

The Arabic-Syriac/Syriac-Arabic Dictionary Project: Report II

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1 Introduction

This paper constitutes the second formal report of the *Arabic-Syriac/Syriac-Arabic Dictionary* (AS/SAD) project; formerly, the *Arabic-Syriac Lexicon* project, from the Syriac Computing Institute. The project aims at producing a hard-copy Arabic-Syriac/Syriac Arabic dictionary.

The dictionary will aim at providing linguists, teachers, students and translators an up-to-date dictionary of written Syriac (classical and contemporary) usage through the medium of Arabic. The project is motivated by the need for an up-to-date treatment of Syriac and Arabic correspondence, together with information on register and usage.

While the dictionary will be designed to meet academic requirements of completeness and accuracy, it will also be made accessible to the learner by including basic information on the Syriac alphabet and the vowel system, and on Syriac pronunciation. Basic grammar information will also be included (see §4).

The outline of the paper is as follows: Section 2 presents the motivation behind the project; section 3 describes the methodology of compilation, taken from our first report (Kiraz and Ponsford, 1994); section 4 outlines the features we envisage to include in the dictionary; section 5 gives the lemma structure as we envisage it now; section 6 provides an illustrative example; finally, section 7 gives concluding remarks.

2 Motivation

There have been many attempts to compile Arabic-Syriac dictionaries in the past (Ibrahim, 1994), none of which were either completed or published due the complexity of the task and the time it would consume. Na'um Fa'iq (d. 1930) reported a dictionary of his work; unfortunately, the whereabouts of his manuscript is not known. The learned Syrian Orthodox scholar, the late Patriarch Ephrem Barsaum (d. 1887-1957) composed a small, incomplete Arabic-Syriac dictionary; the manuscript is preserved at the private library of Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim of Aleppo, who promised to publish it in the future. It is also reported that Bahnam Isaac, the late Syrian Orthodox vicar of al-Ḥasakeh composed an Arabic-Syriac dictionary; the manuscript is preserved with his family. Other attempts were made by the late George Sa'do of al-Qamišleh (the manuscript in this case seems to be lost), and 'Abd al-Masih Qarabashi who composed an incomplete dictionary.

The only Arabic-Syriac dictionary which was partially published is that of Michael Murad (1879-1952) of Mosul; he published the first volume (from 'alif until the root *sl*). This volume was reprinted in 1984 in Sweden and in 1994 by Metropolitan Ibrahim. The remainder of this work seems to be lost.

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Currently, 'Awgen Mnofer reported that he is working on a small Arabic-dictionary. *Friends of the Syriac Language* in the Lebanon started two years ago compiling an Arabic/Syriac/English dictionary; it is reported that nine letters of the alphabet have been completed [Patriarchal Magazine, 33:289].

The above survey indicates that an Arabic-Syriac dictionary is an urgent desideratum for the Arabophon members of the Syriac Churches. The necessity for such a work cannot be over emphasized. Such a dictionary will help in translation, language learning and scholarship. However, the most important outcome of a bi-directional dictionary (especially the Arabic-Syriac part of it) may be the enhancement of Contemporary Written Syriac (CWS). A simple statistical analysis (even a glance) at modern writings would indicate that CWS uses only a subset of the classical vocabulary.¹ Although a great number of classical lexemes appear in CWS with a new meaning, the absence of a great number of Syriac lexemes is partially due to the lack of awareness of modern writers of such vocabulary (rather than as a result of the development of the language). The absence of a dictionary, where Syriac is the target language rather than the source language, has kept the set of lexemes used in CWS a small one. The contemporary writer may be surprised to know of the number of available words unknown to her (and I hope that female writers will emerge one day). Further, scholars working on coinage may find, after persistent search, that their *dälla mansūda* in the heart of classical vocabulary.

3 Methodology

The project aims at compiling an Arabic-Syriac/Syriac Arabic dictionary based on the current published Syriac-Arabic lexica. The phases of compilation are as follows:

- **Phase 1.** Compiling an electronic Syriac lexicon based on (Brockelmann, 1955; Smith, 1903; Audo, 1985; Manna, 1975).
- **Phase 2.** Compiling an electronic Arabic lexicon based on (Wehr, 1971).
- **Phase 3.** Marking correspondences between the Syriac and Arabic lexica based on published Syriac-Arabic dictionaries.
- **Phase 4.** Generating a draft Arabic-Syriac/Syriac-Arabic dictionary and submitting it to a committee.
- **Phase 5.** Incorporating the changes proposed in Phase 4.
- **Phase 6.** Compiling the final dictionary.

The technical aspects of phases 1 and 2 were discussed by (Kiraz and Ponsford, 1994). Our main concern in this paper is to present the features which we would like to incorporate in the final dictionary.

4 Main Features

The dictionary will be organized by root, rather than strict alphabetical order. This approach seems more scientific and can provide the user with all the derivatives of one semantic notion in one place. To cater for beginners who may find the root system harder to use, an alphabetical index to help with finding problematic words will be provided, especially for entries containing weak radicals.

Some of the features which we envisage to be incorporated in the dictionary are:

- The use of prepositional phrases in changing the meaning of lexemes, e.g. *daraba* ܕܪܒܐ, while *daraba bayn* ܕܪܒܐ ܒܝܢ.

¹For a survey of modern writings, see (Brock, 1989).

7 Conclusion

This paper stated the motivation behind the compilation of a bi-directional Arabic-Syriac/Syriac-Arabic dictionary. The features and lemma structure we envisage to incorporate in the compilation of the dictionary were outlined.

Currently, we are working on phases 1 and 2 (the compilation of Syriac and Arabic electronic lexica). The in-house utility programs used for entering Syriac and Arabic words are complete and are being used for this task. The Syriac lexicon contains all the entries in the *Syriac Electronic Data Retrieval Archive* (SEDRA) database (Kiraz, 1994). The Arabic lexicon, based on (Wehr, 1971), currently contains 20 out of the 27 letters of the alphabet.

Note Comments on any aspect of the project are welcomed.

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