' < **šāmʿā*, or a non-etymological pharyngeal, e.g., *tmaʿni* 'eighty' < *tm̩ani* (Khan 2013). Such a development seems to have been brought about by convergence with the phonological structure of neighboring Kurdish (Kahn 1976: 49–52).

In the Jewish Urmi dialect of the northwestern Iran subgroup, the phonetic spreading of coarticulatory pharyngealization of consonantal segments has been reinterpreted as a suprasegmental phoneme that is a property of an entire word. This has come about under the influence of the vowel harmony of Azeri Turkish, with which the dialect was in contact. The same happened to the Christian dialects of the area, but a unique feature of Jewish Urmi is that the historical emphatic stop **ṭ* became identical with the non-emphatic stop */t/* on the segmental level:

	Iraq	Northwestern Iran	
	Jewish Arbel	Christian Urmi	Jewish Urmi
**ṭūrā* 'mountain'	*ṭura*	*ˈṭ̲ura*	*ˈtura*

The original emphatic **ṭ* was distinguished from non-emphatic **t* not only in pharyngealization but also in glottal setting, in that **ṭ* was unaspirated and **t* was aspirated. As remarked, in the Urmi dialects the pharyngealization has become a suprasegmental feature (represented above by a superscribed ˤ). In the Christian dialect, the glottal setting of **ṭ* is retained and the consonant is pronounced unaspirated (represented above by the symbol /t̲/), which contrasts with aspirated /t/. In the Jewish dialect, however, the glottal setting is not retained and **ṭ* has become totally assimilated to **t* on a segmental level. This can be interpreted as reflecting a greater degree of convergence with the phonology of Azeri, which does not have an unaspirated phoneme equivalent to the /t̲/ of Christian Urmi. Furthermore, in Jewish Urmi the back vowels /u/ and /o/ are fronted to [y] and [ø], respectively, in non-emphatic words, corresponding to the fronting that is found in the Azeri vowel harmony system, whereas this is not systematically found in Christian Urmi (Khan 2013).

In the Jewish Salmas dialect in the northwestern Iran subgroup, the suprasegmental pharyngealization has been lost in all words that originally used to contain it, but the phonetic effect of this feature on vowels has been preserved. This is most conspicuous in the development of long *a* vowels that were originally pharyngealized. These were backed and rounded to the quality /o/, e.g., *xosa* 'back' < **xāṣā*. This has occurred only in morphological stems and not in inflectional vowels:

	Lexical stem	Inflectional ending	
xosa 'back'	*xos-*	*a*	(nominal singular) < **xāṣā*
tyolana 'player'	*tyol-*	*ana*	(agentive singular) < **ṭyālānā*

This development in Jewish Salmas has occurred due to contact with various non-Semitic languages, including Russian in the recent history of the dialect.

An example of an innovation in morpho-syntax in the western Iranian subgroup is the loss of the genitive particle *d*. This particle, which combines a head noun with a dependent noun in a genitive construction, continues to be used, mainly in the form of a clitic on the head in the trans-Zab dialects of Iraq and northwestern Iran. In the western Iran subgroup, however, it has disappeared. It is possible to explain this as a convergence with Kurdish (Khan 2007b: 202), e.g.:

Jewish Arbel/Jewish Urmi	Jewish Sanandaj	
belət Šlomo	*bela Šlomo*	'the house of Šlomo' < **bayt̲ā d-Šlomo*

In most dialects of the western Iranian subgroup, it has survived only as a vestige in genitive pronouns, but in the dialect of Jewish Kerend it is often omitted even in this context (Khan 2009: 11):

Jewish Sanandaj	Jewish Kerend	
bela do	*bela ʾo*	'his house'

The conservative nature of the Iraq subgroup of trans-Zab, vis-à-vis the other trans-Zab subgroups, is reflected in some areas of morphology, such as the copula and the patterns of verbs. Compare the form of the present copula across the dialects:

	Iraq Jewish Arbel	Northwestern Iran Jewish Urmi	Western Iran Jewish Sanandaj
3ms	*-ile*	*-ile*	*-ye*
2ms	*-wet*	*-ilet*	*-yet*
1s	*-wen*	*-ilen*	*-yena*

In Jewish Arbel, the original heterogeneity of the paradigm is preserved, with the */l/* element in the 3rd person and the */w/* element in the 2nd and 1st persons. In Jewish Urmi the */l/* element has been generalized, and in Jewish Sanandaj the */l/* has been lost in the 3rd person and replaced by the glide */y/* (*-ye* < *-ile*), then the */y/* element has been generalized.

