

# Christina Michelle Weaver\* and George A. Kiraz Turoyo Neo-Aramaic in northern New Jersey

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**Abstract:** Turoyo, an endangered Neo-Aramaic language that originated in the area of Tur Abdin in southeastern Turkey and had not been written prior to this century, is spoken today by around 50,000 people scattered worldwide. Spurred on by persecution, Turoyo-speaking immigrants began to arrive in the US as early as the late 1890s. We focus our study on a northern New Jersey community in which Turoyo is spoken. This tight-knit community, whose religious and social center is the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Church, is made up of around 200 families. The community is working hard to pass the language on to their children through speaking Turoyo in the home and in church, and also through programs including a specially created Sunday school curriculum, a weekly Aramaic school, and a summer day camp. However, despite the community's best efforts, language shift is taking place. We use a sociolinguistic approach involving sociolinguistic methods and interviews to show that family, social networks, and religion influence who is most likely to be a proficient speaker of Turoyo in this community, but that identity is the one sociolinguistic variable that can best account for the variety of cases in which language shift is taking place.

**Keywords:** Neo-Aramaic, family, social networks, religion, identity

## 1 Introduction

The endangered Neo-Aramaic language of Turoyo was originally spoken in southeastern Turkey, but is now mostly spoken by the diaspora. One particular community, which is the research site for this article, came mainly from one village in Tur Abdin, 'Ayn Wardo. This community arrived in the United States starting from the early 1970s and now numbers about 200 families mostly living in New Milford, NJ, as well as some of the surrounding towns. (As the community is so small, census data are unreliable.) The community has a parish, Mor Gabriel (after the Monastery of Mor Gabriel, the spiritual hub of Tur Abdin) in Hackensack, NJ, and is currently building a larger structure in Haworth, NJ.

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The Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Church is the religious and social center of the community, and so we refer to the community as the Mor Gabriel community, as this is its most distinguishing characteristic. The Mor Gabriel parish belongs to a wider community of Syriac Orthodox parishes. What sets it apart is that it holds its services entirely in Syriac and Turoyo, something the parish is proud of. That said, the Mor Gabriel parishioners take part in social activities with the wider community, interacting with the others in languages other than Turoyo.

The research methodology used to gather the data for this article is as follows. Much of the research was conducted using a participant-observer methodology. One of the authors, Christina Weaver, spent a significant amount of time engaging with the community members in a variety of venues and domains, including the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Church, the weekly Aramaic school, the summer day camps, a youth conference on identity, in homes, and through Facebook. Informal interviews and conversations with open-ended questions with approximately fifty people were conducted to learn about the community. These interactions were recorded via quick notes and then followed by a focused write-up afterwards. Other significant research was gained via one-on-one language lessons with the priest of the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Church, who graciously agreed to be Christina's language consultant. These sessions were digitally recorded. Information was also gathered through a pilot study involving a specially prepared sociolinguistic questionnaire given via interview with a limited number of consultants ( $N = 4$ ). The results of these questionnaires were recorded during the interviews. Specific follow-up questions were asked via phone, email, or text as needed. In addition, the other author, George Kiraz, has been deeply embedded in the community since 1996 and much of what is reported in this article is supported by his observations.

## 2 Turoyo and its “script”

Turoyo is a Neo-Aramaic language, which is part of the Northwest Semitic subgroup of the larger Semitic language family. Originally spoken in southeastern Turkey, Turoyo constitutes Central Neo-Aramaic, one of three geographical distributions of Neo-Aramaic, the other two being Western Neo-Aramaic (the language spoken in the three Syriac villages of Ma'lulah, Jubb'adin, and Bakh'a) and Eastern Neo-Aramaic, which is divided into the Christian and Jewish dialects of North Eastern Neo-Aramaic (Heinrichs 1990) as well as Neo-Mandaic (Häberl 2009). The name Turoyo is a demonym referring to Tur 'Abdin, the area in southeast Turkey where the language originates. Interestingly, this is

the term mostly used by non-Turoyo Syriac-users, as well as scholars, to refer to this branch of Aramaic. Turoyo-speakers themselves tend to use the term *Suryoyo*.

