

which is right, and his training will not be successful.”¹ This paper describes how children acquire classical Syriac as a spoken language. However, unlike the pupils at Mor Gabriel Monastery who learn the language after their ‘critical period’ (the period after which a newly acquired language becomes a second language rather than a native one), I will describe a case of a child named Tabetha, who acquired classical Syriac as a spoken language natively. An extremely small number of such cases are known: I know of only three families, but none have been documented to date.

The form of classical Syriac that is spoken today is known as *kthobonoyo*, a term almost exclusively used for the spoken form of the language despite its literal meaning (e.g. I speak *Kthobonoyo*, but I read/write *Suryoyo*). The term *Kthobonoyo* is used to emphasize that the speaker is not speaking a vernacular dialect such as *Ṭuroyo* or *Swadaya*. I have discussed elsewhere some of the formal properties of *Kthobonoyo* Syriac.² To summarize, *Kthobonoyo* is dominant amongst West Syriac speakers, with at least a few hundred speakers worldwide, mostly clergymen and (male) *malphone*. This makes *Kthobonoyo* a male-dominant language where feminine forms are hardly used; in fact, misuse in feminine forms is quite noticeable among even the most fluent of speakers. Code switching is another feature of *Kthobonoyo*, the intensity of which varies depending on the aptitude level of the speakers and the level of formality of the dialogue.

The remarks made herein on Tabetha *Kthobonoyo* Syriac (TKS) are based on a recorded diary study. While the diary approach has been used by researchers in the past, one must take care to avoid generalizations. After all, this paper describes but one isolated case. Furthermore, the diary was kept sporadically during the five years under investigation.

This paper begins with a description of Tabetha’s sociolinguistic environment, and the challenges met in raising Tabetha as a *Kthobonoyo* speaker. Following this, a description of Tabetha’s grammar (in terms of phonology, morphology and morphosyntax) and lexicon is given. This paper describes the first five and half years of Tabetha’s

¹ *Heto* [*Heto*], vol. 5, nos 8-9, 2003, p. 46.

² G. Kiraz, ‘*Kthobonoyo* Syriac, Some Observations and Remarks’, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 10 (2007) pp. 113-24.

language development (Tabetha turned 11 in Feb, 2012). All examples here (including those with English code switching) are written right-to-left.

TABETHA'S SOCIOLINGUISTIC ENVIRONMENT

Tabetha lives in what is usually called a 'Syriac-speaking community,' although the term is quite misleading in the context of this paper. Generally, a 'Syriac-speaking' community is considered to be one whose liturgical language is Syriac; it does not follow that members of the community actually speak or read Syriac (or any other Neo-Aramaic dialect). Within the specific community to which Tabetha belongs (NJ, USA), only those who are originally from Ṭur 'Abdin, and not always all, tend to speak Ṭuroyo; others speak either Arabic, Turkish, Armenian or Kurdish (in order of the approximate number of speakers). English is of course the common language of communication. Most community children are at least bilingual, but none have Kthobonoyo as a primary or secondary native language apart from Tabetha (and her two brothers). Hence, Tabetha's interactions in Kthobonoyo are exclusively with adults. With her peers, even within the Syriac-speaking community, she communicates in English.

Tabetha's home linguistic setting is quite complex. Her father is a native speaker of Arabic and a speaker of Kthobonoyo. Her mother is a native speaker of Turkish. Tabetha's paternal grandmother, a native speaker of Arabic, lived in the same household until Tabetha was four. The parents communicate in English, and Tabetha's father and paternal grandmother communicated in Arabic. Her mother and grandmother communicated primarily in English. Interactions with Tabetha take the following patterns: Father-Tabetha, Kthobonoyo; Mother-Tabetha, Turkish (until the age of four); paternal Grandmother-Tabetha, Arabic. Until the age of 8 months, Tabetha spent most of her days with her Arabic-speaking paternal grandmother. Later, she was sent to an English-speaking babysitter (a native of Jamaica) with five other children (all of whom were African American). At the age of 16 months, Tabetha uttered her first words in English (her first words were *thank you*). During her first two years, Tabetha did not communicate with her parents in English (apart from a few favorite utterances such as *no* and *all mine*). In fact, her parents were unaware of how much English the child actually knew, but received periodic reports from the babysitter on her English development. A few times a month Tabetha interacted with

visitors who spoke Kthobonoyo, which enforced the notion that Kthobonoyo was not just her father's language.