The northwestern Iran and western Iran subgroups exhibit a greater degree of leveling across the vocalism of the verbal patterns. This can be seen, for example, in the forms of the infinitive:

	Iraq Jewish Arbel	Northwestern Iran Jewish Urmi	Western Iran Jewish Sanandaj
simplex	*CCaCa*	*CaCoCe*	*CaCoCe*
causative	*maCCoCe*	*maCCoCe*	*maCCoCe*

The Iraq subgroup retains the archaic form of the infinitive of the simplex (historically *peʿal*) form, whereas in the other subgroups this has been levelled with the vocalic pattern of the infinitive of the derived causative form (historically *ʾapʿel*). The Jewish Urmi dialect, in fact, exhibits a complete levelling of vocalic patterns across all conjugations of the simplex and derived forms of the verb (Khan 2008a: 65–67).

Another feature of the Iraq subgroup of trans-Zab that can be regarded as conservative is the occurrence of oblique marking of the subject of past perfective verbs in both transitive and intransitive clauses, e.g.:

Jewish Arbel	
griš-li	'I pulled' (transitive)
qim-li	'I rose' (intransitive)

In the transitive clauses, the oblique suffix can be interpreted as an ergative marker. It is a feature of Christian NENA dialects, and the Jewish *lišana deni* and Iraqi trans-Zab dialects, that this ergative suffix is used also as a marker of the subject of intransitive verbs in an alignment profile that may be called "extended ergative" (Doron & Khan 2012). This profile is likely to have existed in the proto-form of the NENA subgroup, as a result of partial convergence with Iranian ergative languages of the region. The use of the oblique marker of intransitive subjects is attested in NENA interferences in classical Syriac texts at an early date (Khan 2004b). This is of considerable theoretical interest for studies in language contact and diachrony, in that it involves incomplete pattern matching (Matras & Sakel 2007) and constructional persistence, i.e., the continuing existence of the formal and semantic framework of a particular construction throughout the history of a language (Haig 2004: 55–57).

The innovative trans-Zab dialects of western Iran, however, exhibit a more canonical alignment profile, whereby the subjects of transitive verbs are marked by the oblique ergative suffix, but unaccusative intransitive verbs are marked by direct nominative suffixes, e.g.:

Jewish Sanandaj
grəš-li 'I pulled' (transitive)
qim-na 'I rose' (intransitive)

Such canonical ergative alignment, which is unique in NENA to the Jewish dialects of western Iran, is best considered to be the result of innovation rather than archaism, which has arisen, like other innovations in this subgroup, through a greater degree of convergence with Kurdish. Apart from the general innovative character of the subgroup compared to the Iraqi NENA dialects, there is some more specific evidence for this proposal. The past copula, for example, in the western Iranian trans-Zab dialects is conjugated with oblique ergative suffixes, e.g., *ye-le* 'he was', as is the case in extended ergative dialects such as the Iraqi trans-Zab dialect Jewish Arbel: *we-le*. In a canonical ergative alignment system, a copula would be expected to have nominative subject suffixes. The presence of ergative suffixes must be a relic from an earlier period in which there was extended ergative marking. The shift to nominative marking of the past copula was blocked by the fact that the resulting form would be identical, or nearly identical, to the present copula. In the northwestern Iran subgroup of trans-Zab, nominative subject marking is found on the present perfect of intransitive verbs, but the extended ergative system is retained on verbs when they have perfective function, e.g.:

Jewish Urmi
qəm-li 'I rose' (perfective)
qim-en 'I have risen' (present perfect)

The development of such present perfects with nominative subject may also be regarded as an innovation. It is, indeed, probably the first stage of the shift to the nominative marking of the perfective, the development present perfect > perfective being a common pathway of diachronic evolution. The existence of present perfect verbs with nominative subject suffixes is not, however, unique to Jewish NENA, since it is found also in some Christian dialects in the northwestern periphery of NENA in south-eastern Turkey, such as Hertevin (Jastrow 1988: 58–59) and Bohtan (Fox 2009: 56).[7]