The history of Turoyo is obscure because, until very recently, the language has only been spoken. Its earlier form can be reconstructed on the basis of Aramaic through the comparative method (Khan 2008). The popular notion, amongst speakers of the language, that it is a corrupt form of Classical Syriac, has no linguistic basis (cf. with popular notions that Arabic dialects are a corruption of *fusha* Arabic). We do know that Turoyo is indigenous to the area of Tur Abdin and must have been spoken there for at least a few thousand years. Apart from that, our knowledge of the existence of Turoyo stems from reports by nineteenth century travelers to the area (e.g. Perry 1895), though they do not tell us much about its linguistic features.

Although missionaries, with the help of native speakers, were able to successfully create a literary written form of the Christian North Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects that almost replaced Classical Syriac as the literary language of those communities (leaving Classical Syriac mostly in the domain of liturgical practices in churches), attempts by missionaries to create a literary form of Turoyo were not successful (because of opposition from the church establishment and even from Turoyo speakers), and Turoyo has remained a vernacular. A few liturgical prayers have been published in Turoyo, but always in the Syriac script. Turoyo has been written in a small number of academic publications (Ritter 1967–1971; Jastrow 1987, 1992, 1996; Talay 2002, 2009).

When Turoyo is written, two scripts are used. One is the Serto script of Classical Syriac. The system, as is the case with the Christian dialects of North Eastern Neo-Aramaic, is motivated by historico-etymological reasoning which wrongly assumes that Turoyo is a derivative of Classical Syriac. This point can be illustrated with the possessive feminine suffix which is marked in Classical Syriac with the suffix ܐ <h>. As Syriac is usually not vocalized, the masculine form is pronounced [eh], while the feminine form [oh]; i.e. both suffixes constitute a homographic pair at the consonantal level. To distinguish both forms, a diacritical point is placed above the ܐ when the suffix is feminine [oh], while the suffix is unmarked when it is the masculine [eh]. In Classical Syriac, one then can have masculine ܟܠܗ <klh> [kuleh] and feminine ܟܠܗܐ <klh<sup>h</sup>> [kuloh] ‘all of it’. In Classical Syriac, for example, one may say ܟܠܗܐ ܘܡܘܟܠܗܐ ܘܟܠܗܐ ܘܡܘܟܠܗܐ <bryt<sup>h</sup> klh<sup>h</sup> w<sup>f</sup>m<sup>h</sup> klh> [britho kuloh w<sup>f</sup>amo kuleh] ‘the entire creation and the entire people’. Here <bryt<sup>h</sup>> ‘creation’ is feminine and hence takes the dot on <h>, to indicate the vowel [o], while <w<sup>f</sup>m<sup>h</sup>> ‘people’ is masculine and does not take a dot. (The <w> in the middle of the phrase is the conjunction ‘and’.) In Turoyo, the phrase is the same except that the feminine [kuloh] becomes [kula]. Yet, writers represent [kula] as ܟܠܗܐ <klh<sup>h</sup>>

with two diacritics. The line under <h> indicates that it is silent, an orthographic sign ubiquitous in modern usage of Classical Syriac texts, and the dot indicates that the form is feminine, even though in Turoyo the suffix is not even pronounced (Kiraz 2012a: Section 717). An extreme case of historico-etymological translation was used most recently in a new edition of the New Testament in Turoyo (Holy Bible 2013). The transcription is historico-etymological centric in that it is debatable if a Turoyo speaker who does not know Classical Syriac would be able to read the text.

Others have opted for a Latin-based orthography. The first systematic attempt, a byproduct of a diaspora community, was motivated by Swedish policy in the 1970s that every child ought to be taught his or her native language. An educator named Yusuf Ishaq was given the task of coming up with a transcription system, and a set of reading books, titled [toxu qorena], were produced. One can see how IPA influenced the choice of [x] which in the Serto script would have been represented as a <k> with a sublinear dot. This Latin-based system has not been adopted outside of Sweden. Those who are outside of Sweden, however, are using their own, non-standardized Latin script form of Turoyo for texting, emails, Facebook, etc.

