The Function of the Perfect in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic

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The North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) dialects constitute one subgroup of the modern spoken vernaculars of Aramaic, a Semitic language. Until the first half of the beginning of the 20th century the NENA dialects were spoken in northern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey and western Iran. In the course of the 20th century many of the NENA-speaking communities were displaced from the area and now the majority of the dialects are highly endangered.

The NENA dialects have been in contact with Iranian languages for many centuries. In more recent centuries they have also been in contact with Turkic languages. Most of the dialects of NENA have developed a perfect verbal form, probably induced by convergence with contact languages. This perfect is structurally a predicative form, consisting of a resultative participle and copula or clitic subject pronoun. All dialects that have a perfect form also have a form that expresses the perfective past.

The primary function of the perfect form is to express a resultative perfect. It is also used with a secondary function which I term 'indirective'. The resultative perfect expresses a resultant state arising from a preceding situation that is temporally disjoined from the present. The basic function of the perfective past form is to express a situation in the past at an unspecified distance from the present. Its endpoint may, therefore, be coterminous with the present (and so can idiomatically be translated by the English 'perfect of recent past'). The indirective use of the perfect does not express a resultant state but rather expresses an event in the past, with either perfective or imperfective aspect. When used with this indirective function, therefore, the perfect form has a similar function to the past perfective form or an imperfective form. The indirective perfect form is used, however, specifically to denote that the speaker is distanced from the past situation in question. This may be due to the fact that the speaker has learnt about the event indirectly by report (i.e. an evidential function) or to denote an event that the speaker may have witnessed in the past but he/she is distanced from it temporally. The term 'indirective' was introduced originally by Lars Johanson to refer to verbs with this function, which are widely attested in Iranian and Turkic languages.

The use of the indirective is not obligatory in conditions where it can be used and speakers may alternate between a primary perfective/imperfective form and an indirective form in the same context. The change in coding between primary form and indirective form can be exploited to mark boundaries in discourse structure.