A general innovation that is unique to the trans-Zab dialects of Jewish Neo-Aramaic is the formation of the perfective stem of the simplex pattern (historical *peʿal*) form on the analogy of that of the causative pattern (historical *ʾaphʿel*):

Christian Barwar	Jewish Sanandaj	
simplex	simplex	causative pattern
griš-le	*grəš-le* 'he pulled'	cf. *mərxəš-le* 'he caused to walk'
griša-l e	*gərš-a-le* 'he pulled her'	cf. *mərxš-a-le* 'he caused her to walk'

The more conservative trans-Zab dialects of Iraq still retain the *CCiC-a-le* pattern in middle */w/* verbs, e.g.

Jewish Arbel	Jewish Sanandaj	
dwiq-a-le	*dəwq-a-le*	'he held her'

The small cluster of Jewish dialects in the region of Barzan (Mutzafi 2002b, 2004b), which are transitional between the *lišana deni* and trans-Zab subgroups, exhibit features of both of the other subgroups and also some unique features. Among the unique features is the use of the preverbal indicative-marking particles *y-* and *k-*. These are found elsewhere in NENA, but not with the distribution that is found in this dialect cluster. In these dialects, for example, they may be combined in the order *y + k*, e.g., *y-k-emər* 'he says'. In other NENA dialects such a combination is found only in the reverse order, e.g., Christian Urmi *c-i-patəx* 'he opens'. In some of the dialects of the cluster, the *y* is used in positive verbs and the *k* in negated ones, e.g., *y-saxe* 'he swims', *la k-saxe* 'he does not swim'.

7 For further details of the development of ergative constructions in NENA, see Doron and Khan (2012), Coghill (2016), and Khan (2017). It has generally been assumed by scholars that the alignment patterns that are found in the western Iranian trans-Zab dialects are more archaic than the majority of dialects with generalized marking of oblique subject suffixes, e.g., Hopkins (1989), Mutzafi (2014b), Coghill (2016), and that the extended ergative profile reflects the decay of the orginal ergative system (Barotto 2014).

3.3 Lexicon: Hebrew elements

A common feature of all Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects is their Hebrew component, which existed in the dialects before the migration of speakers to Israel (Sabar 1975a, 1975b, 2013a, 2013b). The quantity of Hebrew words varies according to whether the speaker is learned or not in Jewish sources, but there is a core of a Hebrew component in the speech of all speakers. The following description will focus on two subgroups of dialects as case studies, viz., the *lišana deni* subgroup and the northwestern Iran subgroup of trans-Zab.

Certain sound shifts that took place early in the history of NENA have not affected the corresponding sounds in the Hebrew words of the Hebrew component. In the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialect of Zakho (*lišana deni* subgroup), the pharyngeals **ḥ* and **ʿ* shifted to */x/* and */ʾ/* respectively, whereas these sounds are retained in Hebrew words, e.g., Neo-Aramaic *xamša* (< **ḥamša*) 'five', but Hebrew *ḥámmaš* (חֲמֻשׁ) 'Pentateuch', Neo-Aramaic *ʾawər* (< **ʿāḇər*) 'to pass', but Hebrew *ʿavéra* (עֲבֵרָה) 'transgression'. As seen in the last example, there is also a lack of parallelism between the shift of **ḇ* to [w] in Zakho Neo-Aramaic and its realization as [v] in Hebrew. Hebrew *gimel rafeh* was pronounced as a fricative, e.g., *ʿaġǻla* (הַגְעָלָה) 'purification of utensils for Passover', whereas a historical fricative **ḡ* has generally been lost in NENA and has shifted to */ʾ/* in the Zakho dialect, e.g., *šrāʾa* 'lamp' (< **šrāḡā*). It is important to note that, although there is a mismatch in the general sound shifts, all of the aforementioned sounds in Hebrew, [ḥ], [ʿ] and [v], occur in some words of the lexicon of the Jewish Zakho Neo-Aramaic dialect, due to conditioned retention in certain phonetic contexts, e.g., *nḥāqa* 'to touch', *ʿamōqa* 'deep' (Khan 2013: 112), and elsewhere, e.g., *zavāra* 'wanderer', *ġlāqa* 'to close'.