Despite the fact that Turoyo is rarely written, it has been used in the liturgy for a very long time. A priest or a deacon will hold a Classical Syriac text (either prayers or Scripture reading), and will translate it *ex tempore* into Turoyo. The form of the language produced is a mid-way between Turoyo and Classical Syriac, which one may call Liturgical Turoyo (Kiraz 2012a: Section 723–731). Readers seem to remain within the syntactic bounds of Classical Syriac, changing Syriac lexemes (both nouns and verbs) to their Turoyo or Swadāyā counterparts. In many cases, cognates (sometimes false ones) are chosen. It is also quite common to retain Classical Syriac lexemes; e.g. *šalmo* (ܫܠܡܘܘܬܐ), *koruzo* (ܟܘܪܘܙܐ), *rawmo* (ܪܘܡܘܘܬܐ). At the morphosyntactic level, it is usually the case that suffixes are changed to the target language, even when the base lexeme keeps its Classical Syriac form; e.g. *šalmaydi wšiklaydi for* (ܫܠܡܘܘܬܐܝܢܐ ܘܫܝܟܠܝܢܐ); *wi-šan'a di-dothi for* (ܘܝܫܢܐ ܕܝܕܘܬܝܢܐ). While parishioners are able to follow the general semantics of these prayers, it is doubtful if they can follow complex theological nuances.

As a vernacular, the language is the day-to-day language both in its pre-migration homeland as well as in diaspora communities, although always mixed with local languages. Even in Tur Abdin, most people would need to know at least one other local language in order to communicate with the outside world: Turkish, Arabic, or Kurdish. (Those who only know Turoyo typically tend to be older females who may not have ventured much outside their villages.) Because of Turoyo's association with Aramaic (the language spoken by Christ), it is a holy language in the eyes of its speakers. In the past, there has been a strong

opposition to using a “holy” language for things such as secular music (which only appeared in the late 1960s), but Turoyo is now used, mostly in the diaspora, for all sorts of cultural activities. According to UNESCO, there are somewhere around 50,000 speakers of Turoyo in the world today. However, Turoyo is a “severely endangered” language (UNESCO 2014). This is because the young Turoyo speakers are less likely to learn the language, and those that do are increasingly unlikely to pass it along to their children. Instead, the young people generally opt to speak the dominant language of the region in which they live. Turoyo has no official status in any country.

## **3 The language and the diaspora community within the US**

### **3.1 The ethnolinguistic diaspora community within the US**

The above discussion has already alluded to the diaspora, and in fact, Turoyo is now primarily a diaspora language. During World War I, the Syriac-using communities were dispersed following atrocities committed against them that some term genocide. Turoyo speakers migrated from what became Turkey to what became Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. A few immigrated to the United States where small Syriac communities had already existed since the late 1890s in New York / New Jersey (mostly Turkish speaking from Diarbakir), Worcester, Massachusetts (Turkish and Armenian speaking from Kharput), and Rhode Island (Turoyo speaking). A series of subsequent conflicts in the Middle East, the latest of which is occurring as this issue goes to press, caused further immigration to the West. While most Turoyo speaking communities ended up in Europe, mostly Sweden, Germany, and The Netherlands, a good number ended up in the United States, settling mostly in New Jersey and Los Angeles, but also in other places.

### **3.2 Social description of the Mor Gabriel community**

The Mor Gabriel community is extremely tight-knit, and most socialization happens within the community. In addition to weekly church services, there are also many social events throughout the year. The families within the community are not only friends, but most are also related to each other. Even the children, who attend public and private schools in English, do not

(usually) become as good of with those who are outside of the community, as those friends would be seen as temporary, while friends from the community are seen as lifelong friends. The young people usually marry within the larger Suryoyo community (to youth in the Mor Gabriel community, or in other communities in the area, or in the other communities around the world). Events are held for the youth (e.g. youth events for all the youth in the NJ/NY area, a yearly youth convention for all the youth in the US, etc.) to allow opportunity to grow in friendship and romantic relationship (in a group setting) with other Suryoyo young people. The people in the community are extremely hospitable, friendly, and welcoming. Most of the Turoyo speakers were self-employed while living in the Midyat area, and that tradition has continued in the United States, with many community members in the jewelry business.

### **3.3 Linguistic description of the Mor Gabriel community and language preservation efforts**

As noted in Section 2, almost all Turoyo speakers speak at least two languages. About 90% of people in the Mor Gabriel community speak Turoyo to some degree. Around 80% also speak Turkish (because the older generations / new arrivals to the community emigrated from Turkey) and English (because the community exists in the largely English-speaking country of the United States). Only a few people in this community speak Arabic, and there are a small number of people who speak other languages, as well, depending on their background. The complex linguistic makeup of the community provides context to the linguistic choices that community members make.