Both parents purposefully taught Tabetha their respective languages through a repetitive process. For instance, at the age of 12 months, when playing a game whereby Tabetha repeatedly fell on the bed, the phrase *ܘܚܘܠܐ ܘܘܠܐ* was repeated, as was the corresponding Turkish phrase, *Tabetha düştü* 'Tabetha fell.' Even earlier, phrases were repeated with almost every action. For instance, when Tabetha was being nursed, the phrase *ܘܘܠܐ ܘܘܠܐ* 'we are sucking milk' was often repeated (initially the father used *ܘܘܠܐ ܘܘܠܐ* for a month, until it dawned on him that *ܘܘܠܐ ܘܘܠܐ* would be a better usage!). When indicating an action, the active participle plural form was always used; e.g. *ܘܘܠܐ* (when going down the stairs), *ܘܘܠܐ* (when going up the stairs), *ܘܘܠܐ* (when putting clothes on), etc. This use of the active participle in the plural form would later become dominant in Tabetha's verbal system.

Three modalities were encouraged at home: speaking (from day one), and reading and writing from the age of 17 months onward. Children's books, consisting of referential words (e.g. animals, vegetables), were read to Tabetha in Kthobonoyo and Turkish. At around the same time, Tabetha was exposed to reading and writing the alphabet (in both Syriac and Latin scripts), and would recognize, but not generate, letters in both scripts. At an early age, Tabetha was also exposed to the East Syriac script through the video *Assyrian Alphabet* and was able to recognize both scripts at the age of five.

The two primary languages (Kthobonoyo and Turkish), as well as the social dominant language (English) diverge in a number of ways. Kthobonoyo is considered the highest in social status, and no doubt Tabetha will be unique and commended for being able to speak it. In fact, her teacher and babysitter report that Tabetha is very proud of her languages. "Daddy doesn't know all words," she once reported to her babysitter after boasting that she knows many languages, "He has to look in the big book [i.e. the dictionary]."

Linguistically, the three languages could not be more diverse in phonology, morphology, and syntax. Each of the three languages has sounds which do not exist in the other two, the morphology of English is concatenative, that of Turkish is agglutinative, and of Syriac is templatic (root-and-pattern morphology). Syntactically, Syriac is less configurational (i.e. has freer word order) than English and Turkish. None of this, however, seems to affect Tabetha's acquisition abilities.

CHALLENGES

As children have an innate ability to learn multiple languages simultaneously prior to the ‘critical period,’ the challenges here are faced by the Kthobonoyo-speaking parent(s), not the child.

Two main challenges, from the parental perspective, were noticed with regards to the lexicon and morphology. The Kthobonoyo-speaking parent’s prior experience with Kthobonoyo was limited to conversations with clergy and adults, restricting the size of the parent’s active lexicon. The lack of a wider social context for the use of Kthobonoyo means that speakers forget, from time to time, lexemes which they have once acquired, and may not be able to produce them spontaneously. This is primarily the case in referential lexemes (i.e. referring to objects). Tabettha’s father would temporarily resolve an unknown lexeme, or a forgotten one, with the use of the demonstrative pronouns ܡܘܢܐ or ܗܘܢܐ, and by pointing to the object. Later, the father would check the lexica, or if necessary coin a new lexeme, though this could sometimes take several weeks. The use of the demonstrative pronouns remained very pronounced in Tabettha’s productive speech until the age of five, using ܡܘܢܐ for objects whose names she did not know. Sometimes her father would spontaneously coin a word, such as ܡܘܢܐ ܡܘܢܐ ܡܘܢܐ for the ‘travelator’ in an airport when Tabettha once pointed to it and asked ܡܘܢܐ ܡܘܢܐ ܡܘܢܐ.

As the usual Syriac lexica have Syriac as a source language, they are not helpful in finding Syriac words. Here, *Zahrira* (2000), by Khoshaba and Yokhanna, was most welcome. This lexicon is primarily a reverse of Manna’s Syriac-Arabic lexicon, but with many more new additions. In using it, however, one must be critical and careful. The authors provide for each Arabic word numerous Syriac correspondences without ‘fine-tuning’ the semantics. Nevertheless, it has been immensely helpful in communicating with Tabettha.

With regards to morphology, addressing a female posed some challenges. A feature of adult Kthobonoyo (as briefly mentioned above) is its male centricity as speakers are predominantly clergy (by default, male) and male *malphone*. Even in adult speech, feminine verbal forms are not used properly. Ill-usage on the part of the parent was noticed and later corrected.