More recent sound shifts, in particular Jewish NENA dialects, have also affected the Hebrew component. This applies, for example, to the Hebrew fricative *bgdkpt* sounds **ḏ* and **ṯ*, which shifted to */z/* and */s/* respectively in the Jewish Zakho dialect, both in native Aramaic words and also in Hebrew loanwords, e.g., *bēs* '(letter) beth' (בֵּית), *səʿoza* 'festive meal' (סְעוּדָה). This indicates that the Hebrew component entered the dialects after the formation of the proto-NENA subgroup, but before the occurrence of more recent sound shifts. Hebrew loanwords were sometimes pronounced with emphatic (pharyngealized) consonants, in order to distinguish them from Neo-Aramaic homonyms, e.g., *ṭōṛa* 'Torah' vs. plain *tōra* 'bull'. The vowels of Hebrew words in Jewish Zakho generally exhibit the general features of Sephardi pronunciation traditions, i.e., there was no distinction in pronunciation between *qameṣ* and *pataḥ*, on the one hand, or between *ṣere* and *seghol*, on the other. Also *ḥolem* and *shureq* were, at times, pronounced identically. It is noteworthy that *shewa* was often pronounced *a*, e.g., *našǻma* 'soul' (נְשָׁמָה).

Hebrew loanwords in the *lišana deni* dialects are stressed on the penultimate syllable, which is the normal position of stress in native Aramaic words in these dialects, e.g., *pâsuq* 'verse' (פָּסוּק), *tašûva* 'repentance' (תְּשׁוּבָה). In the reading of Biblical Hebrew in liturgy, by contrast, the stress is according to the biblical accents, i.e., generally on the final syllable. In Hebrew loanwords in the spoken language, the stress may be moved onto the short-vowel of a *shewa* with resultant gemination of the following consonant, e.g., *šáṭṭar* 'document' (שְׁטָר). This may be compared to a simlar process in the native Aramaic lexicon to produce bisyllabicity of a monsyllabic noun, e.g., *šə́mma* 'name' < **šma*. Innovative gemination also occasionally occurs after the stress in originally bisyllabic words, e.g., *kúmmar* 'Christian priest' (כּוֹמֶר). The consonant *resh* was sometimes pronounced geminate in other contexts, e.g., *məṣurrāʿ* 'leper' (מְצוֹרָע). In Hebrew words, original consonant gemination is generally retained, whereas this has often been lost in the Neo-Aramaic dialect, e.g., Jewish Zakho Neo-Aramaic *qaṭâla* 'killer' (< **qaṭṭālā*), but Hebrew *šammaš* 'synagogue beadle'.

In Jewish Urmi of northwestern Iran, suprasegmental pharyngealization of Hebrew loanwords is conditioned by the historical presence of one of the following elements (Khan 2008a: 37–39): (i) The emphatic consonants **ṭ* or**ṣ*, e.g., *ʿtəppa* 'drop' (טִפָּה), *ʿsaddiq* 'pious man' (צַדִּיק); (ii) The pharyngeals **ḥ* or *ʿ, which shift to */h/* and zero respectively, e.g., *ʿhātān* 'bridegroom' (חָתָן), *ʿgnedem* 'paradise' (גַּן־עֵדֶן). Some exceptions are *ani* 'poor' (עָנִי) and *hanukke* 'Hanukkah' (חֲנֻכָּה), which are not pharyngealized; (iii) Elsewhere, pharyngealization occurs predominantly in words with long rounded back vowels, especially *qameṣ*, the reflex of which is [ɒ], e.g., *ʿhaggada* 'Passover legend' (הַגָּדָה), *ʿamen* 'amen' (אָמֵן), although some words with long *qameṣ* are pronounced without pharyngealization, e.g., *kawod* 'honour' (כָּבוֹד), *mazuza* 'mezuzah' (מְזוּזָה). As in the *lišana deni* dialects, Hebrew loanwords were sometimes pronounced with suprasegmental emphasis in order to distinguish them from Neo-Aramaic homonyms, e.g., *ʿtora* 'Torah' vs. *tora* 'bull'. A *gimel rafeh* in Hebrew words in Jewish Urmi is pronounced as a fricative, e.g., *ʿaġala* (הַגְעָלָה) 'purification of utensils for Passover', although it has become zero in Aramaic words, e.g., *pela* 'radish' (< **pāglā*). Original gemination of consonants is lost in most Aramaic words, but is often maintained in Hebrew words, e.g., *šibbat* 'Sabbath' (שַׁבָּת), although it is weakened in some cases, e.g., *sidur* 'prayer book' (סִדּוּר). High front vowels in Hebrew words are often lowered to */a/*, e.g., *tašri* 'Tishri' (תִּשְׁרִי), *ʿbanadam* 'human being' (בֶּן־אָדָם). Conversely the reflex of original */a/* is occasionally */i/*, as in *šibbat* 'Sabbath' (שַׁבָּת). *Shewa* is usually pronounced */a/*, e.g., *barit mila* 'circumcision' (בְּרִית מִילָה), and occasionally */i/*, e.g., *nišama* 'soul' (נְשָׁמָה). Stress is on the final syllable of Hebrew words, as in words in the Aramaic dialect, this being a feature of the trans-Zab dialects (see above).