The Mor Gabriel community is unique among Turoyo-speaking communities in the United States. Although there are communities in countries such as Sweden and Germany which have more speakers and who speak the language in more domains (particularly school), the Mor Gabriel community has the most Turoyo speakers in the United States, and they are making the most effort (among communities in the United States) to pass their language on. Efforts to pass the language on are numerous and include speaking in the home, speaking the language in the church, a specially created Sunday school curriculum, a weekly Aramaic school, and an Aramaic summer day camp which also serves the larger Suryoyo community.

Many families speak Turoyo in their home. In about a quarter of these homes, Turoyo is spoken exclusively by both parents. And in about half of the remaining homes, Turoyo is spoken to some degree. However, those children who speak to

their parents in Turoyo at home go to school in English, usually speak to their friends in English, and often speak to their siblings in English, as well.

Turoyo is also spoken in the Mor Gabriel church. The Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Church is part of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, in particular the Archdiocese for the Eastern United States. The church services are traditional, conservative, and largely conducted in Classical Syriac and Liturgical Turoyo (see Section 2). The liturgical service is called the Holy Qurbono and consists of chants of Bible readings, prayers, and songs (Holy Qurbono 2010). However, the announcements and sermon are given in Turoyo. A priest officiates over the services, wearing ornate vestments, and is assisted by deacons. The priest gives Holy Communion during each service. The choir is comprised of choir girls (ages 13 and up). The men and women sit separately from each other, and most women cover their heads.

There is a Sunday school program for children in kindergarten through grade 7 during the school year. A new Sunday school curriculum has recently been created for the purpose of passing on Biblical knowledge, as well as church traditions, important church terminology, and prayers. It is hoped that parents will learn this information as well, from their children and through take home materials. Sara Hadodo Candan, a member of Mor Gabriel, with the help of her Protestant co-author, Nadine Cauthen (Candan and Cauthen 2014), work together on the initial draft of the curriculum (adding one level each year), and then it is reviewed by archdiocesan Sunday School and Clergy committees. The curriculum has been adopted by the leadership of the Syriac Orthodox churches in the United States to be used in Sunday school classes parish-wide. Although the curriculum is written in English (to be accessible to children in all the parishes), the Sunday school teachers at Mor Gabriel may teach in Turoyo, depending on their language background and which children are present. There is no formal program for children below kindergarten age – some attend church with their parents and some stay home until they are old enough to participate in church activities. The junior youth (ages 13–17) attend and often participate in the service as deacons (for the boys) and choir girls. Youth are those 18 years of age and older who are unmarried, and they also attend the service.

Turoyo is also being maintained through Mor Gabriel's weekly Aramaic school, which meets during the school year and focuses on teaching the basics of the language. While there has historically been a strong emphasis in teaching the children Classical Syriac, the focus of instruction is now moving increasingly towards Turoyo because the Mor Gabriel community is witnessing the loss of their language and they want the Aramaic school to be as practical as possible for the children who attend it. The school meets on Friday nights from 5:30 – 8:30 and has classes for kindergarten through seventh grade students. A number

of children who have graduated from the Aramaic school are now teachers in it. Almost one hundred children attend the school.

In 2011, an Aramaic summer day camp was started for the Suryoyo community at large. The day camp is for 5 to 13 year olds and meets for six weeks each summer. One of the focuses of the day camp is the language, but they also cover morning prayers, Bible lessons, and cultural and folklore activities, as well as other typical summer day camp activities like sports, and arts and crafts. The day camp is attended not only by children from Mor Gabriel, but also by children from the other Syriac Orthodox parishes in the surrounding area. In 2014, approximately 200 children attended the day camp.

Whether it be speaking Turoyo in the home, in the church, at Sunday school, at Aramaic school, or at the Aramaic summer day camp, it is very clear that efforts to pass the language on within the community are focused on the children. The community believes that children are the future, and they hope to not only reach them with the language, but also in learning their culture and making lifelong friendships with others from the community. Their beliefs line up with current research which has shown that the survival of a language and the level to which the language is endangered depends upon the degree to which it is being transmitted to the next generation(s) (Crystal 2002; Harrison 2007).

## 4 Sociolinguistic factors

There are, of course, many sociolinguistic variables that have been shown to affect linguistic choices, including social class, gender, age, and ethnicity, just to name a few. Within the Mor Gabriel community, the sociolinguistic factors of family, social networks, religion, and identity are the most influential. Each of these factors will be examined below.

