SYNTAX
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SYNTAX OF NOMINALS

14.1. Expression of Definiteness

14.1.1. Preliminary Remarks

The term ‘definiteness’ can refer to a cognitive phenomenon in the act of linguistic communication or to a feature in the grammatical structure of a language. It is important to distinguish these, since the definiteness of something on the cognitive level is not always signalled by the grammatical structure. When a nominal is said to be definite on the cognitive level, this refers to the informational status of a nominal. The crucial factor is the judgement by the speaker concerning the identifiability of the referent by the hearer. If the speaker assumes that the hearer can identify which specific referent he is referring to by the nominal, the nominal is treated by the speaker as definite in status. This assumption is typically made when the referent has been mentioned previously or at least is associated in some way with the context or situation that is being talked about, or when the nominal has a unique referent, as is the case with proper nouns. If, on the other hand, the speaker assumes that the hearer cannot identify which specific referent he is talking about, the nominal is treated as indefinite in status. The grammatical expression of this definiteness varies across languages.

In Aramaic the distinction between the definite and indefinite status of nominals was originally expressed grammatically by the distinction between the ‘determined state’ and the ‘absolute state’ respectively. In the NENA dialects, this original grammatical means of expressing the distinction has broken down, but other devices have been developed to compensate for its loss. In the C. Barwar dialect, as in other NENA dialects and indeed as in many other languages, the cardinal numeral ‘one’ (xa m., ḏa l.) is often used as an indefinite article that is a grammatical signal of the indefinite status of the nominal. The dialect has not, however, a corresponding definite article, though, as we shall see, there are embryonic signs of this developing.