

Phonological enrichment in Neo-Aramaic dialects through language contact

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This paper is a study of enrichment of the phonological system of Neo-Aramaic dialects that is induced by contact with other languages. The case study that is presented concerns the development of a phonemic distinction between aspirated and unaspirated unvoiced stops in some North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) dialects. In earlier Aramaic and Semitic in general unvoiced stops are aspirated. In some NENA dialects, such as Christian Urmi, an additional series of unaspirated stops and affricates has developed through convergence with the phoneme inventories of Kurmanji Kurdish and Eastern Armenian. The paper examines the process by which the unaspirated stop phonemes emerged in the NENA dialects. It is argued that these developed by processes that were internal to the Neo-Aramaic dialect in most cases there was an internal functional and were phonemicized by perceptual matching with unaspirated phonemes in the contact languages. Moreover within the NENA dialects they had functional applications, such as the reduction of complexity, the marking of morpheme boundaries or sound symbolism. This internal functional enrichment may have been a key motivating factor for the enrichment of the phonological system.