### 4.1 Family

The family is where language learning first takes place, and also where values are taught. (These values can and do directly affect other sociolinguistic factors.) The family influences a language speaker greatly during the years when most of the child's time is spent with them (usually ages 0–5) (Hart and Risley 1995), and that influence continues to some degree throughout the rest of their lives. Much of the sociolinguistic research on the family thus far has focused on situations in which there are two dialects or languages: one dialect or language of the parent(s) and

one dialect or language of the community. In this model, there are only two options and each option directly relates to only one group, so these are the most straightforward situations in which to track whether children pattern with their family or with the community. According to Hazen (2002), there are four family-pattern types. A child can: (1) pattern with parents, (2) pattern with the community, or (3) pattern in a way that indicates that they are influenced by both parents and community. Another common occurrence is that: (4) different children within the same family will pattern in different ways (Hazen 2002: 304–305).

In the case of the Mor Gabriel community, there are four groups rather than only two: (1) the family, which is a part of (2) the Mor Gabriel community, which is a part of (3) the community made up of the New Jersey area Syriac Orthodox communities, which is a part of (4) the largely English-speaking community in the New Jersey area in which they live. And there are three languages rather than two: (1) Turoyo, (2) English, and (3) Turkish. While groups (1) and (2) are generally making the same language choices and both encouraging their children to learn the Turoyo language, groups (3) and (4) are both very English dominant.

In the Mor Gabriel community, family is very important and central and has more influence on the language of a speaker than in other communities where family is not as important and central (see Kerswill and Williams [2000] who make this point about other family-oriented communities). Although Turoyo is strongly represented within the Mor Gabriel community among older generations and young children, other groups do not speak as much Turoyo. Many sociolinguists (including Weinreich et al. [1968] and Eckert [1988]) have shown that, even though family plays an important role in the choices of a language speaker, speakers ultimately tend to follow the influence of their peer group. This is because, the nearer children come to their teenage years, the more their peer networks become a central part of their lives. The youth in the Mor Gabriel community regularly meet with youth in group (3) and go to school with youth in both groups (3) and (4). In this way, the youth in groups (3) and (4) become significant in the peer groups of the Mor Gabriel youth and, in situations in which they are together, English is (usually) the only language they have in common. The Mor Gabriel youth then begin to use English with each other as well, since they are commonly in English-speaking situations together already. And so, even children who are taught Turoyo at home from birth switch heavily to English when they begin to attend school. Although the children continue to understand Turoyo, they begin to even respond to their parents in English (in many but not all cases).

It must be noted that, even though peer groups are found to be such an important influence on speakers, there is significant research that shows that the

family will still have an effect on the degree to which the child assimilates to the peer group. For example, Sankoff and Brown's (1976) study of Tok Pisin verb structure shows that, when children and parent choices about verb structure are compared, the children and adults are making significantly different choices. However, when the children are compared to each other, there is a striking correlation in which children who use a certain verb structure the least are the children of the parents who use that verb structure the least, and vice versa. A similar pattern can generally be found in the Mor Gabriel community: the children whose parents focus greatly on teaching them Turoyo in the home from birth are the children who speak Turoyo the most, even if it is not as much as the community would hope for maintaining the language. And, depending on the choices the children make as adults (discussed in the next paragraph), these children have the option to return to their Turoyo roots and still pass the language on to their children.

Ideally, the family's language choices would be reinforced by the community. Unfortunately, although the Mor Gabriel community themselves do foster the speaking of Turoyo, the wider groups of (3) and (4) do not. And so, the children are generally forsaking the language of their family and speaking the language of their peers. There are, of course, those children who stay within the Mor Gabriel community itself for their choice of friends and spouse, and these are the ones who continue to speak the language despite outside pressures. However, those children who have close relationships outside the community (even among non-Turoyo speaking Suryoye) are the ones who generally stop speaking the language. In some cases, a person in the Mor Gabriel community will marry someone who is from an outside community that does speak Turoyo faithfully (e.g., some of the Suryoye communities in Europe). Although it is later in life, the new community reinforces the language of the family and the former child becomes once again a predominantly Turoyo speaker (see Bentolila [2000] for a similar case involving Oriental Hebrew).