With regards to the idiomatic usage of Kthobonoyo, especially in phrases hitherto unknown in liturgical or classical Syriac, references are made to Arabic or English phraseology. Frequently, English usage dom-

Tabetha was exposed to the combined phonemic sets of Kthobonoyo, Turkish, English, and, to a certain extent, Arabic. While many consonants are common to these languages, there are sounds unique to Syriac and Arabic (e.g. [ʾ], [q], and emphatic sounds), and others to Turkish (e.g. ç, ş, j). Tabetha, like any other monolingual, was under-generating phonemes by the age of 16 months; e.g. [t] for both [t] and [θ]. She reduced Semitic emphatic sounds to their non-emphatic counterparts. The phoneme [ʾ] was not pronounced for the first two years, but is now pronounced clearly. The phoneme [q] was also not pronounced by the age of two, and is now half way between [q] and [k] (and remains so to this day). As expected, vowel qualities were hard to distinguish during the first year or two. Even at the age of 16 months, Tabetha referred to ܘܫܘܐ ‘[letter] *beth*’ with both /bet/ and /bit/. By now, however, the various vowels have been mastered.

During the first two years, phonemic confusability was a feature of Tabetha’s speech. At 13 months, for example, Tabetha understood and produced ܘܫܘܐ ‘fire [in fireplace]’ and ܘܫܘܐ ‘fish [in a fish tank],’ especially in the latter case when a parent was feeding the fish, using the canonical babbling *mam-mam* (for ‘food’). However, when devoid of this context, she very often mixed up these two words.

In terms of intonation, Tabetha’s intonation patterns were well developed even during the babbling stage. When generating words, stress followed the canonical rules of the language in question, even when the various languages differed in how they represent stress (e.g. English marks stress lexically, while Syriac is rule-based.)

Tabetha’s handling of syllabification also follows what is generally observed with other monolinguals and bilinguals. She would often omit a consonant in two-consonant clusters, e.g. **shem* instead of *shlem* for ܡܠܚܡ ‘end.’ Tri-syllabic words were reduced to two-syllabic ones, e.g. ܣܠܡܘܫܘܐ ‘let’s go down’ became ܣܠܡܘܫܘܐ and sometimes ܣܠܡܘܫܘܐ. Syllabic reductions became more obvious in larger phrases; for instance, although Tabetha could say ܠܘܫܘܐ perfectly at the age of 25 months, the [b] was omitted when ܘܫܘܐ was added, resulting in ܠܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ ‘sit here.’ Also, ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ > *ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ, etc. By the age of two, she no longer omitted consonants within the word. To this day, Tabetha omits the first consonant in many initial consonant clusters, e.g. ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ > *ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ, ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ > *ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ. This gives rise to the creation of a homograph, ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ, from the lexemes ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ and ܘܫܘܐܘܫܘܐ. This phenomenon is connected with another one: Tabetha’s lack of prefixation (discussed further below).

Unconventional metathesis takes place in a number of lexemes, e.g. $\text{صُعُلا} > * \text{صُعُلا}$ (until age four, but now corrected), $\text{صُعُلا} > * \text{صُعُلا}$ (where the ل turns into ه , not unlike the Malankara/Malabar pronunciation of لا), $\text{صُعُلا} > * \text{صُعُلا}$ (where the schwa is on ا as expected). All these were corrected after the age of five.

At the age of five, when Tabetha's verbal system began to recognize verbal patterns, epenthetic vowels were inserted when code switching with English stems conjugated as Syriac verbs, e.g. / لُيْلُ run // 'do not run'. Code switching and morphosyntax are discussed below.

MORPHOLOGY AND MORPHOSYNTAX

It was too difficult to determine Tabetha's acquisition abilities for morphology prior to the age of four. It was around this time that she became somewhat, but not fully, aware of number, gender and person. Suffixation in verbal forms became very clear at this age, even suffixing Syriac morphemes to English stems which code switching. It is unlikely that Tabetha recognized prefixation (see under the lexicon). What is most interesting is that by the age of four (and more so at the age of five) Tabetha began exhibiting signs of acquiring the CV-template as a morpheme.

As the imperative is usually dominant in parents' interactions with children (e.g. don't do this or that), the imperative form replaces the typical past 3rd singular masculine as Tabitha's base stem from which other verbal forms were derived, e.g. $\text{هَلا} \text{لُيْلُ} \text{هَلا}$ (for لُيْلُ) 'you take it'. Later, the active participle form began to become dominant simply because this form was emphasized by the Kthobonoyo-speaking parent from the outset. This was especially the case in code switching with English stems, e.g. $\text{لُيْلُ} \text{لُيْلُ}$ (from *pretend*), $\text{لُيْلُ} \text{لُيْلُ}$ (from *brush teeth*), $\text{لُيْلُ} \text{لُيْلُ}$ (from *build*).