With regard to morphology, nouns in the Hebrew component of the dialects may retain their Hebrew plural form and accent or, alternatvely, have a Neo-Aramaic plural suffix, e.g., *məṣwṓṯ* / *məṣwắye* 'precepts', *malʾāxím* / *malʾáxe* 'angels'. The gender of Hebrew nouns sometimes changes, e.g., *ʿolắm* 'world' and *ʿawṓn* 'inequity' are usually feminine, but are masculine in Hebrew.

Several Hebrew words are integrated into verbal expressions by combining Hebrew nouns or adjectives with light verbs, e.g., *p-y-š nifṭar* 'to die' (literally: 'to become deceased'). After the migration of the Jews to Israel, Israeli Hebrew verbs began to be integrated into the spoken Aramaic dialects by combining an Israeli Hebrew infinitive form with a light verb, e.g., *lišmor koliwale* 'they used to preserve it' (literally: 'to preserve [= לִשְׁמוֹר] they used to do it') (Khan 2004a: 14).

The Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects use Hebrew and Rabbinic Aramaic words as cryptic expressions. These replace regular lexical parallels that would have been understood by non-Jewish neighbors (Mutzafi 2010, 2013).

Relating to religion, one finds *təppól, tâppul* 'Muslim prayer', literally 'falls' (תִּפֹּל), derived from Exodus 15:16: תִּפֹּל עֲלֵיהֶם אֵימָתָה וָפַחַד 'awe and fear falls upon them'; *beṯ təppul* 'mosque' (literally: 'house of תִּפֹּל'); *šetí waʿereb, šattu-ʿérev, šaṭṭa-ʿéruv* 'crucifix' (literally: 'warp and weft; crosswise' שְׁתִי וָעֵרֶב).

Warnings in dangerous situations are sometimes expressed by cryptic expressions, such as *wayyidom, waydóm* (וַיִּדֹּם), based on Leviticus 10:3 וַיִּדֹּם אַהֲרֹן 'and Aaron was silent'. Words with a similar function may be alluded to by referring to the letters of their Hebrew orthography, e.g., *tre lamedé* 'two letter *lameds*', an allusion to the Neo-Aramaic (ultimately Iranian) word *ḷāḷ* 'dumb, mute'.

Aramaic-speaking merchants used Hebrew words in their secret argot, e.g., *kesāfe* 'money' (< כְּסָפִים, with an Aramaic plural suffix replacing the Hebrew one); *šəlmé* also 'money', derived from the Hebrew verbal root שלם 'to pay' with the nominal pattern of the synonymous cryptic word *fəlsé* (of Arabic etymology). Cryptic words were often used by merchants to refer to products, e.g., *šexar* 'alcoholic drink' (שֵׁכָר), or *zeʿa* (זֵעָה), literally 'sweat' (a Hebrew translation of the primary meaning of the Arabic parallel *ʿaraq* 'sweat', which also denotes 'arrack' as a secondary meaning). The Jewish merchants' secret argot of the dialect of Urmi disguised Aramaic verbs, which might have been understood by local Aramaic-speaking Christians, by replacing the final vowel of the Aramaic infinitive forms with the Hebrew plural suffix *-ím*. Most of these cryptic forms are employed as imperatives, thus *hivalím* 'give it!' (*hiwālá* 'to give'), *šaqolím* 'buy it!' (*šaqolé* 'to buy'), *zaboním* 'sell it!'.

