
The Aramaic of Daniel continues to puzzle interpreters, both from a diachronic and a functional point of view. This book assumes that it represents a single variety and thus takes a more strictly descriptive stance when addressing the intriguing phenomena of verbal usage. It aims at including the results of recent research on linguistic typology, an approach also endorsed by the present reviewer in his Tempus, Aspekt und Modalität im Reichsaramäischen, Wiesbaden 2004 (= Tempus). Tarsee Li frequently refers to this monograph and finds himself in essential agreement with the analysis presented there. By putting more emphasis on the theory of grammaticalization and cross-linguistic insights brought to light in its context, his considerations widen the perspective and contribute to understanding why exactly certain forms serve particular purposes. Therefore his study surely fills a gap.

The introduction to Li’s concise volume (1-19) succinctly presents the underlying conceptual framework and other preliminary matters. He is sensitive to the way new grammatical forms or functions emerge and envisages not only to describe their use, but also to account for their genesis. Stressing the dynamics of a linguistic system at any given point and the resulting overlaps, he manages to avoid the pitfalls of a “flat” correlation between form and function in favour of a multifaceted interaction of various semantic properties in different circumstances: language is messier than pure structuralism would suggest. Discourse analysis, which has been the object of some previous dissertations on biblical Aramaic, features less prominently, but it is adduced where advantageous. Guided by sound method, the remaining chapters discuss, in the order of frequency, the relevant constituent parts of the verbal system. The examples cited are by and large well chosen; throughout the work, the author also pays attention to the ambiguity of the unvocalized text and engages with alternative interpretations, albeit at times a bit too cursorily.

First, the suffix conjugation (20-38) is described as an old anterior, or resultative (denoting a past action with current relevance), on its way to becoming an aspectually neutral simple past (expressing only that an event occurred before the moment of speech). Both are often hard to differentiate (cf. Tempus 168-72). Li’s extension of resultativity to performatives (25) appears less convincing, though, since performatives imply both simultaneousness and completeness rather than anteriority. Further, the amount of simple past usages in Daniel may be conditioned by the narrative genre, and the distribution of purported resultative and preterite functions does not seem to diverge significantly from the situation in older stages of Aramaic. If one accepts such a shift, it must therefore have happened by the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E. at the very latest. It is
thus quite difficult to believe that the language began to undergo a gradual transformation from an aspect-prominent to a tense-prominent system with Imperial Aramaic (159).

Owing to their great diversity, the functions of the active participle (39-57) are more elusive. Verbal and nominal usages cannot always be clearly distinguished from each other. Competing with the prefix conjugation, whose functional load it decreased, the participle appears to be less strongly marked for tense and covers several nuances associated with imperfectivity as an extension of its earlier progressive meaning. This gains support from its use for enduring or repeated situations in the past and for the general present (which is by definition ongoing). Other examples, by contrast, fit Li’s interpretation of the participle as a basically imperfective form, convincing though it is in general terms, less easily. The present reviewer, for one, hesitates to posit a “past inceptive” use on the basis of šṭb in Dan 5:1 and ʿllyn in Dan 4:4a (49-50; cf. 82), because the inchoative situation type (“he began to drink”; “they began to come in”) would not normally be expected with a form otherwise used for manifestations of the imperfective aspect (cf. B. Comrie, Aspect, Cambridge 1976, 19-20). Instead, both participles can be satisfactorily analyzed as either historical presents for dramatic vividness (Tempus 124-25; 128) or past progressives, šṭb at least in theory also as a subordinate event (“with himself drinking”; cf. Th. Nöldeke, Compendious Syriac Grammar, London 1904, §275; H. Gzella, “Aramaic in the Parthian Period: The Arscacid Inscriptions,” in: id. and M. L. Folmer [eds.], Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting, Wiesbaden 2008, 107-30, esp. 118). In an attempt to minimize the number of functional categories, the author subsumes possible instances of a performative participle under the “actual present” (52; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “(More) On Performatives in Semitic,” ZAH 17 [2004-7] 36-81, likewise doubts that performativity, being a pragmatic concept, belongs to verbal semantics). Participles for past events, too, are related to the imperfective aspect, but this leaves the mostly consistent switch to the participle in self-contained narrative units introduced by the suffix conjugation unexplained (Tempus 129). Hence, it seems preferable to understand this phenomenon as a reduction of markedness. The same goes for the participle of ʾmr “to say” following a form of ʿnī (ibid. 131-6; cf. Orientalia 74 [2005] 399-408).

While the passive participle on the whole acts as a verbal adjective (not necessarily with a passive meaning) developing into a resultative, the t-stem participles serve as the “true passive (and reflexive) counterparts to the active participle” (58-78). The latter function might, however, be more aptly described as medio-passive, since mitr yn “loosened” (5:6), mtbl “perplexed” (5:9), and mtbyyn “confused” (5:9) are prototypical middles. With the so-called “periphrastic” constructions (79-97), the verb hwī “to be” together with a non-passive participle is reanalyzed as an auxiliary for explicitly marking the past and perhaps also the future imperfective, depending on whether the suffix or the prefix conjugation of