After the age of four, Tabetha began generating words in the past singular 2nd person feminine, but always addressed her father in the feminine form (because this was the form with which he addressed her), e.g. $\text{لُيْلُ} \text{لُيْلُ}$ (both m. and f.) and in code switching as well, e.g. $\text{لُيْلُ} \text{لُيْلُ}$ (from *write*).

By the age of five, the verbal CV template was noticeable in Tabetha's verbal system. This was especially pronounced in code switching when vowels (and sometimes consonants) were added in order to fill in gaps in the CV template, e.g. $\text{لُيْلُ} \text{لُيْلُ}$ 'we see' where و on the verb

ample of a new coinage is **ܦܢܩܩܐ**, from English *pan* and Syriac **ܦܢܩܐ** 'cake' for *pancake*.

As is the case for all monolinguals and bilinguals, Tabetha began acquiring lexical items prior to her generative abilities, and examples of this have been noted in relation to phonology. During her first two years, overextension, where a word is used beyond its meaning, was a feature of Tabetha's mental lexicon. For instance, she used **ܦܢܩܐ** to denote the end of an action, but also to denote that something was not there, instead of **ܦܢܩܐ**, a word she would later generate. Similarly, she used **ܦܢܩܐ** for both cats and dogs (and probably would use it for other small four-legged animals if she encountered them) until she learned the distinction between these words. The letter **ܦܢܩܐ** was used to denote *writing* in general. By age four, Tabetha's overextension had dwindled. Also by age four, Tabetha began to ask about Syriac lexemes she did not know, e.g.

/ʔhe **ܦܢܩܐ** / "What is *he* in Syriac?"

and

/ʔboots **ܦܢܩܐ** / "What is *boots* in Syriac?"

She would also enquire about the English meaning of words she did not understand, e.g.

Tabetha: **ܦܢܩܐ ܦܢܩܐ ܦܢܩܐ** "Where is your hat?"

Father: **ܦܢܩܐ ܦܢܩܐ** "The hat was lost."

Tabetha: **ܦܢܩܐ ܦܢܩܐ** "What is *ebad* in English?"

Father: **ܦܢܩܐ ܦܢܩܐ** "lost" *ebad* is lost."

In other instances, Tabetha uttered a sentence with code switching and then inquired about the missing Syriac word, e.g.

/ܦܢܩܐ forgot **ܦܢܩܐ** / Katrina's gift. What is *forgot* in Syriac?"

"Tabetha *forgot* Katrina's gift. What is *forgot* in Syriac?"

This inquisitiveness, however, was not the norm and in most cases code switching was retained. Many examples appear in the appendix, but worth mentioning here are the English two-word idioms which are split by an object, e.g.

/off **ܦܢܩܐ** take **ܦܢܩܐ** / "Kenoro takes the shoes off."

/on leave ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ/ “Tabetha wants to leave this on.”

/up ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ/ “The gift when you *wrapped* it up.”

Tabetha also scolded her Father if he used an English word in an utterance, even in the case of compound proper nouns, e.g.

Father: Rhode Island ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ
 “We will go later to Rhode Island”

Tabetha: ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ .. ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ
 “Dad, you said *island* in English!!”

Father: Rhode ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ Oh
 “Oh, we will go to the island of Rhode.”

As Tabetha lacked prefixation at the age of five, *bdwl* letters became part of the lexeme, e.g. ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ is *evening*, not *in the evening*; ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ lexicon, not *in the lexicon*; ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ forest, not *to the forest*. Examples enforcing this notion are ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ‘is the lexicon a book?’ (where ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ is for ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ), and the following conversation:

Father: ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ “We shall go to the forest.”

Tabetha: ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܘܬܗ “What is l’obo?”

CONCLUSION

This paper has given remarks on the sociolinguistic environment surrounding Tabetha, and some remarks on phonology, morphosyntax and lexicon. While the observational approach used in presenting this study cannot be generalized, it provides a starting point for understanding how children acquire Kthobonoyo natively. More and more, English is now taking over in Tabetha’s general linguistic acquisition and her Kthobonoyo is probably below that of a five year old.

APPENDIX

The following nursery songs were translated from English and used during the first five years.