## 4.2 Social networks

Social networks are "the aggregate of relationships contracted with others" (Milroy 2002) and are formed by individuals to create a meaningful group of people to help them navigate the issues of daily life (Mitchell 1986: 74). The kind of social network analysis that is used by sociolinguists is a product of social anthropological work in the 1960s and 1970s (Milroy 1987; Li 1996; Johnson 1994). This kind of social network analysis looks at the social ties of an individual and analyzes the types and strengths of those ties. Types of ties include

first order ties (direct contact) and second order ties (indirect contact), and the strengths of ties includes strong ties (friends and kin) and weak ties (acquaintances). An individual's social network is said to be dense if their ties interact heavily with each other across spheres of life (e.g. they live in the same community with their family, they live in the same community with the people they work with, they spend their social time with family and/or people they work with, etc.). When an individual has lots of strong, dense ties to similar speakers in their social network, there will be no serious linguistic change despite outside pressures. But if the ties to similar speakers in an individual's social network lessen and/or weaken, the situation becomes susceptible to linguistic change.

This type of approach has been used to study both varying dialects within a monolingual community and also bilingual communities. In the case of minority languages, such as Turoyo, and especially within immigrant communities, the language must resist great outside pressures in order to avoid language shift to the majority language. An especially strong, dense social network would be needed in order to accomplish this. Immigrant communities that have been studied using social network analysis include Zentella's (1997) study of a Puerto Rican community in New York and Li's (1994) study of a Chinese community in Tyneside. In both of these studies, as well as in the Mor Gabriel community, there is a typical three-generation pattern that is seen: (1) a "grandparent" generation which interacts most heavily with family and close friends and speaks mostly the language(s) of the country they immigrated from, (2) a "parent" generation which interacts with those in the community as well as those outside the community and speaks the languages of the immigrant country as well as the language of the host country, and (3) a "child" generation which interacts heavily with those outside the community and which does not speak much of their heritage language (only enough to continue to speak to elders in the community) but instead speaks mostly the language of the host country.

Within the Mor Gabriel community, the grandparent generation are the ones who immigrated from Turkey in the 1970s. They speak Turoyo, Turkish, and the English they have learned since arriving in the US. Some of those in this generation speak almost no English because their social network is made up almost exclusively of their family and those in the Mor Gabriel community. Although they may go to places such as a store, they are able to complete this activity without much language use. The parent generation is comprised of the children of the original immigrants, and they may or may not have been born in the US. Their parents taught them Turoyo from a young age, and they speak it both with their parents and their peers. However, they also interact outside the community. In short, their social networks are a mixture of Turoyo speakers and

English speakers, though they tend toward having more Turoyo-speaking ties and the Turoyo-speaking ties are strong ties. Those in the child generation were born in the US and, although they may have been taught Turoyo as children, much of their social network is made up of people outside the Mor Gabriel community. The fact that they have so many English-speaking ties creates a social network which lacks a large number of strong, dense ties to Turoyo speakers, creating a situation ripe for language shift.

Within this general pattern, there are always more complexities. For example, within the Chinese community in Tyneside, those in the child generation who were members of the True Jesus Church had a much stronger level of Chinese language maintenance than their peers because of the need to use Chinese with those in the close network of their church (Li 1994). From this example, we can see that social networks not only help to explain the differences between the “generations” described above, but they can also help to explain more nuanced differences within the general pattern. Within the Mor Gabriel community, there are also those who do not fit neatly within the three-generation pattern. There are people in the child generation that speak Turoyo in many domains. And there are those in the parent generation who speak Turoyo very little. Those in the community who have stronger network ties with their family, extended family, and with the church (which all relate in a very dense network because most people in the community are related and do attend church) are generally the ones who maintain the language the most (though that is not always true, as we will discuss below), and the opposite is generally true of those whose social networks include many ties outside the Mor Gabriel community.

### 4.3 Religion

Religion has not received much attention in comparison to other sociolinguistic variables. This is likely due to the fact that there is disagreement about whether or not religion actually is a sociolinguistic variable. There are two main views in relation to this. The first view is that religion is a sociolinguistic variable. One such proponent of this view, Miller (2004), argues for it because (at least in the Middle East) religion often determines where people live, and these communities did not interact much at all with each other and so their languages developed separately in isolation. The second view is that, while religion is important, it only indirectly affects linguistic choice, and therefore is not a sociolinguistic variable. As stated by Bassiouney (2009: 105), “Religion is important in terms of language variation and change only in the sense that it can create a close-knit

community whose members feel for one reason or another that they are united by it.” But whether the affect is direct or indirect, it is clear that religion does affect language. It is the view of the authors that religion is a sociolinguistic variable, at least in relation to the Mor Gabriel community, as we will discuss below.