3.4 Language contact influences

In numerous places in the foregoing discussion of grammatical structure, the point has been made that many of the differences between the *lišana deni* dialects and the trans-Zab dialects have come about by the greater convergence of the latter with contact languages. Here we shall restrict ourselves to some remarks on the lexicon.

As expected, the lexicon of the trans-Zab dialects exhibits a greater influence from contact languages than the *lišana deni* dialects. This is reflected by a greater proportion of loanwords in core areas of the lexicon. The table below shows a series of items in the core lexicon that are of native Aramaic etymology in Jewish Amedia, a *lišana deni* dialect, compared to the corresponding items in the trans-Zab dialects Jewish Urmi and Jewish Sanandaj. In each case, at least one of the trans-Zab dialects has a loanword, from Azeri Turkish (T), Kurdish (K), or Persian (P). In some cases both trans-Zab dialects have loanwords.

Table 1.2: Selected core vocabulary in *lišana deni* and trans-Zab dialects

	Amedia	**Urmi**	**Sanandaj**
'eyelash'	*təlpa*	*kəprəg* (T)	*peḷa* (K)
'eyebrow'	*bəgwina*	*⁺qaša* (T)	*gwenya*
'jaw'	*leʾma*	*čanakta* (K/T)	*čanaga* (K)
'spit'	*roqe*	*roqe*	*təf* (K/P)
'arm'	*ʾida*	*⁺qola* (T/K)	*qoḷa* (K)
'mother'	*yəmma*	*⁺daa* (K)	*daăka* (K)
'hail'	*barda*	*⁺dolu* (T)	*tarzăka* (K)
'shade'	*ṭəlla*	*kolga* (T)	*poxa*
'green'	*yaruqa*	*⁺yašəl* (T)	*yăruqa*

Outside of the core vocabulary, the extent of influence of contact-languages is greater, especially in nouns. Garbell (1965b) has calculated that in the Jewish Urmi dialect, 69% of the total lexicon of nouns are loanwords, and similar proportions can be identified in other trans-Zab dialects (Khan 2004a: 7).

Although nouns are particularly susceptible to being loaned, as is generally the case cross-linguistically, the impact of contact-languages can be seen in all areas of the lexicon in the Jewish NENA dialects. Many verbal roots have been extracted from loanwords. This applies also to Hebrew loanwords, e.g., Jewish Zakho *t-p-l* 'to pray (Muslims)' < Hebrew תִּפּוֹל (see above). Some grammatical particles have been borrowed, including discourse connectives and, in the case of some trans-Zab dialects, the Kurdish definite article (Khan 2007b: 201–202).

4 Written and oral traditions

4.1 Writing system

When Jewish Neo-Aramaic speakers began to commit their language to writing in the 17th century, they used Hebrew script, as is the norm with other Jewish languages. The orthography was *plene*, corresponding to the contemporary practice of spelling Hebrew (Sabar 1976: xxxi–xxxiv, 2002: 15–21). There are, however, some differences. The most conspicuous one is the use of *ʾaleph* to represent long *ā* in word-medial position, e.g., כמארא *xmāra* 'ass', including in Hebrew loanwords, e.g., נשאמוך *nišāmox* 'your soul' (= נִשְׁמָה), and occasionally also medial short */a/*, e.g., כַאלְוֵוי *kalwe* 'dogs'. In contrast to written Christian Neo-Aramaic, which has incorporated historical elements of Syriac orthography, Jewish Neo-Aramaic orthography is phonetic and not based on that of any early literary form of Jewish Aramaic, e.g., כמשא *xamša* (= חמשא), שואא *šōʾa* (= שבעא). Scribes sometimes write prosthetic vowels that break initial consonantal clsuters, e.g., אתרי *ʾətre* 'two', אטלהא *ʾəṭlāha* 'three'. These are generally not pronounced in the surviving spoken language. Spread of emphasis is reflected in spellings with emphatic letters, such as צלוצא *ṣloṣa* 'prayer' (= *ṣlōsa* < **slōṯā*), and loss of emphasis by spellings such as שרתי *šarte* < *šarṭe* 'conditions'. Texts written by Jewish Urmi speakers reflect the weakening of pharyngeal consonants in that dialect, e.g., אלחא *ilha* (*ḥet* represents */h/*) (Sabar 2013b: 481).