The fact that the most distinguishing characteristic of the Mor Gabriel community is the church is strong evidence that the community is defined in terms of religion. However, it is important to understand what that means in the context of the Mor Gabriel community. As was noted in Section 2, the Mor Gabriel community is made up of members fairly recently immigrated from Turkey. In the Middle East, religion is seen as something you are born with, rather than as an individual choice (as it has generally come to be seen as in the west). If you are born Suryoyo, it would be a rejection of family, tradition, and community to reject the Syriac Orthodox faith.

Being born with a religion that you are unable to change is similar to being born with an ethnicity that you are unable to change. And, in fact, religion is sometimes a major component in defining ethnicity. Ethnicity in the Middle East has been defined as “any of a number of social parameters by which non-national social groupings are distinguished, including religion, shared history, skin color, kinship, lineage, and place of origin” (Owens 2001: 434). The social parameters which are most relevant can change from one place to another. In the case of the Mor Gabriel community, it may be said that the greatest component in the definition of their ethnicity is the Syriac Orthodox religion. Other components of their ethnicity include country of origin, ancestral city or village, ancestral lineage, and language.

While all of the members of the Mor Gabriel community share the same religion, they vary in the degree of importance that the Syriac Orthodox faith holds in their lives. It is generally true that those in the Mor Gabriel community who place the most emphasis on religion are the same ones that speak Turoyo the most extensively. And when asked who the best speakers of the Turoyo language are, those in the community continually say it is the clergy. However, there are likely other factors involved in this correlation and there are also, once again, exceptions to this generalized observation. As with family and social networks, religion alone cannot explain the linguistic situation in the Mor Gabriel community.

Another important factor related to religion is the Classical Syriac language and its relation to Turoyo, as discussed in Section 2. Although Classical Syriac is not natively spoken by anyone (with a few exceptions for which see Kiraz [2012b]), it persists in the church because of strong belief that it is a holy language. Turoyo is also seen as somewhat of a holy language (see Section 2),

but it is not held in nearly as high of regard as Classical Syriac, and Classical Syriac is always given preference whenever possible. Because religion is so central to this community, and Classical Syriac is so central to the Syriac Orthodox church, it is likely that Classical Syriac will continue to persist, at least in the domain of the church, even if Turoyo does not (cf. similar relationships between Neo-Mandaic/Mandaic [Häberl 2009] and Arabic Dialects / *fusha* Arabic, which favor the written liturgical language, as compared to Hebrew, Greek, and Hindi, which favor the modern vernacular forms).

#### 4.4 Identity

A person's identity is a dynamic relationship between themselves as an individual and the rest of society. People use their identity to signify which group(s) they belong to. For example, a person in the Mor Gabriel community might want to show that they belong to that community. They can do this with language, which is the focus of this article, but they can also show their group identity through actions and practices (what they wear, what activities they participate in, etc.). At any given time, a person will belong to multiple groups, and those groups will change depending on the situation, who else is present, and other contextual elements. For example, when in the wider NJ Suryoyo community, a Mor Gabriel youth might want to show that they belong to the Mor Gabriel community, but when in the non-Suryoyo NJ community, that same youth might want to identify with others who belong to the NJ Suryoyo community.

A central issue for the Mor Gabriel community is what exactly does it mean to be part of the community, and/or what does it mean to be Suryoyo? One element that relates to this question is the history of persecution of the Suryoyo people. In the past, Suryoyo people sometimes protected themselves by assimilating into another community (including changing their last name and ceasing to speak Turoyo). In order to protect their children from similar experiences, some downplayed their Suryoyo identity (to their children) by not teaching them the Turoyo language or about their heritage. This past identity suppression has repercussions in making it less clear what the current Suryoyo identity involves. Another element that relates to the above questions is that identity is a dynamic construct. Because identity is dependent on both the person signaling their identity and those who are being signaled to, there is a difference between identifying oneself as Suryoyo in the US and identifying oneself as Suryoyo in Turkey. The Mor Gabriel community is fairly new to the United States and is still negotiating what exactly it means to be Suryoyo in the US. The youth especially have the opportunity to choose whether or not they want the fact that they are

Suryoyo to be easily identifiable. To this end, there was a youth conference held by the World Council of Arameans in March of 2013 at the Aramaic American Association (Rochelle Park, New Jersey) that focused on the topic of Suryoyo identity.