Texts written in Israel since the 1950s exhibit some influence from Israeli Hebrew pronunciation, e.g., ח may be used for Neo-Aramaic */x/* and ק for Neo-Aramaic */k/*, דומַיָק *dūmāyək* 'eventually', or Hebrew orthography, e.g., the use of ע, as in cases such as עִינָא *ʾena* 'eye' (cf. Hebrew עַיִן), or the use of שׂ in cases such as שְׂעַארֵי *saʿāre* 'barley' (cf. Hebrew שְׂעוֹרִים).

Hebrew vocalization signs came to be used frequently in texts written down in the 20th century. These reflect Sephardi Hebrew pronunciation, in that the signs *qameṣ* and *pataḥ*, on the one hand, and *ṣere* and *segḥol*, on the other, interchange inconsistently. The *shewa* sign is often used to represent */a/*, even in closed syllables, e.g., חְכוֹמָא *ḥakōma* 'king'. A noteworthy feature of vocalization is the insertion of epenthetic vowels breaking initial consonantal clusters, which are generally not pronounced in the spoken dialects. This is found predominantly in verbal forms in Bible translations, e.g., in the trans-Zab Neo-Aramaic Bible translation studied by Rees (2008: 16) פַּלִיכְלֶה 'he opened' (spoken dialects: *plixle*).

A distinctive feature of the Bible translations is their close imitation of the syntax of the Hebrew source text. This results in the fact that their syntax deviates radically from the syntax of the spoken dialects (for details, see Rees 2008).

4.2 Literature

There is no clear distinction between the written literature and the oral literature of the Neo-Aramaic-speaking Jews, since the majority of their literary heritage originates in oral transmission (Aloni 2014: 22). The many bible translations published by Sabar, for example, were committed to writing only in the 20th century, at the request of scholars in Israel.

Jewish Neo-Aramaic literature may be divided into the following categories (Sabar 1976: 161–178, 1982: xxxii–xxxvi; Aloni 2014: 22–24):

I. Religious literature, most of which exists today in manuscripts, including:
   (i) Homilies on portions of the Pentateuch.
   (ii) Expositions on the *Hafṭarot* and *Megillot* in the form of free translations.
   (iii) Literal translations of the Bible, mostly written down from oral traditions in the 20th century.
   (iv) Liturgical literature, including dirges (*qinot*), especially for the Ninth of Ab, paraliturgical songs (*pizmonim*), and expositions of the 613 commandments (*'azharot*)
   (v) Rhymed aggadic narratives (*tafsirim*), loosely based on biblical and midrashic sources. Many of these were published by Rivlin (1959).

II. Oral folk literature. This played a central role in the culture of Neo-Aramaic-speaking Jews. Some of it has been committed to writing by scholars, as part of their documentation of the dialects, and also by native speakers.

In Israel, new performance genres have developed among the Neo-Aramaic speaking community. Theatrical plays have been produced, notably by the performer and singer Nisan Aviv, in the Jewish Urmi dialect (Khan 2008a: xviii, 417). The *lišana deni* community in Jerusalem currently holds monthly cultural gatherings, at which they have poetry readings and stand-up comedy entertainment. Speakers of some of the western Iranian trans-Zab dialects have held phone-in radio programmes, organized by speakers of Sulemaniyya and Sanandaj, including poetry readings and other cultural activities. Participation in these activities dwindles from year to year, as the number of competent speakers gradually diminishes.

5 State of research

Despite the progress that has been made with the documentation of the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects, it is very important to strive for a fuller documentation during the last two decades or so of the life of the dialects. This applies both to the description of the linguistic structure of the dialects and also to the collection

and transcription of oral literature. This documentation should consist not only of the publication of data, but also the secure archiving of unpublished audio and visual data.

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Edited by
Benjamin Hary
Sarah Bunin Benor

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MOUTON