As their identity relates to Turoyo, the important questions for the community will be: Is the Turoyo language part of the Mor Gabriel community identity? (Likely yes.) Is it part of the Suryoyo identity? (Likely no, since most of the other NJ communities and other Syriac Orthodox communities in the US do not speak much Turoyo.) And so, the youth of the community will have a choice: Will they continue to speak Turoyo because their membership in the Mor Gabriel community is central to their identity? Will they identify as Suryoyo but focus on other aspects of that identity since language is not a crucial part of it? Or will they decide that they would rather leave those identities behind, as some of their persecuted ancestors did, and just identify as American? It seems that most of the Mor Gabriel youth are following the middle route: identifying as Suryoyo, but not further identifying as part of the Mor Gabriel community by speaking the Turoyo language.

In the family, social network, and religion sections above, we have seen that these sociolinguistic variables are important factors in the language shift in the community, and that they have a lot of explanatory power when it comes to the linguistic situation. But, in each case, there were things they could not explain. In contrast, the sociolinguistic factor of identity seems to be able to handle all the different expressions of identity by individuals in the community (because it is such an individual-based concept).

To further illustrate this point, let us examine in more detail one family in the community. The father is a prominent member of the community, and a native speaker of Turoyo (though he also speaks Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish, English, Armenian, and Greek). He was born in Midyat, Turkey and, in 1973, immigrated to the United States with his wife. His wife is from Istanbul and is a native speaker of both Greek (her mother's native language) and Armenian (her father's native language), though she also speaks several other languages including having an almost native command of Turoyo. The father's in-laws live with his family. He and his wife have three children, ages 32, 30, and 25. The children speak various levels of English, Turoyo, Turkish, Greek, and Armenian, and have those various groups open to them to identify with. The eldest two children are females, are heavily involved in the community and the church, and speak Turoyo fluently. Despite spending significant time outside the community (for college, in jobs, etc.) and being native speakers of English and being most comfortable speaking in English, they both identify themselves as Suryoyo. (The oldest identifies herself as Suryeyto [the female form of Suryoyo] American, while the younger identifies herself as purely Suryeyto.) Both are married to

Turoyo speakers (one who was born in Turkey, and one who lives in a Suryoyo community in Germany where the couple now lives). The oldest daughter has two children, and she and her husband are teaching them Turoyo as their native language (as well as other languages that family members speak). In the case of the third child, he identifies more with his mother's (particularly his grandmother's) Greek roots. He has a close relationship with his grandmother and learned Greek from her. While he has a few friends who are Suryoyo, most are not. And in fact, he distanced himself from the other male Suryoyo students when he was a child because many of them did not value education (they knew they were going to go into the family jewelry business and did not think education was relevant) and often acted out in school. This son clearly does value education as he has received a BA and an MA, and he is currently applying for PhD programs. He self-identifies himself as a Syriac-Greek-Armenian American. Knowing that he signals his identity in the available groups in these ways, it is not surprising to find out that he is a native speaker of English, a fluent speaker of Greek, and only a conversational speaker of Turoyo. While at first, it might seem unusual to see the difference in his linguistic choices compared with his siblings, once we delve into the details of the situation, the way he is signaling his identity linguistically becomes transparent.

## 5 Conclusion

The Turoyo language has been spoken for thousands of years and still exists almost exclusively in the vernacular. Because of persecution, the 50,000 speakers of the Turoyo language today are spread throughout the world. This article has focused on one particular community in New Jersey in the United States, a community centered around the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox Church, which we have labeled the Mor Gabriel community. In this community, the sociolinguistic variables of family, social networks, religion, and identity have all been significant factors in the ongoing language shift in the community towards English. But identity was the factor that is most able to account for all the myriad of cases within the complex linguistic landscape of the Mor Gabriel community. And so, we conclude that those who are the best at maintaining the language are those that identify most strongly with the Mor Gabriel community. And it is identity that is most responsible for the language shift taking place within the community.

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